



A DARK ALLIANCE

perfect storm

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS 70

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INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR


DARK ALLIANCE

PERFECT STORM

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS

BOOK SEVENTY

I. T. LUCAS

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DARK STRANGER

1: DARK STRANGER THE DREAM

2: DARK STRANGER REVEALED

3: DARK STRANGER IMMORTAL

DARK ENEMY

4: DARK ENEMY TAKEN

5: DARK ENEMY CAPTIVE

6: DARK ENEMY REDEEMED

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6.5: MY DARK AMAZON

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7: DARK WARRIOR MINE

8: DARK WARRIOR'S PROMISE

9: DARK WARRIOR'S DESTINY

10: DARK WARRIOR'S LEGACY

DARK GUARDIAN

11: DARK GUARDIAN FOUND

12: DARK GUARDIAN CRAVED

13: DARK GUARDIAN'S MATE

DARK ANGEL

14: DARK ANGEL'S OBSESSION

15: DARK ANGEL'S SEDUCTION

16: DARK ANGEL'S SURRENDER

DARK OPERATIVE

- 17: DARK OPERATIVE: A SHADOW OF DEATH
- 18: DARK OPERATIVE: A GLIMMER OF HOPE
- 19: DARK OPERATIVE: THE DAWN OF LOVE

DARK SURVIVOR

- 20: DARK SURVIVOR AWAKENED
- 21: DARK SURVIVOR ECHOES OF LOVE
- 22: DARK SURVIVOR REUNITED

DARK WIDOW

- 23: DARK WIDOW'S SECRET
- 24: DARK WIDOW'S CURSE
- 25: DARK WIDOW'S BLESSING

DARK DREAM

- 26: DARK DREAM'S TEMPTATION
- 27: DARK DREAM'S UNRAVELING
- 28: DARK DREAM'S TRAP

DARK PRINCE

- 29: DARK PRINCE'S ENIGMA
- 30: DARK PRINCE'S DILEMMA
- 31: DARK PRINCE'S AGENDA

DARK QUEEN

- 32: DARK QUEEN'S QUEST
- 33: DARK QUEEN'S KNIGHT
- 34: DARK QUEEN'S ARMY

DARK SPY

- 35: DARK SPY CONSCRIPTED
- 36: DARK SPY'S MISSION
- 37: DARK SPY'S RESOLUTION

DARK OVERLORD

38: DARK OVERLORD NEW HORIZON

39: DARK OVERLORD'S WIFE

40: DARK OVERLORD'S CLAN

DARK CHOICES

41: DARK CHOICES THE QUANDARY

42: DARK CHOICES PARADIGM SHIFT

43: DARK CHOICES THE ACCORD

DARK SECRETS

44: DARK SECRETS RESURGENCE

45: DARK SECRETS UNVEILED

46: DARK SECRETS ABSOLVED

DARK HAVEN

47: DARK HAVEN ILLUSION

48: DARK HAVEN UNMASKED

49: DARK HAVEN FOUND

DARK POWER

50: DARK POWER UNTAMED

51: DARK POWER UNLEASHED

52: DARK POWER CONVERGENCE

DARK MEMORIES

53: DARK MEMORIES SUBMERGED

54: DARK MEMORIES EMERGE

55: DARK MEMORIES RESTORED

DARK HUNTER

56: DARK HUNTER'S QUERY

57: DARK HUNTER'S PREY

58: DARK HUNTER'S BOON

DARK GOD

59: DARK GOD'S AVATAR

60: DARK GOD'S REVIVISCENCE

61: DARK GOD DESTINIES CONVERGE

DARK WHISPERS

62: DARK WHISPERS FROM THE PAST

63: DARK WHISPERS FROM AFAR

64: DARK WHISPERS FROM BEYOND

DARK GAMBIT

65: DARK GAMBIT THE PAWN

66: DARK GAMBIT THE PLAY

67: DARK GAMBIT RELIANCE

DARK ALLIANCE

68: DARK ALLIANCE KINDRED SOULS

69: DARK ALLIANCE TURBULENT WATERS

70: DARK ALLIANCE PERFECT STORM

DARK HEALING

71: DARK HEALING BLIND JUSTICE

PERFECT MATCH

VAMPIRE'S CONSORT

KING'S CHOSEN

CAPTAIN'S CONQUEST

THE THIEF WHO LOVED ME

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS SERIES SETS

BOOKS 1-3: DARK STRANGER TRILOGY—INCLUDES A BONUS SHORT STORY: **THE FATES TAKE A VACATION**

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BOOKS 14-16: DARK ANGEL TRILOGY

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BOOKS 23-25: DARK WIDOW TRILOGY

BOOKS 26-28: DARK DREAM TRILOGY

BOOKS 29-31: DARK PRINCE TRILOGY

BOOKS 32-34: DARK QUEEN TRILOGY

BOOKS 35-37: DARK SPY TRILOGY

BOOKS 38-40: DARK OVERLORD TRILOGY

BOOKS 41-43: DARK CHOICES TRILOGY

BOOKS 44-46: DARK SECRETS TRILOGY

BOOKS 47-49: DARK HAVEN TRILOGY

BOOKS 50-52: DARK POWER TRILOGY

BOOKS 53-55: DARK MEMORIES TRILOGY

BOOKS 56-58: DARK HUNTER TRILOGY

BOOKS 59-61: DARK GOD TRILOGY

BOOKS 62-64: DARK WHISPERS TRILOGY

BOOKS 65-67: DARK GAMBIT TRILOGY

MEGA SETS

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THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS: BOOKS 1-6

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS: BOOKS 6.5-10

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CONTENTS

1. Jade
2. Kian
3. Phinas
4. Jade
5. Kian
6. Jade
7. Phinas
8. Jade
9. Phinas
10. Toven
11. Yamanu
12. Kian
13. Toven
14. Kian
15. Annani
16. Kian
17. Phinas
18. Jade
19. Eleanor
20. Captain Nils
21. Kian
22. Captain Nils
23. Kian
24. Toven
25. Kian
26. Kalugal
27. Annani
28. Kian
29. Kian
30. Syssi
31. Kian
32. Toven

33. Kian
34. Jade
35. Toven
36. Phinas
37. Jade
38. Phinas
39. Jade
40. Marcel
41. Sofia
42. Kian
43. Kalugal
44. Kian
45. Yamanu
46. Jade
47. Toven
48. Jade
49. Phinas
50. Jade
51. Phinas
52. Jade
53. Phinas
54. Kian
55. Toven
56. Jade
57. Phinas
58. Jade
59. Phinas
60. Jade
61. Toven
62. Sofia
63. Toven
64. Kian
65. Jade
66. Phinas

67. [Jade](#)
68. [Toven](#)
69. [Jade](#)
70. [Phinas](#)
71. [Jade](#)
72. [Phinas](#)
73. [Jade](#)
74. [Kian](#)
75. [Jade](#)
76. [Phinas](#)
77. [Jade](#)

[The Children of the Gods Series](#)

[The Perfect Match Series](#)

[EXCLUSIVE PEEKS](#)

JADE

“*T*his is unacceptable,” Jade murmured under her breath as she stared at the cabin’s closed door, willing it to open.

The *Helena* had exploded nearly half an hour ago, and the survivors must have been fished out of the water by now. Still, no one had bothered to notify her whether Igor had been among them.

She was relegated to pacing in front of the closed door of the war room and waiting like a beggar for Yamanu or Tom to give her an update.

Her agitation was growing by the minute.

At least they had deigned to tell her that Phinas had been unharmed, so some of the agonizing aches in her chest had been assuaged, but not the emotional upheaval she’d gone through while he was away.

Phinas’s absence and the worry for him had pulled the proverbial rug from under her feet, destabilizing her foundation and shaking up her belief system. Cracks had appeared in both before, but Mey’s suggestion that they’d bonded had turned the small fissures into deep chasms.

It shouldn’t be possible for a Kra-ell to bond with anyone, not one of her own people, and certainly not with a member of a different species.

And yet, what Mey had said explained so much.

The irrational need to be with Phinas at all times, the struggle to leave him in the morning so she could do her job

and not see him until the evening, and the fact that she'd experienced what humans would call a panic attack when he'd left on the *Seafarer* to lure Igor away from the *Aurora*.

That had never happened before, and Jade had been through more adversity than one person should ever endure in a lifetime.

And yet, she found herself agonizing about being apart from Phinas for a couple of days. The fifty-two hours and seventeen minutes had felt like an eternity, but not because she'd been so worried about him.

The truth was that she cared about him more deeply than she was willing to admit.

Hell, she'd prayed to the Mother to keep him safe, and she had even been willing to sacrifice the one thing that had kept her from falling apart during her years in captivity.

Avenging her sons and all the other males of her tribe had been her number one goal, and plotting how to do it had occupied most of her thoughts. But instead of praying for victory and for the butcher of her people to be delivered to her so she could finally end him, Jade had prayed for Phinas to return unharmed.

She was a disgrace to everything the Kra-ell held dear, and she should step down as the leader of Igor's former compound. The people should select someone who better embodied the Kra-ell way.

The door banged open, startling Jade from her self-disparaging thoughts. As she saw Yamanu's hulking body filling the doorway with a huge grin spread over his face, her heart leaped with hope.

"Well?" she asked.

"We got him." He reached for her and pulled her into a crushing embrace, lifting her off her feet and slapping her back with his giant paw.

"Put the lady down, Yamanu," Tom said from behind him. "You're making her uncomfortable."

Tom or Toven. She didn't know which name the god preferred, but she liked Toven better. Tom was too plain of a name for a being like him.

“Sorry.” Yamanu put her back down on her feet. “I'm just so excited it's finally over. I can't imagine how thrilled you must be.”

It wasn't over until Igor's head was no longer attached to his neck, but it was a big step in the right direction. Hopefully, Phinas was keeping Igor sedated and not taking any chances.

Toven cleared his throat. “We are not in the clear yet. We still have the Russian cruiser on our tail, but we can talk about that inside instead of making a spectacle of ourselves in the corridor.”

So that was it?

They'd given her the news, and now the two of them were going to disappear back into the cabin, and she would be left to guess the rest of what had happened?

As Yamanu stepped back in, Toven kept the door open. “Are you coming?”

She arched a brow. “Am I invited?”

“Yes, you are, and with Kian's blessing. He wants to talk to you.”

That was a surprise. The immortals' leader hadn't wanted her to be part of the planning, but maybe he was okay with her being there for the celebration.

“Am I going to see him this time?” She walked into the cabin and looked around. “Or am I going to just hear his voice again?”

A tablet was propped up on the dining table, but that didn't mean that Kian had approved visual communication. When she'd told Toven and Yamanu about the history of the conflict between the Kra-ell and the gods, the tablet had been there, and Kian had listened in, but the screen had been blank.

Toven glanced at Yamanu. “He didn't give us instructions one way or another.”

Yamanu shrugged. “If he doesn’t want Jade to see him, he can deactivate the camera on his side.”

When the door opened again, Jade pivoted on her heel to see who had come in without ringing the bell. The soundproofing in this ship was so damn good that sometimes it was difficult to hear when someone was knocking, and most opted to use the doorbells each cabin was equipped with.

“Champagne and three glasses as requested.” The Guardian put the items on the table and gave her the thumbs up. “You must be over the moon. Your people don’t need to run anymore.”

“The Russian cruiser is still on our tail.” She eyed the champagne. “And we are still on the run.”

Carbonated drinks did a number on the Kra-ell digestive system, and there was no way she could drink that. Should she pretend and just wet her lips? Or should she tell Toven that she couldn’t tolerate his choice of celebratory beverage?

Usually, Jade was the direct type who didn’t tiptoe around anyone’s preferences, but she was in a precarious position, dependent on Toven and Kian’s good graces. Insulting them even indirectly wouldn’t be wise.

But then being dishonest wasn’t wise either.

As the god handed her a glass and reached for the champagne, Jade put it back on the table. “I can’t drink that.”

He put the bottle down. “What can you drink?”

“Vodka with cranberry juice or some other tart-tasting beverage.”

“I’m on it.” The Guardian headed to the door. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“We can wait for his return to celebrate.” Toven pulled out a chair for her.

Jade wanted to tell him that she wasn’t a human female and that he shouldn’t do that, but it wasn’t in the same category as her inability to tolerate carbonated drinks. It was a cultural difference that Toven was unaware of. To her, the

gesture was insulting, but to him, it was the polite thing to do. It was a trivial matter that wasn't worth alienating her allies for.

She might mention it in passing some other time, but right now it was more important to her to hear details about Igor's capture and what they were doing with him.

The original plan regarding the decoy ship had been for the crew to return the *Seafarer* to Copenhagen and for the Guardians and their prisoners to be flown to Greenland, where they would wait for the *Aurora* to arrive, but Kian kept changing plans for various reasons, so maybe that had changed as well.

In any case, it would take the *Aurora* about five days to reach Greenland, and Jade didn't know how she would survive so long without Phinas. Just thinking about it made her heart ache and her throat close up.

Her anger flared.

She was a Kra-ell warrior, a veteran of hardship and suffering. She shouldn't be agonizing about missing her boyfriend.

Damn. Since when did a Kra-ell pureblooded female have a boyfriend?

Shaking her head to dispel the annoying thoughts, Jade asked, "So, how was Igor captured, and are they sure it's him? It's not like they had a picture of him, and we all look alike to your people."

Toven arched a brow. "What makes you think that?"

"Phinas said that out of the three humanoid species on Earth, the Kra-ell are the most androgynous and that it's difficult to tell us apart. We all have the same coloring, are all about the same height and body build, and most of us wear our hair long."

Yamanu snorted. "He must have been teasing you. I can assure you that you look nothing like Pavel or even Kagra to me." He leaned closer. "If I weren't a happily mated male, I would have found you attractive."

It was an odd way to phrase a compliment, but she wasn't the type who sought them or even enjoyed positive comments about her looks unless they came from Phinas.

As the door opened again, the Guardian from before entered with a bottle of vodka in one hand and a bottle of cranberry juice in another. "Good?" he asked.

"Perfect. Thank you." She took the two bottles from him and twisted off the caps. "Let's toast this victory."

After the guy left, she mixed herself a drink in one of the champagne glasses, ignoring the disapproving look from Toven.

Gods were such snobs. Even the nice progressive ones.

Toven uncorked the other bottle and poured the bubbly for Yamanu and himself.

"Let's put the others on the line." Yamanu leaned over to the tablet.

As the screen filled up with a strikingly handsome face, Jade didn't need to be told who it belonged to. If she saw Kian on the street, she would have immediately suspected that he was a god. Humans were never that perfect, not even with the help of plastic surgery.

"Kian, I presume."

He dipped his head. "The formidable Jade. It is a pleasure to finally talk to you face to face."

She hadn't been the one who'd refused to show her face, but Jade kept her mouth shut and forced a pleasant smile.

Kian obviously wanted something from her, and she had a good idea what that was. Negotiations were about to start, and she needed to put her diplomat hat on and act the part.

"The pleasure is all mine, Kian."

KIAN

Jade looked precisely as Kian had imagined—an alien beauty who radiated power. Her large eyes were intelligent, and they regarded him with curiosity, assessing him the way he was assessing her.

If not for the eyes, she could have passed for a human of Asian descent, but only on casual inspection. Her cheekbones were pronounced, her forehead a little too broad, and her nose too small for her face. And yet, everything somehow came together in perfect harmony.

He could definitely understand Phinas's attraction to her.

It wasn't just about her alien beauty, though. Jade radiated the kind of power and intensity that only true leaders possessed, and as her black eyes bored into his, Kian knew that he was facing an equal. She wouldn't be intimidated by him or the might of the clan he represented.

As Kalugal leaned over so his face was in view of the camera, Kian leaned away to make room for him. "Let me introduce my companions. To my right is Kalugal, Phinas's boss."

"Delighted to meet you, Jade," Kalugal said.

She dipped her head. "Well met, Kalugal."

"To my left is our Chief Guardian, Onegus."

"Hello." Onegus flashed her one of his super charming smiles, but all he got in return was the same slight head incline she'd given Kalugal.

Jade was either not overly impressed with either of them, or she had a great poker face.

“On Kalugal’s left is Victor Turner, and he’s responsible not only for coming up with the strategy to entrap and capture Igor but also for procuring all the vessels, munitions, and other equipment that made this mission a success. We couldn’t have done it without him.”

This time Jade’s large eyes registered interest. “You must be very well connected, Mr. Turner. What’s your position in the clan?”

Turner regarded her with the same interest she was showing him. “I have no official position, but I lend my expertise whenever needed. I’m in the business of hostage retrieval, which is independent of the clan.”

Jade dipped her head lower than she’d done for Kalugal and Onegus. “Your chosen occupation speaks well of your character. Saving hostages and returning them to their families is a profession worthy of a warrior.”

Turner cracked a rare smile. “Perhaps, but my motives are not purely altruistic. I’m the best at what I do, and people are willing to pay me exceptionally well for my services.”

The bright smile Jade returned to him was genuine. “There is nothing wrong with getting proper compensation corresponding to your ability and its scarcity. I might have started my life in the military, but upon arriving on Earth, I discovered that I had an entrepreneurial spirit. I enjoyed making money and providing for my tribe.”

Kian liked the female more by the minute, and even Turner seemed taken with her.

“We have that in common,” Turner said. “I learned my craft serving as a strategist for special ops. When I retired, I started my hostage retrieval business.”

“I like her,” Kalugal whispered in Kian’s ear. “She reminds me of you.”

Shifting her eyes to Kalugal, she tilted her head. “What is your position in the clan?”

“Right now, I don’t have one, but Kian has offered me a seat on the council, and if the council approves my nomination, I might become a councilman soon. Right now, I’m just a wealthy businessman, and my main interest is new technology.”

She didn’t seem surprised, and Kian suspected that Phinas had told her about his boss more than he’d told her about the rest of them.

“Thank you for volunteering your men, Kalugal, and thank you for helping them escape Navuh, the clan’s archenemy. Phinas speaks very highly of you.”

So he was right, and Phinas had told Jade about his and Kalugal’s past. Had he told her that the tyrant was Kalugal’s father, though?

“Now that the introductions are over let’s make a toast.” Yamanu lifted his champagne glass. “To freedom and a better future for all of us.”

“Shouldn’t Phinas join the toast?” Jade asked. “After all, it is his victory that we are celebrating.”

“Indeed,” Kian said. “But he has his hands full at the moment. Phinas will call as soon as he gets everyone on board the chartered plane.”

Jade looked like she wanted to say something but stopped and turned to Yamanu. “I like your toast. I will also drink to freedom and a better future for our people. May we all enjoy many years of peace and prosperity.”

PHINAS

“*I* sedated the three purebloods with a dose that could knock out an elephant,” Aiden reported. “And as you’ve requested, I went light on the hybrid so you could interrogate him on the way to Greenland.”

“Thanks.” Phinas clapped him on the back.

He wanted nothing more than to keep Igor awake for just long enough to beat the crap out of him until even his mother couldn’t recognize the bloody pulp, but even bound and gagged, and despite the earpieces they all wore, the guy was too dangerous to leave conscious.

Perhaps they’d made him into a bigger threat than he really was, but Phinas wasn’t taking chances just because he wanted the satisfaction of beating the crap out of the maggot that had abused Jade for over two decades.

And then there was the fact that Jade wasn’t the type of female who would tolerate anyone avenging her while she was more than capable of doing so herself.

“What do you want to do with the humans?” Max asked. “We can ask the helicopter pilot to deliver them to the nearest police station and save Berg’s crew the trouble of having to deal with them on their way back to Copenhagen. I have no doubt that the crew can handle them, but why burden them with the scum? They barely have enough hands to run the ship, let alone deal with five surly prisoners.”

“You are right. What the police do with them is of no concern to us. Their boss is going to find them and release

them anyway, and then he'll probably execute them for letting his precious yacht get taken and blown to pieces."

Max snorted. "Even oligarchs carry insurance, and he would get his money back. Besides, he was the one who Igor contacted and compelled to allow him the use of the yacht, so he can't blame his men for what happened to his precious *Helena*, which I found out was named after his daughter." The Guardian smiled. "That's kind of sweet, and it makes me less eager to kill the fucker."

"The oligarch is not our problem." Phinas headed inside the ship.

"He's everyone's problem." Max fell in step with him. "When I was a kid, I dreamt about becoming a vigilante and killing the bad people who made life miserable for everyone else."

Phinas cast him a sidelong glance. "What happened to that dream?"

"I'm living it." Max put his hand on his chest. "That's why I became a Guardian. I don't get to kill whoever I want, but I do my part in eradicating evil. Rescuing trafficking victims is my contribution to the greater good." He put his arm around Phinas as if they were best buddies. "You and your men should join our humanitarian effort at least part-time. It's very gratifying. Saving damsels in real distress will make you feel better about yourself."

Phinas had enough skeletons in his proverbial closet to fill a department store, but the good deeds of tomorrow could not erase the misdeeds of yesterday.

"I'll think about it, but unlike you, my time is not free to do with as I please. I have a boss who decides what I do and when."

Max shrugged. "I have a boss too. Onegus tells me what to do and assigns me to missions, but if I'm not happy and want a change of pace, all I have to do is ask. I can also resign, but I have no intention of doing that. I love being a Guardian."

Phinas envied the guy.

Max had chosen to be a Guardian; he was good at it and still enjoyed doing it after who knew how long.

Phinas was also good at his job, perhaps even exceptional, but he hadn't chosen it. He didn't love it and didn't hate it either, but he would have loved to explore other options.

That wasn't going to happen.

Kalugal had saved him from the nightmare of serving in the Brotherhood, and he owed him his life. He would serve Kalugal until he was no longer needed and Kalugal dismissed him.

Looking at the blank expressions on the humans' faces, he turned to Max. "What kind of story did you plant in their heads?"

Toven had made quick work of releasing the humans from Igor's compulsion over the phone, and Max had taken it from there, thralling them to forget the details of what had happened to them and replacing those memories with others that were more plausible and didn't hint at an alien with incredible compulsion ability.

"Nothing overly exciting. The story is that Igor wanted to test the missile battery they had on board, and the thing malfunctioned, blowing up in his face, killing him and his men, and blowing a hole in the deck. Then a fire started, and as the men realized that the yacht was about to blow, they jumped into the water and swam away as quickly as they could." Max smiled. "The closer a story is to the truth, the more believable it is."

The men had suffered minor burns, which Aiden had treated, and hypothermia, which the other Guardians with medic training were still treating, but remarkably that was the extent of their injuries, and no one had died.

When questioned, the humans had told Max that there had been no cooks or maids on board and that they had subsisted on frozen meals.

Phinas wondered what Igor and the two other purebloods had done for food. Had they fed on the humans? Or had they

brought bagged blood with them?

Kian should be happy that there had been no civilian casualties or any casualties at all, but Phinas was disappointed. The humans they'd saved were professional killers, and getting rid of them would have been a service to humanity.

But they weren't his or the clan's problem, and he had no business appointing himself their judge and executioner. Besides, Max and his Guardian buddies would not stand for that.

The important thing was that Phinas had the ones he'd come for, and the sense of satisfaction was incredible, mainly because he knew how happy it would make Jade.

Well, happy might not be the right word.

Satisfied wasn't right either.

Jade was keeping so much grief and anger bottled up inside of her that once her vengeance was complete and grief flooded the void created by the departure of rage, she would fall apart.

Hopefully, he would be there to catch her. The question was whether she would allow it.

JADE

“*I* used a little more cranberry juice and a little less vodka this time.” Yamanu handed Jade another glass. “Tell me if you like it.”

It was her fourth, and she was starting to feel a little tipsy, which she suspected was Yamanu’s intention. They wanted to make her more amenable before asking her to postpone killing Igor so Toven could interrogate him.

“Thank you.” She took a small sip. “It’s good. It’s still a little too heavy on the alcohol, but that’s fine. I don’t get drunk easily.” Even when her head was spinning and her balance was off, her mind worked just fine.

It was both a blessing and a curse.

There had been so many times she’d wished alcohol would do for her what it did for others. Regrettably, it didn’t muddle her thinking, nor did it numb the pain, and she could never get a vacation from her own head. The effects were only physical, and she didn’t like them.

“We don’t get drunk easily either.” Yamanu leaned back against the couch cushions. “This crap doesn’t even tickle me.”

She lifted her glass. “You’re welcome to some of my poison.”

He eyed the half empty vodka bottle. “I think I’ll take you up on your offer. If we finish the vodka, we can always get more.”

Ignoring Toven's sour expression, Yamanu mixed himself a drink in his champagne glass.

"So, what now?" Jade put hers down on the table. "Do we continue removing the trackers? Or do we tell Merlin to stop?"

The three of them looked at the four males crowding the small screen.

"He can definitely slow down now that he has more time," Kian said. "I assume that your people want the trackers out." He cast her a questioning look.

What was he implying? That she wanted the trackers to stay so she could keep tabs on her people?

A good leader didn't need to monitor her people with technology. Their vows of loyalty should suffice to keep them from running off or betraying her trust in other ways. The only one who'd broken his vow to her was Veskar, but she had a feeling that the clever male had found a way around the vow, convincing himself that by leaving he was doing her and the tribe a favor.

The problem was that those who'd been born in Igor's compound didn't believe in the power of vows, and neither did the humans.

Nevertheless, she wouldn't employ any of Igor's tactics to keep her people in line. She'd find a way to reinstall the old beliefs that had kept the Kra-ell society functioning for hundreds of thousands of years.

"We have no need of trackers. I would appreciate it if Merlin continued the removal. It's no longer an emergency or a necessity, so his services might not be offered freely, but I will gladly pay him to finish the job."

It was also a hint, reminding Kian that he had the money Igor had stolen from her tribe and the others, and that he should at some point transfer the funds to them.

"You don't need to pay Merlin for his services," Kian said. "He volunteered for this mission, and he's doing it to help your people."

She dipped her head. “He has my thanks, and I’ll thank him in person as soon as I see him.”

“I’m sure he will appreciate it,” Kian said. “The next and perhaps most important item we have to discuss is whether you want to return to your compound. With Igor gone, you and your people are no longer in danger there.”

She’d thought about it at length, and there were many more negatives than positives to returning to the compound.

The only positive was that the humans might be comfortable there, but she wasn’t even sure about that. Igor hadn’t tormented them as he had the Kra-ell, but she doubted they had fond memories of the place.

Karelia was beautiful, and the forests were filled with wildlife, which was perfect for the Kra-ell, but the harsh winters were miserably cold and dark.

The planet the Kra-ell shared with the gods was warm and humid, and even though their sun wasn’t as bright as Earth’s and its hues were red and purple instead of yellow, there was light for approximately the same time as the absence of it. Anumati’s axis had much less of a tilt than Earth’s, so the daytime in winter was almost the same as in summer.

Still, Karelia’s harsh weather wasn’t as much of a problem as the memories of living under Igor’s rule. The compound had his imprint all over it, and it would be a constant reminder of what she’d suffered.

“I’d rather not.” Jade lifted her glass and took a long sip before putting it back down. “A fresh start in a new place is preferable.”

Kian nodded. “I understand. Too many bad memories, eh?”

“That too. I also don’t know who Igor compelled to shield the compound from human eyes, and what other directives he implanted in the local authorities’ minds. It might not be safe for us to return there even with Igor gone.”

“I agree,” Turner said. “Where would you like to go?”

She smiled. “Somewhere warmer. Do you know of a deserted tropical island we can inhabit?”

Kian chuckled. “I know just the one, but regrettably, it belongs to our enemies.”

“You mean the Doomers and their leader Navuh? Perhaps we can launch an offensive and conquer it?”

The force she commanded was laughable in comparison to the might of the Brotherhood, and Jade hadn’t said it seriously, but she was curious to see how Kalugal would respond to it.

“How much did Phinas tell you about his past?” Kian asked.

“He only told me the highlights, but I understand that the island is home to thousands of immortal warriors, and it’s ruled by Kalugal’s father.”

“Correct,” Kalugal said. “And that’s why conquering it is not on the table.”

KIAN

“That’s a shame.” Jade smiled behind her glass of cranberry vodka. “Perhaps we can find a similar island somewhere else.”

Turner shook his head. “Purchasing an island that size and keeping it hidden from the world was doable when Navuh took possession of it. In today’s internet connected world, it’s much more difficult.”

Perhaps even impossible.

Kian hadn’t explored the option because he had no desire to live on an island, but he’d often wondered how Navuh was managing to keep it hidden. It probably involved a lot of compulsion work on his part and was reinforced with hefty bribes to human leaders in the area.

Jade leaned closer to the tablet so her face took up the entire screen. “There aren’t that many of us, including the humans. A group so small could fit in a gated community in the middle of a city, and no one would be any the wiser. We could also get a very small island somewhere, one of those that rich people buy to build a castle on. The problem with such a small landmass is that it might not be enough to contain the wildlife needed to sustain us.”

As Turner and Jade kept exploring the island idea, Kian stifled a groan.

Up until now he’d still entertained the option of returning the Kra-ell to their old compound, but now that was off the

table. Even if Jade could be convinced to go back there, he wouldn't do that because the issues she'd raised were valid.

With Igor gone, the Kra-ell and the humans of their community were safe from him but not from the humans on the outside, who might have been compromised by Igor and problematic to control without him.

Humans couldn't be allowed to find out about the aliens living amongst them.

Once a single Kra-ell or immortal was captured and brought to the authorities, the hunt would begin, and even their immortality and super abilities wouldn't protect them from the sheer numbers that humans could throw at them.

No wonder the gods had been concerned with the rapidly expanding human population. Their method of solving the problem had been terrible, but they must have felt that they had no choice. They had either caused the flood or had known it was coming and hadn't warned humanity to seek higher ground.

Ironically, the gods' end hadn't been caused by the humans they had feared, but by one of their own.

Still, it made sense for Igor and the other Kra-ell to assume that the gods who had settled on Earth had been obliterated by the humans they'd created.

When there was a lull in the conversation, Kian refocused his gaze on Jade and realized she was waiting for him to answer her.

"I'm sorry. What was the question?"

"I asked Turner what you are planning to do with the trackers you remove from my people, and he said it's up to you."

"The simple trackers can be trashed, but we will probably want to keep the sophisticated ones and analyze them. We have the one we took out of Sophia, but William didn't want to take it apart because of its solid state and it would have destroyed it. If we have many more, he won't have to be so careful."

Kian expected her to object and demand that the trackers be returned to her people for safekeeping, but she surprised him by nodding. “I don’t have a problem with that as long as William shares his findings with me. I would also like to have a few for safekeeping in case William can’t decipher them, and I decide to launch an investigation of my own.”

Translation—Jade wanted to have the alien trackers in case the findings weren’t shared with her. It was an opportunity to create more goodwill and get something in return from her.

“I see no problem with that. By the time the removal is done, we will have plenty of them to divide between us.”

Jade swished the alcohol in her glass for a moment. “What I want to find out is how Igor monitored the signals. He had to have the signal receiver with him on the yacht, and unless it could fit inside his pocket, it’s now in pieces at the bottom of the sea. How are we going to find the other survivors without it?”

“Are you interested in finding their bodies to give them a proper Kra-ell passing ceremony?” Toven asked.

“If they are dead, yes. But maybe some are alive.”

“Other than those Igor found, the others probably didn’t make it.” Kian didn’t know how to phrase it more gently, but thankfully Jade wasn’t the kind of female who needed coddling. She was a straight shooter just like him. “The alien trackers need a living host to transmit a signal, and since Igor didn’t find them, we have to assume that the hosts are no longer alive.”

JADE

*K*ian was probably right, and the same had occurred to Jade, but she wasn't willing to give up hope yet.

There could be other explanations.

Perhaps Igor had access to a receiver that could follow only a small portion of the Kra-ell settlers, but that was grasping at straws.

Perhaps the other pods were under water, and that's why the signal couldn't travel far. After all, that's the explanation Phinas had given her for why they couldn't communicate with the submarine following them. Something about radio signals not traveling well in salt water. But given how advanced the gods' technology was, that was a weak straw as well.

"There could be another explanation," Turner said. "The others might still be in stasis, and perhaps the trackers are not designed to transmit when the host's body is in that state. I can ask Bridget what happens to the body's electrical activity during stasis. Perhaps it's not enough to energize the trackers."

Hope surged in Jade's chest. Perhaps the twins were alive after all.

How would she find them, though?

If Igor hadn't found them despite having access to the monitoring equipment and knowing how to identify the signal, how would she manage what he couldn't?

What if he had found the twins and killed them?

At the thought, a shiver of dread slithered down her spine. That wasn't a far-fetched scenario if Igor was an assassin who'd been sent to eliminate the twins. But what about the other settlers? Why hadn't he gone after them? Surely he wanted their females.

The new generation of purebloods born in the compound was predominantly male, and without a continuous influx of pureblooded females, the gender disparity would have only grown.

But if the twins were still alive, her only chance of finding them was with the help of the clan. From what she'd seen so far, they had access to technology she didn't, and Turner had resources in the human world that she wouldn't even know where to start looking for.

Except, she would have to tell them about the twins, and she couldn't trust them with that information.

They seemed like good people, and they'd helped her against Igor, but it was only because their interests had aligned. Her email to Safe Haven had exposed the clan and they had been forced to eliminate the threat.

Kian shook his head. "That doesn't make sense. The trackers were most likely meant for precisely the kind of disastrous scenario as the ship exploding and the escape pods getting scattered all over. It was done to locate survivors. The trackers must operate even when the hosts are in stasis, but if the hosts are dead, there's no sense in wasting resources on finding them. It's more crucial to get to the survivors as quickly as possible."

Turner pursed his lips. "You've got a point. Although it depends on what the purpose of the trackers was. Maybe they were meant as a general means to track the settlers and not as an emergency beacon. In that case, it makes sense that the trackers were activated only when the host was awake. Don't forget that they had to travel hundreds of years to get to their destination. The chances of malfunctions increase the longer a device is used."

“You might be right as well.” Kian leveled his eyes at Jade. “The only one who has the answers is Igor.”

Here it comes.

Kian was about to ask her not to execute Igor on the spot and to allow them time to interrogate him.

“I know what you’re about to suggest, and if I thought that we could learn something useful from him, I would be willing to wait. But I know Igor, and he’s not going to tell you anything. Why would he? He knows he’s a dead man either way.”

“Tom might be able to compel him,” Kian said. “It’s worth a try.”

“I don’t think he can, but I’m willing to give him a chance. One day.”

She would have preferred to chop off Igor’s head the moment she stepped off the ship, but there was also satisfaction in letting him think about his impending death. Besides, it was good to show Kian that she was reasonable and would make a good ally.

Kalugal cleared his throat. “One day might not be practical. As soon as the *Aurora* docks in Greenland, you will board the planes and get out of there. I know there is no rush now, but the flights were scheduled, and the pilots can’t wait around for Toven to be done interrogating Igor. That means he has to be loaded onto one of the planes, and Toven can question him on the way.”

Jade narrowed her eyes at him. “Why would you risk getting him on a plane? The prudent thing to do is interrogate him in Greenland, kill him, and dispose of the body.”

“We came up with an interesting idea,” Kalugal said. “We can ask Merlin to tamper with Igor’s vocal cords so he can no longer generate the special sound waves to produce compulsion. That will render him nearly harmless.”

“How do you know that tampering with his vocal cords will do that?”

Kalugal shrugged. “It makes sense since compulsion works only when the voice is heard. But since Igor can heal pretty fast, maybe it’s better to remove them completely, which will take him much longer to regenerate, and he’ll be dead before that. Even when mute, he can still tell us what we want to know by writing the answers either with pen and paper or on a keyboard.”

The idea was intriguing for the simple reason that seeing Igor helpless and desperate would be immensely satisfying. The problem was that removing his vocal cords would not make him any more susceptible to compulsion than he was with them intact.

“The problem with your idea is that he still can’t be compelled to cooperate. He might try to bargain for his life with information, but you can’t promise him a stay of execution in exchange for what he can tell you, and I know that you won’t lie.”

Kian chuckled and tilted his head toward Kalugal. “He might, but I won’t.”

Kalugal didn’t look offended. “Then leave him to me.”

“That means bringing him to you,” Jade said. “I’d rather be done with him in Greenland.”

Kalugal cast Kian a sidelong glance before turning back to her. “We have one more person who might be able to compel Igor, so maybe bringing him with you is not such a bad idea. Once you kill him, the door is closed, and I believe in leaving doors open.”

He must have meant his mother, the goddess. Should she tell him that Phinas had told her about Annani? Or was it supposed to be a secret?

Jade closed her eyes. “Let me think about it. We have four more days until we reach Greenland. That should be enough.” She rose to her feet. “If we are done celebrating here, I would like to share the good news with my people and celebrate with them.”

“Of course.” Kian gave her a slight nod. “We can talk more tomorrow after you’ve had some rest.”

“Before I go, is there any news from the *Anatolov*? Is it still keeping the same distance from us?”

“It is,” Turner said. “But not for long. You have nothing to worry about, though. As soon as it tries to close the distance or make any aggressive move, our submarine will take it out.”

PHINAS

*A*s the plane finished its ascent, Phinas unbuckled his seatbelt and walked over to the chained hybrid. Assuming his most intimidating expression, he leaned toward him. “How did Igor know that the compound was compromised?”

The guy looked at him with a blank expression, but the brief flare of red in his eyes gave him away. He’d understood the question and was just playing dumb.

“Maybe he doesn’t understand English.” Max walked over and leaned against the seat.

“He understands.”

“How do you know?”

“Kra-ell eyes give away their emotions. Red can mean either aggression or desire.”

Max chuckled. “So, he either wants to punch you or boink you.” He leaned closer. “What’s your name, buddy?”

The hybrid didn’t even turn his head to glance at the Guardian.

Max crossed his arms over his chest. “Igor must have compelled him to keep his mouth shut.”

“Maybe. Or perhaps he thinks he’s a dead man either way.” Phinas trained his gaze on the hybrid. “If you cooperate, we might let you live. If you don’t, I’ll let Jade deal with you.”

The guy’s eyes blazed blue for a moment. “She’s alive?”

It should have occurred to Phinas that Igor and his men had believed that they were on a rescue mission to save their people from an enemy.

They had no reason to believe that the people had left voluntarily, especially given the powerful compulsion they had been under to defend the compound at all costs.

“Very much so, and so are most of your people. We came to liberate the compound and brought along a powerful compeller who freed your people from Igor’s compulsion. They were all very happy to leave.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but mostly.

“So no one died?”

“The only ones who are no longer breathing are Igor’s men who participated in the slaughter of Jade’s tribe. She and Kagra dispatched them.”

He’d killed one, but only because Kagra had been in trouble, and he’d jumped in to save her. It wasn’t worth mentioning.

The guy frowned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Of course not. The hybrid was born in the compound and didn’t know how and why the females had gotten there. He might not even know that it wasn’t natural for a Kra-ell community to have that many females.

“How did Igor find out about the compound?” Phinas tried again.

“I can’t tell you.”

“You can’t, or you won’t?”

“I can’t. Where is your compeller?”

Phinas let out a breath. “He’s not here.” He looked up at Max. “Let’s put him under. He’s useless to us.”

“Aiden!” Max called. “Get over here. Put him to sleep.”

The Guardian ambled toward them. “We can’t keep them sedated forever. I mean, it’s okay for the duration of the flight and to get them into the hotel, but we can’t do it for five days until the ship gets to Greenland. They will to relieve themselves, and if we don’t let them stay awake long enough to do that, we will have a mess to clean up.”

Max grimaced. “How do they do it in hospitals?”

“They put a catheter in sedated people and feed them intravenously, but I don’t know how to do either. I just know how to stick them with a needle.” He pulled a syringe out of his pocket and stuck it in the guy’s thigh through his clothes.

“We will worry about it when we get there.” Phinas let out a sigh and pushed up to his feet. “I’m going to the bathroom. Keep an eye on him.”

Max grinned. “Are you going to call your girlfriend?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Right. So you’re not calling Jade?”

“Nope. I’m calling Mey.”

“Same thing.” Max waved him off. “Tell her to say hi to Kagra for me and ask her if she misses me.”

Phinas shook his head. “Find your own way to call Kagra. Maybe Jin will do you a favor.”

He walked into the tiny bathroom, closed the door behind him, and called Mey.

“Hi, Phinas,” she answered in a cheerful voice. “How are things on the *Seafarer*?”

“Good, but we are no longer on the ship. We are on the plane on our way to Greenland. Can I ask you for a favor?”

“Of course. I’ll go find her.”

He smiled. “How did you know what I was going to ask?”

“What other reason do you have to call me?”

“I’m sorry to keep bothering you like this.”

“It’s not a bother. I’m happy to help two people so obviously in love.”

If Jade had heard Mey, she would have jumped overboard.

“We are not in love. We are friends with benefits.”

She laughed. “Keep telling yourself that. I’ll call you when I find her.”

“Thank you. You’re the best.”

“I know, right?”

JADE

“*L*et’s make another toast!” Kagra poured vodka into Jade and Morgada’s glasses. “To our freedom!”

Morgada followed. “To Igor’s head rolling off into the ocean.”

“To a new beginning.” Jade lifted her glass with an unsteady hand and poured the vodka down her throat.

It burned, the same way the six that had come before it had burned, but she didn’t care even though her vision was swimming, and she was the closest to passing out from drinking than she’d ever been before.

The cranberry juice had run out, and none of them was in a state to go looking for more. Instead, they were downing the vodka straight.

She and Kagra had gone from cabin to cabin, sharing the good news of Igor’s capture with their people. Tomos and Boris had offered to inform the humans, and Jade had accepted their offer even though she should have done it herself. She just didn’t have the energy to continue repeating the same story.

Jade was exhausted from the worry for Phinas, the fear that Igor would pull an unexpected move and gain the upper hand, the lack of sleep, and now nausea and a headache from imbibing too much alcohol, but despite it all, she felt better than she had in years.

After decades of hopelessness, and losing time and again, winning for a change felt incredibly good. The only thing that

could have made these moments better was having Phinas there and culminating the celebrations in his bed.

As the doorbell rang, the three of them turned to look at it, but only Morgada was sober enough to get up and let their visitor inside.

When she opened the door, and Mey walked in, Jade welcomed her with a grin. “Did you come to join our celebration?” She lifted the bottle of vodka. “There is plenty left, but only because it’s the second bottle. We finished the first bottle and all the cranberry juice, so you’ll have to drink it straight up.”

“I’ll pass.” Mey walked over to the couch and sat next to Jade. “Phinas wants to talk to you. Do you want to call him from here or somewhere more private?”

“That depends.” She put her hand on Mey’s arm. “Do you still have to be there when I use your phone? Because if I can call him in private, there are some things I want to say to him that are not for your ears.” She gave Mey what she hoped was a meaningful look.

The female laughed. “If you weren’t about to pass out, I would take the chance and let you take my phone to the bedroom, but I need it back, and I don’t want to have to pry it from your fingers.”

“Then come into the bedroom in fifteen minutes to get it.”

Mey hesitated for a moment. “I wish I could, but I can’t. There is too much personal information on it, some of it classified, so I have to come with you, but I’ll do my best not to listen.” She pulled a pair of earbuds from her pocket.

Jade eyed the devices with a frown. “Those are not the specialty earpieces.”

“They are just regular earbuds that I use to listen to podcasts while I exercise.”

With Mey’s enhanced hearing, those wouldn’t do much to keep Jade’s conversation with Phinas private unless the female blasted music.

Jade let out a breath and rose to her feet with effort. “I don’t know why you are all so worried. I have absolutely no one to call except Phinas.” She started toward the bedroom on unsteady legs. “Aside from him, everyone I care about is on this ship.”

Mey followed her to the bedroom. “It’s not about that. All of our calls are recorded. No one is listening, but if anything happens, and there is reason to suspect something isn’t kosher, the Guardians can and will listen to the recording. It’s just that there is too much information on this device that I’m not at liberty to share.”

Jade looked over her shoulder at the female. “If it was up to you, would you trust me with it?”

Mey took in a deep breath and nodded. “I would. I don’t think you are the kind of person who would ever repay kindness with betrayal. You are honorable.”

“Thank you.” Jade dropped her bottom on the bed. “That’s exactly right. Can I have the phone now?”

“Let me dial Phinas for you.”

“Okay.” Jade lay down on the bed and groaned. “I’m getting a headache.”

“Do you want me to get you a couple of Motrin? I’m sure Merlin has them in his clinic.”

Jade laughed. “Haven’t you heard what Motrin does to Kra-ell?”

“No.” Mey regarded her with a frown. “What does it do?”

“It affects us like alcohol affects humans.”

PHINAS

While waiting for Mey to find Jade, Phinas had to vacate the bathroom twice to let others use it, and when the call finally came in, he was outside the bathroom, leaning against the opposite wall.

“Hello, my brave warrior,” Jade slurred her words. “Are you delivering my prize bull hogtied with a red bow around his neck?”

Phinas chuckled. “I still need to find a red bow, but affirmative on all the rest. By the sound of it, you either celebrated with too much alcohol or someone snuck a Motrin or two into your drink.”

“No Motrin, but too much vodka. Don’t get fooled by my impaired mouth, though. Even though my head is swimming, my mind works perfectly fine.”

He stifled a snort. “I have no doubt. Where are you now?”

As the bathroom door opened, he waited until Vortek stepped out to duck inside and shut the door behind him.

“In my cabin. Kagra and Morgada are in the living room, and Mey is with me in the bedroom. She is sitting on a chair pretending she can’t hear me, but I know she can. But maybe she can’t hear you, so we can have one-way phone sex. Where are you?”

Jade was definitely drunk, and she was saying stuff she wouldn’t have said when sober. Not that she was shy or even concerned with decorum, but she was never that carefree.

“I’m on the plane, hiding in the bathroom so I can have some privacy.”

“Goodie. Do you want sexy-talk? I heard that humans are into that. I never tried it before.”

“I would love to, but not while you are using Mey’s phone and not while I’m in a stinky bathroom.”

Vortek had left toxic fumes behind him.

Jade groaned. “Why did you tell me that? It’s gross, and now I want to puke. Get out of there.”

“I’ll survive. I need a private spot so I can tell you how much I miss you.”

“I miss you too, but it makes me very uncomfortable, so let’s talk about something else. What did you do with your prisoners?”

Had she meant that missing him was making her uncomfortable or that he was talking to her from a stinky bathroom?

“We’re keeping them sedated. I left the hybrid semi-sedated so I could interrogate him, but he’s under Igor’s compulsion not to reveal anything.”

“Maybe you should put Tom on the phone with him.”

Evidently Jade was right about her mind staying clear despite the alcohol’s effect. She’d remembered to call Toven by his fake name.

“I thought about doing that, but it can wait for when we meet in Greenland. The guy probably doesn’t know much, and even if he does, none of it is urgent.”

“True. I wonder if he knows which officials Igor compelled to ignore our compound.”

Phinas’s gut clenched. Did Jade plan to return to Karelia?

“Why do you need to know that? Do you want to go back?”

She sighed. “Kian and your boss asked me the same question. I said no, and Kian looked disappointed. I think he would prefer for us to go back there, and I don’t want to repay his kindness by placing more burden on him. So, I reexamined my decision, trying to find solutions for the issues that prevent us from going back. One of those issues is that I don’t know which of the local officials is under Igor’s compulsion and what they are compelled to do. If Porgut knows who they are, Tom can release them from Igor’s compulsion, and I can use mine to compel them to do what I tell them. I’m not nearly as strong as Igor or Tom, but I’m strong enough to compel most humans.”

Toven could make the hybrid talk, and if Porgut didn’t know the answers, the two purebloods probably did. But Jade said that the compelled officials were just one of the issues.

“What were your other reasons for not wanting to go back?”

She sighed. “The weather and too many bad memories. There is hardly any sunlight in the winter, and that’s not healthy for Kra-ell. But those are not life-and-death issues. Security is.”

Phinas closed his eyes. “You should not compromise on your new location. This is an opportunity for a fresh start, and it shouldn’t be diminished by practical considerations. You are making so many positive changes in the way your people live and interact. If you go back to the compound, they will fall back on old habits, and everything will revert to how it was when Igor was in charge. You don’t want that.”

Was he being a selfish bastard for pushing her to relocate?

Maybe.

But his gut was telling him that she shouldn’t return to the old compound. Then again, his gut was informed by his preferences, and he didn’t want Jade to be on the other side of the world from him.

“Yeah, you’re right. But I’m too nauseous to think right now. My head is swimming.”

“It’s not your head,” he heard Mey say. “It’s the ship. The ocean is getting turbulent.”

Phinas clutched the phone to his ear. “What does she mean by turbulent? What’s going on?”

“It’s raining,” Mey said. “And the wind is picking up. I should check what’s happening.”

“Yeah, and when you find out, call me, please.”

“Will do,” Mey said. “I need the phone back.”

“I have to go.” Jade groaned. “I wish I hadn’t had so much to drink. I’m going with Mey to find out what the deal is with this bad weather. No one said anything about a storm.”

Mey chuckled. “Try not to puke on me.”

TOVEN

When Toven entered Valstar's cabin, the television was playing without sound, and the guy was staring at it with unfocused eyes. Given his pallor, he'd probably heard about Igor's capture, but Toven was curious about what terrified him.

He should be much more worried about Jade than about Igor.

"Hello, Valstar." Toven sat across from him on one of the armchairs. "You don't look so good."

"The ship is swaying, and the guards told me there is a storm. Is this vessel safe?"

So that was what the formidable Valstar was scared of. Apparently, phobias affected Kra-ell in the same way they did humans and immortals.

The truth was that Toven had been a little worried himself, mostly because of Mia and the humans on board, so he'd read up on the subject to reassure himself that they weren't going to sink even if the weather got worse.

"The storm is not that bad, but even if it was, modern cruise ships are very safe, and it's extremely rare for them to get into real trouble that requires evacuation."

"What about the *Titanic*?"

Toven chuckled. "That was a very long time ago, and it collided with an iceberg. This ship and others like it have

equipment that detects obstacles long in advance so they can avoid them.”

Valstar didn't look convinced. “We are in a floating bucket. If the waves get really big, what will prevent it from tipping so low that it starts taking in water and sinking?”

“The ship is made from heavy steel, and everything in it makes it even heavier. It can easily roll through rough waters or rogue waves. The worst that can happen is that it will tilt to one side, but even that's unlikely. The ship's center of gravity is designed to keep her steady even in hurricanes, and the storm we are experiencing is nowhere near as violent as that. Ships also have several ballast tanks, and the water inside of them can be pumped to either side of the ship to help keep her balanced.”

“So why is it rocking so badly?”

Toven chuckled. “It would have been much worse without the stabilizing. Anyway, you shouldn't worry about the weather. If you want to worry about something, it should be the Russian destroyer on our tail, or that we caught Igor, although neither represents a clear and present danger to us.”

Valstar's shoulders stiffened, but given that his expression changed only marginally, he'd already known about Igor's capture.

“Why didn't you order your men to kill him on the spot?”

“I promised Jade his head, and I'm not one to go back on my promise.”

That got Valstar's attention. “What about me? You promised her my head as well.”

“I did, but I pleaded your case with her, and she promised to give it some thought. I told her that you should be given a fair trial.”

Valstar sighed. “You're just postponing my execution.”

“Would you rather die today than tomorrow?”

The male shrugged. “I don't know. Sometimes I think that ending it all is preferable. I hate being alone in this cabin,

chained like a dog, and I hate not knowing when and how my end will come.”

“Well, if you don’t want to wait for a trial, let me know, and I can arrange your execution.”

“I might take you up on your offer. At least I would be able to choose the when and how.”

Toven nodded. Having even a tiny bit of control over one’s destiny was comforting, and Valstar wasn’t enough of a monster to be denied that. He had done monstrous things, but he hadn’t chosen to do so. He’d been as much of a victim as the ones he’d killed.

“If you’re keeping Igor alive because you want to get information out of him, that’s a mistake.” Valstar shifted his position, and as his chains made a clanking sound, he winced. “He won’t talk even if you torture him.”

“What makes you say that? The guy has always relied on his compulsion ability to get anything he wanted. He has never been tortured, and he might sing after the first squeeze.”

Valstar shook his head. “He’s tough, and he had military training that was superior to the rest of us. Perhaps he served in one of the queen’s special units.”

That was a new piece of information, and Toven jumped right on it. “What did the queen do with her special units?”

“I don’t know.” Valstar lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck. “What are special ops units for?”

“Good point.” Toven made a mental note to ask Turner about it. He had a general idea, but it was based mainly on books he’d read and movies he’d seen. “Infiltrations, espionage, retrieval of captured operatives.” He frowned. “Why would the queen send a special operator on a settler ship?”

“I often wondered the same thing,” Valstar admitted. “But Igor is like a vault. He doesn’t reveal anything he doesn’t have to or want to.”

YAMANU

“*I*’ll talk with the captain.” Yamanu kissed Mey’s cheek and cast Jade a sidelong glance. She wasn’t looking good, and he was worried about her barfing in their cabin. “Perhaps you should escort Jade back to her cabin and put her in bed.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Jade plopped down on the couch. “I want to know what’s going on with the weather and how bad it’s going to get, but since I don’t think I can make it across the deck to the bridge, I’ll wait here for you to return and tell me what you learned. If we are in danger, I need to let my people know so they can take the necessary precautions.”

While Mey’s lips twitched with amusement, Yamanu turned his face away from Jade so she couldn’t see his expression.

It wasn’t nice to make fun of the Kra-ell’s water phobia, but the weather wasn’t bad enough to justify safety drills.

“What kind of precautions?” Mey asked.

“To start with, we need to get life vests on the children. Maybe even go to the lifeboats and wait there in case we need to board them.” Jade’s speech was slurred, but her eyes were completely lucid.

“I’ll make coffee.” Mey cast him an amused glance as she walked over to the cabin’s kitchenette.

Trying to keep a straight face, Yamanu headed for the door. “The situation doesn’t call for such extreme measures, but I’ll call Mey as soon as I know anything.”

“Thank you.” Jade put a hand on her forehead as she slumped against the couch cushions.

When Yamanu stepped through the sliding doors onto the top deck, the rain pelted him with cold droplets, but even though it seemed as if the temperature was freezing, it wasn't. The rain didn't turn into sleet, but the wind was making it miserably cold, and as he made his way toward the bridge, he kept his hands in the pockets of his coat and cursed himself for not putting on a hat or at least wrapping a scarf around his neck.

Pulling the door open, he was quick about getting in and closing it behind him. “Good evening, gentlemen.” He strode toward the captain. “How is the weather looking?”

“It could be worse,” the captain said.

The guy looked like he hadn't slept in days, which was probably spot on since nearly half his crew had gone to the *Seafarer*, and he was severely understaffed.

Once Berg had delivered the decoy back to Copenhagen, he, his crew members, and the Guardians accompanying them would fly to Greenland to meet up with the *Aurora*. The ship would continue its journey south with its whole crew on board, while all the passengers would leave on the planes Turner had chartered.

The question was where the Kra-ell and the humans would land. That had yet to be decided, and there was little time left.

“I'm glad it's not too bad.” Yamanu rubbed his hands to warm them up. “Perhaps it's a good idea to speed up a little and get away from the Russian trailing us.”

The captain shook his head. “I have to slow her down to avoid the storm.” He pulled up a weather map on the screen. “Here is the storm's center.” He pointed. “And here is the *Aurora*.” He pointed at a spot east of it. “If I want to avoid sailing right into the storm, I have to slow her down to sixteen knots.”

“That's a shame. I thought the storm was behind us.”

The captain turned to look at him. “Why is the Russian still on our tail? He should have either attacked or gone back. The *Parchin* is mainly used to patrol the Baltic. It’s not a blue-water vessel, and it can’t keep following us across the North Atlantic. What’s more, the Russian naval command will have realized by now that they have a rogue ship on their hands, and the *Anatolov*’s captain must be aware of that.”

Perhaps Captain Sergey Gorshekov was waiting for Igor’s command?

It was likely that Igor had compelled him to follow the *Aurora* and wait for his instructions. The captain would keep following them until told otherwise by Igor or taken over by the Russian navy. Turner’s instructions to Nils were to attack only if the Russian made an aggressive move or sped up to close the distance between him and the *Aurora*.

Maybe now that they were being forced to slow down, they would force the confrontation, and Nils would disable the Russian cruiser.

Yamanu would have preferred a resolution that didn’t involve unnecessary loss of life, and if the Russian was hit hard enough, sailors would die. It would be preferable to run, but the Fates might have other plans, and they were not always merciful.

“Thank you for the update, captain. I will inform the command center back home.”

Olsson responded with a slight nod and went back to his monitoring equipment.

Sticking his hands back in his coat pockets, Yamanu made his way across the deck and through the sliding doors inside. Once out of the rain, he pulled out his phone and called Toven.

“I’m heading to the war room to call Kian and the gang. Do you want to join?”

“Of course,” the god said. “Is it about the storm? Is it getting worse?”

“Not unless Olsson sails right into it, which he might have to if Kian wants to avoid confrontation with the Russian. Meet

me in the war room, and I'll explain the situation.”

“I'll be there in a moment.”

“See you there.” Yamanu ended the call and made another to his mate.

“Well?” Mey answered. “Are we sinking any time soon?”

“We are not. Tell Jade that the captain is slowing the ship down to avoid the worst of the storm. This is probably as bad as it's going to get.”

“That's good news. Are you on your way back?”

“Not yet. I'm heading to the war room to talk to Kian and the others about our tail.”

“What about him?”

“He should have made his move already, and since he hasn't, he must be waiting for a command from Igor, which isn't going to come. At least, that's what I'm hoping for. It would be a shame for those Russian sailors to die for no good reason.”

KIAN

As Kian listened to Yamanu's update about the storm, he glanced at Turner to see the guy's expression, but what he found was not what he'd been hoping for.

When Turner had answers at the ready, he looked smug, and when the gears in his mind were spinning, working out a solution, he had a faraway look in his eyes. Now he just looked indifferent.

"We need to force the Russian to either engage or disengage," Onegus said. "We can't allow him to continue trailing the *Aurora*. If the Russian navy intercepts him, they will want to know why he was trailing us, and they might want to investigate. If we want to keep the ship, we can't allow even a speck of suspicion to be attached to her."

Kian grimaced. "I really don't want to have to tell my sister that her wedding on board a cruise ship is not happening. She has her heart set on it."

Yamanu chuckled. "The one who has his heart set on it is you. Alena couldn't care less where and when she gets married."

Toven smiled. Onegus nodded in agreement.

Turner ignored the entire exchange and turned to Roni. "We need to find out whether the Russian navy is diverting vessels to go after the *Anatolov*. Can your program do that?"

Roni pursed his lips. "The one I designed to identify ships pursuing the *Aurora* is not going to be helpful for that. I need to write a new program with new parameters."

“Why do we need a program?” Onegus asked. “We are only interested in Russian navy vessels, and there can’t be too many of them in the North Atlantic.”

Roni cast him a condescending look. “Do you want to click on each dot to check whether it’s a Russian navy ship or a fishing boat? I assure you that would take more time than it will take me to write a simple program that will keep monitoring their movements on autopilot.” He pushed to his feet. “It shouldn’t take me more than fifteen minutes.”

Tucking his laptop under his arm, he walked out of the room.

Kian drummed his fingers on the table. “While Roni is working on the program, let’s discuss how to stop the *Anatolov*’s captain.”

Onegus turned to Kalugal, who hadn’t taken part in the conversation yet. “Can Phinas force Igor to compel the captain to disengage?”

“Phinas will do whatever we ask of him, but I doubt Igor will do that even under torture and the threat of death. He knows he’s a dead man, and he doesn’t care about anyone other than himself.”

Onegus nodded. “That’s what we all assume. But what if we are wrong? I say it’s worth a try.” He looked at Turner. “What do you think?”

“At the moment, Igor is sedated, and I prefer him to remain that way and not endanger our people. I was thinking of getting Roni to hack into the *Anatolov*’s communication system, and hook Toven in, posing as Igor.” He looked at Toven. “Do you think you can remove Igor’s compulsion remotely and impose your own?”

Toven shook his head. “I can give it a try, but I wouldn’t base our decision on the assumption that I would succeed. The humans on the yacht were easy enough to release from Igor’s compulsion, but then he most likely didn’t have to compel them as deeply and with as much power as he needed to force the captain of the *Anatolov* to do his bidding.”

Kian had run through the same logic loop, arriving at the same conclusion. Neither Toven nor Igor himself could be used to divert the *Anatolov* away from the *Aurora*. Their only options were to outrun him, which could be done if Olsson was willing to brave the storm, or to wait for the Russian captain to make his move, which was no doubt imminent.

That was what they had prepared for, and Nils would take the *Anatolov* out.

The first option risked the *Aurora*'s passengers because of the storm and because the submarine couldn't keep up. The second option meant dealing with the Russian navy and potentially having to sell the cruise ship and get a new one.

Perhaps that wasn't such a bad idea. He could sell the ship to Jade, and she could turn it into their new compound. With the money, he could get a larger ship that didn't need remodeling, but there was no way it would be ready in time for Alena's wedding. Maybe he should sell it right after the wedding cruise?

"I have it." Roni strode into the war room as if he owned the place. "Two Russian ships changed course in the last twenty-four hours, and they are on an intercept course with the *Anatolov*." He pointed at a dot. "This one will only catch up to it tomorrow morning at about ten o'clock." He pointed at the other dot. "But this one will get there sooner. ETA six and a half hours."

"What kind of ship is it?" Turner asked.

Kian cocked a brow. "Does it matter? It's not as if we are going to engage with it. We have only two options. The *Aurora* takes a risk and speeds up into the storm, or we wait for the *Anatolov* to make its move and for Nils to take it out. After that, we will have to deal with the Russian navy."

TOVEN

Toven got up and poured himself vodka from the bottle Jade had left behind. “It’s a perfect storm. We have a real storm, a Russian destroyer on our tail with torpedoes ready to launch, a submarine on the Russian’s tail, ready to take it out before he’s in range to fire a torpedo at us, and the Russian navy closing in on their rogue destroyer. Perhaps our best bet is to hazard the storm full speed ahead and get away from the rest.”

“Olsson is not going to like it,” Yamanu said. “And given our passengers, I agree with him. Besides, storms are unpredictable, and this one could still get worse.”

Turner leaned back. “If the Russian doesn’t make his move within the next two hours, he’s not going to. Maybe it’s worth increasing the speed just for a short time to force his hand. I just hope that Nils is monitoring the situation closely.”

“I’m sure he is,” Onegus said. “He’s using a periscope to get visual confirmation.”

“Is he dancing with the gray lady?” Toven asked.

Onegus regarded him with a puzzled expression. “Is being stuck on a ship getting to you?”

Toven laughed. “It’s an expression used on submarines. I wondered how the sub’s captain was monitoring the situation while maintaining radio silence, so I read up on it. Standing watch at the periscope is called dancing with the gray lady, I guess because it’s a metal cylinder that can be raised, lowered, and rotated. It’s kind of a dance.”

“I’ve never heard that expression, but I’ll take your word for it.”

Toven crossed his legs and interlaced his fingers. “I wondered how he could raise the periscope without being detected. Apparently, the material it’s made from reflects the water around it, so it’s not visible even at short range. Modern periscopes are equipped with high-resolution optics and sensors, thermal imaging, lowlight imaging, image intensified cameras, and low observables technology—whatever that is.”

Onegus cast him a condescending smile. “You are talking about the level of equipment on nuclear submarines. Nils probably has something much simpler.” He glanced at Turner. “Am I right?”

“Probably. He has an old submarine that was decommissioned by the Norwegian navy decades ago. He’s done some upgrades, but I don’t have the details. What I do know is that he’s a responsible guy, and he wouldn’t have undertaken a mission he’s not equipped to handle. He knew that he would have to monitor the tail closely, and I’m sure he has the proper equipment. What he’s not going to do is follow the *Aurora* all the way to Greenland, and the same goes for the *Anatolov*. I say let’s end it. When the *Aurora* speeds up, he will have two choices, either chase it or turn around, and we will have our answer.”

“Can he even catch up?” Kian asked. “You said that he’s slower.”

“He is, and the submarine is even slower, so we will lose both by having her speed away. The thing is, she can’t maintain that speed without burning through her fuel before reaching Greenland, and a boat without fuel is a boat that can easily sink even in a mild storm. She needs to keep moving to stay balanced. The Russian knows that all he needs to do is keep going, and eventually he would find her stranded and defenseless, or an even worse scenario, sinking fast.”

Yamanu nodded. “I’m not a sailor, but thanks to the internet, I found out that engine failure is more dangerous for a cruise ship than I assumed. I thought that it wasn’t a big deal

since it could just float until help arrived, but that's not the case. Still, cruise ships have several engines, and it's very rare for all of them to fail at the same time."

Kian lifted his hand. "Bottom line, can Nils keep up if the *Aurora* speeds up?"

"Not in stealth mode," Turner said. "But as soon as he detects that the Russian is increasing speed, he will switch to diesel, chase him, and fire a torpedo at him before the *Anatolov* is in range of the *Aurora*."

"Good." Kian tapped his palm on the table. "Let Olsson know that if the Russian doesn't make his move in the next couple of hours, we will need him to put on a short burst of speed to force the *Anatolov* captain's hand."

KIAN

With another crisis looming close, going to his mother's for lunch might not be the most prudent way Kian could utilize his time, but he'd been summoned, and wiggling out of it was not an option. His mother expected to be obeyed, and despite her diva personality, she rarely did that for frivolous reasons.

Besides, if he was needed, the war room was only minutes away.

Oridu opened the door and bowed. "Master Kian. The Clan Mother is expecting you."

"Thank you." Kian rushed by the butler, bee-lining for the dining table and kissing his mother on her offered cheek before taking a seat next to her.

He'd expected Alena and Orion to be there as well, but there were only two place settings on the table.

"It's just the two of us?"

"Yes." She patted his hand. "I know that you are pressed for time, but I need you to tell me about our interests in the North Sea, and having more people over would have meant more questions that you would not have the time to answer." She waved at her butler. "We are ready to eat. Please serve lunch, Oridu."

He bowed. "Right away, Clan Mother."

"Thank you." She reached for the water pitcher and filled Kian's glass. "How are things between you and your cousin?"

Annani had been overjoyed when he'd told her about the talk he'd had with Kalugal and the agreement they had reached, but she'd been skeptical about the implementation, hence the question.

“Good. He’s participating in most of the war room meetings, but not all, and he’s contributing as much as he can. He’s rusty on strategy, but he’s smart enough to improvise.”

“Why is he not present at all the meetings?”

Kian smiled. “He can’t stay away from Darius for too long, or at least that’s the excuse he gives me. Making money is still Kalugal’s first priority after his family. His men and the Kra-ell are a distant third.”

Annani wagged her finger at him. “You are doing it again. You are letting yourself think less of your cousin because you are judging him based on your standards. Kalugal is not the leader of this community, and he does not carry the same responsibility as you.”

“True.” Kian unfurled the cloth napkin and draped it over his slacks. “I need your advice on the Kra-ell issue.”

That was the best way to divert the conversation to another topic. His mother loved it when he asked her advice.

Annani smiled brightly. “I am delighted that you seek my input. Usually, I have to insist that you listen to what I have to say.”

“I value your opinion, Mother. I don’t always need it, though.”

She looked down her nose at him. “Well, let us get right to the subject of the Kra-ell, lest we spoil each other’s moods. What do you need my advice on?”

As Oridu brought the appetizer plates, Kian took a moment to reply. “As you know, we captured Igor, so the Kra-ell are no longer in danger. I asked Jade if she wanted to return to the compound, and she replied that she preferred a fresh start.”

“That is understandable. If I were in her position, I would not want to live where I was enslaved, even with my slaver

gone.”

That was a succinct way to put it.

“Jade is also concerned about the officials who Igor compelled to shield the compound or just ignore it. I agree that it might not be safe for them to go back there. Turner and Syssi are both pushing for inviting them and the humans who shared their lives with them to the village. Turner wants to keep a close eye on them, and Syssi wants the added security of having an additional legion of capable warriors protecting our community. I’m not too keen on the idea, mainly because there are too many of them, which is problematic on several fronts.”

His mother nodded. “It would be difficult to hide all the traffic going in and out of the tunnel.”

“Indeed. They would double the population of the village, which would put a strain on everything, but mostly security and hiding the village from the humans and the Brotherhood. The Kra-ell also have over a hundred humans with them. They lived with these aliens all of their lives and can’t be thrilled to forget them. You know how I feel about humans in the village.” He groaned. “But compared to how I feel about over two hundred Kra-ell, that’s the lesser problem.”

ANNANI

“*I*t is indeed a conundrum.” Annani leaned closer to Kian and put her hand over his. “You know what I say about handling big problems.”

He nodded. “Break them up into small chunks and address each piece separately. Except, I don’t see how I can do that with the Kra-ell problem unless you are suggesting that I break them up into smaller groups and settle each one in a different location.”

Annani smiled. “That is one possible solution, but that is not what I meant. Let us start with the problem of Igor. What do you plan to do with him?”

“I want to interrogate him, but if Toven can’t compel him, we probably won’t be able to get anything out of him. Jade gave us one day to do that, but I think I can convince her to give us more time. She’s surprisingly reasonable.”

“Why surprisingly?”

Kian reached for a breadstick. “My preconceived idea of her came from Stella, and she got her impression from what Vrog had told her about Jade. Once it was formed in my mind, it got stuck there. I was pleasantly surprised to find out that Jade is very different in person.”

What surprised Annani was the note of admiration in Kian’s tone. “You like her.”

He nodded. “She’s tough, brave, and she does the best she can for her people. I don’t know if I could have endured what she’s been through and remained sane. She saw her sons

murdered in front of her eyes, and then she was forced to become their killer's breeder."

As Kian's fangs elongated and his eyes blazed with inner light, Annani patted his hand. "Calm down, my son. There was nothing you could have done to help her."

With a sigh, he put his hand on top of hers and nodded. "I can't imagine the suffering she's endured. But that's neither here nor there. Before the tragedy that befell her, she was a strict but fair leader, which even Emmett admits, and her subjects were loyal to her. She'd never been cruel for the sake of cruelty or for the sake of aggrandizing herself. She tried to do what was right, and she made mistakes, to which she readily admits. She's willing to adapt and make changes, so all members of her community are treated with respect, including the humans, and she wants everyone to be reasonably comfortable coexisting."

"Are you sure she is not feeding you what you want to hear?"

He chuckled. "It's possible, but by all accounts, she's an honorable person. Besides, my gut tells me that she means what she says, and I feel real affinity toward her. I can see a lot of myself in her, and since I know that I'm far from perfect, I'm more forgiving of her mistakes."

Annani had a feeling that Kian's compassion for what Jade had gone through was coloring his impression of her, but she'd reserved judgment for when she met the female in person.

"So, Jade's chunk of the bigger problem is settled. You respect and like her, so you will have no problem working with her."

"I think so. That's a very astute observation, Mother. Thank you."

Annani nodded. "Let us move to the next problem. The over two hundred Kra-ell. What are your misgivings about them?"

"I don't know them. I like Vrog and Aliya. I like Emmett less, but I don't hate him. But all of them are hybrids, and their

human part makes them more palatable to me. If all the purebloods were like Jade, I would probably like them as well, but we know that they are not. Many of them were born in the compound and grew up on Igor's philosophy, which embraced all the militant Kra-ell tendencies but rejected the honorable tradition that served to mitigate their innate aggression. Still, if there were only a few of them, that wouldn't be a problem."

Annani nodded. "So it is less about the people themselves and whether they are purebloods, hybrids, or human, and more about their sheer number and what it would do to life in the village."

"Precisely. It's also a matter of security. I would have to put cuffs on all of them, and given that they were just liberated from a tyrant that had most of them wearing collars, that would not go well with them."

"I agree. Although it could be mitigated. Jade could explain that it is a temporary measure until both sides feel secure living together."

"It would still cause resentment."

"That is true. Let us look at it from another angle. Where else can you settle them?"

"I don't know. Turner keeps saying that we need to keep an eye on them, and that means that I would need to put them somewhere nearby. I don't have enough space in the keep, and even if I did, I don't want to have to guard them from now until forever. Besides, they need to hunt, and other than humans, there is no game in downtown Los Angeles."

Annani was taken aback. "Do they feed from humans?"

"They don't. Taking a little blood during sex is part of their bed play, but for food they prefer animals."

"Thank the merciful Fates. If they planned to feed from my children, I would never allow them anywhere near my people."

KIAN

“*T*hat’s actually what I wanted to ask you. How do you feel about the Kra-ell and the humans joining the village?”

His mother’s gut feelings were usually spot on, and they had saved her life and later those of her descendants on multiple occasions. Sometimes her decisions had seemed erratic or emotional, but in hindsight, they had been proven not only correct but also timely.

Annani let out a sigh. “I am not thrilled about it, but that is a natural response. We all cling to the familiar and want to preserve our way of life. If their inclusion would improve life in the village, it would be a good thing. Let us discuss the advantages and disadvantages of their inclusion. What are the advantages of having them here?”

“You mean provided that we can trust them?”

Annani nodded. “Obviously, that is essential. But if they are trustworthy and dependable, they will provide added security.”

“I agree. They are incredibly strong, well-trained, and fierce warriors. I would sleep better at night knowing that I had a large force defending the village. They would also provide diversity, but that could be just as detrimental as it could be beneficial. In the long run, though, their higher birth rate and propensity to produce males predominantly could be a big problem.”

“What if they mate with clan members?” Annani asked. “Vlad is a delightful young man, and a village full of Vlads

and Vladettes does not seem so bad. Maybe the Kra-ell and the immortals are each other's answer to survival. Their genetics would increase our birth rates, and our genetics would even out their gender disparity."

Annani was the quintessential optimist.

"What if it doesn't work like that? I don't know much about genetics, but it could work the other way around, and we might end up with a village of mostly Vlads. He is a sweetheart of a guy, but I don't want our sons to live in harems, or tribal units, as the Kra-ell refer to them."

"Neither do I." Annani sighed. "Maybe we should not think of inviting them to the village as a final solution but as a transitional period until a better solution presents itself. We might need to keep our communities separate but close, and to do so, you will need to find a new location that can accommodate both of our clans."

"I don't want to move. We've just completed phase three, and I love our new home."

"I know, my son." Annani leaned closer to him and kissed his cheek. "The village is lovely, and its location is perfect. It is remote and well-hidden while still close to a major metropolis. But a community is made out of people, not buildings, and you can create an even better one somewhere else that is just as lovely and checks all the boxes. There is no rush either. You can house the Kra-ell and their humans in the village for several years without worrying about overpopulation, and in the meantime, you can build a new place." She smiled. "You should consult with Sari before selecting a new location. Perhaps she can suggest an arrangement that will allow her the autonomy she needs while at the same time being close to the rest of her family."

"Like what? Three separate villages? One for us, one for Sari's people, and one for the Kra-ell?"

"Why not? I think it is a brilliant idea."

Kian chuckled. "Jade asked me if we could find her an island like the one Navuh has. Maybe I should look into that."

Do you think we can buy Catalina Island?"

"I do not see why not. How many people live there?"

"Not that many. Probably under five thousand."

Annani waved a hand. "There you go. Give them incentive to leave, buy their businesses and homes, and take over the island. It's only an hour away by boat."

It was a crazy idea, but his mother was thinking outside the box. Catalina Island was small, but given that they needed space for less than a thousand people, including Sari's part of the clan and everyone in Annani's sanctuary, it was big enough.

"We should have a family meeting," Annani said. "Put all of our heads together."

"I was hoping to finalize a decision and bring it in front of the council, and once they approve it, to bring it to the large assembly for a clan-wide vote. But since I don't seem to be capable of solving this puzzle, a family meeting might be a good idea. What I need to decide now, though, is where to fly the Kra-ell from Greenland. I can't keep them there until we make up our minds."

Annani pursed her lips. "Why not? Instead of flying them back, they could cruise back on the ship. That will give you a couple of weeks to solve this puzzle and make arrangements for receiving them."

"The idea has occurred to me, but there are several logistical issues involved that I don't want to bore you with." He rose to his feet. "I should return to the war room." He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Thank you for lunch and for the advice."

"Any time. It was my pleasure." She held on to his hand. "I am always here for you."

"I know." He leaned again and kissed her forehead. "I love you, Mother."

As he made his way back to the war room, Kian tried to analyze the uneasy feeling his conversation with Annani had

left him with. She hadn't offered him a solution, and perhaps he'd hoped she would, and she hadn't even indicated her preference.

His subconscious mind was processing the input and not liking the results.

Letting his thoughts wander often crystallized things for him, but he needed some quiet time for that, which he wouldn't have in the war room, and stopping at the café at this time of day wasn't a good idea either. The place was teeming with people, and just walking by it forced him to smile and wave back at everyone who smiled and waved at him.

Suddenly it dawned on him that his unwillingness to welcome the Kra-ell into the clan was a kind of racism. He didn't want their genetics to mix with his immortals. The Kra-ell were long-lived, not immortal, and it was still unknown how long Vlad or other hybrids produced by immortal mothers and Kra-ell fathers would live.

Since the immortality gene was passed on by the mother, chances were that the hybrids would be immortal as well, but it wasn't a given.

Longevity wasn't the only problem either. The Kra-ell's alien looks made it more difficult for them to blend in with humans. In the long run, Annani's clan would veer so far off the source that its members could no longer call themselves the descendants of the gods.

Whose descendants would they be? Half gods, half demons?

Kian stifled a chuckle. With their nearly perfect features, immortals embodied the image of the gods, while the Kra-ell, with their large black eyes that turned red on occasion, embodied the image of demons.

Perhaps that was why the gods and the Kra-ell had both prohibited the breeding of hybrids. Neither people wanted to blend their genetics.

On the other hand, there were also benefits to blending the two species. For the immortals, the benefits would be stronger

offspring with a better fertility ratio. For the Kra-ell, the benefits would be longer life spans and better gender distribution.

The only example they had was Vlad, who was stronger than the average immortal and looked a little strange but could still pass for a human. It remained to be seen whether he and Wendy would produce a daughter. Vlad's longevity was also in question.

Perhaps Bridget should conduct a few experiments on him. The Kra-ell didn't heal as fast as immortals did, so Vlad's healing rate might be a good indicator of whose longevity genes he'd inherited.

PHINAS

*P*hinas opened the door to the prisoner's room and walked in.

The two beds hadn't been designed for double occupancy, but the Kra-ell were long and slim, so stuffing them two per bed wasn't too bad.

They were also sedated.

Besides, they could sleep in hell as far as he was concerned.

"What are you doing here?" Max waved him away. "I got them. Go, call your girl."

Jade wasn't a girl. She was a powerhouse of a female, but Phinas didn't comment on Max's choice of words. The Guardian's heart was in the right place.

Then again, perhaps he should warn him not to call Jade or Kagra girls and risk their wrath.

Or maybe not.

Max and Dandor were competing for Kagra's attention, and so far, no clear winner had emerged. Kagra was happy to flirt with them both but hadn't invited either to her bed. Naturally, Phinas was rooting for Dandor, so giving Max pointers for how to act around Kagra could be considered a betrayal.

Dandor would surely think that.

“Thanks.” He clapped the Guardian on the back. “Make sure that Aiden checks on the Kra-ell every thirty minutes or so. We want to keep them sedated enough to be barely conscious, but if we don’t want to put them in diapers, they need to be able to relieve themselves.”

Maybe getting adult-sized diapers wasn’t such a bad idea. He should send someone to a local supermarket as soon as the stores opened.

Max smirked. “I’m way ahead of you, buddy. Aiden gave me a list of what he needed to keep them fully sedated, and I sent Sal to get the supplies from the local clinic.”

Since it was too late for the clinic to be open, Phinas assumed that the supplies would be taken without permission. He had no doubt that the Guardian would leave money for what he took, but the question was whether the clinic could do without the medical supplies he was about to take.

“I hope they have supplies to spare. This town is so small that they probably don’t stock much.”

The fact that the tiny port town had a hotel with nine vacant rooms for their party of twenty-seven was a small miracle. They had to book three people per room, with one of them sleeping on a rolling cot, but it was better than sleeping on the floor.

“We don’t need much.” Max waved a hand. “Mainly catheters and feeding solutions.”

“I thought that Aiden didn’t know how to insert a catheter.”

“He talked with Merlin and watched a YouTube video. He’s confident that he can manage the catheters and the intravenous feeding. It’s not like he needs to be super gentle.” Max grinned evilly as he mimed jabbing a tube where it needed to go.

Phinas cringed. “Please. I could have done without that visual. You have a sadistic streak.”

Max’s grin got broader. “No mercy for the bad guys.”

Forcing a smile, Phinas walked away.

There was a time when he'd been considered a bad guy and for good reason. A male like Max wouldn't have shown him mercy, and perhaps he would have been right.

Even though Phinas had been following orders, that wasn't good enough of an excuse, and he deserved punishment for all the bad things he'd done. If he'd refused to carry out orders, he would have been executed, and he'd been too weak to choose the lives of strangers over his own, but he often wondered if he should have chosen death over a life of guilt.

When judgment time came, he wasn't going to the fields of the brave, or any of the other imagined good places.

He was going to hell.

Perhaps he should take Max up on his suggestion and join the clan's humanitarian effort part-time. Maybe rescuing trafficking victims would ease his conscience a little. It might even keep his soul from ending up in the worst part of hell.

Talk about being melodramatic.

As villains went, Phinas was way down at the bottom. There were so many much worse than him that he surely didn't belong in the deepest chasms of hell.

Not even a cold-blooded murderer like Igor qualified for that special place, and for that matter, neither did Navuh. They were bad, but there were much worse monsters than them among the humans.

Except, Phinas had a feeling that every villain thought he wasn't the worst. It's like the people in this little town who thought that their climate was moderate compared to the northern parts of Greenland, and the hotel front desk clerk thought that she was running the Ritz, with how haughty her attitude had been toward them.

Not that it mattered what she thought about the large group of big males staying at her hotel. What she would remember after they were gone was a bunch of middle-aged tourists.

Passing by her desk, he smiled and waved and got a tight, nervous smile in return.

The hotel had two old-fashioned telephone booths in its lobby that no longer had phones in them, but they were nonetheless perfect for conducting a private conversation.

Phinas got inside, closed the glass door behind him, and sat on the chair. The only person he could call and ask to find Jade for him was Mey, and he hoped that she was still okay with being the go-to person between them.

“Hi, Phinas,” she answered in a cheerful voice. “How are things in Greenland?”

“Good. The bad guys are sedated and in Max’s care. Can I ask you for a favor?”

“Of course. I’ll go find her.”

He smiled. “How did you know what I was going to ask?”

As if he had any other reason to call her.

“It’s easy to guess. I’ll call you when I find her.”

“Thank you. You’re the best, and I owe you. When we get back, I’m inviting you and Yamanu to a fancy dinner in town.”

“I hope it will be a double date with you and Jade.”

“That would be nice, but Jade doesn’t eat food. We can go to a bar, though. Evidently she likes to drink.”

Mey laughed. “That she does.”

JADE

At first, Jade didn't understand where the buzzing sound was coming from, but as the cobwebs of sleep lifted, she realized that it was the doorbell.

Despite the anxiety over the swaying of the ship and the impending attack, she'd somehow fallen asleep on the couch.

Perhaps she'd slept through the attack?

With a groan, Jade pushed to her feet and shuffled toward the door as quickly as the noodles that her legs had turned into could carry her.

"I'm never going to touch alcohol again," she grumbled as she opened the door. "Are we under attack?"

"Not as far as I know." Mey lifted her phone. "Phinas called. I told him that I'd find you and call him back." She looked Jade over. "You look even worse now than you did three hours ago. Did you keep drinking?"

"No, but I fell asleep on the couch." Jade took a step back and motioned for Mey to come in. "Can I offer you coffee?"

"No, thanks."

"Are you sure?" Jade walked over to the kitchenette and popped a pod in the coffee maker. "I'm going to make some for myself."

"Well, in that case, why not? I'll have some."

"Any news about the *Anatolov*?" Jade put a mug under the spout and waited for the coffee to brew.

“No change so far. Our hacker is monitoring the cruiser, and it is still keeping a forty-mile distance from us, but that will change soon.”

“Why?” Jade removed the mug, put another pod inside the machine, and another mug under the spout.

“Kian’s instructions were to wait a couple of hours to give him time to make his move, and if he doesn’t, to increase speed for a little while to force him to react. The two hours are almost up.”

“Oh.” Jade looked at the floor as if she could gauge the speed from the way it was swaying under her feet, or was it her head that was swaying?

“Then perhaps I shouldn’t call Phinas at a time like this.”

Mey shrugged. “The sub will take care of the Russian. Nothing is going to happen to the *Aurora*.”

Jade removed the second mug from the platform under the coffee maker and brought both to the coffee table. “You seem very confident in the submarine captain’s ability. Has he proven himself before?”

“Not to me personally.” Mey reached for the mug and took a sip. “But I’m sure he proved himself to Turner. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have recruited him for this job.”

Jade was about to ask about Turner and his connection to the clan, but Mey lifted her phone. “Phinas is waiting. He’ll get worried if we don’t call him soon. He’ll think you’ve passed out from too much drinking.”

“Yeah, though he shouldn’t.” The protest sounded weak even to her own ears.

Jade liked that Phinas was concerned about her and had called for the second time today. He’d even told her that he missed her, and no one had ever told her that before. Not even her sons when she’d been away on business trips.

Had she been a bad mother?

By human standards, probably, but she’d been a perfect Kra-ell mother.

As pain gripped her insides, Jade hid her face behind the coffee mug and took several long sips.

“Hi,” Mey said into the receiver. “I’m in Jade’s cabin. Here she is.” She handed her the phone.

Jade put the mug down and took the device. “Hello,” she said in a neutral tone.

“Hello to you, gorgeous. How are things on the *Aurora*?”

“We are in a storm, or rather at the edges of it. The ship is swaying, and I have a hangover. Other than that, Captain Olsson is about to accelerate to force the *Anatolov* to make its move. That’s all I have to report. How about you? Is Igor still sedated?”

Phinas chuckled. “As romantic conversations go, ours sucks. To answer your question, Igor and his three companions are all sedated, and I know about the plan to force the *Anatolov* to either play or leave the game.”

“If you want a romantic partner, you should find a different female.” The brave words had zero intent behind them.

If Phinas so much as looked at another female, she was dead meat.

Damn, where had that come from?

Jealousy was one of the worst sins a Kra-ell could commit.

“You are the perfect female for me. You might not be romantic, but you’re hotter than the deepest inferno in hell.”

That shouldn’t please her as much as it did, especially given that Mey was privy to the entire conversation and was smirking behind her coffee mug.

“I don’t know whether you’re trying to flatter or insult me, but I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“It was meant as a compliment.”

“Good. Can you do me a favor?”

“For you, anything.”

“Tomorrow morning, search for a secluded spot for Igor’s execution. I promised Kian I’d give him one day to interrogate Igor in Greenland, but given the storm, I don’t think we will arrive early enough for a full day of interrogation before we need to fly out. We will probably only have a couple of hours.”

There was a moment of silence on the other side of the line, and Mey regarded her with a somber expression on her gentle face.

“What? Would you want to wait to avenge the murders of your children?”

Eyes blazing, Mey bared her tiny fangs. “No.”

“That’s what I thought.” Jade returned to Phinas. “Are you still there?”

“Didn’t you tell Kian that you need to confer with your people about it?”

She didn’t remember promising that. “I told him that I needed to think about it. I did, and that is what I want to do.”

“Perhaps you should sober up first and think about it logically instead of emotionally. It doesn’t matter when you kill Igor, as long as you get to kill him in the end. If he has useful information, isn’t it worth a slight delay of his execution?”

Jade uttered a long-suffering sigh. “If Toven can make Igor talk, he can get what he needs out of him in a couple of hours. If he can’t, Igor will not tell us anything, and there will be no reason to delay his execution.”

ELEANOR

Vivian leaned closer to Eleanor and hugged her tightly. “I’m happy and sad. I don’t want you to leave, but I’m happy for you.”

“I feel the same.” Eleanor held her sister-in-law in an awkward embrace.

She’d never been much of a hugger, but Vivian was, and so were her children.

“Will you come to say goodbye to Parker before you leave?”

Eleanor chuckled. “I’ll try to hold off leaving until he comes back from school. Emmett is all packed and bouncing off the walls with excitement. He was so depressed when he thought that we could never return to Safe Haven. It’s his baby, and he really loves the place.”

With Igor captured and his cronies either dead or imprisoned, it was safe to go back. They were flying along with Anastasia, Leon, and three Guardians. The secret project Marcel was working on would have to wait until he returned, and Onegus would probably assign more Guardians to the place once the project resumed.

“What about you? Do you love it there?” Vivian asked.

“I like my autonomy and being in charge of the paranormal program.”

She also liked Emmett better when he was happy than when he was depressed and dragging her down with him, and

he was happiest in Safe Haven.

Vivian tilted her head, her long blond hair cascading in perfect waves down one side. “Is that all? The flip side of autonomy is loneliness.”

Eleanor smoothed her hand over her frizzy mane and cursed her genes. When she’d transitioned, she’d hoped to emerge prettier, with lovely, manageable hair that looked effortlessly styled without her having to work on it. But that hadn’t happened. She looked younger than she had before her transition, for which she was grateful, but she wasn’t any prettier than she was in her twenties, and unless she used a flat iron on her hair, it was a frizzy mess.

Oh, well. Beauty wasn’t everything. There were many beautiful women in the world, but only a handful or two of compellers. Besides, she had plenty of other great qualities. She was intelligent, tenacious, and good at managing people, even without resorting to compulsion.

“I’m not lonely. Leon and Anastasia became good friends, and I enjoy spending time with my paranormals. I also like running the paranormal workshops in the new retreats.”

Vivian nodded her approval. “Did you pick up any new prospects for your paranormal program?”

“Not from the one retreat we’ve run so far, but there are a couple that the Echelon system flagged that look promising. With the Kra-ell crisis going on, I couldn’t ask Onegus to send Guardians to investigate them, and Kian doesn’t want me to do it myself, so it will have to wait until the rest of the Guardians return home.”

Vivian winced. “If they come with the Kra-ell, they might be busy policing them. This crisis is far from over.”

“I haven’t heard about any such plans. Did Magnus tell you that?”

Vivian assumed a sheepish expression. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I thought you knew.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure Leon will tell us about it on the way to Safe Haven. If Kian plans to bring the Kra-ell

here, he needs to tell everyone so they can prepare. In fact, he should ask the council's permission before he brings a bunch of strangers into the village."

Vivian laughed. "Not too long ago, you were the stranger."

"It seems like it was eons ago. I'm a proud member of the clan now." And if anyone dared to dispute her claim, she would challenge them to a fistfight.

Vivian nodded. "Yes, you are. Now, tell me about those prospects. Who are they, and why were they flagged by Echelon?"

Eleanor lifted her empty teacup. "I'll need another cup of tea for that."

"With pleasure." Vivian lifted the porcelain teapot and poured more tea into Eleanor's cup.

"One is a psychic, and the other is a gambler. The psychic is a female, and the reason she's believable is that she doesn't charge money for her predictions. The gambler's winning streak is uncanny, but the casinos can't pin anything on him. He just seems too lucky. After the big casinos banned him, he started circling the smaller ones and wised up. He leaves after his first win not to draw their attention."

CAPTAIN NILS

“Captain to control,” Rob Farland sounded at the com.

“On my way,” Nils responded.

Finally.

He’d been worried that his infallible instincts had failed him.

Nils had chosen to move ahead of the *Aurora* and the Russian cruiser shadowing it, plotting a course that should have put him in their path over two hours ago, but weather wasn’t always predictable, and a storm had started out of nowhere near the coast of Iceland. It didn’t affect the submarine, but it did affect the ships cruising above.

Captain Olsson must have decided to slow down to avoid heading right into the storm, and he was crawling ahead with the Russian behind him.

The *Aurora* had only passed them twenty-one minutes ago, and Farland must have spotted the *Anatolov*, which was why he was summoning Nils to control.

Passing through several bulkheads and two decks to get there, he exchanged smiles with his men instead of the salutes that would have been required if this was a navy vessel. Everyone on board had served in one navy or another and had spent years following strict protocols, but this was a private boat, and Nils encouraged familiarity. It kept his crew loyal and motivated.

Well, the money was good too, but they were operating in a shady area of private military subcontractors and had to keep a low profile, which was not how most of his men had imagined their retirement years.

“What have you got for me, Rob?”

“Take a look.” His XO moved aside so he could take over the periscope.

“The *Anatolov* is exactly where you said he would be.”

“Only two hours late.”

Nils looked through the periscope at the almost indistinguishable dot on the horizon that was barely visible even in the periscope’s magnified optical view. “Did they change course or speed since you found them?”

“They slowed down to adjust to the *Aurora*’s lower speed, and they kept shadowing her while keeping the same distance they did before. They don’t appear to be in a hurry to engage.”

Moving over to the navigation control, Nils noted their position relative to the closest land. “They will be making their move soon. We are over a day’s time from any land, and they can’t keep it up for long. The *Anatolov* is not meant for the Atlantic, and its navy command is probably getting ready to retrieve its rogue ship. I still don’t understand how the hell a Russian captain can take control of a cruiser without anyone on board raising hell or contacting command.”

Farland shrugged. “The *Anatolov* was stationed in the Baltic, and its job was probably to monitor that entire area. That’s why no one suspected anything until he got out to the North Sea. The Russian navy command has no doubt tried to contact him and order him to turn around, and when he didn’t respond, they sent ships after him. It’s probably a matter of hours before they get here, and when they do, we don’t want to be anywhere near the cruiser.”

Nils nodded. “If he doesn’t make his move in the next hour or so, we will have to get out of here.”

The situation was bizarre, and Turner’s explanation didn’t make much sense.

He'd said something about an oligarch taking control of the *Anatolov*, but with all due respect to those mafiosi, they wouldn't take on the entire Russian navy. Then again, maybe they could. Corruption was rampant all over the world and in all countries, and the Russians didn't even try to hide it. Maybe someone higher up in the Russian power ladder was chasing after someone on the *Aurora* and was using a third party to do the dirty work for him.

"We are approaching torpedo range," Rob said. "Should we switch to electric now or wait until we are closer?"

At their current speed, any sonar operator listening in would be alerted to their presence, and they didn't want the *Anatolov* to know they were within range. In all likelihood, it would ignore them and continue after the *Aurora*, but it could also turn around to investigate.

Nils was not taking any chances. "Switch to electric and take us down to 50 meters."

KIAN

*K*ian walked into the war room and took a seat next to Turner. “Any news about the storm?”

“It’s getting worse. Olsson was wise to slow down and let it blow over instead of heading right into it. He will probably need to slow it down even more or head in a different direction.”

Since there was nothing for him to do but wait, Kian flipped his laptop open and started an idle search on the global map application.

If he were to choose a new location for the clan, where would be the ideal place?

In days past, being close to Hollywood had been important because of the influence the clan could gain through scripting movies to push their agenda of human rights and equal opportunity for all. But times had changed, and everything could be done remotely. He could move the entire clan to Alaska and build several sanctuaries around Annani’s, and still manage most of the clan’s business and social agenda objectives without having to fly over to Los Angeles.

The war on trafficking, however, was waged in large urban areas, and it had become such an integral part of the clan’s makeup that abandoning it was out of the question.

Besides, he liked being close to nice restaurants and shopping venues, even if he didn’t indulge in either often. It was the ability to do so that made him feel less closed off in his hidden village.

“What are you working on?” Onegus asked.

“Nothing concrete. The Clan Mother had a few interesting ideas regarding the relocation of the Kra-ell and our future, with or without them. One of those ideas was to move once again to a new location that was larger and could accommodate several communities. That way, the Kra-ell can have their own place, we can retain our exclusivity, and Sari might consider joining as well since we can offer her people a separate area that will allow her to retain her autonomy.”

Turner chuckled from behind his screen. “History moves in cyclic ways. The gods divided the humans under their rule, and each god or goddess ruled over a city-state. The cities were largely autonomous, but they joined forces to defend each other, and every major decision had to be agreed on by the assembly of all gods. You are basically talking about recreating that system.”

“I didn’t get that far, but yeah, that can work. It’s always good to use an existing model rather than to try to reinvent the wheel.”

Onegus shook his head. “I don’t want to move. I love the village, but it’s already too secluded for my taste. I don’t want to move somewhere even more remote.” He cast Kian a sidelong glance. “I hope you’re not thinking of Safe Haven. It’s a nice place to visit, but not to live full time. It’s too damn cold and secluded.”

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of moving to the Oregon Coast. I have a daughter to raise, and I want her to hang out with humans her age.” He winced. “Correction. I don’t want her to ever leave the house, but I’m sure she’ll want to be around other young people.”

Onegus let out a breath. “Thank the merciful Fates. You scared me for a moment. I thought that the real Kian had been abducted by aliens and replaced by a clone.”

Turner chuckled behind his screen. “I don’t envy Allegra or the young males who will want to court her.”

Ignoring him, Kian arched a brow. “Do you have any other ideas for where we can live comfortably, safely, and also independently of the Kra-ell while keeping a close eye on them, and at the same time not being more than forty-five minutes away from downtown Los Angeles?”

“We should stay right here.” The chief leaned back in his chair. “Maybe we can get another piece of land or two on the adjacent mountains, build two more villages and connect them with underground tunnels like we did with the keep and the office buildings on the other side of the street.”

“Too risky,” Turner said under his breath. “In my opinion, it’s better to hide in plain sight than to truly hide.” He slid his laptop aside. “You’re a developer, Kian. Right now, you are building hotels and office buildings, but you can easily get into building gated communities. Some would be sold to humans, while a few would be dedicated to us, the Kra-ell, and Sari’s people. It will be a major headache to design a security system for them and to keep them connected, but it’s doable.”

Kian shook his head. “The village is much easier to defend than a gated community in the middle of suburbia.”

“Not true.” Turner crossed his arms over his chest. “Even the Doomers are not stupid enough to draw the attention of humans. We will be safer surrounded by them.”

Despite his strategic acumen, Turner hadn’t spent centuries hiding from the Doomers and ensuring his people’s safety.

“That’s precisely what we did with the keep, and it wasn’t good enough. Our people are much safer in the village, not to mention happier.”

Turner was about to offer another rebuttal when Roni ran into the room.

“Guys, the *Anatolov* is closing the distance. He’s only thirty-six miles away from the *Aurora* now.” He put his laptop on the desk.

“Did he increase his speed?” Kian asked.

“I can’t tell from looking at the screen, but I can tell that he’s closer to the *Aurora* now than he was twenty minutes

ago.”

“Maybe it is not intentional.” Onegus leaned closer to the screen. “Because of the storm, Olsson has slowed down the *Aurora* significantly. The Russian might be keeping the same speed without realizing that he’s getting closer.”

Turner shook his head. “He knows the *Aurora*’s speed. This is intentional. I just hope that Nils is keeping a close watch on the *Anatolov* and noticed what Roni just did.”

“I’m calling Olsson.” Onegus pulled out his phone.

Kian did the same. “I’ll call Yamanu and Toven.”

CAPTAIN NILS

Anatoly lifted his head from the sonar station. “The *Anatolov* has increased its speed.”

Nils walked over to him. “By how much?”

Anatoly pursed his lips. “About four knots faster, give or take twenty percent.”

To remain hidden, they were using passive sonar when not in periscope depth, which wasn’t as good as sending an active ping and calculating precisely where the *Anatolov* was relative to the submarine, but that couldn’t be helped.

The *Anatolov* was a sub-destroyer, and if she discovered them, it was game over.

Not that they were easy to detect, even if the Russian suspected something and sent a sonar ping to locate them. Nils had spent a small fortune to cover the submarine in anechoic tiles. The synthetic polymer tiles contained thousands of tiny voids to absorb the sound waves of active sonar, reducing and distorting the return signal, which limited its effective range. They also attenuated the sounds emitted by the sub, reducing the range it could be detected by passive sonar.

Thankfully, the *Anatolov* hadn’t been built for stealth, and it was easy to detect. Since the *Aurora* had passed them by about thirty-six minutes ago, they had been carefully monitoring the *Anatolov*’s progress, waiting for it to increase speed.

In order to get within the five-mile torpedo range, it had to speed up significantly, and since it had been maintaining a

large distance from the *Aurora*, they would have plenty of advance notice to take the *Anatolov* out before the vessel got close enough to fire at the cruise ship.

“How long until the cruiser is within torpedo range?” Nils asked.

Anatoly arched a brow. “Of the *Aurora* or us?”

Was he joking? It was sometimes hard to tell with the guy. He had a warped sense of humor that no one but him found funny.

“The *Aurora*, of course. Hopefully, the *Anatolov* still doesn’t know about us.”

“If both ships keep current speed, she’ll be within torpedo speed within forty-two minutes.”

“Ready torpedo,” Nils said. “If he keeps speeding ahead, let him pass us and fire when he’s two miles away.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Rob acknowledged.

Time slowed to a crawl as Nils and the rest of the crew waited for the *Anatolov* to get within range.

“We were just pinged,” Anatoly announced. “They are changing course.”

That was impossible. How the hell had the Russian detected them? And why was he abandoning his pursuit of the *Aurora* to go after them?

“Change course to one-six-one and increase speed. Let’s see if he follows.”

Nils half listened to the acknowledgment repeating his order as he plotted his next move.

The Russian cruiser was old, but it was faster, and it was designed to hunt and kill subs. They had to get away but, at the same time, lure her away from the civilian cruise ship.

“He’s adjusting his heading and speed,” Anatoly said. “He’s in pursuit. He’ll be within firing range in two minutes.” The guy smirked. “Of us, not the *Aurora*.”

That wasn't funny. They were in mortal danger, and if they failed, it wouldn't just cost them their lives. They would doom a ship full of civilians. As soon as the *Anatolov* was done with them, she would turn around and go after the *Aurora*. Hopefully, Olsson would be smart and speed into the storm to avoid the Russian. It could survive the storm, but it wouldn't survive a torpedo.

Nils turned to Rob. "Plot a new firing solution and fire as soon as he's in range."

"Aye, captain," Rob replied. "Torpedo away," he stated, matter-of-fact.

Right now, the Russian was giving his crew a similar command, and Nils was not waiting.

"Change course to two-five-zero and dive to one hundred meters."

It was crucial to move unexpectedly and erratically to avoid the torpedo the Russians would be firing at them any second now.

Every hand on both boats, his and the Russian's, was counting down the seconds as the torpedo made its way to its target. One crew praying for a direct hit, while the other was praying for a miss.

"It's a direct hit!" Anatoly said at the same time as the torpedo found its prey and exploded.

"They are still in pursuit," Anatoly said.

The Russian was crippled but not killed, and they were going to even the score.

"Torpedo in the water," Anatoly announced.

"Release countermeasures and take us down to one hundred and twenty-five."

His command was followed as soon as the words left his mouth.

His crew knew what they were about, and in moments like this, he blessed the stars for each one of them.

“We will survive this and live another day,” Nils said.

Every hand on board grabbed hold of something as the sub tilted sharply downward in rapid descent, and the countermeasures were deployed to guide the torpedo away from the sub’s hull.

“Second torpedo armed and ready, captain,” Rob said.

“Fire as soon as we level off, Rob. As soon as the torpedo clears, go back to diesel and change course again back to one-six-one and climb to fifty meters.”

With the Russian ready for the torpedo, he would deploy countermeasures the same way Nils had, but his objective was not hitting the cruiser but rather distracting its crew and giving him a small window of opportunity to increase his distance from them beyond torpedo range.

Normally the cruiser would be able to outrun and kill them, but they’d been hit, so hopefully that was no longer the case. The sub was easily detectable to radar when running on diesel power, but it no longer mattered. As soon as they were a safe distance away, he would go back to stealth to avoid detection by the Russian navy, which was no doubt closing in on its runaway ship.

With the cruiser disabled, the *Aurora* was no longer in danger, and Nils’s only objective was to disengage while still in one piece.

The sonar pings of the approaching torpedo were getting closer together, and as the sounds got louder, Nils and all hands on board held their breath.

This time the explosion was both heard and felt, the two sensations arriving at the same instant, indicative of how close the torpedo was before it was eliminated. The boat was violently thrown about by the concussion wave. But the torpedo did not hit the hull, and that was all that mattered.

Nils caught Rob’s eye and nodded. They had upgraded their weaponry and were carrying some cutting-edge tech on board, but when it came to their countermeasures, it was Rob who insisted they upgrade to Rafael Technologies’ Shade

system. This Israeli defensive tech had just saved their lives. Shade came at a steep cost, but it brought new dimensions to countermeasure deployment and capabilities. Nils had resisted approving the added expenditure required for a long time, but in the end, Rob had convinced him.

He owed the guy a fat cigar and a promotion.

As soon as the sub settled, Rob announced, “Torpedo away.”

The helmsman repeated the new bearing while changing course and depth.

The sub tilted sharply again in the opposite direction, making a rapid ascent to fifty meters.

Nils didn't wait to see if the second torpedo hit the target or the countermeasures.

With the *Anatolov*'s crew busy maneuvering out of the incoming torpedo's path and deploying its countermeasures, Nils rapidly increased his distance from the Russian ship.

“The Russians are not in pursuit, captain,” Rob announced.

They were not in the clear yet, but the worst was behind them.

“Maintain heading and course at full speed and take us to periscope depth. I want to scope the extent of damage the cruiser sustained and share the good news with Turner. The *Aurora* is no longer in danger.”

KIAN

“*I* have a message from Nils,” Turner said.

If Nils was sending messages, he was no longer maintaining radio silence, which hopefully meant that the *Anatolov* was no longer a threat. The other option was that either the *Aurora* or the submarine had been hit, with the submarine being the more likely one. If the *Aurora* had been hit, they would have heard about it already.

As usual, Turner’s expressionless face revealed nothing.

All eyes were on him as he read the message aloud, “The lady got away without a scratch. The naughty boy got spanked twice for wrecking daddy’s car, and he’s crying for his mommy, but mommy won’t be home in time to comfort him. He might need the lady to comfort him instead.”

As Kian tried to decipher the strange message, Turner looked at Roni. “Check the location of the approaching Russian navy ships. How far away are they?”

Roni shook his head. “It will take them hours to reach him.”

Kian scratched his head. “Is that some pre-agreed coded message language?”

Turner cracked a smile. “Nothing as fancy as that. It’s just a way to say things without actually saying them. The *Anatolov* got hit twice, it’s sinking, and it needs the *Aurora* to turn around and rescue the sailors.”

Now that Turner had interpreted the message, the meaning had become clear, but Kian didn't like the idea of having the *Aurora* turn around.

“What about rescue helicopters?” Kian asked. “Can they make it to them in time?”

“They are too far out,” Onegus said. “A military helicopter's range is long, and it might make it to them, but it will not have enough fuel for the return flight. We have to tell Olsson to turn around.”

Kian didn't like it one bit. “What if they can still fire a torpedo at the *Aurora*? They are under compulsion, so we can't count on them acting logically and not shooting at their rescuer. Besides, they must have lifeboats or rafts. They should be fine for a few hours until the Russian navy ships arrive.”

“Probably.” Turner tapped his pen on his yellow pad. “But we should get to them before their comrades do. Igor might have compelled them to say that the *Aurora* was carrying dangerous chemical or biological weapons. I don't need to tell you what will happen if the Russian naval command follows up on that intel.”

“Why would they believe him?” Onegus asked. “Where did he get the information from? Why didn't he report to command that he was pursuing a potentially dangerous cargo? No one will buy that story.”

Turner leveled his gaze at the chief. “If one person tells a crazy story, they might deem him mad. But when the *Anatolov*'s entire command tells the same story, the Russians will take it seriously and chase after the *Aurora*. Toven needs to release them from the compulsion and thrall them to remember a different scenario before the two navy ships arrive.”

He had a point, but Kian didn't want to risk it. “I will only approve it if Nils can verify that the *Anatolov* is no longer capable of shooting a torpedo at the *Aurora*. But even then, they can still shoot at the rescuers.”

“We don’t have a choice.” Turner typed on his laptop. “In Toven’s words, it’s a perfect storm.”

“We should have thought of this before.” Kian groaned. “This scenario would have played out even if the *Anatolov* wasn’t sinking.”

Turner lifted his eyes to him. “The *Aurora* was supposed to be farther away by now, which might have deterred the Russians from going after it and referring the intel to the Canadian and American navies. It would have been much easier to deal with them.”

Kian assumed Turner’s connections would have helped with those navies.

“I’m waiting for a return message from Nils.” Turner closed his laptop. “In the meantime, we should tell Olsson to turn around.”

When Onegus looked at Kian for approval, he nodded. “Tell him to send out a distress call. He saw an explosion and turned around to investigate. That alone should convince the Russians that the *Aurora* is not a smuggler ship. It wouldn’t have turned around to help its pursuer. They will assume that the captain has gone mad, and his crew believed his story. Captains are gods on their vessels. Their word is the law.”

When Turner’s computer pinged, everyone’s eyes shifted to him.

“Nils says that they are deploying inflatables and abandoning ship. In his estimate, the *Anatolov* will sink in less than half an hour.” He lifted his head. “He didn’t say it in those exact words, but that’s my interpretation.”

Kian would have loved to hear the wording Nils had chosen to convey that meaning, but it could wait for later.

“It must have been one hell of a hit,” Roni said. “Why isn’t Nils just calling you instead of sending you weird messages? You have a secure clan phone.”

Turner cast him a smile. “Nils doesn’t know what security measures I employ. We are using a secure channel to leave each other messages that can’t be traced to either of us. And

even if someone can trace them, they are worded in a way that's not incriminating Nils. It's safer for him this way."

Kian rubbed a hand over his chin. "What kind of a scenario can Toven plant in the crew's heads that could possibly explain away the captain and his crew going rogue?"

Turner pursed his lips. "Not much can be done to exonerate them. Perhaps a story of receiving false commands from the secret service or something of that nature. The important thing is that the Russians don't figure out that the *Anatolov* was trailing the *Aurora* and why. If the captain and his officers all tell the same story, and it's even remotely plausible, they might be believed. It should be scripted in a way that would seem like a malicious cyber hack."

"I like that," Roni said. "We can incriminate the North Koreans. They are known for their malicious hacking."

Onegus frowned. "Why would the North Koreans mess with the Russians? Aren't they allies?"

Roni waved a dismissive hand. "Who cares? Everyone knows that the North Korean leader is insane. It's not a story that's going to be hard to sell. Give me a few minutes, and I'll have a script ready for Toven with all the right hacker terminology."

TOVEN

*B*y the time the *Aurora* arrived at the approximate coordinates that Onegus had provided Olsson, there was no trace of the *Anatolov* or the survivors, but perhaps they were still too far away, even for Toven's eyes.

The pouring rain and the wind weren't helping either.

Lifting the binoculars, he scanned the dark water and located the rafts by their beacon lights.

The captain must have done the same from the bridge because the ship made a slight adjustment in course and headed right toward them.

The skill of the captain or his navigator was admirable. Despite the bad weather, the wind and the rain, he aligned the *Aurora's* side with the group of three rafts in one go.

Was that the entire crew?

Or had some perished?

The senseless loss of life shouldn't bother him after all this time, but since Mia had restarted his heart, all the old emotions that he'd tamped down, the compassion and sorrow that had made life so difficult for him, had returned.

That was the flip side of being capable of feeling love again, and for that, he was willing to suffer the less desirable emotions that he'd worked so hard to get rid of.

Toven's empathy and compassion were the reasons he could have never assumed a leadership role. That wasn't what

he was destined for. He just felt too much to make decisions that could result in the loss of life.

After this mission was over, he wouldn't volunteer again unless the clan's survival was on the line.

"I found you a megaphone," Yamanu said from behind him.

The Guardian's long hair was wet and braided into at least two dozen thin dreadlocks which were gathered with an elastic to keep them away from his face.

The guy smiled. "Mey was stressed, so I let her braid my hair. It always relaxes her." He extended his tongue and caught a few droplets of rain.

"Thank you." Toven took the megaphone and leaned over the railing.

Switching to Russian, he said, "*Bros 'te oruzhiye v vodu*—drop your weapons into the water. *My zdes, chtoby pomoch*—we are here to help."

The sailors obeyed immediately, the sound of their handguns hitting the water confirming that the compulsion worked.

"That was easy," Yamanu murmured from behind him. "The Guardians are securing the shell doors. Tell the sailors to get closer. When we open them, they should jump in one at a time."

"I'll explain and join you. Don't open the doors until I'm there."

"They are human. We can handle them."

"I want to be there in case Igor compelled them to attempt a last-ditch suicide attack."

"Got it." Yamanu saluted him before turning on his heel and marching away.

Toven translated the instructions, asked the sailors to raise their hands in confirmation that they understood, and hurried down to the cargo bay.

The place was prepared to receive the rescued sailors, with piles of towels and blankets at the ready, water bottles, snacks, and several bottles of vodka.

Toven smiled. “Who brought the vodka?”

One of Kalugal’s men lifted his hand. “This is to warm them up from the inside.”

Standing next to him, Merlin shrugged. “Nothing wrong with that. Just don’t give it to anyone who’s bleeding.”

The guy saluted. “Yes, doctor.”

The rest of the ship’s passengers were in their cabins with the lights out, which wasn’t a big deal since most were asleep. Once the Soviet ships arrived, they would be told that the *Aurora* had only crew on board and was being delivered to its owners in the US. If they demanded to search the ship, he would have to thrall them to believe that they didn’t see a thing. Especially the livestock in the adjacent cargo bay.

Hopefully, the animals were asleep and wouldn’t bleat.

“Let’s do it.” Yamanu turned the wheel, unlocking the watertight door.

As the Guardian next to him pulled it open, wind-driven rain pelted all of those standing near the door, and then the first sailor jumped in.

“*Pridi s mirom*—come in peace,” Toven said as one of Kalugal’s men handed the sailor a towel and a blanket. He should have said, *my prishli s mirom*—we come in peace, but he phrased his welcome as a command on purpose and imbued it with compulsion.

The men would just assume that his command of the language wasn’t good.

He repeated the same greeting with every new sailor who either jumped or was hoisted by his friends and pulled in by the Guardians.

When everyone was inside, he asked for the captain.

“He’s dead,” one of the officers spat in Russian. “We weren’t hit hard enough to sink, but the dog sabotaged the ship and put a bullet in his own head.”

The poor guy had probably been compelled to do that once his objective was achieved or he failed. It was a miracle that the rest of the crew had somehow survived.

Or maybe it wasn’t a miracle but Captain Sergey Gorshekov’s last act of defiance and bravery. He’d obeyed the compulsion almost to the letter, but he’d found a loophole to save his crew.

KIAN

*K*ian waited until every member of his family was seated around the dinner table before pushing to his feet and raising his wine glass.

“As you all know, Igor is in our custody, and the Russian vessel pursuing our ship is gone. Let’s toast our victory.”

It was one hell of a mission. It had cost a fortune, had been nerve-wracking, and it wasn’t over yet, but after all that stress and hard work, they all deserved to celebrate their victory.

After the toasting was done, Kalugal leaned back with his wine glass. “What happened to the Russian sailors? Did any of them survive?”

Kian was surprised that Kalugal cared, but perhaps it was just curiosity. His cousin hadn’t been in the war room when the *Anatolov* had gone down, and Kian hadn’t told him any details yet, saving himself the trouble of having to repeat the story to every member of his family.

“Other than the captain, all the sailors were picked up by our people and delivered to the Russian navy. Captain Sergey Gorshekov sank his ship and shot himself in the head, most likely following Igor’s compulsion, but Toven theorizes that he did everything he could not to fire on the *Aurora* and to save his crew. The compulsion probably hadn’t specified the exact timing and conditions needed for the *Anatolov* to fire a torpedo at the cruise ship, and the captain used that as a loophole, dragging it out as long as he could. It’s not clear whether he chose to attack the submarine as a way to draw its

fire and prevent him from firing on the civilian ship or whether that was part of Igor's instructions. One of the officers told Toven that the damage the *Anatolov* had sustained from the torpedoes wouldn't have been enough to sink it, but it would have been dead in the water. We assume that Igor's compulsion included the destruction of the evidence. As soon as the mission was complete or as soon as it became clear that it wasn't going to be achieved, the captain was compelled to sink the ship and kill everyone on board, including himself. He found another loophole, doing it in a way that allowed his men time to escape the sinking ship." Kian lifted his glass again. "Captain Sergey Gorshekov died a hero."

Kalugal raised his glass as well. "In the words of the formidable Jade, may he forever walk in the fields of the brave."

Given everyone's nods, they had all heard the expression by now and knew what it meant.

If the Kra-ell joined his community, would it become part of the vernacular like 'Thank the merciful Fates'?

Syssi sighed. "It's a shame no one will know about the captain's bravery."

Kian hadn't asked Toven about what story he had planted in the sailors' heads, but hopefully he'd painted the captain in a better light than a madman who wanted to kill himself and his crew.

"An unsung hero," Amanda murmured. "The world is full of them."

When a long silence stretched across the table, Andrew put his glass down and turned to Kian. "What are you planning to do with Igor? I heard that Jade gave you one day to interrogate him. Do you need me to fly out to Greenland and assist with my truth detecting?"

It hadn't occurred to Kian for the simple reason that he hadn't figured out yet how to get Igor to talk.

"If Toven can compel him, he can force the truth out of him. And if he can't, Igor is not going to tell us anything, so

there will be nothing for you to confirm.”

Andrew glanced at Annani. “Perhaps the Clan Mother can give it a shot. With or without Mia’s enhancing powers.”

That was another thing that Kian hadn’t thought of, and for another simple reason. He wasn’t letting his mother anywhere near the compeller.

“That’s not on the table.”

His mother gave him a reproachful look. “This is my decision, Kian. Not yours. I want to find out who sent Igor and for what purpose. If Toven cannot force that information out of him, then I will surely give it a try.”

Toven had spoken to Valstar, and according to the guy, Igor had some military background. Valstar suspected that he’d served in one of the queen’s special units.

Perhaps he’d been sent on the settler ship to spy on the gods they’d been supposed to serve, or maybe to do something worse, like trying to take over their community.

Could it be that Igor was more powerful than Annani’s father had been?

That was unlikely and, although interesting, irrelevant. The queen was long dead, and so were most of the gods.

“Igor is dangerous, and he might have been sent to do damage to the gods, but they were long gone by the time he got here. He saw an opportunity for a power grab and took it. The guy is a sociopath with no regard for anyone’s life, and you are not flying to Greenland to talk to him.”

She arched a brow. “If I want to fly to Greenland, I will.”

He wouldn’t argue with her in front of everyone, but there was no way she was doing that.

“Why not bring him here?” Kalugal smiled sweetly at Annani as if he was conspiring with her. “Did anyone run my idea by Bridget or Merlin?”

“What idea?” Amanda asked.

KALUGAL

*K*alugal shouldn't feel disappointed that Kian hadn't told anyone about his brilliant idea to render Igor mute by removing his vocal cords, but he couldn't help it.

It was a stroke of genius if he said so himself.

Then again, perhaps he shouldn't have suggested it. He was also a compeller, and giving others ideas for how to disable him was not wise. He and Kian were buddy-buddy now, but no one had a crystal ball to see the future, and things might change between them.

Oh, wait. That wasn't true. Both of them had crystal balls. Syssi and Jacki were seers of sorts, but their visions and predictions were so sporadic and unpredictable that they weren't of any real utility.

He stifled a chuckle. Unpredictable prediction—that was an oxymoron.

Amanda was still looking at him expectantly. “Well? I'm waiting to hear your idea.”

“It might not work,” he prefaced. “That's why I wanted the doctors' opinions, but evidently, Kian hadn't thought it was worth pursuing.”

“There was no time,” his cousin said.

There had certainly been enough time for a simple phone call. Kian had probably forgotten about it mere minutes after he'd suggested it.

Kalugal smiled graciously at his cousins. “I could have called the doctors myself, so I can’t really blame you for forgetting when it didn’t occur to me to do it.” He turned to Amanda. “Since compulsion requires vocalization, disabling Igor’s ability to speak should render him harmless, or as harmless as any other super-strong Kra-ell male.”

Amanda frowned. “That’s an interesting idea. I assume that you are suggesting taking out his vocal cords?”

Kalugal nodded. “The Kra-ell heal faster than humans, but not as fast as we do. He might be able to regrow them, but it will take time.”

“Given the power of his compulsion, he might be part god,” Kian said. “In which case, he will regrow them almost as fast as it would take us to remove them.”

Annani stiffened. “I do not like the idea of maiming a person even if he is about to be executed. Naturally, I do not condone executions either, but I cannot intervene.”

Kian cast her a sidelong glance. “You wanted to get information out of him. I will be much less reluctant to let you near him if I know he can’t compel you and anyone who’s with you, but removing his vocal cords does not guarantee that. Firstly because he might regrow them too fast, and secondly, he might be able to compel without using his voice. We don’t know how compulsion works. Sound waves are just the vehicle by which the compulsion is delivered. If he’s part god, he might piggyback them on top of thralling.”

“I do not think it can be done like that.” Annani flicked her fingers against her wine glass. “At least I’ve never tried it, but then I am not a fan of compulsion.” She cast Kalugal an apologetic look. “No offense, my dear nephew, but I do not think that compulsion should be used for any reason other than to save lives or as a party trick with the full consent of the participants. I am a firm believer in free will.”

He dipped his head. “I agree wholeheartedly. Compulsion is a slimy trick, and I never use it unless I have no other choice.”

Kian snorted. “Since you decide when it is okay to use it, and you don’t limit its usage to life and death situations, that doesn’t require much restraint from you. You use it when it benefits you.”

Evidently, their new cooperation agreement didn’t extend to mutual courtesy. The repartee continued, which was fine by him. He enjoyed it too much to give it up.

He looked down his nose at Kian. “Morality is not absolute, and everyone has a different interpretation of what is morally right or wrong.”

Amanda lifted her hand to stop their banter. “I have a better idea, but it might not work if his body rejects implants like ours do. We know that the Kra-ell bodies don’t do that because they all had those implants, but if Igor is half god, then his body would. If he’s not half god, though, we can implant a voice box over his vocal cords and change the pitch and frequency of the sound waves he emits. If we do that, we will have to test the procedure’s effectiveness somehow.” She turned to Andrew. “Your lie-detecting services would be required to verify whether Igor is trying to use compulsion and failing or just pretending to do so to fool us.”

Andrew shook his head. “I don’t like any of these ideas. They involve too many ifs. The best thing would be to build a special cell for him. It shouldn’t be too difficult to construct a soundproof room and have Igor speak into a microphone. His voice will be converted to a machine voice the same way the earpieces do, and we know that works because the technology has been proven effective.”

Leaning back, Kian gave Andrew a smile. “That’s a great idea except for two things. We don’t have time to build a soundproof room and test it before Jade loses her patience and demands Igor’s head. Secondly, Toven or Annani won’t be able to compel him to answer their questions if their voices have to travel through wiring to the loudspeakers in that soundproof room. It would be the same as them trying to compel him via phone or tablet. We know that is much less effective.”

Andrew's face fell. "You make a good point."

Kalugal was glad that his idea wasn't the only one to get rebuffed. "We should discuss it with the doctors. Perhaps Merlin can put a mechanical device on his vocal cords and attach it somehow to his spine so his body can't reject it." He cast Annani an apologetic glance. "I know that it sounds barbaric, but so does chopping off his head, which we promised to allow Jade as soon as we are done with him."

"He is a very bad man," Syssi said. "I'm usually compassionate and forgiving, but I feel no compassion for that monster. Do whatever you want with him to get him to talk, and then let Jade kill him. She's waited long enough to avenge her sons."

ANNANI

*A*nnani had never heard Syssi sound so vehement, and it was shocking coming from her gentle daughter-in-law.

Had living with Kian's sharp edges hardened Syssi? Or had being a mother changed her, making her empathize with Jade's terrible loss?

Letting out a sigh, Annani reached over and patted her arm. "Fate will teach Igor to do better, my dear Syssi. If not in this life, then in the next."

Syssi's eyes blazed with inner light as she returned her gaze, which Annani had never seen them do before, either. "I am not as forgiving as you are, Clan Mother. I want Jade to get her revenge, justice to be served, and to have one less monster walking the Earth and spreading more death and misery."

Annani smiled. "I am not forgiving, but I've lived long enough to know that revenge does not soothe the soul of those who were wronged. It only breeds more bloodshed and misery."

Syssi looked like she was biting her tongue not to answer, which was a wise choice. Not because she would have angered Annani but because she would have worked herself into a fit of anger that was not conducive to anything.

"You are all overthinking this," Dalhu said.

Since he rarely expressed his opinion, everyone hushed and turned to look at him.

"What do you suggest we do with Igor?" Orion asked.

“Igor needs to die, not only because Jade was promised his head but also because he’s too dangerous alive, not just to the Kra-ell or us, but to humanity at large. We don’t need another Navuh.”

Kalugal let out a sigh. “One is more than enough.”

Dalhu cast a tentative look at Allegra, who was sitting on the floor with Phoenix and playing with a toy bus. Seeing that the girls were immersed in their role-play game, he lowered his voice and leaned forward. “That being said, before his head is separated from his body, he must be interrogated and forced to talk using any means available to us, whether compulsion or torture. We can mitigate the danger by having him in chains and the Guardians wearing earpieces. It wouldn’t take more than a day or two to be done with him, and then he can be executed.” He turned to Kian. “If you need help with the interrogation, I can fly to Greenland for a couple of days and lend the Guardians a hand.”

It was the longest speech Annani had heard Dalhu deliver in a while. It was also a reminder that the talented artist used to be a ruthless killer and that he did not have any qualms about getting his hands dirty once again for the clan.

He had decapitated Carol’s tormentor, and she had no doubt he would have gladly done so to Igor, but he respected Jade’s right to do it herself.

Kian smiled at Amanda’s mate. “I think the Guardians can manage, but you seem eager to release some pent-up energy.” He turned to Andrew. “The three of us can go together. Can you take time off work?”

“Sure. I haven’t taken time off in a while.”

Syssi did not look happy, but she did not say anything. They had been mated long enough for her to withstand Kian’s absence for a couple of days.

“Do you have a place to stay there?” Amanda asked. “From what I understand, it’s a tiny town with a small hotel that barely has enough rooms for our men and their prisoners.”

“True.” Kian leaned back in his chair. “It’s not the best location to conduct the interrogation. The question is, where can we take him?”

“Only the keep,” Andrew said. “You already have a dungeon with reinforced cells, and no one will hear him scream down there.”

Syssi winced. “Please. Don’t say things like that next to Allegra and Phoenix. You can never know what they pick up while we think they are busy playing and not paying attention to what the grownups are talking about.”

“What about Safe Haven?” Nathalie asked. “The lab you built for William is underground. You could convert it into a temporary jail. You can also use the lair Emmett has under his cottage.”

Kian regarded her with a frown. “That’s actually a good idea. I was wracking my brain what to do with the Kra-ell until we decided where we wanted them. Safe Haven has enough room providing that they are not running a retreat right now.” He pulled out his phone and then cast an apologetic glance at Annani. “Do you mind if I make the call here?”

Family dinners were for spending time with loved ones and not with phones. Usually, Annani did not approve of phone calls or texts or browsing the internet at the dinner table, but these were not normal circumstances.

She nodded. “Give my regards to Emmett.”

“Thank you, Mother. I’ll make it quick.”

KIAN

“*W*e have a retreat scheduled for this weekend,” Emmett said. “But we are not booked to capacity. In fact, we have sold only half of the spots. People just don’t want to be on the Oregon coast in the winter. I might combine this group with the next retreat, but I’ll have to offer them a refund or a significant discount for canceling it so close to the start date. If you want to bring the Kra-ell to Safe Haven, you must tell me now.”

“Can I give you my answer in a couple of hours? I’m having a family meeting to decide what to do with them.”

Emmett was silent for a long moment before answering. “We can make a home for them in Safe Haven. The property is big enough, and it’s in the middle of nowhere, with nature all around us, so hunting will not be a problem. But we don’t have sufficient lodging for them even when we are not running a retreat. There is also the problem of the Safe Haven community. I can compel them to keep the Kra-ell presence a secret, but you conditioned my return on me never compelling them again.”

Kian had a feeling that Emmett liked the idea of leading the new Kra-ell community along with his human one. When he was still a member of Jade’s tribe, he’d been relegated to a second-class citizen, and this was his chance to return the favor, so to speak.

“Naturally, I will rescind that contingency. I like your idea, but you might not have thought it through. Jade is the new unofficial leader of those Kra-ell, and she will not want to

answer to you or anyone else. I'm sure you don't want your former mistress to take over Safe Haven. It is your baby."

"I have no wish to lead these Kra-ell or become part of their community and answer to Jade again. I'm only offering them a temporary sanctuary. If we come to an agreement of mutual coexistence, I would consider it becoming a permanent solution. I just hope you wouldn't force me to accept them."

It seemed like Kian had been wrong about the guy's motives, and he was surprised that Emmett was willing to compromise his location to offer sanctuary to the Kra-ell without asking for anything in return. Perhaps he missed his people more than he was willing to admit.

"I will never force your community to accept people they don't get along with and don't want to coexist with."

The clan owned half of Safe Haven, but Kian respected the right of their community to either accept or reject the newcomers.

"I appreciate that," Emmett said. "I'm just not sure how to go about it."

"A permanent solution will be based on a mutual agreement between all parties, and by that, I mean a majority vote of all members." There was no way to get a unanimous vote on something like that, and a decisive majority of over seventy-five percent should be good enough.

"If the Kra-ell accept Jade as their leader, they will vote the way she tells them."

If that was so, Kian would have to insist on a democratic vote. "Jade is in the process of adapting her leadership style and making it more inclusive. I will convince her to let her people vote freely. Maybe anonymous voting is preferable in this situation."

The big assembly voted by a show of hands, but his people didn't fear repercussions if their vote didn't align with his or even Annani's.

"Good luck persuading Jade to go for it." Emmett let out a sigh. "But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Housing the Kra-

ell in Safe Haven, even temporarily, is not a foregone conclusion. You still need to discuss it with your people.”

Kian suspected that Emmett was having second thoughts about his offer, and Jade wasn't going to like Safe Haven either. Compared to Karelia, it had balmy weather, but she wanted to settle in the tropics.

“I'll run it by all the usual suspects and let you know.”

“Don't wait too long. If it's happening, I need to get Riley to start contacting people about rescheduling their retreat.”

“Worst case scenario, you can do that at the last minute and claim a malfunction like a pipe bursting and flooding the lodge. I'll refund their money and pay for their next retreat. I doubt many will have a problem with that. These retreats are costly.”

Emmett sighed. “You obviously don't have personal experience dealing with customers. If you did, you wouldn't be saying that. Some people are a pain in the rear, especially when I can't compel them into a more cooperative mood, but I love having them here anyway. I must be a masochist.”

That was a big hint, and if need be, Kian would allow Emmett a one-time exception to compel problematic customers to accept the deal, but it was premature. “You are a narcissist who loves to perform for a crowd of adoring fans, and you are willing to suffer the occasional pain in your backside for the privilege of being worshiped by everyone else.”

Emmett snorted. “I didn't know that you knew me so well. I'm flattered that you were paying attention.”

“It was hard not to.” The guy had loved to sit in the café and collect admirers for his sermons. “Thank you for offering Jade and her people a sanctuary. That's very generous of you, especially given your history with Jade.”

“They are my people too, but I'm not sure I want them in my life again. It's perfect as it is.”

“I can understand that. I'll call you later today.”

KIAN

*K*ian ended the call and looked at his dinner companions. “What do you think?”

They had all listened in, so there was no need to repeat what had been said.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Alena said. “I was concerned that you would invite the Kra-ell to join the village.”

“That was on the agenda until I talked with Emmett, but I like his idea better.”

The security measures around the place would have to be modified to keep the Kra-ell within a certain perimeter and not just to keep intruders out, but that shouldn’t be too complicated since William and his crew had installed state-of-the-art surveillance in and around Safe Haven.

The more Kian thought about the idea, the more he liked it.

“I do not like it,” Annani said. “We have enough room in the village. Why not bring them here?”

Kian frowned. They had discussed the issue earlier today, and Annani had seemed ambivalent about where the Kra-ell should settle.

“Do you prefer for them to come here?” Amanda asked.

“Yes.” Annani leaned back in her chair. “I want to learn about these people and would rather do it from the comfort of the village.” She turned to look at Kian. “If I asked to visit Safe Haven, you would have a fit. Am I right?”

He had no problem with her visiting Safe Haven. It was much safer than most places she traveled to, but he didn't want to publicly contradict his mother. However, he could make it sound like he had changed his mind.

"I took Syssi and Allegra for a visit even before William made the place super secure for the lab we've built. At the moment, we don't have enough Guardians there, but once we do, I might consider taking you for a visit. The place is not fancy, though. You might not like it."

"I do not care about that, but it is not going to be the same as having the Kra-ell here in the village, accessible to me whenever I wish to explore their culture. I find the differences between them fascinating, and I want to learn more about life on the home planet."

That was actually a very good reason not to invite the Kra-ell to the village. They were too strong, and they were immune to thralling and shrouding. Compulsion worked on them, which was the only reason he was even considering it, but it wasn't foolproof.

"I will present both options to the council, and if the council decides that the village is preferable, I will call for the big assembly and put it up for a vote. This is too big and too impactful on our future for us to decide on for everyone."

"There is a third option," Alena said. "You could split them up. The humans and some of the more human-looking hybrids could remain on the *Aurora*, and the purebloods could either join the village or the Safe Haven community. That way, we don't overcrowd one location with so many new people. In fact, you should cancel the planes that are supposed to pick them up from Greenland and have them sail here. That will give us enough time to get organized to receive them."

Kian had considered the idea as well, but there were some logistical considerations. The *Aurora* would need to restock on provisions for those who didn't subsist on blood and to get the quantities needed for the three-week trip would require the ship to dock in one of the big ports in Canada to restock. They also had to arrange transportation for the Guardians, who were

needed back home, and Kalugal's men, whom he no doubt needed back in the office.

The problem was that some of the men would have to stay behind to guard the Kra-ell and provide thralling and shrouding as required, and Kian wasn't keen on that.

"That's not such a great idea," Andrew said. "We will need to prepare passports and crew visas for everyone on board, and that's one hell of a task given that we are talking about over three hundred people that would need those done before they arrive at Long Beach."

Syssi folded her napkin on top of her plate. "If we managed to smuggle them into the ship with supply trucks, we can smuggle them out the same way. I don't think the port of Long Beach has more security in place than the port of Helsinki."

"You'd be surprised." Andrew puffed out his chest. "The Europeans have nothing on us. The Finns don't have a problem with foreign nationals trying to get into their country illegally, smuggle drugs, or plot terrorist attacks, at least not as big of a problem as we do. They are lucky to be on the periphery of Europe, so they don't attract as many foreigners with malicious intent."

Orion chuckled. "They only have to worry about their friendly neighbors the Russians, but that's not a big deal, right?"

SYSSI

Syssi didn't know whether Andrew had been exaggerating the security measures in Long Beach, but a glance at Kian's expression made it clear to her that he wasn't interested in that solution.

He turned to Alena. "We might be able to smuggle them in, but the question is whether we want them together with their livestock on the *Aurora* for so long. I can just imagine how bad the ship will smell, and we might never get the stink out. Your wedding cruise might be compromised."

"I'm fine with a small wedding." Smiling, Alena reached for Orion's hand. "We can have a ceremony only with our siblings and their families and my children."

Orion leaned over and kissed her cheek. "The entire clan is your family, my love. Every person you don't invite will be offended, and rightfully so."

"That's a very good point." She turned to Amanda. "It seems that it's back to the village square. We can have a lovely wedding with a big tent in case it rains and with the Odus preparing a feast under Callie and Gerard's supervision."

Amanda nodded. "I can make it happen."

Alena didn't look overly disappointed to have her wedding in the village instead of on the cruise ship, but they hadn't gone to all the trouble of getting a ship and remodeling it to give up on the idea because of a herd of sheep and goats doing their business in the cargo bay. If need be, the Kra-ell could be

put to work and scrub it clean until no smell remained. After all, it was their responsibility to clean up after their meals.

But if they wanted to keep the wedding cruise dream alive, the option of inviting the Kra-ell and their humans to the village was problematic. They couldn't leave them alone in the village while everyone else went on the cruise.

“What are you frowning about?” Kian asked.

Syssi sighed. “I'm not ready to give up on the wedding cruise idea, but if we still want to make it happen, we can't invite the Kra-ell to the village. We can't leave them alone here while we are all gone.”

“My men can stay behind to guard them.” Kalugal turned to Kian. “Or do you still not trust me with the village security?”

Syssi stifled a chuckle. Kalugal knew how to push Kian's buttons, and he didn't miss a single opportunity to do so. The thing was, they both enjoyed the banter.

It was one big game to them, in which each of them was trying to get the upper hand with snarky remarks that would leave the other one speechless. Perhaps it was natural for two type A males to always compete even when they genuinely liked each other.

Didn't brothers do that?

As always, thinking about the brother she'd lost triggered a wave of sadness that Syssi had learned not to fight but to let wash over her.

It was easier now that she had Allegra.

One look at her daughter playing with her cousin on the floor was enough to banish sad thoughts and keep them at bay.

Leaning back, Kian cast his cousin a smile. “Given that we've just renewed our vows, I'm still in the trusting stage of our honeymoon.”

Amanda snorted, and Syssi chuckled behind her hand.

Kian had told her about Kalugal teasing him by calling their relationship a bromance, an enemies-to-lovers story between two cousins. She thought it was funny, but Kian had been annoyed, and she would have never expected him to use it and expand on it.

“Then it’s settled.” Kalugal lifted his wine glass. “Let’s make a toast to our bromance.”

“Not so fast.” Kian lifted his hand. “I’m sure your men are all looking forward to the cruise and celebrating seven weddings with their new extended family. Leaving your men behind in the village while the rest of us party goes against the spirit of full cooperation, transparency, and integration we both agreed on. It will be construed as discriminatory and offensive.”

“Seven?” Kalugal ignored the rest of Kian’s words. “Who else is getting married?”

“We have a long list,” Amanda said. “We will need to launch several cruises to cover everyone, but so far, for this maiden voyage, the first seven couples are Alena and Orion, Dalhu and me, Wendy and Vlad, Callie and Brundar, Wonder and Anandur, Aliya and Vrog, and either Richard and Stella or Bridget and Turner. Both couples say that they can wait for the next round.”

“Two or three cruises should cover it,” Syssi said. “At least for now. I expect more couples will want a wedding cruise.” She took Kian’s hand. “Perhaps we can renew our vows.”

The smoldering look he gave her was bone-melting. “I renew my vows to you every morning when I wake up next to you in bed and every night when I hold you in my arms.”

“Bravo.” Kalugal clapped his hands. “That should go right into a romance novel.”

Jacki elbowed him playfully. “You should take notes.”

“Ouch.” Kalugal assumed an offended expression. “Am I not romantic enough for you?”

Syssi leaned over and kissed her husband. If they weren’t surrounded by immortals with excellent hearing, she would

have whispered, *Way to go. You won this one.*

KIAN

*K*ian didn't want to leave Kalugal's men in charge of the village while the clan was celebrating, especially since Kalugal would be on the cruise ship along with Rufsus. That would leave Phinas in charge—the guy who was currently dating Jade.

As bad ideas went, this one was up there with the worst of them, but Kian had been smart enough to use a different argument against them watching over the Kra-ell, one that didn't paint him as paranoid but rather as someone who cared about Kalugal's men's full integration in the clan.

Kian stifled a smile. He was learning to think like a politician, but he hadn't decided yet whether that was a good or a bad thing. It certainly was helpful, but he had no love lost for smooth-talking manipulators who only cared about money and power, and he didn't want to be grouped together with them.

Truth be told, he cared about money too, but only as a means to provide for his clan and to finance the clan's humanitarian and social activities. He didn't care about power or what people thought about him, and if there was someone else capable and willing to take over from him, he would gladly step down and transfer the baton to the new person.

The problem was that there were no volunteers, and his people were happy to leave the management of the clan businesses and security to him while complaining that he was overcautious at best and paranoid at worst.

Kian could live with that.

He was tasked with keeping everyone in the village safe, and he'd rather be called paranoid than let even one clan member get hurt on his watch.

Well, that might be the wrong term. A watch implied a defined time frame, while his watch was indefinite.

Glancing at his precious daughter playing with her cousin on the carpet, he didn't wish her the burden of responsibility he carried. Hopefully, when the time came for him to step down, she would no longer have to worry about deadly enemies and keeping everyone safe.

Would she even want to take over from him?

He had a feeling that she would. Allegra was a born leader.

But if she didn't, perhaps the clan would vote someone else into the position. After all, the job was never meant to be hereditary, but since he and Sari had been groomed from childhood to become the future leaders of the clan, they had assumed the positions, and no one had opposed them.

The thing was, he should plan for one day stepping down and make it a habit to work more with the council. If a future elected leader wasn't Annani's direct descendant, Kian would feel better knowing that the council held that person accountable.

"Cruising over here will give me enough time to bring the issue to the big assembly's vote," he said. "But the same objective can be achieved with much less headache by temporarily housing the Kra-ell in Safe Haven. If Emmett cancels the upcoming retreat, very little preparation will be needed for him to host the Kra-ell."

"I was hoping to include the Kra-ell in the village for added security," Syssi said. "If we bring them to Safe Haven and then decide to move them somewhere else, the place will once again get compromised, and we can't do that to Emmett. He was so broken up about having to evacuate when Igor was still at large."

Kian frowned at her. “I don’t understand how inviting them to the village is better.”

“We will bring them here the way we do with everyone else. They will not know where they are or how they got there.”

“They are not like everyone else.” It occurred to Kian that the same was true about Vrog and Aliya. “They are stronger, faster, and they need to hunt. If we let them hunt in the area, they will realize where they are. They can scale these mountains with ease.”

Vrog and Emmett didn’t hunt often, and even Aliya did it only once in a while, but the purebloods would need to do so more frequently.

“Right.” Syssi pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “So, I guess inviting them to live with us in the village is off the table.”

“It’s not. If they can subsist on blood from domesticated animals and go hunting only occasionally somewhere else, like near our mountain cabin, then the village is an option. I will have William make location cuffs for all of them, so we can monitor their location at all times, but I doubt Jade will be willing to accept that for the dubious pleasure of sharing our village.” He picked up a glass of water and took a sip. “We love the village, but to them, it’s just a location, and if it means less freedom, they will prefer to go somewhere else. If I were in her shoes, I would choose Safe Haven and negotiate as much autonomy as possible.”

Amanda nodded. “Me too. There is another factor that none of you have considered. Their humans comprise a population that genetically is too small to safely reproduce. They will need to bring new members into their community. How is that going to work? Are we going to allow the Kra-ell to kidnap more humans?”

Kian groaned. “That’s why I wanted to return them to their compound with a Guardian or two as liaisons. Marcel would have no doubt volunteered, and perhaps Phinas as well.”

Amanda cast him an incredulous look. “The fact that we won’t be there to witness the kidnapping doesn’t mean that we are not responsible for letting them continue. It does not absolve you or the rest of us from making sure that the Kra-ell don’t kidnap any more humans.”

“So what do you suggest we do? Let the humans go?”

“Of course not.” Amanda crossed her arms over her chest. “What I was trying to convey is that Safe Haven is a great solution for the humans as well. They can become part of the Safe Haven community, and the young ones can find love among retreat attendees. The attendees who decide to stay and join the community will do so voluntarily. It’s like we do with Dormants. After the rules of the game are explained to them, and they are told about the aliens, they will be given a choice to leave after getting their memories thrallled away.”

Kian nodded. “That’s a good solution. I’ll present it to Jade and the council, and if both are in favor, I will put it up for a vote in the big assembly.”

“Why do you need the big assembly to approve?” Annani asked. “Safe Haven is an auxiliary location, and the Kra-ell living there will not affect the clan.”

“I agree with the Clan Mother,” Kalugal said. “And I also have an idea that might be a bit outlandish. What if we get one of those enormous cruise ships that can house thousands of passengers? We can have a floating village with enough space for every member of the clan, the Kra-ell, and a bunch of humans to serve us all. Naturally, we will have large, luxurious apartments instead of the thousands of small cabins, and we will have several restaurants, so there will be a nice selection of menus. A buffet that’s open twenty-four-seven, offices, clinic, in short, the works.” His eyes sparkled as he looked at Kian. “What do you think, cousin?”

“As lovely as that sounds, I prefer solid land for my permanent living quarters.”

TOVEN

“We should go to sleep.” Yamanu stretched his arms over his head. “Mey is probably wondering where I am.”

Toven nodded. “I should check on Mia as well.” She was probably asleep. Otherwise, she would have texted him to ask how things had gone with the Russian ship that had arrived to collect the rescued sailors. “I’m surprised we didn’t get a visit from Jade yet. It’s not like her to let others take care of things.”

The sailors had been collected over an hour ago, and everything had gone smoothly. The Russians hadn’t asked to search the ship, and no thralling or compulsion had been needed to convince them that the *Aurora* had no passengers and was on its way to its owners in the United States. Toven and Yamanu had gotten a few curious looks, but no one had questioned their claim that they were part of Captain Olsson’s crew.

The captain of the other ship had thanked Olsson and Toven for keeping their men safe and warm, they had shaken hands, and that was the end of the story.

“We didn’t give her much choice.” Yamanu took a sip from his coffee. “We told her to stay in her cabin and not come out until we tell her it’s okay, which we should have done as soon as the Russian ship was far enough for us to turn the lights back on.”

On the couch, Merlin turned on his side and kept snoring.

It wasn't loud, and it didn't bother Toven. It just made him curious about the differences between the gods and their immortal descendants. Gods were too perfectly made to have an obstruction that caused snoring, but apparently, immortals weren't as perfect.

“What do you want to do with the good doctor? Should we leave him here to sleep or carry him to his cabin?”

Yamanu cast an amused look at Merlin. “He can sleep here. I'm not carrying him and putting him to bed like some damn princess.”

“He did well earlier.” Toven refilled his glass with more whiskey. “I wasn't sure about him staying with the sailors who he'd patched up and transferring them to the care of their doctor, but that was a good call. It made our rescue story more believable.”

Yamanu chuckled. “You didn't even have to work hard on planting a good story in their heads. They all believed that their captain had gone mad.”

Toven's smile wilted. “It's a damn shame that no one will ever know how remarkable that man was and what he accomplished. These men wouldn't be alive now if not for his strong will and smarts.”

Yamanu put his coffee cup down and lifted the whiskey glass that had only a few drops left in it. “To Captain Sergey Gorshekov. He will forever live in our immortal minds and be remembered with respect and admiration.”

“To Captain Gorshekov.” Toven emptied his glass and reached for the bottle for another refill. “I embellished the story a little to make his intentions seem less malevolent but not so much as to make it unbelievable. The best option was to make them unaware that their captain wasn't following navy command orders and was on a suicide mission. I just hate that his family will be told the same story, and think he abandoned them.”

“It is what it is.” Yamanu put the empty glass down.

As the Guardian's phone pinged with an incoming message, he pulled it out of his pocket. "Kian's asking me to get the two of you in our war room and call him after we wake up. Should I call him back?"

"Yeah." Merlin turned around and lowered his feet to the floor. "Right after I make myself a coffee."

"I'm calling him now. You can make yourself a coffee while we talk."

When Merlin waved a hand instead of answering, Yamanu placed the call and propped his phone against the half-empty whiskey bottle.

"Good morning," Kian's gruff voice came through. "What are you doing awake?"

"We never went to sleep. Toven, Merlin, and I came up here to celebrate the successful conclusion of the sailor rescue operation, and Merlin fell asleep on the couch, but he's awake now."

"Good. I'm glad to have the three of you together, and I'll try to make it short so you can catch some sleep. I want to discuss with you a few options regarding Igor, and where to take the Kra-ell and their humans."

"Shouldn't we get Jade in here?" Toven asked.

"Not yet. I want to run the options by you first and then tell her what we decide are the best."

"Go ahead." Merlin sat down with a fresh cup of coffee in his hands.

"Actually, the first idea has to do with you. What do you think about damaging or removing Igor's vocal cords to prevent him from using his compulsion ability?"

Merlin frowned. "Damaging them probably wouldn't be enough because we don't know how compulsion works. I suspect that it piggybacks on sound waves, and it doesn't matter what those sound waves are. I would have to remove his vocal cords altogether. But since we have William's earpieces, why bother?"

“Because not everyone on the ship has them, and shit happens. I want to neutralize him. But before you do that, I want you to test how fast he heals. We suspect that he’s a hybrid, half god and half Kra-ell, so if he heals as fast as we do, it will confirm that. Also, he would probably regrow his vocal cords in a matter of days, so we need to keep checking their status.”

“He doesn’t have days,” Toven said. “Jade agreed to give me one day to interrogate him. If I can compel him, one day will suffice for what we need to get out of him, and if he can’t be compelled, then we shouldn’t waste any more energy on him and let Jade have him. Taking out his vocal cords will just waste time I could use to learn more.”

KIAN

*K*ian hoped to get Jade to agree to more than just one day. If they could get Igor to talk and reveal a thread of information that she was interested in, she might be tempted to let him live for a few more days. But if she did not agree to extend her stay of execution, Kian wasn't going to push the issue and start their relationship by going back on Toven's word.

"I agree with Toven regarding the vocal cords," Merlin said. "Nevertheless, I would still like to test whether Igor is part god, and that would take no time at all. One small cut will do the trick. If he's part god, we might have a bargaining chip in case compulsion doesn't work. As part god, he is not exclusively Jade's to punish, and he falls under our jurisdiction as well. We can offer him entombment instead of beheading in exchange for information."

Merlin was a smart guy. Neither Kian nor Turner had thought of that loophole.

"That's a good point, but I don't think we will win points with Jade by using this as an excuse to rob her of her right to revenge."

Frowning, Toven leaned back in his armchair. "Let's first see if I can compel the scumbag, and if I can't, we will take it from there."

"Agreed." That wasn't the only thing Kian needed to discuss with them, and the three looked like they were running out of steam. "Let me bring you up to speed about the options

for the Kra-ell relocation I discussed with my mother and the rest of the family over dinner.”

When he was done, Toven nodded. “I like the Safe Haven idea the best. It solves nearly all the problems associated with integrating the Kra-ell into our community.”

“Jade is not going to like Safe Haven,” Yamanu said. “Hell, I don’t like the place. It’s cold and dreary, and the free-love community gives me the creeps.”

Kian laughed. “You haven’t been there since we stormed the place to free Eleanor and get Peter back.”

“That was enough. I wouldn’t want to live there full-time. Visiting is a different story.”

“Do you prefer for them to join the village?”

Yamanu shrugged. “Why not? It will shake things up a little. When Kalugal and his men joined us, people were wary of them, but it turned out pretty good. We have extra help defending the place, and the clan ladies enjoy plenty of immortal shagging and venom bites that they didn’t get to experience before. If we can coexist in perfect harmony with our former enemies, we should be able to do so with the Kra-ell. They might have fought the gods back in the day, but if what Jade told us is true, then they had been right to rebel. Navuh, on the other hand, fights us for the simple reason that he hates Annani and that her assistance to humans interferes with his world domination ambitions.”

Was he the only one bothered by the fact that the Kra-ell were a different species?

“One major difference works in favor of Kalugal’s men. The former Doomers are genetically the same as us, a combination of human and god genetics, and it’s easy to forget that they weren’t always on our side. The Kra-ell are fundamentally different. They don’t look like us or eat the same things we do, and they produce four males for every female.”

“So? I say let’s celebrate the differences.”

Yamanu was the quintessential optimist.

“Let’s decide on two or three options that we are comfortable with and present them to Jade,” Toven said. “She and her people need to have a say in this too.”

Kian preferred for the choice to be his and the clan’s. If Jade didn’t like it, they could negotiate a compromise. “What about the cruise ship option? Do any of you think it’s a good idea?”

“It might be for the humans,” Merlin said. “They like it here, and it can provide them with jobs. I don’t think the Kra-ell are comfortable living on a ship. In fact, most of them are water phobic. They tolerate it, but it’s not a long-term solution for them.”

“We can’t separate them unless they want it.” Kian groaned. “Every time I think I have a solution figured out, another thing comes to mind that puts it in question. In my opinion, Safe Haven is the best solution. Let’s do our best to sell it to Jade.” He trained his gaze on Yamanu. “Don’t share your opinion of the place with her.”

The Guardian shrugged. “I’ll keep my mouth shut, but once she sees the place, she will refuse to stay there.”

“We can tell her that it’s the best we can do for her,” Kian said. “Even if I was willing to accept the Kra-ell, which I’m not, what about the humans? Are you comfortable with them living in the village with us?”

Yamanu grinned. “I’d be thrilled. I vote for opening a big dining hall and paying them to prepare three meals a day for the entire population of the village. Talk about a symbiotic coexistence. The humans enjoy preparing meals for us, and we enjoy eating them.”

Had the Guardian been joking?

Sometimes it was hard to tell with Yamanu. Hopefully, when it came time for the council to vote, he would take it more seriously and vote with his brain rather than his stomach.

JADE

Jade tossed and turned in the overly comfortable bed, exhaustion weighing heavily but sleep eluding her.

She was agitated and hungover and missed having Phinas with her in bed, which made her even more agitated.

If he were there, he would have wrapped his arms around her and said something that would have made her smile, soothing her frayed nerves and making her feel like she wasn't alone and that the entire world was not set against her. Until he'd entered her life, Kagra had been the only one who had stood by her side and made her feel like the two of them were united against the world.

Now Phinas was added, but as much more than Kagra was, and that was disturbing.

She'd known Kagra since she'd been born.

And yet Phinas was her antidote to loneliness, the balm to the simmering anger inside her, and the companion she'd never known she needed. And that was all in addition to the physical bliss he so masterfully provided.

Jade had sought to drown her yearning for him in alcohol, but all she'd gotten for her efforts was a headache and an upset stomach.

If only she had a phone, she could call him and find solace in his voice, but she was still considered a risk, and the immortals refused to even let her talk to him in private.

With a groan, Jade grabbed a pillow and hugged it to her roiling stomach.

Yamanu was supposed to tell her and the others who were confined to their cabins when it was okay to turn on the lights and step outside their doors. He must have fallen asleep, or thought that everyone was still sleeping, and therefore didn't bother to let them know that the Russian ship was gone and it was okay to turn on the lights and roam about the ship.

The windows and doors of the cabins didn't have shutters, and the curtains weren't completely opaque, but perhaps she could turn on the television to check what time it was. Could the light from the TV be seen from outside the ship, though?

Did it matter? Was the Russian vessel that had collected the sailors still within sight?

So far north, the sun didn't rise until nearly noon, so if she wanted to venture out of her cabin and check, she had to do it in the dark.

So be it.

She was done fighting for sleep that wouldn't come.

Ten minutes later, Jade was out in the dark corridor, finding her way to the stairs by keeping her hand on the wall. Her night vision was excellent, but no light filtered into the hallway, and she had to rely on her other senses and memory to guide her in the right direction.

When she reached the stairs, things got better. One of the upper floors must have had some illumination because the stairwell wasn't as utterly dark as the hallway outside her cabin.

Her destination was the cabin the immortals had designated as their war room and the bridge if they weren't there. Whoever was at the helm could tell her whether the Russians were gone and whether it was okay to let everyone know that they could leave their cabins.

The humans needed to start working on breakfast, and she needed to find a phone and call Phinas before she went crazy.

Was Mey right about the bond? Or had her words planted the idea in Jade's head, and she was having a psychosomatic reaction to them? It wasn't possible for her to form a bond with an immortal unless she had some godly blood in her, which she couldn't have.

She was purely Kra-ell through and through.

Still, the gods and the Kra-ell were related species who had probably sprouted from the same root. At some point in their natural evolution, they had diverged, or as the legends suggested, the gods had been genetically altered.

The bottom line was that the Kra-ell might have recessive genes that could make them susceptible to bonding, and the trigger was intermixing. Since that had been strictly forbidden by both cultures, it wasn't a well-known fact.

It was all speculation, but that was the only thing that could explain her reaction to Phinas and her intense need to be with him.

How the hell was she going to survive three more days without him? Or was it four because of the delay?

And what was she going to do once they were reunited?

They couldn't stay together. Her people would never accept a leader who chose one male instead of forming a family tribe, and that male wasn't even one of them.

Mother of All Life, what a mess she'd gotten herself into.

The right thing to do was to be strong and sever the connection to Phinas no matter the cost to her.

She had an obligation to her people to carry on the Kra-ell tradition and keep them from becoming extinct. Her own needs and wishes were secondary.

TOVEN

Toven wasn't surprised when the doorbell rang.

"I was wondering when Jade would show up." He rose to his feet. "I bet she didn't sleep either." He opened the door for her. "Good morning."

The female looked almost as bad as she had the night of the attack on Igor's compound. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her skin was pale and lacked its normal vibrancy.

"I've had better." She strode into the cabin and glared at Yamanu. "You said you would let me know when it was okay to leave the cabin. The lights are off everywhere except on this deck."

Yamanu winced. "I thought everyone was still asleep."

"Yeah, well. I wasn't." She walked over to the kitchenette and poured herself coffee. "Did the Russians give you any trouble?" She walked over to the couch and sat next to Merlin.

"Not at all." Toven returned to his armchair. "They were thankful for our help." He continued to tell her about the Russian captain's last act of bravery.

Jade nodded. "May he forever walk in the fields of the brave. I know how difficult it is to resist Igor's compulsion, even in a small way, and I'm not human. The captain must have had a powerful mind."

"Speaking of Igor's ability." Toven crossed his legs. "We decided not to tamper with his vocal cords. Since you are giving us just one day to interrogate him, that would be a

waste of time.” He didn’t add that Igor might be able to regrow them.

They didn’t know that for sure, and until Merlin tested his healing speed, it was just speculation.

Jade narrowed her eyes at him. “Is that another attempt to convince me to let him live more than one day after we arrive in Greenland?”

“It is,” Yamanu admitted. “If Toven can’t compel him, there are other ways to get him to talk, but they all take time. We can starve him or torture him until he sings just to stop the pain. You say that he’s a sociopath, so it’s not like he wants to protect someone by withholding information. He would keep his mouth shut out of spite, as a fuck-you to you and to us. But since he’s a selfish bastard who cares only about himself, he will tell us whatever we want to know in exchange for food and comfort, even if he knows that he’s about to die anyway.”

“I doubt that.” Jade pushed a strand of hair away from her face. “I’m too tired to think right now.” She looked at Yamanu. “First, let’s see how Toven manages with Mia’s help, and if that doesn’t work, we will take it from there.”

Yamanu nodded. “I just want you to think about it. Don’t you want to see him suffer? It’s much more satisfying than just one swipe of the sword to end him. I can arrange a front-row seat for you and anyone else who needs to see him getting beaten into a pulp.”

The smile she gave him was chilling. “I like the way you think, and I promise to give it serious consideration. Is there a chance that in the spirit of our mutual understanding and cooperation, you could give me a phone that I can use without someone monitoring what I say? I would like to talk to Phinas in private.”

The Guardian winced. “We don’t have any spare phones, and I can’t give you mine.”

“You can have mine,” Merlin said. “I’ve already talked with Ronja, and I don’t need to call anyone else, but I have a lot of personal information on this device that I would like to

keep private.” He smiled apologetically. “It’s not about you. I wouldn’t want Toven or Yamanu scrawling through my notes, either. But I think William can block everything except my contact list remotely.” He pulled out the device. “He should still be awake.”

Jade seemed to perk up as Merlin typed a message to William. “How long can I keep it?”

Merlin lifted his head. “First, let’s check that William can block all that other stuff. If he can, you can keep it for a couple of hours. I’m going to my cabin for a little shut-eye, so when you’re done, just come over and ring the bell.”

“If you’re going to be asleep, I don’t want to wake you up.”

“Two hours should be enough for me, and I’m sure you can make good use of the time talking to your gentleman caller.”

She hadn’t heard that expression in ages. “Phinas is not my gentleman caller.”

Merlin waved a hand in dismissal. “I don’t like the term boyfriend because Phinas is not a boy. And I don’t like the term lover because it implies an illicit affair.”

“Mate is a good one.” Yamanu cast her a meaningful look.

“Oh, look at that.” Merlin lifted his phone. “It’s already done.” He handed the phone to Jade. “You can call and message everyone on my contact list, but nothing else.”

Jade took the device with both hands and dipped her head. “Thank you, Merlin. Your kindness is greatly appreciated, and I vow to repay it.”

PHINAS

“Merlin?” Phinas answered the phone sleepily.

“It’s me,” Jade said. “Merlin was kind enough to let me borrow his phone.”

“Hi.” Smiling, Phinas sat up and glanced at the other two beds in the room, which were thankfully empty. His roommates must have woken up early and left him to sleep.

“You sound sleepy. Did I wake you up?”

He’d been up late, talking with Kalugal and getting updates about the *Aurora* and the rescue of the Russian sailors.

“It’s the best wake-up call. Hearing your voice first thing in the morning will make the rest of my day better. I miss you so badly that it hurts.”

There was a long moment of silence, and when Jade finally spoke, it wasn’t to say the words he’d been hoping for. “I need your advice.”

Swallowing his disappointment, he switched the phone to his other ear. “Of course. What can I help you with?”

“Toven and Yamanu are putting pressure on me to let Igor stay alive longer so they can force information out of him in case Toven can’t compel him. I don’t think taking him with us on the plane is smart. I don’t know what they hope to learn from him, and I want to be done with him. When we arrive wherever you are taking us, I want my people to have a fresh start without Igor and Valstar’s executions hanging over our heads. I want to do it in Greenland.”

“Was there a question somewhere in there that I’ve missed?”

She let out a breath. “It’s coming. I still don’t know where you plan to take us, and I don’t want to piss Kian off by refusing to give him those extra days and have him get rid of us in some remote location and wash his hands of us. As much as I crave revenge, I can’t think just about what I want. My people need me to look after their interests. I need access to our money, and I need help settling my people. When it was just my pod-mates and me, it was difficult to adjust to the new world we found ourselves in, but there were only twenty of us, and with our combined skills, we managed just fine. Now I have over three hundred people to care for, and I can’t do that without your clan’s help.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that it wasn’t his clan, but with the latest developments Kalugal had told him about, that was about to change. Two seats on the council and complete transparency were the beginning of full integration.

He also knew the possible options for settling the Kra-ell, but he wasn’t supposed to tell Jade about them until the council voted on one of them.

“Kian will not retaliate against you if you refuse to let him have more time to interrogate Igor, but it would be a good move on your part to allow it and have Kian owe you a favor. He knows how much this means to you and the magnitude of your sacrifice if you agree to wait with the beheading.”

“Good point. But it is a huge sacrifice, and it might bite him and me in the ass. I really want to close that chapter of my life.”

Phinas could empathize, but he knew that chapter would never close, not even with Igor and Valstar’s deaths. Jade could never get back what had been taken from her, and she could never forget and start a new life.

There was no point in smashing her hopes, though. She would figure it out on her own.

“Shouldn’t you talk with your people about Igor and Valstar’s fate?”

“It’s not up to them. They could have the heads of the others if they wronged them. I’ve seen these two kill my males, and I have the right and obligation to avenge them.”

“True, but given the other factors that affect all of them, perhaps you shouldn’t carry the weight of this decision solely on your shoulders. Let it be decided by the majority.”

“No. That’s my burden to carry.”

Stubborn female.

“I see you’ve made up your mind, so what exactly do you need my advice on?”

She let out a breath. “You helped me crystallize my thoughts.”

He hadn’t said much, but maybe she’d just needed a sounding board.

“I’m glad that I was able to help. What did you decide to do?”

“I’ll wait to see whether Toven can compel Igor and decide then. Kian asked me if I wanted to go back to the compound. I told him that I didn’t, but if he’s planning to send us somewhere worse or wash his hands of us, perhaps I should accept that offer. If he gives us our money back, I can manage.”

Perhaps that was what she’d been trying to find out. Whether she could trust Kian to make good on his promise to return the funds to her.

“I don’t doubt even for a moment that you’ll get the money. But you’ve just said that you want a fresh start, and that’s not going to happen in that compound. Even after you kill Igor, you’ll see his fingertips on every surface and his shadow in every corner.”

“What are my alternatives?”

Phinas closed his eyes and let out a breath. “If I tell you, you have to promise to keep it to yourself. Nothing has been decided yet, but there are several options that Kian is going to bring to the clan council for a vote.”

JADE

Jade's heart rate accelerated. "How do you know what Kian plans?"

"Kalugal told me. They are meeting with the council tomorrow."

The purpose of her call hadn't been to get Phinas to reveal things. Heck, it hadn't been to ask his advice either. She'd just wanted to hear his voice and quiet the unease churning in her stomach.

But then he'd said that he missed her so badly that it hurt, echoing what she was feeling, and she'd had to change the subject before she'd admitted to missing him as well.

Their story didn't have a happy ending. There was no future for them. And after Greenland, they probably would go their separate ways.

Except, he just offered her a secret that he wasn't supposed to share with her, which meant—

What?

That he loved her?

Phinas was loyal to his boss, and if he was willing to betray Kalugal's trust for her, what else could it mean?

"What are the options?"

"There are several. One is inviting you to join the village, which Kian is not too keen on, but others are in favor of. The second is Safe Haven, which the clan outfitted with state-of-

the-art security. The third is a mountain property that the clan owns, but it has no lodging ready to receive you, and the fourth is to use either of the two first options as a temporary solution until a suitable location is found. Kalugal also had the crazy idea of getting one of those huge cruise ships that can host thousands of passengers and have everyone move there, but no one else was in favor of that.”

“The Kra-ell and water don’t mix well together, so the ship is definitely a no-go. We are not seafarers. We are hunters. What are the pros and cons of the other two options?”

Kian was only considering inviting them to the village or Emmett’s location because he still thought of them as a threat for some reason and wanted to control them. They would probably have very restricted mobility, if any. It would be like Igor’s compound all over again, just without Igor.

“The village is where my men and I live too, and it’s beautiful. It’s located in Southern California near a major metropolis, but it’s extremely well hidden. I don’t even know its precise location because we use special self-driving vehicles to get there, and their windows turn opaque several miles before the hidden entrance to the tunnel leading to it. I could probably find it if I put my mind to it, but I prefer not to know so no one can torture it out of me. There are two problems with that location, though. Your people would almost double the village’s population, making it more difficult to keep it hidden. The other problem is that the mountains surrounding it might not have enough hunting game for your people. One of the suggested solutions was to organize weekly trips to where there was game. The rest of the time, you and the other purebloods would have to make do with domesticated animals or refrigerated blood.”

“That’s doable. We don’t need to hunt every day. What’s Emmett’s place like?”

“It’s very secluded, has plenty of wildlife, and is located on the Oregon Coast. It’s a beautiful location, and the winters are mild compared to what you are used to in Karelia, but it still gets quite cold there, and I know you prefer a warmer climate.”

“And the third option? Where is the mountain property that the clan owns?”

“It’s also in Southern California, and in the winter it snows there, but there is plenty of game, very few humans around, and it’s an hour’s drive from the edges of the metropolis, where you can go shopping for clothes and other necessities. Emmett’s place is an hour and a half drive from the nearest small town, but you can order what you need online and get it delivered.”

It wasn’t like she and the other purebloods enjoyed shopping, so that was not a problem.

They could pass for humans if they wore dark sunglasses to conceal their large eyes and baggy clothes to hide their too-narrow middles, but that still left the fangs that didn’t retract all the way like the immortals’ and the dark triangle some of them had on their tongues. Both were easily explained away, but it was still better to minimize their exposure to humans.

“All three options sound good. Which one do you think they’ll vote for?”

“Emmett’s place.”

“Because they don’t want us in their village?”

“It’s more about the humans than it is about you. In fact, the humans are the biggest problem. Perhaps the solution is to settle the humans in Emmett’s place and the Kra-ell in the village. Kian is much more likely to agree to that.”

“Many of the humans don’t know how to live independently of us, and others are in relationships with our hybrids. Besides, we need them to thwart extinction.”

“Then Safe Haven is probably the best solution for all of you, but it’s up to the council. They might decide that having you in the village is a better solution because of the added security. With you and your people helping us defend the place, we will all sleep better at night.”

It was good to hear that at least some of the immortals considered the Kra-ell a beneficial ally and not a threat or a burden.

“Do you think they will let us choose?”

“I don’t know. The council is also voting tomorrow to approve or deny Kalugal the two seats that Kian offered him. If they agree and we join the council, I can probably convince Kalugal to vote for your preferred choice.”

“Which one do you prefer?”

“It depends. For me, the best option would be for you to come live in the village, so I don’t have to leave Kalugal and the rest of my friends. But I think that Emmett’s place is the best for your people given your mixed population. It checks all of the boxes.”

Jade’s mouth suddenly felt dry. “You would abandon the male who saved you from the tyrant to be with me?”

“In a heartbeat.”

PHINAS

*H*e'd said it, he meant it, and he wouldn't take it back even if he could.

When a long moment passed, and all he could hear were Jade's ragged breaths, Phinas asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I don't know. I don't know what to say."

He understood that the concept of fated mates and bonding was foreign to her, and given that they had known each other for only days, her response was understandable, but Jade wasn't like other females. She wasn't afraid of anything, not even her own feelings, and it was time she stopped lying to herself.

He was tired of dancing around the issue and letting her put up shields to keep him out.

"I know you, Jade. And you are not a coward. You feel the same about me, and it's about bloody time you stop fighting your feelings and hiding behind the bullshit of the Kra-ell do this and don't do that. The only thing that matters is what you feel and want."

"I want you," she blurted. "There, I said it. But it has never been about what I want or what I need. I have a duty to lead my people. What kind of a Kra-ell leader would I be if I spat on my people's entire way of life and chose to be with only one male? A male who isn't even one of my own?"

"The kind of leader who thinks for herself and doesn't blindly follow customs and doctrines created out of necessity and not because they were true or morally right."

“I bet Igor thought the same thing when he decided that the Kra-ell needed to be led by males, not females. If everyone decided for themselves what was right and what was wrong, society couldn’t function. If I selfishly choose to be exclusive with you, I will have to step down, but there is no one else to lead them.”

“Don’t give me that crap, Jade.”

She hissed. “You don’t get to talk to me like that, Phinas.”

“You’re right.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I apologize, and it’s not going to happen again. I’m just so frustrated with you. I know that you are the one for me, and you know that I’m the one for you. To make us happen, I’m willing to give up a position that I worked very hard to climb to, and you are not willing to do a single thing. You can’t even admit your feelings for me.”

“I just did! I told you that I want you.”

“I need more than that. What are you willing to sacrifice to be with me?”

She let out a breath. “I was willing to sacrifice the thing that kept me going ever since I lost everything that mattered to me. When you left on the *Seafarer*, I prayed to the Mother of All Life to keep you alive and to bring you back to me in one piece. I didn’t pray for victory, and I didn’t pray for Igor’s capture. I was willing to give up the dream of avenging my sons and slicing Igor’s head off just so you wouldn’t get hurt.”

That shut him up.

For Jade, that was the ultimate sacrifice, and Phinas felt humbled. The sacrifice he was willing to make for her paled in comparison to the one she’d been willing to make for him.

“I love you, Jade. I know that you can’t bring yourself to say it back, but the prayer you offered to your deity on my behalf was as good as a declaration of love.” He closed his eyes. “And please, for the love of the Fates and the Mother of All Life, don’t tell me that the Kra-ell can’t feel love because we both know that it’s not true. You loved your sons, you still

love them and mourn their loss every day, and you love your daughter. You also love me.”

JADE

Tears stung the backs of Jade's eyes, and her throat clogged with a lump, producing a familiar choking sensation.

Most of the time, she managed to swallow the grief and pain that threatened to overwhelm her and rob her of reason, and when it became too much, she usually burned through it with a vigorous run or a vicious practice fight.

The Kra-ell did not cry, and to let the tears flow would be humiliating, but there was nowhere to run, no one to practice fighting with, and also no one to see her lose it.

She would never allow anyone to see her crying.

Even if what Phinas had said rang true, she couldn't allow herself to feel love. She was held together by duty and obligation, by the Kra-ell tradition and adherence to the teaching of the Mother of All Life, and if she accepted that even part of it wasn't true, her house of cards would collapse and scatter on the wind, and there would be nothing left of her.

"Jade? Are you there? Talk to me, sweetheart."

Sweetheart? Did he just call her sweetheart? Was he delusional?

"There is nothing sweet-hearted about me, Phinas."

He chuckled. "My bad. Should I call you iron heart?"

Despite the lump lodged in her throat, her lips twitched with a smile. "Yeah. That's much better."

He sighed. “I shouldn’t have had this conversation with you over the phone. I know that it’s difficult for you to acknowledge your feelings. You’ve been disassociating from them your entire life, and when they manage to penetrate that iron shield you’ve built around your heart, you don’t know how to handle them. But you are strong and brave, and you can conquer the whole world if you set your mind to it, and you can conquer your own fears as well. If you let me, I will be there to help you every step of the way.”

How could he possibly know her so well? How could he penetrate her shields and see the places in her soul that she was afraid to look at?

“How did you become so smart?”

He laughed. “I was born that way. Seriously, though, I’m not that smart or that insightful. I just see you, Jade. I see all of you and admire every facet of you. Don’t think for a moment that anything I said was meant as a criticism. You are the strongest, bravest person I know, and I’m in awe of you.”

That was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her, but instead of making her happy, it just wrung more tears out of her.

“You’re too nice to me, Phinas.”

“Are you crying? Did I just make you cry?”

“I’m not crying,” she lied.

“Oh, so you must have caught a cold. Come on, Jade.”

“Fine. But if you tell anyone, I’ll have to kill you.”

He laughed. “You can’t. You owe me a life debt. You are sworn to protect me. Does that vow expire once you save my life, or is it a life-long commitment?”

“It’s a life-long commitment.”

“Then you have a perfect excuse for choosing me over your pureblooded males. You have to be with me because of your vow. How else are you going to protect me?”

He was just teasing, trying to make her laugh, but there was something to it. A life debt didn't require the one giving the vow to be with the person they vowed to protect at all times, but the holder of the vow had the right to call upon it anytime. If Phinas demanded her protection, she couldn't deny the request.

“Do you have enemies that want to see you dead?”

“Plenty. The entire Brotherhood and even my own blood brothers would kill me on sight. I need your protection twenty-four-seven.”

Was he still teasing, or was he in real danger from his own brothers?

“Seriously. Are they after you?”

“They think that I'm dead, and no one is actively looking for me, but if I encounter them by chance, they will try to kill me.”

“Then you indeed require my protection.”

“Will that be a good enough excuse to appease your people? They all know that you gave me the life-debt vow for saving Kagra.”

“Yeah. Kagra herself has spread the story. Only in her version, I robbed her of vowing it herself.”

The truth is that Jade didn't know what had possessed her to offer Phinas a life debt for saving her second-in-command. A simple thank you and a promise to repay the favor would have been enough. Maybe it had been the exhaustion or perhaps the feeling of freedom that had prompted her to be so generous, giving Phinas the most sacred of vows, but she didn't regret doing that. If anyone deserved it from her, it was him.

“I'm glad it was you and not Kagra,” Phinas said. “So, would the excuse work?”

She sighed. “I don't know. If my people want me to lead them, they might accept the vow as a viable excuse for my

unorthodox behavior. But if anyone wants my position, they will use it as proof that I'm not suitable to be their leader."

"Don't they have to challenge you to a duel to prove their worth?"

"In certain circumstances, yes. In others, no. It depends on what the challenge is based on."

"Perhaps it's something that you should bring up in the big meeting you're planning. There are many changes in your people's future, and it's better to let them know in advance that their mistress will no longer be choosing to procreate with any of them."

She chuckled. "You sound very sure of yourself. I didn't promise you exclusivity yet."

"You don't have to promise me anything. We have bonded, and it will be physically impossible for you to feel attraction toward any other male. In fact, you'll be repulsed by any who attempt to seduce you."

MARCEL

Marcel cleaned up the MRI machine with a disinfectant wipe, threw it in the trash bin, and glanced at Merlin, who was looking at the printout of the last patient for the day.

They'd opened the clinic a little later than usual because breakfast had been delayed, but they'd caught up to their planned quota by the end of the day. Nevertheless, it was an easy pace compared to what it had been before Igor was caught.

They were removing the remaining trackers at a slower rate, and work at the clinic had become less hectic, so Sofia wouldn't be as exhausted at the end of the day.

They were both eager to start working on her transition, and now that the ship was safe and there was no one chasing them or threatening them in any way, perhaps they could.

But what if she started transitioning on the ship? Or on the flight back home?

He walked up to Merlin and leaned against his desk. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Merlin lifted his head and looked at him. "What's bothering you?"

"If Sofia and I start working on her transition, and it starts while we are still on the ship, can you take care of her with the equipment you have in the clinic?"

Merlin grinned. “I can, and I will be more than happy to assist her and welcome her to immortality. That being said, she might not transition right away. She might make it to the village beforehand. We have four or five days before we make it back, and some Dormants transition within that time frame, while others take longer.”

“What if she starts transitioning but is still not past the first stage when we get to Greenland? How are we going to transport her?”

Merlin gave him a one-shoulder shrug. “The same way injured Guardians are transported. We load her up with the gurney, and I take portable equipment with me to monitor her. It’s not as good as the stuff I have here, but it should do. As long as I have the medications she might need on the way, we are good.”

That was reassuring. “One last question. What if she starts transitioning on the flight back home? It’s a seven-hour flight.”

Merlin smiled indulgently. “I can take emergency supplies with me. But if you are so worried, wait until you get back to the village. Another week or so won’t make much of a difference.”

“True. I will leave it up to Sofia. I just wanted to have all the scenarios covered before I talked with her.”

Merlin put the printout into the file and rose to his feet. “Whatever you two decide is fine with me. I’ll take out this one last bugger for today and head to the dining hall for dinner.”

As Merlin ducked into the surgery room, Marcel stepped out of the clinic and walked over to the recovery room where Sofia worked.

Knocking lightly on the door, he opened it a crack and stuck his head inside. “Do you have a minute?”

“I’m almost done.” She leaned over the cloth partition to look at him. “Is Merlin doing another one?”

He nodded. “The last for the day, but he just got started, so you have time for a short break. Do you want me to make you coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

As he headed to the snack table and popped a pod into the coffeemaker, Marcel second-guessed his decision to have the conversation in the hallway where everyone could hear them while Sofia was on a short break.

The correct way to do it was to wait until they were in their cabin and discuss it over a glass of wine or, even better, in bed. It was a simple matter of condom or no condom.

Yeah, as if that was romantic.

He needed to go to the storage area and get a good bottle of wine. After dinner, they would head to their cabin, and he would open it and pour Sofia a glass, maybe also offer her a foot massage to put her in a relaxed mood. He should start talking about the transition only when she was in the right mood for such an intimate conversation.

Except, she might want to visit her family or friends, or they might drop by as they had done nearly every evening since boarding the ship.

Perhaps he should start now and suggest that they continue later in their cabin so she would know not to make plans with her father, aunts, cousins or friends.

Marcel loved seeing how happy Sofia was with her extended family and friends, and he was glad she wouldn't have to live without them. But he was also a selfish guy who wanted her all to himself from time to time, or rather all of the time.

“Possessiveness is a personality flaw,” he murmured under his breath. “It got you in trouble before.”

With all the commotion, Sofia had forgotten about his upcoming meeting with Edna and his impending confession, but he hadn't, and now that the time was getting closer, he was becoming anxious. Hopefully, Edna would not choose entombment as his punishment. Even if it was only for a week,

he couldn't stand the thought of being away from Sofia for so long.

Nevertheless, he would do that so he could put the past where it belonged and start a new life with her.

SOFIA

Sofia finished bandaging Dugmon and handed him a lollipop. “I found these in the storage. I remember the doctor who came to give us vaccines had those for the kids to make the jabs sweeter. I thought that it was nice of him.”

Dugmon took the pop and removed the wrapping. “The hybrid kids didn’t get vaccines. We don’t get sick.”

“Lucky you.” She patted his shoulder. “You can remove the bandage in three to four hours. The incision will be healed by then.”

He nodded. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

It was a new trend among the Kra-ell to try being more polite, and Sofia was glad for it. They were preparing to venture into the world and needed to adjust to how most people interacted. They knew from the movies they’d watched that in most cultures grunting or nodding heads was not a substitute for actually saying the words.

She was also becoming more comfortable around the hybrid and the pureblooded males. After Jade’s speech, they were all on their best behavior. On the other hand, it could have been Marcel’s presence that stopped them from flirting and making suggestive comments.

He might not be as physically strong as them, but he was one of the others, and they still didn’t know who and what the others were, so they were being careful.

Stepping outside, she found Marcel sitting on one of the chairs next to the snack table, with a coffee cup in each hand.

“Hello, handsome.” She sat down next to him and took the cup he handed her. “Are you done for the day?”

“Yeah. I cleaned the machine and covered it.”

She took a sip from the cup and sighed. “You make the best coffee. Just the way I like it.”

Marcel grinned. “Of course.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and leaned to plant a peck on her lips. “It’s my job to look after you.”

That was so sweet, but he was taking that job too seriously. All she had to do was mention in passing something she needed or wanted, and he would do everything to get it for her.

“Oh yeah? So what’s my job? To be looked after?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.” She leaned over to return the peck on his lips. “I like taking care of you too.”

“That’s what mated couples do. We take care of each other.” His expression sobered. “I talked with Merlin earlier about your transition. He said that he has everything you’ll need here in the clinic, meaning that we can start working on it if you like.”

She nodded. “You must have read my mind. I was just thinking about that this morning.” She lowered her voice and leaned closer. “The danger is gone, so there is no reason to keep using condoms. I will be really glad to feel you without barriers.”

Marcel’s eyes shone with inner light, and she knew that if he opened his mouth, she would see his fangs elongating.

“I can’t wait either.” He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, the glow was gone. “On the other hand, one more week won’t make much of a difference, and it will be much safer for you to start transitioning in the village. Another bonus is that you will be less anxious. I’m not a doctor, but

supposedly humans are healthier when they are not stressed, and you need to be in perfect health for the induction to work.”

“I don’t know about that. There will be so much to do before we even get there. It hasn’t been decided yet where everyone is going, but wherever it is, I will need to help my family settle. On the other hand, if I transition and become immortal even before we end this voyage, it will give people hope that the children of the hybrids can become long-lived like them.”

His lips curved in a barely-there smile. “You forget that only the children of the hybrid females can transition, and you are the only one.”

“I didn’t forget. But things are different for the Kra-ell in so many ways that it could be different in that regard as well. I think we should test it, at least on the male children of the hybrid males, because it’s easier and doesn’t involve sex.”

“Are you hoping that your cousin Helmi can transition?”

“I wish.” She sighed. “But Helmi is fully human. Her father is human as well.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. It’s just the way it is, and Tomos loves her anyway.”

“He’s going to outlive her.”

“He knows that.” Sofia cupped Marcel’s cheek. “Do you remember what you said when no one thought I could be anything other than human?”

He nodded. “I said I would take whatever time you could give me.”

“That’s how Tomos feels.”

KIAN

*K*ian entered the large subterranean assembly hall and turned on the lights.

He was so glad Amanda's ostentatious chairs had been left in the keep. When it was time to decide on the theme for the new assembly hall in the village, his instructions to Ingrid had been to make it functional, comfortable, and contemporary.

The result was a little stark and reminded him of an elegant movie theater. Perhaps he shouldn't have built it at all and changed the voting to virtual. In part, it already was, with Sari's people assembling in Scotland and those residing in Annani's sanctuary assembling in Alaska, but old traditions were hard to give up, especially ones that were so fundamental to how the clan governed itself.

There was no substitute for the energy created by the clan physically congregating in one place to vote on important issues. There was something magical about it that couldn't be replicated in a virtual assembly.

Taking one last look, he turned the lights off and continued to the council's conference room. It was much smaller, and the oblong table had been originally designed to accommodate twelve seats, but they could make room for two more. However, if the Kra-ell joined the clan, and in time demanded a seat on the council, he would have to commission a new table.

As if that was the only concern. Perhaps he shouldn't even offer the option to the council's vote. Safe Haven was the best

solution for the Kra-ell, at least temporarily, and that was what he would push for.

The door opened, and Shai came in with his laptop tucked under his arm. “Today is the big day.” He walked over to the recording station situated in the corner.

“Big day because I’m going to put Kalugal’s inclusion up to the vote or because of the Kra-ell?”

“Both.” Shai sat down and connected his laptop to the recording equipment.

It wasn’t necessary for his assistant to be there for that, and his time would have been better utilized in the office, but it was one more tradition that Kian didn’t feel right about ending. Having a person dedicated to recording and archiving formal council meetings added formality and weight to the decision-making process.

When Shai finished his prep, he pushed to his feet and walked over to the bar fridge. “I expect this meeting to be lengthy.” He pulled out several bottles of water and brought them to the table.

Kian helped distribute them while Shai went for more. “I don’t think so. Kalugal’s inclusion in the council will not meet with any objections, and I don’t expect much pushback about taking the Kra-ell to Safe Haven. Most of the clan members haven’t even visited the place and have no emotional connection to it. They won’t mind if we settle the Kra-ell there.”

“I assume that you will station Guardians dedicated to keeping an eye on them in Safe Haven.”

“Of course.”

“In addition to the ones guarding the research?”

Kaia claimed that she didn’t need the human bioinformaticians team’s assistance and that she could continue deciphering Okidu’s journals on her own. Kian didn’t have a problem with that. He wasn’t in a rush to have the journals translated, and it was safer to keep the work in the village. The fewer people who had access to it, the better.

“The Fates provided us with the best in-house bioinformatician, so I don’t think I will continue the research in Safe Haven. But since we made such a huge investment in building the facility, I might use it for something else. I just don’t know what yet.”

Shai shrugged. “It can be our escape contingency. If we need to evacuate the village for some reason, we will have a second command center ready.”

“The place is already set up with incredible security measures. They will just need some tweaking for the Kra-ell because they are designed to keep undesirables out and not to keep people from leaving Safe Haven.”

Shai tilted his head. “Are you planning to keep them imprisoned there?”

“Imprisoned is a harsh word. I prefer contained. It will not be much different from how they lived before.”

Given his sour expression, Shai didn’t like his answer. “What are you going to do with the human students that are still in the universities and don’t know what happened to their families?”

The truth was that Kian had forgotten about them, but the plan had been to wait until the Kra-ell future was settled before contacting them and bringing them in. It wasn’t as if they could be notified over the phone. Someone had to go and personally pick them up one by one.

Kian pulled out a chair at the head of the table and sat down. “We will address the issue once we have the Kra-ell settled. We will have to send people to collect them.”

“And do what? Throw them into the same confined area as the rest of their families? What if they want to continue their studies?”

That was a good point, but it wasn’t like Shai to be so contrary. “What do you suggest we do?”

“First of all, they need to know that their families are okay and that they shouldn’t go back to the compound. Yamanu can have a couple of Guardians loan their family members their

phones and provide them a script that will not get flagged by Echelon or any other systems listening in on calls. Then we need to establish a protocol similar to what Igor has done. The students will come to visit, get their compulsion reinforced, and go back to continue their studies.”

Kian groaned. “I hate that I’m being put in a position where I have to continue Igor’s methods, and I don’t see how I can do things differently without risking our people.”

Shai cracked a smile. “There is one more option. Find Jade a place that’s not anywhere near us and give her complete autonomy over her people. She did well without having to resort to compulsion. Vows were enough to keep her people obedient.”

“That’s the power of religion.” Kian leaned back in the chair. “The problem is that once religion is abandoned, it’s very difficult to bring it back and use it to control people. It’s not going to work for Jade with the young generation of Kra-ell who were born in the compound under Igor’s rule. Religion can be replaced with ideology, but it takes a lot of time and concentrated effort until it takes root deep enough to compel blind adherence.”

“That’s true.”

When Bridget walked in, Shai rose to his feet. “Good afternoon, doctor.”

“Good afternoon.” She pulled a chair next to Kian and pulled out her tablet. “Where is everyone?”

“On their way. You are a little early.”

They didn’t have assigned places around the conference table, but Bridget was usually one of the first to arrive, so she often sat next to him. Edna would probably arrive next and take the seat to his right.

Pushing a thick lock of her flaming red hair behind her ear, she glanced at the door. “How is Kalugal? Is he nervous about addressing the council?”

“If he is, he didn’t confide in me. But knowing my cousin, he’s assuming that it’s just a formality and the seats are his.”

“He isn’t wrong. With you recommending him, I don’t see any council members opposing his inclusion.”

“I hope that if they do approve, it is because they believe that it’s a good move for the clan. I need to know that I can depend on the council to stop me when I make a wrong decision.”

KALUGAL

*K*alugal nodded and smiled until his face hurt, and he did his best to conduct lively conversations to charm the council members until the session officially began and his case was brought up for a vote.

Except for Amanda all the council members were already there, either in person or via teleconference with the *Aurora*, but they couldn't start until she arrived.

Kalugal had known that the head Guardians were part of the council, but he'd thought that they only voted on security issues. Perhaps he was still considered a security risk and that was why the six had been included?

He was on friendly terms with Yamanu, Bhathian, Anandur, and Brundar. However, Arwel might still hold a grudge against him, and Kri was an unknown factor.

Out of the core council members the one he didn't know well was Brandon, the media specialist. Edna would vote in his favor, and so would Amanda. William and Bridget were a good bet but not a sure thing, and Onegus was a maybe.

Kian cast Kalugal an apologetic glance. "Amanda is always late. I should have asked Shai to tell her that the meeting was fifteen minutes earlier so maybe she would have gotten here on time."

"That's fine." Kalugal twisted the cap off his water bottle and took a sip. "It looks like no one is overly upset about the delay. They must have expected it."

The council members were discussing the Kra-ell situation and debating the different options for their resettlement. It seemed that Kian hadn't been secretive about what he was going to suggest, and they all knew what was on the table. Perhaps Amanda's tardiness was a good thing, allowing them to debate the issue unofficially and get a feel for what the others were thinking.

As for himself, Kalugal's only misgiving was his choice of attire.

Expecting an official council meeting, he'd put on a nice conservative suit, but he was the only one wearing a tie and a jacket. Even the dapper Brandon was dressed in a pair of gray slacks and a black cashmere turtleneck. He'd arrived with a smart black leather jacket on, but it was now draped on the back of his chair.

Was wearing leather still okay in Hollywood? Or was the jacket made from vegan leather?

It looked real enough.

Onegus and Kian were dressed similarly in slacks and sweaters, and William had a thin colorful shirt on and slacks that didn't match it. Bhathian, Anandur, and Brundar were all in jeans, T-shirts, and leather jackets.

Theirs were no doubt the real thing.

Kalugal wondered whether Kian's shoes and belt were leather. The guy was vegan, so it would have made sense for him to avoid real leather. But it was hypocritical for all the meat-eaters to avoid it on moral grounds.

Amanda walked through the open door with a coffee cup. "Sorry I'm late. I would have brought all of you coffee, but I was already running late, and Kian would have been upset." She slanted him a look.

He shook his head at her and pushed to his feet.

"We have two items on the agenda today. One is the expansion of the council from twelve members to fourteen, with the two additional seats going to Kalugal and another representative from his section of the village. The second item

on our agenda is the Kra-ell relocation and choosing the best option for the clan.”

Amanda lifted her hand. “Shouldn’t it be the best option for the Kra-ell?”

“Our responsibility is first and foremost to the clan. We will discuss the various options and choose the one or perhaps two that best serve our interests. We will let the Kra-ell choose from the options we agree are beneficial to the clan.”

It was a good answer, and Kalugal approved. Should he give Kian a nod?

Inconspicuously glancing at the other council members, he saw some nod in approval and added his nod as well.

Kian turned to him. “I’ll let Kalugal present his case, and then you will vote twice. Once for a seat for him, and the second time for the additional seat he’s requesting.”

Sneaky bastard.

Kian hadn’t told him there would be two separate votes, and he hadn’t prepared two separate pitches, but he could improvise. In days past he could have relied on his compulsion ability to sway people’s minds in favorable ways, but he reminded himself that he didn’t need compulsion to win people over. He was charming, smart, and likable.

Rising to his feet, Kalugal offered Kian his hand. “Thank you for allowing me to present my case to the council.”

“You’re welcome.” Kian shook his hand briefly before sitting back down.

Kalugal smiled at the council members assembled around the table and the two participating via tablet, making brief eye contact with each person before moving to the next.

“I know you are all busy, and I promise not to take long.”

“Take as long as you need,” Bridget said.

Did that mean she wasn’t in favor? The female was hard to read, but she’d been very helpful with Jacki’s transition and pregnancy and then delivering Darius. She’d also been very

patient, answering their numerous questions and assuaging their concerns.

Kalugal nodded and then turned to address the council members as a group. “It has been a year since my people and I moved into the village, and both sides were suspicious at first. We didn’t know whether we could trust each other, and many clan members resented the inclusion of former Doomers in their community.” He smiled. “Especially the males. The ladies were more welcoming.”

That got him a few smiles and a couple of chuckles.

He continued, “Over time, things got better, mutual trust grew, and the culmination of our integration into the clan was the joined mission to save the Kra-ell from their oppressor. My men worked seamlessly with the Guardians to bring this mission to its successful conclusion, and I joined Kian, Turner, and Onegus in the war room. I admit that my military skills are rusty, and my contribution was limited, but I was honored to be included in the decision-making. It was an excellent litmus test, and we all passed it with flying colors.”

He clapped his hands, and the others joined but without much enthusiasm. Perhaps he wasn’t communicating what he felt in the right way, and he needed to come up with a more personal angle.

“Jacki and I feel blessed to have such a thriving and supportive community to raise our son in, and we can’t imagine ourselves living elsewhere. My men are happy here as well. I didn’t run a survey, asking each of them individually how they felt about life in the village, but I didn’t have to. If anyone was unhappy, they would have voiced their displeasure. But I haven’t heard any dissatisfied comments or even reminiscing about the days before we moved into the village. The bottom line is that we are here to stay, and the next step in our full integration into the clan is fair representation in the council. Given the number of my people relative to the number of clan members in the village, we should be awarded two and a half seats, but since Darius can’t speak yet, I can’t ask for the half seat to be given to him, so I’m asking only for two.”

It was a lame joke, but it was cute, and he got some smiles.

Amanda chuckled. “He’ll be sitting on this council before you know it.”

Kalugal shrugged. “Perhaps he won’t be interested in politics or a leadership position. He might choose to be an artist.”

“Will you be okay with that?” Edna asked.

“I will be proud of my son no matter what path he chooses, as long as he’s passionate about it and works hard to excel at it.”

KIAN

*K*ian clapped his hands. “Well said, cousin.”

Hopefully Kalugal had meant it, and it hadn't been a ploy to win over the council members. If it was, the guy had much better people skills than Kian and an awareness of what would convince them.

“Thank you.” Kalugal dipped his head. “We all want our children to be happy and fulfilled, and we can't expect them to be replicas of us.”

“Well said again. I will be proud of my Allegra no matter what path she chooses, but given her personality, she will want to lead. She is very much like her daddy.”

Well, she was much more than that, but he wasn't going to spend the next hour telling everyone why his daughter was the pinnacle of creation and that there would never be another child born to the clan more suitable to lead it. Well, unless Syssi and he were blessed with another child, but he doubted that anyone could ever outshine Allegra. Even his mother said she was unique, and Annani didn't say things like that lightly.

She wasn't the type of grandmother who waxed poetic about her grandchildren.

Rising to his feet, he smiled at Kalugal. “Do you want to stay for the vote? Or do you prefer to wait outside?”

There was no doubt in Kian's mind about what option Kalugal would choose.

“I'll stay.”

“Of course.” He turned to the assembled council members. “Kalugal is asking for two seats. Let’s vote first on one seat, and if that’s approved, we will vote on the second.” When everyone nodded their agreement, he continued. “All in favor of Kalugal joining the council as its thirteenth member, raise your hands.”

Kian raised his and was soon followed by the others. Brandon was the last one to raise his hand, and he seemed to raise it only because everyone else had done so.

He would have to talk to the media specialist later and ask him about his reservations regarding Kalugal’s seat on the council.

Turning to Kalugal, Kian offered him his hand. “Congratulations, cousin, and welcome to the council.”

“Thank you.” Kalugal shook his hand while smiling at the other council members. “Thank you all for your welcome and your vote of confidence. I promise to do my duty and attend all future meetings.”

After he and Kalugal had sat back down, Kian turned to his people. “Now, let’s vote on the second seat. All in favor, raise your hands.”

Kian lifted his, but only four other hands joined him this time. Edna, Onegus, Yamanu, and Bhathian.

Those who voted in favor had been exposed to Kalugal and his men lately and had first-hand experience working with them. That included William, though, but for some reason, he wasn’t in favor of granting them one more seat.

“You can put your hands down.” Kian turned to Bridget. “I respect your decision, and I’m not going to try to convince you to change your mind, but just out of curiosity. Why are you opposed to granting Kalugal another seat?”

She turned her gaze to Kalugal. “I have nothing against you or your men. You’ve all proven yourself as a good fit for our community. But I don’t like rushing into things. I suggest doing this in two stages. First, you join the council, and if that

works out well, we will reconvene in one year and vote on adding one more seat.”

Kalugal nodded graciously. “That’s reasonable. Perhaps it will give me time and better insight into who I want to award the seat to. I can’t decide between Rufsur and Phinas, so I was thinking about dividing it between them, with one serving half a year and the other the other half.”

Lifting a brow, Bridget glanced at Edna. “Is that even allowed?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll have to check the records.” She looked at Kian. “Do you remember a time when that was done?”

He shook his head. “Never, but I don’t see why that would be a problem. When the time comes to award Kalugal another seat, we can vote on that as well. Let’s move to the next item on the agenda, and that’s what to do with the Kra-ell.”

“What are the options?” Edna asked. “I’ve heard that the village is one and Safe Haven is another. Are there more?”

Anandur lifted his hand. “What about returning them to their compound? Why was that idea scrapped?”

Kian hadn’t fully discarded it yet, and the truth was that he preferred a solution that didn’t involve keeping an eye on them on the other side of the globe and allocating Guardians from the clan’s small force to the task. There was a big difference between having people stationed at Safe Haven, which was only two hours away by plane and another hour by car, than in Karelia, which was more than a day’s travel away, and in a foreign country that wasn’t on friendly terms with the US.

“Jade prefers to have a fresh start, and we prefer to have them where we can watch them. I don’t need to tell you what the dangers of rogue aliens roaming free are. If they are discovered, a hunt will start, and we will be at risk as well. Besides, these Kra-ell represent a fraction of everyone that was on that ship. The others might be dead or still in their stasis pods, and leaving them where they are represents the same danger. If any of those pods are discovered, it wouldn’t

matter whether their occupants are dead or alive. A hunt would ensue, and we must do everything we can to prevent that.”

“How are we going to find them?” William asked. “The trackers don’t transmit unless the bodies hosting them are alive.”

“I don’t know yet,” Kian admitted. “But now that we have Igor in our hands, I hope to find out how he located the pods of those who were awake and why it took him nearly a century to go after them.”

YAMANU

It was the first time Kian had mentioned his interest in finding the other pods, and Yamanu wondered what Turner's take on that was. Perhaps he had been the one who had brought it to Kian's attention?

So far, none of them had considered the possibility that the pods could be discovered by humans. After all, if they hadn't been found by now, they probably never would be.

Most likely, they had landed in the ocean where they would stay unless someone actively looked for them and tried to fish them out. But to do that, they would need a signal or some kind of unique emission to guide them toward the pods.

As far as he knew, satellites could only see up to a depth of thirty feet, while the average depth of oceans was about ten thousand feet. Good luck finding anything that had sunk to the bottom.

But that wasn't a discussion for the council to have, and he felt odd about discussing the future of the Kra-ell without Turner and Toven present.

So what if they didn't have seats on the council?

Kian should have invited them to join the meeting as temporary councilmen or advisors. By now, they knew much more about the Kra-ell situation than most of the council members, including Anandur, Brundar, and Kri, who'd probably gotten updates from Onegus. But since they hadn't been part of the mission, they hadn't interacted with the Kra-ell.

“I don’t know why it has taken Igor so long to go after the settlers he could find,” Onegus said. “Perhaps the idea to do so didn’t occur to him before. He might have been busy building his stronghold and accumulating wealth and influence. He might have even tried breeding with human females and found them either lacking or their offspring even more so since they couldn’t produce hybrid Kra-ell children. Then he got the brilliant idea to obtain more Kra-ell females by finding the other pods and killing their males.”

Kian nodded. “That’s possible. Hopefully, we will know more when Toven arrives in Greenland and gets him to talk.”

Bhathian crossed his massive arms over his even more massive chest. “Make sure that Toven doesn’t approach him without his earpieces. It would be really bad if Igor is the stronger compeller and takes control of Toven.”

As the discussion veered toward the safety precautions that everyone dealing with Igor should take, Yamanu glanced at Arwel, who hadn’t said a word so far. The guy either didn’t have anything to add on the subject or was preoccupied with shielding his mind from the emotions of all the humans on board.

Yamanu loved the guy, but he would have preferred to have Toven there or even Phinas.

“Has anyone considered the campground?” Kri asked. “It’s not big enough to house over three hundred people as it is, but we can get more mobile homes in there. It has an excellent security system, and the greenery surrounding it has grown dense enough to hide what’s happening inside. Not having to travel far will make it easy on the Guardian force.”

“We considered that,” Kian said. “But only as a temporary solution until a permanent one can be found. We can’t build homes there, and we can’t expect the Kra-ell and the humans with them to live in mobile homes forever, especially since we can’t get enough of those in the area we have to house them comfortably.”

“Why not?” Kri shifted to face Kian. “Many humans live in mobile homes, and from what I’ve heard, the living

conditions they had in Karelia were very basic. Their expectations are probably modest.”

Kian shook his head. “As I said, it can barely function as a temporary solution, and it would take a major effort to get so many additional mobile homes there on short notice. Right now, we don’t even have enough connections to water and sewage facilities.”

“At least give them the option,” Kri insisted. “From what I heard so far about Jade, she will not want to be under anyone’s jurisdiction, which would be the case in the village and in Safe Haven. The campground is the only place we can offer her that can belong exclusively to their group.”

Letting out a breath, Kian nodded. “I’ll offer it as one of the options. Our mountain cabin area was also suggested, but it has no infrastructure, and it will be difficult to conceal such a large population there. My first choice is Safe Haven.” He lifted his hand to stop further discussion. “Who’s in favor?”

Yamanu lifted his hand, but Arwel didn’t. In the conference room, five more hands joined Kian’s.

“Good. We have enough votes for that. Who is in favor of offering the Kra-ell the option of joining our village?”

Yamanu wasn’t sure he wanted that, and when Arwel lifted his hand, he arched a brow at his friend.

Arwel shrugged. “They don’t emit many emotions, which means that they don’t bother me, and they are strong warriors. I wouldn’t mind having them fight by our side in case Navuh finds us and decides to attack in force. Kian said that we need to think about what’s best for the clan, and I believe that together with them, we will be stronger. Also, let’s not forget the other pods, which I assume we will start actively seeking once we get Igor to reveal how he found the ones he did. For obvious reasons, we will need the Kra-ell to join the effort.”

Kian nodded. “Those are excellent points.” He lifted his hand. “Who’s in favor?”

Yamanu joined him, and so did four more council members. Brandon, Anandur, Brundar, and Kri didn’t.

“Good,” Kian said. “I can offer them this option as well. Is there a point to voting on the less desirable options?”

Edna lifted her hand. “We should vote on them in case Kri is right, and Jade doesn’t accept the two we think are best. As I see it, we have the option of using the mobile site or the cabin area as a temporary solution and an entirely different location as a permanent solution. The Kra-ell have sufficient funds to purchase a gated community if they please, and as long as it’s not too far away for our Guardians to monitor and William outfits it with proper security measures, it could be a viable solution that Jade would prefer.”

Kian nodded. “Very well. Let’s put that to a vote as well.”

JADE

Jade listened with half an ear to Kian's explanations about the advantages and disadvantages of each of the options his council had approved.

She should have paid more attention, but with Phinas's words from earlier that morning running on repeat in her head, it was difficult to concentrate.

You don't have to promise me anything. We have bonded, and it will be physically impossible for you to feel attraction toward any other male. In fact, you'll be repulsed by any who attempt to seduce you.

She'd returned the phone to Merlin and hadn't asked for it again. If Phinas had wanted to talk to her, he knew how to reach her, but evidently he wanted her to ponder them without putting more pressure on her, which she appreciated. But with that song playing in the background, it had been difficult to concentrate on anything else, including the list of options she'd just been given.

"Thank you for the invitation to join your village and for the other offers, but I can't give you an answer before I run them by my people."

She should have written them down.

Kian nodded. "Of course. Take your time and discuss it with your people, all three groups, but I need an answer no later than this evening. I need time to make all the necessary arrangements so whatever option you choose, it will be ready for you. You can also choose a combination of the options.

The humans can settle in one place while the purebloods and hybrids settle in another. I suspect the humans will be most comfortable in Safe Haven. They can join the community that's already there and work in the lodge. Emmett and his mate can ensure that they keep your existence secret, and it will also solve the problem of their community obtaining new genetic material. They will be free to find partners among the community members and visitors to the retreats."

Jade had to admit that it was the best solution for the humans. They would be taken care of and protected in a supportive environment, and they would enjoy some freedom without being overwhelmed by it.

"I agree, and that's why I think Safe Haven is a good option for us as well. We need humans to breed with. Without them, we will go extinct."

"You can also decide to go back to your old compound. It's not an option I prefer, but we can make it work."

Obviously, Kian had no intention of just letting them go, and Jade understood his reasons perfectly well. But his reasons were not hers, and she needed to choose what was best for her people.

Jade nodded. "I don't think anyone wants to go back, but I'll bring up this option as well."

"You have a lot to think about and not much time. I suggest that you assemble your people as soon as possible and discuss the options with them."

She sighed. "No pressure."

"One more thing before I go." She glanced at Toven and Yamanu before shifting her eyes back to Kian. "I can't present the options to my people without telling them the truth about who their rescuers are."

Other than her, Kagra, and Sofia, no one knew that their rescuers were not human. Valstar had guessed who Toven was, but he had no contact with the others, so he couldn't tell them. Besides, he'd only guessed the god's identity. He didn't know that the others were the immortal descendants of the gods.

“If they choose Safe Haven or one of the other options, it’s not necessary to tell them about us, but if they decide to join the village, they need to know who their new neighbors are.”

She cracked a smile. “I can’t present them with the village option without telling them who its current residents are.”

“That’s true.” Kian turned his eyes to Toven. “Once they decide where they want to settle, and if it’s not the village, can you erase the humans’ and hybrids’ memories and compel the purebloods to secrecy?”

Toven nodded. “The humans will be easy, the hybrids manageable, and the purebloods a pain in the rear, but Mia and I can do that.”

“Excellent. Let me know as soon as the decision is made.”

“I will.” Jade dipped her head. “Thank you again. I know that you are looking after your own people’s interests, but I also know that you genuinely care about mine, and I’m grateful.”

“You’re welcome. Good day, Jade.” Kian terminated the call.

“I should go.” Jade pushed to her feet and turned to the beautiful god and almost equally beautiful immortal. “Do either of you have some sage words of advice for me?”

Both Toven and Yamanu were perfect male specimens, and yet she felt not a lick of attraction for either of them.

Was Phinas right, and it was the bond’s doing? Would she be repulsed if a male approached her?

The Kra-ell knew better than to initiate anything with her, and the immortals knew about her and Phinas, so none of them even looked at her with covetous eyes. As for her, she’d been asking herself the same question throughout the day, examining her feelings toward the males she’d interacted with. Apart from annoyance, none stirred even one nerve in her, but then she hadn’t been interested in anyone since the massacre of her tribe. She’d had no choice but to tolerate Igor, but thankfully she wasn’t the only female he used to satisfy his urges, and he’d called upon her mainly in her fertile cycle.

Hating to even think about it, she quickly shoved the thought deep into the crevice in her mind along with all the other things she couldn't deal with.

Turning her thoughts to Phinas and the passion they had shared helped clear her head, and as she smiled at the memories, she realized that he was the only male to stir her passion and make her feel alive in over two decades.

TOVEN

“Do you want me to come with you?” Toven asked. “Your people might not believe you, and I can provide proof.”

Jade shook her head. “It’s not going to be difficult to convince them. Many probably already suspect who you are as it is. The only reason no one has challenged you is that I pretended you were just a paranormally talented human, and they took my word for it.” She smiled sadly. “I have a reputation for being honest and direct, which will be tarnished once I admit to hiding the truth from them.”

“You had no choice,” Yamanu said. “We forced you to do it, literally. Toven compelled you, and they know it’s impossible to fight compulsion.”

“I hope that will be enough. What about the various options? Which one do you think I should take?”

“Safe Haven,” Yamanu said. “It’s headed by Emmett, who is one of yours, and the humans will be comfortable there because the resort is run by a community of humans. They adhere to a free-love philosophy, probably due to Emmett’s influence, but they are very accepting of others, and they rarely leave the place, so keeping them from talking about the aliens living among them will not be a problem.”

“Is that so?” Jade turned to Toven. “What do you think? Is Safe Haven as good as it sounds?”

“I vote for the village,” Toven said.

He hadn’t consciously arrived at that conclusion up until that moment. Perhaps the many suggestions had had to

marinate for a while in his subconscious before his mind could spit up the correct answer, but now that it had, Toven had no doubt that it was the way to go.

Yamanu regarded him with a puzzled expression. “What makes you say that?”

“In the long run, it’s the best option.” Toven looked into Jade’s huge eyes. “You can stay in Safe Haven until the village is ready to receive you, but once it is, leave the humans and some of the hybrids who can pass for humans there. You don’t need them for breeding. Your people can mate with clan members and produce long-lived or immortal offspring. Not only that, you are proof that the Kra-ell beliefs about love and relationships are wrong, or rather misguided. If you and Phinas could bond, so could others.”

Jade’s eyes became even bigger. “How do you know that Phinas and I have bonded?”

He smiled. “You were so desperate to call him this morning that you practically begged us for a phone that you could use in private. Other than the obsession that comes with a new bond, I can’t imagine anything capable of reducing the formidable Jade to begging.”

Glaring at him, she crossed her arms over her chest. “I didn’t beg. I asked. Phinas and I enjoy each other’s company, that’s all. It doesn’t make sense that we somehow bonded despite it not being possible for Kra-ell. Even among the gods, bonding between mates was rare. Most of them had multiple partners same as my people, with the only difference being that they had one official mate and scores of paramours, while my people made having multiple partners official. Our way is more honest.”

“You’ve just proven what I was trying to say. The gods and the Kra-ell are not fundamentally different. Both have the ability to bond with one person or to have non-committed relationships with several. It’s the same for humans. Some are committed to one person for life, others never feel bound by their commitment, and some cultures still condone and even

encourage males to take several wives. A small minority enjoys polyamorous relationships as a personal choice.”

Jade looked down her nose at him. “The Kra-ell are committed to the tribe instead of committing to one person. The tribe unit is like a group marriage. The males vow their loyalty to their mistress or mistresses, but it’s more about their commitment to the tribe than about their personal relationship with the female or females heading their tribe. The human equivalent would be a harem, but I don’t like using the term because it implies sexual subjugation and exploitation, and that’s untrue of our tribal system.”

“No, it’s not.” Toven smiled indulgently. “The Kra-ell religion established rules of conduct that made it seem like a fair system, and I respect that. Whoever came up with that solution was brilliant. I just don’t understand why the gods didn’t do anything to help your people. With their genetic manipulation mastery, they should have been able to even out the gender disparity.”

“Maybe they did.” Jade smiled evilly. “Maybe the legends are right, and the gods were originally the same as the Kra-ell, but they found a way to change their genetics. The bond between mates might have been one of their modifications.”

The addiction between exclusive mates had been most likely genetically created, but the bond between fated mates couldn’t have been.

“A genetic manipulation would have affected everyone, and it wouldn’t have left finding one’s true love to chance. The gods didn’t engineer each person individually but rather introduced global enhancements that changed everyone. If they could have created the bonding mechanisms artificially, they would have done it for everyone. In my opinion, the ability to bond to one special person is innate and predates all genetic manipulations. Therefore, both the gods and the Kra-ell are capable of it.”

For a long moment Jade just stared at him, and he thought that he’d managed to convince her, but then she shook her head. “If it was possible for the Kra-ell, some must have found

that one special person and the bond was formed. Since the bond prevents the lovers from having any other partners, it would have been difficult to hide.”

She made a good point, and he didn't have an answer. “Perhaps it is even rarer for the Kra-ell than for the gods, and you are one of the lucky ones.”

“Lucky.” She snorted. “More like cursed.”

At least she was no longer denying it.

Jade swallowed audibly and plopped on the couch. “Why me? Why do I need to be the odd one who bonds with an immortal?”

“Fate.” Toven sat next to her and patted her shoulder, remembering too late that Jade didn't like casual touching. Thankfully she was too distraught to notice, and he continued, “Your people look up to you, and that's why the Fates chose you to be the first, the trailblazer so to speak. Once your people see that it's possible, they will open their hearts to the possibility of finding love and companionship with a single partner.”

“We can't.” Jade groaned. “There aren't enough females for all the males, and it's unfair to them. Even if the tribe system was only invented to solve this problem and was not innate to our people, it was the best solution, and it still is as long as four males are born to every female.”

Toven shook his head. “I'm not a geneticist, but my father was a scientist, and he taught me to think scientifically. The gender disparity probably started as a mutation, and the social system that was established to solve the problem propagated it instead of solving it.”

“How?” Yamanu asked. “I mean, what could have caused the original mutation, and how could it have corrected itself if they had developed a different social system? Evolution takes a very long time.”

“The Kra-ell are an ancient race, by order of magnitude older than humans. Evolution had enough time to adjust their biology to their way of life.” Toven paused to collect his

thoughts. “All I’m saying is speculation because I don’t know how it really happened. But here is a plausible scenario. The gender disparity created the tribal system and the taboo on forming couple relationships. The same system also encouraged the males to fight and kill each other off to cull their numbers and to promote the survival of the fittest. I wouldn’t be surprised if the incredible physical strength is the result of hundreds of thousands of generations allowing only the strongest males to father offspring. The system worked, and it was reinforced by their religion, so no one challenged it. Because of the culling, there weren’t four males competing for every female, but maybe just two, which was more manageable. Then a forward-thinking, progressive queen came to power and sought to end the bloodshed. She disallowed tribal wars and duels to the death, inadvertently upending a system that had prevented their society from falling apart and bringing about the unrest that ended up in a rebellion.”

“That’s not what happened.” Jade shook her head vehemently. “The rebellion wasn’t the result of an overpopulation of males. The unrest resulted from the gods exploiting the Kra-ell, and the rebellion was against the gods, not against their own queen. It also didn’t happen all at once. I told you the history of the conflict. It spanned many generations and many queens.”

Toven had given it a lot of thought, and even though he didn’t doubt that there was some truth to the claim, he’d lived through enough to know that history was more of a fable than a record of actual events.

“You know that history is not reliable and that it’s either entirely fabricated or twisted to portray one faction as virtuous and the other as villainous, depending on who’s writing it. When the unrest started, the original queen might have resorted to a tactic that was successfully used by many rulers throughout history. She blamed others for what ailed her people and diverted their anger elsewhere, and her successors followed in her footsteps.”

JADE

Jade stood in the back of the dining hall, watching her people taking seats around the tables. The humans no longer looked at her with fear in their eyes, for which she gave herself a pat on the back, the hybrids looked at her with respect, which was surprising since she hadn't made any effort to earn it, and the purebloods regarded her with wariness, which she didn't understand either.

Since taking command of their community, she hadn't acted with the arrogance she'd wielded like a weapon during her days of glory in her own compound, and she'd tried to be attuned to their concerns.

The young ones didn't know what to expect, and the old ones were probably dealing with years of suppressed grief that had finally been allowed to surface when Toven had freed them from Igor's compulsion.

Igor hadn't been able to compel her to ignore her own grief, and it had always been there, manifesting mostly as anger and a need for revenge. She needed to deal with it properly, but she didn't have the luxury of doing it now or in the near future.

She had people to lead, Igor to kill, and a clan of immortals to negotiate terms with.

Breakfast was long over, the dining hall had been cleaned and prepared for the meeting, and Kagra, Drova, and Pavel were in charge of corralling everyone to attend. The problem

was that Jade still didn't have a speech ready despite trying to write one late into the night.

Her mind had kept wandering to what Toven had told her, and it was still doing that even though she'd run out of time and would have to improvise the most important speech of her career as a leader.

Toven was an old and smart god, and she couldn't dismiss his speculations as groundless or fanciful because she'd entertained similar thoughts, just not as well formulated and thought out. But then, she wasn't a scientist, and her thinking process was based on her military and business experience.

Toven might have twisted things to fit his agenda, and since he was smart, he could do that quite convincingly. But why would he?

She could see the mutual benefits of coexisting with the immortals, but she also imagined that incorporating a large group of purebloods into their small community would make many of them unhappy.

Was it about the money?

Her people wouldn't come as paupers who would strain the clan's resources. They were like a rich bride with a hefty dowry. She might not be as beautiful or charming as the groom would have hoped, but he still wanted her because of what she could bring to the marriage.

Kian had made it sound as if the immortals were mostly interested in the added military strength the Kra-ell would bring to their village, but since the clan wasn't in any imminent danger from their enemies, that couldn't be the main motivation behind the invitation.

Still, Toven had sounded sincere when he speculated about the Kra-ell and the gods being more similar than not, and that the Kra-ell could form bonds with one special person the same as the gods.

Jade doubted that her people were ready to hear that the tribal family unit had been a solution to a problem and not innate to their species. Then again, with Igor doing away with

their religion and traditions, perhaps it would be easier to convince them of that than it would have been before they had experienced his version of Kra-ell patriarchy.

There was so much she needed to tell her people that it was difficult to decide where to start. Perhaps she should open with telling them who their rescuers were.

Should she admit her feelings for Phinas?

Nah, that would immediately disqualify her as their leader, and someone else would be chosen. She wouldn't have minded if there was anyone capable of leading them at this turning point in their lives, but she knew every person, and there was no one she would entrust with the future of their people.

Perhaps she could present it as a case study. As their leader, she had taken it upon herself to test the possibility of inter-species mating, and so far, the results had exceeded expectations. She could tell them about Vrog's son with an immortal female and how everyone said he was an exceptional young male.

What did they mean by exceptional, though? Was he a strong warrior? Handsome? Charming? She should have asked Toven and Yamanu about him, but it was too late now. She would have to improvise.

Kagra walked up to her. "Everyone is here except the six dancers."

Jade's lips twitched with a smile. Ever since the dance they had performed, their collective name was changed from Igor's cronies to the dancers.

"Did you do a head count?" Jade asked.

"Not yet. I'll do it right now."

"Make sure that all the humans are here too."

"Of course."

Jade still had to deal with the six, though, as well as with Valstar. She'd promised Toven to think about letting Igor's second stand trial. Toven insisted that she needed to give

Valstar a chance to explain himself, but she was reluctant to do so.

The male was smart and a master manipulator. He might be able to lie despite Toven's compulsion by making himself believe in his own lies. It wasn't even that difficult to do. No one thought of themselves as evil, probably not even Igor, and convincing himself that he'd been a victim shouldn't be a problem for him.

"Everyone is here," Kagra said. "Are you ready to start?"

Jade swept her gaze over the faces of her people, noting the expectant expressions on some, the tight-lipped on others, the fearful and the hopeful.

"I am. Please close the doors and make sure that no one leaves before I'm done."

"Yes, ma'am."

PHINAS

“*H*e doesn’t look good.” Phinas lifted Igor’s hand and checked his pulse. “Maybe the solution you’re feeding him is not suitable for Kra-ell?”

His skin color was grayish and looked dry, and his fingertips were an even darker shade of gray.

Aiden shrugged. “I’m doing precisely what Merlin told me to do. Besides, what do you care if he dies? He’s a dead man anyway.”

“His death belongs to Jade. I promised to deliver him alive with a red bow tied around his neck to mark the spot for her sword.”

Aiden’s lips curled in a smile. “You’ve really got it bad for her, don’t you?”

There was no point in trying to deny it or make light of what he was feeling for Jade. He didn’t care if others thought he was insane for falling for the Kra-ell leader or if they pitied him for fate pairing him with the wrong female.

She might not be ready to admit that they had bonded, but he was going to tell that to anyone who cared to listen.

“She’s my truelove mate, and we’ve bonded, but she refuses to accept it.”

“Wow.” Aiden lifted his hands and smoothed his long bangs back with both. “Just thinking how complicated this must be for you gives me a headache.”

“It’s not complicated at all.”

“If you say so.” Aiden dropped his hands down and pulled out his phone. “I’ll send a picture of him to Merlin. Maybe Igor needs a blood transfusion instead of the nutrients in a regular IV drip.”

“I’m not giving him any of mine.” Phinas clapped Aiden on the back and stepped out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Max asked as he passed by his open door.

“For a walk.”

“Do you want company?”

“No, thanks. I need time to think.”

The Guardian lifted his hand with a thumbs up. “Good luck.”

“With what?”

“Not with what, but with whom. Jade, of course. You were moping about like a lovesick puppy the whole day yesterday.”

Max was a good guy, but he was a lot to handle. He was like the nosy girlfriend in movies who was too nice to get mad at but also too annoying to tolerate for more than a few minutes.

Dudes were supposed to mind their own business and only offer advice if asked. If they wanted to help, the most they should offer was a drink.

“See you later.” Phinas lifted his coat collar and opened the outside door. “Damn, it’s cold out here.”

It wasn’t just the northern latitude or the time of year. The rain had finally stopped after two days of constant deluge, and now only the wind remained, chilling him to the bone.

Then again, the chill was coming from the inside as well as from the outside.

The realization that he had found his true love mate should make him feel elated. Instead, he had a sinking feeling that he’d blown it with Jade. He’d thought they’d made progress,

and she'd accepted that they had bonded, but then she hadn't called him the entire day.

He could have called, but he'd wanted to give her time to process what had been said between them, and apparently, she had decided to distance herself from him.

It wasn't that he doubted she wanted him. It was that Jade always put her people first, and if she got it in her head that they would not accept her choice of an exclusive relationship with a male who wasn't a pureblood or even a hybrid, she would give him up in a heartbeat.

On the one hand, her self-sacrificing attitude was admirable, but on the other hand, it was irritating because it was uncalled for. Her people were lucky to have her as their leader, and if they couldn't see that, they didn't deserve her. She shouldn't give up her own happiness for theirs.

With a groan, he pulled his phone out of his pocket, yanked his glove off his hand, and called Mey.

"Hello, Phinas," she answered with a cheerful tone. "How are things in Greenland?"

"Boring. I'm in charge of keeping four unconscious Kra-ell from dying just so Jade can kill them at her leisure. Am I the best boyfriend ever, or what?"

Mey laughed. "To each her own. I'm sure Jade appreciates your dedication."

"I wish. Can I bother you once again with finding her? I need to talk to her."

"It's not a bother, but right now is not a good time. She's in the middle of a meeting with her people to discuss their settlement options. Kian wants an answer as soon as possible, so it needs to be decided today."

It shouldn't feel like a kick to the gut that she hadn't called to ask his advice. After all, he'd already given her his opinion on the various options. And yet he knew he would have called her if the situation was reversed.

“Can you do me a favor and ask her to call me once the meeting is over?”

“Sure thing. I expect that she will tell either Yamanu or Toven what was decided, and I’ll ask both to tell her to come to see me.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime. I’m happy to help. “

JADE

Jade lifted her hand to get everyone to hush.

“As you all know, Igor was captured and taken to Greenland to await our arrival. I’m giving Tom one day to interrogate him. After that, I will execute him for the crime of murdering the males of my tribe and probably many of yours as well.”

She scanned the older pureblooded females, noting their nods of agreement.

“What about Valstar?” Joanna asked.

Jade doubted it was a daughter’s concern for her father that had prompted her to ask about his fate.

“I haven’t decided yet whether I’ll execute him along with Igor or let him stand trial for his crimes. The six remaining male members of Igor’s pod didn’t take part in the slaughter of my people, so I will leave their fate in the hands of those they wronged. They will stand trial and be given a chance to defend themselves.”

Once again, she scanned the faces of the pureblooded females and was surprised by them nodding in agreement. Had none of their males been killed by those six?

Or did these females not feel the need for revenge as acutely as she did?

Jade had been observing them, and it seemed that their spirits had been quashed for too long under Igor’s rule, and

they couldn't bounce back to being the proud Kra-ell females they had been before the subjugation.

She wished there was something she could do for them, but she wasn't skilled in offering counsel and encouragement. She wasn't that kind of a leader.

"I'm sure all of you are wondering where we are heading after arriving at Greenland, and what the future holds for us."

Several pureblooded females, the older ones who'd been among the original settlers, tapped the tables with their palms. It was the customary way of agreeing with what was said, but since no meeting had even been held or issues discussed in Igor's camp, this custom had been forgotten. To disagree, they would tap the floor with one foot.

Jade smiled. "I'm glad to see that not all of our ways have been forgotten. Now that we are free, I hope the elders will teach the young ones, so our traditions won't die out."

"Are we free?" Drova asked. "Because it seems to me that these paranormally talented humans with their strong compeller hold all the cards."

That was her cue to reveal the truth. "Our rescuers are not human. They are the immortal descendants of the gods."

The older purebloods hissed and tapped their feet while the younger ones frowned. Except for the fables that she'd told the children, they hadn't been taught the history of the conflict and didn't know that the gods preceded them on Earth.

"Where are the gods?" Morgada asked. "Why didn't they search for survivors after our ship exploded? Are we supposed to serve them after they abandoned us?"

"Most of the Earth gods are gone, and Tom claims that they didn't even know that we were coming. We were told a lie. No one was expecting us, and I suspect that the ship's thousands of years' delay was not a malfunction but sabotage."

"Why?" Morgada asked. "What purpose could it have served?"

It had to do with the twins, Jade was sure of that, but she wasn't clear on the reasons yet. If Toven managed to compel Igor, she would ask him to command him to answer her questions, and the first one would be whether he was sent to kill the royals. But maybe it wasn't such a good idea. Even if she asked it in Kra-ell, Igor might choose to answer in Russian or English just to get back at her, and it was crucial to keep the twins' existence a secret.

Tom and Kian and the other immortals seemed to be decent people, but their obligation was to keep their families and friends safe. The twins would pose too much of a threat to them which they would try to eliminate.

The immortals had been afraid of Igor's compulsion ability, and rightfully so. The twins were doubly dangerous because there were two of them. They might not be as powerful as Igor, but with their powers combined, who knew what they could do?

"I don't know why it was sabotaged. Maybe it was Igor's doing."

"Why would he do that?" Drova asked. "In what way could it have benefited him? And more importantly, how long did you know who they were and kept it from us?"

"I'll start with your last question. I recognized Tom as a god right away, and he told me that his companions were immortal but not gods. I was compelled to keep it a secret from everyone except Kagra. Now that joining their settlement is one of the options for us, I was permitted to tell you about them. As for the first part of your question, your guess is as good as mine. Maybe Igor wanted to arrive on Earth after everyone we knew back home was dead. If he was an escaped criminal, that would make sense."

She'd just pulled that argument out of her ass, but now that she thought of it, it really made sense, and not just if Igor was an escaped criminal. If he was sent to kill the twins, he would have preferred to do that after their mother was no longer the queen.

But what if the queen herself wanted them dead?

A chill ran through Jade. There must have been a good reason for them having always been veiled, even in the private palace gardens where only the queen, the head priestess, and the queen's family were allowed. The priestesses wore similar veils, but they took them off when there were no worshipers around. The twins never did.

Maybe they were deformed?

It was common practice to dedicate females who were born with abnormalities to priesthood and males to serve as temple guards and perform other duties. The twins' only known abnormality was being born at the same time, but what if there were more?

No, that couldn't be the reason. She'd only gotten a quick glimpse at the two settlers she suspected were the twins before they lay down in their pod, but if they'd had abnormalities, she would have noticed them. They could have worn makeup to hide them, but if makeup could do that, they wouldn't have needed to veil themselves at all times.

Perhaps the explanation was much simpler than that.

The queen had known that she would need to smuggle them off the planet one day, and she planned in advance, making sure that no one would recognize them.

"Why were we lied to about serving the gods?" Morgada asked, pulling Jade out of her reveries. "It wasn't essential to tell us that. We were selected by a lottery, and no one asked us if we wanted to settle on Earth. It wouldn't have made a difference to us. Why tell us that serving the gods on Earth was the queen's way to pay for the voyage?"

Those were all valid questions for which Jade had no answers.

"Again. I don't know. Maybe none of us was supposed to make it, and the ship was supposed to explode before the escape pods were launched."

"Are you saying that the gods planned it?" Pavel asked. "That they didn't tell their settlers on Earth to expect our arrival because they knew we would never get here?"

“I don’t know why the gods would want to get rid of a bunch of Kra-ell.” Unless they wanted the twins dead. “At this point, all we can do is speculate. I hope we will learn more from Igor, provided that Tom can compel him.”

Pavel raised his hand. “Will you share with us what you find?”

“Of course.” Not if it was about the twins. “Let’s leave the past where it belongs for now. We need to discuss the future and decide where we want to settle.”

PHINAS

When Phinas's phone rang twenty minutes into the walk, his heart leaped, but when he pulled it out of his pocket, it sank back to where it had been floating for the past twenty-eight hours.

Pulling off his glove, he accepted the call. "Hello, boss. What are you doing up so late?"

"Darius is fussy as usual, and I don't want Jacki to wake up. I'm sitting in his room, waiting for the next time he cries, so I can be there right away to take care of him."

Kalugal had turned into a dadzilla, and it was adorable. Maybe he was compensating for his own fatherless childhood. Then again, all the immortals in the village had grown up without fathers, and yet those who had been blessed with children of their own hadn't turned into dadzillas like his boss.

Maybe knowing who his father was and being exposed to him without getting the love and guidance children naturally expected from their fathers was worse than not having a father at all.

As a boy, Phinas had often wondered who his father had been, but once he'd understood how things worked in the Dormant enclosure and who the men brought in to breed with the Dormants were, he'd stopped wondering and started hating. Eventually, he'd stopped thinking about it at all.

Later, when he realized how different he was from his brothers and the other trainees in the camp, he wondered whether his father had been different as well. He had made up

all kinds of scenarios in his mind about how his father had been tricked into breeding with his mother and imagining that he was a decent, intelligent guy.

He was well aware that the real male who'd fathered him had been just as nasty as all the others who had used the Dormants for their pleasure, but he had the benefit of the doubt. He could pretend that the male who'd contributed his genetic material to his was a good guy.

Kalugal didn't have that luxury. He knew who his father was, and he knew the kind of genes he'd gotten from him.

"Doesn't it disturb the baby that you are talking right next to him?"

"It doesn't. I've noticed that he sleeps more peacefully when he hears my voice in the background. I'm thinking about taking him with me to the office."

It took a very confident male to ignore people's expectations from fathers, and Kalugal was precisely the kind of male who would lead by example.

"Go for it. I think it would be good for both of you. Jacki needs a breather."

"She does." Kalugal sighed. "A baby is a lot of work, but he's worth it. The love we feel for him is just indescribable, and it is priceless."

"I believe you, but I'm sure you didn't call me in the middle of the night to talk about fatherhood."

Kalugal chuckled. "Frankly, my mind is always on Darius, and I'm running our business with diminished capacity. Fortunately, I'm so brilliant that even a fraction of my ability is more than enough."

He'd said that teasingly, but he meant it. Kalugal's ego was the size of the solar system or maybe the galaxy.

The guy had big ambitions.

"Your modesty astounds me."

“As it should, my friend, as it should. I petitioned the council yesterday, and they approved my seat.”

“Congratulations.”

“I didn’t get the two I wanted, and that’s disappointing. They want to see how having me on the council will work out before granting us another seat. I’m not happy about it, and I don’t think it’s fair, especially since Kian was willing to give us two seats, but it is what it is. They said a year, but I’m not going to wait that long. I’ll petition them again in three months, and by then they will be eating out of my hand.”

Phinas had no doubt that, given the chance Kalugal would succeed in turning all the council members into his fans. He’d always been charming, and he’d become even more so since marrying Jacki and moving into the village. Kalugal no longer suffered from the bouts of melancholy he’d often been afflicted with before.

Not that he’d ever admitted to being depressed. He used to call those his contemplative periods.

Phinas found a bench and sat down. “The problem with your plan to charm the council is that they don’t meet often. The next three months might pass without a single meeting.”

“Right.” Kalugal sighed. “You are always so pragmatic.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but someone has to anchor you in reality.”

“I know. That’s why I need you back here. I need both of my devils to balance my shoulders.”

“Devils?”

“Well, yeah. It’s supposed to be an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, but since neither you nor Rufsus is an angel, I think of you as different colored devils. You are blue, and Rufsus is red.”

“I’m glad that you at least painted me in angelic colors.”

“Blue is for reason, and red is for passion.”

“I see. Although lately, my reason’s faltering, and my emotions are all over the place.” Phinas stretched his legs in front of him and crossed them at the ankles.

“Jade trouble?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to her since yesterday morning, and I feel like my intestines are being pulled out of my body. I need to be with her or at least hear her voice, but apparently, she doesn’t feel the same about me.”

Kalugal was silent for a long moment. “You’ve bonded with her.”

“It would seem so. And I think she’s bonded with me, but she’s stubborn and refuses to accept it.”

“How is that even possible? She’s not immortal.”

“Apparently, Kra-ell and gods are not all that different genetically, and the Kra-ell have the ability to bond, if not with each other, then at least with immortals.”

“Don’t tell that to Eleanor and Emmett. I don’t think they have bonded.”

“Right. I forgot about them. Maybe it has to do with the venom? The Kra-ell’s venom is not as potent as ours. And it’s not just the hybrids’ problem. The purebloods’ venom is weak as well. That might explain why the Kra-ell didn’t bond with each other. The tribal family system can’t explain the utter lack of reported cases of bonded couples, and it’s not like it would be easy to hide. A bonded pair couldn’t want to be with anyone other than the bonded partner, and that would have gotten noticed in a society that encourages variety and does not accept exclusivity.”

Kalugal sighed. “Neither of us is a geneticist, and I have to admit that I haven’t explored the subject nearly as thoroughly as I should. The new developments in gene editing have opened opportunities that were unimaginable before. It can change human society the way it changed the gods, but I digress. What I was trying to say before this long preamble was that we don’t know enough about the bond and how it

works, and the Kra-ell might have the ability to bond with more than one partner.”

Phinas felt his body swell with aggression and his fangs elongate. “I hope that’s not the case. I’m not sharing Jade with anyone.”

“Of course not.” Kalugal chuckled. “It just occurred to me that maybe the duels between the Kra-ell males over females had started that way. You sounded as if you would tear apart any other male Jade might bond with.”

“Not going to happen. I will keep her so busy that she will not have a chance to bond with anyone else. Besides, the addiction will set in at some point, and then I will not have to worry about it ever again.”

JADE

“*W*hat happened to the gods?” Pavel asked. “Did they go home?”

Jade stifled a groan. She should have expected this. She’d asked the same questions and had gotten most of the answers from Phinas, who’d been much less reserved about sharing the gods’ history with her than Toven and Yamanu.

“They didn’t go home. One god killed most of the others and died along with them, or so the story goes. No one is sure what actually happened, but the result was that the gods were gone. That’s why we only found legends about them but not the gods themselves. We are on our own here, with no way to communicate with our people back home, provided that they are still there and didn’t annihilate each other, and we need to do the best with what we have. Can we please move on?”

Drova raised her hand. “You said that these people are the immortal descendants of the gods. Does that mean that they are hybrids?”

“Yes. They are part human and part god. They don’t have the same problem we do with their second-generation offspring. Their hybrid females produce hybrid children. There is more to it, but I don’t want to get into that right now. That’s a discussion we will have later once we decide where we want to settle.”

“Only the females?” Helmi asked without raising her hand. “What about their male hybrids?”

“If the mother is human and the father is hybrid, the children are born human.” Jade lifted a hand. “I will not answer any more questions about the gods, their immortal descendants, or how their genetics work. This meeting is about the options Tom’s people offer us.” She paused and added, “Please hold your questions until I’ve listed them all. Otherwise, we will not be done before dinner, let alone lunchtime.”

She proceeded to explain the various options, the advantages and disadvantages of each, and she even went into explaining how they could choose a combination of them by dividing their community.

“Any questions?” Jade asked when she was done.

Drova lifted her hand. “What do you think is our best option?”

Jade had made a conscious effort not to inject her personal preferences into her speech, mostly because she didn’t have clarity yet. Toven’s speech about immortals and Kra-ell breeding to produce a stronger long-lived next generation had hit a chord with her, but after giving it more thought, she’d found a number of problems with his suggestion.

“I’m conflicted,” Jade admitted. “On the one hand, I want to keep our community united and settle everyone in one place, but on the other hand, I realize that what’s best for the Kra-ell among us is not necessarily what’s best for the humans and the other way around. Right now, there are no humans in the village, and their leader is very strict about keeping it that way for security reasons, so I don’t know how comfortable the humans among us will be there.”

According to Phinas, there were a few humans in the village, but they were all confirmed Dormants awaiting transition, so she could bundle them up with the immortals.

She wasn’t ready to tell her people about the potential for long-lived children produced by unions between hybrid males and immortal females. The younger purebloods who’d been born in the compound and hadn’t grown up on Kra-ell traditions would have no problem mating with immortal

females, and the older males were all from Igor's pod, and they didn't matter because their days were numbered. They might get a trial, but she doubted they would be exonerated.

The question was how the immortal males would react to outsiders mating with their females. The good news was that most of them were related and forbidden to each other, so it wasn't as if the Kra-ell males would be stealing potential mates from the clan males. The clan males would also have access to the Kra-ell females, but not every male was as secure in his masculinity as Phinas, and they might have a problem with the Kra-ell females' superior strength. On the females' side, they might not be attracted to males who were physically weaker than them and who couldn't offer them a fight for dominance that most pureblooded females considered a form of foreplay and couldn't get aroused without.

Isla raised a hesitant hand. "I have a question."

Jade nodded. "Go ahead."

"Will the immortal males expect us to breed with them?"

"No. All clan members, whether male or female, are discouraged from having long-term relationships with humans. They have sex with humans, though, and the immortal females welcome pregnancies, but the human fathers are never part of their lives. As for the males, they have no reason to produce children with human females because their children are born human."

Isla smiled. "Then I vote for the village. It sounds like a much nicer place than Safe Haven."

Helmi didn't seem to agree with her mother. "It might be a nicer place, but not better. You've heard what Jade said about the security there. If we settle in the village, it will be exactly like it was in the compound. We will be prisoners there. We will have more freedom in Safe Haven."

"There wouldn't be much difference, at least not at the beginning." Jade leaned against the table at her back and crossed her arms over her chest. "Our mobility will be restricted whether we move into the village or Safe Haven. It

will take time for both camps to build trust, and since we are their guests, we will have to abide by their rules. But after a transition period, I believe we will be granted the same freedoms as the clan members. We need to hide our existence as much as they do so our interests align.”

“What are they getting out of it?” Pavel asked. “No one is that altruistic, especially when it comes to inviting strangers into their fold.”

“They get strong warriors to defend their village and a capable workforce for whatever projects they can use us for.”

Pavel didn’t look happy. “We are finally free of Igor, and I don’t want to become anyone’s slave again. Not yours and not the immortals’.”

Jade intended to grant her new tribe members more liberties and choices than she’d done in her original tribe, but that didn’t mean that people could choose to be idle or do whatever they pleased without regard for others. Once they got settled, she would assign each member of her community tasks according to their abilities.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you challenging my leadership?”

“Not yet.” Pavel’s eyes were full of challenge. “Right now, you are the most qualified person to lead this community. What I meant was that I didn’t want to become a slave to the descendants of the gods. I don’t want Tom or anyone else to compel me and subjugate my will. I want to choose what I do and why.”

“They will use compulsion on us, but not to force us to serve them. The compulsion would be to never rise against them or betray their existence to humans or to their enemies. It will only be about security.”

“Are you sure? What’s to prevent Tom from compelling us to do whatever?”

She smiled. “If that was their mode of operation, we wouldn’t be meeting here and voting on the best place to settle in. Tom would have compelled us to follow his commands the

same way Igor did. But Tom and his relatives are not like Igor. They are giving us a choice. We might choose to settle somewhere else entirely or go back to our old compound, and they will respect our wishes. Their council voted and approved those options as well.”

Pavel nodded. “To sum up, we need to decide whether we should go back to the old place, find a new place and start from scratch, or join the immortals either in their village or one of the three other locations they control.”

“Correct.” Jade pushed away from the table. “We will vote with a show of hands. Let’s start with the least desirable choice. Whoever thinks that going back to our old compound is our best choice, raise your hands.”

Surprisingly, many of the humans were for it, and some purebloods and hybrids as well, but it wasn’t the majority. Nevertheless, they needed to count the number of hands for each option and compare the results.

“Kagra, please count the hands and note the result.” Jade motioned for Drova to come over. “I want you to count as well. We want to make sure that the counts are accurate.”

Drova regarded her with a frown. “Did you ever put anything up for a vote before?”

“No, this is my first time. I’ve gained a new perspective during my years of captivity, and I intend to run things differently from the way I ran them before.” She put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Igor got one thing right. We are on our own here, and we make our own rules. We are no longer bound by our traditions and our religion. But unlike Igor, I don’t intend to discard them in their entirety. We will keep the good and modify the not-so-good to serve our needs.”

PHINAS

Nearly three hours had passed since Phinas had called Mey, and he was starting to think that Jade was ghosting him, but then as he was paying for his coffee in the town's only coffee shop, his phone rang, and this time the caller was Mey.

"Hello," he said into a receiver as he collected his credit card from the cashier.

"It's me," Jade said.

He smiled at the cashier, took his coffee, and sat down in the corner of the shop.

"How are you?" He started with a bland question that didn't convey any of his thoughts or emotions.

The people in the coffee shop/bakery probably didn't speak English, but most people on the western side of Europe could probably understand it. Nevertheless, it was too damn cold outside, and he wanted to sit his ass in a chair and drink hot coffee to warm himself from the inside.

He might still have what it took to be a warrior, but outside of battle, he'd become a creature of comfort, and he wasn't going to apologize for it.

"Exhausted." Jade sighed. "Everyone had questions, and the meeting took forever. The hardest part was summoning patience and answering everyone without tearing their heads off."

The ice in Phinas's gut was starting to melt, and it wasn't because of the coffee.

Jade wasn't telling him that she loved him and that she couldn't live without him, but she talked to him like she would to a confidant, a friend, and not someone she was trying to distance herself from.

Perhaps she'd been too busy to call him or maybe she'd expected him to call.

“What did they decide? Or rather, what did you decide?”

“It was a tie between Safe Haven and the village, with humans mostly voting for Safe Haven and the Kra-ell mostly voting for the village. About a quarter of the purebloods voted on settling in the jungles of South America, some of the young ones voted for the camping grounds, and some voted for the mountain cabin, but they were in a minority, as were the ones who wanted to go back to the compound. I gave everyone a couple of hours to mull it over and discuss it among themselves, and we will have another meeting after lunch to vote on whether the majority is in favor of splitting our community. If the majority agrees that's the best course of action, we will need another round of voting to choose the best options for the split.”

Phinas was glad that the most popular choices brought her closer to him. It would have been a real pain if they decided to go back to the compound or settle somewhere in South America. He knew that he would follow her wherever she went, but it would be nice to be able to visit his friends in the village more than once every few months.

“What is your preference?”

“Along the same lines as the votes went. The village for the Kra-ell, Safe Haven for the humans, with a few exceptions to accommodate couples like Tomos and Helmi. Perhaps some of the older humans would prefer the peaceful life in the village as well. If we are to rely on livestock for sustenance, I would like to have Jarmo in charge of that.”

Phinas chuckled. “I hear you. I would like to have Isla and some of her helpers cook meals in the village, but my wishes are irrelevant. Although I’m surprised that you are willing to split your people. When we last talked, you said that your community can’t survive without the humans.”

“I had a long talk with Kian and then with Toven and Yamanu. Toven brought up some compelling arguments neither of us considered before, and it got me thinking, but the solution didn’t crystallize in my mind until this morning.”

“Enlighten me. Why do you want to split them up like that? I thought that you needed the humans to keep your people from going extinct?”

“Not if we move into the village and form relationships with immortals.”

Phinas was surprised that Jade was open to Kra-ell and immortals producing hybrid children. “Our fertility rate is even lower than yours, but I agree that’s a good solution. You’ll have more genetic variety, and so will we. The only problem I can see with that is reluctance on both sides to intermingle and produce hybrid offspring.”

There was also the issue of different traditions and other cultural differences. Many would not want to deal with that.

“They will have us as an example of a mixed couple, and they will have Vlad as an example of the offspring of such a union. You said that he’s well liked in their community, so even if we are the only couple, there still might be children produced from mixed encounters. Those children might inherit better genetics, from us in regards to better fertility and strength, and from you in regards to longer lifespans and better gender distribution.” She chuckled. “I’m usually not an optimist. But I’m allowing myself to hope for a better future for our people.”

Everything she’d said was music to his ears, and for the first time in his life, Phinas experienced what it meant for a heart to soar.

He felt buoyant.

“I love you.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say despite having so much that he wanted to convey. He simply didn’t have the words.

Jade chuckled nervously. “If you expect me to say it back to you, you’ll be disappointed. However, I’m ready to admit that we have bonded. I just can’t deny it any longer. I miss you with every fiber of my being, and I can’t wait to hold you in my arms. I don’t think I can ever let you go again.”

“That’s good enough for me. Did accepting our bond have anything to do with your decision to move into the village?”

“It did. Toven helped me realize that if you and I have bonded, so could other Kra-ell. We must have similar genetics to the gods, and the bonding with the one we are destined to be with must be a recessive gene that is rarely expressed. Otherwise, there would have been true love matches among the Kra-ell as well.”

“There might be another explanation for that. The venom of immortal males is much more potent than the venom of Kra-ell males, and since it’s a crucial component in the bonding process, it’s possible that only immortal males can induce it.”

There was a long moment of silence as Jade processed the information. “Fate seems to disfavor Kra-ell males. The gender birth ratio prevents them from having mates of their own, and they also can’t bond with immortal females.”

“I might be wrong about that. The reason it occurred to me is that Emmett and Eleanor are in a committed, loving relationship, but they don’t seem to have bonded.”

“Maybe they have, and you are not aware of it? I wouldn’t have known we bonded if we weren’t forced to separate. I would have never expected being away from you to be so difficult.”

“Is that the only indication?”

“To me, it is more than enough. I had several partners throughout my life, and when I established a tribal family unit with my pod members, I grew to care for all of them, both

males and females. But I never missed them when I traveled abroad.” She was quiet for a moment. “Frankly, I never enjoyed the squabbles and posturing the males engaged in to get my attention or that of the other females. I always thought that it was demeaning and wished there was a better way. I even implemented a scheduled rotation so no one would feel neglected, but they didn’t like it. Evidently, it’s part of the male psyche to compete and show off to get the female’s attention. They weren’t happy with the schedule.”

Phinas didn’t like her mentioning her past lovers, but it wasn’t so bad when she talked about them in such a dispassionate manner. She’d regarded it as her duty to bear children for the tribe and to look after her males’ well-being, but she hadn’t loved them or even craved them sexually.

On the one hand, it gladdened him that he was the first she really wanted, but on the other hand, he was saddened that she’d experienced mostly meh sex before.

“My poor iron heart. It sounds like you had no fun until you met me.”

Jade snorted. “I had fun, just not often.”

A growl rose in his throat. “Please, can you just agree with me? I’m okay with you lying to me and telling me that you didn’t enjoy any of the males you’ve been with.”

There was a long moment of silence before Jade answered. “It was so long ago that I hardly remember whether it was good or so-so, which makes me think that it was so-so or I would have remembered it. What I do remember, and quite vividly, is our last bed play, so that tells you something.”

Phinas let out an exaggerated relieved breath. “Thank you. My ego is saved.”

“I didn’t lie, Phinas. I never truly enjoyed intimacy before I met you.”

KIAN

“Good evening, Jade.” Kian examined her expression for clues, but it revealed very little.

She looked just as stressed and tired as the day before, so the results of the vote were neither disappointing nor satisfactory.

“Good morning, Kian.” She shifted her gaze to his right. “Hello, Onegus. Where is the third leg of your triad?”

Turner hadn’t been in their last video meeting either, but she hadn’t noticed his absence, and they were no longer in the war room but in his office. “Now that we have Igor, the Russians are dealt with, and all the arrangements have been made, Turner’s expertise is no longer needed, and he’s free to return to his own office and accept new rescue jobs.”

She nodded. “That’s a very admirable business. Do you know if he’s hiring?”

“Are you looking for a job?”

“I don’t want to be idle, and from what Phinas tells me, there isn’t much to do in your village.”

His gut clenched, but he forced a smile. “So that’s where the vote went? The majority wanted to join our village?”

“Not exactly. We decided to split up. Most of the humans will go to Safe Haven, but some want to join us in the village if that’s possible. Mostly it’s the older ones who don’t want to change their lives too significantly, and Isla’s two daughters. One is in a relationship with a hybrid male, and the other one

is still a teenager and wants to stay with her mother. They are also asking if it will be possible to visit each other. Isla and Jarmo's sister, Hannele, wants to go to Safe Haven, but she also wants to be able to visit her brother and sister and her nieces, or for them to visit her, and the same goes for the others."

Kian was starting to develop a headache. "I don't think it can work because of security. It will have to be either all the humans in one place or all of them in the other. We can't allow them to shuffle from one location to the other."

Jade tilted her head. "I don't see why. All the humans will be under compulsion to keep our existence a secret as well as yours, and as long as their permanent residence is in one of the two locations controlled by the clan, your compellers can periodically reinforce the compulsion. The risk of them revealing anything they're not supposed to while traveling from place to place is nonexistent. Igor sent humans to study in universities, and they had to return to the compound once a month for him to reinforce the compulsion. The system worked, and the compound's location remained a secret. If it worked for him, it would work for you."

He couldn't argue with her logic, but he still didn't like the idea of humans in the village, and even less so humans traveling back and forth between Safe Haven and the village.

"The travel arrangements would be a nightmare. The distance between the two locations is about twelve hours by car or five hours using a commercial airliner and driving to and from the respective airports."

"I will cover their travel expenses and any associated security costs, so that shouldn't be a concern either."

Onegus leaned toward Kian. "I heard that Isla is an exceptional cook, and she knows how to run a big kitchen. We can use her in the village. I wouldn't mind a buffet that serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Neither Cassandra nor I have the time or inclination to cook, and I'm tired of eating restaurant fare."

You too, Brutus? That was what Kian wanted to say. Instead, he tackled the problem from another angle. “I can deal with having the older humans here. My problem is the teenager. She will be isolated here.”

Jade took a deep breath. “We have forty-five Kra-ell children of varying ages with us, and twenty-five human children. Lana will have other kids close to her age in either community, but perhaps she will prefer to be with other human children. Perhaps I can convince Isla to let Lana stay with Hannele.”

“How old is Lana?” Onegus asked.

“Thirteen.”

“We have three kids around that age in the village. One is immortal and two are Dormants. They are a little older than her, but I’m sure they will happily include her in their little group.” He looked at Kian. “Lana grew up with aliens, and she will have to be compelled anyway. Besides, if it doesn’t work out or the big assembly votes against the Kra-ell inclusion, we can find a different solution. None of this is final until everyone casts their votes.”

Kian closed his eyes for a brief moment and then returned his gaze to Jade. “Did you tell the humans about the restrictions they will face in the village?”

“I touched on it briefly, but I didn’t go into details. For some reason, the humans have got the impression that they would have more freedom in Safe Haven, but that’s not really true. They won’t be allowed to leave the area, not in the beginning, but at least they will have contact with other humans. Between the Safe Haven community members and visitors to the retreat, they will have ample opportunity to increase their small genetic pool.”

“That’s true.” Kian rapped his fingers on his desk.

Everything said so far seemed reasonable, but his gut was rebelling against the imminent monumental changes to life in his village.

“When are you going to have a final answer for us? I don’t want my people to get excited about this plan, and then your assembly votes against it. Shouldn’t you put it up for a vote before our arrival?”

Things were never that simple when so many moving parts were involved, and each of those parts was a person with their own set of beliefs and preferences.

“We decided that it would be better to let the two groups intermingle for a while before a final decision is made. At this time, most clan members haven’t been exposed to your people, not even to the three hybrids who have been part of our community for a while now. They need to spend some time with the purebloods to realize that they are not as different from them as they appear.”

She chuckled. “I can just imagine the conversations in your village. Has Kian lost his mind? Why is he inviting bloodsuckers to live in our community? What if they want to suck our blood?” She bared her fangs and hissed.

As pretty as she was, Jade looked terrifying with her fangs bared and her eyes blazing red. Then again, he didn’t look any less scary with his fangs on full display and dripping venom, and yet Syssi fell in love with him despite his vampiric appearance.

“Please refrain from doing that in the village,” Onegus said. “You might scare some people.”

“Why? Your males have fangs. Is a female with fangs scarier than a male?”

Onegus smiled. “Generally, no, but you are not just anyone. You’re Jade. The one and only.”

“Thank you.” She returned his smile. “I hope that you meant that as a compliment.”

“Let’s put it this way. In a battle, I’d rather fight with you than against you.”

TOVEN

When the call ended, Jade turned to Toven. “I have a favor to ask.”

“Go ahead.”

“My people would like you to tell them about the history of the gods and what happened to them. They have a lot of questions I couldn’t answer, some because I didn’t know, and some because I wasn’t sure whether it was okay to tell them what I learned from Phinas and what I guessed from reading between the lines.”

“I should have expected that, but you should have asked Kian first. I’m a newcomer to the clan, and there is a lot I don’t know yet about their history. Our paths diverged right after the disaster. I didn’t even know that anyone other than me had survived.”

Her eyes softened. “It must have been awful to think you were the only one left. Finding out that Annani had survived and created a whole clan of immortals must have been incredible.”

“It was.” He arched a brow. “Should I ask who told you about Annani?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Phinas talked too much.

Toven pinned Jade with a hard stare. “Add her name and existence to all the things you are not allowed to disclose to anyone who doesn’t already know about them.”

“Naturally.” Jade grimaced. “I wouldn’t have told anyone about the goddess even without the compulsion. I know how important it is to keep her existence a secret. Your enemies are powerful and ruthless.”

“I appreciate that, but I prefer to err on the side of caution.” He let out a breath. “For many years, I tried to do what Annani has done, but where she has succeeded, I failed. Perhaps it was because I was doing it wrong or perhaps because I didn’t have the help she did. But before I gave up and let ennui set in, I was busy pursuing the lofty goal of bringing civilization to the primitives.”

“How did you find out that Annani survived?”

He smiled. “That’s a long and convoluted story with a simple ending. The gist is that I fathered two immortal children whom I didn’t know about, and one of them is my spitting image. When he was found by the clan, Annani immediately recognized him as my son, and they started looking for me.”

“How did they find you?”

“They didn’t. We found each other by chance, or what is more likely, by fate. I’ll tell you more about it in the village.” He leaned back. “By the way, Kian’s mate is a seer, and she foresaw your people. Have you heard about the Perfect Match Virtual Adventures Studios?”

Jade frowned. “I might have seen an advertisement on the internet for the service. What does it have to do with Kian’s mate or with us?”

“Syssi owns a large chunk of the company, and she designed a made-up adventure starring aliens called the Krall, who are tall and slim, drink blood, and produce way more males than females. She was sure that it was a product of her imagination, but here you are.”

“When was that?”

“A few years back. It was long before we found Emmett or Vrog and learned that the Kra-ell are real. She foresaw your arrival.”

Jade strengthened, her shoulders tensing. “What else did she foresee?”

“Her visions are sporadic and most often useless. We might have never discovered you, and she would have never known that her imaginary Krall are real people.”

Jade’s shoulders still didn’t lose their tension. “What did she see about the Krall? Did more of us come?”

“Did you expect more?”

She shrugged. “If none came in the seven thousand years it took us to get here, then probably none are coming. And that’s what worries me. There should have been more ships sent with more settlers. Something must have happened back home. It’s not like anyone I cared for is still alive, but I worry about my people.”

“Perhaps losing contact with your ship was the reason the program was stopped,” Toven suggested.

“But you lost contact as well, and it happened around the same time. Maybe a natural disaster destroyed the gods and the Kra-ell.”

“It’s possible. But I suspect that they just wanted to forget about the rebels they had sent to Earth.”

“Yeah, it might be.” Jade let out a breath. “There is no way for us to find out what happened there.”

Toven wasn’t sure about that. With how fast technology was moving forward, they would one day find the place they’d come from. “Does the planet of the gods have a name?”

“We call it Anumati.”

“Does it mean anything?”

She nodded. “Loosely translated, it means we are the children of the Mother.”

“What do the gods call it?”

She chuckled. “The same thing, but it means something else in their language. Again, loosely translated, it means we are omnipotent. Isn’t that fitting?”

“It’s fitting only when filtered through the prism of your beliefs.”

“Perhaps.” She averted her eyes, maybe because she knew he was right or because she didn’t want him to see that he’d angered her. “Are you going to speak with my people?”

So it was the second one.

“I’d rather leave it to Kian when they get to the village. I’m not much of a public speaker.”

“They already know you, and they are curious about you.”

They wanted to ask about the gods, and he didn’t want to talk about them. There was still too much pain and guilt involved. It didn’t matter that logically he knew that he couldn’t have stopped Mortdh, but the niggling feeling that perhaps he could have done something refused to go away. Maybe if he’d been a better brother, Mortdh would have been less psychotic. Perhaps he would have hesitated to drop the bomb because someone he cared about was in the assembly, namely Toven and Ekin.

“Toven?” Jade prompted.

He wasn’t surprised she knew his real name.

If Phinas had told her about Annani, he had told her that as well.

Toven let out a breath. “I’ll make a deal with you. If you come with me to speak to Valstar, I’ll speak with your people, but I can’t promise I’ll answer all their questions. In fact, I will probably answer only a few and tell them that the rest will have to wait until we get to the village.”

Her lips twisted in a grimace. “If that’s what it takes, I’ll talk to Valstar.”

JADE

The last place Jade wanted to be was Valstar's cabin, facing the male she was about to execute.

Having to sit across from the sniveling manipulator was its own kind of torture, and Jade was tempted to just agree to the trial so she could be done with it. She'd spent over two decades interacting with him while dreaming of the day she would make him shorter by a head, but this was different.

Jade didn't want to hear him groveling and making himself appear like one more of Igor's victims. Just a settler like her who had been forced to do unthinkable things.

She listened to his explanations with half an ear while her mind wandered to Phinas and their conversation from earlier that day. Why did it feel as if she'd capitulated? Like she'd chosen the easy way out instead of standing her ground and sticking to her decisions?

Was she weakening?

Yeah, she was.

Now that it was almost over, and Igor was about to meet his end, she felt like a deflated balloon. Plotting vengeance and stoking the fire inside of her was all she'd known for so long that she didn't know what to do with herself once that objective was met.

Joining an established village with all the comforts ready for her people's use was another capitulation. She should have convinced them that a fresh start somewhere else was the best option, that building their lives from the ground up was the

way to go. But she was tired, and the immortals' village sounded like a vacation in paradise.

Especially since it would be with Phinas.

“Give me another chance,” Valstar pleaded. “I will serve you well, better than I served Igor because I’d be doing it willingly. I have experience running a large community. I can be helpful.”

Was he delusional?

“I’m done here.” She pushed to her feet and turned to Toven. “If you want him to stand trial, be my guest. It won’t change the outcome.”

Toven didn’t move from the armchair. “What if it does? Will you abide by the court’s decision?”

She let out a breath. “If your judge finds him innocent, I will lose faith in your system, and I will not abide by her ruling. Assuming that she will use human crime terminology, finds him guilty only of being an accessory to murder, and sentences him to entombment rather than a beheading, I might be willing to consider that as an option, but don’t take it as a promise. It’s a maybe.”

The coward hadn’t even asked for a duel to the death. Not that she would have granted it, but at least he would have preserved his honor.

Except he didn’t have any.

Valstar’s panicked expression was priceless. “I’m not a god. I can’t go into stasis without a life pod to sustain me. I will die.”

She shrugged. “Then choose beheading. At least it’s a quick death.” She walked to the door, opened it, and looked at Toven. “Are you coming?”

With a sigh, he rose to his feet. “Let’s agree not to decide until Edna probes him. She will see straight to his soul and find the truth. She might give you a different perspective.”

“She will see that I was a victim just like you.”

“I doubt it.” Jade walked out of the cabin. “How much are you willing to bet that your judge will see exactly what I see? A rotten soul that should never be reborn.”

Toven closed the door behind him. “I’ve lived for a very long time, and I know people. If Valstar was lying in there, he’s the best actor who has ever lived or he’s a sociopath like Igor.”

“He’s worse. Igor will not beg for his life like a coward.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Toven fell in step with her. “He will certainly try to bargain for it.”

“He has nothing I want.”

If Igor knew where the twins were, he would have found them already and killed them. Whether he was an assassin sent to end them or an agent for the queen meant to protect them, he would have gotten rid of the twins so he wouldn’t have to bow to them. The queen was long dead, and there would have been no one to hold him accountable. Knowing what their fate had been would have given her closure, but it wasn’t worth bargaining with Igor.

“When do you want me to meet up with your people?” Toven asked.

Jade was surprised he was still going to do that after the way she’d brushed off Valstar’s pleading his case.

“After dinner tonight.” She stopped and looked at him. “I know that you are disappointed I didn’t soften up my position regarding Valstar, and I appreciate that you are still willing to speak with my people despite that.”

“I promised to do that in exchange for you meeting Valstar. You fulfilled your part, and I’ll fulfill mine.” He smiled. “I keep my promises, Jade, and just like you, I try not to overpromise. Don’t expect me to tell them much.”

“I don’t. As long as you show up and answer a few questions, I’ll consider it a promise fulfilled.”

PHINAS

Phinas stood on the dock, ignoring the drizzling rain and freezing cold. It was getting dark, and the *Aurora* was just a speck on the horizon, but even if it started raining in earnest, he wouldn't move from that spot until it docked.

The tether inside of him hummed with anticipation, the pain worsening instead of abating as Jade got nearer.

He had a plan, and if anyone tried to stop him, they would regret it. As soon as the ship opened its shell doors, he would leap inside, and if he found Jade waiting for him there, he would pick her up, rush her to his cabin or hers, and make love to her all night.

Knowing her, she would want to see Igor, and a small part of him wanted to present his trophy to her as a mating present, but a much bigger part of him needed to get naked with her, and he wasn't referring to the one throbbing in his boxer briefs despite the cold.

Max had thankfully volunteered to guard Igor and the other three, or he would be there teasing Phinas mercilessly about his reunion with Jade. The guy had a warped sense of humor, which Phinas enjoyed most of the time, but he was too strung out to tolerate it right now.

Several of his men had made it to the dock and were waiting along with him, but they knew him well enough to know to leave him alone and keep their distance.

Patting his pocket, he checked that the box with the necklace he'd bought for Jade was there. It had been an

impulse buy, and now he wasn't sure about giving it to her. She wasn't the type of woman who appreciated jewelry.

Hell, she wasn't a woman at all. She was a Kra-ell female with different traditions and a strange culture, and giving her a necklace might offend her.

There were still so many things he didn't know about her, but thank the Fates and the Mother of All Life and every other power out there, they would have plenty of time to explore their differences in the village.

It took another hour for the ship to finally dock, and as soon as the doors opened, he didn't even wait for the plank to be fully extended and leaped across the remaining ten feet or so.

Yamanu and Toven were there with several Guardians and a few of his men, and he knew that he was being rude by ignoring them as his eyes darted around, looking for his mate.

“Where is she?”

Toven chuckled. “She's on her way. A couple of the hybrids got into a squabble, and she had to deal with them.”

“I'll meet her halfway.”

Phinas ran inside, ignoring the snorts of laughter from the Guardians.

When he saw her striding toward him, he gave a burst of speed. Stopping himself at the last moment from tackling her, he grabbed her by the waist, lifted her to his chest, and smashed his lips over hers.

Wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his middle, she kissed him with such force that his lips tingled, and his neck felt like it was going to snap, but he didn't care and kept kissing her.

When they finally came up for air, they were both panting.

“I don't care if the ship catches fire, or we are under attack. I'm taking you to bed.” He hoisted her higher and started running.

Jade laughed. “Put me down.” She got free of his arms with little effort, halting him with a hand to his chest. “I still have appearances to keep up.”

Damn. She probably wanted to see Igor first.

“What do you want to do? Do you want me to take you to Igor?”

The smile melted off her face. “He can wait.” She took his hand. “Right now, I want you, just without giving everyone on this ship a show. Can you do that?”

“I can do anything you want as long as it leads us to a bed, but a supply closet would do at a pinch.”

“Hmm, sounds fun, but perhaps we’ll try the closet some other time.”

JADE

Jade had never had sex in a supply closet, but she'd fought with Kagra in a supply room, and they'd made quite a mess.

Grasping Phinas's chin, she leaned in and feathered her lips over his. "Your cabin or mine?"

"Mine." Phinas gripped the back of her neck. "Let's use the elevator, so no one stops us on the way." He pulled her in for another quick kiss and then took her hand and ran toward the elevator.

Standing next to each other with their fingers entwined, they both stared at the numbers on the display, urging them to change faster and praying that no one called the elevator on one of the other floors.

The Mother must have answered Jade's prayers, and she sent a silent apology for bothering her with such a frivolous request.

As soon as Phinas kicked the door to his cabin closed, she yanked his coat down his arms and his sweater over his head, desperately needing to touch his naked skin. She missed his hard, muscled body, the solid bulk of him, the warmth, and as she ran her hands over his chest, her sex squeezed with need.

"Jade," he whispered her name as if it was a prayer.

Lifting her into his arms, he waited until she wrapped her legs around his hips, and as he carried her to the bedroom, she kissed down his neck and scraped her fangs along the strong column.

He laid her on the bed, and as she whipped her shirt over her head, his eyes roved over her naked breasts, and his fangs punched down over his lower lip.

“Perfect,” he hissed through his fangs.

Catching one foot, he pulled down her boot, tossed it behind him, and then did the same with the other. Her socks were next, and as he lifted her foot and kissed her toes one at a time, she squirmed and giggled like a child.

“It tickles.” She popped the button on her leathers and unzipped them.

The faster they got naked, the sooner he could be inside her and relieve the ache that had settled there in his absence.

“I know.” He kissed the arch of her foot and then tugged her pants down her hips.

When they hit the floor behind him, and all that covered her body was a pair of simple panties, he sucked in a breath.

“You are so beautiful, my iron heart.”

A grin spread over her face. “I love it when you call me that. Now get naked and come here before I tackle you to the ground and ride you like you’ve never been ridden before.”

He arched a brow. “Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“No, it’s a promise. Now give me what I want.” Her eyes roamed over his magnificent torso, going down to the impressive bulge, testing the strength of his zipper.

Smiling with his fangs on full display and his eyes glowing, he was magnificent. His male beauty was rugged and perfect in its imperfection. He wasn’t like the gods, who were so beautiful that they looked airbrushed, unreal, and to her, unappealing.

“Do you like what you see?” He kicked his boots off, unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his jeans, and pushed them down his hips with deliberate slowness.

“You’re such a tease.” Jade licked her lips, knowing what the sight of her tongue did to him.

“Look who’s talking.” He shoved down his jeans along with the boxer shorts, and his erection sprang free.

His manhood wasn’t longer than the pureblooded males, but it was definitely thicker, and he knew how to use it just the right way to please her.

His smirk was all male satisfaction as he prowled on the bed and put one big hand on her stomach.

“Mine.”

The possessive tone and gesture should have annoyed her, but she was too needy to care, and right now, everything he did and said was a turn-on.

“Prove it,” she hissed at him, immediately regretting the words.

This wasn’t a Kra-ell foreplay, and Phinas couldn’t overpower her, but it didn’t seem like her blunder had affected him.

As he settled between her legs and drew a nipple into his mouth, his massive erection was hot and heavy between her legs, a promise of pleasure mingled with a little pain just the way she liked it.

He paid attention to both nipples, licking and sucking and pinching. It took all of her resolve not to flip them over and ride him like she’d threatened.

Her growls, however, betrayed her hunger.

“Patience,” he murmured against her nipple. “I’m just as desperate for you.”

She arched up, rubbing her mound against his arousal. “We have all night to play around. Right now, we both need to sate our hunger. I need you inside of me.”

“Is that so?” He reached between their bodies and slid a finger inside of her. “You’re so wet for me, my iron heart.”

“Did you expect anything else?” She gripped his butt and lifted hers to position her entrance at the tip of his manhood.

PHINAS

*P*hinas gripped his shaft in his fist, positioning himself at her entrance. “Do you want this?”

Her eyes blazing purple with desire, Jade bared her fangs. “You know I do.”

He nudged just the head inside of her. It wasn't their first time together, but they'd been apart for several days, and Jade was built long and narrow, while he was both long and thick. If he slammed into her like she wanted, it wouldn't be comfortable, and he didn't want to cause her pain even though he suspected she craved it.

Besides, there was always the chance that pain would unleash the tigress in her, and she would attack him, which he didn't have a problem with, but she might. He couldn't overpower her, and it might be a turn-off for her.

As Jade lifted her hips, trying to get more of him inside her, he gripped her hip and gazed down at where their bodies were joined. “Patience, sweetheart.”

“I'm not a sweetheart.” She rolled her hips, impaling herself on a couple more inches.

“My bad, my ferocious iron heart.” He clamped his hands over the back of her thighs, spreading her wide as he pressed in a little further.

“Yes.” She groaned. “Stop teasing and give me everything. I'm not some fragile human you need to be careful with.”

He dipped his head and kissed her. “Maybe not, but you’re precious to me, and I want to take care of you.”

She softened under him, her taut muscles going lax. “It’s my job to protect you. Not the other way around.”

“We can protect each other.” He pushed the rest of the way in.

She gasped and arched her back. “You can take care of me like that all night long.”

“I intend to.” He pulled back and thrust in again, going as far as her body allowed, which was deeper than any other female he’d been with. “You’re perfect for me.”

He’d hoped she would echo his words, but he should have known better. Jade expressed herself with her body, not her words. As her hands drifted up his back and cupped his head, her touch was gentle and loving, and when she lifted her head and kissed him, her lips were soft against his.

He wanted to take it slow and savor the moment, the connection, to feel their bond hum in satisfaction, but when she gripped his buttocks and squeezed hard, his restraint broke, and he withdrew only to ram back into her.

Going fast and hard, he twisted his hips and ground against the seat of her pleasure with every thrust.

Jade growled and moaned, her fingertips digging painfully into the flesh of his buttocks and intensifying the ecstasy of their joining.

He tightened his hold of her. “I will never give you up.”

Her answer was a pained groan, and then she gripped the nape of his neck, lifted her head, and bit into his vein.

Fire and ecstasy mingled as pain turned to pleasure, and as she sucked his blood, her sheath clenched around his shaft, and seed exploded out of him along with a bellow that must have shaken the ship.

When her tremors subsided, she pulled out her fangs, licked the puncture wounds closed, and wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you.”

Was she thanking him for one of the best orgasms he'd ever had? And he hadn't even bitten her yet.

Still panting like a locomotive, he lifted off her just enough to brace his weight on his forearms. "Why are you thanking me?"

"For the gift of your blood and your seed." She smiled, her fangs retracting into her gums. "You nourished me and perhaps gifted me with a child."

Phinas wished he could, but he didn't want her to have false hope.

"I don't know about that." He dipped his head and kissed her lightly. "The chances of that happening are less than slim. But you are welcome for the blood. It's yours whenever you please. I don't mind becoming your exclusive source."

"Don't make promises you will regret later. I might get addicted to your blood. It tastes better than anything I've ever had."

Why did that make him feel like thumping his chest and grunting 'mine?'

His shaft swelled inside her, eliciting a delightful purr from Jade.

"Please do." He kissed the side of her neck. "I'm an immortal, and my body will replenish whatever you take within minutes, not hours or days. It's like having a personal juice bar that never runs out of juice."

She arched up and swiveled her hips. "Speaking of never running out of juice. You haven't bitten me yet, and I crave your venom bite."

He suddenly found himself on his back with Jade straddling him, still impaled on his erection. "I promised you a ride, big boy."

Somehow when she called him a boy, he didn't mind, especially when it was prefaced with big.

"I'm yours, beautiful." He gripped her hips to keep her in place and punched his hips up.

“Tsk, tsk.” She took his hands and pinned them to the bed by his sides. “You’re not taking over. It’s my turn to be in charge.”

JADE

“Whatever is your pleasure, my iron heart.” Despite his words, Phinas’s eyes blazed with defiance, but he didn’t try to fight her to get free, and given how his shaft swelled and throbbed inside of her, he hadn’t gotten turned off by her show of dominance either. “I’m yours.”

He kept saying that, no doubt hoping that she would say the same thing back to him, but even though it was true to the core of her being, the words couldn’t pass her lips.

But, Mother of All Life, how she wished she could tell him that she couldn’t imagine a future without him, and that she was his for as long as he wanted her, and since they had bonded, it would be for as long as she lived.

It should have saddened her to think that he would outlive her, but she was too hyped up on the blood she’d taken from him, buzzing with energy and arousal, and something else she couldn’t define. It was as if the tether tying her to him was happy that they were finally together and was singing a merry tune inside her heart, making it buoyant.

But her heart wasn’t the only organ affected by his incredibly potent blood. Her sex had contracted around his swollen shaft, the need so intense that it bordered on pain.

Perhaps she’d taken too much of his immortal blood and was now suffering a sort of intoxication?

It had been much more than she’d taken the other time, almost as much as she would have taken from an animal to satisfy her thirst, and the energy boost was incredible.

Leaning down, she took his lips in a teasing kiss, flicking her long tongue around his fangs, which she knew drove him up the wall.

Releasing a frustrated groan, he bucked under her, and despite her superior strength she couldn't hold him down because she didn't have sufficient weight for that.

The male weighed at least twice as much as she did.

“Drinking from you is incredible.” She lifted herself, bracing on her outstretched arms. “You're like an energy drink.” She swiveled her hips in a corkscrew motion, then lifted off him and slammed back down.

“You are welcome to imbibe on my vein whenever. I love your fangs at my neck, and I love knowing that I'm providing for you.” He grinned. “As long as you are with me, you will never go hungry or thirsty.”

Letting go of his wrists, she put her hands on his chest. “That's a bonus I hadn't considered when I decided you were the one for me.”

His eyes blazed. “Is it official, then?”

She nodded and lifted off him before slamming down again. “It's official between you and me.”

Phinas didn't like her answer, and in a move that took her by surprise, he flipped them around and pinned her arms by her sides. “That's not good enough.” He pulled his hips back and thrust inside of her again. “I want everyone to know that you are mine, and I'm yours. I don't want to be your dirty little secret.” He punctuated his words by retracting and surging in again.

She could've gotten free with ease, but she let him hold her down, pretending that she couldn't.

It pleased her to have his large, heavy body on top of hers, and the angle of penetration was more pleasurable as well. There was something to be said for the missionary position, as humans called it.

“You’re not my dirty little secret. You are my everything, but for now, it will have to remain between us.”

He stilled on top of her. “Your everything? What about your people? Your daughter?”

No matter what species, males were so damn literal.

“They are my other everything. Would you shut up already and do your duty by me?”

Amusement sparkling in his eyes, he lifted his hips and held himself suspended on top of her with just the tip at her entrance. “My duty? As what? Your mate? Your plaything?”

It was a Kra-ell expression, and it didn’t belong between her and Phinas. Male Kra-ell had a duty to answer their mistress’s summons and service her. Immortal and human males did it just for the pleasure of it or to procreate.

Yanking her wrists out of his hold, she wrapped her arms around his torso. “It’s one of those cultural differences we need to work out. I expect to be pleased when I’m in the mood or in my fertile cycle.”

“Oh, sweetheart. You’ll be pleased so often and so thoroughly that you will never even think to ask for more.” He smiled. “I have satisfaction guaranteed practically stamped on my ass.”

TOVEN

*P*avel pulled on the brig's bars with all his strength. "They will hold. Who did you build this jail for?"

Toven chuckled. "I didn't even know that the ship had one. It wasn't on the tour we were given when we got here."

Toven had been thinking about where to interrogate Igor, and although Yamanu could shroud the hotel, Toven didn't like the idea of doing it in a place that was surrounded by humans. Igor was an unknown factor, and once Merlin administered the antidote or whatever it was that would wake him up, Toven preferred not to do it in a cheap hotel room with walls that a Kra-ell could burst through even while chained.

After all, chains had to be attached to something.

The brig was perfect for that, but he needed to make sure that it would withstand the strength of a Kra-ell pureblood.

"I found it by chance." Merlin stuck his hands in his pockets. "I got lost looking for the booze storage, and when I noticed the steel door, I tried to open it, but it was locked. I was intrigued, so I asked Karl, and he said that it led to a corridor where the brig and the morgue were located." Merlin snorted. "How convenient."

Pavel seemed to agree.

"How is Drova taking it?" Merlin asked. "It must be difficult for her, knowing that her mother is about to execute her father."

Pavel's smile wilted. "She is doing what humans call dissociation. She pretends like Igor isn't her father." He grimaced. "All of us who were born in the compound are either the children or grandchildren of Igor's pod buddies. It's not easy for any of us."

That hadn't occurred to Toven, but it should have. The Kra-ell fronted a tough and unemotional attitude, but inside, they were like any other humanoid or animal for that matter.

Apes, monkeys, and dogs mourned lost companions and often couldn't be consoled, and he was sure it was true of other animals as well. Those who were too limited to understand death and loss were the lucky ones.

Toven had often thought about the chains of love that connected beings of all kinds to each other. He knew better than most how meaningless life was in an emotional vacuum.

As someone who had lost everyone and had roamed the Earth alone, he knew firsthand that the loss of connection to others meant the loss of the will to live. He'd been tethered to life by the thin thread of wanting to continue the gods' work and bring civilization to humans so they would live better lives, but after his failures, he hadn't had even that.

What had saved him were the fleeting connections to human females and the stories of love he'd written to immortalize them.

The Kra-ell had each other, and they were united by their survival, but many had lost so much, and now that he'd released their memories and their ability to grieve, many might sink into a deep depression.

All of the captured females had lost all of the male members of their families, and some of those who'd been born in the compound had recently lost a parent or a grandparent to Jade's and Kagra's swords.

The rest of Igor's male pod members were awaiting trial, but given Jade's attitude toward Valstar, Toven doubted any of those males would be found innocent or pardoned. Many more would lose their fathers and grandfathers.

The whole lot of them would need to get counseling when they got to the village, but as far as he knew, Vanessa was the clan's only therapist, and she had her hands full with the rescued trafficking victims.

He should have brought it up with Kian, but with all the battle plans, the human aspect had been ignored. Well, the Kra-ell aspect, but that was semantics.

They'd been primarily concerned with the humans of Igor's compound, but the truth was that the humans were the least damaged of the three groups.

If any of the Kra-ell asked him to compel them to forget again, he would be inclined to comply with their requests even though it wasn't the best way to deal with grief. He doubted Kian would bring a bunch of therapists for the Kra-ell and then have them thrall'd to forget their alien patients.

Merlin patted the young Kra-ell's back. "If you need to talk to someone, my door is open. I'm always willing to lend an ear or offer advice if you want it from a guy who most people think is a little crazy."

"Are you crazy?"

Merlin chuckled. "Of course not, but then crazy people never think they are."

"We should go." Toven locked the brig and put the key in his pocket. "It's getting late, and if I can't compel Igor to obey me, I want to transfer him here tonight."

Merlin nodded. "I'm at your disposal."

"So am I," Pavel said. "If you need a strong pureblood to muscle Igor down, I'm your male."

"I appreciate the offer, but without the special earpieces to protect you from Igor's compulsion, you will be more of a liability than a help."

Pavel's face fell. "Can't you compel me to ignore his compulsion?"

"If Igor is a weaker compeller than I am, it might work, but I don't think that's the case."

Pavel regarded him with curiosity in his big eyes. “How strong are the gods? Are they stronger than their hybrid offspring?”

“Physically, there isn’t much of a difference. I can run faster and see farther, but not by much. The big difference is in mental abilities. Immortals can’t thrall each other, only humans, but I can thrall immortals and humans and do that on a larger scale.”

Pavel’s grin returned. “But you can’t thrall me, right?”

“No, I can’t.”

“So that puts me on a par with the gods.”

“It does,” Toven admitted. “What I find curious is that the purebloods can’t thrall or shroud.”

Pavel shrugged. “I don’t get what’s the difference between compulsion and thralling.”

“They have a lot in common,” Merlin said. “But they use different delivery systems. Compulsion is carried on voice waves, and although it’s powerful, it doesn’t feel integral. On some level, you always know it didn’t originate from your own will. Thralling, on the other hand, is mind-to-mind communicating, and you won’t be able to tell that the thoughts and memories were not yours.”

“So thralling is more powerful.” Pavel turned to Toven. “It’s a shame you can’t use thralling on Igor.”

“Indeed. One-on-one thralling might be more useful, but compulsion affects anyone within hearing distance. Both have their uses.”

When Pavel still looked confused, Merlin wrapped an arm around his shoulders and led him toward the exit. “I’ll try to explain it better. When someone compels you to do something, you know that you have been compelled, and you do it even if you don’t want to. When someone thralls you, you don’t know that it wasn’t your decision to do whatever they wanted you to do. You think that you are doing it of your own free will.”

“I don’t get it. So how did Igor make all those settler females forget what he had done to their males? Can he thrall?”

“He might be able to,” Toven said. “But he relied on compulsion to force them to avoid thinking about their losses, which was nearly as effective as thralling them to forget them.”

Merlin shook his head. “Let me explain it better. If someone compels you to forget one thing and remember another, you might do that, but it will feel odd. You will always feel as if you have forgotten something important. Thralling, on the other hand, will achieve the same thing but feel more natural. You might dream about the things you were thralled to forget, but when you are conscious, and something reminds you of the thing you forgot, you’ll get a headache if you try to remember it.”

“I’m getting a headache now.” Pavel lifted a hand to rub his temple. “This is all very confusing.” He looked over his shoulder at Toven. “But I’m still volunteering to stand guard outside the door.”

There was no need, but the guy looked eager to help, and Toven didn’t have the heart to deny him. “Thank you. I’ll speak with Yamanu about the security procedures and let you know.”

SOFIA

Sofia hopped on top of one of the crates and sat down with her knees pulled up like she used to do as a child. “I’m glad you decided to come with me to the village.”

Her father patted the flank of the sheep he was checking on. “Where else would I go? You are my only daughter. I’m just glad that I’m allowed to join you in the immortals’ village.” He walked over to her and hopped onto the crate next to her. “How are things going with Marcel? Are you still in love?”

She cast him a sidelong glance. “What does it look like?”

“I don’t know. I barely get to see you. You were so busy in the clinic, helping with removal of the trackers, and when I saw you, you looked tired and stressed.”

“Marcel is wonderful. He’s not the storybook boyfriend who knows all the right things to say at the right time, but he loves me, and he’s obsessed with taking care of me. Don’t get me wrong, it’s nice, but I want him to ease up a bit. I’m not some fragile doll that needs constant protection.”

“To him, you do.” He glanced at the entrance to the animal enclosure and lowered his voice. “When you turn immortal, he will be less worried about you. Did you start working on it?”

Sofia chuckled. “Not yet.”

It was as if her father was asking her whether she and Marcel were working on making a baby. It wasn’t the kind of conversation fathers and daughters usually had, but since her mother had been practically absent, her father had assumed

both roles. Her aunts had helped a lot, but he was the one she'd turned to with everything. Well, except for when she needed help with using tampons. Had it been Isla or Hannele who had explained to her what to do?

She didn't remember.

"Why not?" her father asked. "The danger is over, the future has been decided on, and you are happy with Marcel."

"I'd rather wait for us to get settled in the village. Marcel says that the body needs to be in optimal health to start transitioning, and it's common knowledge that stress and anxiety have a negative impact on health."

Sighing, her father wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "You're afraid that it's not going to happen. That's why you keep postponing it. As long as you don't try, the possibility exists. When you try and fail, the hope is gone. It's like when you were afraid of taking tests even though you were beyond ready. You were terrified of failing."

He knew her so well.

Sofia nodded. "I think that the same is true for Marcel. He suggested that we start working on it, but he took it back right away with the optimal health explanation. And since I was afraid too, I didn't argue the point." She turned to look into her father's kind eyes. "Do you think we should just go for it?"

Jarmo shook his head. "There's no rush, and you can just spend the time enjoying each other. But if the uncertainty creates tension for the two of you, then maybe you shouldn't wait." He smiled. "I heard that meditation and yoga are good for relaxation. Perhaps now that you are not so busy in the clinic, you can try both as a way to release stress. Soaking in a bathtub is also known to be relaxing."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "Talking to you is relaxing. Perhaps listening to your voice reminds my subconscious of all the nighttime stories you told me, and that's why I automatically relax."

"Well, that can be another good relaxation technique. I can come over to your cabin every night and read you a bedtime

story. Except, I don't think your boyfriend will be too thrilled about my visits."

She wasn't sure about that.

Marcel would do anything to make her happy, even if it was letting her father tell her a bedtime story.

Lifting her head off his shoulder, she kissed his cheek. "You need to write down the stories you told me as a child so you won't forget them. One day, Marcel and I will have children of our own, and when you come over to tell them bedtime stories, you won't have to make them up on the spot like you did for me."

He chuckled. "Half the fun was neither of us knowing how the story would end."

"That's true. I always tried to get the ending out of you, and when you said that you didn't know, I thought you just wanted to keep me in suspense. In a way, your stories imitated life. We don't know how our story will end either."

"I do." He smiled. "And they lived happily ever after."

"How can you know that?"

"What other ending could a love story have?"

TOVEN

Max opened the hotel room door and motioned for Merlin and Toven to go in. “We put the four of them together. I just hope Aiden didn’t mess up things and turn them into vegetables.”

The medic flipped him the bird.

As a panicked expression twisted Merlin’s lips, and he rushed into the room to examine the medic’s work, Toven cast Max a reproachful look. “Why did you say that?”

“I like messing with Merlin, but they really don’t look so good.”

The medic crossed his arms over his chest. “I followed Merlin’s instructions to the letter.”

A moment later, the doctor let out a breath. “Everything looks okay, and they are breathing fine.”

The medic cast Max a smug look. “I told you that you had nothing to worry about.”

Max shook his head. “If Igor dies before Phinas can deliver him to Jade, he will blame me. He left me in charge.”

Merlin pulled out his stethoscope. “Which one is Igor?”

Aiden pointed to the cot under the window.

Toven walked over and looked down at the pureblood. Was he a pureblood, though?

He looked Kra-ell, and although he was handsome, he didn’t have the perfect skin and symmetrical features of a god

or even an immortal. If he was a hybrid, he hadn't inherited his physical attributes from his god parent.

After Merlin checked the male's vitals, he pulled out a syringe from one pocket and a large vial from another. "How conscious do you want him?"

"Only semi-conscious. Are you sure you can dial it so precisely?"

"I believe so, and if he gives us any trouble, I can incapacitate him with my sleeping serum until the new dose of tranquilizer takes effect." He shook the vial. "I tested it on Pavel, and it worked. The kid was a very good sport about it. I left him to sleep it off in the clinic."

Max arched a brow. "What did you promise him in return?"

"Nothing much. I just told him some funny stories from my colorful past that made him laugh."

"Pavel is thirty-two years old, so I don't think he appreciates being called a kid." Max finished wrapping Igor in chains. "But a good laugh is worth its weight in gold. We all need more of that." He secured the lock. "Check your earpieces, please."

"I have them in." Merlin moved his long hair to show that he had them in his ears. "Thirty-two is a baby immortal and a teenage pureblood. To me, Pavel is a kid, and he doesn't mind me calling him that."

It seemed that the doctor had taken a liking to the young pureblood.

Max checked to ensure that the fit was as perfect as it should be and then looked at Toven. "Just in case, you should put yours in as well."

"I know. I wouldn't risk rousing him without them. If he can compel me, he can command me to unchain him, and none of you would be able to stop me."

Max arched a brow. "If you say so, your Highness."

Ignoring the Guardian's impudence, Toven pulled the earpieces out of his pocket and stuck them in his ears. "Please, go ahead, Merlin."

Without much preamble, the doctor stuck the needle in Igor's neck and depressed the syringe. "That should do it."

"How long until he wakes up?" Toven asked.

"Right about now."

Igor gasped and opened a pair of unfocused eyes. "*Kto ty?*"

"He asked who you are," Aiden said as if Toven needed the translation.

"*Skazhite mne vashe imya,*" Toven commanded. "Tell me your name."

Igor tried to focus his eyes. "*Kto ty?*" he repeated.

"*Vo-pervykh, skazhi mne svoye imya!*" Toven repeated, using the full force of his compulsion. "First, tell me your name."

"Igor."

Hope surged in Toven's chest. Perhaps he could compel Igor after all. "Tell me where you came from," he commanded in Russian.

"No," Igor answered in English, his eyes focusing on Toven with a knowing look.

"Fuck," Max murmured under his breath.

"Put him back under," Toven said, but Aiden was already injecting the liquid bag with the sedative.

Igor made a feeble tug on the chains binding him, and his eyes closed.

They waited a few moments longer until Merlin confirmed that he was out.

"Now, the other test, please," Toven told Merlin.

The doctor pulled a stopwatch from his pocket and handed it to Max. "Start the timer the moment I make the cut, please."

Nodding, Max took the watch. “Ready when you are, doc.”

Merlin pulled a small box from his pocket and opened it to reveal a surgical knife that was no bigger than a pair of nail clippers.

Igor’s wrists were shackled to the chains around his torso, but Merlin didn’t make a fuss about having to bend close to the prisoner. “On my mark.” He positioned the knife on Igor’s palm. “Now!”

Blood welled where Merlin had made the cut, but the cut itself disappeared in three and a half seconds.

Merlin lifted his head and looked at Toven. “That’s way too fast for a Kra-ell, or even an immortal. He’s definitely part god.”

Toven nodded. “He doesn’t look like a god, but there is no other explanation for his rapid healing.”

“How fast do you heal?” Aiden asked.

“A little faster than that, but not by much.” Toven let out a breath. “Make arrangements to transfer the prisoners to the ship. Igor goes into the brig. The other three can be put in a cabin like the rest of Igor’s pod-mates. Just not together with them. I don’t want anyone filling them in on what happened.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” Max saluted. “I’ll gladly get out of this hotel and spend the rest of the night in the comfort of my old cabin.” He sighed. “I’m going to miss the *Aurora*. She’s a classy lady and a comfortable lay.”

Toven shook his head. “You’re something, Max.”

“Yeah, I know.” The Guardian smirked. “I’m one of a kind.”

“Thank the Fates for that,” Aiden murmured under his breath.

KIAN

“*I* can’t compel Igor.” Toven delivered the news Kian didn’t want to hear.

“I was afraid of that.” Kian got up, walked over to the bar, and poured himself a shot of whiskey.

“I’m going to try again tomorrow with Mia,” Toven said. “But if that doesn’t work, we are out of options. One day will not be enough to break him the old-fashioned way.”

“Take Arwel with you when you go to see him with Mia. I’m curious what he’ll make of the guy.”

“I will.” Toven sighed. “I’m afraid that Igor’s immunity to my compulsion is not the only bad news.”

Kian stopped his pacing. “Don’t tell me that he can compel you.”

“I had the earpieces in, so I don’t know that he can, but I doubt it. It’s common for compellers to be immune to compulsion by others.”

“Annani can override most. I thought that being a god, you would also have the ability.”

“We can still have her try to compel Igor remotely. What’s the worst that could happen? If she can’t, at least we tried.”

“Talk to me again after you try to compel him with Mia enhancing your powers. If the two of you together fail as well, I’ll talk to my mother.”

The only reason he agreed to it was that Toven might do that anyway. The god didn't answer to Kian, and there was nothing stopping him from calling Annani and asking her to give it a try.

"Thank you. She would be peeved if you didn't."

Kian chuckled. "Yeah, and that's putting it mildly. So, what's the other bad news?"

"Igor definitely has godly genes in him. The cut healed in less than four seconds. That's how fast Orion and Geraldine heal, and I guess you and your siblings as well. The curious thing is that he doesn't look like a god. He looks fully Kra-ell. I talked with Kagra, and she said that he hunted and used animal blood like all the other purebloods, and she'd never seen him eating regular food. If he's half god, he should be able to tolerate grains and dairy and all the other good stuff."

"Maybe he can, but since he didn't want anyone to know that he's not really a pureblood, he hid it well. He's probably like Emmett, who can tolerate some nearly raw meat but needs to supplement it with blood." Kian groaned. "I really hope you'll be able to compel Igor to talk with Mia's help. I need to know what and who he is. He's such an enigma."

"I'm very curious myself," Toven said. "Before I called you, I was wracking my brain trying to come up with something that we could offer Jade in exchange for giving him a longer stay of execution. I'm not a proponent of torture, but starving him would have the same effect. The problem with that is the time it would take. He can last weeks if not months without food."

"Perhaps we can offer her the freedom to come and go as she pleases." Kian resumed his pacing. "I'm not really worried about her betraying our trust, and I'm willing to give her one of our special vehicles. After being imprisoned for so long, I bet that will appeal to her."

"That's a good idea, but I don't think it's going to be enough. She's really hankering to behead both Igor and Valstar. I did my best to convince her to let Valstar stand trial together with Igor's other pod members, and she even agreed,

but then she told me in front of him that no matter what the verdict was, she was going to execute him. So, what's the point of having him stand trial?"

"Time." Kian plopped down on the couch. "The more time passes and the more freedom Jade has, the less angry she will be, and perhaps her need for revenge will subside. Not that I care either way. If the bastard deserves to die, then he dies."

"That's the thing," Toven said. "I'm not sure that he does. He was a tool in Igor's hands. If I compelled you to kill Anandur or Brundar, you would have no choice but to do it even though it would break you. Under those circumstances, would Edna find you guilty of murder?"

"She wouldn't, but I might want her to. The problem is that we don't know whether Valstar would have acted differently without the compulsion."

"We don't. But the possibility casts a shadow of doubt, and no judge would agree to a death penalty unless a premeditated murder has been proven beyond a reasonable doubt."

JADE

Jade snuggled closer to Phinas.

He was so warm, and she wasn't thinking just about the heat his big body was emitting. His soul was warm, and it thawed the ice in hers.

Being with him brought to the surface soft feelings she'd suppressed for so long that it was like discovering for the first time that she could feel anything other than duty, loyalty, hatred, and rage.

The thing was, Igor wasn't the only one to blame for her emotional handicap. The Kra-ell way didn't allow for soft feelings like love and kindness, and those had been beaten out of her at such a young age that she'd forgotten ever experiencing them. But she had. She'd loved her mother, and she'd loved her father and the other males in her mother's tribe who had been as much her fathers as the one who'd contributed his genetic material to hers.

Except, love and kindness had been beaten out of them as well, and they hadn't returned her love, not overtly anyway. There had been small acts of kindness that she still remembered to this day, although sometimes she wasn't sure whether she'd lived them or dreamt them.

From time to time, she even considered that none of her memories were real and that they had been implanted in her mind during the long voyage. Perhaps she wasn't who she thought she was, and neither were the others.

It was a terrifying thought, and usually, she tried to get rid of it as soon as it flitted through her mind, but it had a nasty habit of coming back when her mental shields were down.

“Good morning, my iron heart.” Phinas planted a soft kiss on her forehead while his hand smoothed down her back and cupped her bottom. “What are you thinking about?”

“That I don’t want to get up.” She put her hand on his chest. “And that you are like my own personal furnace. How come you are so much warmer than me?”

“I’m bigger.” He pulled her closer, his impressive erection pressing against her belly.

She chuckled. “Indeed.” Trailing her hand down his muscular chest, she gripped that throbbing, velvety length and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Is this for me?”

“Always.” He was on top of her in an instant, cupping her cheeks in his large hands and looking at her with so much warmth in his eyes that the ice covering her heart melted a little further. “You are so beautiful. I could look at your face for days and not get tired of looking.”

She smiled and tilted her head up to catch his lips in a quick kiss. “Hold that thought. I need to use the bathroom and shower, and so do you.”

They’d played so many times last night that she didn’t want to think about what was covering them and the state of the bedding. They probably should change the sheets.

For a brief moment, Phinas looked disappointed, but then mischief sparked in his eyes. “We can play in the shower or the closet if you prefer a darker, drier place.”

Jade liked to see Phinas playful like that. Despite his sunshiny disposition, he harbored darkness deep inside of him, and he’d allowed her glimpses of it, but she had a feeling that it was just the tip of the iceberg.

Perhaps that was why they were such kindred souls. They had both gone through hell and survived to find solace in each other’s arms.

Phinas called it love, and maybe it was time she called what was in her heart by its proper name, but her past and what had been drilled into her head still had too strong of a hold over her. Maybe she needed to practice saying that damn word in front of the mirror while no one was there to hear her.

Wrapping her arms around Phinas's broad back, she palmed his buttocks and squeezed hard. "We could try both and see which one we like better."

Phinas grinned. "I like the way you think, my sexy mate."

Rolling her eyes, Jade pushed on his chest. "Is that word going to be in every other sentence from now on?"

"Which one? Sexy or mate?"

"You know which one." She gave him a stronger push, forcing him to let her go. "I'm going to use the toilet." She got out of bed and headed toward the bathroom. "If you need to use it too, go to the other bedroom."

"Always so pragmatic, my iron-hearted mate." Phinas swung his legs over the side of the bed and got up.

She stopped with her hand on the door handle. "If you say mate one more time today, I'm going to punch you."

PHINAS

Stifling a laugh, Phinas followed Jade's magnificent ass to the bathroom. "If the moratorium on the word mate is just for today, I can abide by your wishes, my iron-hearted beauty. But I can't make any promises about tomorrow."

She turned around and put her hands on her hips, looking formidable even in the nude. "Tomorrow, you can say it two times, and only when we are alone."

His lips twitching, he arched a brow. "What about the day after? Can I say it three times?"

Jade's eyes traveled over his body, and when they reached his prominent erection, she licked her lips. "I can't think with you looking at me like that."

He gripped his shaft. "Are you referring to him or to me?"

"Him?" She arched a brow. "Does he have eyes?"

"He has one, and it's just for you."

Jade burst out laughing, and it was the most beautiful sound Phinas had ever heard, and given that he'd heard Annani laugh, that was saying something.

It wasn't a musical sound like the goddess's. It was throaty and coarse, but it was wholehearted, and it was the first time he'd heard Jade really laugh.

Unable to help himself, he closed the distance between them in one long step and plucked her into his arms. "I love you." He smashed his lips over hers.

Winding her long legs around his hips, she kissed him back.

When he put her down next to the toilet, she smiled a little shyly and made a circular motion with her hand. “I can’t do my business with you watching. Go to the other bathroom.”

She would get used to the familiarity, but they had the rest of their very long lives to work on it, and for now, he could accommodate her.

Turning his back, Phinas wagged his butt cheeks, hoping to get another laugh out of her, but he only got a sigh. Then again, it might have been a sigh of relief at finally emptying her bladder.

“I love your laugh.” He walked over to the vanity and reached for the toothbrush. “I want to hear it more often.”

She flushed the toilet and joined him at the other sink. “You are the only one who can make me laugh.” She pulled the other toothbrush from the cup and squeezed toothpaste over it.

It hadn’t been the first time Jade had slept in his cabin, and he’d gotten her a toothbrush from the supply room before leaving. He liked the mornings of them standing next to each other and brushing their teeth in the nude.

Jade finished brushing first and rinsed out her mouth. “I used to laugh back in the day, not a lot, but enough. I haven’t laughed this hard in a very long time.”

Phinas’s heart squeezed at the thought that she hadn’t laughed since her world came crashing down. Once they left the haven of his cabin, she would come face to face with the one responsible for her pain, and he doubted she would be in the mood for jokes after that.

Dropping his toothbrush in the cup, he turned to her and engulfed her in his arms. “I promise to make you laugh at least once a day.”

Amusement dancing in her dark eyes, she cupped his cheek. “I’ll make you a deal. Every time you make me laugh, you can say the forbidden word one more time that day.”

“Which word?” He pretended ignorance. “Mate?”

Affecting an angry expression, she playfully punched his chest. “Yeah, that one. You’ve reached your quota for today, and I told you that I’d punch you if you said it again.”

“Yeah, but I made you laugh.”

“True.” She patted the spot she punched. “I take it back.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. Now you have to pay.” He lifted her and carried her over to the shower.

“Start the water while I take care of my bladder.”

“Is that how I’m going to pay for punching you?”

“Not even close.” He flushed the toilet and sauntered over to the sink to wash his hands.

Jade got the water running and stood under the spray. With her tiny waist, enormous eyes, and her long wet hair forming a black curtain over her silky skin, she looked like a nymph, otherworldly and magical.

Getting under the spray with her, he cupped the back of her head and kissed the tip of her tiny nose. “I’ll take your real name as payment. The Kra-ell name you were given by your mother. Or are the fathers in charge of that?”

“No, it was my mother, and she gave me a very unbecoming name for a Kra-ell girl. I was teased mercilessly for it and got into more fights than I care to remember.”

“Wasn’t she happy about giving birth to you? I thought that girls were highly prized.”

“They were, and that’s why my mother called me precious. My Kra-ell name is Je-kara, and I hate it passionately. I wanted a warrior name like Gi-bera or A-zuma.”

“I love it. Can I call you Je-kara?”

Her lips twisted in distaste. “Please, don’t.”

“Then I’ll have to use that other word that you don’t like.”

She smiled. “You know the rules for that one.”

“Then laugh for me.” He tickled her waist. “I need to say it.”

A small laugh left her lips. “That wasn’t fair.” She removed his hands from her waist. “The deal is that you need to do or say something that amuses me.”

Tilting his head back, he let the water pelt his face as he thought of another funny thing to say, but he felt too raw and too emotional to come up with anything amusing.

“I want to have ten children with you. Five girls and five boys.”

“That’s not funny. You can’t give me that even if you really want to have that many kids.”

He’d said it as a poorly conceived joke, but she sounded as if she really wanted that.

Sitting on the bench, he pulled her into his lap. “Maybe I can. Your fertility is better than mine, and Merlin has a potion that is supposed to improve it.”

Jade smiled sadly. “You didn’t think it through, Phinas. Any children we have will not be immortal, only long-lived, and the same goes for me. I have less than nine hundred years left, give or take a couple of centuries, while you have eternity. Do you really want me as your mate?”

Talk about dissociation. The thought hadn’t occurred to him even once.

“The Fates chose for us to bond and mate, and they didn’t do it to be cruel. A truelove mate is rare and precious, and only a few are blessed with one. The immortals believe that the Fates reward those who have suffered greatly or sacrificed a lot for others with that once-in-a-lifetime boon. If that’s true, then I know no one more deserving of a truelove mate than you.”

Jade swallowed. “You suffered and sacrificed too.”

“I did, but what I went through pales in comparison to what you had to endure. My point is that the Fates will either find a way for us to be together forever or die together.”

“Don’t talk like that. You’re immortal. You must go on.”

He shrugged. “I’d rather have nine hundred blissful years with my true love mate, give or take a couple of centuries, than spend eternity alone.”

JADE

“Nervous?” Phinas took Jade’s hand.

She yanked it out of his grasp. “I’m not nervous. I’m angry that I have to wait. I want to be done with it.”

They weren’t alone, and their entourage included two purebloods in addition to Toven, Mia, Yamanu, Arwel, Merlin, and two Guardians whose names she didn’t know.

Jade didn’t mind the immortals seeing her holding hands with Phinas, but she didn’t want to give the purebloods any more fuel for gossip.

By now, everyone probably knew that she and Phinas were a thing, but she hoped her people assumed that she was doing what she’d done with Igor, which was to collect information to help their cause and get more concessions from their new allies.

It might have been true in the beginning, but even then she’d felt a connection with Phinas that she hadn’t felt with any male before him.

And now... well, now she was still trying to wrap her head around them being destined for each other.

Truelove mates.

A gift from the Mother of all Life, or the Fates, to compensate her for what she’d been through.

Except, as much as Jade appreciated Phinas and the new life he offered her, he could never replace her sons, their fathers, or the other males Igor had murdered.

One just did not equate to the other.

Perhaps others could be satisfied replacing the family they'd lost with a new one, but she couldn't understand how anyone could even think like that.

She would always remember those she'd lost, and she would mourn them to the day she died and then join them in the fields of the brave.

Regrettably, there were only two options for a Kra-ell's afterlife, and the valley of the shamed was not good enough for Igor, or rather not bad enough. His rotten soul should spend eternity in the deepest recesses of the humans' hell, forever tortured by fire and brimstone.

As their group stepped out of the elevator on the clinic's level, Yamanu led them to a massive steel door that she'd seen before but assumed led to a bank vault or maybe more cold storage.

Yamanu typed a code into the keypad, and when a click sounded, indicating that the lock was released, he turned the big wheel in the center of the door and yanked it open.

"It's a watertight door," he explained. "In case of a hull breach, it locks automatically. For some reason, the brig and the morgue are located behind it."

"Convenient," Phinas said.

Jade hoped he wasn't too upset about her refusing to let him hold her hand.

It was true that they'd reached a new stage in their relationship, but she was still uncomfortable about displays of physical affection in public.

Hell, she was uncomfortable about any displays of affection, physical or otherwise. She was a tough warrior and a strong leader. She couldn't afford to appear soft.

"After you." Yamanu motioned for Toven and Mia to enter first.

Jade stopped next to the Guardian. "Perhaps the rest of us should wait outside while they conduct their test? I don't want

Igor to get the impression that he's so important." She looked behind her at the two young Kra-ell purebloods. "They shouldn't be anywhere near him because they don't have earpieces."

"They are going to stay outside here," Yamanu agreed. "That's the only way in or out, and I want them guarding the entrance in case one of yours decides to break Igor free."

Since the brig was secure, with the strength of the bars having been tested by Pavel, she'd wondered why Yamanu had insisted on the purebloods accompanying them.

It hadn't occurred to her that any of her people could be that stupid, but Yamanu was right not to take the risk. Igor might have left a deep-seated compulsion in some of those who were loyal to him with instructions about what to do if he ever got captured.

The guy was smart, and he didn't leave things to chance.

Toven and Mia waited for them outside the brig's outer door, and as the rest of them caught up, Yamanu didn't open it right away.

"Please check your earpieces one more time before entering."

"Is he awake?" Mia asked.

Merlin nodded. "We put him in there while still sedated, but he's had all night and morning to shake off the effects."

Igor was probably going mad with thirst, but all that was available to him was water from the faucet in the bathroom, provided that the brig had a bathroom. It had been days since he'd had blood, and water wouldn't satisfy his thirst.

Perhaps the promise of a last meal would be enough to make him talk in case Mia's enhancing powers wouldn't bolster Toven's compulsion ability enough to compel him.

TOVEN

*A*s everyone checked their earpieces, Jade leaned toward Merlin. “I wish you’d taken out Igor’s vocal cords.”

“It wouldn’t have worked. He would have regrown new ones overnight.”

She frowned. “That’s impossible.”

They hadn’t told her about the experiment Merlin had done last night. Toven had decided that it could wait until after he and Mia had given compelling Igor a try. His reasoning had been that if it worked, Jade would be less anxious learning about Igor’s enhanced genetics, and if it didn’t, she would probably guess that Igor was not a pureblooded Kra-ell.

After all, they had speculated on the subject before, so it shouldn’t come as a big surprise. But it seemed like she was going to learn about it sooner rather than later.

“Unfortunately, it is not.” Toven checked the fit of Mia’s earpieces. “As we’ve suspected, Igor must be part god. He heals incredibly fast.”

“How do you know that?”

“Last night, before we brought him here, Merlin tested his healing speed. Igor heals almost as fast as I do.”

Curiously, Igor hadn’t required a larger dose of sedatives than the other Kra-ell. Toven wondered if a god would have needed a bigger dose to be sedated than a pureblood or an immortal, but he had no wish to experiment on himself, so it would remain a mystery.

Jade lifted her hand to get his attention. “Does that change anything?”

“In what way?” Yamanu asked.

“In any way. Do I still get to behead Igor even though he’s part god?”

Toven nodded. “He’s yours to do with as you please. I just hope that you can summon a little more patience and allow us enough time to get information out of him.”

Her eyes flashed red. “You have twenty-four hours. Make them count.”

Stubborn female.

Toven couldn’t really blame her. If someone had murdered his children, he would have torn them apart with his bare fangs. Looking at it from that perspective, Jade was being more than reasonable.

“Is everyone ready?” Yamanu looked at each of them to confirm before inputting the code into the keypad.

“Phinas, you are with me.” He pulled out his dart gun and motioned for the male to take his out as well.

Regrettably, the ship hadn’t been equipped with any surveillance cameras yet, and if Igor somehow managed to break through the bars of the prison cell and made it to the office or reception area, or whatever the space was called, they wouldn’t know that without checking in person.

Phinas pulled out a handgun and aimed it at the door. “If he heals so fast, I’d rather put a bullet in him.”

Jade patted her hip as if looking for her sword and murmured something unintelligible under her breath.

“Arwel.” Yamanu motioned to the Guardian. “You know your part.”

“Of course.”

As Yamanu pushed the door open, Phinas walked in with his gun pointing the way.

“All clear,” he said from the inside before walking out into the hallway. “The butcher is behind bars.”

Yamanu glanced at Arwel. “Anything?”

The Guardian shook his head. “Absolutely nothing. It’s like no one is there.”

Jade huffed. “He’s a sociopath. What did you expect?”

“Fear,” Arwel said. “Even sociopaths feel that.” He looked at Toven. “He either doesn’t feel fear or knows how to block his body from emitting emotions.”

“I’ll take it under consideration.”

Yamanu motioned for Toven to go in. “Do your thing. We will wait outside until you need us, but I want the door to remain slightly open for Arwel.”

“Thank you.” Toven took a deep breath, walked into the room, and left the door ajar.

The prisoner was behind the iron bars, his long body sprawled on the cot they had laid him on when they’d brought him in. His arms were crossed over his chest and his feet at the ankles, and he didn’t seem perturbed by his visitors.

“Hello, Igor.” Toven pulled out a chair and sat facing the bars, far enough from them so Igor couldn’t reach for him.

“Release me,” Igor said in perfect English.

For a moment, Toven was startled by how American he sounded, but then he remembered that the earpieces translated what was being said, and the machine voice was programmed to sound like a native Californian.

“Your compulsion is not going to work on me.”

That got Igor’s attention. Lifting his head, he took a look at his visitor, and his eyes widened for a brief moment before going back to their blank expression.

A string of words followed.

Toven recognized it as the gods’ language, or some dialect that was related to it, but he couldn’t understand a single word.

He lifted a hand to stop him. “I don’t understand what you are trying to say.”

“Are you trying to pass for a human?”

Toven smiled. “And succeeding.”

“Good for you. Were you sent to retrieve me?”

Perhaps Igor’s command of English wasn’t as good, and he’d used the wrong words.

“Retrieve you from where?” Toven asked in Russian.

Igor tilted his head. “You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?”

“No. I don’t. But I will find out in a moment.”

Mia was right outside the room, which should be enough to give him the boost he needed, but he wasn’t taking any shortcuts.

Rising to his feet, he turned around, walked to the door, and opened it all the way. “Come on, my love. Let’s do this together.”

Mia wheeled her chair in but stopped as soon as she crossed the threshold. “It should be fine from here, right?”

“Yes.” He took her hand.

“What is that?” Igor rose to his feet and approached the bars. “Who’s the female?”

“I’m the one asking the questions.” Toven focused his compulsion and turned it into a sharp spear. “Who was supposed to retrieve you?”

“Your relatives.” Igor went back to his cot and sat down. “If you’re trying to compel me, you are wasting your time. I’m immune.”

JADE

Jade had heard Igor loud and clear.

“I guess there is no point in waiting twenty-four hours. I should have brought my sword with me and ended it right now.” She looked at Arwel. “Anything?”

He shook his head. “He’s a vault.”

“Would it help if you go inside?”

“No. This is close enough.”

She nodded. “Well, you tried.” She turned around and strode into the room with Phinas and Yamanu on her heel.

“Jade.” Igor smiled creepily.

What the hell? What was he smiling about? She couldn’t remember him ever smiling at her.

“You shouldn’t be so happy to see me,” she said in English. “I’m here to end your miserable existence.”

“I don’t think so,” he said in Kra-ell. “Tell the others to leave.”

It was her turn to smile. “You can’t compel me either.” She pushed away the strand of hair covering her earpiece. “Who would have thought that a simple device like that could nullify your power. You’re now at my mercy, and I have none to give. Prepare to die.”

“Not so fast.” He rose to his feet and approached the bars. “I have something you want,” he said in Kra-ell. “Something you are desperate to find out. But I’m only going to give you

the information you seek if you vow to the Mother that you will keep me alive.”

The male was delusional. “There is nothing you can give me that is worth that to me. I’ve dreamt for twenty-three years about the day I’d avenge my sons, their fathers, and all the other males of my tribe, and that day is today.” She tilted her head toward Toven. “They asked me to give them time to interrogate you, but since they can’t compel you to talk, I see no reason to deny myself the pleasure of killing you right now.”

His eyes darted to her hip, where her sword should have been. Toven had explicitly asked her to leave it behind, and Jade regretted agreeing to his request.

She’d accommodated him enough already.

“Then you are never going to find the royal twins,” he said in Kra-ell.

Her breath caught in her throat. She’d never asked him about the twins explicitly, only in a roundabout way. How did he know that she knew they’d been on the ship? How did he know that she would do anything to find them?

“Do you want me to switch to English so they will understand?” He smiled his creepy smile again. “I can tell the god about them, and you know what he will do. He will have to kill them to protect his people.”

“He wouldn’t,” she said in Kra-ell. “Unlike you, he’s a decent person.”

Igor shrugged. “Everyone thinks that they are doing the best they can and that their cause is right. Your new friend the god will have to eliminate the threat to his people.”

He was bluffing, Jade knew that, but she also knew that she had to keep the twins safe, which meant not letting the immortals find out about them.

The thing was, she didn’t understand why her gut was telling her to hide that information from them.

So far, Toven and his people had done everything they had promised. They had freed her and her people, captured Igor, and even invited her and her people to join their community. Decency required that she tell them about the twins, but she'd given a life-debt vow to protect the queen and her family, and telling anyone about the twins might cost them their lives. She had no doubt that the queen had a good reason to keep them veiled their entire lives and then smuggle them out on the settlers' ship.

“Why are they a threat to anyone? They are priests, not warriors. And how do you know they were on the ship? I don't even know that for sure.”

“I'm not going to tell you anything more until the others leave the room and we are alone.”

“They don't understand Kra-ell.”

“Those are my terms. You can kill me right now and wonder about the twins' fate until the day you die. Or you can ask your companions to leave the room.”

Letting out a breath, she turned to face the others. “I need you to leave. He's willing to share some information with me but only if we are alone.”

“It's a trick,” Phinas said. “I'm not leaving you alone with him.”

She gave him a reassuring smile. “He can't bend bars with his compulsion power, and he can't use it against me as long as I have the earpieces. You can wait for me out in the hallway.”

Phinas shook his head. “Whatever he promised you, it's not worth the risk.”

She threw her hands in the air. “What risk? He's not omnipotent. If he were, he wouldn't be behind bars.”

“Jade is right.” Toven put his hand on Phinas's shoulder. “If she wants a few private minutes with him, it's her right.”

Phinas pulled his gun out of his waistband. “Do you know how to use it?”

She nodded.

“Let me show you anyway.” He removed the safety. “Just point it at his chest and shoot. It won’t kill him, but you’re more likely to hit the target when you’re aiming at a larger mass. It’s easy to miss the head.”

She chuckled. “I know how to handle firearms, and I happen to be a very good shot.”

“Of course, you are.” He put the handgun in her outstretched hand and leaned in to plant a quick kiss on her cheek. “Be careful.”

“Always.”

PHINAS

“*I* don’t like it.” Phinas leaned against the steel door. “There is no reason for him to want to speak with Jade alone when they can talk in Kra-ell, which none of us understand.”

“He was probably concerned about me,” Toven said. “I know only a little of the gods’ language, and the dialect he used was so different that I couldn’t understand a single word, but he can’t be sure of that. He probably thinks that I know both languages, and I’m bluffing.”

There was some logic to that, but not much. “What can he say to her that’s not meant for us to understand?”

“Maybe he wants to appeal to her on a personal level,” Mia said. “They have a daughter together, so he might use that for leverage.”

They all turned to Arwel, who shrugged. “There was a little something I felt when Jade walked in, but then it winked out. The Kra-ell don’t emit much to start with, and this guy must have been trained to control what he emits.”

Merlin jingled the various vials he carried in his pocket, which was annoying since Phinas was trying to listen to what was being said behind the closed door.

“Can you please stop making that noise?”

The doctor looked at him as if he didn’t know what Phinas was talking about, then looked down at his pocket as if he hadn’t noticed it before, and the noise stopped. “Sorry about that. I didn’t realize what my hand was doing. I was thinking about Igor and why he wanted Jade alone. He’s probably

pleading with her for his life and didn't want us to witness his humiliation."

"I don't think so." Toven leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "I think he's bargaining with her, and whatever he's offering her is not meant for our ears. This means that Jade is hiding something from us because she seemed anxious for us to leave."

Toven was right.

Most of the exchange between Igor and Jade had been in Kra-ell, so Phinas could only gauge her reactions to what Igor was saying by her tone of voice.

At first, she'd sounded annoyed and impatient, then angry and impatient, and then her tone had turned anxious.

"I also wonder what he meant about me coming to retrieve him," Toven asked. "Was he expecting the gods to come to get him after seven thousand years?"

Phinas put his ear to the door. He didn't understand what was being said, but as long as they were talking, he knew that Jade was okay.

Yamanu snorted. "Maybe he had an accomplice among the gods on Earth. What if someone didn't want the Kra-ell to arrive and hired Igor to sabotage the ship?"

"It's not such a far-fetched idea." Toven shifted his weight to his other leg. "The settlers' ship left the gods' home world shortly after the rebel gods were exiled to Earth. Well, shortly in immortal terms. It could have been a couple of centuries later. But back then, the gods could still communicate with their home, so it's possible that some sort of a conspiracy was hatched."

As Phinas's phone vibrated in his pocket, he pulled it out and groaned. "I have to take it." He looked at Yamanu. "Can you listen at the door for me?"

Yamanu nodded. "I got her back. Don't worry."

"Thanks." Phinas accepted the call. "Hello, boss. Is it urgent?"

“Not really. I just wanted to know what you found out about Igor. Can Toven compel him?”

“He’s immune.”

Kalugal sighed. “I was afraid of that. What’s next?”

Phinas walked to the end of the corridor. The god and the immortals could still hear him, but they might not hear Kalugal.

“Jade is inside, talking with him alone, and we suspect that he’s trying to bargain with her. By the looks of him, he’s confident that he has a good bargaining chip, but I doubt she’ll accept any offer he can make her.”

“Let me know as soon as you know. Now I’m even more curious to hear what he has to say.”

“I will.”

“Are you excited about your girl coming to live in the village with you?”

Phinas chuckled. “Never call her a girl to her face, and yes, I’m excited. Things are progressing well.”

“I’m glad. I’m even more glad that she decided to join you in the village. I knew that you would follow her wherever she went, and I hated the idea of losing you.”

“You wouldn’t have lost me. The only other option was Safe Haven, and it’s not that far away. Besides, you would have hardly missed me. You have Jacki, Darius, and Rufsur.”

“I like to keep those I care deeply about close by, and you are just as dear to me as Rufsur. I need both my devils with me.”

Something eased in Phinas’s chest, a hard place that he hadn’t been aware of softening. Ever since Kalugal had promoted him and Rufsur to be his second- and third-in-command, there had been an unofficial competition between them on who was closer to Kalugal, and who was officially his second. But even though Kalugal refused to name one or the other, it had always seemed to Phinas that Rufsur had been the favorite.

It was nice to hear that Kalugal considered them equally dear and useful.

“That’s good to know, boss.” He would have said more, but he had company. Or at least that was his excuse. What was he supposed to tell Kalugal? That it meant a lot to him?

Kalugal already knew that.

JADE

Jade sat down on the only chair in the room and put the handgun on her lap.

The chair was placed far enough from the bars, so there was no chance Igor could reach out and grab her, and the gun wasn't really necessary. If she held it pointed at him, it would look as if she was scared of him, and she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

It was his turn to be afraid of her, and she would revel in every moment of it.

Except, the scumbag didn't look scared at all. Sitting on his cot with his thighs spread as if he owned the place, he seemed as confident and as calm and collected as ever.

When he just stared at her in silence, she asked, "What do you know about the twins?"

"First, tell me if you are under the god's compulsion."

"He's not like you. He freed us from your compulsion and set us free."

"In exchange for what?"

"Eliminating the threat you represented."

"I was no threat to them. I didn't know that any gods were still on Earth. I couldn't find any, and believe me, I looked. They must be very good at hiding."

"They are."

"Are they all still here?"

“No more questions, Igor. The twins. Where are they?”

“I want your vow first. The life-debt vow.” He stared her in the eyes the same way he used to do when she was still under his control. “I want you to spend your life protecting mine.”

“Not going to happen. Not even for the twins.”

He tilted his head. “Really? I thought that a traditionalist like you would never break her vow. But evidently, you are not as righteous as you like everyone to believe.”

Her blood chilled.

No one on the settler ship had known each other. They had been selected by a lottery that every young, childless Kra-ell had to participate in.

Neither Igor nor anyone else knew what she had done before joining the expedition. She’d told Kagra some things over the years, though, and it was possible that Igor had compelled her second to tell him what she knew and then compelled her to keep it from Jade.

Except, Toven had released Kagra from Igor’s compulsion, and she would have told her that her secrets had been compromised.

Unless Kagra felt guilty and was too embarrassed to admit that.

She’d never told Kagra about the vow, but she’d told her about serving in the queen’s guard, and everyone who’d served in it had to vow to protect the queen and her family.

“What vow?” She arched a brow, hoping to look nonchalant. “I didn’t give you any vow.”

“You owe the queen a life-debt vow, and that includes her children. You are obligated to do everything in your power to protect them. How are you going to do that if you don’t know where they are?”

“And you do?”

“I know how to find them.”

“If you did, you would have found them already and killed them. They are probably dead anyway, and so are the queen and her consorts. My life debt is null. Besides, I didn’t even know that they were on the ship, I only suspected it, and you have somehow found out about it, and you’re trying to trick me into sparing your life.”

“I admit that I don’t know whether they are alive or dead, but they might be still alive and in stasis, but that could change at any moment. They could be found by humans, their pod might malfunction, and if it landed in the ocean, which it probably would, the hull might get breached, and they would drown. If you do nothing to find them, you’ll be breaking your vow, and after a lifetime of adherence to the Mother’s ways, you will end up in the valley of the shamed.” He tilted his head. “Wouldn’t that be a shame?”

Damn him all to hell.

The doubt he’d put in her mind was enough to stay her hand. If she killed him, she would eliminate the only potential link she had to the twins, and if they died as a result, she would definitely find herself in the valley of the shamed when the time came to shed her mortal existence.

She needed advice, but she couldn’t tell Phinas and the others about the twins.

Tilting her head back, she looked at the ceiling and offered a prayer to the Mother, asking for guidance.

“Give me the vow, Jade. You know that you have to do it, so why prolong the charade?”

“If you could find them, you would have done so already. You’re just trying to manipulate me into sparing your life.”

“Well, we have a conundrum. I’m not going to tell you how to find them until you vow a life debt to me, and you don’t want to give me the vow before I can prove I know how to find them. But I’ve already proven that I can. How do you think I found you and the others?”

“We had trackers implanted in us without our knowledge.”

He nodded. "I figured that you found out about them. I also figured out that the gods had somehow found the compound and taken everyone by force. I thought that I would need to save my people from slavery. It never occurred to me that you went willingly."

"They freed us from slavery to you." Or so she hoped.

It was still possible that what awaited them in the village was not the promised utopia but forced labor and breeding. But that was unlikely.

Phinas loved her, and he would have warned her about it.

"If you say so." Igor leaned his back against the wall.

"What about the other pods? There are still sixty-two pods missing."

"They could be found the same way as the twins' pod, and I hold the key, literally."

She assumed that their theory about the trackers not transmitting when their hosts were in stasis was correct, but that still begged the question why Igor had waited for nearly a century to find her tribe and the others. If he had the key, as he claimed, he should have found them sooner. Also, assuming that the pods would magically activate the revival sequence after a century was illogical. All the other settlers were most likely dead.

"Your claim doesn't make sense. If you had the key all along, why did it take you so long to find us? And why should I believe that the other pods are still functioning and will one day spontaneously revive the people inside them from stasis?"

As he looked at her with those piercing eyes of his, she felt as if he was reaching into her mind to read her thoughts. But since Toven couldn't do that to pureblooded Kra-ell, it was unlikely that Igor could.

"You are a smart female, Jade. That's why I chose you as my prime. You're also strong of body and mind. It's a shame you didn't give me a son."

“The Mother gave you a daughter, which all males back home would have been grateful for and proud of. But you barely paid her any attention.”

No emotion crossed his eyes. “I wanted a son from you, but that’s irrelevant to our discussion. You wanted to know why it took me so long to find you and the others. The answer to this is simple. The ship was gone, and with it, all the technological marvels the gods equipped us with. I had to wait for human technology to catch up, so they could build receivers strong enough to identify the signals coming from the trackers. Also, not all the pods came out of stasis at the same time. Yours did right after the landing, but it has taken some of the others decades to come out of stasis. If you don’t believe me, talk with the other females. If they are no longer under my compulsion, they should be able to tell you when they woke up.”

It hadn’t occurred to her to ask that, but she would. “I assume the trackers were activated as soon as they got out of stasis.”

“That’s most likely, but since I didn’t have the proper devices to locate the signals, I can’t say that for sure.” He tilted his head in that annoying way of his. “I found all of you and none of those who haven’t come out of stasis yet, so I assume that they are still in their pods. The moment their pods activate their revival, their trackers will start transmitting, and I’m the only one who can find them.”

If Igor needed to wait for human technology to advance enough to build a device, then William could build a similar one. They had dozens of those trackers, so he should be able to crack their technology and build receivers for the signal they emitted. But she had to make sure that he could before killing Igor.

Jade rose to her feet. “I need to think about it. I still think that you are trying to trick me.”

“Take your time.” He pulled his legs onto the cot and lay down. “I need blood. Have someone deliver it to me.”

Jade snorted. “If I do, it will be for your last meal.” She pivoted on her heel and walked toward the door.

“I’ve told you more than enough,” Igor said. “I will not say anything more to you or your new friends until you give me your vow. I also expect to be properly fed and clothed.”

Not deigning to answer, Jade pulled the door open, stepped out into the corridor, and slammed the door closed behind her.

PHINAS

“*W*e need to talk,” Jade said as the door slammed shut behind her.

That didn’t sound good, especially since Phinas didn’t know whether she meant all of them or just him.

“What did he say?” Toven asked.

“Let’s go to your war room and get the others on the line.” She lifted her hand. “It’s not an emergency, and nothing is about to blow up, so stop looking so worried. It has to do with the missing pods and how to find them.”

Phinas let out a breath. “Thanks for clarifying. For a moment there, I thought that Igor had a bomb in his stomach and threatened to detonate it and blow up along with the ship.”

Yamanu chuckled. “It would have been just like him to do something like that.”

Jade handed Phinas his gun. “He’s way more sophisticated than that, and his plans usually don’t involve him going down with the ship, so to speak.”

“True.” Phinas fell in step with her. “Can you tell us more on the way?”

She shook her head. “I need to organize my thoughts, and I don’t want Pavel and Aleksei to hear what Igor said before we decide what to do about it.”

“Makes sense.”

Phinas stuck his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching for her hand.

Yamanu put in the code and opened the waterproofed door, and as they walked through, Pavel regarded Toven with a frown.

“That wasn’t a success, was it?”

“He’s immune,” Toven admitted.

Pavel cast Jade a worried glance. “Are you going to kill him?”

“Eventually.” She grimaced. “But not today. I promised Yamanu and Tom a stay of execution for twenty-four hours to interrogate him.”

She didn’t sound as sure as she’d sounded before, and Pavel either picked up on that or didn’t understand what a stay of execution meant. “What did Igor say to you?”

Jade stopped and looked at him. “I can’t tell you yet, but as soon as I have more information, I’ll share it with everybody.”

When they got to the war room, Jade strode to the kitchenette and opened the refrigerator. “Oh, good. There’s some vodka left.” She took out the bottle and poured a generous helping into a coffee mug. “Does anyone else want a shot?”

“It’s not even nine in the morning,” Toven said. “I would prefer some coffee.”

Jade shrugged and walked over to the couch with the mug in hand.

“I’ll make it,” Phinas volunteered.

He was agitated, and having something to do would calm his nerves.

He filled the water in the coffeemaker tank and popped a pod into the slot. “Anyone else want coffee?”

“I do,” Mia said.

Merlin raised his hand. “So do I.”

Phinas turned to Yamanu. “What about you?”

“I’ll pass. I want to know what Igor said before I contact Kian.”

Jade put her mug on the coffee table. “He claims to know how to find the other pods the moment they activate and rouse their occupants from stasis. Our suspicions about the trackers were correct in that regard. He also said that he couldn’t do that until human technology got advanced enough for him to build a receiver. I didn’t ask whether he had it built or whether any store-bought device would do, but I figured that your William would be able to either build a device like that or obtain it, and then I will have no reason to keep Igor alive. But first, I need you to contact your home base and ask William if that’s possible.”

“So that’s the bargain he offered you?” Toven asked. “His life in exchange for finding the other pods if and when they activate?”

Jade nodded. “More or less. We are talking about twelve hundred and forty people. If they wake up and get caught by humans, it will endanger all of us. We need to get to them as soon as they get out of stasis, and if possible, before that. It’s a miracle that none were discovered yet.”

“Perhaps some of them were,” Mia said. “All those rumors about the government hiding aliens in Area 51 might be true.” She chuckled. “Sometimes I think that the conspiracy theories are just the tip of the iceberg and that if we knew what was really going on, we would have laughed at them not because they were untrue but because they were so trivial compared to the real thing.” She waved a hand at Toven. “I present to you exhibit number one.” She smiled at Jade. “And exhibit number two. Two aliens having drinks on a ship owned by a clan of immortals. If anyone had written about that, it would have been called fiction.”

Phinas was still stuck on the number Jade had thrown. Why had no one asked her how many people had been on the ship before?

It seemed like such an obvious question to ask.

“How many pods were on the ship?” Yamanu asked.

“Seventy.” As Jade took a sip from her vodka, she glanced at Phinas. “You look surprised. Didn’t I tell you that before?”

“You didn’t.” He handed Mia a mug filled with coffee and another to Toven. “How do you know that was the number of pods? Did you count them, or were you told?”

“We were told that there were fourteen hundred settlers on the ship, and since each pod could only hold twenty, that makes seventy pods.” She smiled at Toven. “The gods liked to group things in multiples of seven or six. I never understood why.”

“I’ve noticed that,” he said. “Seven days in a week, twelve months, and numerous other examples. But back to the ship, that’s actually fewer people than I thought were on it, but it’s a good enough number to create a viable colony. It has just enough genetic variety.”

JADE

*I*t was working.

No one was questioning her motives. They'd accepted her desire to find the rest of her people as perfectly natural, and they understood that it was vital to find the pods before humans discovered them.

The royal twins could remain her secret, and once Igor was dead, she and Kagra would be the only ones who knew about them.

If Igor told anyone it would be Valstar, and his days were numbered as well. She'd been against letting him stand trial and leaving it in the hands of the immortals' judge, but now she needed Toven and Kian's help more than ever, and if that made them more positively disposed to her, then Valstar's demise could wait a little longer.

Hopefully, she wouldn't have to keep Igor alive as well. Now that she was free of his compulsion and no longer terrified of what he might do to her people if she misbehaved, she allowed herself to feel the full extent of her hatred for him, and every moment that he still lived was a moment too long for her to tolerate.

"I'm calling Kian first." Yamanu looked at her. "He can put William on a three-way call with us and maybe get Turner on a four-way. I would like to run it by him as well."

She nodded. "Whatever works for you. I just need to get the answer before I go back to talk to that snake. It will make me really happy to see his face when I tell him that he can take

what he knows to the grave because I don't need it. I can find my people without him."

"That might not be the only thing he knows," Toven said. "He asked me if I came to retrieve him. Aren't you intrigued by that question?"

She'd heard Igor ask it, but she'd forgotten about it. "Maybe he meant to ask whether you were sent to capture him. That makes more sense."

"I don't think Igor has a problem with expressing himself. He thought that I was sent to get him, and when I asked him by whom, he said my relatives. I assume he meant the gods. Why would the gods want to retrieve him? Was he working for them? I need answers for that."

Jade grimaced. "He's not going to tell you or me anything else unless I vow a life debt to him."

Phinas's eyes started glowing. "Over my dead body. You are not vowing anything to him."

"If William can't find the other trackers when they come online, I might have no choice. My vengeance is not worth the lives of over twelve hundred people."

There was no guarantee that any of them were still alive, and if they got revived, they might be able to evade detection like she and her pod members had done, as well as the other pods that had gotten activated.

Except, today's world wasn't the same one she'd woken up to over a century ago, and it wasn't as easy to go unnoticed and disappear nowadays. A group of confused newly-awakened settlers was very likely to be found, reported, and captured.

"A life debt means that you'll have to protect the life of the maggot who murdered your family." Phinas pushed to his feet and started pacing. "We can solve it. Yamanu can lock you up in one of the safes, and if you try to fight him, Merlin can put you to sleep. And while you are out, I'll kill Igor for you. I know it's not as satisfying as killing him yourself, but at least you won't be bound to him for life."

She smiled. “You know that I can’t agree to that, right? It would mean breaking my vow. Let’s just hope that I don’t need to give it.”

He stopped pacing and crouched in front of her. “I’m not asking your permission. If you give him your vow in exchange for information, I will get rid of him. It’s a promise whether you like it or not.”

Reaching with her hand, she cupped his cheek. “There is one problem with your solution. A life debt also means that I will have to avenge his death.”

Phinas narrowed his eyes at her. “I’m really trying to be tolerant and respectful of your religion, but this is absurd. You need to re-evaluate your beliefs.”

Jade had been doing that for a while, but she didn’t appreciate him telling her what to do.

“This is not the time for this, Phinas. We can continue this discussion after we talk with William.”

KIAN

*A*s Kian listened to Jade recounting her meeting with Igor and the deal he'd offered her, his heart went out to her.

She'd been placed in an impossible situation, and neither outcome would allow her to finally have peace. If she killed Igor, she would have the revenge she'd craved for so long, but she would forfeit the slim chance of finding her people. If she capitulated and offered him a life-debt vow, she might be able to find her people when they woke up from stasis, but she wouldn't get to kill Igor.

At least not with her own two hands.

Kian was more than willing to do the deed for her, but that wouldn't be nearly as satisfying to her.

Igor might be bluffing to keep his head attached to his neck, but not about his ability to find the pods. He'd proven that he knew how to track them. But the bluff might be that some of them were still alive and in stasis. Igor might know that it wasn't true, but the way he'd phrased it was that he didn't.

When she was done, Toven took over to report his impression of Igor, and when he was done, Phinas volunteered to take care of the Igor problem for Jade.

She lifted her hand. "As I said, let's explore other possibilities first. If William can find them, the rest of this discussion is irrelevant."

"I agree." Kian transferred the video call from his phone to the big screen in front of his desk and added William to the

call.

“Hello, team.” William smiled. “Congratulations on capturing Igor and arriving safely in Greenland.”

“Thank you,” Toven said. “We have a question for you.” He proceeded to explain, with the others adding comments to clarify things.

“I see.” William pushed his glasses up his nose. “I will need to check the other trackers, but if they all have similar transmission signatures, it’s not going to be difficult to pinpoint where they are transmitting from, especially since the signal doesn’t weaken with distance. I will have to calibrate two receivers to that signal’s signature and triangulate the signal’s location. Because they could be coming from anywhere in the world, I will have one receiver scanning for the signal from the village and the other one from our European location.”

Kian had a very superficial understanding of what William was trying to explain, but he didn’t need to understand the technical details to decide on a course of action.

“The bottom line is that William needs to check a few more trackers to verify that they all emit a similar signal.” He trained his eyes on Jade. “Until he gets them, you can’t kill Igor, but you shouldn’t give him your vow either.”

“What about the two hybrids you have in the keep?” Toven asked. “The ones who were following Sofia. What kind of trackers did they have?”

“Simple ones,” William said. “The only alien tracker I have here is the one we removed from Sofia. But since you are bringing me many more, I can crack this one open and examine it more thoroughly.”

Jade leaned forward. “So what’s the plan? Do I stay in Greenland with Igor and a few Guardians until William gets the other trackers, or do we bring Igor with us to the village?”

“Good question.” Kian drummed his fingers on his desk. “I don’t like the idea of getting him anywhere near here, but it’s

going to be much more convenient to keep him contained and interrogate him in our dungeon in the keep.”

Yamanu nodded. “We are keeping him in the ship’s brig. There is nowhere in this town we can secure him.”

“Maybe he can stay on the ship,” Jade suggested. “I’ll have to stay as well to guard him, and if William says that he’s not needed, I’ll end him.” She smiled a chilling smile. “The morgue is right next to the brig.”

William cleared his throat to get their attention. “We need to consider the possibility that the trackers produce very different signals, which is entirely possible since they use alien technology that I’m not familiar with. If that’s the case, I won’t be able to identify them among all the other signals permeating the airways. The thing that makes it less likely is that Igor would have had to memorize the signal’s signature for fourteen hundred people and store it in his brain for the duration of the voyage and afterward. That’s impossible unless he’s a savant.” He looked at Toven. “Since he has some godly genetics in him, maybe he inherited incredible memory from his godly ancestors. Have you ever heard of a god with a talent for memorizing long numbers?”

The god shook his head. “I didn’t, but then I was only familiar with the talents of the small group of gods on Earth.”

Kian wondered if Shai could memorize hundreds of numbers and letters combinations. Eidetic memory didn’t mean that he actually remembered everything. Shai needed to form an image of what he wanted to remember or attach a story to it, and he doubted he could do that with meaningless numbers and letter sequences.

“Maybe Igor is an Odu in a Kra-ell disguise,” Yamanu said. “A computer would have no trouble remembering an infinite number of combinations.”

“He’s not,” Merlin said. “A tranquilizer dart wouldn’t have worked on him.” He chuckled. “Or a bullet or a grenade. The Odus are indestructible.”

A chill ran down Kian's spine. Yamanu had said it as a joke, but he was onto something.

If Igor was sent by the gods to sabotage the ship or maybe even harm the gods on Earth, he might have been implanted with a computer chip in his brain. If humans were on the cusp of developing such an interface, the gods must have known how to do that for eons.

JADE

*A*fter the call ended, Jade rose to her feet. “I’ll try to get Igor to tell me what he knows about the trackers.”

Phinas followed her up. “He’s not going to tell you anything without the vow, and you can’t give it to him.”

“I won’t.” She gave him a tight smile. “He’s not getting the life-debt vow from me. But I can trick him into telling me more without promising him anything.”

“How?” Toven asked.

“I’ll tell him that we don’t need him to find the pods. We have enough trackers to crack the technology and the knowhow to build the receiver. If what William suspects is true and the signals from the alien trackers don’t share the same frequency or whatever, Igor will boast about having memorized each of the sequences. “

“I’m coming with you,” Phinas said.

Jade had expected that, but she didn’t want either of them inside the brig when she talked with Igor. If he threatened to tell them about the twins when she refused to give him the life-debt vow, she would kill him. Doing it with her sword would have been more satisfying, but a bullet in the eye cavity would do the job as well, and she wouldn’t have to get close to him.

“I need to talk to him alone, but I will take your handgun before I go in.”

He nodded.

“I’ll accompany you as well.” Toven pushed to his feet. “We will wait for you outside the door like we did before.”

“So will I.” Yamanu put his mug on the kitchenette counter and joined them by the door.

“I don’t see why you all need to come, but you are welcome to accompany me.”

As soon as Igor issued the threat, she would put a bullet in his head, so he wouldn’t have time to shout the secret to them.

It felt bad to keep it from Toven and Kian, and even worse to keep it from Phinas, but the life-debt vow she’d sworn to the queen left her no choice. If there was even a slight chance that the clan would want to eliminate the twins, she couldn’t risk it.

The queen had been the most powerful Kra-ell compeller, and her children were rumored to be even stronger. The clan had mobilized a force and traveled across the globe to eliminate Igor, who they considered a threat after he’d discovered Safe Haven. Saving her people had been a secondary goal to that.

They couldn’t allow two powerful compellers to go free, and they wouldn’t offer them an alliance either. If that was an option, they would have offered it to Igor. She didn’t believe that Igor’s actions against his own people really mattered to Kian. He’d sent a force to liberate the compound and catch Igor because Igor was a threat to the clan.

“Good luck,” Mia said. “I’m going back to our cabin.”

“I’ll take you,” Merlin volunteered and then turned to Toven. “Unless my services are needed?”

“I think we can manage without you.” Toven leaned to kiss Mia’s cheek.

Phinas walked up to the doctor. “I’ll take the potions if you don’t mind. Just in case Igor does something unexpected.”

Jade wished she could use them, but Merlin’s potion would surely incapacitate her, while it might not work on Igor, who had godly genes in him.

The doctor reached into his pocket and pulled out three vials. “All you need to do is break them. Tossing them on the floor next to him should do it.”

“Thank you.” Phinas put them in the inner pocket of his jacket.

They parted ways with Mia and Merlin at the elevators and continued down to the bowels of the ship.

The two Guardians and two purebloods guarding the door greeted them with nods, but Pavel was the only one who approached them. “What’s going on? Are you going to kill him now?”

“Perhaps.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “Does it bother you?”

“No. You can kill Igor. Just don’t kill my father.”

“I won’t. I promised you that.” He cast a look at Yamanu. “What about your people?”

She’d already told him that, but maybe he needed to hear it from Yamanu, who was the highest authority on the ship, even higher than Toven, who was there in an advisory position.

“We don’t have a say in any of this. Your people will have to decide the future of Igor’s men.”

“But your judge will judge them. So you do have a say.”

What had gotten into Pavel?

Had he talked with his father? Or had he heard something that had upset him and made him anxious?

She would find out later, but now was not the time for that.

“The timing of your inquiry is inappropriate.” She removed her hand from his shoulder. “As I explained before, their judge will provide her special probing services and preside over the trial, but our people will determine their future.”

When he opened his mouth to respond, Jade lifted her hand. “Not now, Pavel.”

“Yes, mistress.” He dipped his head.

Chuckling, Phinas clapped him on the back. “Smart boy. That was the correct answer.”

PHINAS

*P*hinas handed Jade his gun. “When was the last time you practiced shooting?”

“Two decades ago.” She let it hang down by her side. “Don’t worry. I was an excellent shot, and that’s a skill not easily forgotten.”

As usual, Jade was fronting a tough attitude, and she was emitting next to no emotional scents, but Phinas knew her well enough by now to read the almost imperceptible signs of nervous anxiety.

She shouldn’t go in there in less than perfect form, and he knew how to get her there, but she wouldn’t appreciate him doing it with Toven and Yamanu present.

“You are not used to this one. Maybe we should go to the top deck so you can get a few practice shots before you go in there?”

“I’ll be fine.” She cast him a tight smile. “Thank you for the offer, though.” Her eyes tried to communicate more than her words, but he didn’t want to read too much into the softness he saw in them.

If they had no witnesses, he would have pulled her into his arms, kissed her hard, and called her his mate several times to rile her up.

Why couldn’t Toven and Yamanu get the hint and make themselves scarce for a few minutes?

He turned to Yamanu and blinked three times. “I hate to bother you, but Jade is thirsty, and all she’s had to drink was vodka. I don’t want her going in there in less-than-perfect form. Could you and Toven get us a couple of bottles of water?” He blinked again.

Grinning, Yamanu nodded. “Of course.” He clapped Toven on the back. “Let’s get some water bottles for the lads guarding the entrance to this corridor as well.”

Toven looked puzzled, but when Yamanu nudged his arm, he shrugged and followed.

Phinas waited until the door closed behind them and pulled Jade into his arms.

Sighing, she rested her cheek on his shoulder. “Thank you. I needed that.”

“I will always be there for you. When you go in there, remember that your people chose you willingly as their leader, while the maggot inside had to compel their compliance. He’s nothing compared to you, and when he tries to put you down and undermine your confidence, put him in his place.” He patted the gun she was holding by her side. “With this, if needed.”

“They didn’t choose me. There just wasn’t anyone else to take the lead, so I was the default.”

“It’s the same thing as choosing you. If they didn’t want you as their leader, they would have objected and selected someone else. You didn’t threaten anyone with retribution or negative consequences if they rejected your leadership, and you didn’t make false promises to coerce them into accepting you as their leader. You didn’t use compulsion to force them to answer to you, either. Your people just know that you are the best among them, and there is no one better to look after their interests.”

She lifted her head off his shoulder and cupped his cheek with the hand that wasn’t holding a loaded gun. “That was the best pep talk I’ve ever gotten. Thank you.” She leaned in and

kissed him softly, then leaned away and looked into his eyes. “I’ll tell you a secret if you vow not to tell anyone.”

Chuckling, he lifted a hand and put it over his chest. “I promise to take it to my grave.”

Jade frowned. “That’s too much. Just promise me you won’t tell anyone until I say it’s okay.”

He was about to tease her about how serious she was, but the sound of the door opening at the end of the corridor announced Toven and Yamanu’s return, and he realized that he was out of time. “I promise not to tell anyone until you allow it.”

She leaned closer and whispered, “I love you.”

JADE

After putting in her earpieces and checking the fit, Jade entered the ship's jail with a smile on her face and fluttering in her heart. Even Igor's despised visage couldn't spoil her good mood.

She'd finally done it.

She'd told Phinas that she loved him, and she was as sure of that as she was sure that the Earth was spinning.

The pep talk he'd given her had finally brought home what having a mate was all about, and it helped spring free the tight lock she'd had on her emotions.

She still had a lot to learn about being a mate, and perhaps Phinas didn't have it all figured out yet either, but the examples he'd given her so far were an excellent start.

"What are you so happy about?" Igor approached the bars and gripped them.

"I'm happy because I don't need you to find the other pods. We removed all the trackers from everyone, and we have plenty of those that were made by the gods. My new friends have the technological knowhow to take them apart, figure out how they work, and build receivers without your help." She leaned a little closer, but not close enough for him to grab her. "Prepare to die, Igor."

Regrettably, he didn't seem scared or even discouraged. The maggot looked smug.

“Even if they had a receiver built by the gods, it would be useless without the code. And I’m the only one who knows it. Not only that, the code changes every fifteen seconds, so even if you got it out of me somehow, it would be useless. You need me alive and awake to decipher where the signal is coming from.”

Jade frowned. “Do you have a computer chip installed in your brain?”

Perhaps Merlin could remove it after she killed Igor, and William could use it to decipher the code.

Igor laughed, a chilling sound she’d never heard him emit. “I can see the wheels in your head spinning, but I’m glad to disappoint you. I don’t have a computer chip in my brain. Part of my brain was designed to work like the computer chip you were thinking of, and you can’t cut it out and decipher it. As soon as my brain is dead, the deciphering ability dies with it. I’m not even consciously aware of it. As soon as I identify the right signal, my mind unravels the encryption.”

“How is that even possible?”

He shrugged. “The wonders of genetic manipulation.”

“You were made by the gods.”

“In a manner of speaking. But I think you get the picture now. If you want to find the twins and the rest of the settlers, you have to keep me alive and well, and you have to protect me from your new friends. I’ll have your vow now.”

Jade shook her head. “How do I know any of this is true? You could have fabricated the story to manipulate me into sparing your life.”

“It’s easy to prove. Have your new friends build a couple of receivers, send a couple of people with embedded trackers to undisclosed locations without recording the signal’s signature ahead of time, and try to identify the signals. Without the code, they will fail. But if I’m there, equipped with your vow and well-nourished and cared for, I’ll decode it for them, and they will be able to pinpoint the location.”

“There is one problem with your offer. You want me to make a vow to you before you prove your utility, and I won’t do that.”

“As long as you don’t kill me before the proof is obtained, I can wait. Perhaps I can sweeten the deal for you, but I need to think it through so I leave no loopholes. I want to guarantee my survival even after the pods are found.”

Jade turned the chair around, straddled it, and put the gun on top of her thigh. “Take your time. I have all day.”

“Let’s start with a simple vow that you shouldn’t have a problem with. I want to find out more about your new friends and what they want to do with me, but I need you to answer truthfully. Can you vow to do it?”

“I vow not to lie to you. But I don’t vow to tell you everything you want to know. If I don’t want to answer, I won’t.”

Igor regarded her with pride in his cold eyes. “So clever. I taught you well.”

“You ruined my life.”

“And yet, you emerged anew, better than you were before. Like a phoenix, you were forged in fire and reborn.”

Jade grimaced. “How poetic. What do you want to know?”

“It seems that they left my fate in your hands. Is that true?”

“It is.”

“If we reach an agreement and you vow not to kill me, will they want my death?”

“Probably. You are too dangerous to leave alive. On the other hand, the gods don’t believe in capital punishment, so they won’t execute you. They’ll probably entomb you, and since you are part god, you’ll go into stasis.”

She might have said too much, but the surprised look on his face was worth it, even if it lasted only a split second.

“How do you know that?”

“You heal as fast as a god, but you look Kra-ell, so I assume you are a hybrid. Your compulsion ability is also a giveaway. No Kra-ell is as strong a compeller.”

“That’s not true. The queen was a very powerful compeller.”

“As powerful as you?”

“I don’t know. I was never pitted against her. I also don’t think I can go into stasis without a pod. I don’t know which parts of my genetics are Kra-ell and which are god.”

It was impossible to tell whether Igor was being truthful or deceitful, and with the earpieces in, she didn’t even have the benefit of identifying slight fluctuations in his tone.

“You will have to negotiate something with them. All I can promise is not to kill you until you prove that what you told me about the signal is true, and if it is, I will vow to never take your life. But I will not give you a life-debt vow. I will not protect you.”

“That’s not good enough. You can vow that, and once you find the twins, you could send Kagra or someone else to kill me.”

That hadn’t occurred to her, but she wasn’t a devious bastard like Igor.

“I will add to my vow that I will not command anyone to kill you or even knowingly allow it. Besides, my new friends, as you call them, are very curious about you, and they want to interrogate you. You can strike a deal with them and have them protect you, just not from me. I was promised your and Valstar’s heads.”

“Did you kill Valstar?”

Jade smiled coldly. “Do you care?”

“No. I’m just curious. So, do we have a deal?”

Reluctantly, Jade nodded. “With one caveat. If you tell anyone aside from me about the twins, the vow is nullified.”

He tilted his head. “Vows don’t work like that. They are absolute, and they have no caveats.”

“Mine do.” She stared him in the eyes. “I’m not as traditional as you think. I’m adapting to my new environment.”

“I see that you don’t trust your new friends with that information.”

“I can’t. If I hadn’t given the queen a life-debt vow to protect her and her family, I might have shared the information with them.”

“I doubt that.”

He wasn’t wrong.

She would have protected the royal twins even without the vow. But she would have told Phinas about them and asked him to keep it a secret from his people.

“Think what you will. I don’t care.”

He nodded. “It doesn’t matter to me. You can include the caveat in the vow.”

Jade took a moment to think of the exact phrasing. “I vow not to kill you until you prove that you are the only one who can decipher the signals the gods’ trackers emit, and if you prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt, I vow not to kill you and not allow anyone under my control to kill you as long as you fulfill your part of the bargain and decipher every signal until we find all the pods. If you falter on your promise or try to negotiate for more things in exchange for locating the pods, the vow will be nullified. But if you fulfill your obligation and all the pods are found, my vow not to kill you by my hand, or that of anyone I control will extend indefinitely. However, all my vows to you will be nullified if anyone else finds out about the twins from you.”

“We have a deal.” He extended his hand through the bars.

She looked at it with disgust. “Do you think I’m stupid?”

He retracted his hand and smiled. “Not at all. I think you’re brilliant.”

If he thought his compliment meant anything to her, he was dead wrong. Just not dead, and that was one of the greatest disappointments of her life.

Perhaps William would come through and crack the code somehow, and she would still get to kill Igor, but she had a feeling that he had told her the truth. She also suspected that Toven and Kian could learn a lot from him, and if she cared to admit it, she was curious to find out who had sent him and why.

Rising to her feet, Jade turned around without another look at the monster behind bars and walked over to the door.

Phinas was waiting for her on the other side, and with him, a future better than she could have ever imagined. She would always carry the pain of what she'd lost and keep the memory of her sons and their fathers in her heart, but she was ready to embrace the next chapter of her life, and Jade had no doubt that it would be the best one yet.

COMING UP NEXT

The Children of the Gods Book 71

DARK HEALING

Blind Justice



**DARK HEALING Blind
Justice**

*To read the first 3 chapters **JOIN** the VIP club at **ITLUCAS.COM** —To find out what's included in your free membership, click **HERE** or flip to the last page.*

The sanctuary is Vanessa's life project. The monumental task of rehabilitating the traumatized victims of trafficking doesn't leave much time for personal life, let alone dating or finding her one and only.

When Kian asks her to help the Kra-ell, she's torn between her duty to the sanctuary and a group of emotionally wounded aliens who no other psychologist can treat.

She's the only immortal with the necessary training to get it done.

The Kra-ell culture and the purebloods' nearly androgynous alien looks shouldn't appeal to her, and yet, she finds one of them disturbingly attractive.

Is it the dangerous vibe he emits?

Does it speak to her on a subconscious level?

Or is it her need to put the broken pieces of him back together?

And why is he interested in her?

She cannot offer him a fight for dominance like a Kra-ell female would, but some strange and unfamiliar part of her wishes she could.

Also coming soon:

A NEW PERFECT MATCH!

The Thief Who Loved Me

A FULL-LENGTH STANDALONE 007

VIRTUAL FANTASY ROMANCE ADVENTURE



PERFECT MATCH! The Thief Who Loved Me

When Marian splurges on a Perfect Match Virtual adventure as a world infamous jewel thief, she expects high-wire fun with a hot partner who she will never have to see again in real life.

A virtual encounter seems like the perfect answer to Marcus's string of dating disasters. No strings attached, no drama, and definitely no love. As a die-hard James Bond fan, he chooses as his avatar a dashing MI6 operative, and to complement his adventure, a dangerously seductive partner.

Neither expects to find their forever Perfect Match.

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading the Children of the Gods.

As an independent author, I rely on your support to spread the word. So if you enjoyed the story, please share your experience with others, and if it isn't too much trouble, I would greatly appreciate a brief review on Amazon.

Love & happy reading,

Isabell

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS SERIES

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS ORIGINS

1: GODDESS'S CHOICE

When gods and immortals still ruled the ancient world, one young goddess risked everything for love.

2: GODDESS'S HOPE

Hungry for power and infatuated with the beautiful Areana, Navuh plots his father's demise. After all, by getting rid of the insane god he would be doing the world a favor. Except, when gods and immortals conspire against each other, humanity pays the price.

But things are not what they seem, and prophecies should not to be trusted...

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS

1: DARK STRANGER THE DREAM

Syssi's paranormal foresight lands her a job at Dr. Amanda Dokani's neuroscience lab, but it fails to predict the thrilling yet terrifying turn her life will take. Syssi has no clue that her boss is an immortal who'll drag her into a secret, millennia-old battle over humanity's future. Nor does she realize that the professor's imposing brother is the mysterious stranger who's been starring in her dreams.

Since the dawn of human civilization, two warring factions of immortals—the descendants of the gods of old—have been secretly shaping its destiny. Leading the clandestine battle from his luxurious Los Angeles high-rise, Kian is surrounded by his clan, yet alone. Descending from a single goddess, clan members are forbidden to each other. And as the only other immortals are their hated enemies, Kian and his kin have been long resigned to a lonely existence of fleeting trysts with human partners. That is, until his sister makes a game-changing discovery—a mortal seeress who she believes is a dormant carrier of their genes. Ever the realist, Kian is skeptical and refuses Amanda's plea to attempt Syssi's activation. But when his enemies learn of the Dormant's existence, he's forced to rush her to the safety of his keep. Inexorably drawn to Syssi, Kian wrestles with his conscience as he is tempted to explore her budding interest in the darker shades of sensuality.

2: DARK STRANGER REVEALED

While sheltered in the clan's stronghold, Syssi is unaware that Kian and Amanda are not human, and neither are the supposedly religious fanatics that are after her. She feels a powerful connection to Kian, and as he introduces her to a world of pleasure she never dared imagine, his dominant sexuality is a revelation. Considering that she's completely out of her element, Syssi feels comfortable and safe letting go with him. That is, until she begins to suspect that all is not as it seems. Piecing the puzzle together, she draws a scary, yet wrong conclusion...

3: DARK STRANGER IMMORTAL

When Kian confesses his true nature, Syssi is not as much shocked by the revelation as she is wounded by what she perceives as his callous plans for her.

If she doesn't turn, he'll be forced to erase her memories and let her go. His family's safety demands secrecy – no one in the mortal world is allowed to know that immortals exist.

Resigned to the cruel reality that even if she stays on to never again leave the keep, she'll get old while Kian won't, Syssi is determined to enjoy what little time she has with him, one day at a time.

Can Kian let go of the mortal woman he loves? Will Syssi turn? And if she does, will she survive the dangerous transition?

4: DARK ENEMY TAKEN

Dalhu can't believe his luck when he stumbles upon the beautiful immortal professor. Presented with a once in a lifetime opportunity to grab an immortal female for himself, he kidnaps her and runs. If he ever gets caught, either by her people or his, his life is forfeit. But for a chance of a loving mate and a family of his own, Dalhu is prepared to do everything in his power to win Amanda's heart, and that includes leaving the Doom brotherhood and his old life behind.

Amanda soon discovers that there is more to the handsome Doomer than his dark past and a hulking, sexy body. But succumbing to her enemy's seduction, or worse, developing feelings for a ruthless killer is out of the question. No man is worth life on the run, not even the one and only immortal male she could claim as her own...

Her clan and her research must come first...

5: DARK ENEMY CAPTIVE

When the rescue team returns with Amanda and the chained Dalhu to the keep, Amanda is not as thrilled to be back as she thought she'd be. Between Kian's contempt for her and Dalhu's imprisonment, Amanda's budding relationship with Dalhu seems doomed. Things start to look up when Annani offers her help, and together with Syssi they resolve to find a way for Amanda to be with Dalhu. But will she still want him when she realizes that he is responsible for her nephew's murder? Could she? Will she take the easy way out and choose Andrew instead?

6: DARK ENEMY REDEEMED

Amanda suspects that something fishy is going on onboard the Anna. But when her investigation of the peculiar all-female Russian crew fails to uncover anything other than more speculation, she decides it's time to stop playing detective and face her real problem—a man she shouldn't want but can't live without.

6.5: MY DARK AMAZON

When Michael and Kri fight off a gang of humans, Michael gets stabbed. The injury to his immortal body recovers fast, but the one to his ego takes longer, putting a strain on his relationship with Kri.

7: DARK WARRIOR MINE

When Andrew is forced to retire from active duty, he believes that all he has to look forward to is a boring desk job. His glory days in special ops are over. But as it turns out, his thrill ride has just begun. Andrew discovers not only that immortals exist and have been manipulating global affairs since antiquity, but that he and his sister are rare possessors of the immortal genes.

Problem is, Andrew might be too old to attempt the activation process. His sister, who is fourteen years his junior, barely made it through the transition, so the odds of him coming out of it alive, let alone immortal, are slim.

But fate may force his hand.

Helping a friend find his long-lost daughter, Andrew finds a woman who's worth taking the risk for. Nathalie might be a Dormant, but the only way to find out for

sure requires fangs and venom.

8: DARK WARRIOR'S PROMISE

Andrew and Nathalie's love flourishes, but the secrets they keep from each other taint their relationship with doubts and suspicions. In the meantime, Sebastian and his men are getting bolder, and the storm that's brewing will shift the balance of power in the millennia-old conflict between Annani's clan and its enemies.

9: DARK WARRIOR'S DESTINY

The new ghost in Nathalie's head remembers who he was in life, providing Andrew and her with indisputable proof that he is real and not a figment of her imagination.

Convinced that she is a Dormant, Andrew decides to go forward with his transition immediately after the rescue mission at the Doomers' HQ.

Fearing for his life, Nathalie pleads with him to reconsider. She'd rather spend the rest of her mortal days with Andrew than risk what they have for the fickle promise of immortality.

While the clan gets ready for battle, Carol gets help from an unlikely ally. Sebastian's second-in-command can no longer ignore the torment she suffers at the hands of his commander and offers to help her, but only if she agrees to his terms.

10: DARK WARRIOR'S LEGACY

Andrew's acclimation to his post-transition body isn't easy. His senses are sharper, he's bigger, stronger, and hungrier. Nathalie fears that the changes in the man she loves are more than physical. Measuring up to this new version of him is going to be a challenge.

Carol and Robert are disillusioned with each other. They are not destined mates, and love is not on the horizon. When Robert's three months are up, he might be left with nothing to show for his sacrifice.

Lana contacts Anandur with disturbing news; the yacht and its human cargo are in Mexico. Kian must find a way to apprehend Alex and rescue the women on board without causing an international incident.

11: DARK GUARDIAN FOUND

What would you do if you stopped aging?

Eva runs. The ex-DEA agent doesn't know what caused her strange mutation, only that if discovered, she'll be dissected like a lab rat. What Eva doesn't know, though, is that she's a descendant of the gods, and that she is not alone. The man who rocked her world in one life-changing encounter over thirty years ago is an immortal as well.

To keep his people's existence secret, Bhathian was forced to turn his back on the only woman who ever captured his heart, but he's never forgotten and never stopped looking for her.

12: DARK GUARDIAN CRAVED

Cautious after a lifetime of disappointments, Eva is mistrustful of Bhathian's professed feelings of love. She accepts him as a lover and a confidant but not as a life partner.

Jackson suspects that Tessa is his true love mate, but unless she overcomes her fears, he might never find out.

Carol gets an offer she can't refuse—a chance to prove that there is more to her than meets the eye. Robert believes she's about to commit a deadly mistake, but when he tries to dissuade her, she tells him to leave.

13: DARK GUARDIAN'S MATE

Prepare for the heart-warming culmination of Eva and Bhathian's story!

14: DARK ANGEL'S OBSESSION

The cold and stoic warrior is an enigma even to those closest to him. His secrets are about to unravel...

15: DARK ANGEL'S SEDUCTION

Brundar is fighting a losing battle. Calypso is slowly chipping away his icy armor from the outside, while his need for her is melting it from the inside.

He can't allow it to happen. Calypso is a human with none of the Dormant indicators. There is no way he can keep her for more than a few weeks.

16: DARK ANGEL'S SURRENDER

Get ready for the heart pounding conclusion to Brundar and Calypso's story.

Callie still couldn't wrap her head around it, nor could she summon even a smidgen of sorrow or regret. After all, she had some memories with him that weren't horrible. She should've felt something. But there was nothing, not even shock. Not even horror at what had transpired over the last couple of hours.

Maybe it was a typical response for survivors—feeling euphoric for the simple reason that they were alive. Especially when that survival was nothing short of miraculous.

Brundar's cold hand closed around hers, reminding her that they weren't out of the woods yet. Her injuries were superficial, and the most she had to worry about was some scarring. But, despite his and Anandur's reassurances, Brundar might never walk again.

If he ended up crippled because of her, she would never forgive herself for getting him involved in her crap.

“Are you okay, sweetling? Are you in pain?” Brundar asked.

Her injuries were nothing compared to his, and yet he was concerned about her. God, she loved this man. The thing was, if she told him that, he would run off, or crawl away as was the case.

Hey, maybe this was the perfect opportunity to spring it on him.

17: DARK OPERATIVE: A SHADOW OF DEATH

As a brilliant strategist and the only human entrusted with the secret of immortals' existence, Turner is both an asset and a liability to the clan. His request to attempt transition into immortality as an alternative to cancer treatments cannot be denied without risking the clan's exposure. On the other hand, approving it means risking his premature death. In both scenarios, the clan will lose a valuable ally.

When the decision is left to the clan's physician, Turner makes plans to manipulate her by taking advantage of her interest in him.

Will Bridget fall for the cold, calculated operative? Or will Turner fall into his own trap?

18: DARK OPERATIVE: A GLIMMER OF HOPE

As Turner and Bridget's relationship deepens, living together seems like the right move, but to make it work both need to make concessions.

Bridget is realistic and keeps her expectations low. Turner could never be the true love mate she yearns for, but he is as good as she's going to get. Other than his emotional limitations, he's perfect in every way.

Turner's hard shell is starting to show cracks. He wants immortality, he wants to be part of the clan, and he wants Bridget, but he doesn't want to cause her pain.

His options are either abandon his quest for immortality and give Bridget his few remaining decades, or abandon Bridget by going for the transition and most likely dying. His rational mind dictates that he chooses the former, but his gut pulls him toward the latter. Which one is he going to trust?

19: DARK OPERATIVE: THE DAWN OF LOVE

Get ready for the exciting finale of Bridget and Turner's story!

20: DARK SURVIVOR AWAKENED

This was a strange new world she had awakened to.

Her memory loss must have been catastrophic because almost nothing was familiar. The language was foreign to her, with only a few words bearing some similarity to the language she thought in. Still, a full moon cycle had passed since her awakening, and little by little she was gaining basic understanding of it—only a few words and phrases, but she was learning more each day.

A week or so ago, a little girl on the street had tugged on her mother's sleeve and pointed at her. "Look, Mama, Wonder Woman!"

The mother smiled apologetically, saying something in the language these people spoke, then scurried away with the child looking behind her shoulder and grinning.

When it happened again with another child on the same day, it was settled.

Wonder Woman must have been the name of someone important in this strange world she had awoken to, and since both times it had been said with a smile it must have been a good one.

Wonder had a nice ring to it.

She just wished she knew what it meant.

21: DARK SURVIVOR ECHOES OF LOVE

Wonder's journey continues in *Dark Survivor Echoes of Love*.

22: DARK SURVIVOR REUNITED

The exciting finale of Wonder and Anandur's story.

23: DARK WIDOW'S SECRET

Vivian and her daughter share a powerful telepathic connection, so when Ella can't be reached by conventional or psychic means, her mother fears the worst.

Help arrives from an unexpected source when Vivian gets a call from the young doctor she met at a psychic convention. Turns out Julian belongs to a private organization specializing in retrieving missing girls.

As Julian's clan mobilizes its considerable resources to rescue the daughter, Magnus is charged with keeping the gorgeous young mother safe.

Worry for Ella and the secrets Vivian and Magnus keep from each other should be enough to prevent the sparks of attraction from kindling a blaze of desire. Except, these pesky sparks have a mind of their own.

24: DARK WIDOW'S CURSE

A simple rescue operation turns into mission impossible when the Russian mafia gets involved. Bad things are supposed to come in threes, but in Vivian's case, it seems like there is no limit to bad luck. Her family and everyone who gets close to her is affected by her curse.

Will Magnus and his people prove her wrong?

25: DARK WIDOW'S BLESSING

The thrilling finale of the Dark Widow trilogy!

26: DARK DREAM'S TEMPTATION

Julian has known Ella is the one for him from the moment he saw her picture, but when he finally frees her from captivity, she seems indifferent to him. Could he have been mistaken?

Ella's rescue should've ended that chapter in her life, but it seems like the road back to normalcy has just begun and it's full of obstacles. Between the pitying looks she gets and her mother's attempts to get her into therapy, Ella feels like she's typecast as a victim, when nothing could be further from the truth. She's a tough survivor, and she's going to prove it.

Strangely, the only one who seems to understand is Logan, who keeps popping up in her dreams. But then, he's a figment of her imagination—or is he?

27: DARK DREAM'S UNRAVELING

While trying to figure out a way around Logan's silencing compulsion, Ella concocts an ambitious plan. What if instead of trying to keep him out of her dreams, she could pretend to like him and lure him into a trap?

Catching Navuh's son would be a major boon for the clan, as well as for Ella. She will have her revenge, turning the tables on another scumbag out to get her.

28: DARK DREAM'S TRAP

The trap is set, but who is the hunter and who is the prey? Find out in this heart-pounding conclusion to the *Dark Dream* trilogy.

29: DARK PRINCE'S ENIGMA

As the son of the most dangerous male on the planet, Lokan lives by three rules:

Don't trust a soul.

Don't show emotions.

And don't get attached.

Will one extraordinary woman make him break all three?

30: DARK PRINCE'S DILEMMA

Will Kian decide that the benefits of trusting Lokan outweigh the risks?

Will Lokan betray his father and brothers for the greater good of his people?

Are Carol and Lokan true-love mates, or is one of them playing the other?

So many questions, the path ahead is anything but clear.

31: DARK PRINCE'S AGENDA

While Turner and Kian work out the details of Areana's rescue plan, Carol and Lokan's tumultuous relationship hits another snag. Is it a sign of things to come?

32 : DARK QUEEN'S QUEST

A former beauty queen, a retired undercover agent, and a successful model, Mey is not the typical damsel in distress. But when her sister drops off the radar and then someone starts following her around, she panics.

Following a vague clue that Kalugal might be in New York, Kian sends a team headed by Yamanu to search for him.

As Mey and Yamanu's paths cross, he offers her his help and protection, but will that be all?

33: DARK QUEEN'S KNIGHT

As the only member of his clan with a godlike power over human minds, Yamanu has been shielding his people for centuries, but that power comes at a steep price.

When Mey enters his life, he's faced with the most difficult choice.

The safety of his clan or a future with his fated mate.

34: DARK QUEEN'S ARMY

As Mey anxiously waits for her transition to begin and for Yamanu to test whether his godlike powers are gone, the clan sets out to solve two mysteries:

Where is Jin, and is she there voluntarily?

Where is Kalugal, and what is he up to?

35: DARK SPY CONSCRIPTED

Jin possesses a unique paranormal ability. Just by touching someone, she can insert a mental hook into their psyche and tie a string of her consciousness to it, creating a tether. That doesn't make her a spy, though, not unless her talent is discovered by those seeking to exploit it.

36: DARK SPY'S MISSION

Jin's first spying mission is supposed to be easy. Walk into the club, touch Kalugal to tether her consciousness to him, and walk out.

Except, they should have known better.

37: DARK SPY'S RESOLUTION

The best-laid plans often go awry...

38: DARK OVERLORD NEW HORIZON

Jacki has two talents that set her apart from the rest of the human race.

She has unpredictable glimpses of other people's futures, and she is immune to mind manipulation.

Unfortunately, both talents are pretty useless for finding a job other than the one she had in the government's paranormal division.

It seemed like a sweet deal, until she found out that the director planned on producing super babies by compelling the recruits into pairing up. When an opportunity to escape the program presented itself, she took it, only to find out that humans are not at the top of the food chain.

Immortals are real, and at the very top of the hierarchy is Kalugal, the most powerful, arrogant, and sexiest male she has ever met.

With one look, he sets her blood on fire, but Jacki is not a fool. A man like him will never think of her as anything more than a tasty snack, while she will never settle for anything less than his heart.

39: DARK OVERLORD'S WIFE

Jacki is still clinging to her all-or-nothing policy, but Kalugal is chipping away at her resistance. Perhaps it's time to ease up on her convictions. A little less than all is still much better than nothing, and a couple of decades with a demigod is probably worth more than a lifetime with a mere mortal.

40: DARK OVERLORD'S CLAN

As Jacki and Kalugal prepare to celebrate their union, Kian takes every precaution to safeguard his people. Except, Kalugal and his men are not his only potential adversaries, and compulsion is not the only power he should fear.

41: DARK CHOICES THE QUANDARY

When Rufsur and Edna meet, the attraction is as unexpected as it is undeniable. Except, she's the clan's judge and councilwoman, and he's Kalugal's second-in-command. Will loyalty and duty to their people keep them apart?

42: DARK CHOICES PARADIGM SHIFT

Edna and Rufsur are miserable without each other, and their two-week separation seems like an eternity. Long-distance relationships are difficult, but for immortal couples they are impossible. Unless one of them is willing to leave everything behind for the other, things are just going to get worse. Except, the cost of compromise is far greater than giving up their comfortable lives and hard-earned positions. The future of their people is on the line.

43: DARK CHOICES THE ACCORD

The winds of change blowing over the village demand hard choices. For better or worse, Kian's decisions will alter the trajectory of the clan's future, and he is not ready to take the plunge. But as Edna and Rufsur's plight gains widespread support, his resistance slowly begins to erode.

44: DARK SECRETS RESURGENCE

On a sabbatical from his Stanford teaching position, Professor David Levinson finally has time to write the sci-fi novel he's been thinking about for years.

The phenomena of past life memories and near-death experiences are too controversial to include in his formal psychiatric research, while fiction is the perfect outlet for his esoteric ideas.

Hoping that a change of pace will provide the inspiration he needs, David accepts a friend's invitation to an old Scottish castle.

45: DARK SECRETS UNVEILED

When Professor David Levinson accepts a friend's invitation to an old Scottish castle, what he finds there is more fantastical than his most outlandish theories. The castle is home to a clan of immortals, their leader is a stunning demigoddess, and even more shockingly, it might be precisely where he belongs.

Except, the clan founder is hiding a secret that might cast a dark shadow on David's relationship with her daughter.

Nevertheless, when offered a chance at immortality, he agrees to undergo the dangerous induction process.

Will David survive his transition into immortality? And if he does, will his relationship with Sari survive the unveiling of her mother's secret?

46: DARK SECRETS ABSOLVED

Absolution.

David had given and received it.

The few short hours since he'd emerged from the coma had felt incredible. He'd finally been free of the guilt and pain, and for the first time since Jonah's death, he had felt truly happy and optimistic about the future.

He'd survived the transition into immortality, had been accepted into the clan, and was about to marry the best woman on the face of the planet, his true love mate, his salvation, his everything.

What could have possibly gone wrong?

Just about everything.

47: DARK HAVEN ILLUSION

Welcome to Safe Haven, where not everything is what it seems.

On a quest to process personal pain, Anastasia joins the Safe Haven Spiritual Retreat.

Through meditation, self-reflection, and hard work, she hopes to make peace with the voices in her head.

This is where she belongs.

Except, membership comes with a hefty price, doubts are sacrilege, and leaving is not as easy as walking out the front gate.

Is living in utopia worth the sacrifice?

Anastasia believes so until the arrival of a new acolyte changes everything.

Apparently, the gods of old were not a myth, their immortal descendants share the planet with humans, and she might be a carrier of their genes.

48: DARK HAVEN UNMASKED

As Anastasia leaves Safe Haven for a week-long romantic vacation with Leon, she hopes to explore her newly discovered passionate side, their budding relationship, and perhaps also solve the mystery of the voices in her head. What she discovers exceeds her wildest expectations.

In the meantime, Eleanor and Peter hope to solve another mystery. Who is Emmett Haderech, and what is he up to?

49: DARK HAVEN FOUND

Anastasia is growing suspicious, and Leon is running out of excuses.

Risking death for a chance at immortality should've been her choice to make. Will she ever forgive him for taking it away from her?

50: DARK POWER UNTAMED

Attending a charity gala as the clan's figurehead, Onegus is ready for the pesky socialites he'll have a hard time keeping away. Instead, he encounters an intriguing

beauty who won't give him the time of day.

Bad things happen when Cassandra gets all worked up, and given her fiery temper, the destructive power is difficult to tame. When she meets a gorgeous, cocky billionaire at a charity event, things just might start blowing up again.

51: DARK POWER UNLEASHED

Cassandra's power is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and destructive. If she doesn't learn to harness it, people might get hurt.

Onegus's self-control is legendary. Even his fangs and venom glands obey his commands.

They say that opposites attract, and perhaps it's true, but are they any good for each other?

52: DARK POWER CONVERGENCE

The threads of fate converge, mysteries unfold, and the clan's future is forever altered in the least expected way.

53: DARK MEMORIES SUBMERGED

Geraldine's memories are spotty at best, and many of them are pure fiction. While her family attempts to solve the puzzle with far too many pieces missing, she's forced to confront a past life that she can't remember, a present that's more fantastic than her wildest made-up stories, and a future that might be better than her most heartfelt fantasies. But as more clues are uncovered, the picture starting to emerge is beyond anything she or her family could have ever imagined.

54: DARK MEMORIES EMERGE

The more clues emerge about Geraldine's past, the more questions arise.

Did she really have a twin sister who drowned?

Who is the mysterious benefactor in her hazy recollections?

Did he have anything to do with her becoming immortal?

Thankfully, she doesn't have to find the answers alone.

Cassandra and Onegus are there for her, and so is Shai, the immortal who sets her body on fire.

As they work together to solve the mystery, the four of them stumble upon a millennia-old secret that could tip the balance of power between the clan and its enemies.

55: DARK MEMORIES RESTORED

As the past collides with the present, a new future emerges.

56: DARK HUNTER'S QUERY

For most of his five centuries of existence, Orion has walked the earth alone, searching for answers.

Why is he immortal?

Where did his powers come from?

Is he the only one of his kind?

When fate puts Orion face to face with the god who sired him, he learns the secret behind his immortality and that he might not be the only one.

As the goddess's eldest daughter and a mother of thirteen, Alena deserves the title of Clan Mother just as much as Annani, but she's not interested in honorifics. Being her mother's companion and keeping the mischievous goddess out of trouble is a rewarding, full-time job. Lately, though, Alena's love for her mother and the clan's gratitude is not enough.

She craves adventure, excitement, and perhaps a true-love mate of her own. When Alena and Orion meet, sparks fly, but they both resist the pull. Alena could never bring herself to trust the powerful compeller, and Orion could never allow himself to fall in love again.

57: DARK HUNTER'S PREY

When Alena and Orion join Kalugal and Jacki on a romantic vacation to the enchanting Lake Lugu in China, they anticipate a couple of visits to Kalugal's archeological dig, some sightseeing, and a lot of lovemaking.

Their excursion takes an unexpected turn when Jacki's vision sends them on a perilous hunt for the elusive Kra-ell.

As things progress from bad to worse, Alena beseeches the Fates to keep everyone in their group alive. She can't fathom losing any of them, but most of all, Orion.

For over two thousand years, she walked the earth alone, but after mere days with him at her side, she can't imagine life without him.

58: DARK HUNTER'S BOON

As Orion and Alena's relationship blooms and solidifies, the two investigative teams combine their recent discoveries to piece together more of the Kra-ell mystery.

Attacking the puzzle from another angle, Eleanor works on gaining access to Echelon's powerful AI spy network.

Together, they are getting dangerously close to finding the elusive Kra-ell.

59: DARK GOD'S AVATAR

Unaware of the time bomb ticking inside her, Mia had lived the perfect life until it all came to a screeching halt, but despite the difficulties she faces, she doggedly pursues her dreams.

Once known as the god of knowledge and wisdom, Toven has grown cold and indifferent. Disillusioned with humanity, he travels the world and pens novels about the love he can no longer feel.

Seeking to escape his ever-present ennui, Toven gives a cutting-edge virtual experience a try. When his avatar meets Mia's, their sizzling virtual romance unexpectedly turns into something deeper and more meaningful.

Will it endure in the real world?

60: DARK GOD'S REVIVISCENCE

Toven might have failed in his attempts to improve humanity's condition, but he isn't going to fail to improve Mia's life, making it the best it can be despite her fragile health, and he can do that not as a god, but as a man who possesses the means, the smarts, and the determination to do it.

No effort is enough to repay Mia for reviving his deadened heart and making him excited for the next day, but the flip side of his reviviscence is the fear of losing its catalyst.

Given Mia's condition, Toven doesn't dare to over excite her. His venom is a powerful aphrodisiac, euphoric, and an all-around health booster, but it's also extremely potent. It might kill her instead of making her better.

61: DARK GOD DESTINIES CONVERGE

Destinies converge, and secrets are revealed in part three of Mia and Toven's story.

62: DARK WHISPERS FROM THE PAST

A brilliant scientist and programmer, William lives for his work, but when he recruits a young bioinformatician to help him decipher the gods' genetic blueprints, he find himself smitten with more than just her brain.

A Ph.d at nineteen, Kaia is considered a prodigy and expects a bright future in academia. But when William invites her to join his secret research team, she accepts for reasons that have nothing to do with her career objectives. William's promise to look into her best friend's disappearance is an offer she just can't refuse.

63: DARK WHISPERS FROM AFAR

William knows that his budding relationship with the nineteen-year-old Kaia will be frowned upon, but he's unprepared for her family's vehement opposition.

Family means everything to Kaia, so when she finds herself in the impossible position of having to choose between them and William, she resorts to unconventional means to resolve the conflict.

64: DARK WHISPERS FROM BEYOND

The sacrifices Kaia and her family have to make for a chance of gaining immortality might tear them apart, and success is not guaranteed.

Is the dubious promise of eternal life worth the risk of losing everything?

65: DARK GAMBIT THE PAWN

Temporarily assigned to supervise a team of bioinformaticians, Marcel expects to spend a couple of weeks in the peaceful retreat of Safe Haven, enjoying Oregon Coast's cool weather and rugged beauty.

Things quickly turn chaotic when the retreat's director receives an email with an encoded message about a potential new threat to the clan.

While those in charge of security debate what to do next, Safe Haven's first ever paranormal retreat is about to begin, and one of the attendees is a mysterious woman who makes Marcel's heart beat faster whenever she's near.

Is the beautiful mortal his one true love?

Or is she the harbinger of more bad news?

66: DARK GAMBIT THE PLAY

To get to Safe Haven's inner circle, the Kra-ell leader sacrifices a pawn. He does not expect her to reach the final rank and promote to a queen.

67: DARK GAMBIT RELIANCE

Marcel takes a big risk by telling Sofia his greatest sin. Can he trust her to keep it a secret? Or maybe it's time to confess his crime and submit to whatever punishment Edna deems appropriate?

Three miserable centuries of living with guilt and remorse are long enough.

Once the dust settles on the Kra-ell crisis, he will gather the courage to put himself at the court's mercy.

68: **DARK ALLIANCE KINDRED SOULS**

A daring operation half a world away devolves into a full-scale crisis that escalates rapidly, requiring the clan's full might and technological wizardry to manage and survive.

Hardened by duty and tragedy, Jade is driven by a burning desire for revenge. When Phinas saves her second-in-command, Jade's gratitude quickly becomes something more.

69: **DARK ALLIANCE TURBULENT WATERS**

When a dangerous foe turns the tables on the clan, complicating the Kra-ell rescue operation in unforeseeable ways, Kian and his crew bet all on a brilliant misdirection.

On board the Aurora, Phinas and Jade brace for battle while enjoying a few stolen moments of passion.

Drawn to the woman he sees behind the aloof leader, Phinas realizes that what has started as a calculated political move has evolved into a deepening sense of companionship.

Jade finds reprieve in Phinas's arms, but duty and tradition make it difficult for her to accept that what she feels for him is more than just gratitude and desire.

After all, the Kra-ell don't believe in love.

70: **DARK ALLIANCE PERFECT STORM**

After two decades in captivity, Jade is finally free, her quest for revenge within grasp, but danger still looms large. A storm is brewing on the horizon, gathering momentum and threatening to obliterate Jade's tenuous hold on hope for a better future.

71: **DARK HEALING BLIND JUSTICE**

The sanctuary is Vanessa's life project. The monumental task of rehabilitating the traumatized victims of trafficking doesn't leave much time for personal life, let alone dating or finding her one and only.

When Kian asks her to help the Kra-ell, she's torn between her duty to the sanctuary and a group of emotionally wounded aliens who no other psychologist can treat.

She's the only immortal with the necessary training to get it done.

The Kra-ell culture and the purebloods' nearly androgynous alien looks shouldn't appeal to her, and yet, she finds one of them disturbingly attractive.

Is it the dangerous vibe he emits?

Does it speak to her on a subconscious level?

Or is it her need to put the broken pieces of him back together?

And why is he interested in her?

She cannot offer him a fight for dominance like a Kra-ell female would, but some strange and unfamiliar part of her wishes she could.

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When Gabriel's company is ready to start beta testing, he invites his old crush to inspect its medical safety protocol.

Curious about the revolutionary technology of the *Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy-Fulfillment studios*, Brenna agrees.

Neither expects to end up partnering for its first fully immersive test run.

PERFECT MATCH 2: KING'S CHOSEN

When Lisa's nutty friends get her a gift certificate to *Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy Studios*, she has no intentions of using it. But since the only way to get a refund is if no partner can be found for her, she makes sure to request a fantasy so girly and over the top that no sane guy will pick it up.

Except, someone does.

Warning: This fantasy contains a hot, domineering crown prince, sweet insta-love, steamy love scenes painted with light shades of gray, a wedding, and a HEA in both the virtual and real worlds.

Intended for mature audience.

PERFECT MATCH 3: CAPTAIN'S CONQUEST

Working as a Starbucks barista, Alicia fends off flirting all day long, but none of the guys are as charming and sexy as Gregg. His frequent visits are the highlight of her day, but since he's

never asked her out, she assumes he's taken. Besides, between a day job and a budding music career, she has no time to start a new relationship.

That is until Gregg makes her an offer she can't refuse—a gift certificate to the virtual fantasy fulfillment service everyone is talking about. As a huge Star Trek fan, Alicia has a perfect match in mind—the captain of the Starship Enterprise.

THE THIEF WHO LOVED ME

When Marian splurges on a Perfect Match Virtual adventure as a world infamous jewel thief, she expects high-wire fun with a hot partner who she will never have to see again in real life.

A virtual encounter seems like the perfect answer to Marcus's string of dating disasters. No strings attached, no drama, and definitely no love. As a die-hard James Bond fan, he chooses as his avatar a dashing MI6 operative, and to complement his adventure, a dangerously seductive partner.

Neither expects to find their forever Perfect Match.

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