



# UDARK HEALING

blind justice

THE CHILDREN OF  
THE GODS 71

I. T. LUCAS  
INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# DARK HEALING

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BLIND JUSTICE

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS

BOOK SEVENTY-ONE

I T. LUCAS



Also by I. T. Lucas

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## MO-RED

Mo-red shivered as the brutal wind whipped through the thin jacket the immortals had given him. He was a Kra-ell warrior, and the cold should be the least of his worries as he was led to the plane that would bring him one step closer to his death, but he'd been born on a warm planet and had never gotten used to the northern latitude Igor had chosen to settle them in.

Still, as cold as Karelia was, it had nothing on Greenland, and as he dragged his chained feet toward the boarding staircase, he was chilled to the bone.

Somehow, the cold didn't seem to affect the immortals, and he wondered if the gods had altered their genetics so they wouldn't be susceptible to extreme weather.

"Wait." The soldier escorting him put a hand on his shoulder. "Let the other guy finish climbing first."

Mo-red lifted his eyes to Madbar, who was struggling up the boarding stairs with the short chain around his ankles forcing him to go super slow.

With an inward sigh, he braced for the same awkward experience.

As soon as Madbar was done, the immortal soldier gave Mo-red a slight shove. "Your turn."

He had to climb the steps to the plane one at a time. The damn chain was just long enough for him to lift his foot and put it at the edge of the step, and as he teetered on that edge,

he had to lift the other foot and bring it over before repeating the laborious process.

In the grand scheme of things, it was a minor inconvenience, but it was humiliating, especially with Pavel watching him from below.

Standing next to a group of immortals, his son was chatting with one of them as if they had known each other for years. He'd always been a clever boy, and he'd smartly joined Jade's rebellion right from the start, making himself indispensable to her and her new friends.

When Jade had finally admitted that their so-called liberators were not human, Mo-red hadn't been surprised. Humans, no matter how well equipped, couldn't have stormed the Kra-ell compound and emerged victorious against the superior physical strength and training of the Kra-ell defenders.

Besides, the powerful compeller who had been instrumental to their success and freed the Kra-ell from Igor's compulsion was so obviously not human that trying to pass him off as one was ridiculous. The guy called himself Tom, a mundane human name, but his powerful compulsion ability and physical perfection gave his godly genetics away.

Still, Mo-red hadn't said anything, not even hinting at knowing who the invaders were until he'd been told that they were the immortal descendants of the gods.

After serving under Igor for over a century, he'd learned that self-preservation meant keeping his mouth shut and not asking too many questions. He'd been a victim just the same as all the other Kra-ell settlers in the compound, and like the rest of Igor's pod members, helpless to rebel against the compeller's rule and forced to be the sociopath's henchmen, but the others didn't see it that way, and they wanted him dead.

He was probably alive only thanks to the god and his army of immortals. The gods didn't condone executions, and neither did their descendants. They must have insisted that Igor's surviving pod members stand trial first.



“Let me give you a hand.” Pavel came up from behind him and threaded his arm through his.

“Don’t,” Mo-red murmured under his breath. “This is humiliating enough.”

“As you wish.” His son pulled out his arm but stayed beside him, ready to catch him if he fell.

“Do you know where we are going?” Mo-red asked as he climbed the last step.

“The United States of America. That’s all I am allowed to tell you.”

That was better than nothing. “I’m glad. I’ve always wanted to visit there.”

The immortal standing in the middle of the aisle pointed to a window seat. “Over here. Pavel, you sit next to him.”

“That’s my father,” Pavel said. “Are you okay with me guarding him?”

The immortal shrugged. “He has nowhere to go and is under Tom’s compulsion to behave. But if you want to sit with Drova, I can assign someone else to guard him.”

Mo-red frowned. Had his son lost his mind?

Drova was only sixteen, but even if she were an adult, the girl was Igor’s daughter and shared many of her father’s characteristics. Those were somewhat mitigated by Jade’s influence, but Pavel should stay away from her nonetheless.

“I’ll stay here.” Pavel slid into the seat. “I want to make sure that my father is not mistreated.”

His son had only visited him once throughout the sea voyage, so concern for his well-being wasn’t why he wanted to sit next to him.

The immortal cast him an incredulous look. “Did he complain?”

“He couldn’t even if he wanted to,” Pavel said. “Tom put such a strong compulsion on the remaining members of Igor’s clique that they can’t go to the bathroom without asking

permission. I wouldn't be surprised if he forbade them to complain too."

Mo-red tensed. Why was Pavel aggravating the immortals? He should cooperate with them so they wouldn't turn against him and also put him in chains.

The soldier laughed. "I wish. They complained nonstop about everything. I thought the Kra-ell purebloods were tough, but your dad and his buddies behaved like a bunch of spoiled princesses." He made a face. "It's uncomfortable sleeping with chains on," he mimicked Madbar's voice. "It's uncomfortable to drink blood from a goat or a sheep while chained. Etcetera."

It had been uncomfortable, but they wouldn't have complained if the reason for the discomfort was of their own choosing.

As prisoners bound by physical and mental chains, complaining was the only way for them to assert some power over their hopeless situation and feel less like victims.

Were they indeed victims, though?

It was a question that Mo-red had struggled with for over a century.

When he'd first awoken from stasis and found himself at Igor's mercy, he'd made several futile attempts to resist, to run off, but when it had become clear that there was no way to escape Igor's compulsion, Mo-red had resigned himself to his new life and had tried to make the best of it.

The Kra-ell were militant people, so attacking other tribes for resources wasn't anything new, but Igor's compulsion ability had turned them from warriors into butchers. If they had fought the other males and killed them in battle, Mo-red wouldn't have felt guilty, but that wasn't what they had done. They'd slaughtered males who'd been frozen by Igor's command and couldn't fight back.

After a while, though, the guilt had subsided.

Mo-red could not have opposed Igor, and speaking against his methods had resulted in being compelled to do even worse

things. Keeping his head down and his mouth shut had been the best way Mo-red could protect himself and others.

Nevertheless, he was guilty of enjoying the fruits of Igor's cruelty.

As a young, fatherless male, he'd convinced himself that having plenty of females at his disposal was the flip side of being a tool in Igor's hands.

After fathering Pavel and his two half-brothers, though, Mo-red had started to worry about the future of his sons. The ratio of males to females had been nearly equal after they had slaughtered the other tribes' males and taken their females. But Igor couldn't control biology, and the next generation born in the compound was split along the normal Kra-ell gender birth ratio of four males to one female.

The realization of Igor's vision of a Kra-ell society that was run by males with plenty of females to serve them required the elimination of excess males. Mo-red had lived in constant fear of Igor deciding to do away with the young males.

Now that the danger was over and Igor was about to meet his end, Mo-red could finally breathe more easily even though his own end was also imminent.

If he had to die to secure the futures of his sons, so be it.

After all, wasn't that a father's duty?

To give life to the next generation and ensure its survival?



## VANESSA

“Compassion is not a weakness, Nancy.” Vanessa leaned over and patted the hand of the young woman sitting across from her. “It takes a brave soul to take on the pain of others.”

*There goes another volunteer.*

Since the sanctuary had opened its doors to the rescued victims of trafficking, many had volunteered to help. Some were professional psychologists like Vanessa, while others were kind souls who wanted to lend a hand, like Vivian with her sewing class, Karen with Krav Maga training, and many others. But even though everyone knew what to expect when they signed up, at least half didn't make it past the two-week mark.

Were they expecting a walk in the park?

The Ojai location was beautiful, and maybe that was part of the draw, but the stories of suffering that were told within the walls of the restored monastery were too difficult for many to stomach.

“I'm supposed to be a professional.” Nancy pulled a tissue out of the box Vanessa kept on her desk and wiped the tears from her eyes. “I chose to study psychology to help people, but maybe I made a mistake. I'm not strong enough for this.” She looked at Vanessa with red-rimmed eyes. “I'm not as strong as you.”

Affecting a neutral expression, she said the same thing she'd said many times before to other volunteers who couldn't

handle the job. “Give it some time. It gets easier.”

Was Nancy right? Was she really strong?

She had to be to run the sanctuary, but perhaps she’d become inured to the stories of pain.

No, that wasn’t true.

The stories no longer shocked Vanessa, but they still pained her. She’d just changed her perspective, and instead of fixating on stories of the women’s pasts, she focused on the inspiring stories of the courageous survivors who had gone through the program and ventured out into the world ready to live the best life they could.

In moments of weakness, when she wished she was still practicing her craft in the village and dealing with the occasional phobia or disorder her clan members needed help with, Vanessa would open her drawer and pull out the letters she’d gotten from survivors, thanking her and the charity foundation for helping them restore their faith in humanity, achieve independence, and live a productive and fulfilling life.

“I don’t know if I can do that.” Nancy blew her nose into the tissue.

Years of experience had taught Vanessa to keep her professional expression compassionate but not pitying, thoughtful but not judgmental, and to keep her feelings to herself even when talking with a fellow psychologist.

Pulling out another tissue, she handed it to the volunteer. “When you feel discouraged, read through the success stories. Sometimes it takes everything I have not to cry with the victims, but then I read the thank-you letters from the survivors, and the satisfaction I get from that is worth every heart-wrenching moment.” She looked into the woman’s eyes. “They need your help. The sanctuary needs every volunteer it can get.”

“I know.” Nancy sniffled. “That’s why I came. I knew that it was going to be hard, but I was tired of listening to spoiled rich brats complaining about their terrible parents who didn’t understand them while having the parents pay for my time and

everything else in their entitled lives. I had to continue doing that to make a living, but I wanted to do something meaningful, at least part-time.” She looked down at the crumpled tissues in her hand. “But I don’t want to go home to my family in the evening and force myself to smile for my kids.” She lifted her eyes to Vanessa’s. “I haven’t made love to my husband even once since I started volunteering here.” Her chin wobbled. “Poor guy doesn’t deserve the dirty looks I give him, but after hearing the victims’ stories, it’s hard not to see every male as the enemy.”

Vanessa smiled. “As I said, it takes time. You never get used to it, but you can learn how to compartmentalize and leave the horror stories behind when you go home.”

“Can you do that?”

“To a certain degree.” Vanessa rose to her feet. “A stroll in nature helps center me. In fact, I was planning to do that when you came into my office. Do you want to join me on a walk around the sanctuary? We can continue talking in the fresh air.”

She often did that with the girls. Sometimes it was easier to talk outside than in the therapist’s office.

“Oh, I can’t.” Nancy glanced at her watch and pushed her chair back. “I need to head home. When are you leaving?”

“I’m staying here tonight. I don’t commute every day. I live far away.” Vanessa opened the door to her office and waited for Nancy to step out.

The sanctuary was only an hour’s drive away from the village, but someone needed to be there at night for the girls, and more often than not, Vanessa couldn’t get any of the volunteers to take the night shift.

Perhaps it was time to hire more permanent staff.

Between the clan’s and Kalugal’s monthly donations and the fundraising effort Ella had started for the sanctuary, there was no shortage of funds, and Vanessa could afford more full-time help. The problem was finding the time and energy to start interviewing suitable candidates.

Besides, every penny she saved on running the sanctuary went to helping the victims get back on their feet, and she preferred the money to go there instead of spending it on more salaries just so she could take it easy.

Nancy gave her a pitying look. “I’ve heard that you often do that. Is your family okay with you staying here overnight?”

“No one is waiting for me at home,” she admitted.

Jackson was happily mated and had his own house, but even if he was still living with her, it wasn’t as if she could tell Nancy that she had a twenty-three-year-old son.

Vanessa was over three centuries old but looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. The only way to explain how she could have an adult child was to claim that she’d acquired him through marriage.

Being immortal meant a lot of lying, but she did her best to minimize it.

Nancy nodded sagely and whispered, “It’s this job. That’s the only reason a gorgeous woman like you is alone. It makes us regard all men as the enemy.”

The woman would have never said those things to anyone other than a fellow psychologist, but that was why psychologists needed each other’s help. To function at their jobs, they needed to dump their negative feelings on someone who understood and wouldn’t judge them.

“I don’t think of men as the enemy.” Vanessa smiled. “I happen to know many good men, and I definitely don’t judge their entire gender based on a few rotten apples.”

Jackson was an amazing male, one of the best people she knew, but he was her son, so she wasn’t objective. Still, the fact that he was mated to a former victim of trafficking and had helped Tessa heal her deep emotional wounds spoke volumes about his character.

There were also plenty of other males she loved and admired. Other than a handful of exceptions, all the males of her clan were great.



In fact, most men were good people, just like most women were good. Well, the scale might be tilted slightly in favor of females in the goodness department, but that wasn't what Nancy needed to hear right now.

"I know." The woman sighed. "I don't think that either. Not really. My Kevin is a sweetheart, and he deserves better than a grumpy wife who gives him dirty looks when she comes home, especially after he's picked up the kids from my mother's and cooked dinner for us."

Vanessa put her arm around the shorter woman's shoulders. "You need to change the script playing in your head. Just think of all the heroes, like the men who save babies from burning buildings and jump into rushing rapids to save drowning victims. And who do you think rescues these girls from the sex slavers?"

The Guardians of her clan did that, but it was a secret that neither Nancy nor anyone else in the sanctuary was privy to, including the rescued victims themselves.

"I wondered about that." Nancy looked up at her. "The girls I asked about it couldn't remember whether their saviors had worn uniforms or identified themselves as the police. I assumed they belonged to a special task force assigned to taking out traffickers and saving the victims. I'm sure they flashed some kind of badges when they arrested the scumbags, but the girls were too traumatized to notice."

Vanessa nodded without verbally confirming or denying. "When you're tempted to bundle all men together as evil, you need to remember that the people serving in those special units are mostly men, and they are the good guys. They are the heroes who save these victims from a horrible fate and give them another chance at life."

The war on trafficking wasn't waged by some government agency. The victims didn't remember their rescuers because the Guardians thrall'd them to forget specific details about the operation, but they were primarily males.

Kri was the only female Guardian, and she didn't participate in the attacks. She was responsible for collecting

the traumatized trafficking victims, calming them down, and driving them to the sanctuary. The reason she wasn't part of the assault team wasn't that she didn't measure up, she did, and then some, but because her paranormal talent was instilling calm, which was best utilized in getting the victims to safety.

The Guardian also volunteered in the sanctuary, teaching self-defense. Her class was in high demand, and once a week wasn't enough, but that was all the time Kri could spare. Thankfully, a human teacher Tessa had recommended had agreed to teach Krav Maga twice weekly.

Jackson's mate attributed the Krav Maga class and its fierce teacher with getting her to feel stronger and less fearful even before her transition into immortality.

When the no-nonsense former military fitness instructor started teaching her special brand of self-defense in the sanctuary, she did the same for its residents. The girls loved Karen and her take-no-prisoners attitude, and Vanessa suspected that the woman was doing more for their self-confidence than all the therapy sessions provided by the slew of volunteer psychologists combined.

"That's a good image to hold in my head." Nancy let out a breath. "Thank you for sharing it with me."

"You're welcome." Vanessa stopped in front of the woman's car. "So, will I see you tomorrow?"

"Of course." Nancy used the crumpled tissue to dab at her nose. "I'm not a quitter. I just needed to vent to someone." She smiled. "I'm going to be really nice to Kevin tonight. If nasty thoughts interfere with my plans, I'll chase them away by imagining a hunky firefighter saving a baby from a burning building."

"That's an excellent plan." Vanessa waited until Nancy opened the door and got in. "Have a great evening. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Nancy pulled the seatbelt down and buckled it.

*Not really.* “Sure.”

“Are you recently divorced or separated?”

“I’ve never been married.”

“Oh.” Nancy eyed her with curiosity. “So you like men, but you don’t like-like them.”

Vanessa laughed. “I very much like-like men. I just haven’t found my one and only yet.”



## KIAN

“*I* brought you a cup of tea,” Syssi said as she walked into Kian’s office with a cup in each hand. “By the way, have you spoken with Vanessa about the Kra-ell?” She sat on the couch and put the cups on the coffee table.

It had completely slipped his mind.

Getting the village ready for the Kra-ell refugees and Safe Haven for the humans who had chosen not to accompany their former overseers was a clan-wide effort, and everyone was hustling to get it done in time.

“I forgot. I’ll call her tomorrow.”

Syssi shook her head. “You should have called her as soon as the decision was made to bring the Kra-ell to the village. She needs someone to take over for her in the sanctuary or she won’t be able to do this. Last I’ve spoken with her, she told me that she had trouble keeping volunteers from leaving. Did you know that she stays there during the week? Sometimes she doesn’t come home even during the weekend.”

“I didn’t know that,” he admitted. “Why doesn’t she hire more people?”

Syssi shrugged. “I guess it’s not easy to find professionals willing to commute to the remote location. Besides, it takes special people to work in a place like that.” She shivered. “I’m ashamed to admit it, but I wouldn’t be able to handle it. The horrors would follow me even in sleep.”

Kian rose to his feet and walked over to sit next to his wife. “You are a gentle soul, my love.” He wrapped his arm

around her shoulders. “You are also a mother of a baby girl and can’t afford to let yourself get depressed. It would affect Allegra, and Fates only know what damage it could do to a young child.”

Syssi nodded. “She’s very attuned to me. Sometimes I think that she can read my mind.”

“I get that feeling too.” He kissed her temple. “She is the daughter of a seer, and she communicated with you even in the womb.”

“We have an extraordinary girl.” She lifted her face to him and smiled. “I bet every parent thinks that.”

“Yeah, but we are right. We really do have an extraordinary child.”

“Indeed.” Syssi leaned her head on his arm. “Nevertheless, I wouldn’t be able to work in the sanctuary even if I didn’t have a baby daughter at home. I’m not strong enough, and it makes me feel ashamed.”

“Don’t. Each of us has different things to contribute to our community. You’re helping Amanda research paranormal phenomena, which might help us find more dormant carriers of godly genes, and you are creating fascinating virtual environments for Perfect Match, which helps countless people enjoy things they could never have enjoyed in the real world.”

Syssi was also helping keep him calm, which everyone in the village was thankful to her for, but she wouldn’t like him saying that.

She sighed. “I guess my work is important too, but what Vanessa is doing is so difficult, and we have only one of her. The Kra-ell will need an army of psychologists, and the one we have has her plate full. I doubt she will be able to find a replacement in time.”

“There is no urgency.” He smoothed his hand over her bare arm. “The Kra-ell psychological assessment can wait. First, they will be probed by Edna, and only if she can’t determine their intentions, Vanessa will have to step in and psychoanalyze them.”

“Your mother might be able to get into their heads. You tend to underestimate what Annani can do.”

Did he?

Not really.

Annani was a force of nature, and Kian suspected she was a much more powerful god than Toven. But where he had no problem using Toven in the Kra-ell operation, he was reluctant to involve his mother.

Annani was impulsive and too kind for her own good. She needed him to protect and shield her, or maybe Kian just needed to do that for her. He had to keep her in the loop but could spare her the details.

Given his mother’s positive and optimistic outlook, it was easy to forget how much suffering she’d experienced and witnessed. It was Kian and his sisters’ turn to shoulder the burden and let Annani enjoy the large family she’d created or whatever else gave her pleasure.

At this stage of her life, she should be enjoying the fruits of her efforts that were thousands of years in the making.

“I would be a fool to underestimate my mother’s abilities. I just don’t want her to have to deal with Igor and what has been done to the people under his rule. Like you, she’s too delicate and compassionate to be exposed to all that evil.”

Syssi laughed. “Are we talking about the same goddess? The one who has singlehandedly kept humanity from falling prey to Navuh’s grand subjugation plan?”

Kian frowned at his wife. “Not singlehandedly. She had lots of help from Alena, Sari, me, and the rest of the clan.”

“True, but to think of Annani as fragile is a fallacy. Your mother is the strongest person I know.” Syssi smiled and patted his knee. “Except for you, of course. But since you are not nearly as powerful a thraller as your mother, and your capacity for empathy is not that great either, she’s much better suited to deal with the emotionally damaged Kra-ell.”

“We don’t know how badly damaged they are, or if at all. Their society is militant in nature, and they are the farthest from fragile you can imagine. These people are raised as warriors whose ultimate goal in life is to die honorably in battle.”

Syssi sighed. “Those born in Igor’s compound were not raised on the Kra-ell traditions, and all of them are either the children or grandchildren of Igor’s pod buddies. Nearly half of those males were recently killed, and the others are imprisoned and about to stand trial. I suspect that many of those young Kra-ell need Vanessa’s help, and since they are about to become part of our community, it’s in our best interest to ensure their mental stability. But that’s the easy part compared to healing the emotional wounds of the women who had their families murdered before them and were then compelled to have sex with the killers. They will probably need years of therapy.”

Syssi had the unique ability to distill problems to their very essence and present them in a way that spoke to him.

“You are right.” Kian pulled out his phone. “I’ll text Vanessa and ask her to call me.”

Smiling, Syssi glanced at her watch. “I love how you are always so quick to implement my suggestions, but it’s eleven-thirty at night.”

“I’m sure Vanessa is still awake, and if she’s not, she’ll see my text when she wakes up and call me first thing in the morning.”





# VANESSA

As the sound of an incoming message pulled Vanessa out of the fascinating storyline she'd been immersed in, she frowned and put down her e-reader.

A message this late at night could only mean trouble.

It couldn't be incoming rescued victims. Since half of the Guardian force had left to liberate the Kra-ell, all the trafficking rescue operations had been put on hold until they returned, and she didn't expect any new arrivals.

Perhaps one of the residents was having an episode, or maybe one of the rehabilitated survivors needed to talk to her.

The victims' fear never really went away, and panic attacks were common.

They knew they could call Vanessa anytime, and she would take the call no matter where she was or what she was doing.

Snatching the phone off the charger, she was relieved that the message was from Kian, but when she read it, she got worried for an entirely different reason.

What the heck could he want to talk to her about at this hour of the night?

It wasn't late by immortal standards, and she hadn't been asleep, but still, people usually didn't call her at midnight unless it was an emergency.

Frowning, she called him.

“Good evening, Vanessa. Thanks for calling me back so quickly.”

“Did something happen? Is someone having a meltdown?”

He chuckled. “Except for Ingrid? No, I don’t think so.”

With a relieved breath, Vanessa pushed up on the pillows and folded her legs in the lotus position. “What’s going on with Ingrid?”

“The usual. Too much work and not enough time. You’d think that being immortal, we would take things easy and not rush anything, but it seems like there is always something that has us running around like headless chickens.” He huffed out a breath. “Why did I just say that? I’m a vegan, for Fates’ sake, and that image nauseates me. But anyway, Ingrid is about to lose her mind or resign from her position and open a design studio in town.”

Vanessa had no clue what he was talking about. Why was Ingrid about to lose it?

The truth was that she was out of the loop. She hadn’t been back in the village in at least a month, or had it been two?

Her only sources of gossip hadn’t mentioned anything out of the ordinary, either. Vivian had mentioned Magnus being overworked because so many Guardians were on the other side of the world, and Kri had canceled her class the previous week for the same reason.

It dawned on her then that she hadn’t spoken with Ruth or Stella in far too long. The three of them used to be best friends, but they had drifted apart.

Since Vanessa had become the director of the sanctuary, Ruth had taken over management of Nathalie’s old café, and Stella had become the in-house clothing designer for Mey and Jin, the three of them had gotten so busy that they’d neglected their friendship. That resulted in effectively disconnecting Vanessa from the gossip grapevine.

“Forgive me for being out of the loop, but I don’t know what’s going on and why Ingrid is overworked.”

“Haven’t you heard about the Kra-ell situation?” Kian sounded incredulous. “That’s one of the most monumental changes in the clan’s history and what everyone is talking about lately.”

Closing her eyes, Vanessa took a silent breath. “The last I heard, they were on our cruise ship, sailing toward Greenland.”

Kri was her usual source of information about the various missions the Guardians were involved in, but since the Kra-ell operation had started and the local rescue missions had been put on hold, all the remaining Guardians were on duty in the village, and Kri hadn’t even taught her weekly self-defense class.

There was a long moment of silence. “How long has it been since you last visited the village or talked with your son?”

She sighed. “It’s been a while.”

“What happened?”

Was Kian trying to psychoanalyze her?

Vanessa shook her head.

He was simply concerned about her.

“Jackson is busy with the new bakery he’s building from the ground up, and it has been a crazy month in the sanctuary, with volunteers quitting and new ones coming in. I had to train them while picking up the slack for those who quit, and I just haven’t had time for anything personal. I suggest you give me the SparkNotes version of what happened recently and how it pertains to me.”

“I don’t know what sparks have to do with notes, but I assume you mean a summary. So here it goes. We raided the Kra-ell stronghold, hoping to set a trap for the compeller who led them, but despite our best efforts to prevent any information from leaking out of the compound, he somehow found out about the raid and stayed away.”

“I know that part.” Vivian had given her the highlights. Obviously, being married to a Guardian, she knew much more than she’d divulged, but she was never sure about what was okay to reveal and what was not, and Vanessa hadn’t pressured her to say more than she’d been comfortable with. “You had to evacuate the place and get the Kra-ell out so Igor couldn’t return and reassert his mind control over them. You smuggled them into Finland and got them on our cruise ship. They were supposed to arrive in Greenland and fly somewhere from there.”

“Right. I see that you are partially updated. As we expected, they were all implanted with trackers so Igor could follow them, and he did. I’ll spare you the details of how we captured him, but the bottom line is that we have him, and we are bringing him and several members of his inner circle to the keep’s dungeon for interrogation. We will host the rest of the Kra-ell in the village, either temporarily or permanently, and that’s why Ingrid is so busy. She and a bunch of volunteers are preparing all the vacant homes to receive them.”

A chill ran down Vanessa’s spine. Had Kian suffered a nervous breakdown, or had he been abducted by aliens and replaced with a clone?

The Kian she knew would’ve never allowed a bunch of strangers in the village.

“Why would you do that? Wasn’t there somewhere else you could’ve put them?”

He huffed out a breath. “That would have been more like me, wouldn’t it? But here is a thought. If they were not a slightly different species of people but a group of unaffiliated immortals we had discovered, families with children who had been subjugated to a powerful compeller, escaped, and needed shelter where they would be protected from discovery by humans and the Brotherhood, wouldn’t you have invited them to the village?”

“Only if they were willing to swear alliance to us like Kalugal’s men did.”

“Precisely. My mother ensured Kalugal’s full cooperation with compulsion, and Toven did the same with the Kra-ell. The only reason for the reluctance to accept them is that they are different from us. Once I realized that, I knew that I had to offer them the option, but I didn’t decide on it alone. The council approved, and later, once our people have gotten to know the newcomers a little better, I’ll put it to the vote in the big assembly. If they turn out to be a pain in the rear, we will relocate them somewhere else, most likely Safe Haven. Many of the humans from the compound chose to settle there instead of the village.”

Interesting. It made sense for the humans to prefer Safe Haven, but she was curious about their reasons.

That was a topic for a different conversation, though.

“How many newcomers are we expecting in the village?” she asked.

He chuckled. “I’m not the kind of guy who believes in signs, but after hearing that their number is almost identical to the number of our clan members in Scotland, I became convinced that the Fates had maneuvered events to bring the Kra-ell to our village.”

“I don’t see how those two things are connected.”

“I built phase two of the village to accommodate the Scottish arm of the clan, but since they are not keen on leaving their castle and joining us, most of those homes have remained vacant. It would seem that they were waiting for the Kra-ell.”

Now she was sure that Kian had been replaced with a clone.

“Who are you, and what have you done with the grumpy guy who doesn’t believe in the Fates and doesn’t trust anyone?”

“He got mated, became a father, and is a lot happier and less grumpy.”

She hadn’t expected Kian to answer her so candidly, and his words triggered a slew of unexpected emotions. She was so happy for him that tears stung the back of her eyes.

“I’m glad that you got your happily ever after, Kian. You deserve it.”

“Thank you. You deserve it too, and I hope you get it sooner rather than later.”

Okay, now she was tearing up for real, which was unacceptable. She needed to change the subject to something more pragmatic.

“When are the Kra-ell arriving at the village?”

“In about seven hours.”

“Wow. No wonder Ingrid is freaking out. I assume you need my help or you wouldn’t have contacted me at midnight.”

“I do.” He sighed. “The Kra-ell will get probed by Edna to determine their intentions, but she might not be able to penetrate their shields. They are almost impervious to thralling and shrouding and respond to only the strongest compulsion. If she fails, I will need you to evaluate them the mundane way, using the tools of your trade.”

“That’s a lot of people to evaluate. I can perhaps do one a day, and you will need to bring them here. I don’t have time to commute to the village.”

“That’s not going to cut it. The evaluation is only a small portion of what I need you for. The Kra-ell also need psychological help. The older females are grieving the families they lost and the way they had been used for breeding and pleasure by Igor and his pod mates. Those who were born in the compound have other issues to deal with. They are all the children or grandchildren of those males. Nearly half of them were recently killed, and the other half is about to stand trial and most likely get sentenced to death by the other Kra-ell. A human psychologist can’t help them. You are the only one who can.”





## VROG

“*I*s that good?” Vlad called from the tree branch he was perched on.

Vrog shielded his eyes with his hand. “I think it’s a little too high.”

The banner flapped in the wind, and the terrain was uneven, making it difficult to tell whether the banner’s sides were equidistant from the ground.

Vrog’s eyes burned from lack of sleep, so that might have something to do with his difficulty estimating the banner’s equilibrium. Excitement had kept him awake last night, but it also energized him, and he didn’t feel fatigued.

“Drop it lower,” Wendy said. “By at least a foot.” She turned to Aliya, who had scaled the other tree. “Half a foot on your side.”

His future daughter-in-law sounded so confident in her instructions that he didn’t bother to check whether she was right.

The Welcome to the Village banner had been made for a different celebration, but thankfully, Amanda had saved decorations from every event that she’d ever organized in the village, so they had plenty to work with.

Not many had volunteered to help with the decorations, though, but he wanted to believe that was because of the early morning hour and not because people were unhappy about the Kra-ell’s arrival.

Everything was being done in such a rush that it was a wonder that the welcome to the village celebration was coming along so nicely. The Odus were busy organizing tables with refreshments, drinks for the purebloods, and snacks for the hybrids who could eat human food.

He would finally be reunited with Jade and Kagra and the other females of his tribe, making the males' absence even more painful. Some of the pureblooded males had been jerks, but he remembered fondly those who hadn't been condescending or mean to him and the other hybrids.

Vrog missed his father, but most of all, he missed his hybrid friends.

"Good morning," Kian said from behind him. "I didn't plan on throwing them a welcome party, but it's a nice touch. Was it your idea?"

"It was Wendy's," Vrog admitted. "I was too excited to think straight. There are so many things I want to say to Jade and the others."

"I bet." Standing next to him, Kian stuffed his hands in his pockets. "They are coming with forty-five kids of varying ages. You will have enough students for your school."

The excitement bubbling in Vrog's stomach reached fever pitch, but he quickly quashed it with a dose of reality. "I don't want to make plans before the big assembly votes in favor of them staying."

"Make them." Kian pulled a hand from his pocket and put it on Vrog's shoulder. "Your people will stay here and become part of our community. The entire thing has the Fates' mystical fingertips all over it. I wish the Fates had also devised solutions for the complicated logistics involved, but they left it all up to us."

Vrog frowned. "I thought that it was all done. Ingrid took care of the housing."

Kian laughed. "I wish it was that easy. We gifted the livestock they brought with them on the ship to a local farmer, and I had to find a supplier for farm animals here. Then I had

to find a suitable location for the animals far enough away from the village so the stink wouldn't reach here. They also need a barn, and I've already ordered building materials. I just hope the Kra-ell know how to build things because I can't get a construction crew on such short notice. Then I had to solve the problem of how to feed the purebloods until the animals and the barn were ready. We need a large supply of blood and the freezers to store it. Thankfully, Jackson has connections in the food supply industry, and he's taking care of that for us. Three large freezers and ten crates of frozen animal blood are out for delivery and should get here in time for their arrival."

Vrog felt his cheeks heat up with embarrassment. He should have helped with that instead of trivialities like a welcome celebration.

"I'm sorry that my people are giving you so much trouble, and I'm grateful for everything you're doing for them."

Kian nodded. "I hope they will make it worth the trouble."

"They will. The Kra-ell are proud people who will not be happy living on charity. They will do everything they can to pay you back, either with money, labor, or both."

"I was thinking more along the lines of helping us with security, but there are many other jobs in the village that they can take on if they want to. That said, I'll leave it up to them to decide how much or how little they want to do. They've been enslaved for long enough."

Aliya jumped down from the tree and walked over to them. "Hi. I couldn't help overhearing your conversation, and I didn't hear anything about the gerbils. What did the Guardians do with them?"

Kian grimaced. "They are on their way as well. The Guardians brought them to Greenland and then loaded them on the planes. William needs the trackers that were embedded in them, and there was no time to remove them in Greenland."

Wendy tied a garland to one of the branches and walked over to their small group. "Maybe after William takes the

trackers out, they can be given to the children as pets.” She glanced at Vrog. “Do Kra-ell kids have pets?”

He stifled a chuckle. “Giving a pet to a bloodsucker is not the best idea. Imagine if a kid gets attached to the little critter and then decides that drinking blood from animals is gross. The child could starve to death.”

Wendy rolled her eyes. “One has nothing to do with the other. Plenty of human kids have pets, and they still eat meat and don’t think it’s gross.”

“Just because a cow doesn’t look like a dog doesn’t mean that a child can’t make the connection,” Kian said. “I wonder how that works. Is that what they mean by dissociation?”

“Kids don’t know where the meat comes from,” Wendy said.

Vlad jumped down from the tree and walked over to them. “Good morning, Kian.”

“Good morning, Vlad.”

“Is anyone going to meet the Kra-ell at the airstrip? I’m asking because I wondered whether Vrog, Aliya, and I should be there when they land.”

“They are not landing on our airstrip, and Magnus will be there with several delivery trucks and Guardians to escort them.” He waved at the banner and the Odus preparing the tables. “That will have to do as a welcome party. We must get them out of the airport with as little fanfare as possible.”

“Why are they not landing on our airstrip?” Wendy asked.

“The two planes we originally chartered were too big to land there, and we made a last-minute change to six smaller ones, but they were still too large for our runway. We are bringing them to three small airports, two not too far from our airstrip and one closer to Safe Haven.”



## MO-RED

As the plane began its descent, Mo-red peered out the window. At first, all he could see were clouds, but when the aircraft got below the cloud cover, he saw sparsely wooded mountains and no airport in sight.

“Where are we going to land?” he asked, hoping one of the soldiers accompanying them would answer.

To say that they weren’t forthcoming with information was an understatement. Most of the time, they responded to his questions with a blank stare or a shrug.

It was ridiculous. Who was he going to tell?

“Somewhere safe and remote,” one of them said.

Mo-red had wondered how they would transport ten bound males through an airport, including the sedated Igor, who would have to be carried. The compeller wasn’t with them to clear the way by having the humans look the other way, and Mo-red feared that they would land the plane on a deserted stretch of road. It was a relatively small craft, but it was still too large to land just anywhere, and he hoped they knew what they were doing.

Igor’s original pod members were in chains, but the other purebloods and hybrids on the plane were not. Evidently, the immortals didn’t consider them as dangerous.

Still, they were all heading to the same place, which was probably a jail or some other holding facility. Igor’s pod members would be detained until their trial, but Mo-red had no

idea what the immortals would do with the others or why they had been singled out.

The rest of their people would join the immortals wherever they lived, and he was also worried about that.

The guards he had gotten to know were decent enough, and they didn't seem as haughty and entitled as their progenitors, the gods, but he was still afraid of how his people would be treated.

Would the immortals look down their noses at the Kra-ell because they were only long-lived and not immortal?

Would they fear their superior strength and try to subjugate them like their ancestors had done?

“Do you trust those new friends of yours?” he asked Pavel.

His son waited to answer, which meant he wasn't sure. “So far, they have done everything they promised and more. They freed us from Igor.” He looked into his eyes. “How does it feel to be free of his compulsion?”

Mo-red lifted his chained hands. “If anything, I'm less free than I was before.”

“True. But at least Tom will not command you to kill anyone.”

Mo-red tilted his head. “Are you sure about that? He might be just as bad or worse than Igor. We moved from under the rule of one dictator and into the clutches of another, only the new one is a god, and in my experience, we shouldn't expect anything good from him and his kind.”

Pavel pinned him with a hard look. “Igor is part god.”

“That's ridiculous. He's not pretty enough to be the son of a god or a goddess.”

“And yet he heals at the rate gods heal and can compel like the strongest of their compellers.”

“Our queen is a strong compeller as well.” Mo-red winced. “Well, she was a strong compeller. I don't know if the current queen is a compeller or even if there is a queen. No one was

sent to look for us, which makes me think that something bad happened back home.”

Had the queen known that the ship had traveled far slower than it had been supposed to? Or had the malfunction that caused the delay also impacted the ship’s communication with home?

They might have thought the ship had gotten lost and assumed that everyone aboard had died. Or maybe they had sent scouts to look for the settlers while the ship was still in space, and when they couldn’t find anyone, they’d reported that the settlers were lost.

“Maybe they sent a scouting ship but couldn’t find us.” Pavel waved a hand at the row across from them where the immortals sat. “Igor looked for the gods and couldn’t find them, but here are their descendants.”

“That is true.” Mo-red closed his eyes.

Behind them, Shover started humming a sad tune. It was sung at funerals of those who didn’t fall honorably in battle but died some other way.

The way they were going to die.

Jade would most likely not grant them the option to die honorably in a duel. She had no reason to show them mercy.

“Stop that,” Volpath said. “We have not been tried and found guilty yet.”

“We will be,” Berdogh murmured. “We are guilty.”

“Be quiet,” Madbar commanded.

Berdogh huffed. “No one here speaks Kra-ell. They don’t understand what we are saying.”

Only the original settlers used the Kra-ell language to talk among themselves. Some of the young ones who’d been born in the compound could understand it, but even they preferred to speak Russian or Finnish because the hybrids had learned those languages from their mothers and used them to communicate between themselves. Then there was television that they’d watched in several languages.



Most of the time, life in the compound hadn't been so bad. Not for the males, anyway. The females might have a different perspective, especially the older ones who'd grown up in a female-dominated society.

Thinking about what the females had endured, Mo-red was glad that the worst offenders had been dealt with by Jade and Kagra.

Distor, Artuom, Vombad, Merdov, Gorven, and Cavard were unlike Mo-red and the remaining males from Igor's pod. Believing wholeheartedly in Igor's vision for a new male-dominated Kra-ell society, they would have done his bidding even without being compelled to follow his orders.

Like Igor, those males wanted to have females on their terms, when they wanted them, and how they wanted them.

Mo-red had often wondered whether the distribution of Igor's male pod members represented the Kra-ell male population back home. If given a chance, would nearly half of them kill their fellow males dishonorably and violate the traditional ways of Kra-ell coupling?

It was such a chilling thought that Mo-red refused to believe it. Without honor, a male was no better than an animal.

Igor and the other six must have known each other before and plotted together to change things in their favor once they arrived on Earth. The settlers had been chosen by a lottery, but those seven could have somehow manipulated it so all of them would be picked up and placed together in the same pod.

Or perhaps the conspiracy had run deeper, and the gods had planted them to wreak havoc on the Kra-ell settlement. Although why would the gods want to sabotage that first settler expedition?

After all, one of the main settlement conditions that the gods had insisted on was the Kra-ell setting up colonies on other planets. They'd wanted to reduce the number of Kra-ell on the home planet.

When the plane's wheels touched down, Mo-red was thrown back against his seat.

“It’s good to be home,” one of the immortals said.

“We are not there yet,” another commented.

When the plane finally came to a full stop, one of the soldiers got up and opened the door.

A broad-shouldered, well-dressed immortal came in and surveyed the prisoners.

“Good morning. My name is Magnus, and I’m in charge of transporting you to your final destination.”

“Which is where?” Volpath asked.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Magnus said. “If you give us no trouble, you will be treated well, fed, clothed, and allowed to shower. If you misbehave, though, the retaliation will be swift and painful. So I suggest you all try to be on your best behavior.”

“We are compelled to obey,” Berdagh said. “How do you expect us to give you trouble?”

The guy smiled. “I don’t. But you could mouth off and do other stupid things. For your own good, you’d better not. The more cooperative you are, the better behaved, the better your chances of impressing our judge and your jury and convincing them that they should let you live.”



# VANESSA

Vanessa glanced at the timer on her desktop. Was seven in the morning too early to start calling people about a job opportunity?

After talking to Kian, she hadn't gone to sleep. Instead, she'd reviewed the information he'd forwarded to her on the Kra-ell and then compiled a list of every psychologist who'd ever worked in the sanctuary, either as a volunteer or as a part-time paid employee, and narrowed that list down to five names. None of them could run the place without her, but perhaps they could hold the fort while she dealt with the Kra-ell.

Leaving the sanctuary in someone else's hands felt like leaving a child with a new nanny.

Vanessa was uncomfortable with that. She wouldn't have minded a short break of a day or two, perhaps even a week, but it seemed like the Kra-ell would need much more than that.

Mey and Jin had done a tremendous job of collecting as much information as they could on each pureblood, hybrid, and human on the ship. They'd snapped photos of everyone, even the children, adding their names and a short comment on top of each photograph. Arwel had also written a few words, and Kian had forwarded everything to Vanessa so she would have something to get her started.

Looking at these snapshots, most would see proud beings who carried themselves with dignity, but Vanessa could always

see behind the masks people put on to shield the pain they were carrying inside, and her ability seemed to work just as well on aliens who looked a little different from humans and immortals.

She often wondered what it was about physical or emotional wounds that people felt compelled to hide.

Was it vanity? A survival mechanism?

Shouldn't she have the answers?

The textbooks offered many. Suffering ridicule, bullying, or abandonment as children or adults was blamed, as well as feelings of betrayal and shame.

Vanessa had a different opinion. She suspected that it wasn't emergent behavior but rather inborn. Animals that were physically wounded instinctively knew to find a place to hide, and so did humanoids, but in the case of the more intelligent species, that instinct extended to emotional wounds as well.

Humanoids were social creatures who needed a community to survive, and a healthy and happy member was an asset, while a sick and sad one was a burden.

The one marked difference about the Kra-ell was that the females wore their masks as firmly as the males despite suffering the most. In the human society, females were also more often victimized than males, but it was more socially acceptable for human women to show their pain.

Vanessa had no doubt that the Kra-ell females required psychological help to deal with years of grief and abuse, and the males needed help to deal with guilt over being forced to do things that went against their beliefs and their nature.

Their stories weren't meant for human ears, though, and as the only immortal psychologist, she was the only one who could help them.

One male in particular had caught her attention, and she'd gone back to look at his picture several times. He was in chains, and the note scribbled over his picture said he was one of Igor's original pod members.

She would've never guessed it from his expression, and she was rarely wrong. He looked relieved, as if he'd been liberated instead of chained and awaiting trial. He also looked resigned, but since he was facing trial and possibly execution, that was easier to explain.

Why was he relieved, though?

Was he glad Igor had been caught, and he would never have to do his bidding again?

He would be an interesting subject to study.

Vanessa sighed.

Taking care of the Kra-ell was necessary, but she was also looking forward to it. It was going to be exciting to work with people from such an alien culture and to analyze how it had shaped them.

Was the way their society had been structured inborn or learned?

Would they respond to treatment that had been designed for humans?

To be able to dive into the project, though, Vanessa had to appoint someone else to take over management of the sanctuary and supervise that person remotely.

Perhaps she could have therapy sessions with the girls remotely as well?

Just so they wouldn't feel as if she'd abandoned them?

It could never replace face-to-face interaction, but it was better than disappearing on them altogether.

As a loud knock on the door startled her out of her reveries, she wondered who it could be so early in the morning. Perhaps one of the Guardians needed to speak with her?

Why didn't he call her instead of coming inside the restricted perimeter?

The girls were terrified of males, and the Guardians knew to stay outside the wall unless it was absolutely necessary for

them to get inside the building.

“Come in.” She got to her feet in case the person on the other side wasn’t an immortal and didn’t hear her.

When the door opened, and Karen walked in, Vanessa frowned. “What are you doing here so early?”

And what was she doing there on a Wednesday?

Karen’s Krav Maga classes were on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“Good morning.” Karen strode toward Vanessa’s desk, pulled out a chair, and sat down. “I need to talk to you.”

“Don’t tell me that you also want to quit.” Vanessa rounded her desk and returned to her chair. “It would be terrible timing.”

Karen squared her broad shoulders. “I never quit.” Her lips twisted in a grimace. “But that’s not always a good thing. I need your advice.” She shifted in the chair, spreading her muscular thighs and leaning her elbows on the desk as if it was her office.

“It must be important for you to come here so early in the morning. How did you even know that I would be here?”

“I know that you start your days early.” Karen winced. “I also know that you don’t have time, so I will make it short. My boyfriend has been getting on my nerves for a while now, but since I’m not a quitter, I tried everything I could to fix things between us. Nothing worked. Well, it did for a little bit and didn’t last. Then it occurred to me that perhaps we need a break from each other, but we live together, so that’s a problem. I can’t kick Jo out unless it’s permanent. So I thought that maybe I could move in here for a couple of months and help you out. The girls could use more self-defense training, and I can also teach other things.”

Vanessa smiled. “I would love to have you. But what is it that you need my advice on? I can’t tell you whether that’s the right move for you and your boyfriend without having all the details.”

“Pfft.” Karen waved a dismissive hand. “It’s the same crap all women complain about. He leaves his stinky socks on the floor instead of putting them in the laundry, doesn’t do the dishes unless I tell him, and spends too much time watching sports. Don’t get me wrong, I love watching a good game occasionally, but not every evening. So I go into the bedroom to read, and I fall asleep because, let’s face it, despite my phenomenal fitness level, I’m not as young as I used to be. Then I wake up in the morning and find empty beer cans and pizza boxes on the coffee table. Jo could at least have the decency to offer to share that with me and if not, to hide the evidence. The guy has no shame.”

Vanessa’s advice would have been to drop the guy and not look back, but it was Karen’s decision to make. She would eventually come to the conclusion that Jo preferred to spend his time alone rather than to be with her. They hadn’t been together long and had no kids, so walking away from the relationship shouldn’t be too difficult.

“None of that is terrible, but I understand your frustration with Jo. What are your reasons for hanging on to the relationship?”

“I told you. I’m not a quitter. If I was, I would have told him to leave months ago.”

So that was why Karen was hanging on. She associated breakups with failure. It wasn’t uncommon for women to believe that, and when children were involved, every possible effort needed to be made to keep the family unit together. But sometimes, there was no fixing what was broken, or even holding it together with some duct tape until the kids were old enough was not possible.

Things were much simpler when no one other than the couple was impacted by the breakup.

Vanessa scrunched her nose. “This is advice from me as your friend, not as a psychologist. Don’t call it quitting. Call it something else.”

“Like what?”



She hesitated for a moment. “Call it house cleaning.”



## KAREN

“Cleaning house!” Karen snorted out a laugh. “I love it.” She lifted from the chair and leaned over to clap the therapist on her bony back. “I knew that I’d come to the right person. Thank you.”

Karen hadn’t been sure about asking the psychologist for advice. She’d never been in therapy, not even after her fiancé had been killed in a suicide bombing attack, or homicide attack as it should be called.

She didn’t use to believe in psychotherapy, but after witnessing Vanessa’s incredible dedication and compassion, and what she and the other volunteers were doing to restore the victims’ self-confidence, Karen had changed her mind about the effectiveness of therapy.

It took a long time though, and it required patience that Karen didn’t have.

“You’re welcome.” Vanessa regarded her with amusement in her eyes. “Do you still want to move in here for a while? Or are you ready for a clean break?”

“Your advice is solid, and I should take it, but if there is room for me here, I want to give Jo one more chance. If and when I decide to end things between us, I don’t want to have any regrets.”

The sad truth was that Karen didn’t want to be alone. Jo wasn’t the lover of her dreams, but he was a fitness instructor like her, who also had never been married and didn’t have

kids, and he was a pretty decent guy except for the few bad habits that drove her up the walls.

She didn't love him, and he didn't love her, but they were reasonably comfortable with each other, and at her age, she figured that was good enough.

“What about the classes you teach in your studio in Venice?”

That was another thing Karen had wanted to talk to Vanessa about, but it was more embarrassing to ask about a possible paid position in the sanctuary than to ask a psychologist for relationship advice.

“The building where I had my studio was sold. The new owners want to make extensive renovations, and it will take months before it's ready. They offered to lease me the studio at the same rate as before once the project is done, but I can't wait that long. I need the income. I looked for a new place, but there was nothing I could afford in Venice, and that's where my clientele is. So then I got the idea that you could use me here full-time. I can teach more than fitness and self-defense. I can also teach high-school-level math and statistics. I have a teaching certificate.”

As Karen noticed that Vanessa's eyes suddenly started glowing, she wondered whether the psychologist was wearing neon contact lenses.

Nah, she'd never heard of anything like that. Maybe Vanessa was tearing up and the light from her desk lamp reflecting off them.

What had she said to make the woman cry, though? Did Vanessa hate math and statistics with such passion that mentioning them distressed her?

Some people weren't good at the subjects, but Karen had never encountered anyone so traumatized by them that the mere mention evoked a tearful response.

She was about to apologize when Vanessa blinked several times, and the glow diminished.

Maybe she'd blinked the tears away.

“You’re hired,” Vanessa said. “When can you start?”

That was a nice surprise.

Letting out a breath, Karen smiled. “For a moment there, I thought that you were about to cry, and that maybe you were traumatized by math.”

Vanessa chuckled. “That’s one kind of trauma that I haven’t encountered yet. So, is it a yes?”

Karen appreciated the enthusiasm, but she needed to know how much Vanessa was willing to pay her. She had bills to pay and couldn’t work for minimum wage. Jo paid half of the rent and utility bills, but she still had to pay the other half even if she temporarily didn’t live there. He couldn’t afford the Venice apartment on his own.

“I can start immediately, but I need to know how much you can pay me.”

“That depends.” Vanessa leaned back and steeped her fingers.

“On what?”

“Are you up to running this place in my absence? How are your administrative skills?”

“Running the place? In what capacity?”

“You will be managing the scheduling, ordering supplies, doing the books, etc. I have a project that I need to take on, and I need someone I can rely on to run the place in my absence. You are not a psychologist, but you are a capable woman, and you have a can-do attitude. So, what about those administrative skills?”

“Excellent. My Krav Maga business might be small, but it still requires lots of paperwork and reporting, and I do it all by myself. I only talk with my CPA once a year when it’s time to file my tax return.”

“That’s good. Much of my work is ordering supplies and keeping track of the expenses.” Vanessa sighed. “I should hire someone to do that full-time. This operation has grown beyond what I can handle on my own.”

“Then I’m your girl. By the way, where are you going, and how long will you be absent?”

“I was asked to do a short-term project and I can’t decline for reasons I can’t go into. I will still be available to you on the phone and via email, so it’s not like I’m throwing you in at the deep end without a lifeline. The girls like you, the volunteers respect you, and I’m desperate. I have to find a replacement right away.”

Karen’s smile turned into a grin. “Are you desperate enough to pay me ten grand after taxes a month?”

That should cover her expenses.

“That’s about fifteen grand a month gross. I can do that.”

Wow, that had been too easy. She should have asked for more. “Excellent. Does that include room and board, or will they be deducted from my pay?”

Vanessa’s lips twitched with amusement. “It’s included. If you want, you can take over my room while I’m gone. You can eat in the dining hall with the girls.”

Karen leaned over and extended her hand to Vanessa. “We have a deal.”

When the psychologist shook it with surprising strength for a delicate-looking thing like her, Karen glanced at her biceps. The woman was tall and lean, and her posture was excellent, but she didn’t have the kind of muscle definition that came from long hours in the gym.

Perhaps she was naturally strong? Or maybe she was one of those who gained strength but not the bulk?

“You’ve been working out,” Karen stated.

Vanessa dropped her hand in a rush. “Yes, well. As much as I have time for physical activity.” She sat back down. “Bring your chair around. I’ll show you where the files are and what you need to do.”

As Karen did that, she thought about the other peculiarities she’d noticed about the woman.

Vanessa never talked about her family or where she lived, her eyes were two different shades and emitted a strange glow, she had strong hands and needed very little sleep. She also had endless patience for the sanctuary's residents.

Maybe she was an angel?

It wasn't as silly a notion as most would think. Karen prided herself on being a freethinker who was not restricted by accepted dogma, but admitting that she believed in angels and aliens clashed with her tough lady persona. Hence, she preferred to keep it to herself.





# JADE

“*H*urry up.” The driver waved at Jade and her companions to get to the back of the truck.

The plane ride had been pleasant enough, and Jade had even caught a couple hours of sleep, but then they had been rushed off the plane so it could take off and the others could land at the single-landing-strip airport.

Phinas had told her about the bus with the windows that turned opaque when it neared the village, and that was what she’d expected. Instead, five delivery trucks with solid walls were waiting for them next to the landing strip.

Oh, well. It wouldn’t be pleasant, and it didn’t really matter how they got to the village, but it mattered to her that they were not waiting for the other planes to land. Jade wanted to see her people get into the trucks and know they were all heading the same way.

“Can we at least wait for the others to arrive?”

The driver let out an impatient breath. “Not everyone is landing at this airport. Besides, we are not going in a convoy. Each truck is going in a different direction.”

Jade turned to Phinas. “Why the precautions? No one is chasing after us. We can take our time.”

“No, we can’t,” the driver said. “And I don’t have time to explain.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Phinas offered her a hand up. “I’ll explain on the way.”

Jade climbed in without his help and sat down on the bench next to Kagra. “What happened to the nice bus you told me about?”

He joined on her other side. “We only have one bus and nearly two hundred and fifty people to shuttle. Besides, it was probably the only safe way to transport your people without drawing too much attention to ourselves and without them knowing where they were going.”

“I get that we are not allowed to see where we are going, but you don’t have to suffer back here with us. You can sit up front with the driver.”

Maybe it was what was expected from mates in his culture, but she didn’t need him to coddle her.

“I’m not allowed to know where we are going either.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Only a small number of people know where the village is located, and I’m not one of them.”

“Why not? Is it because you are Kalugal’s second?”

“Nope. Only the top security personnel have that knowledge, and even though you are my mate, I won’t tell you who they are.”

Igor had tried to keep the compound’s location a secret from her, but she’d figured out where they were despite his efforts to keep her and the other pureblooded females in the dark.

“Doesn’t it bother you that you are not privy to such basic information?”

“Not at all. If my former Brothers catch me or any of the other village residents, they won’t be able to torture the information out of us because we don’t have it, and I prefer it that way. I suggest you explain it to your people so they don’t try to be smartasses and start wandering around the mountains trying to find their way into the village.”

“Is it possible to find it?” Kagra asked from Jade’s other side. “I mean, if people went exploring, is it accessible on foot?”

“Not to humans, not unless they are rock climbers with the proper equipment and know what to look for. But the Kra-ell don’t have the same limitations. That said, you will all be equipped with cuffs that will sound the alarm if you try to leave the secure perimeter.”

Jade cringed. “That sounds a lot like Igor’s compound.”

“It’s not. The village is beautiful, the people are friendly, and you will be treated with respect. The security measures are a necessary evil, and they are temporary.”

“How temporary?” Kagra asked.

Phinas leaned closer to Jade’s ear. “Kian will probably tell you that he needs a year before he can trust you enough to do away with the cuffs, but from what I’ve observed, it usually only takes a few months. Aliya hasn’t been in the village long, and she doesn’t have to wear the cuff anymore. Vrog can come and go as he pleases, but that’s because he has a son in the village, and Kian knows Vrog would never do anything to endanger Vlad.”

That got the wheels in Jade’s mind spinning. “So if Drova stays in the village, Kian would allow me to come and go as I please?”

“You will have to ask him. Kian bases many of his decisions on his gut feelings, and he seems to like you, so there is a good chance he will give you more freedom. There is also the fact that you are my mate.” He grinned. “I used the forbidden word three times today, and you didn’t punch me. I also had my arm around your shoulders for the past five minutes, and you didn’t even notice. We are making progress, my iron heart.”

He was right. She hadn’t noticed.

It felt so natural for him to sit beside her, touching her, his thigh next to hers and his arm around her.

Glancing at the people crowding the narrow benches, Jade expected to see disapproving scowls, but no one seemed to be paying any attention to her and Phinas.

Maybe they were too preoccupied with thoughts about what awaited them in the immortals' village to notice, or perhaps they had already accepted her and Phinas as a couple, and she should stop making a big deal out of it and just enjoy being with him.



## SYSSI

“*T*his welcome party is so different.” Syssi hugged the sleepy Allegra to her chest. “It reminds me of when we welcomed Kalugal’s men, but that was on a much smaller scale, and they didn’t have kids with them. Some of the Kra-ell don’t even speak English, and I don’t speak Russian or Finnish. How are we going to communicate?”

Truth be told, she was excited and anxious to meet Jade. After everything she’d heard about her, the female seemed larger than life.

There hadn’t been time to bring enough tables and chairs to the village square, and given the gray clouds gathering above them, it was about to rain. They would have to keep the welcome party short and escort their new guests to their homes.

William and his team were working like possessed demons—Kian’s words, not hers—to assemble enough cuffs for all the adults and teenagers. After that was done, they would shift gears to assembling phones for all the newcomers. Naturally, the phones would have very limited functionality at first, but it was difficult to manage in the village without them.

There were no landlines, and although all the homes were equipped with inter-village-coms, they were meant more for emergencies than routine communications.

Amanda patted Evie’s back. “An English class for all of the Kra-ell and humans who can’t speak it should be Vrog’s first order of business.”

“I was thinking about the kids.” Syssi turned to Kian. “Can we use the classrooms in the underground for a school until we find a better solution?”

He took Allegra from her and cradled her in his arms. “Those classrooms are in use, but perhaps not all day long. I can have Onegus look at the schedule.”

“He can transfer part of the training to the keep,” Dalhu said. “With the dungeon nearly at full capacity, Onegus will have to keep a team of Guardians there anyway.”

Kian nodded. “Good point. There is no rush, though. These kids can afford to miss a few months of school. They can catch up later.”

Amanda caressed her daughter’s back. “School is as much for the parents as it is for the kids. How are they supposed to work or train, or whatever the Kra-ell do to pass their days, if their kids are home with them?”

Kian’s lips narrowed into a tight line. “We can’t solve everything in one day, Amanda. I refuse to be rushed.”

Amanda huffed. “It takes a village, Kian. You don’t have to come up with all the answers yourself. You can delegate.”

It was more challenging than she made it sound, and Syssi knew Kian was frustrated enough about having no time and insufficient help.

“Perhaps we need to take a break from the university and help out here?” she suggested.

They had taken a day off to welcome the Kra-ell, but that wasn’t something they did often.

Amanda’s perfectly sculpted brows formed a deep V. “I can’t just take a break. I have classes to teach, research to complete, and papers to submit.”

“Giving advice is easy,” Kian said. “But when it comes to actually doing the work, everyone has something else they need to do.”

“I couldn’t help but overhear.” Vrog walked over to their table. “The Kra-ell are not helpless children. They have

resources, and they are not afraid of hard work. They will find their own solutions. All you need to worry about is security.”

Kian regarded him with an amused expression. “Are they going to build a school? Do they know how to build and where to get supplies?”

Vrog hung his head. “I don’t know. Jade didn’t build the compound. It was already there, and she hired humans to build additional structures and improve the existing ones. The humans of the compound were in charge of maintenance.”

“That’s what I thought.” Kian clapped him on the back. “Don’t worry. We will solve the problems one at a time. Right now, we have homes ready for them so they have beds to sleep in, there is animal blood in the freezers so they won’t go hungry, and a truck full of clothing and footwear and other necessities is on its way and will probably get here at the same time they will.”

“Thank you.” Vrog dipped his head. “You’ve thought of everything.”

“I had help.” Kian put his hand on Syssi’s knee. “Between Syssi and Shai, I didn’t have to think too hard.”

“What about the dungeon?” Dalhu asked. “Was there enough time to make the changes I suggested?”

Syssi hadn’t known that Dalhu had made suggestions, and given the surprised expression on Amanda’s face, neither had she.

Kian nodded. “It was easy to do. Thank you for thinking it through, though.”

“What did you do?” Amanda asked.

“We made some modifications to contain Igor and the others without keeping them chained all the time. Dalhu offered a solution that solved a lot of the logistics.” He cast him a smile. “Do you want to help out with the interrogation? One look at you, and Igor will start shaking in his borrowed pants.”



Dalhu grinned. "I'm out of practice, but I'll do my best to look terrifying."

Amanda didn't look happy about that. "Are you sure you want to do that? You're a father now, and you can't let yourself become agitated. Evie will feel that right away."

He put his arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry. I will not turn into a monster. I will just pretend to be one." He turned to Kian. "When are you going to pay Igor a visit?"

"This afternoon. Are you free?"

Dalhu looked at Amanda. "Are you staying home for the rest of the day?"

"Yes. You can go if you want to, but I'm not happy about it."

"I know." He leaned in and kissed her temple. "But you are not going to veto it. Right?"

She let out a breath. "Of course not. I know that you need an outlet for your aggression from time to time. I'm saving my veto right for something more critical."

"Thank you." He drew her closer to him. "I promise not to let it affect me." He chuckled. "Did I take a turn for the worse after slicing off Sharim's head?"

"Not at all." She gave him a sultry look. "Just don't get any ideas about Igor's head. It belongs to Jade."



## MO-RED

*M*o-red opened his eyes, and as the bright light assaulted his pupils, he closed them right back. The piercing headache must have been the result of the tranquilizer the immortals had injected him with. As soon as he and the other prisoners had been loaded into the truck, the syringes had come out, and then it had been lights out.

The next time he hazarded opening his eyes, he only cracked his lids to look around. Not surprisingly he found himself in a prison cell, as evidenced by the iron bars and the steel door behind them.

“You’re awake,” Madbar said.

Mo-red rubbed the spot on his neck where he’d been injected. “How long were we out?”

“No clue.” Madbar lifted his hand to rub his own neck. “Did you notice the new accessory we’ve gotten?”

Confused, Mo-red gave the room another pass. It was small, with barely any space left between his bed and Madbar’s, but the bed was comfortable, the linens felt luxurious, and the walls were decorated with famous art reproductions. If not for the bars and the lack of windows, he would have thought he was in a modestly sized hotel room.

“Don’t look at the walls,” Madbar said. “Look at your wrist.”

As Mo-red lifted his arm, no chain dangled from it. Instead, a gleaming metal cuff was secured on his wrist.

“What is that?” He lifted his arm to get a closer look.

Since there was no visible seam, the thing must have been welded closed on him.

“I know as much as you do.” Madbar pushed to his feet. “I don’t care what it does as long as it means no more chains.” He stretched his arms over his head. “I love technology. Don’t you? It makes life better even for prisoners.” He took two steps and opened the interior door. “Nice bathroom. Come take a look.”

Ignoring his pounding headache, Mo-red got to his feet and peeked into the bathroom. Its size was proportionate to the cell, meaning it was tiny. But it had a toilet, a sink, and an open shower with no curtain.

“I didn’t expect the immortals to give us such comfortable accommodations.” Mo-red turned around to explore the other amenities in the room. “Freeing us from the chains is a nice gesture. I hope it bodes well for our future in here.”

Not that they were going to enjoy the immortals’ hospitality for long. Their trial was imminent, and so was their execution.

“I’m not worried about the immortals.” Madbar stepped inside the bathroom. “They are just providing jail services for Jade. I wonder what they get in return.”

Mo-red glanced at the security camera mounted near the ceiling. “Watch what you say in here.”

Madbar shrugged. “What can they do to me that is worse than what our people are about to do?” He closed the bathroom door behind him.

“True.” Mo-red crouched to look at the two plastic bins peeking from under his bed and found clothing, towels, and toiletries but no razor.

Did the immortals fear their prisoners would try to commit suicide?

“Is there a razor in the bathroom?” he called.

“A shaving machine,” Madbar replied from behind the door.

That was good. Like most Kra-ell purebloods, Mo-red had sparse body hair, and when his facial hair grew beyond a short scruff, it looked pathetic, which was why he preferred the clean-shaven look.

Mo-red shook his head.

Thinking about trivialities like unattractive facial hair was ridiculous when he had much bigger things to worry about, like keeping his head attached to his neck.

Sitting on the bed, he lifted his eyes to the ceiling and examined the two cameras installed at opposite corners of the room. No effort had been made to hide them, so their captors wanted them to know they were being watched.

His assumption was confirmed when the heavy steel door started opening a moment after Madbar had stepped out of the bathroom.

When the door opened all the way, an immortal stepped up to the bars. “Good morning,” he greeted them while examining the bars. “Nice work,” he said to someone behind him. “When were these installed?”

“Yesterday.” Another immortal joined him. “Frankly, I don’t know why they were needed. The doors are impenetrable.”

“The idea is to leave the doors open, so the prisoners don’t feel claustrophobic in there.”

It was nice of him to think of their comfort and well-being. Did he also know that the Kra-ell needed sunlight and fresh air?

“My name is Jay,” the first immortal introduced himself. “And that’s Theo. We are two of the Guardians assigned to you.”

“Mo-red.” He put his hand over his chest in greeting.

“Madbar.” His friend did the same.

“We know who you are,” Jay said. “I’m sure you’ve noticed the cuff by now and are wondering what it does. So here is the rundown. The cuff is a monitoring device and contains a tranquilizer and a paralytic. Any of the Guardians here can activate either, but even if you manage to overpower all of us, the two drugs can be released remotely by the Guardians in the security office, which is miles away from here. If you try to pry the cuff open, it will explode and take your hand with it. I don’t think you can regrow limbs, so playing with them is not advisable. Are we clear so far?”

Mo-red nodded.

He had no escape plans, so the added security features were irrelevant to him.

“Good,” the Guardian said. “Over there is a freezer stuffed with bags of animal blood. If you are hungry, I suggest you take a couple of bags out and let them thaw. There is also a coffeemaker with pods if you like java. The television is connected to an internal server with thousands of movies to choose from.”

“Thank you,” Mo-red said. “Do you treat all your prisoners so well?”

The other Guardian chuckled. “Your former boss doesn’t enjoy all these nice amenities, but he has a cell of his own, so he has more room.” He pointed to his earpieces. “We are protected from his compulsion.”

“What about us?” Madbar asked. “If you open Igor’s door, and he’s awake, he can shout commands at us. He can order us to kill each other or try to remove the cuffs so our hands explode.”

The two Guardians exchanged glances, and Jay nodded. “Thanks for pointing that out. We will not open Igor’s door unless all the other doors are closed so you can’t hear him.”

“How well insulated are these doors?” Mo-red asked.

“You won’t hear him.” Jay turned to Theo. “Group text everyone and remind them to keep Igor’s door closed. When

they need to open it, they should close all the other doors first.”

“I’m on it,” Theo said.

Jay turned back to them. “Any questions?”

“What happens when the blood in the refrigerator runs out?”

“We will get you more.” Jay pointed to the slot at the bottom of the open door. “Through there.” He lifted his finger to the camera. “All you have to do is tell us you are out.”

Mo-red nodded to acknowledge.

They would not be starved for blood, only for sunlight and fresh air.





## EMMETT

“*I* should be in the village.” Emmett stood next to Eleanor in the dining hall, observing the preparations. “The humans are of no interest to me.”

She cast him an amused smile. “You couldn’t wait to leave the village, and now you want to return?”

“I would have liked to be there to welcome Jade and the rest of my people.” He leaned closer to her ear and whispered, “Instead, I’m stuck welcoming their humans.”

He’d hoped the Kra-ell would decide to come to Safe Haven, but to be perfectly honest with himself, it was not because he missed his people but because he wanted to show off what he’d accomplished.

The lowly hybrid would have become their master, so to speak, and it would have been so sweet.

“Perhaps I can convince Kian to allow Jade and a few of the others to come for a visit.” Emmett glanced at the door. “She will want to know that her humans are being taken care of.”

Eleanor looked doubtful. “From what you’ve told me about her, she probably doesn’t care.”

“That’s true.” He let out a sigh. “During my time in her compound, she barely interacted with them, or with the hybrids for that matter. I wonder if that has changed.”

“I’m sure it has.” Eleanor wrapped her arm around his waist. “She went through hell, and that changes a person.”

Also, I heard that she and Phinas are a thing. If she fell in love with him, that's a big change right there."

He scoffed. "Love? Jade is a pureblooded Kra-ell female. She doesn't know the meaning of the word. She's probably using him to get more information about the clan."

"Perhaps it started out that way, but you never know. You fell in love with me."

"I'm half human, that's why. The capacity to love comes from my mother. May she rest in peace."

Eleanor chuckled. "It always amuses me when you use human expressions. What do the Kra-ell say about their dearly departed?"

He winced. "It doesn't apply to humans. They wish their departed ancestors may walk proudly in the fields of the brave."

That saying had always made him cringe. Despite the favorable fable Jade had written about the brave Veskar, no one had ever thought of Emmett as brave, including himself. He hadn't been born with the warrior attitude of the purebloods, and he did his best to avoid violence.

"What does it take to earn a place in those fields?" Eleanor asked.

"Dying honorably in battle."

"Ouch." She snorted. "That must have been a thorn in your side growing up. You never wanted to be a warrior. You are a philosopher."

That was a nice way to put it. "Jade would have considered my studies and writings a waste of time. She would have approved of what I did here, though."

"Because you took advantage of the humans?"

He nodded. "Because I found a way to make money off them. Jade is not just a warrior. She's an entrepreneur."

As the double doors to the dining hall opened, and the first humans entered escorted by Guardians, Emmett assumed his

most charming smile and raised his arms. “Welcome to Safe Haven. Please, make yourselves comfortable.” He motioned toward the tables.

He repeated the same words several more times as the rest of them spilled into the dining room, some carrying sleeping children, others escorting elderly relatives.

He’d known that the seventy-eight people arriving would be of all ages, but he hadn’t had time to consider what should be done about the children. His community didn’t have any, and they had no facilities for learning.

“They will need a school,” he said quietly.

“Online education,” Eleanor whispered. “That’s the only way.’

“Of course.”

A young girl approached them and dipped her head. “Hello, my name is Jessica.” She glanced nervously at an older woman who nodded in encouragement. “Most people in our group can only speak Russian or Finnish, and you will probably need an interpreter. My mother asked me to offer my services.”

“You’re hired.” Eleanor offered the girl her hand. “I’m Eleanor, and Emmett is the handsome guy beside me. We run this place, and neither of us speaks Russian or Finnish. Your services are greatly appreciated.”

The girl blushed crimson. “I volunteer. I don’t need to get paid.”

“It was just a manner of speaking, but since we will need your assistance in pretty much everything, I think it’s only fair that you get paid.” She winked. “That’s the American way.”

Jessica’s bright smile could have illuminated the entire dining hall. “I like America.”

“Of course, you do.” Emmett patted her slim shoulder. “The United States is the best country in the world, or so we like to tell everyone.”

Her eyes widened. “It isn’t?”

“It’s subjective.” He motioned for her to follow him to the small podium erected at the front of the dining hall.

Once everyone was seated and the children hushed down, Emmett put his hand on Jessica’s shoulder. “Regrettably, Russian and Finnish are not languages I’m fluent in, and Jessica has volunteered to translate for me.”

He gently squeezed the girl’s shoulder, prompting her to translate.

When she was done, he continued. “Welcome to your new home. It must be difficult and scary to travel halfway around the world and start a new life, but I assure you that your life here will be much better than it was before. I can’t tell you that you’ll be free to do whatever you please right from the start, but in time, you will be able to pursue your dreams and those of your children. Once the adjustment period is over, and we establish mutual trust, I promise you will be freer than ever and much happier.”

A few people started clapping, and after Jessica had translated what he said, many more hands joined in the applause.

“The current community members are excited to receive you, but given the language barrier and other necessary adjustments, your initial interaction with them will be limited.”

He waited for Jessica to translate and then continued. “As for accommodations, they will be a little cramped until we build new homes for you.”

Hopefully, that wouldn’t take long.

Kian was lamenting that he didn’t have available crews to start the work, but Emmett trusted the guy to find a solution.

Somehow, he always did.



## JADE

Next to Jade, Kagra shifted on the bench for the umpteenth time. “I need to use the bathroom,” she finally admitted. “How much longer until we get there?”

“A few minutes,” Phinas said.

Kagra released a relieved breath. “Thank the Mother.”

Paying close attention to every stop the truck had made on the way, Jade figured out they were close to the immortals’ village. She had noted the change in drivers that had occurred several minutes earlier. The stop had been shorter than the usual traffic light stop, and the sound of the driver’s door opening and closing had confirmed her suspicion.

It made sense that they needed to change drivers at a pre-agreed point. The rented truck didn’t have the special windows that turned opaque or the self-driving capabilities of the cars the clan used, and the Guardian who had driven it from the airport was certainly not one of the select few who knew where the secret entrance to the village was. One of those higher-up Guardians had to take his place.

Jade put her hand on Phinas’s thigh. “When the delivery truck disappears into a secret entrance, won’t other drivers on the road notice?”

“It’s not a heavily traveled road, and we have cameras scattered along the way. The cameras feed the information to a computer that controls the cars. It won’t turn them into the entrance if other cars are nearby. In this case, though, the

driver has to get authorization from the computer that it can go in.”

“Complicated,” Kagra said. “Did William design all those security measures?”

“I guess so.” Phinas cocked his head to the side. “We just went into the tunnel. Did you notice the temperature change?”

Jade shook her head. “It’s pretty cold outside, so no, but the engine sounds different. It has an echo.”

“Brace yourselves,” Phinas said a moment before the truck lurched up. “That’s the lift. We are going up.”

It had to be a big elevator to fit the truck.

Jade was impressed by the setup. It was more elaborate than what Igor had done in Karelia, but since the immortals’ village was smack in the middle of a big city, it needed better camouflage and security measures.

When the elevator stopped, the truck moved a few meters forward, and then the driver killed the engine, and everything went quiet.

The back door was opened by a smiling Guardian. “This is your final destination. Welcome to the village.” He threw the doors fully open and took a step back.

Behind him stood a group of immortals that included Kian.

Jade’s gaze zeroed in on the guy, who was even more impressive in person.

Tall and broad-shouldered, he lacked the absolute perfection of the gods, but he had enough of it to barely pass for a human. Next to him was a small woman with a shock of blond hair in a riot of different shades, and in her hands was the most adorable baby girl.

Jade ignored Phinas’s offered hand, jumped down, and approached the leader of the immortals’ community.

“Hello, Kian.” She offered him her hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

“Welcome to the village, Jade.” He shook her hand briefly. “This is my wife, Syssi, and my daughter, Allegra.”

“Hello, Syssi.” Jade smiled, offered the woman her hand, and shifted her gaze to the baby. “And hello to you too, Allegra. Are you going to be the future leader of this community?”

“Dada.” The baby pointed at her father. “Mama.” She pointed at Syssi. “Gigi?” She pointed at Jade.

Adorable was too mild of a word. “I’m Jade, but you can call me Gigi if that’s easier.”

The girl nodded, and it looked oddly regal coming from such a young child. “Jaja.”

“You’ve passed the test,” Kian said. “I trust my daughter’s instincts, and she seems to like you.”

“I’m not sure she does.” Jade tilted her head and looked into the girl’s big blue eyes, which seemed much older than her age. “I think she’s reserving judgment for when she gets to know me better.”

Syssi grinned. “Only a mother can read a child’s expression so precisely. It’s innate.”

Behind her, Drova chuckled softly, but thankfully she didn’t make a comment.

“Let me introduce my daughter.” Jade motioned for her to step forward. “This is Drova.”

“Hi.” Her daughter squared her shoulders and offered her hand to Syssi first.

Next, Jade introduced Kagra and Morgada, Kian introduced his sister Amanda and her formidable-looking mate, and then they were on their way.

Meeting the goddess was either yet to happen or not at all.

“Vrog and Aliya have been working hard all morning to prepare a welcome party for you,” Syssi said. “But Kian convinced them to wait in the village square and greet you



after you are done with the introductory speeches and other minutiae.”

Jade wouldn't call putting security cuffs on each member of her community minutiae, but Syssi was just the type to use a word like that to minimize the impact of a monitoring device on the wrist of every Kra-ell adult and teenager.

“I appreciate that.” Jade kept her expression schooled.

Syssi and Amanda parted ways with them at the elevators, and the rest of the welcome group led them down a utilitarian-looking corridor.

“Most of your people are already here,” Kian said. “We are waiting for one more truck, but there is plenty to do before it arrives.” He led them to a wide staircase going down. “Usually, we lead newcomers to the surface first, but since there are so many of you, we decided to start the introduction to the village in the council chamber, which is the largest room we have, and it's right here in the underground.”

“I assume that is where we will be outfitted with locator cuffs?”

Kian gave her an apologetic glance. “William and his team have worked day and night to get them ready for you in time. They are simple devices that don't have all the features of the cuffs we usually put on newcomers.”

It was good to get confirmation that what Phinas had told her was true and that she and her people weren't the only ones deemed a threat until proven otherwise.

“In what way?” Kagra asked.

“I'll let William explain.” Kian turned to look at Phinas. “I'm sure you told Jade all about the old cuffs.”

Phinas nodded. “I did.”

“Good. Then they shouldn't be much of a surprise.”



## KIAN

“*I*’m sorry to have missed your welcome party.” Edna offered her hand to Jade. “I had a court case I couldn’t get out of, and Kian suggested that we meet in his office in the keep after I was done with the trial and you were done with the party.”

Kian had had no trouble convincing Jade to leave her people in Phinas’s and Ingrid’s capable hands and accompany him to the keep. In fact, she’d been eager to see the Kra-ell who had been taken to the dungeon instead of the village.

“So you are the judge.” Jade shook Edna’s hand. “Do you like to be referred to as the judge or the Alien Probe?”

Kian swallowed a snort while Edna cast him a baleful look.

“My name is Edna, and that moniker is neither flattering nor accurate.”

“Why not?” Jade let go of Edna’s hand. “Kian tells me that you have the ability to probe people’s souls, and your ancestors are not from Earth, so Alien Probe is most fitting.”

The female was playing with fire.

Was she looking to pick a fight with Edna?

Jade had been oddly quiet on the way to the keep. Kian had expected her to grill him with endless questions, but she’d sat in the back of the SUV with Brundar at her side, and other than casting a couple of curious glances at the stoic Guardian, she’d seemed comfortable with his silence.

“I prefer Edna or judge, if you don’t mind.” Edna turned to Kian. “Should I start with Jade?”

“That’s not a bad idea. If you can’t read her, you won’t be able to read the others, so we might skip that step and wait for Vanessa to arrive.”

“Who is Vanessa?” Jade asked.

“The clan’s psychologist. If Edna can’t use her talent on the purebloods, Vanessa will use the tools of her trade to evaluate them the mundane way.”

Jade snorted. “It won’t work on the Kra-ell. We are not weaklings like humans, and we don’t need a sympathetic ear to listen to our sorrows. Pain is meant to be endured, and we carry it proudly.”

Edna’s lips lifted in a half-smile. “I don’t envy Vanessa her job.” She sat back down on the small couch tucked into a corner of Kian’s old office. “Come, sit with me, and let’s get it done.”

Jade strode to the couch as if she was going to attack it instead of sit on it.

She was prickly, aggressive, and had even less emotional intelligence than Kian, but she was also honest, honorable, and brave. In short, the Kra-ell pureblood was a kindred soul if Kian had ever met one.

Go figure.

And to think that he’d assumed the worst of her based on what he’d heard from Emmett and later from Stella, who’d heard it from Vrog, who’d experienced Jade firsthand. It just proved how unreliable hearsay was.

“Give me your hands,” Edna instructed. “And look into my eyes. Try to lower your defenses, if you can, and let me in. It’s less painful when I don’t have to force my way through your mental walls.”

Jade looked at Edna’s hands and then up into her eyes. “Do we have to hold hands?”

“We don’t have to, but I often find that a physical connection helps.”

Jade’s lips twisted in a grimace. “From what Kian explained about your dungeon setup, you won’t be touching any of the males on trial, and you will probe them from behind the bars separating you from them.”

Edna turned her head to look at Kian over her shoulder. “That’s not going to work. I need to be close to them. Aren’t they under Toven’s compulsion to behave?”

“They are, but I don’t trust that enough to endanger you. They are incredibly strong and could twist your head off before anyone can stop them.”

“I can stop them,” Jade said. “I can stand behind them with my sword unsheathed while Edna does her thing. They won’t dare to breathe the wrong way.”

“I’ll take that under consideration.” He waved a hand. “First, let’s see if Edna can even do this.”

Reluctantly, Jade took Edna’s offered hands and let out a breath.

The door opened as Edna was about to start, breaking her concentration.

“I’m sorry for arriving late.” Toven walked in. “Am I interrupting?”

Kian looked behind him to see if Mia was there, but the god seemed to be alone.

“It’s just me.” Toven smiled apologetically. “Mia’s grandparents wouldn’t release her, so I decided to give it a go by myself. Dima and Anton shouldn’t stay locked up while the rest of their people are settling in the village, especially Anton. Dima can use a few more days in the dungeon. Perhaps it will help adjust his attitude.”

The two hybrids who had followed Sofia had been locked up in the dungeon for days, not because they were deemed dangerous but because they had to wait for Toven to release

them from Igor's compulsion. Once that was done, they could be taken to the village and outfitted with security cuffs.

"You are a kind male," Jade said. "Thank you for doing that for them."

"I'll take you to them." Kian rose to his feet. "Jade and Edna need to do this without distractions."

"After you."



# JADE

Jade hesitated before giving Edna her hands again. Supposedly the judge couldn't read thoughts, only intentions, and Jade's were good. But what if Edna sensed that she was hiding something?

If the judge found out that she was keeping secrets, she would tell Toven, and the god would have no trouble compelling Jade to disclose the information she was hiding.

Perhaps she should just tell Kian about the twins and be done with that burden. It wasn't as if he could find them. But what if he could?

As long as there was even the slightest chance that the clan would harm the Queen's children, the vow Jade had taken prevented her from revealing that they had been smuggled to Earth on the settler ship.

"Give me your hands," Edna said. "I promise not to bite."

Jade snorted. "Since Kian and Toven left us alone, the only one with fangs in this room is me."

"True." The judge smiled. "My fangs are metaphorical." She reached for Jade's hands and took them. "Try to relax. Think positive thoughts."

"Like what?"

"How did you like the village?"

"It's a nice place, but I didn't like seeing the Odus. They bring back bad memories."



They gave her the creeps, as humans liked to say. Between their fake smiles, fake human-looking middle-aged faces, and the knowledge of what was hiding under that misleadingly harmless exterior, Jade couldn't understand how the immortals were so relaxed around them.

Kian was worried about the Kra-ell males being strong enough to twist off people's heads with their bare hands, while the servant he entrusted his baby daughter to could do the same thing and worse.

He was a fool.

The Odus were machines, and like any chip-controlled device, they could malfunction or get hacked and turn against him and the people he loved.

"You weren't even born when the rebellion happened," Edna said. "Why would the Odus bring up bad memories?"

Evidently, the judge had been given an update about the history of the gods and the Kra-ell that Jade had imparted.

"I know what they were used for. They are killing machines, and seeing them bustling around and serving food and drinks while children and babies are around rubbed me the wrong way."

"I chose the wrong topic." Edna sighed. "Instead of relaxing, you've just gotten yourself even more agitated. How about Phinas? Does thinking about him bring you joy?"

"Yeah, it does." Jade grimaced. "And also stress. Our relationship is complicated."

Edna let out a breath. "Is there anything you can think of that will help you relax?"

"I can imagine slicing Igor's head off. That's a nice thing to envision."

"I bet, but it's not relaxing. I need you to be calm."

Jade shook her head. "It's not going to work. The more you pressure me to relax, the more agitated I become."

"Maybe you should see Vanessa first."

“Not going to happen. Just dive in and do your thing.”

Looking resigned, Edna gazed intently into her eyes. Jade didn't know what she was supposed to feel, but it felt like a lot of nothing. After a moment, though, she felt something like tendrils of smoke slithering through her mind.

She winced but tried to remain open to the process. The better she cooperated, the sooner it would be over.

“Stop that.” Edna let go of her hands. “Are you trying to trick me?” She looked angry.

“What are you talking about? I'm not doing anything.”

“You're flooding your mind with anger and sorrow, so I won't see past that. I was fooled once by a clever girl who did exactly what you were doing a moment ago. I will not be fooled again.”

“Your probe must be malfunctioning. I wasn't thinking about anything, and I don't feel any angrier or sadder than usual.”

“Well, then.” Edna retook her hands. “Perhaps you should talk with Vanessa after all. It's not healthy to carry so many negative feelings pent up inside of you.”

Jade blinked, once, twice. “Do you have any idea what will happen if I let them out?”

Edna nodded. “I understand. I lost someone I loved very much as well, but instead of turning hot like you, I turned cold and closed myself off. It took the love of a good man to thaw my frozen heart. Maybe what Phinas can do for you is cool the inferno raging inside of you.”

“He already did that to some extent, but I guess there is just too much of it in there for him to douse.”

“Let's give it another try, shall we?”

Jade shrugged. “It seems that your probe can penetrate my shields, which is a good sign. If it works on me, it will work on the others.”

“Indeed.”

The next ten minutes or so went by, with Edna looking like she was about to pop a vein while Jade could barely feel Edna's probing mental fingers brushing over her mind.

When the judge let go of her hands, she leaned back against the couch pillows and let out a sigh. "That was one of the hardest probes I've ever done, yet you don't seem affected."

"I barely felt anything. What did you feel?"

Edna turned her head toward her and smiled. "You passed my test. Your intentions are honorable, and you don't mean us harm. Duty and honor are your good motives, but they are clouded by your need for revenge and the pain you carry. I really think Vanessa can help you."

Jade leaned away. "Did she help you when your heart was frozen?"

"I didn't seek out her help. Like you, I was too proud and stubborn to admit that I needed help." Edna smiled sadly. "I didn't even realize that I needed help. I loved my practice, and I enjoyed my professional success. I thought that was enough."

Edna seemed like a tough female, someone who Jade could identify with. "You are right that we are not so different. As a Kra-ell female, I'm not supposed to feel anything other than duty and devotion to my tribe and the Mother's ways. As a Kra-ell leader, I'm required to adhere to our traditions even more strictly. I still don't understand how it is possible for me to feel what I do for Phinas."

Edna's smart eyes were full of understanding. "I might not have been limited by cultural dogmas like yours, but after losing the love of my life, I just didn't believe I could love ever again. And here I am today, loving my mate and working on a baby."

That was an unexpected admission. "I wish you the best of luck with that. Motherhood is the highest calling." Jade swallowed the lump in her throat and rose to her feet. "Are we done?"

“Yes.” Edna stood up as well. “Let’s find Kian and tell him the good news that my probe works just fine on pureblooded Kra-ell.” She winced. “Well, just fine is an exaggeration. A more accurate statement is that it works, but with difficulty.”



# VANESSA

Vanessa winced as the clicking sound of her high heels echoed off the dungeon's walls.

The lower levels of the keep's underground lacked the sophistication and luxury of the upper, above ground high rise. The corridors were wide, the walls made of blocks painted a cream color to soften the impact, and the floors were naked concrete that had been polished and kept surprisingly clean, given that no housekeeping crews were allowed in the belly of the beast.

Ingrid had spruced up the dungeon level with famous art reproductions, but the framed paintings didn't do much to make the space less depressing, and they did nothing to absorb the echoing sound.

"Over here." Kian waved from the other end of the hallway.

Shouldering her satchel, Vanessa quickened her stride and winced again when her shoes produced an even louder staccato.

What had possessed her to wear heels to the dungeon? She was a tall female and didn't need the extra height. She should have worn flats.

Except, her elegant outfit, the shoes, and her impeccably styled hair were part of the professional persona she liked to project, and that's how most of her clan members usually saw her.

Flats and jeans were reserved only for the sanctuary.

“Good afternoon,” she said as she reached Kian. “I didn’t know whether you wanted to meet in your old office or down here. I’m glad I gambled on you getting straight down to business.”

“Thank you for coming.” Kian led her into the largest cell. “We converted the dungeon apartment into the Guardians’ headquarters.” He motioned towards the couch. “Please, take a seat.”

“Hello,” she said to the two Guardians sitting at the desk and watching the array of monitors mounted on the wall.

The array replaced the television that was there before, and the long desk had replaced the console with video games.

“Hi, Vanessa.” Jay rose to his feet. “Can I offer you coffee?”

“I would love some, thank you.” She put her satchel on the coffee table and took off her coat. “So, who should I start with?”

Kian sat on the couch next to her and crossed his legs. “You tell me. Do you want the easy or the tough ones first?”

She wanted to see the one called Mo-red, but she didn’t know how he had been classified. “I don’t know who is who yet.”

“I guess that Valstar will be the toughest to crack. The eight males from Igor’s inner clique will be in the middle, and the fourteen who don’t hate Igor as much as the others will be the easiest. We are not even sure that they were Igor’s sympathizers. Their only crime was that they thought he was a good leader. Perhaps you should start with them.”

“I’d rather start with the inner clique.” That was where Mo-red belonged. “The other fourteen shouldn’t even be here. You should move them to the village and just have them watched more closely.”

“I might do that. I don’t even regard them as prisoners. That dubious honor belongs only to the former members of Igor’s pod.”

“Are some of them considered more dangerous than others?”

Kian shook his head. “I don’t think there is much difference between them. They probably represent the same level of difficulty.”

“Did Edna have time to assess them?”

Kian grimaced. “She did a test run on Jade, which wiped her out. The Kra-ell are different than us in many ways, especially the purebloods. They are impossible to thrall, immune to shrouding, and can be compelled only by the strongest compellers, meaning Toven. I wasn’t sure that Edna would be able to probe them, though as it turned out, she could, but it took more out of her than any other probe she’d done before. Jade, on the other hand, was barely affected.”

“Interesting. Given that they can’t be thralled or compelled by just any compeller, I’m surprised that Edna managed to probe Jade at all. Did she consider having Mia enhance her powers?”

Kian shook his head. “Mia’s talent doesn’t work on Edna’s. They tested it a while ago.”

“I see.” That was a shame. “What was Edna’s take on Jade?”

“She confirmed my assessment. Jade is honorable, dedicated to her people, and she means us no harm.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “She’s also filled with pain and rage. Edna believes she could use your help to let go of some of that.”

“Of course. Where is Jade now?”

“She’s talking to the two hybrids Toven has just released from Igor’s compulsion. Those are the two who followed Sofia when she was in Safe Haven. Edna went home to rest and will be back tomorrow to probe the prisoners. If that drains her as much as probing Jade did, she won’t be able to do more than one probe a day, and that’s a problem. I want her to assess all the adults, not just those in the dungeon, but we will start with them.”



“Valstar was Igor’s second-in-command, right?” Vanessa leaned down to get her satchel, pulled out her tablet, and opened it at the list she’d prepared.

“Yes. Toven believes that he was a victim like the rest of them and that he did what he did only because he’d been forced to obey Igor’s commands. Jade has a different opinion. She thinks that Valstar served Igor willingly and that he’s guilty of the crimes he committed in Igor’s name. She thinks he’s a great manipulator and can lie even when compelled to tell the truth.”

“If he’s that good, it will be difficult for me to crack him. Edna might have better luck with him than I will, but she should reserve him for last. The experience she will gain from probing the others will help her assess him.”

Kian nodded. “That’s true. Both of you should start with one of the other eight. Did you have time to review the information Mey and Jin collected?”

“I did.”

“Then you can choose who you want to start with.”

Vanessa stifled her excitement and schooled her features as she pretended to go over her list. “I would like to start with Mo-red. I understand that his son was helpful during the operation and that he claims his father is a good guy.”

Kian turned to look at Jay. “Did you hear anything to that effect?”

Jay nodded. “Max introduced me to Pavel, the son, who seems like a nice guy. He asked me to treat his father well, and I promised I would as long as he behaved.”

“Where is Max?” Vanessa asked. “I would like to get his opinion on the prisoners.”

“He went home to rest,” Theo said. “He’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

“You can call him,” Kian suggested. “You can also talk to Toven. He’s probably interacted with the young Kra-ell as much as Max has.”

“That would be helpful. I would like as much background information as possible before I start.”



## MO-RED

Mo-red lay on his side, his elbow propped on the mattress and his head on his fist, and watched Madbar scrolling through the selection of movies on the server.

They had already seen one complete movie, or rather Madbar had seen it while Mo-red pretended to watch, but his head had been elsewhere.

“I wish they had subtitles,” Madbar said. “My English is not good enough to follow the dialogue.”

“Maybe they do.” Mo-red turned on his back. “You should ask one of the guards.”

“Good idea.” Madbar rose to his feet and approached the bars. “Hey! I need help with the television!”

The guards had left the outer door open, which made the small cell a little less oppressive—a little being the operative word.

It wasn't the size of the cell. His room in the compound hadn't been much bigger, but he hadn't shared it with anyone, and it had a window, which made all the difference.

Besides, that room had been for sleeping and not much else. Most of his days had been spent either training or going on missions for Igor.

Being underground was draining his soul. It hadn't been so bad on the ship because the cabin had a large glass door, so the six of them could absorb what little sun there had been. It had

also been much more spacious, with room to move around. This tiny cell allowed no more than three paces between the bars on one end and the bathroom door on the other.

If the immortals didn't let them stretch their limbs and get some sunlight, he would go crazy.

Jay walked over to the bars with a chain draped over his shoulder. "I want both of you on your beds with your hands on your knees."

"Where are you taking us?" Madbar asked.

"I'm taking Mo-red to see the psychologist."

Mo-red's pulse sped up. Had they been reading his thoughts?

"I'm not going crazy. It was just a thought."

Jay arched an eyebrow. "Did I say anything about you going crazy?"

When Theo arrived with a stun gun at the ready, Jay unlocked the bars and slid them open. "Come out here, Mo-red."

He did as he was told and extended his wrists to the guard. "Then why are you taking me to see a psychologist?"

"She's going to evaluate all of your people, but Kian wanted her to start with the prisoners." Jay shackled one wrist and then the other. "You have the honor of being the first."

As Theo relocked the bars, Jay wrapped a chain around Mo-red's torso. Securing the shackles to his sides, he ensured Mo-red couldn't move his arms more than a couple of centimeters.

"Is that really necessary? I'm under compulsion to cooperate and not use force against anyone."

"I know." Jay crouched to repeat the process with his ankles. "If you weren't so strong, I might have given you a chance to prove yourself, but I can't risk leaving you alone with a female unless you are drugged or chained. She needs

you alert, so drugging you is not an option.” He rose to his feet. “Let’s go.”

“Good luck,” Madbar called after him.

Casting a quick nod at his roommate, Mo-red shuffled behind the guard and nodded at the other prisoners as they passed them by.

At the end of the hallway, Jay opened the door to another cell and motioned for Mo-red to halt before entering.

“Are you ready for him?” he asked the person waiting inside.

“Yes. Please let Mo-red in,” a female with a pleasant, cultured voice replied.

The sound was soothing, the kind of voice Mo-red had expected a psychologist to have. Not that he’d ever met one in person, but he’d seen them portrayed in movies, which should be a good representation of how they acted in real life.

“Slow and steady.” Jay took his elbow and led him into the room.

As the psychologist rose to her feet and smiled, Mo-red’s heart accelerated.

She was stunning, which shouldn’t have surprised him. The female was a descendant of the gods, and like her forefathers, she was perfect.

No, that wasn’t true. Vanessa wasn’t flawless, but the tiny imperfections only made her more alluring to him because they made her look natural and not doll-like as a goddess.

“Hello, Mo-red. I’m Vanessa.” She glanced at his manacled wrists and winced. “I wish those weren’t necessary, so I could shake your hand.”

“I wish so, too,” he rasped.

Why was he so drawn to her?

Blue-eyed blonds had never been his type. The human females he’d been with over the century he’d lived on Earth

had all been tall, willowy brunettes who approximated the Kra-ell ideal of beauty.

Until now.

Vanessa's stunning looks were only part of the attraction, though. Perhaps even the smaller part. What slew him was the compassion and understanding in her expressive eyes.

She didn't even know him, hadn't exchanged more than a greeting with him, yet he felt as if she was seeing all of him down to his soul.

"Sit down." Jay gave him a light push.

Without taking his eyes off the psychologist, Mo-red did as instructed and lowered himself to the metal chair.

"The chair is bolted to the concrete." Jay crouched down and secured the cuffs on Mo-red's ankles to the legs of the chair. "And this thing is made from an alloy that even you cannot bend. So don't try." He attached the manacles on his wrists to the handles and turned to Vanessa. "He's all yours. If he gives you any trouble, you know what to do."

She nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate your help."

"My pleasure." The Guardian saluted her before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.





# VANESSA

*M*o-red was much taller than Vanessa had expected, although given that the Kra-ell were tall people, she shouldn't have been surprised that he stood at least six inches over six feet. Maybe even more.

She was a tall female, but even with the four-inch heels she had on, he towered over her for the brief moment before Jay had secured him to the chair.

From his picture and those of the other purebloods, she'd expected the enormous eyes, but up close and personal they were oddly attractive.

The saying that the eyes are windows to the soul had never been more fitting, and the soul she saw in Mo-red's eyes was tortured and worth saving.

Vanessa's instincts were usually spot on, but there had been a handful of occasions when she'd been mistaken, and she'd learned to rely more on the process than on her gut feelings.

"I apologize for this." She waved at the chair. "I didn't request that."

"It's good to be careful," he said slowly, as if he was choosing his words with care.

His English was accented, but it wasn't a Russian or Finnish accent. It was probably his original Kra-ell, and it wasn't unpleasant.

“Let’s start with the basics.” She smiled. “How old are you?”

“I was twenty-eight when I boarded the settler ship, spent seven thousand years in stasis, and landed on Earth in June of 1908. How old does that make me?”

He sounded matter-of-fact, and his expression was schooled, but she could see the pain he was trying to hide.

“We shouldn’t count the time you were in stasis because you didn’t live those years. Adding twenty-eight to the time you’ve lived on Earth will make you one hundred forty-three years old.”

His lips curved up in a small smile. “Is that too old?”

“Too old for what?”

“To start a new life?”

Vanessa knew that wasn’t what he’d wanted to ask, but that was okay. She never challenged her clients when they told her untruths. It took time and trust before they got comfortable enough with her to open up and share their real thoughts with her.

“It’s never too late.”

He arched a brow. “Even for Igor?”

“I don’t know what lies in Igor’s future.”

From what others had said about him, the guy was a dangerous sociopath, but Vanessa would have preferred to make that assessment for herself instead of relying on hearsay. Regrettably, Kian didn’t want her to analyze Igor. She’d never dealt with an actual sociopath, and studying Igor and what made him tick would have been interesting.

“He’s not inherently evil,” Mo-red said. “He has no feelings, no compassion, no empathy, and that’s what makes him evil. He’s like an Odu, just without the safeguards. He sees a problem, figures out a way to solve it, and just does it without the slightest regard to the cost to anyone but him.”

That was an interesting observation, but she doubted Mo-red was right. No one, not even a sociopath, was devoid of feelings. Sociopaths had little or no sense of right and wrong, and they had no capacity to share or understand other people's feelings, and therefore didn't care.

"How about you? What do you feel?" she asked.

Mo-red opened his mouth, closed it, and sighed. "If I tell you, will you believe anything I say?"

"Why wouldn't I? You were compelled to tell only the truth."

"There are ways around compulsion."

She arched a brow. "Since you are sharing this with me, you must have employed them to avoid Igor's commands. How did that work for you?"

He let out a snort. "Igor is smart. He knows how to phrase his commands, so there is no wiggle room left, but he can't think of everything. I learned that if I kept my mouth shut and just waited to do things my way when he wasn't watching, I managed to do some good from time to time."

Some of the sadness left his eyes and was replaced with satisfaction. Mo-red was proud of the small accomplishments he'd managed to sneak past Igor.

"Give me an example."

"I took care of my sons and their mothers as best I could. I had to be sneaky about it, though. Showing affection for the females who gifted me with offspring or for my sons was considered a weakness, and Igor would have found ways to beat it out of me."

"How?"

Mo-red closed his eyes. "You don't want to know."

"I do."

Letting out a breath, he opened his big, dark eyes. "At worst, he would have killed one of my sons to teach me a lesson. One of the hybrids because they were less valuable in

his eyes. At best, he would have made it a point to torment them and their mothers.”

Mo-red’s mood seemed to have plummeted, and Vanessa wanted him to leave her makeshift office on a positive note.

“How many sons do you have?”

“Three. One pureblood and two hybrids.”

“I know that Pavel is your son. Who are the other two?”

“Elias and Vasily.”

Vanessa wrote their names down. “And their mothers?”

“Pavel’s mother is Borga, Elias’s is Hilla, and Vasily’s is Galina. Are you going to talk to them?”

“Yes. Do you want me to relay a message?”

As Vanessa realized she was holding her breath, she quickly released it with an annoyed inner huff. So, what if he wished to tell them that he loved them or whatever the Kra-ell equivalent of that was?

Maybe he would ask her to tell them to live long and prosper?

Mo-red tilted his head in contemplation. “There isn’t much to say. I hope they will be happy living among the immortals, and I wish them all the best.”



## MO-RED

Vanessa kept asking Mo-red questions, and he answered them on autopilot while observing and learning her.

She had the most amazing eyes, one vivid blue and the other with hazel shades mixed with the blue. Her blond hair was beautifully done in soft waves that cascaded around her slim shoulders, but what drew his attention the most were her lips.

Lush and pink, they looked so soft, so inviting. He could imagine taking hours exploring them with his own, maybe even nibbling gently on them, then licking the little hurts away.

He was not a great proponent of the Kra-ell violent dominance games. They were okay occasionally, and he enjoyed them to some degree, but his main objective when bedding a pureblooded female hadn't been pleasure but producing a child. Once that objective had been achieved, he'd no longer pursued their favors and was very happy to slake his needs with the soft and pliable human females who hadn't fought him and appreciated his various talents, especially what he could do with his tongue.

Were immortal females similar to human females? Or were they more aggressive?

“Mo-red? Are you with me?”

He shook his head. “Forgive me. My thoughts wandered elsewhere. What was the question?”

She eyed him with curiosity. “What were you thinking about?”

He felt his ears warm up. “I’d rather not say.”

“I see.” She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “Was it something personal in nature?”

“Yes.”

“You must miss your partners.”

He frowned. “What partners? Do you mean Madbar and the others? They are not my partners.”

“I might have used the wrong term. I meant the mothers of your sons or maybe a female you’ve been involved with more recently. Perhaps one of the humans?”

“I was never involved with a female, Kra-ell or human. The Kra-ell don’t develop relationships like humans do. The only partnering we do is for procreation or pleasure.”

“So, what were you thinking about?”

“You,” he was forced to admit by the god’s compulsion to answer truthfully.

Her eyes started glowing. “What were you thinking about me?”

“Nothing appropriate.”

“I need to know. Were you planning to overpower me?”

Mo-red tried to shift in the chair, but his movements were so restricted that he couldn’t. “I don’t enjoy those games as much as the rest of my brethren. I prefer a gentler style of intimacy.”

Humans called it lovemaking in movies, or some other crasser terms inappropriate in polite conversation, but he didn’t know what term the immortals used.

Vanessa was visibly taken aback. “Are you referring to sex?”

Had he misunderstood?

“That was what you asked, wasn’t it? You wanted to know if I was thinking about overpowering you, and the short answer was, no. If you were a Kra-ell pureblooded female, my answer might have been different, but you look so human that I assume you enjoy their style of intimacy more, and as it happens, so do I.”

When Vanessa’s shoulders started shaking, he had a moment of panic, thinking that he’d offended her so badly that she was about to attack and claw his eyes out.

He was defenseless in the damn chair.

But then she started laughing, and he relaxed, but he couldn’t understand what she’d found so amusing.

“I’m sorry.” She pulled out a tissue from a box on the desk and dabbed at her eyes. “I shouldn’t have laughed. But that was such a classic example of things getting lost in translation.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course, you don’t.” She took a steadying breath. “When you didn’t want to answer me, I assumed that you were plotting a way to overpower me so you could escape, while you just had sexy thoughts about me.” She smiled. “Thank you, by the way. I’m flattered.”

He would have preferred her to tell him whether she was interested, but that was probably a no, so perhaps it was better to leave it at that. He was in chains, about to stand trial, and his days were most likely numbered. He shouldn’t have entertained sexy thoughts about the psychologist.

Mo-red dipped his head. “I apologize for having inappropriate thoughts about you. I guess being on death row made me bolder than usual.”

Her amusement vanished in an instant. “You are not on death row. You haven’t stood trial yet and haven’t been sentenced yet, either.” She leaned forward. “You are not going to die anytime soon. I won’t let that happen.”

“Thank you, but regrettably, it’s not up to you. I will be judged by those I wronged, and they will find me guilty.”



“Are you?” she asked.

“I am. I did those things.”

“Did you have a choice?”

“There is always a choice. I could have ended my own life. My death wouldn't have saved any of those lives because Igor would have just commanded someone else to do that, but at least I would have died with a clear conscience.”



# VANESSA

*H*onesty was sexy, but Mo-red's was not innate. He'd been compelled to tell the truth by Toven.

Besides, she couldn't think of him as a potential partner. He was her patient, and he needed her help much more than he needed a bed playmate.

Her own needs and desires were irrelevant, and she shoved them away.

The guilt he was carrying was overwhelming, and there was a lot she could do to lighten his load.

Leaning forward, she looked into his big, black eyes. "Let me ask you a question. Did Igor compel you to obey his orders?"

He frowned. "Of course."

"You said he was very precise in phrasing his commands, so there were no loopholes left."

"Correct."

"Did he compel you to execute his commands to the best of your ability?"

"He did."

"Did he allow any leeway in the way you followed those commands?"

"No."

“So what makes you think you could’ve killed yourself instead of doing what you’d been told? Did you try?”

He shook his head.

“I’m positive you wouldn’t have been able to go through with it, not because you were afraid of dying, but because Igor’s compulsion wouldn’t have allowed it. You had to do what he told you, and if you killed yourself, you obviously wouldn’t have been able to follow his orders to the best of your ability.”

For a long moment, he just looked at her with those sad eyes of his peeled wide open. “So what you are saying is I had no choice whatsoever?”

“That’s precisely what I’m saying. Did you try to resist in other ways?”

He nodded. “I tried to speak up. He didn’t compel us to keep quiet, so I thought I could reason with him.” Mo-red swallowed. “I should have known better. He punished me by ordering me to do even more horrific things. I never said anything contrary to him again.”

The guy was just as much of a victim as those who he’d killed.

“I’m not blameless, though.” He looked down. “I know I should make myself appear as the victim, and in many ways, I was, but I enjoyed the fruits of Igor’s actions. I engaged in sex with the captured females, and I produced a son with one of them. A truly virtuous male would have followed the Kra-ell tradition and waited for an invitation from a female instead of issuing it. I convinced myself that they could refuse me, but the truth was that they couldn’t. They were under compulsion to accept every invitation.” He shook his head. “I didn’t know that at first, and I was even surprised at how welcoming the females were. I thought it was my superior performance that made me popular, but I soon realized that other males were also popular, and it didn’t take me long to figure out why.” He lifted his eyes to her. “I should have stopped then, but I didn’t. I’m guilty of the worst offense a Kra-ell male can commit against a female. What I did was rape.”

He shuddered, and his shoulders slumped. “I don’t know why I told you that. If I had any chance in hell to get you to kiss me like I craved from the first moment I saw you, that chance is now gone.”

“You didn’t have even the slightest chance, Mo-red, and not because of who you are. You are my patient, and engaging in any intimate activity with you would be unethical of me. But if I met you in a bar, and you poured out your heart to me over a drink, your chances of a kiss wouldn’t have diminished after telling me your story.”

A smile bloomed on his handsome face. “Are you saying that you would have found me attractive?”

“Very much so.” She steepled her fingers. “Tomorrow, I’ll speak to the pureblooded females and get a better insight into what they have been through and whether any of them feel that they were violated by you or the other males.”

He winced. “Of course, they do. They want me dead. There is no doubt in my mind that once the females were released from Igor’s compulsion, they were flooded with grief and rage, and they want to see everyone responsible for what was done to them die a gruesome death.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. You said that you were kind to Pavel’s mother, and she must have known how difficult it was for you to do and appreciated your efforts. She must also appreciate you being a good father to Pavel.”

“I did very little for him. A kind word here and there, a smile, some small gifts. I was afraid to do more.”

Vanessa rose to her feet, walked around the desk, and crouched before Mo-red. “I’m a mother to a grown son whom I raised alone. I know that in the same situation, I would have appreciated the effort. Borja knew you couldn’t do more.”

She wasn’t surprised when the door opened, and Jay walked in.

“I’m sorry, Vanessa, but you need to step away from the prisoner.”

The Guardian had told her not to get too close, but she had absolutely nothing to fear from Mo-red, even if he weren't chained to the chair.

She pushed up to her feet. "In my professional opinion, Mo-red is a very low risk."



## KIAN

“*T*his is my brother-in-law, Andrew.” Kian introduced him to Jade.

“Hello.” She shook the hand he offered her. “I’m Jade.”

Even though her facial features were schooled, and she emitted next to nothing in emotional scents, Kian could tell how stressed out she was about facing Igor again.

He could understand her hatred for the guy, but she had no reason to fear him. The security measures they’d taken were extreme and probably excessive for keeping one guy detained.

Dalhu’s suggestions for the dungeon had been simple to implement and effective, but when Kian had told him about the tactic he would implement to get Igor to talk, Dalhu had lost interest in joining the interrogation. Threatening the guy with starvation was not what Dalhu had in mind.

It was just as well. For the first meeting with Igor, Kian wanted only Jade, Toven, and Andrew to be there. He’d even instructed Brundar and Anandur to wait for him in the security office.

“I heard a lot about you,” Andrew told Jade. “I wanted to be there when you arrived at the village, but I had a meeting at work I couldn’t get out of.”

“What do you do?”

“I work for the government,” Andrew said.

She tilted her head. “Doing what?”



Jade's directness was refreshing. She never shied away from asking questions or saying exactly what was on her mind.

"I used to be in special ops, but when I got too old for field work, I was semi-retired to a desk job in the antiterrorist department."

Jade looked Andrew over with respect in her eyes. "That's important work, probably more important than being in the field. You are the one directing others now."

"That's why I didn't quit when I turned immortal."

"When was that?"

Kian lifted a hand to stop the conversation from going into Andrew's transition story. "You'll have plenty of time to reminisce about your transition over coffee in the village. We are holding up Toven and the Guardians. We should get started." He handed Andrew a pair of earpieces. "Do you know how to put them in?"

Andrew nodded.

Jade pulled hers out of her pocket and put them in her ears to demonstrate. "You need to make sure that they fit tightly."

"I know." Andrew pushed one into his left ear and repeated with the other on his right. "But I don't know if my talent will work with these. I won't be able to hear him speak, and I don't know if the machine voice will convey all the information I usually get." He smiled at Jade. "I can't do what I do over the phone, though, so maybe hearing the words is not as important as the speaker's body language."

Jade arched a brow. "So you're not a mind reader?"

"No."

Was it Kian's imagination, or did she seem relieved?

What was she hiding?

"So, how does your talent work?" Jade asked.

"I know when someone's speaking the truth and when they lie. So far, I have a perfect record of being correct, but this might be the first time I fail."

No one knew for sure how Andrew could tell truth from lies. He might be reading minute changes in expression, but he also might note slight differences in tonality, which he couldn't hear with the earpieces.

"It's worth a try." Kian put a hand on his shoulder. "If it works, great, and if not, not."

Toven put his earpieces in and grimaced. "I hate these things. Everyone sounds the same."

Kian chuckled. "That's the new and improved version. The old ones didn't even distinguish between male and female voices. It was very disturbing to hear Syssi talk in a male voice."

"Is everyone ready?" Magnus asked.

"Go ahead." Kian motioned to the door.

As Magnus approached the keypad and entered the code, the door started swinging out, and the other Guardian pulled out his gun and aimed it toward the opening.

The iron bars they had installed inside the cell were strong enough to hold an adult male gorilla, so they should hold Igor just fine, but it was always better to err on the side of caution.

When the door finished its swing-out motion and the interior of the cell was revealed, Igor sat up on the cot and turned a pair of indifferent eyes on Kian.

"Hello, Igor." Kian walked in and sat on one of the four chairs they had put in front of the bars.

The cell had been small to start with, but now that it was cut in half by the bars, the remaining part was the size of a closet, just long enough to fit the length of the cot.

Since Igor didn't deserve privacy, they'd removed the wall separating the bathroom, so visually, the cell looked a little larger than it was. All the decorations and additional furniture had also been removed, leaving only a cot for him to sleep on.

They also hadn't fed him. If he wanted blood, he would get it in exchange for information. Until then, he could drink water from the faucet in the bathroom.



# JADE

Jade chose the chair nearest to the wall. Regrettably, the vestibule area they'd created by bisecting the cell with bars was so small that it didn't make much difference where she was sitting, and she could still smell Igor.

The smell of his sweat made her gag.

Igor was still wearing the same clothes he'd had on before, and he either hadn't showered, or he had and put the same dirty clothes back on.

Usually he hadn't smelled so bad, but Jade still couldn't understand how she had survived so many years of being forced to share his bed.

The word dissociation came to mind.

Where had she heard it before?

Had the judge said something about it when she suggested Jade speak to the psychologist? Or had someone else mentioned it? Perhaps Phinas?

Dissociation was what humans did when they couldn't deal with their circumstances. They mentally checked out, so to speak. The truth was that it perfectly described her situation, but she didn't need a psychologist to deal with her issues.

She would work them out on her own.

Igor turned his intense dark gaze at Toven. "I know this pretty face," he said in Russian, shifting his gaze to Jade. "And also this one." He smiled creepily. "The mother of my daughter who wants me dead."

“You don’t deserve to live. You are still breathing only because of the code you supposedly hold in your brain.” She wanted to say more but forced her mouth shut.

Igor shrugged as if what she’d said was of no consequence and turned his cold eyes on Kian, then to Andrew, and then back to Kian. “You are obviously the one in charge,” he said in English. “You’re almost pretty enough to be a god, but not quite. A hybrid, then. The son of a god or a goddess with a human.”

“Good guess,” Kian said. “I have some questions for you.”

Igor trained his gaze on Jade. “Why should I answer him? Supposedly, my life is in your hands, not his.”

She turned her eyes away from Igor and turned to look at Kian.

“That’s true.” Kian crossed his legs and leaned back. “According to Jade, you have information about the rest of her people and that they can’t be found without you. Supposedly you hold some sort of a key. We are still not sure that’s the case, but we are working on cracking the technology of the trackers and will know more in a few days. In the meantime, we can get to know each other.” He smiled. “I’m very curious to find out more about you.”

Shrugging, Igor lay back on the cot. “I don’t need to tell you anything.”

“You do if you want to eat. You either talk or starve. It’s up to you.”

That got Igor’s attention, and he sat back up. “What happens after you verify my claim?”

Jade didn’t like his confidence that his claim would be confirmed. What if he was right?

What if she had to let him live until all the other pods came online?

Some might never do that, but on the remote chance that they did, she would have to let Igor live until he died of natural causes.

It would kill her knowing that he was still breathing. Although given the conditions of his imprisonment, he might prefer to end his misery sooner than later.

Being underground was torturous to a Kra-ell, and being confined in such a small space with nothing to occupy his time with would rob him of his sanity.

Could sociopaths go crazy?

They already had diminished brain function. Could it get worse?

Probably.

A sociopath could turn into a psychopath, but then Igor already was one, so where would he go from there?

It didn't matter. As long as he was confined in this super secure cell, he could get as psychopathic as it got for all she cared.

Kian retained his perfectly relaxed posture, not showing even the slightest irritation with Igor's irreverence. "We hope to be able to find the other pods without the code your brain supposedly creates every fifteen seconds. If we find a way, your only usefulness to us will be the information you can provide. The more you talk, the longer you live."

Igor smiled. "Scheherazade's One Thousand and One Nights. Will you fall in love with me at the end of the story?"

Since when did Igor have a sense of humor?

That was news to Jade.

Then again, sociopaths could mimic normal people, so Igor could be just playing a role. She'd known him for twenty-three years, and during that time, she hadn't heard him say anything even remotely amusing.

Kian returned his smile. "That depends on how exciting your story is and if I want to hear the rest of it. But since I have no desire to spend that much time with you, we will have to arrive at a different agreement. You talk, you get fed. Let's start with what you told Jade and your agreement with her."

“Don’t you trust her?”

“I trust Jade implicitly, but she might have forgotten some details. I want to hear it in your own words.”

“Very well.” Igor got to his feet and approached the bars.  
“Feed me, and I’ll repeat what I told her.”





## KIAN

*K*ian had been ready for Igor's demand and willing to allow it this one time. If the guy didn't fulfill his part of the bargain, it would be a long time before he would be offered another chance.

Lifting his hand toward the camera was the pre-agreed sign, and a moment later, the outer door swung open.

Alfie walked in with a small bag of blood and long tongs. No one would get close enough to the bars for Igor to grab them.

"Here's your breakfast." The Guardian used the tongs to push the bag between the bars and dropped it into Igor's palm. "Do you need a straw?" He pulled one from his pocket.

Igor nodded. "It will make it less messy."

Alfie used the tongs to drop the straw into Igor's hand. "This is an environmentally friendly straw that is actually a long noodle. I'm telling you that in case you are allergic to wheat."

Igor didn't respond. Instead, he removed the straw from its paper sheath, stuck the pointy end into the bag, and started drawing long pulls.

Well, that proved one thing. The guy lived on a Kra-ell diet.

When the bag was empty, he chucked it into a waste container outside his cell section.

"Good aim," Andrew said.

“Thank you.” Igor sat down on the cot. “So here is how it works. My brain produces a new code every fifteen seconds. I’m not consciously aware of it. My mind deciphers the encryption as soon as I identify the right signal.”

That was precisely how Jade recalled and relayed his explanation to Kian.

“Assuming that I believe you, and assuming that you were somehow genetically altered to be able to do that, the question is by whom and why?”

Igor looked at him for a moment before shaking his head. “That wasn’t part of the deal. If you want to know that, provide me with a fresh change of clothing and a towel. I can’t stand my own stench at this point.”

Given the state of his clothing, Igor was still wearing the same things he was fished out of the ocean in, and the smell was indeed offensive. Kian would have supplied him with a change of clothes even without asking for anything in return just so he wouldn’t have to tolerate the stench.

“Agreed, but you talk first and get the clothes and towel later. I showed you good faith and fed you before you answered my question, which you have only answered one small part of, so now it’s your turn to show good faith.”

“That’s reasonable. I’ll tell you what my agreement with Jade was, who made me and why, and in addition to new clothing, you will also supply me with new linen for my bed. I need to get rid of the stench.”

It was good to know that Igor had a sensitive nose. If the need to torture him arose, they could use offensive smells.

“No problem. Start talking.”

“As I told Jade, you will soon discover my claim is true. Once your tech people build a couple of receivers, have them send two people with trackers to go in random directions and see if they can identify the signals they emit and pinpoint where they are coming from. Without the code, they won’t be able to do that. Since each tracker has a different signal, knowing one will not help them identify another, and even if

they manage to do that, they won't be able to locate it without deciphering it first. Jade vowed not to take my life until my claim was disproven, but since I know it won't be, her vow will become permanent. She also vowed not to send anyone to kill me or knowingly allow it. It wasn't the deal I wanted, but we compromised on that." He cast Jade a knowing look. "Right?"

She nodded. "In part. You also promised to decipher each signal until we find all the pods."

Kian had been periodically glancing at Andrew, but the guy either hadn't detected lies from Igor, or couldn't.

"Correct." He looked smug. "But since we might never find all the pods because some of them could be destroyed or their occupants could be dead, my life is basically guaranteed." He shifted his eyes to Jade. "As long as you keep your word."

Kian lifted his hand to stop her from answering. "It seems to me that you have no incentive to tell us when you sense another signal coming online."

"That's not true. Jade vowed not to seek my death as long as I kept providing the locations of the signals once they went online, and after they were all found, her vow would extend indefinitely. My intent is to find all the pods. I just want everyone's expectations to be realistic. Some of them might be beyond salvage. In any case, my life is guaranteed." He looked at the cell. "Not that it's much of a life, but I hope my stay here will not be long."

The guy was surprisingly honest, or maybe he just figured that his reasoning was so obvious that there was no point in trying to cover it up with lies.

"How do you think you will get out of here?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I can negotiate something with you or your godly parent. I'm very useful."

"Not to us." Kian uncrossed his legs. "We don't need assassins."

"What makes you think that I'm an assassin?"

“Just a wild guess. Why else engineer a perfect killing machine with unique locating abilities? Who were you sent here to kill?”



# JADE

Jade felt the blood drain from her face.

How stupid of her had it been to think that Kian wouldn't figure out Igor's purpose?

Why alter a Kra-ell's brain so he could locate implanted settlers if not to send him after someone specific?

"Isn't that obvious?" Igor lifted one brow. "I was sent to kill the gods, of course," he said with a straight face without looking at her. "There were supposed to be others like me on the other pods, and we were all implanted with trackers. No one expected the ship to explode, so locating the other assassins shouldn't have been difficult. I would have gotten their coordinates from the ship. But as it turned out, our services weren't needed, and during the seven thousand years we were en route, someone else had gotten rid of the gods for us, or so I thought." He turned to look at Toven. "You weren't part of the rebellion, so even if I found you, I wouldn't have taken you out unless you were trying to defend your relatives. I was supposed to eliminate the main three rebels. The others were optional—collateral damage to cover our tracks if needed."

Was Igor lying to cover up his real mission?

Why would the gods send him to kill their exiles? What threat had they posed from the remote outpost?

Kian didn't seem to be buying the story either. "Then why implant everyone with trackers? Why not just the assassins?"

“The landing pods were expected to get scattered all over, and the gods wanted the ability to locate everyone.”

“For what purpose?” Kian asked. “And why keep it a secret from the settlers?”

Igor shrugged. “I wasn’t given an explanation. The gods always have a plan within a plan.”

Jade’s breath caught in her throat.

She’d been right all along. The gods must have discovered the queen’s plot to smuggle her children out on the settler ship, which was why they had implanted everyone. A chilling thought slithered down her spine.

What if killing their children was part of the agreement the king and queen had reached? He had agreed to kill his, and she’d agreed to kill hers?

Had the twins been part of the rebellion? Or had the Eternal King demanded it to even out the losses?

That didn’t make much sense, but she was obviously missing pieces of the puzzle.

“How many assassins were there?” Kian asked.

“I don’t know who the others were or how many were sent. We were undercover. But once we were reunited, I would have known who they were.”

“How?” Toven asked.

Igor tapped his head. “The same way I can decipher the signals. Their faces were stored in my subconscious mind. The moment I saw them, their name and designation would pop up, and the same would happen for them. I didn’t even know who was supposed to lead the attack. It would have been revealed along with their designation.”

“Why kill the exiled gods?” Toven asked. “Who wanted them dead?”

Igor chuckled. “You are either incredibly naive or just misinformed. Their father, of course. They rebelled against the king, but since the gods did not believe in capital punishment,

not even for traitors, and the Eternal King had his benevolent reputation to protect, they couldn't be executed. Instead, he made a big show of being a merciful father and ruler and sent his three rebellious children along with their cohorts on a so-called mining expedition to Earth. Everyone knew it was exile, but that was acceptable. All along, the king's plan was to finish them off away from the public eye."

Toven shook his head. "How could he do that to his own children?"

Igor regarded him with a thinly veiled disdain. "The Eternal King has lived for hundreds of thousands of years and has hundreds of children. Do you think he cares if some of them die? All he cares about is preserving his throne and ensuring no one challenges his rule."

"I've heard that about him," Jade said. "I mean about having hundreds of children. But one of the exiles was the son of his official wife, which made him the official heir. I'm surprised that he wanted him dead as well."

Igor trained his dark eyes on her. "He was the one he wanted dead the most."

"Ahn," Kian said. "The ruler of the Earthbound gods."

"Correct," Igor confirmed.

"What happened to the ship?" Kian asked. "Who sabotaged it to take seven thousand years to get to Earth instead of the two hundred or so it should have taken?"

"That's a question I've been pondering ever since I woke up and realized how much time had elapsed. My bet is on the queen. Not the Kra-ell one, but the official wife of the Eternal King. She must have found out about the plot and did the only thing she could to prevent it from happening without tipping her hand, so to speak."

"That makes sense," Kian agreed. "As long as the ship was lost but not destroyed, sending another group of assassins made no sense. Eventually, it would have reached its destination, and the mission would be carried out. Perhaps the queen mother hoped that by then, her son and the other



Earthbound gods would develop technology powerful enough to be able to defend themselves.” He smiled. “Seven is a significant number for the gods. I don’t think that seven thousand years was a random number.”

Igor had constructed such a clever lie that Jade started believing in it herself.

What if he hadn’t been sent after the twins?

What if his mission had indeed been eliminating the Eternal God’s rebellious children?

She cast Igor a glance, but he was too good of a liar and manipulator to hazard a look back.

His focus remained on Kian. “Can I get those clothes now? I’m sure my smell is even more unpleasant for you than it is for me.”

Kian nodded. “We shall resume our talk tomorrow. I need some time to mull over what I’ve learned.”

“Take your time.” Igor waved a hand magnanimously.



## MO-RED

Mo-red lay on the narrow bed, arms folded under his head, eyes on the ceiling, and his mind on the beautiful psychologist.

He felt so much lighter after talking to her. She'd lifted some of the guilt he'd been carrying around, and she'd done so without pitying, lecturing, or making light of what he'd done.

If he believed in angels, he would have thought she was one.

Nah, she was too sexy to be an angel, and if she weren't flesh and blood, he wouldn't be lying in bed and lusting after her.

Damn, he shouldn't have thought that.

How would her immortal blood taste? He was sure it was potent.

Madbar turned the television off and got up. "I need to do something. Do you want to train?"

Mo-red turned his head to look at his friend. "The only thing we can do here is push-ups and only one at a time. There is not enough room for us to do it simultaneously."

"We can put one bed on top of the other to make room."

That was a good idea. He could use some physical activity to take his mind off Vanessa.

"Let's do that." He got off the bed, lifted his mattress, and dropped it over Madbar's bed.

His roommate grabbed the frame and put it over the two mattresses.

“What are you doing in there?” Theo asked from the other side of the bars.

“Making room so we can both exercise at the same time,” Madbar said. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“Not at all. Have fun.”

Mo-red dropped down and started doing push-ups. Next to him, Madbar did the same.

“You can use the bars to do pull-ups,” Theo suggested. “Just grab the top bar and go.”

“Good idea,” Madbar said without pausing his rapid push-ups.

“You’re welcome.” The guard walked away.

“He’s a decent fellow,” Madbar said. “And so is Jay. How is the psychologist, by the way?”

*Beautiful, alluring, captivating, intriguing.*

“She’s okay. Asks a lot of questions.”

“About what?”

“How old I am, how many children I have, whom did I have them with, what do I think about Igor, etc.” He wasn’t ready to share the rest.

Before Vanessa, Mo-red had never talked with anyone about his feelings and the tremendous guilt he felt, the self-loathing, and the shame. Kra-ell didn’t share their feelings. But it had been so easy to talk to her, perhaps because she wasn’t Kra-ell, and it was her job to listen to people talk about their sorrows.

“Did she tell you why you were chosen to go first?”

“She didn’t. Maybe Pavel had something to do with it. He’s always been a smart kid.” It felt so good to actually be able to say that without fear. “He assisted the immortals from the very start, and now they trust him.”

Madbar flipped to his back and started doing sit-ups. “He sat with you on the plane. Did he tell you anything useful?”

“Like what?”

“Like what the immortals are planning to do with us.”

“They are just detaining us until the trial. They will not decide our fate. Our people will.”

Madbar’s head dropped on the hard concrete. “Then we are screwed.”

“That’s what I thought, but the therapist gave me hope. She’s going to talk to the females tomorrow and gauge their attitudes. She thinks that they won’t be as bloodthirsty as we think.”

Madbar snorted. “That’s because she doesn’t know Kra-ell females. They are more vicious than a hungry *dubka* with ten cubs on her back.”

Mo-red flipped to his back and lay next to his friend. “They used to be vicious. They’ve been subjugated and abused for so long that the fight was beaten out of them, and it’s all our fault.”

“What are you talking about?” Madbar sat up and glared down at him. “I’ve never abused any females. What we do during bed play doesn’t count. It’s consensual, and they give as hard as they get.”

“Was it consensual, though?” Mo-red sat up as well. “They were under compulsion to accept every invitation.”

“No, they were not. I’ve gotten rejected plenty of times.”

That was news to Mo-red. “You’ve never told me that.”

“Of course, I didn’t. It’s not something to boast about. Don’t tell me that all of your invitations were accepted.”

“I didn’t issue that many, but yes, they were all accepted.”

“Lucky bastard.” Madbar clapped him on the back. “What’s your secret?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was because I issued so few of them. I prefer human females.”

The gifts he’d brought might have something to do with his rate of success as well.

“Yeah, I know you do.” Madbar turned on his side and looked at him. “I never understood why, though. They are so breakable.”

“I don’t mind being careful, and I like taking my time pleasuring a female.” Mo-red shook his head. “I can’t believe I’ve lived so long with so much guilt, thinking I was taking advantage of the pureblooded females. None of the other males ever said anything about getting rejected.”

Madbar grimaced. “Not all the males got rejected as often as I did. The females were afraid to say no to some of the others. They knew that I wouldn’t do anything to retaliate if they rejected me.”

All the relief Mo-red had felt just moments ago evaporated in an instant. “Did they fear me as well?”

Madbar snorted. “I hate to disappoint you, but no one feared you. You must be an animal in bed to have an unbroken record of accepted invitations.”

Mo-red’s sexual prowess probably wasn’t why he had been so popular.

They had so little in the compound that every little trinket was appreciated, and he’d never shown up empty-handed. Back home, when a male got invited to a female’s bed it was customary to bring a gift, but as far as he knew none of the other males in Igor’s compound had followed the tradition. The older ones who knew about it either subscribed to Igor’s male entitlement philosophy or were afraid to do anything to contradict it.

For Mo-red, it was one of many tiny rebellions, and it had made him feel a little less shitty about himself.



## KIAN

*A*s Kian led Toven, Andrew, and Jade to his old office in the underground of the keep, the thought that sent a chill of foreboding up his spine was that there were more Igors out there.

In fact, Jade's Igor might have been doing them a favor by killing off the Kra-ell males. Perhaps some of them were enhanced assassins like him, and he'd slaughtered them to eliminate the competition.

Then again, given the Kra-ell society, the assassins weren't necessarily all males. Some of those enhanced killers might have been female, and Igor hadn't killed any of them.

Kian cast a sidelong glance at Jade. What if he had brought an assassin into their village? A Trojan horse?

She might not even be aware of being a secret weapon. Perhaps she was a sleeper, waiting for a trigger to get activated.

He had to keep his mother away from her.

Was he being paranoid?

Probably.

As far as the Kra-ell were concerned, there should be no difference between Toven and Annani, and Jade hadn't been triggered by Toven. In fact, she'd almost attacked him and had stopped because he'd had Mia strapped to his back. An assassin who was supposed to be triggered by gods would



have gone for the kill regardless of the collateral damage. According to Igor, those were the instructions he'd been given.

"Please, take a seat." Kian motioned to the conference table and walked over to the refrigerator.

Hopefully, Okidu had kept it restocked.

When he opened it and found a whole case of Snake Venom, he was ready to kiss the Odu on both his flabby cheeks.

"Anyone in the mood for beer?"

"I'll take some," Jade said.

"It's very strong and doesn't taste that good," Toven warned her.

"Is there anything else?" she asked.

"Water." Kian looked at her over his shoulder.

"I'll take the beer."

He'd had a feeling she would say that.

With Jade, it wasn't bravado aimed at making her look more masculine. She had no artifice about her. The female was as tough as any seasoned warrior and had an attitude to match.

"Here you go." He handed her a bottle and another one to Andrew.

Toven shook his head. "I'll take a bottle of water if you don't mind."

"Of course." Kian pulled out one and tossed it the god's way. "More beer left over for me."

He took his own poison, sat down at the head of the table, and turned to Andrew. "So, was he telling the truth?"

"Frankly, I don't know." Andrew popped the cap and took a swig. "Either everything he said was true, or all of it was a lie. I didn't detect any changes in his body language."

Looking relieved, Jade put the bottle down. "From what I've heard about the Eternal King, and I admit that most of it

was probably negative propaganda. Igor's claim doesn't sound outlandish."

"What did you hear about the queen?" Toven asked.

"Not much. She didn't make many public appearances, and when she did, she looked disinterested in her mate's politics. She had no say in court, and he didn't seek her advice. It was a marriage of convenience, as humans call it. They had been mated for hundreds of thousands of years, and he'd never been loyal. Everyone knew about his concubines and his many children. I didn't hear rumors about her having paramours, but she might have been more discreet about it." Jade sighed. "I wonder if they are still there. Sometimes I have the disturbing thought that Anumati no longer exists and everyone living there perished. It makes no sense that no other ships had made it to Earth during the last seven thousand years."

Kian wasn't sure about that. There were so many UFO and USO sightings that aliens might have been landing on Earth all along, and either they were very good at hiding, or the human governments were deliberately keeping the information from the public.

"Maybe Earth is no longer a desired destination," Toven said. "The original purpose for coming here was mining for gold, but I have no doubt that the gods found an artificial replacement that's just as good or better."

"I don't buy Igor's story." Kian rapped his fingers on the table. "It just doesn't add up. The exiled gods were stranded here, with no way to communicate with home or leave the planet. They could do nothing to undermine the Eternal King from here, and there was no reason to send assassins to finish them off in secret. Since no one was supposed to find out about it, the assassinations couldn't have been done to deter others from rebelling."

"Why would Igor lie about that?" Andrew picked up the beer bottle. "It didn't make him look good or less guilty of his crimes, and it would only make us fear him more."

The same thing had occurred to Kian. Igor might have lied to hide the real reason he'd been sent or for some other reason

that they couldn't even guess, but maybe Jade could.

She was keeping a neutral expression, but Kian could sense her nervousness. It could be her reaction to being in Igor's presence, or it could be that she knew something and was hiding it together with Igor.

Nah, that didn't make sense, either. Jade and Igor were enemies. She wouldn't have covered for him, and he wouldn't have covered for her.

The simplest way to find out whether Jade knew something was to ask Toven to compel it out of her, but that would alienate her, and it would be a bad move to start their relationship on a negative note. They were supposed to become allies, and Kian hoped to be able to rely on the Kraell's might to defend the village from the Brotherhood.

Navuh had been lying low for far too long, and Kian had an uneasy feeling that the son-of-a-god was planning something big.

"What's your take on Igor's story?" He pinned Jade with a stern look.

Maybe she would feel intimidated and start talking.

"I don't know what to think. Igor's behavior in there threw me off. I have known him for over two decades and have never seen him act like that. He smiled, he chuckled, and he made jokes. It's almost as if he's happy that he's been caught and that he's in your custody. Maybe he really has a bomb in his gut and is waiting for the right moment to detonate it."

Kian's sense of foreboding returned with a vengeance.

Why was Igor happy about his hopeless situation?



## PHINAS

In the village square, Phinas leaned against a tree and observed Drova checking out items on the tables that the volunteers had stocked with clothing and other necessities for the newcomers.

Lisa, who was in charge of that table, waited patiently for Drova to choose something.

“Can I take these?” Drova pointed at a pair of jeans.

“Of course,” Lisa said. “You can take two pairs of jeans, two pairs of leggings, five T-shirts, two sweatshirts or sweaters, a set of pajamas or a nightgown, a pair of sneakers, and a pair of Crocs for house shoes. We also have packs of panties and bralettes for you to choose from.” Lisa smiled shyly. “Aliya said that you don’t need bras, so we didn’t get you any.”

Drova looked down at her flat chest and frowned. “I don’t. What are bralettes?”

Phinas didn’t know what those were either.

“I also don’t wear bras.” Lisa reached for one of the packages, opened it, and pulled out something that looked like a tiny undershirt. “I like these. They go under clothes to give you a little protection and warmth.” She leaned closer to Drova. “You know, for when it’s cold, and the girls get pointy. It’s uncomfortable and can be embarrassing if you’re not wearing a baggy sweatshirt.”

Erect nipples were nothing to be embarrassed about, especially when the cause was arousal, but that wasn’t

something Phinas should think about while watching over his mate's daughter.

Jade hadn't tasked him with keeping an eye on Drova while she was gone, and Drova had no idea that he was watching her from afar, but he had a plan, and he was waiting for the right moment to approach the girl and talk to her about it.

"Here." Lisa handed Drova a large canvas bag. "You can put everything you get in it."

"Thank you." Drova stuffed the items she'd collected so far into the bag. "How did you know what sizes to get us?"

Lisa chuckled. "Aliya was a great help. She was our advisor and model."

"Where is she?" Drova asked. "I would like to meet her."

Lisa stretched up on her toes and scanned the village square. "I can't see her, but I know she wanted to talk to your mom and the other females she remembered from the compound. She must have found them." She glanced in the direction of the café. "Maybe they are over there."

"I'll find her later." Drova continued collecting items and stuffing them in her bag. "I never had so many things."

Lisa frowned. "Aren't you the daughter of the compound's former leader?"

That was a nice way to phrase the question without offending Drova, but the girl winced nonetheless.

"I didn't get any special treatment because of that." She slung the strap of the canvas bag over her shoulder. "Thank you for helping me. I'll see you later."

"You're welcome." Lisa smiled. "We should get together again soon. I get back from school around four in the afternoon and have a lot of homework, but I'm usually done by seven. Parker, Cheryl, and I meet up in the playground. You are welcome to join."

"Thank you." Drova looked like she wanted to run off but didn't know how to do that without looking rude.

Phinas pushed away from the tree and walked over to the girls. “Hi, Lisa. Great work arranging the giveaway.”

“Thanks. It’s kind of fun buying things for others with the clan’s money.”

“Lisa!” Ronja called from several tables over. “Can you come over here? We have a problem.”

“I’m coming,” she called back and cast them an apologetic look. “I have to go.” She waved at Drova. “I’ll see you later.”

Phinas took Drova’s elbow. “I want to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“I’ll tell you on the way. Come on.”

She looked around as if searching for someone to rescue her. “Where to?”

“Home.”

Drova stopped walking and pulled her elbow out of his gentle grasp. “Do you mean your home?”

“I mean our home. I want you to move in with your mother and me. I don’t have a roommate, and my house has two bedrooms. You will have your own room with your own bathroom. It will be like living with roommates.”

What he wanted to say was that he hoped they could be a family, but Drova wasn’t ready for that.

Her eyes were suspicious as she regarded him. “Did my mother tell you to do this?”

“No, she didn’t have time to tell me anything before Kian took her to see the prisoners. I just thought it would be nice for the three of us to live together.”

She shook her head. “You think like a human. We are a tribe, not a family, and kids don’t live with their mothers. They live in their own quarters.”

“We don’t have dormitories in the village. Each house has two or three bedrooms, so you can share one with me and your mother or someone else, but I would really like you to come to

live with us.” He looked into her big eyes. “We can play at being a family.”

He didn’t want to play. He wanted them to be a family. But given his experience with Jade, he knew that presenting it in such a way would make it easier for Drova to accept.

“Jade is not going to like that, and I’m not going to like it either.” Drova shook her head. “The thing that the two of you do is just weird. I think she is playing you.”

That shouldn’t have hurt his feelings, but it did.

Not that he thought for a moment that Jade was with him for any other reason than she loved him, but it was a shame that Drova thought that, and if she did, probably many of the others thought so too.

“I know it’s uncommon for Kra-ell to form couple relationships, but I believe you all have it in you. The mutation that caused the birth rate disparity created a situation that required a drastic cultural change, and that’s how the tribal system came to be. Humanoids are supposed to be monogamous. Not that I know many humanoid species, but humans and gods are mostly monogamous. They are not necessarily faithful, and they might have a string of relationships, but in my humble opinion, there is no substitute for forming a powerful bond with one person. I really can’t see how it can be formed with more.”

She didn’t dismiss his theory outright, which was a good sign. “So if you could have a harem of several mates, you wouldn’t want that?”

“Not a chance. Before meeting your mother, I’d been with many females, but it was only about fulfilling physical needs. I never had an emotional connection with another person and didn’t even know I was missing anything. Now that I bonded with Jade, I can’t imagine a life without her in it. I don’t want to sound clichéd, but I wasn’t complete without her.”

“Wow.” Drova let out a breath. “You sound like a hero from a romance novel. Real males don’t talk like that.”



He leaned toward her. “That’s because they are cowards who are more concerned with impressing each other than being true to themselves.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so. I lived with a bunch of males for a long time, and they are just as gross and crass as you imagine. But the moment one female moved in, everything changed. Males need females to be civilized.”

Drova chuckled. “Then my mother is right, and females need to be in charge.”

“Females are in charge even when males think that they are.” Phinas ran a hand over his longish hair. “I might have sounded clichéd before, but what I said was true. I can’t imagine a future without Jade, and I don’t know how to say it differently.”

Drova shrugged, but he had a feeling that he was getting through to her. Perhaps the romance novels she’d read had primed the way for her to accept his and Jade’s relationship.

Smiling, he leaned closer to her ear and whispered, “You don’t strike me as the type who reads romance novels. How did you even get them?”

A rosy hue painted her high cheeks. “The humans had a library, and most books there were romance novels. It was an exchange kind of thing, and everyone who bought a book put them in there once they were finished. I was curious, so I snuck one out to read at night and put it back the next day.”

Phinas arched a brow? “Only one?”

Her cheeks got redder. “I came back for more.”

He was willing to bet that Jade had no idea her daughter had done that. It was time the two of them got closer.

“I’m glad you did that. Romance novels might exaggerate certain aspects of human relationships, but they probably gave you a general idea, as did all the shows and movies you’ve seen. Immortals are not much different. Let’s give it a try, shall we? You can pretend you are a human in a reality TV show.”

Her lips quirked in a smile. “How did you know that I liked watching those?”

“A guess. So how about it? Give it a few weeks, and if you don’t like it, you can move in with someone else.”

“Okay,” she relented. “Is your house nice?”

“It sure is. Come check it out for yourself.”



# ANNANI

“Good evening, my son.” Annani patted the spot next to her on the couch. “Come sit with me.”

Kian looked stressed, which was not surprising given the work he had put in to prepare the village for the Kra-ell, not to mention what had preceded their arrival.

Her son was overworked, and he rarely had time to stop for a visit. That he did so right after meeting with the Kra-ell former leader meant that he needed to talk to her about something he had learned from the infamous Igor.

“Thank you.” Kian sat down and turned to face her. “I have a favor to ask.”

It was so rare for him to ask her for anything that it was a treat when he did.

“Of course.”

“I want you to return to the sanctuary for a week or two until I figure out what is going on.”

Annani had not expected that.

She still had not met Jade or any of the other Kra-ell and was eager for the introduction. There were so many questions she wanted to ask those who had been born on the home planet.

Anumati.

She had not known the name of the place her father and the original group of gods had come from. She had not even

been sure they had come from somewhere else in the universe.

For some reason, the older gods had not wanted those who had been born on Earth to know anything about their origins.

Naturally, she had suspected that, and later those suspicions had been confirmed by Khiann, whose father had been more forthcoming with information than hers.

Khiann.

Even after all this time, his name made her heart ache and yearn for what could have been.

Annani sighed and adjusted the skirt of her floor-length silk gown. “What exactly is going on, Kian? Are the Kra-ell giving you trouble?”

“The Kra-ell are on their best behavior, but I just came back from talking to Igor, and what I’ve learned makes me concerned for your safety.”

When Kian had called from the car and requested an audience with her, Annani had hoped he wanted to speak with her about trying to compel the compeller, but she should have known better. Kian was too paranoid about her safety to allow it.

“Are you going to tell me what you learned, or will you keep me guessing?”

Given the tight line of his lips, he had not planned on sharing the information with her, but she would not let him leave without doing so. She was not a child to be coddled.

“Igor is an assassin. He was genetically enhanced in various ways, and I have no way of knowing the extent of his enhancements. He might be a walking bomb, for all I know. I asked him to repeat what he had told Jade about his altered mind. He confirmed that it generates a new code every fifteen seconds to unlock the gods’ encryption of the signals the trackers produce. Still, I suspect that he can do much more than that. I just can’t imagine what.”

“That is not news.” Annani waved a hand in dismissal. “And it has nothing to do with me. Obviously, he was

supposed to assassinate one of the settlers, and that is why he was equipped with the ability to track them. You should concentrate on finding out who that was and why the gods wanted him or her dead, which brings me to my next suggestion. I might be able to compel Igor to tell you everything he knows and put an end to all the second-guessing.”

The glow in Kian’s eyes intensified tenfold. “You are not going anywhere near him. Igor wasn’t sent to kill one of the settlers. He said he was sent to kill the original gods—the main rebels who instigated the Kra-ell uprising—and that he wasn’t the only one. Other assassins were hidden among the Kra-ell settlers, and he was supposed to locate them and assemble a force to take out the gods. If not for the malfunction, which was probably a deliberate sabotage, the ship would have arrived while all the gods were still alive, and he would have carried out his mission. Igor suspects that the queen mother, the mate of the Eternal King, was involved. She might have found out about her mate’s plan to kill off the main rebels, who were his children, and she sabotaged the ship to prevent the assassins from arriving on Earth and killing her son—your father.”

Annani shuddered at the thought. If the ship had arrived when it had been supposed to, and the assassins succeeded in their mission, she and Khiann would have never been born, fallen in love, and had the few months they had together.

“Did he say why the Eternal King wanted to kill his own children?”

As the only legitimate son, Ahn had been his father’s successor, but since the Eternal King had no plans of ever stepping down, the only way Ahn could become king was if he killed his father.

Perhaps he had plotted to do that?

It was possible.

Her father had been a ruthless god, but compared to his father, he had been as just and benevolent as he had purported himself to be.

Ahn might have realized that the only way to effect change was to do away with the Eternal King and put someone more progressive on the throne, i.e. himself.

“Igor didn’t say that he was sent by the king, and he probably wasn’t. A trusted underling no doubt designed the mission, but he suspected the king. The gods did not believe in capital punishment, and the king wanted to preserve his just and benevolent image. Killing the rebels would have painted him in a terrible light. The assassinations would have happened after the Earthbound gods lost their communication ability with the home planet, and no one would have ever found that they had been eliminated. It’s a very good plan, except it doesn’t make much sense. The gods were stranded on Earth, so what was the point of killing them?”

Annani let out a breath. “They might not have stayed stranded forever. Some new rebels might have picked them up. Ahn was the heir to the throne, and he was a progressive god. Eliminating his father and crowning himself instead would have resulted in the least disturbance to their society.”

“That makes sense,” Kian agreed. “And the same is true for you. With Ahn gone, you are the next in line as the only legitimate heir to the throne.”





## KIAN

The puzzle pieces were falling into place, and the emerging picture was terrifying.

Annani smiled indulgently. “My dear son. The ship was sent seven thousand years ago, and no ships have arrived since. No one on the home planet even knows that I exist. I was born long after communication with Anumati was lost.”

“I’m well aware of that, Mother. But Igor and the other assassins were sent to kill the heir to the throne. That heir is no longer alive, but his daughter is, and she is the heir. What do you think they would do? Abandon their mission, or refocus on the new target?”

She huffed out a breath. “I do not know what they will do. They do not know I exist, so why would they come after me?”

Kian smiled triumphantly. Annani had just painted herself into a corner. “That’s why I want you out of here and safe in the sanctuary. I don’t want them to find out about you.”

“The Kra-ell in the village cannot tell anyone, nor can Igor. He is imprisoned in the keep.”

“For all I know, Jade herself could be a sleeper assassin waiting for activation in response to some trigger, and the same is true of all the original settlers. Igor might somehow be transmitting information to the other assassins and sharing what he knows with them. The signals from the damn trackers are impossible to identify unless we know what we are looking for and they are coded. Igor claims that his brain was altered to decipher the code, so it could have been altered to transmit the

information as well, and we might not be able to identify the signal.”

It seemed that his words were starting to penetrate his mother’s stubborn shield, and she looked worried. “Is William working on it?”

“He just got the other trackers earlier today. It will take him a while to break them apart and figure out how they work. Then he needs to test what Igor said. If it’s true, and we can’t decipher where the signal comes from without Igor’s help, I would be really concerned.”

Annani smiled. “As opposed to what? Being mildly concerned?”

“Good point.” Kian took in a deep breath and released it slowly. “There is no rest for the weary. Is it ever going to get easier?”

His mother laughed. “What would be the fun in that? Challenges keep life interesting. We will figure this problem out the way we have figured out all the others, and we will persevere. But I will not hide in the sanctuary while we figure things out.”

Kian’s thunderous expression must have given her pause because she added, “That being said, I have been away from home for far too long, and I should spend a week or two in the Sanctuary, so my people do not feel neglected.” She sighed. “It is difficult for me to be there without Alena. That is why I keep prolonging my stay in your village.”

“You can take Alena and Orion with you.”

Annani nodded. “I shall extend them an invitation. I hope they will accept.”

Should he suggest that she invite Toven and Mia as well?

The god wasn’t heir to the throne, and he wasn’t one of the original rebels, so the chances were good that Igor had meant what he’d said about not wanting Toven dead.

Besides, Kian needed him to keep compelling the Kra-ell. Kalugal was a strong compeller, but Toven was stronger, and

Kian wasn't taking any chances with them.

Not after the conversation he'd had with Igor and then with Jade.

"I forgot to mention something Jade had said after we left Igor's cell." Kian raked his fingers through his hair. "She said that during the twenty-three years she'd known Igor, she'd never seen him smile, laugh, or make jokes, but he did all three while talking with us. She commented that it seemed as if he was happy to have gotten caught and imprisoned by us."

Annani tilted her head, her long hair cascading down to the floor. "Do you suspect Igor is happy because he believes he can finally fulfill his mission?"

"Precisely. But he's not supposed to know about you, and the other gods are of no interest to him."

His mother's red brows dipped low. "Perhaps you resemble your great-grandfather. He might have figured out that you are Ahn's descendant, and therefore one of your parents is Ahn's son or daughter. Maybe he's even plotting to assassinate you? Did you tell him that you are not a god?"

"He knows. He figured it out just by looking at me."

Or was there more to it?

What if Igor's brain was equipped with god sensors?

The Odus' brains were programmed to identify gods. That was how they had found Khiann's father in the first place. They had responded to him because he'd been the first god they'd encountered.

Groaning, Kian massaged his temples. "I'm getting a headache."

Annani put her hand on his cheek. "What did you think about just now that disturbed you so?"

"That the plot thickens. What if the Odus were sent to Earth by the queen mother to protect her son?"



## ANNANI

“The Odus,” Annani murmured. “Ever since we have learned about their decommission, or mass-murder as I think of what was done to them, I have been wondering how and why my seven were spared and found their way to Earth.”

Kian’s brows dipped low. “We assumed that they were sent by their creator to preserve their technology.” He glanced around her living room. “By the way, where are your Odus? I haven’t seen them since Oridu opened the door for me.”

“I sent them to help Jarmo and the others to build the barn.” She smiled. “It would not be the first one they had built.”

When she had escaped Mortdh’s wrath, the Odus had been all that she had, and they had built a shelter for her on numerous occasions.

“I did not ask you to volunteer their help, but thank you for doing so. I’m sure the project will get completed much faster now. That said, I would like you to always keep at least one Odu by your side.” Kian glanced out the window. “I’m glad that I added more Guardians to your security detail. You are not safe without your Odus.”

If Kian expected her to argue with him about that, he was wrong. For once, she was not dismissing his extra precautions as paranoia.

“I will do that.” Annani rose to her feet and walked over to the bar, where she kept fine whiskey for the rare occasions Kian visited her in the evenings.

“What, no rebuttals?”

“Not this time.” She poured them each a glass of whiskey and returned to the couch.

“Thank you.” Kian looked at her with puzzlement in his eyes. “Since when do you drink whiskey?”

“On the rare occasion that I feel unsettled, I find that a shot of whiskey helps me calm down.” She smiled. “Perhaps because it reminds me of you, and I always feel safe when you are around.”

When his eyes shone with pleasure, Annani was glad she had finally admitted that to him. The result would be even more insistence on security and restrictions on her freedom and autonomy, but if it made Kian happy, it was worth it.

“Thank you.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I thought that I irritated you with my overprotectiveness.”

“It gets annoying at times, but I know that it comes from your heart, and I appreciate it.” She took his hand and gave it a light squeeze. “That is how you show love. You protect.”

He blinked and then took a small sip from the whiskey. “What’s got you feeling unsettled? Usually, nothing rattles you unless your wishes are not obeyed quickly enough.”

Annani pouted. “You make me sound like such a diva. I do not make many demands, so when I do, I expect them to be fulfilled expeditiously.” She took a small sip from the glass and put it on the coffee table. “I believe that your suspicions are correct and that the Odus were sent to Earth with the information of how to make more of them, not just to preserve their technology. Igor might be right that the queen mother was behind the ship’s seven-thousand-year delayed arrival. She sent the Odus with the blueprints to make more of them, so her son and the other exiled gods could build an army of them to protect against the Kra-ell assassins the king had sent. I have to admit that her estimate was incredibly accurate. It took about seven thousand years for human technology to reach the stage necessary to produce the components to build the Odus.”

Kian finished the last of his whiskey and put the glass down. “We are not there yet. Humans can’t produce all the materials and components we need to build more Odus, at least not the type that can pass for real people. Kaia says that some of the materials specified cannot be found on Earth. But I have to admit that this hypothesis makes perfect sense except for one glitch. Why did the Odus’ memories appear to have been wiped clean?”

Annani lifted the bottle and refilled her son’s glass. “We know now that they had hidden memories and abilities that were supposed to emerge in response to a trigger. I just do not understand why the trigger was near drowning.”

“Thank you.” Kian lifted the glass to his lips and took a sip. “I don’t think that the drowning was the trigger. It just caused a reboot that released those hidden memories and capabilities, which makes me suspect that the Odus got damaged during their journey or upon landing. We don’t know what kind of craft had brought them to Earth.”

Annani nodded. “I think that they were supposed to appear as if their memories were gone as a precaution, in case they were discovered by the king’s people. Perhaps if they had been gifted to my father, they would have been triggered sooner. Except, Ahn wouldn’t have been able to build Odus with the knowledge, materials, and technology available to him at the time.” Lifting her glass, she pondered that option for a moment. “That being said, the queen might have counted on Ekin’s genius to find a way to do that with what he had available. He would not have had trouble understanding the instructions. Or, she might have hoped that he would use the instructions to steer humanity in the right direction so they would advance their technology and start manufacturing what was needed to put Odus together. The seven thousand years should have been long enough for humanity to evolve sufficiently.” Annani sighed. “What my grandmother did not account for was Mordth and his descendants thwarting human progress time and again.”

Kian put the glass down. “I feel like we’re slowly collecting more puzzle pieces, and the clearer the picture

becomes, the more concerned I am. What if that entire ship of settlers were soldiers sent to destroy the gods? Jade said they were told they would be repaid for the voyage with labor that they would provide the gods on Earth, but Toven said that none of the gods had been expecting the Kra-ell's arrival. They were never even mentioned, which leads me to believe that it was part of the terms of their punishment. They were prohibited from mentioning the Kra-ell."

Annani nodded. "The rebellion was about giving the Kra-ell equal rights, which makes some convoluted sense." She huffed out a breath. "I really do not like my grandfather. He sounds like a master manipulator."

Kian chuckled. "He didn't become the Eternal King by chance or popular vote. He schemed, manipulated, and eliminated competitors for hundreds of thousands of years."

Annani let out a breath. "Are we speculating ourselves into a frenzy, or am I in real danger?"

His eyes softened. "I don't know. Give me a couple of weeks to figure things out. Knowing that you are safe in the sanctuary will make it much easier for me to do."

She nodded. "Do not tell Igor that you are Ahn's grandson."

"Of course not."

Annani flipped her hair back over her shoulder. "I think that your paranoia has rubbed off on me."

"Good." He grinned as if he had won a battle. "That will make you more careful and allow me to sleep better at night."

"You did not ask me why I think your paranoia is rubbing off on me."

He tilted his head. "I thought you were referring to what we just discussed."

"I was, but I also had another disturbing thought. What if Igor's brain can transmit information all the way to Anumati? William said the signal from the trackers was weak, but it did



not weaken with distance. What if their effective distance is really long, as in light years away?"



# SOFIA

“*I* love your house.” Sofia came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her body and another around her hair. “This was the best shower I ever took, and that’s saying something, given that we spent almost two weeks in a luxurious cabin.”

Marcel had already showered while she’d unpacked, so she knew she hadn’t been hogging the bathroom and had played with the controls until she’d gotten all six shower heads to pulsate just the way she liked it.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” He pulled her into his arms. “I whipped us up something to eat. Do you want to get dressed, or are you coming like that?”

“I have nothing nice enough to do justice to this bed.” Sofia waved a hand over the incredible four-poster. It was made from massive wood beams and stained nearly black. A sheer white canopy hung from the metal rails connecting the posts, and the gleaming white bedding was so luxurious that it was fit for a queen.

Marcel kissed the tip of her nose. “I disagree. This bed can’t do justice to the woman in my arms, who from now on is going to sleep in the nude.”

Why was his bossiness so damn sexy? She shouldn’t get aroused by it, but her body had a mind of its own.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to let him know that.

As her core squeezed and moisture gathered between her thighs, she pretended as if nothing was going on and arched a

brow. "Says who?"

"Says I." He pulled at the towel covering her head and let her long hair cascade down her back. "Why wear anything to bed just to take it off? I intend to make love to you every night and every morning."

Her lips twitched with amusement. It wasn't empty boasting because he'd been doing just that during the cruise, and sometimes they even snuck back into their cabin in the middle of the day for a quickie.

Sofia had never had so much sex in her life, but she wasn't complaining. Nothing ever hurt or stung afterward, no matter how wild things got in bed and how intense. She didn't need a long time between bouts of lovemaking to recuperate like she'd needed with the two human boyfriends she'd had.

Marcel's venom was like a wonder drug, numbing any residual pain and healing all scrapes and bruises within hours. When she turned immortal, Sofia would be able to heal those herself, but since her longevity came from her Kra-ell mother, she wouldn't heal as fast as if she was a descendant of the gods.

Provided that she transitioned at all.

Sofia's biggest fear was that it wouldn't work, which clouded the joy of being with Marcel in his home. The magical village the immortals had built was the perfect place to raise children, and she wanted to get started on that as well, but working on her transition came first.

"I'm not hungry." She lifted her arms and wound them around Marcel's neck. "I can skip dinner. How about you?"

As Marcel's nostrils flared, she knew that he'd smelled her arousal, and as his eyes started glowing, she also knew that he was on board for skipping dinner.

"We can eat later." He lifted her into his strong arms, carried her to the magnificent bed, and laid her gently on top of the covers.

Pulling the towel off, she tossed it to Marcel. "No condoms today. We are in the village, and I'm ready to

transition.”

She had a silly thought that she had to believe she would transition or it wouldn't happen. Somehow her body would find a way to block it.

“So am I.” Marcel whipped his turtleneck over his head.

The rest of his clothes were gone so fast that her eyes couldn't track his movements, and then he was prowling over her.

The sight of his glowing eyes and his gleaming fangs would never cease to amaze her and make her even more hungry for him.

As his body blanketed hers, she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down so his chest pressed into her breasts and his erection was nestled between her legs.

It was hot and heavy, and the anticipation of making love to him without barriers was nearly as exciting as anticipating the transition, and since the two were connected, her excitement was reaching a fever pitch.

Dipping his head, Marcel took her lips in a sweet kiss that stole her breath away, and when he lifted his head and looked at her with adoration in his eyes, Sofia teared up a little.

“I love you so much,” she whispered.

He smiled. “I love you just as much and more.”

“You can't love me more than I love you. It's impossible.”

He moved his hips, grinding his long shaft against her heat. “There is more of me to love you. So I love you more.” He did that again, stealing the retort from her mouth with a kiss that was far from sweet.

She could argue with him later. Right now, she wanted that hard length inside her and his fangs at her neck.



## MARCEL

Sofia was so sweet, arguing who loved whom most, but it wasn't a competition. They were mates, bonded to each other forever, however long that forever was.

After offering a quick prayer to the Fates, Marcel banished all disturbing thoughts from his head and concentrated on pleasuring his female.

He couldn't get enough of her sweetness, and as she hummed with pleasure under him, he tightened his arms around her and held her so close to him that she probably felt caged.

When he lifted his head and looked at her, her eyes were hooded with desire, and her lips swollen from their kiss, and as she darted her tongue and licked them, he had to catch it between his lips and suck it into his mouth.

Getting bold, she swiveled her tongue around one of his fangs, causing his balls to tighten with need.

He leaned away. "Naughty girl. If you keep it up, you'll miss out on the other kiss I have in store for you."

She lifted her hips and ground her mound into his erection. "You don't need to get me ready. I'm good to go."

By now, Marcel knew her body's needs better than she did, and usually, she needed more prep to be as ready as he liked her to be. When he thrust inside her, he hated to encounter even the slightest resistance because it meant he hadn't done his job preparing her.

“Oh, yeah?” He kneed her legs further apart and swiveled his hips to aim his shaft at her core and check her claim.

She was soaking wet.

That was a pleasant surprise.

“What has gotten you so excited, my naughty girl?”

“You.” She wiggled a little in the cage of his arms. “I like it when you get bossy in bed.”

His smile was full of fangs. “Do you, now?” He pushed inside of her and encountered no resistance.

“You feel so good like that.” She lifted her legs and wound them around his torso.

The sensation of having her once again with no barriers between them stole his breath. Her arms were still caged between his, and he saw no need to change that. “We are not leaving this bed for the next week.” He punctuated his declaration with a hard thrust.

As her thighs twitched around his waist and more moisture coated his shaft, he swiveled his hips on the next surge, rubbing against the little bud of pleasure at the top of her sex.

Her sheath fluttered around his erection, getting him dangerously close to the edge, and as he loosened his arms around her, she immediately pulled her arms out and went for his butt, digging her fingers into the flesh.

Seeing stars, Marcel held on by the sheer power of his will. “You’re playing with fire, sweetheart.”

She kneaded his ass even harder. “Are you talking about this?”

“Yes.” He lifted on his forearms and looked at her beautiful, impish face.

She was challenging him, and he knew precisely what she wanted to achieve by that, but he couldn’t let loose with her, not yet. She was still human, still fragile, and he was too strong.



Leaning up, she caught him by surprise when she bit his pectoral.

Marcel's control snapped.

Drawing his hips back, he began to thrust into her hard and fast. The guttural sounds Sofia emitted were like gasoline on the inferno of his desire, and when she crested, her back arched like a bow and his name left her lips with a gasp.

His fangs were dripping venom, demanding he sink them into her neck, but he wanted to hold back the bite just for a little longer and enjoy Sofia's climaxing without the added boost the venom provided.

He held out for mere moments, but it seemed like an eternity to him, and when he finally succumbed to the need and bit her, his own release roared through him, and he was helpless to do anything but ride out the pleasure along with the woman he loved.

The venom triggered another string of orgasms, and when she blacked out, her hands left his buttocks to fall limply on the mattress below.

Marcel retracted his fangs, licked the puncture wounds closed, and lifted his head to look at Sofia's beautiful face.

His ass was probably covered with indentations from her fingernails, and Marcel hoped they would stay long enough for him to see in the mirror.

Perhaps he would even snap a picture with his phone to show her later.

Cupping her cheeks, he lowered his head and kissed her eyelids, her nose, her cheeks, and finally her lips, soft, grateful kisses she wouldn't remember when she woke up.



## VANESSA

Vanessa stood next to the front porch of her next appointment, waiting for Toven to arrive.

The language barrier was a big problem. Some of the Kra-ell didn't speak more than a few words of English, but all of them knew Russian. Out of everyone residing in the village, Toven and Morris were the only ones who were fluent in the language, and between the two, Toven was the lesser evil.

The god was much more sympathetic and empathetic than Morris, but the Kra-ell were wary of him because he was a god and a compeller.

The language barrier was the main obstacle, but it wasn't the only one. Conducting the sessions in the Kra-ell's new homes was less than desirable because all of them had roommates, and some of them had kids living with them, but doing so in her home in the village was problematic as well.

The Kra-ell were skittish and mistrustful, and getting them to come to her was more difficult than going to them.

The other problem was more personal in nature.

A therapist shouldn't be anxious when helping others, but Vanessa couldn't help it when the appointments were with females. The fear that the next one would tell her about Mored killing the males of her tribe and doing other horrific things was stress-inducing, to say the least.

So far, though, she hadn't met those he had wronged. The ones she'd interviewed hadn't had any bad things to say about

him, and a couple mentioned that he was generous, always bringing gifts to those who had agreed to share his bed.

Evidently, it was a Kra-ell custom from the home world and not his way of assuaging his guilt. Some of the other males had gotten a much less favorable assessment, but she had no doubt that she would soon encounter females who had a vendetta against Mo-red.

“Sorry I’m late.” Toven appeared next to her on the walkway, startling her.

Vanessa’s hand flew to her chest. “I didn’t hear you approach.”

“I’m sorry about that as well. You seemed a thousand miles away.” He gave her a sympathetic look. “It’s not easy doing what you do, listening to the grief and the sorrow. I know it’s difficult for me, and I only hear those who need a translator.”

“You released their grief from Igor’s compulsion. I’m sure that wasn’t easy to face.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t have time to let it sink in, and they didn’t tell me anything I didn’t specifically ask about. It was very superficial. You delve deep, and it’s hard.”

“It’s my job. That is what I do day in and day out. I can’t say I’m used to it because there is no getting used to that. But I’ve learned to compartmentalize and leave work behind at the end of the day.”

Toven didn’t say anything in response, but his expression revealed his doubts, and he wasn’t wrong.

Some nights Vanessa lay awake thinking about her patients and contemplated thralling them to forget so they would have some relief from their pain, if only temporarily.

But in the long run, she would be doing them a disservice.

The feelings inside wouldn’t go anywhere, only the conscious awareness of what had caused them. In a way, it was even worse than remembering the horrors because it made them doubt their sanity.

“Who are we seeing now?” Toven asked.

“Asuka. Her English is almost nonexistent.”

Toven nodded. “I remember her. She’s one of the original settlers.”

“Yes.” Vanessa forced a smile. “Thank you for doing this. I know that an interpreter job is beneath a god, but my only other option is Morris, and he’s really not a suitable translator for therapy sessions.”

The pilot was a good guy, but he had the emotional intelligence of a shoe.

Toven nodded. “I’m glad that I can help. I just wish they weren’t so frightened of me.”

“Yeah, so do I. But it is what it is, right? We work with what we have.” She climbed the three steps to the front porch and rang the bell.

A small boy opened the door. “Mama!” he yelled and then smiled at her and offered his hand.

She thought he wanted to shake it, but he pulled her into the house while chattering in Russian.

Behind her, Toven translated. “His name is Moshun, and he likes the village. He says it’s nice and sunny, and he loves having a backyard. He’s asking if you want to see his pet gerbil.”

She was about to say that she would love to when the boy’s mother entered the living room.

“Hello.” She offered Vanessa her hand. “My name is Asuka.”

And that was that for English. What followed was a long paragraph in Russian with the name Kra-ell popping up in every other sentence.

Vanessa didn’t need to know the language to figure out what the female was saying. Whether female or male, whether delivered in English or Russian, it was the same speech she’d heard seven times yesterday and twice this morning.

“Asuka says that she’s thankful for your time, but she doesn’t need your services.” Toven tried to stifle the amusement in his voice. “The Kra-ell don’t need psychologists. They know how to deal with adversity and pain on their own.”

She turned to look at him over her shoulder. “Do I need to repeat my answer, or can you recite it from memory by now?”

“I can recite it. But she needs to hear you say the words even if she can’t understand them.”

“I know. I was just joking.” She turned to look the proud female in the eyes. “This is not a therapy session. I’m here to make an assessment and to collect information.”

Just talking about the things they had kept bottled up for years was therapeutic, but the Kra-ell responded better when personal issues, psychology, and therapy weren’t mentioned.



## KIAN

*K*ian walked into William's lab and closed the door behind him. "I need to talk to you." He pulled out a chair next to William's cluttered desk and sat down.

Kaia shifted in her chair. "Do you want me to leave?"

"You can stay." Kian cast her a tight smile. "You're privy to the clan's most guarded secret, and if I trust you with that, I can trust you with what I need to talk to William about."

She cleared her throat. "I'm dying to hear what you have to say, but I would feel bad if I don't remind you that I'm under compulsion not to reveal what I'm working on. I'm not under compulsion to do the same for whatever you are going to say. If you tell me not to tell anyone, I won't, but it's up to you."

"I trust you." He gave her a more genuine smile.

The girl was brilliant, and she was an excellent puzzle solver. Perhaps she would arrange the pieces better than he had done.

"I'm not done testing the trackers," William said. "I need a little more time."

That was only one of the reasons Kian was there and not even the main one.

"How much longer?"

William pushed his glasses up his nose. "My guys are putting together two powerful receivers, and they should be ready by the end of the day. Cracking the little buggers open is



another story, though. We've already destroyed two trying, and I'm reluctant to attempt it with more." He chuckled. "I'm glad that the Clan Mother didn't allow us to try to take the Odus apart to examine their brains. If they were made using similar technology, I shudder to think what would have happened."

"They are not," Kaia said. "But their brains might be. Although I doubt the gods would have fused all the components into a solid state. Any malfunction would have required replacing the entire brain, and since the Odus are much more complicated than the trackers, that would have been incredibly wasteful."

Kian hadn't checked with her about her progress in a while, but there was only so much he could focus on at a given time.

"How is the deciphering progressing?" he asked.

"I'm making good headway, but the amount of information is staggering. I'm learning a lot along the way." She cast a sidelong look at William. "Pretty soon, I'll have a better grasp of the gods' language than you do."

"Good. After you are done with the journals, you are welcome to give Ekin's tablet a look and decipher everything I didn't get to yet."

"Gladly." Amusement dancing in her eyes, she turned back to the photocopied pages she'd been poring over when Kian had entered.

"Stay with us," Kian said. "You might have valuable input."

"Of course." She put the page down and swiveled her chair around.

When he had both William and Kaia's full attention, Kian took in a breath. "I don't know if you know about the Clan Mother's departure." Given their surprised expressions, they didn't. "I purposefully didn't make it known that she was leaving. I suggested she return to the sanctuary for a couple of weeks, and she agreed. She took Alena and Orion with her."

Kaia frowned. "Is it because of the Kra-ell?"

“Yes, but not for obvious reasons. I actually wanted her to meet Jade and to mass-compel the Kra-ell to cooperate, but after what I’ve learned from talking with Igor, I felt that it wasn’t safe for her to stay. Toven will have to continue the compulsion work, and Jade will have to wait until I ascertain the risk to my mother.”

“To her personally?” William asked. “Or to the clan in general?”

“To her personally. As far as we know, Annani is the only legitimate heir to the Eternal King’s throne, and her grandfather might want to eliminate her.” He continued to explain Igor’s mission and what Jade had said about his odd behavior. “The thing that worries me most is why Igor is so happy to be in captivity.”

“Good question.” Kaia leaned forward. “The Eternal King, as his name suggests, is probably still the ruler of the gods’ planet, and he must have promised Igor an enormous reward for killing his only legitimate son. Ahn has been dead for thousands of years, but since there was no communication with the home planet, the king doesn’t know that. Igor can claim that he was responsible for the god’s death.”

Kian crossed his arms over his chest. “The thing is, how is he going to inform the Eternal King of his so-called success, and even more importantly, how is he going to claim his reward when he’s locked in an unescapable prison?”

“That’s one question we need to answer,” Kaia said. “The other is, why did he wait? If he could communicate with the king, Igor could have claimed success when he couldn’t find Ahn. Why wait until now?”

That was an excellent question for which Kian couldn’t figure out an answer, but he was certain that there was one, and he hoped that William and Kaia’s combined brain power would come up with something.

“He also doesn’t know about Annani. My mother thinks I might resemble the Eternal King and that Igor has figured out I’m his descendant. How is that helpful to him, though?”

Kaia scrunched her nose. “If he could somehow obtain a DNA sample from you and somehow transmit it to the Eternal King, it could provide proof that he found a descendant. But that’s not proof that he killed Ahn. Fortunately, you are half-human, so you can’t be an heir to the throne, and therefore he has no reason to kill you.”

William leaned back in his chair and let out a breath. “There is no way he can get a sample of your DNA without you getting close enough to him so he can grab a hair or scratch your skin, and even if he could, he can’t analyze the information and send it somewhere that is hundreds of light years away.”

When Kian’s phone buzzed with an incoming message, he pulled it out of his pocket and read it. “Excuse me for a few moments. I have to make a phone call.” He pushed to his feet. “This shouldn’t take long, so continue discussing it between you until I’m back.”



# VANESSA

*A*fter Asuka's roommate had taken Moshun to the playground, the three of them sat down at the dining table, and Vanessa took out her tablet.

"First, I want to assure you that Tom is here only in the capacity of a translator. He's not going to compel you to answer truthfully, but I would appreciate it if you did."

When Toven translated, Asuka nodded.

"Let's start with a few background questions." Vanessa waited until Toven translated. "How old were you when you boarded the settler's ship?"

"Twenty-two," Toven translated Asuka's answer.

"Were you glad to be selected?"

That answer took a little longer.

"She wasn't. She was young and not ready to venture out on her own. Some of the other females were excited about forming their own tribes and having a group of males selected for them, but she wanted to take her time and learn more things from her mother. She also didn't want to travel across the universe to a strange new planet and never see her family again. But it wasn't possible to refuse the draft. It would have been considered treason."

Vanessa had heard the same story from the one other original settler she'd interviewed. The difference was that the other female had been excited about the adventure. The settlers had been told the Earth was abundant with wildlife and

that the area they were supposed to settle in was warm and humid like their home planet. They were told that humans were primitive creatures who were easily subjugated and that they could have as many slaves as they wanted.

Given that they had rebelled against the gods for being exploited similarly, Vanessa found it curious that they had been willing to do the same to humans.

Talk about hypocrisy.

But her job was not to judge. It was to assess and to help.

“How would she describe her life before Igor’s males attacked her compound?”

When Toven translated, Asuka winced. It took her a few seconds to answer, and when she did, she didn’t look at Toven. She told her story to Vanessa.

It took a while until she was done and Toven started the translation.

“It was difficult. They were alone, they didn’t know what happened to the other pods, and the world they arrived at was very different than what they had expected. She didn’t feel a connection with the other settlers in her pod. The three other females were condescending toward her because she was so young and didn’t have much experience with males. The males constantly fought each other to prove themselves to the females, and not much had been done to build up their settlement. None of the three other females was the leader type, and they also argued and fought among themselves about every decision. Asuka couldn’t understand how they were sent across the universe without guidance or training. The humans were not the primitive creatures they’d been supposed to be, but they were easy to compel, so that saved her and the others in her pod from living like animals in the forest. When Igor and the others attacked, it was all over in moments. She doesn’t remember much, even after I removed Igor’s compulsion. She was in shock.”

“Did you add that comment, or did she say that?”

From what she'd learned about the Kra-ell so far, Asuka wouldn't even know what shock was.

Toven smiled apologetically. "I added it. I'm sorry. I'll try to stick to only translating."

Vanessa needed to learn Russian as fast as possible, or therapy wouldn't be possible for those of the Kra-ell who didn't speak English.

"Did you have children before the attack?" she asked.

Asuka shook her head.

"Moshun is her only child," Toven translated her answer.

Vanessa smiled. "He's adorable."

If she needed confirmation that at their core the Kra-ell were the same as immortals and humans, Moshun had provided it. He was like any other little boy. He was joyful and excited about his new pet.

"He's a good boy," Toven translated for Asuka. "He listens and does what he's told."

It was such a Kra-ell answer, but the tone of Asuka's voice betrayed the love she felt for her son. Her voice had warmed by at least ten degrees when talking about him, and her eyes briefly flashed blue.

Smiling, Vanessa asked her next question. "How were you treated at Igor's compound? Did you experience forced intimacy?"

When Toven translated, Asuka took a deep breath, nodded, and answered in a low voice.

"She says that she had no choice. She was denied privileges if she didn't agree to go to the males' beds. They would also taunt and humiliate her in front of everyone. It was easier to just agree and get it over with."

"Who were the worst offenders?"

Vanessa held her breath as she waited for the answer.

*Please, dear merciful Fates, don't let it be Mo-red.*

Thankfully, the only name Asuka said was Jade a couple of times. Neither Mo-red nor any of the other prisoners were mentioned.

“They are all dead,” Toven translated. “Jade killed most of them, and Asuka is grateful to her for that. She says that Jade is a good leader, and Asuka is glad that Jade took on the responsibility to lead them.”

“What about the eight remaining males from Igor’s pod? Did any of them harm her?”

As the female took a few moments to answer, Vanessa started sweating, and Toven cast her a curious glance. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. It’s just too hot in here. The Kra-ell turn the thermostats to a comfortable temperature for them, which is much too hot for me.”

Asuka waited for the exchange to be over before giving her answer, which wasn’t long.

“She says that not all of Igor’s pod members were evil. Some of them hated what they were forced to do. Two of the six males who attacked her tribe looked like they were about to puke their guts out. They weren’t seasoned warriors, and the carnage made them sick. They didn’t want to be there and do what they were ordered. She feels sorry for them.”

“Who were the two that looked sick?”

“Korvel and Mo-red.”

Vanessa felt faint with relief. “Who were the other four?”

“She says that two of them are dead, and Igor and Valstar are about to lose their heads.”

Toven asked Asuka a question that had Valstar’s name in it, and when she answered, he asked another question.

When that was done, Vanessa arched a brow. “What did she tell you about Valstar?”

“Nothing positive, I’m afraid.”





# KIAN

*K*ian ended the call, put the phone back in his pocket, and realigned his mind with the problem he had needed William and Kaia's incredible brains to help him solve.

When he reentered the lab, the two stopped a heated discussion and turned to look at him.

"We have an idea," William said. "It's going to be difficult to test, and it will take too much time, but it's doable."

"Shoot." Kian sat down.

"Remember what I told you about the trackers transmitting a weak signal that didn't change depending on distance and wasn't affected by disturbances?"

Kian nodded. "The same thought occurred to me. What if Igor's altered brain can do more than decrypt an encrypted signal and broadcast information light years away?"

"Yeah, that's what Kaia and I have been talking about. We didn't test Igor for trackers when we brought him to the keep, and we didn't even bother removing the trackers from the three males he had with him. We figured that there was no need since no one else was pursuing them. What if that signal goes all the way to the home planet or some spaceship orbiting the solar system?"

Kian's blood chilled in his veins. "I didn't think of a ship. We should evacuate the keep right away."

William lifted his hand. “Hold on. We can put them through an MRI machine, take out the trackers, put them in gerbils, and let them loose somewhere far away from here. Heck, we can even fly them back to Greenland.”

“Good idea.” Kian let out a breath. “Only we no longer have an MRI machine in the keep because we sent it to Safe Haven, and there is no way I’m bringing those four to the village.”

“Of course not,” William said.

“We can get a portable one,” Kaia suggested. “They are not as difficult to transport and cost less.”

Kian pulled out his phone. “I’ll tell Bridget to get on it right away.”

Kaia lifted her hand. “A cheaper and simpler solution is to sneak the four prisoners into some outpatient clinic closed for the night and do it there. You can take Sylvia to tamper with the alarm and the surveillance cameras.”

William smiled indulgently at his mate. “I wouldn’t get Sylvia anywhere near delicate medical equipment. When she came to the lab to help Roni with research, some equipment always malfunctioned. Her talent sometimes misfires.”

“Right.” Kaia caught the end of her ponytail and wound it around her fingers. “You should tell Kian about the other idea we had.”

“Yeah.” William sighed. “We played around with several ideas, and one of them was that Igor’s brain might be a transmitter of sorts and that we won’t be able to pick up the transmissions with standard equipment. To test this hypothesis, we will need to build two isolated chambers deep underground that are impervious to all the known waves and particles, one inside the other. We put Igor inside the inner one and measure output in the outer one. Then we will need to isolate all the normal signals a body emits and see if there is anything more.”

That sounded good in theory, but it would take weeks to build. “Is there any testing facility like that in the area that we could use?”

William removed his glasses and put them on his desk. “Not that I’m aware of, but I can make some inquiries.”

Kaia tapped a finger on the tip of her nose. “A simpler way would be to get Igor to talk. I’m sure you can think of ways to incentivize him.” She winced. “I hate the very idea of torture, but if Annani’s life is on the line, I’m all for it.”

Torture would be ineffective. “The problem is that Andrew can’t tell if Igor is telling the truth or lying. He can tell us any story that comes to his mind, and we won’t be any the wiser.”

The only thing that could work was compulsion, but since Annani was the only one who could possibly be a stronger compeller than Igor, that wasn’t going to happen.

“Do you want me to start working on the isolation chamber?” William asked.

“No. It’s too involved. It will be easier to just kill Igor and be done with it, but we can’t. Now that we have reason to believe that other assassins are hiding among the Kra-ell settlers, it is even more important to get to the pods as soon as they come online and eliminate the threat. “

“We can put Igor in stasis,” William said. “If we can identify the signals coming from the other trackers, we can wake him up as needed to decipher the encryption and find their location. According to Jade, it has been over twenty years since Igor raided another tribe. Those pods might never come online.”

“First, you need to finish building those receivers and test them so you can find out if you can identify the signal. It’s possible that Igor was bluffing and that you’ll be able to triangulate their location. If not, we can do what you suggest. I’m just not sure we can put Igor in stasis without a pod. He claims that he doesn’t know to what extent he was altered, and if he has the capacity to go into stasis.”

William frowned. “How is Kalugal’s excavation in China going? He believes that he will find a pod under those ruins.”

“I’ll ask him.” Kian pushed to his feet. “Last I heard, they were back to digging, but I don’t know how much progress

has been made.”



## MO-RED

“*T*wenty-five. Twenty-six. Twenty-seven—”

While Madbar did pull-ups on the bars, Mo-red lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling.

“Thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four. Come on, Mo-red. Get off your lazy butt and join me. You can’t lay in bed all day. Thirty-nine, forty—”

“Later.” Mo-red turned on his side and stared at the wall.

The beautiful psychologist hadn’t returned on Thursday like she’d promised, and it was near noon on Friday, so she wasn’t coming back today either.

He shouldn’t be surprised.

She’d said she would speak with the females on Thursday, and after hearing from them, she probably decided he wasn’t worth a second visit.

“Fifty-two, fifty-four—”

It had been only three days since he’d been locked in that damn shoebox underground, or rather two and a half, and he was already losing his mind. Perhaps it would be better if they just executed him and ended his misery.

“Get off the bars, Madbar,” Alfie said from the other side. “I need to get Mo-red.”

His heart started beating faster.

Vanessa was back, and she wanted to see him.

He should have showered again this morning even though he didn't have another set of clothing to change into. He and Madbar had been given a few clothing items, but he was wearing them, and the others had been taken to be laundered.

Madbar dropped to the floor. "Why does he always go first?"

"Do you want to get probed first? That can be arranged."

"Probed?" Madbar asked. "Is that what it is called? I don't mind her probing me."

Alfie chuckled. "You thought that I was taking Mo-red to see Vanessa. Not today. He's going to see Edna, our judge, and what she does is a tad more intrusive than talking."

Mo-red's heart sank. It wasn't Vanessa he was about the meet, but the clan's judge.

"It's okay," Madbar said. "Anything is better than rotting in this cell, especially if it involves a female."

Alfie's lips twitched in a smile. "You'll change your mind after a session with Edna." He motioned for Madbar to sit on the bed and unlocked the bars.

"Come on, Mo-red." He waved him out.

When he stepped out of the cell, Mo-red noticed that the guard, or Guardian as the clan's security force preferred to be called, didn't have chains.

Perhaps Vanessa had put in a good word for him?

"Did my security risk get downgraded?" he asked.

"You were never considered a high-security risk, but that's not the reason for the lack of chains. Edna needs to hold your hands, and she doesn't want you as tightly bound."

"Aren't you concerned about me attacking the female or trying to run?"

Alfie cast him a lopsided smile. "You're not a stupid male, Mo-red. There is nowhere to run, and if you make one wrong move, either I or the guys in security watching the camera feeds will activate the neurotoxin in your cuff. It will have you



on the ground in a split second, and your whole body will convulse in excruciating pain.”

All of that had been explained to him before, yet they had taken him to see Vanessa in chains. Perhaps the next time she came, he wouldn't be bound like a dangerous criminal.

“I promise to be on my best behavior with the judge.”

“I'm sure you will be.” The Guardian clapped him on the back and led him to the same room where he'd met Vanessa the other day.

“Hello, Mo-red.” A severe-looking female greeted him. “Please, take a seat.” She motioned to the same metal chair he'd sat in before.

The desk Vanessa had used had been moved aside, and the chair she'd sat in was facing the metal chair, which now had cuffs attached to its legs and armrests.

Alfie secured each limb to the chair, but there was enough give to the chains that Mo-red could kill the female if she got within his reach.

Perhaps he should point that out?

Was it a test?

“This is useless.” He lifted his hands the six inches or so that the chains allowed. “If the judge gets close enough to me to hold my hands, I can kill her while still in the chair. I won't, but I can't vouch for the others.”

“Tom's compulsion should mitigate that risk,” the Guardian said.

Then why had they put him in chains two days ago? Nothing had changed since then.

Perhaps it had been done to lower his spirits and make him feel helpless?

They shouldn't have bothered.

His spirits were low enough as it was.

The female nodded. "I'm not as helpless as I look, but I will take your advice under consideration and take the proper precautions. I can do this without holding the subject's hands, but I've found it works better when I do."

"You are safe with me." He looked into her ancient eyes. "I vow to the Mother not to harm you in any way."

She sat on the chair across from him. "Do you still believe in the Mother of All Life?"

"I've never stopped believing in her. I just wondered what I was being punished for. I figured I must have done something bad in a previous life."

The judge arched a brow. "I didn't know that your religion includes reincarnation. From what I've learned so far, the afterlife is spent either in the fields of the brave or the valley of the shamed."

"Those are the two extremes. Reincarnation is for the in-between. Those who did not qualify for the fields of the brave but also weren't bad enough for the valley of the shamed. It's considered another chance to get things right."

"Interesting." She pursed her lips. "Are you supposed to reincarnate only as a Kra-ell, or can you reincarnate as a god, a human, or whatever other intelligent species?"

"I don't know." Mo-red smiled apologetically. "I wasn't a very devoted follower of the Mother, and I never attended sermons. I just assumed that I would get reincarnated as a Kra-ell. How else would I earn the right to walk in the fields of the brave?"

"Good point." The judge leaned forward. "I'm going to take your hands now. Is that okay?"

As if he had a choice. "Of course."

She dragged her chair closer to his so their knees were nearly touching and took his hands.

Curiously, he felt absolutely no attraction to her, not even the slight tension that males and females feel when in proximity of someone who is sexually compatible.

He was a virile male with a healthy appetite, and she was a good-looking woman, so it was odd. He would have loved to ask her about it but didn't dare.

Perhaps it was her ancient eyes?

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

She looked surprised. “What would you like to know?”

“How old are you?”

“I'm over three hundred years old. Why did you ask?”

“Your eyes are ancient. I thought that you were much older.”

Her smile was sad. “I get that a lot.”



# JADE

Jade put down the crate of water bottles. “Come get it, everyone!”

The barn building was progressing rapidly, although it was going a little slower than the day before when three more Odus were there to lend their skills. For some reason, they were absent today.

Perhaps Kian had tasked them with a different project.

The day before, it had been quite the shock to see them working alongside the young Kra-ell, who had no idea who the creatures were, and it had taken her a lot of effort to control her reaction to them. Today, she was almost indifferent to the sight. Her fangs only occasionally itched and started to elongate before she forced them to retract.

The Odus looked so amiable with their humanoid friendly expression, and they knew how to build things, which many of the Kra-ell didn't, so refusing their help because they gave her the creeps wouldn't be wise.

Surprisingly, the cyborgs hadn't reacted with animosity toward her people. Maybe these ones didn't know of the fate that had befallen their fellow creatures after the peace agreement had been signed between the queen of the Kra-ell and the king of the gods.

Nevertheless, the immortals were fools to trust the hybrid creations that were part god and part machine. She didn't know much about artificial intelligence and how it worked, but

she knew how easily it could be corrupted and turned into a killing machine.

It all depended on who controlled them.

Walking over, Vrog pulled out a bottle of water and stood beside her.

“Hello, Jade. We didn’t have an opportunity to talk much yet. I wanted to tell you what I have done with the compound.”

He’d approached her the day before, but she had been too busy to spend time talking about what they had lost. Well, she was also agitated and worried after the story Igor had concocted for Kian to cover his real mission, but that wasn’t Vrog’s problem.

If she could only talk with Igor privately, she could ask him if the story he’d told Kian was true. Hell, she should have asked him what his mission had been when she’d had a chance. She’d just assumed that he’d been sent to kill the twins, but he had never confirmed that had been his mission.

Clever bastard.

Maybe he had a dual mission?

Or maybe his mission was to kill the ruling gods and help the twins take over?

No, that didn’t make sense. Igor was a creation of the gods, and even if the Eternal King wanted his heir gone, he wouldn’t want the twins to rule over the remaining gods.

It was a matter of pride.

Vrog shifted from foot to foot. “Do you have a moment, or are you still too busy?”

The guy wouldn’t let it rest until she heard him out.

“The compound was burned to the ground. I saw it going up in flames myself, and later Igor confirmed it. The land belonged to the Chinese government, so there was nothing to salvage.”

Vrog smiled smugly. “That’s not entirely true. Not everything burned down. I was able to salvage the safes with the money, the ledgers, and the weapons. The human quarters and some of the auxiliary structures survived as well. I used the money to rebuild the compound and turned it into a school for international students. I invested all the net profits and saved them for you, hoping and waiting for you to return. Then the clan found me, I discovered I had a son, and I met Aliya. I decided to stay in the village and sell the school.” He stopped for a moment to catch his breath. “I sold it for a nice profit and also invested that money. All that money is the tribe’s. I never thought of it as my own.”

Good, loyal Vrog.

“I appreciate your loyalty.” She dipped her head in acknowledgment of his good work and dedication. “Kian’s hackers were able to snatch the money Igor stole from our tribe and the others, so we don’t lack funds. You can keep the fruits of your labor.”

Vrog bowed his head much lower than she had. “I can’t possibly keep it. I couldn’t have built the school without the seed money I found in the safes. It’s not mine.”

She gave him an encouraging smile. “Since you managed to salvage what I was sure was lost, and then you grew it with smarts and dedication, it is yours to do with as you please.” When he shook his head, she added, “Kian told me that you are working on a school curriculum for our children as well as the clan’s. If you want, you can use some of the money for the school and keep the rest.”

When he opened his mouth to argue, she lifted her hand to stop him. “It’s a good compromise. Just accept it.”

He bowed his head again. “Yes, mistress.”

She used to love it when her people addressed her like that, but now it made her cringe. “Just Jade, Vrog. Mistress is such an outdated form of address. We are all on a first-name basis in this progressive world.”

He tilted his head. “May I speak freely, mi—, Jade?”

“Always.”

“You’ve changed a lot. You are not the same person you were two decades ago.”

“I know. Going through hell changes a person.” She let out a breath. “But I want to believe that the change is for the better, for my people, and for me, of which there are many more than there were before.”

“You were born to lead, Jade. You’ll do a great job leading our new larger tribe.”

“Thank you. I will do my best.”





## MO-RED

The judge held on to Mo-red's hands for what seemed forever, boring into his soul with her intelligent, compassionate eyes.

She'd warned him that it might be difficult and had claimed that if he opened up and let her in, it would be easier, but so far, the only one who seemed to be having a hard time was her.

Mo-red didn't feel much other than a vague awareness of a foreign presence in his subconscious, but the feeling could have been psychosomatic. He knew she was probing him, and he expected to feel something.

When she finally let go of his hands and leaned back in her chair, the judge released a breath. "That wasn't a walk in the park."

"I didn't block anything."

She smiled. "I know, and there was a lot. That's why it was so exhausting. Or maybe it's just the Kra-ell suppressed and layered emotional jumble. It's as if you don't process anything and just store it, and when I take a look, I get so swamped in the quagmire that it's difficult for me to swim through it and get back to shore."

Her analogy could use some work, but he understood what she was trying to say.

"How did I do?"

“You are carrying enough guilt on your shoulders to topple Atlas, which makes me believe you are a good male who was forced to do bad things. I also didn’t feel any hostile feelings toward us or anyone else, which threw me off and made me doubt the accuracy of my assessment. You must have hostile feelings at least toward Igor, but all I found was resignation with a tiny amount of hope.”

The hope was Vanessa, but the judge would laugh in his face if he told her that.

“I don’t have hostile feelings toward Igor because there are many in line before me, and their quest for vengeance takes precedence over mine. I was a tool in his hands, but I didn’t lose tribe members and I wasn’t forced to breed with people I despised.”

She arched a brow. “Forced? I thought that rape wasn’t condoned in the compound.”

“To a Kra-ell female, coercion is as effective as a physical force, if not more. Don’t forget that in our culture, a physical fight for dominance is considered a form of foreplay.”

She nodded. “I know that. By the way, your English is superb compared to some of the others. How did you become so fluent?”

He hadn’t expected that question.

“Igor wanted all his inner circle males to master several languages besides Russian. I chose English and German, but I’m more fluent in English because I got to use it more.” He smiled. “My proficiency was the loophole that freed me from having to participate in the raids. I was tasked with reading news from around the world and looking for clues about the gods as well as any other topics that might have been of interest to Igor.”

“Clever.” The judge pushed to her feet, walked over to the desk, and lifted a bottle of water. “If I had a straw, I would offer you some.” She removed the cap and took a sip.

“That’s okay. I’ll drink when I get back to my cell.”

He was thirsty, but he could wait, and since the judge seemed to be in a talkative mood, perhaps he could ask her about Vanessa.

“Do you know when the psychologist is coming back?”

She shook her head. “Vanessa finished her initial assessment of the prisoners, and she has a lot of work in the village with the rest of your people. I don’t know when she’s going to be back.”

His heart sank. “She said it was only an initial intake assessment and she would return the next day. I wondered what happened.”

“You will have to ask her.” The judge waved her hand at the camera.

A moment later, the door opened, and Alfie walked in. “All done?”

“Yes.” Edna put the bottle of water back on the desk. “I’m ready to probe the next prisoner.”

Alfie frowned. “I thought that you could only do one a day.”

“So did I, but I’m getting the hang of it. I’ll do one more and call it a day.”

“Who do you want to see?”

“One of the easy cases like Mo-red. I’m saving Valstar for last.” She turned to look at him. “What’s your opinion of Igor’s second?”

That was a difficult question to answer. “Let’s put it this way. After he dies, he’s probably going to reincarnate.”

“So, in your opinion, he’s not purely evil but not good either?”

Mo-red nodded. “I’ve seen him doing cruel things, but I’ve also seen him finding loopholes in Igor’s compulsion to make things better for people when he could. It was his idea to send young humans to universities to study. He convinced Igor that he would benefit from keeping up with the latest

developments, but it also provided the humans with hope for the future and a way out of the compound for at least a little while. It was a big boost to morale.”

He wasn't sure that improving conditions for the humans had been part of the equation, but if the initiative resulted in that, Valstar deserved the credit.



# VANESSA

Vanessa trotted along the gravel path, hurrying toward the office building, her light coat billowing behind her and her satchel swinging back and forth.

Why had she put on heels again today, for the Fates' sake?

Because she was a vain female. That's why.

She didn't do much to pamper herself, and her days were dedicated to helping others, but she enjoyed looking well put together. Loafers were practical but unattractive, and she despised sports shoes for anything other than exercise. She wore ballet flats in the sanctuary but nowhere else.

"Doctor Vanessa," someone called from behind her. "Do you have a moment?"

No clan member called her doctor, and given the Russian accent, the voice belonged to one of the Kra-ell.

She slowed down to a stop and turned around. "Good afternoon." She recognized the young Kra-ell. "How can I help you, Pavel?"

He was covered in dust from working on the barn, so he must have come straight from the construction site.

How had he known where to find her?

He caught up to her in three long strides and dipped his head in the Kra-ell greeting. Some of them had learned the habit of shaking hands, but once she'd found out it wasn't customary for them, she'd stopped offering.

“I wanted to ask you about my father.”

“What about him?”

“His name is Mo-red, and he’s one of the prisoners.”

“I know who he is.”

Heck, she couldn’t stop thinking about him, and he’d even starred in her dream last night.

Fates, what a dream that had been.

Only her years of practiced self-control saved her from blushing like a shy virgin.

“Did you have a chance to speak with him yet?” Pavel asked.

“I did. Once.”

“What do you think? I mean, what is your professional opinion of him?”

Obviously, the young male was concerned about his father.

“I think he carries tremendous guilt over things he was forced to do. He’s a good male.”

Pavel let out a breath. “Thank you. Do you think he will be found innocent in the trial?”

“I don’t know.” She reached to put a hand on his shoulder and retracted it at the last moment.

The Kra-ell didn’t like casual touching.

“I will offer my opinion, but it will be up to your people to decide his fate.”

“You’ve talked with several of the females. What is their stance?”

“None of the ones I talked with think of him as inherently evil, but I didn’t talk with everyone yet. I hope that the sentiment is shared by most.”

He nodded. “Thank you. My father is a good guy. He doesn’t deserve to die because Igor forced him to do evil things.”



The son's testimony carried weight too, and she was glad his opinion of Mo-red was positive.

She would have hated herself for lusting after a ruthless killer.

"I agree." She slung the satchel over her other shoulder. "I wish I could stay and chat some more, but I'm late for a meeting. It was nice talking to you, Pavel."

"Same here."

In fact, the meeting she was rushing to was about her and Edna's evaluation of the prisoners. Edna wasn't done with everyone yet, but Kian wanted an update, and they were meeting in his office to discuss their findings.

She and Edna made it to the office building door at the same time.

"Hi," the judge said. "I'm glad that I'm not the only one who's late."

"I don't know why Kian wants to see us so soon." Vanessa pulled the door open for Edna. "How many of the prisoners have you probed so far?"

"Two, and I also probed Jade." She smiled. "I did Mo-red first, as you'd requested, and I confirmed your assessment of him. If anyone deserves a second chance, it's him."

"Thank you." Vanessa felt a weight lift off her chest. "I needed the confirmation."

She hadn't trusted her evaluation to be objective given the inexplicable pull she felt toward the male, but Edna was mated, and therefore incapable of being attracted to anyone but Rufsar.

"I also probed his cellmate, Madbar, and reached the same conclusion about him as you. He's not as guilt-ridden as Mo-red, but he has a very low opinion of himself, and he blames Igor for everything bad he has done. He's not the type who takes responsibility."

"It's an age-old dilemma," Edna said. "Madbar is a follower who needs to be told what to do. He would have

probably obeyed Igor's commands even without the compulsion, but does that make him responsible for the crime? If he refused, Igor would have probably killed him because he would have been just another useless male competing for the scarce females. Not many people have the guts to accept death instead of committing a crime."



## KIAN

*K*ian walked into Bridget's office. "I need you to get me an MRI."

"After I got your text, I made some inquiries, but there was nothing available that we can pick up right away." Bridget leaned back in her chair. "What do you need it for?"

He sat down across from her desk. "Igor and the other three males who were with him still have trackers in their bodies. We didn't think it was important to remove them because we believed that with Igor's capture the danger was over, but we were wrong."

"Because?" Bridget prompted.

Once Kian was done explaining, she let out a breath. "Your best option is to do what Kaia suggested and smuggle them into some downtown clinic in the middle of the night."

"I don't want to wait for nighttime." Kian knew he was asking Bridget to pull the proverbial rabbit out of the hat, but he needed those four Kra-ell free of their trackers yesterday.

"What do you want me to do? Even if I buy one now, it will take a few days to arrive."

"Can we get the one in the village on a truck and get it to the keep?"

Bridget's eyes brightened. "You are a genius. We could hire a big moving van, load the MRI up, and not even unload it in the keep. We can run an extension cord to the van and get the Kra-ell scanned there."

“What about the magnetic field the MRI creates? Don’t you need a special crate?”

“We could get some of the leftover materials from the barn building project and use wood planks on the floor of the van. If the van is large enough, we can keep the MRI in the middle so it won’t be close to the sides.”

Kian still remembered the massive crate they’d used to transport the MRI from the clinic in the keep to Safe Haven. “Will that be enough?”

“It should be.”

“Then let’s do that. I also want to have a permanent device in our downtown warehouse, so keep your inquiries going and as soon as you find portable devices available for sale, buy two.”

They had rented them before on an as-needed basis, but it seemed there was always a need.

Well, not always, but frequently enough.

“For the once-in-a-blue-moon occasion that we need it, it really doesn’t make sense to go into such an expense.” Bridget pushed her fingers through her thick hair. “I wish I hadn’t sent the MRI from the keep to Safe Haven.”

“It’s done, and it doesn’t make sense to get it back.” He got to his feet. “We can get a new device and charge it to the Kra-ell. After all, it’s their mess that we are cleaning up.”

Bridget’s lips twisted in a grimace. “I don’t think Igor qualifies as a Kra-ell problem anymore. Not after what he told you. He’s very much our problem.”

“True.” Kian walked toward the door and stopped before depressing the handle. “Do you need help organizing the transport of the MRI?”

She probably didn’t, but he had to ask.

“Consider it handled. I’ll also notify Merlin to get ready.”

“Thank you. Let me know when the van is on its way to the keep.”

“Yes, boss.” She saluted him.

As he walked down the hallway to his office, Edna and Vanessa emerged from the staircase.

“Good afternoon, ladies.” He opened the door and motioned for them to enter. “Thank you for dropping everything and coming over on such short notice.” He pulled out two chairs next to the conference table and waited for them to sit down before pulling out a chair for himself.

“I’ve only done two probes,” Edna said. “And I did them on the easiest cases.”

He was aware of that, but he needed to get a feel for where things were going with the assessments.

“What’s your impression?” Kian asked.

“One subject was riddled with guilt to the point that he was barely clinging to his will to live, and the other subject felt helpless and didn’t blame himself. He blamed Igor and the circumstances. Neither are bad people, but I have to admit that I liked Mo-red better. He’s more intelligent and takes responsibility for his actions even though he has as much justification for blaming Igor and the circumstances as his cellmate.”

Edna was such a pleasure to work with. Despite her freaky probing talent, she had a no-nonsense attitude and the ability to convey things clearly and economically.

“What about Jade?”

Edna winced. “She’s a complicated case. There is so much anger and grief inside her that it’s difficult to feel anything else. It took me a long time to get past that storm of feelings and get to her core. She is driven by duty and honor, which are good qualities if not taken to the extreme. So far, she has proven reasonable and willing to listen to logic, so I’m not worried that she’ll become a fanatic.”

Kian turned to Vanessa. “What about you? What is your assessment?”

“I’ve performed only basic information-gathering interviews because I wanted to get to as many people as possible as quickly as possible. The prisoners will soon stand trial, and it was important to gauge how the other Kra-ell felt about them. I agree with Edna’s impression of Mo-red and Madbar. The other six males I spoke to had varying degrees of culpability, guilt, and shame, but I didn’t spend enough time with any of them to provide a solid assessment yet.” She shifted her gaze to Edna. “I’m so glad that your ability works on the Kra-ell. It would have taken me months to confirm what you can do in one sitting.”

“I’m glad for my alien probe too.” She glared at Kian.

He lifted his hands. “I didn’t coin that nickname, so don’t look at me.” He was guilty of using it, though, and Edna knew that. It was best to steer clear of the subject before she decided to retaliate by sending her ghostly fingers into his soul.

Not that she would do that without his consent, but she might let a small tendril loose and call it an *oops*.

Shifting on his chair, he turned to look at Vanessa. “So I gather that neither of you has detected a hidden agenda? Maybe a subconscious one?” He turned toward Edna. “You’re usually good at detecting that.”

She frowned. “What exactly did you expect me to detect?”

Not wanting to influence their assessments, Kian hadn’t told them about the new developments with Igor, but they needed to know what he suspected. When he was done explaining, Edna frowned, and Vanessa seemed doubtful.

“You are basing a lot on Jade’s impression of Igor’s behavior,” Vanessa said. “You should consider that people act differently according to their circumstances. He might have been smiling more and making humorous comments to make himself more likable to you. It could have been calculated, or it could have been a natural defensive response. In my experience, male aggression sometimes manifests as humor or banter.” She placed her palms on the conference table. “To extrapolate from Igor’s behavior that all the settlers are potential assassins is a stretch.”

“Some of them might be,” Edna said. “From what you’ve told me, it seems that the gods on the home planet were master manipulators, and they played deadly games. If what Igor says is to be believed, the king plotted his heir’s demise and sent a group of genetically altered assassins, the queen thwarted his plans and sabotaged the ship so it arrived seven thousand years later and, in the meantime, sent seven Odus to protect her son.” She shook her head. “Sounds like a *Game of Thrones* plot.”

Kian chuckled. “It does, and I agree that it sounds too fantastical to be taken seriously, but since my mother is the next in line for the Eternal King’s throne, I’m not willing to overlook even the most unlikely scenario. From now on, I want you both to look for hidden agendas and triggers when you do your evaluations. I want you to report anything even slightly suspicious.”

Edna groaned. “The Kra-ell are difficult enough to probe as it is. If I need to dig even deeper, I won’t be able to do more than one a day. How many original settlers do we have?”

“Forty females in the village and the ten males in the dungeon. I don’t want either of you anywhere near Igor, so that leaves nine.”

“Perhaps we should isolate the settler females as well?” Edna suggested.

Vanessa shook her head. “We can’t do that. Some of them have children, adult and underage. Besides, those females have been through enough already. The ones I talk to feel like the village is a sanctuary, a place to heal. We shouldn’t take that away from them.”

Kian briefly closed his eyes. “I had to sneak my mother out and send her back to Alaska because I feared for her life. With all due respect to the suffering of these females, this is still Annani’s clan, and her well-being comes before theirs.”





## VANESSA

*K*ian was right. This was Annani's clan, they were her family, and the Clan Mother came first, but Vanessa didn't believe for a moment that any of those females were sleeper assassins.

She hadn't had time to talk with them in depth, but she'd asked a few questions about their lives on Anumati before being selected by the lottery. The only commonality was that they had been young and hadn't had children yet. They had all trained with swords and bows since they were old enough to hold a weapon, but it hadn't been organized military training for a specific purpose. They had been trained by their mothers and fathers.

Unless they had all gone through a mind wipe and been implanted with pasts that hadn't been their own, she couldn't see any of these females being assassins.

Besides, it went against the Kra-ell code of honor.

The Kra-ell fought their enemies face to face. They didn't stab each other in the back or plot stealth killings.

The gods, on the other hand, would do precisely that. It seemed that they were the first politicians, and just like humans, theirs were corrupt, power-hungry, and without scruples.

"If we are done, I should go." Vanessa lifted her satchel off the back of her chair. "I want to go back to interviewing the prisoners."

What she really wanted was to see Mo-red, but she had to make it look as if she was doing her job.

Kian glanced at his phone and pushed to his feet. “I’m heading to the keep as well. If you want, you can hitch a ride with me.”

That meant she would have to go back with him as well, and she didn’t need the additional pressure of accommodating his schedule.

“Thank you, but I’d rather take my own car. I plan to stop by the mall on my way back.”

“Then you should definitely take your car. My visit to the keep is not going to be short.” He pulled his phone out again and glanced at the screen. “We are loading the MRI machine on a moving van and taking it to the keep. We were remiss and didn’t remove the trackers from Igor and his three companions.” He lifted his gaze to Vanessa. “I want that done as soon as possible.”

Given what he’d learned from Igor, she could understand his urgency. “Is there anything I can help you with while I’m in the dungeon?”

Kian shook his head. “I want to talk with Igor before the MRI arrives and witness the removal. I want to know if Igor’s tracker differs from the others.”

She nodded. “Do you have anyone specific that you want me to assess first?”

“Not today, but I want you to schedule Jade for your first appointment tomorrow morning and do a thorough assessment of her, not just an information-gathering interview.” He turned to Edna. “I trust your judgment, but as you said, Jade is complicated. Perhaps Vanessa can catch something that you’ve missed.”

Edna shrugged. “By all means. You shouldn’t worry about my ego. I don’t have one when it comes to that special ability of mine. I did nothing to earn it. My legal expertise is another matter. I worked hard to be the best and take pride in my knowledge of the law, clan and human.”

He dipped his head. “Indeed. Are you going back to the keep?”

Edna shook her head. “I’m too drained to perform any more probes, and there are a couple of human cases I’m working on that need my attention.” She smiled. “It’s funny that I think of them as relaxing.”

“I get it.” Kian let out a breath. “I feel the tension leave my shoulders when I spend time reviewing business proposals and reading reports from our various holdings. That’s what I’m best at, and I enjoy it. No lives are at stake, only money, and I’m not emotionally attached to it. If I lose, I lose and move on.” He waved a hand in a motion meant to encompass everything else. “If I could delegate all the rest to someone else, I would be a happy male.”

Chuckling, Edna patted his arm. “You wouldn’t be happy because you wouldn’t be in control, which would give you an emotional ulcer.”

Edna was right. Kian was a control freak and wasn’t ashamed to admit it.

“I’m working on that.” He opened the door. “Maybe one day I will appoint someone more capable than I am to act as regent for my mother, and I’ll focus solely on business. I bet our earnings would shoot through the roof.”

“I have no doubt.” Edna walked out the door. “Until we meet again, have a good evening and night, and don’t work too hard.”

Vanessa waited for Kian to follow Edna, but he turned toward Bridget’s office. “I’ll see you in the keep,” he threw over his shoulder as he strode down the hallway.



## MO-RED

*M*o-red's heart thundered as he walked toward the therapist's room, which was just a converted cell, but to him it represented hope.

He'd met with the judge earlier in the day, so he hadn't expected to meet Vanessa as well, and the summons was a mood-uplifting surprise.

Since Mo-red had last seen Vanessa on Wednesday, he'd been thinking about her constantly, waiting for one of the Guardians to come to get him and take him to her.

The attraction and yearning didn't make sense.

Perhaps his impending death had made him weak and left him feeling things that no Kra-ell should feel, especially not toward a descendant of the gods. But there was something unique about Vanessa that he hadn't encountered with any female before, not a pureblood, hybrid, or human.

It was like having magnets in their chests that were two halves of the same whole, and his magnet was desperate to reunite with its other half.

As the Guardian opened the door, the thundering in Mo-red's chest got so loud that he was sure Vanessa could hear it from the other end of the room where she sat behind the desk.

Dimly, he was aware that the desk hadn't been returned to its previous position, but it wasn't where it had been when the judge had probed him.

“Hello.” He smiled tightly as he entered the room. “This is a most pleasant surprise.”

She smiled back, and her bright eyes gleamed, the inner light shattering the illusion that she was human. “I’m glad that you are happy to see me.”

As the Guardian secured him to the chair, Mo-red was vaguely aware that the restraints weren’t as constricting as they had been for his previous meeting with Vanessa. The chains were looser, giving him more freedom of movement, the same way as it had been done for his meeting with the judge. Still, if any of the other prisoners got a bad idea in his head and decided to attack Vanessa, they should be effective enough to keep her safe provided that she stayed on the other side of the desk.

She was such a delicate female.

At the thought, his fangs elongated, and he quickly closed his eyes, not to scare her with the red glow. Human females panicked when they saw his red eyes, even those who’d lived in the compound and knew him and who he was. Some of those he’d bedded outside the compound had gotten hysterical, and he’d been forced to take control of their minds to calm them down.

After the Guardian left the room and closed the door behind him, Vanessa leaned forward. “What got you upset, Mo-red?”

He loved hearing her say his name.

“I’m sorry.” He opened his eyes, hoping they were back to their usual color. “Did I scare you?”

She shook her head, the beautiful wavy blond hair cascading over her delicate shoulders. “I’m familiar with the response. Our males’ fangs also elongate when they are agitated, and I find it reassuring rather than disturbing.”

Thank the Mother, she hadn’t seen his red eyes, only his fangs. “Why reassuring?”

“Because their fangs are weapons, and I know they would use them to defend the other females and me.” She smiled,

baring her teeth. “Regrettably, immortal females have tiny fangs that don’t elongate, so we are pretty defenseless if attacked by an immortal male.”

His fangs itched, but he forced them to retract. “Does that happen often?”

“Not at all, but we have enemies, so the fear is there.”

The wheels in his head took a moment to process what she’d said. “You have immortal enemies?”

Vanessa nodded and then chuckled. “Mortal enemies who are immortal. How is that for contradicting terms?”

She was confusing him. “I don’t understand. Are they mortal or immortal?”

“Mortal enemies means that they want us dead, but they are immortal just like us. We are not truly immortal, you know. We can be killed just like the Kra-ell. Well, maybe we can survive some injuries that the Kra-ell can’t because we heal faster.”

Was it his imagination, or was Vanessa talking too fast and sounding a little breathless?

Perhaps the two halves of one magnet he’d imagined on the way were real?

“Who are those enemies of yours? Other gods?”

“Like us, they are the immortal descendants of gods, but they have taken a different path than we have. While we want to help humanity advance and evolve, they want to subjugate it.”

“Who is winning the war?”

“We are in a ceasefire at the moment.” She shifted in her chair. “But we are not here to talk about that conflict. We are here to talk about you.”

He was very interested in the topic of the clan’s enemies and who they were, but he knew better than to pester Vanessa with questions she didn’t want to answer. It would only upset her, which was the last thing he wanted.



Mo-red wanted her to like him, not just because he needed her to testify in his favor in the upcoming trial.

“You asked what got me upset.”

“Yes.” She looked embarrassed as she pushed back a wayward lock of her hair. “We’ve gotten distracted.”

“When the Guardian secured me to the chair, I was relieved that I wasn’t as tightly bound as I was the other day, but I was still glad that precautions were taken and that no one could leap from this chair and attack you.”

“Who would do that?”

He could barely contain his fangs from elongating. “One of the other prisoners might do something crazy and try to hold you hostage or harm you somehow. That thought was what got my fangs to elongate and my eyes to turn red. You didn’t notice the red glow because I closed my eyes not to scare you.” He let out a breath. “But they are probably back to glowing red right now.”



# VANESSA

Vanessa shouldn't have found Mo-red's response sweet, but she did. He was protective of her, and it had been a long time since she had anyone feel that way about her.

The only one who had ever appointed himself her protector was Jackson, but he'd grown out of that phase, and now he was dedicated to protecting Tessa, as he should be.

"I don't scare easily." She smiled to show him that the red glow in his eyes didn't affect her. "I know that demons and devils do not exist, but other species do who have fangs and glowing eyes that sometimes flash red and sometimes other colors." She held up her tablet and went through her notes. "I have them all listed here. Black means calm or neutral, red means excited or aggressive and usually happens during feeding. They can also turn blue, green, and purple at night, depending on how much light there is, and they also glow to help with visibility. When it's very bright, they can turn golden." She lifted her head and looked at his eyes, relieved that they were once more black, but she was also a little disappointed. Red was the color of arousal. "That's an impressive array of colors."

"The blue, green, and purple glow are also related to extreme emotions. Green is for fear, purple is for amusement, and blue is for profound feelings like devotion. Very light blue that looks almost white is reserved for extreme emotions like those experienced during the birth of a child or religious sermons." He smiled. "The good ones. I remember attending quite a few sermons that put me to sleep as a boy."

As Vanessa tried to imagine him as a young boy, Pavel's face popped in front of her eyes. He wasn't a boy, but he was young, and he looked a lot like his father.

"Pavel approached me earlier today. He's concerned about you."

"He's a good son."

As Mo-red's eyes got a slightly bluish hue, she felt a pang of longing in her heart. Would his eyes ever turn that color when he looked at her? Did she want them to turn blue? Or was she more interested in them turning red?

It was shameful to admit even to herself, but hearing the pureblooded females describe the typical Kra-ell mating dance had gotten her aroused and curious.

Vanessa had never had an immortal lover, and the humans she'd been with couldn't challenge her in a dominance game. All immortal females were strong, but she was even stronger than typical. She could overpower most men easily, even the burly ones who frequented the gyms.

When Kalugal and his men had first moved into the village, Vanessa had been tempted to try out one of them, but she was never in the village long enough to find one she could tolerate seeing later. The humans she occasionally engaged with were one-night stands she never had to see again, but the same wasn't true of the former Doomers.

They lived where she did, and it just wouldn't work, especially with the gossip problem the village suffered from. Everyone would know within hours who she had been with, and likely also what she had done with the guy.

It was a big no-no.

"It's my turn to ask what got you so... thoughtful." Mo-red dragged out the last word, making it evident that he wanted to use a different one that was inappropriate in their situation.

Not that there was anything appropriate about her thoughts.

The Kra-ell didn't emit emotional scents, but they could smell them. Even though Mo-red didn't have experience with immortal females, he could easily identify the scent Vanessa was emitting.

Should she admit it?

They had two cameras pointed at them, and she knew they were being actively watched, but she'd asked for the sound to be turned off. The males in the dungeon had the same right to privacy with their therapist as anyone else.

Given her inappropriate feelings toward Mo-red, she should resign as his therapist, but since there was no one else to take her place, she didn't have that luxury.

On the one hand, revealing her thoughts to him violated professional standards, but on the other hand, she couldn't demand honesty from him without being honest herself.

Lying might be an option with human patients, but not with this Kra-ell male who could probably read her like an open book.

"You intrigue me, Mo-red, but as long as we engage with each other in the capacity of a patient and his therapist, I'm forbidden from exploring it further. Besides, we are not alone." She wanted to wave at the cameras, remembering at the last moment that raising her hand was a sign for the Guardian to come in.

Instead, she lifted her eyes to the device and then back to Mo-red.



## MO-RED

*I*ntrigued? What did Vanessa mean by that?

Given what Mo-red's nose was telling him, she was just as interested in him as he was in her, but since he hadn't made a single suggestive move or even a comment, he didn't know what had prompted her reaction.

By Kra-ell standards he was a good-looking male, handsome with more muscles and broader shoulders than most, but he wasn't beautiful like the gods or even their immortal descendants, and human females found his large eyes, narrow middle, and long tongue disturbing.

He followed Vanessa's gaze to look at the camera behind him. "Can they hear us?"

"Thankfully, no. I asked them to give us privacy."

Since he wasn't sure how to proceed, he decided the safest way would be to use the same term she had. "I find you very intriguing too."

A smile bloomed on her gorgeous face. "I appreciate you being honest with me."

Did she mean that she doubted his honesty and wanted him to stop lying, or did she mean that she believed him and was thanking him for his honesty?

His English was very good, but it wasn't his native tongue, and some nuances were lost on him.

"I wonder if you would be offended if I tell you what I mean by intriguing," he said.

All she had to do to understand what he meant was glance at the evidence he had no way of hiding, with his wrists bound to the armrests and his ankles chained to the chair legs.

As Vanessa leaned forward, her eyes were glowing. “I think I know what you mean by that, but even though no one can hear us, we shouldn’t spell it out for each other. As I mentioned before, as long as you are my client, I can’t engage with you in such a way.”

“I didn’t hire you.” Hopefully he wasn’t blowing his chances with her, or worse, his chances of getting her to speak for him at the trial.

He should beat down his libido and concentrate on avoiding execution.

“That is true, but Kian asked me to evaluate every Kra-ell adult and teenager and identify those who need my help. So even though you didn’t hire me, I’m still your therapist.”

Mo-red had difficulty deciphering Vanessa’s expression. She seemed amused, but he didn’t know if it was because she enjoyed the banter or because she wanted the guys in security to think that she was conducting a pleasant conversation with him and that they had nothing to worry about.

“Can I fire you? I mean, if I didn’t like you, and I mean IF, because I like you too much, but if I didn’t, would it be my right to refuse therapy from you?”

“Yes, it would, but we don’t want to do that.” She smiled, and he knew it was for the camera because her eyes looked troubled. “You need me to speak on your behalf in the trial.”

He nodded. “Perhaps we can approach it from a different angle.”

The amusement spread to her eyes, and she leaned back in her chair. “I can’t wait to hear it.”

He swallowed. “You are here because Kian asked you to make a professional assessment of the Kra-ell and to check who needs psychological help. That means that you haven’t become anyone’s therapist yet. You are still in the assessment stage, and your real function is advisory and not therapeutic.



You are collecting information to help Kian and the judge with the upcoming trial. Therefore, you are not my psychologist or my attorney, and we can choose to engage with each other as we please.”

Vanessa arched a brow. “Is that so?”

When her lips twitched with a stifled smile, he let out a relieved breath. “I’m glad you are finding this amusing. I was afraid of overstepping my boundaries, so to speak.” He lifted his forearms the five centimeters or so he could. “I don’t have much leeway to overstep anything other than saying something I shouldn’t.”

She regarded him for a long moment, glanced at the camera, looked back at him, once again at the camera, and then smiled. “Living under the thumb of a compeller, you’ve learned to look for loopholes and where to find them.”

Hope surged in his chest. “Did I find a good loophole this time as well?”

Vanessa briefly closed her eyes. “The other day, a human female who works for me in a different location asked for my advice regarding her boyfriend. I decided to give her advice as a friend and not as a psychologist, and it was sort of a loophole.”

“What was the advice?”

“She wasn’t happy with him, and for good reason, but since she equated breaking up with failure, she couldn’t bring herself to do that. I told her to call ending things with her boyfriend something else so it wouldn’t feel like a failure to her. I offered her a loophole.”



# VANESSA

*W*hy had she told Mo-red about her conversation with Karen?

Vanessa's subconscious had latched onto the idea of playing sexy word games with him, saying one thing while meaning another, and her mind had connected the dots, finding similarity to what she had done with the Krav Maga instructor.

She hadn't acted perfectly professionally with Karen, giving her advice she would have never given a client, and she wasn't acting professionally with Mo-red either.

A small, wicked voice in the back of her head whispered that human rules didn't apply to an immortal interacting with a Kra-ell, but that was the devil on her left shoulder. The angel on her right shook her head and wagged her finger in disapproval.

So yeah, calling herself an advisor instead of a therapist was a loophole Vanessa could use to convince others of her innocence, but she knew it wasn't right. An advisor should be impartial, and having a relationship with a prisoner was the opposite of that.

On the other hand, though, Mo-red wasn't accused of committing any crimes against the clan, so Kian shouldn't care whether she was involved with Mo-red or not, and he was the one who had hired her, not the Kra-ell who were Mo-red's accusers.

So maybe she could use the loophole after all.

It wasn't much of a loophole anyway, and even if she was willing to call herself an advisor instead of a therapist, there wasn't much they could do other than talk, and there was no harm in that.

On the contrary, talking was part of her job.

“What did she call it?” Mo-red asked.

Vanessa's lips curved in a smirk. “I told her to call it house cleaning.”

His laughter took her by surprise and warmed her heart. None of the Kra-ell she'd talked with had laughed, and even smiles were rare. It wasn't that all of them were depressed. They were just such serious people.

It seemed as if humor was regarded as silly and inappropriate for adults.

“That was a very clever way to say what you wanted to say without actually saying it, Doctor Vanessa.”

“Just Vanessa. I don't like being called a doctor.”

“Why not?”

“People confuse it with a medical doctor, and I'm the type who gets faint when she sees a drop of blood.”

Mo-red's amusement vanished in an instant. “Then you must be repulsed by my people and me.”

Damn, talk about a faux pas.

“I didn't phrase that correctly. Blood on its own doesn't bother me. I have no problem with the Kra-ell consuming blood for sustenance, especially since they don't drain the animals they drink from. It's the idea of suffering and pain that gets me. I get faint when I see a bleeding wound.”

He didn't seem convinced. “We also bite each other during sexual intercourse, and taking a little blood from our partners is a form of bed play. Does that bother you?”

Heck, no.

Strangely, it aroused her.

“Not at all. Our males also bite during sex, and even though they don’t drink blood, only inject venom, I’m sure some blood is involved. I’ve never been with an immortal male, so I don’t have firsthand experience, but from what I’ve heard, it’s incredible. The venom supposedly triggers a series of powerful climaxes.”

Mo-red’s eyes flashed vivid red and then turned dark crimson, and when he spoke, his voice came out deep and a little raspy. “Why haven’t you experienced sex with an immortal?”

“Most of my clan is descended from one goddess, so it’s taboo for us to engage sexually with each other. All my partners were human men.”

“Aren’t you curious about the difference?”

“Immensely.” She leaned forward. “What about you? You have two hybrid sons, so obviously, you had sex with human females. How do they compare to the purebloods and the hybrids?”

There. She was asking questions that would help her understand the Kra-ell better. She was still doing her job.

Mo-red didn’t emit any emotional scents, but she could see the effect their talk had on him clearly enough without the benefit of smelling his emotions. He was aroused, and the evidence pushed against his zipper most enticingly.

“I love how soft and pliable human females are. They are naturally much more submissive than our females, and they don’t attack as soon as they enter my bedchamber. I can take my time and pleasure them into oblivion, which gives me a lot of satisfaction. The downside is that I need to hold back to avoid accidentally hurting them, and that takes away from the pleasure.”

Vanessa nodded. “My male relatives complain about the same thing.” She didn’t know whether she could tell him about Dormants, and until she got permission from Kian, she’d better not mention them. It was better to shift the conversation back to the Kra-ell. “What about the pureblooded females?”

They can't be all bad if Igor went to so much trouble to get more of them."

"They are not. It's just a different experience." He smiled suggestively. "It's like flavors of ice cream. Sometimes you might be in the mood for vanilla, and other times you might be in the mood for something with a little more bite."

Vanessa chuckled. "You seem to have mastered the art of allegory in no time." She leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest to apply pressure to her stiff, achy nipples. "Which flavor do you prefer?"



## MO-RED

If Mo-red got any harder, his zipper would give out, and given how many times Vanessa's eyes had briefly darted down, she was very much aware of his predicament.

"I can't comment on ice cream because I can't tolerate dairy, but I can use alcohol as a metaphor. I like to experiment. Sometimes I like whiskey, and other times I like vodka, sometimes flavored with cranberry juice, and other times with raspberry. But I'm very interested to learn what flavors of ice cream you favor."

Amusement danced in Vanessa's eyes, but that didn't detract from her arousal. The more they talked, the more flavorful her scent became.

It was intoxicating.

"Well, that's not easy to answer." She pursed her luscious lips. "Vanilla is widely available, and the more exotic flavors don't come in with enough bite to satisfy an immortal female, so vanilla is what I have tasted so far. I enjoy it, but after over three hundred years of the same flavor, I would like to experiment with something more exotic. Perhaps I've finally found a flavor with enough bite to satisfy me."

Mo-red swallowed.

She couldn't have been more blatant if she had spelled it out, and he was about to explode in his pants without her laying a single finger on him.

Gripping the chair armrests until his knuckles turned white, he forced a smile for the camera. "This new flavor you



are introducing me to is a very different experience for me. I've never been so close to reaching satisfaction from just talking about tasting it."

"Yes," she said breathily. "I don't think I can fall over the edge from just talking about it, but I've never been closer."

"Dear Mother of All Life, I want to touch you so badly and push you over that edge."

She shook her head and whispered, "Please, we need to stay with the metaphors."

He glanced at the camera. "You said that they can't hear us."

"They can't, but the artificial intelligence can, and if it catches words that imply something that shouldn't be said in here, it will alert the guys in security, and they will turn up the volume and start listening."

That was as good as throwing a bucket of cold water over his arousal. It didn't deflate entirely, but at least his zipper was no longer in danger of bursting.

The words touching and pushing might be interpreted as aggression by the AI, and the Guardians might have already turned up the volume.

"I'm afraid that my brain is deficient in oxygen at the moment, and it's having a difficult time coming up with good metaphors."

"That's a shame." She uncrossed her arms, and the sight of her stiff nipples returned him to his earlier predicament. "I was enjoying this so much." She leaned her elbows on the desk. "This is such a different flavor of interacting with an attractive male. Usually, the road from hello to bed is very short for immortals, but given our particular circumstances, we are forced to express ourselves in words instead of deeds."

"I'm glad that you are finding pleasure in this, and so do I, but the pleasure is tinged with pain."

The glow in her eyes intensified. "This kind of torment is conducive to even more pleasure. It's called delayed

gratification.”

He chuckled. “When I return to my cell, I’m going to ponder the merits of that in the bathroom until I reach a satisfying conclusion.”

Her lips twitched with a suppressed smile. “I’ll probably do the same, and I’m not sure I can hold off until I get home.” She shifted in her chair. “I’m sure I’ll revisit our conversation in my mind many times before the night is out.”

She was killing him.

They wouldn’t need to execute him because he would die by spontaneous combustion.

“I will no doubt do the same.”

“How many times?” she challenged.

“Dear Mother, you are wicked.” He took several deep breaths to calm down. “At least a dozen.”

“Oh, wow.” Vanessa fanned herself with her hand. “That’s impressive. Is that normal for you?”

He snorted. “Not even when I was a young male dreaming of my first invitation.”

Her amusement faded. “I wish we could further explore this, but I’m afraid that dreaming is the extent of where it can go.”

That was another bucket of ice, and it was timely. They had allowed themselves to get carried away.

“If by some miracle I’m found innocent and released from prison, we could explore it more. I’ll start praying to beseech the Mother to make it so.”

Vanessa frowned. “It sounds like you haven’t prayed to your goddess to help exonerate you before.”

“I haven’t. I didn’t think I deserved her help.”

“And now you do?”

He nodded. “First, I discovered that I had some misconceptions and shouldn’t carry guilt over imagined

wrongs. Then Edna probed me and declared me a good male,  
and now you. I dare to hope again.”



## KIAN

“*I*’m excited.” Anandur rubbed his hands. “Finally, I get to meet the bad guy. Seeing him on the security camera, I had such a strong urge to punch him in his smug face.” He smiled. “May I?”

“You shouldn’t get close enough to him to punch him,” Kian reminded him. “We stay a safe distance away.”

“Bummer,” Anandur murmured. “And here I thought I could finally get some action.”

On Kian’s other side, Brundar was striding purposefully with his usual stoic expression, but Kian could tell he was also looking forward to the meeting. He knew the guy so well that even the slightly-longer-than-usual stride was a giveaway.

Kian hadn’t wanted them in there the other day because the tiny cell had been crowded enough with him, Toven, Jade, and Andrew. Besides, he didn’t want Igor to think that he feared him and had brought his bodyguards with him, but there was no more need for pretense.

The brothers hadn’t seen much action since they had both found their mates. Mostly, Kian kept them in the village on standby for when he needed their escort and for backup to the village defenders. That made life somewhat boring for the duo, but the flip side was mated bliss, so it was a good trade-off.

Anandur and Brundar didn’t even mind going to the keep on a Friday night, but Kian did. Because of damn Igor and his vague implication of threat to Annani and the clan, his mother

was back at the sanctuary, and the family's traditional Friday night dinner had been canceled.

As usual, Syssi had been wonderfully accommodating and offered to host the family for a Sunday brunch instead, which had eased some of his irritation over the whole messy situation.

As the saying went, no good deed went unpunished. Not that Kian's motives for helping the Kra-ell had been purely altruistic. He'd done that to eliminate potential risk to the clan, but he hadn't known the extent of that risk. It wasn't just a vague threat of another race of powerful people sharing the planet with them. Some of the Kra-ell had explicitly come to kill the king's only heir, and since Ahn was gone, that was Annani.

All those years of feeling a sense of foreboding for his mother's safety suddenly made sense. It hadn't been paranoia. It had been a premonition.

"Good evening," Andrew greeted them next to Igor's cell. "I see that you brought the cavalry this time." He looked Anandur up and down. "Did you gain even more muscle since last I saw you?"

The Guardian stretched to his full height of six feet six inches and squared his massive shoulders. "Have to keep in shape for my mate. She likes me better when I'm ripped." He flexed his biceps.

Brundar rolled his eyes but didn't say anything.

Wonder had liked Anandur just fine even before he'd gained another thirty pounds of muscle. The dude was competing with Dalhu in the gym, and the two were starting to look like gorillas.

Someone needed to put a stop to the ridiculous competition. Perhaps he should have a word with Wonder and ask her to intervene and do the same with Amanda. The only way to stop the two was to have their mates complain about their excess muscles.

It was a funny thought that Brundar was the sane one who kept his training focused on maintaining his skills rather than pumping iron.

Theo walked over and stopped in front of the door. “So we are tranquilizing him and the other three again today.”

Kian nodded. “The MRI is already on its way. I don’t want to bother unloading it and bringing it to the clinic, so we will do the scanning and the extraction in the parking garage inside the van. The guys are bringing an extension cord, and Merlin is bringing his tool bag.”

“I got the tranquilizer gun.” Theo patted one of his two holsters. “Do you need me in there with you?”

“We got Kian covered,” Anandur said. “We are just waiting for Jade to get here.”

“Where is she?”

“The ladies’ room,” Anandur said. “I think that seeing Igor makes her nervous.”

Theo chuckled. “Enraged and homicidal is more likely.”

“He’s right,” Jade said from the other end of the hallway.

Kian had contemplated leaving her out of this meeting so he could ask Igor if Jade was one of the sleeper assassins, but it didn’t really matter if she was there to hear his answer or not.

She’d been a little put out when Kian told her that Annani had had to leave on a moment’s notice and that she wouldn’t get to meet the goddess immediately, but she didn’t make a big deal out of it. She hadn’t attacked him either, so chances were that she wasn’t one of the killers.

“I’ll open the door for you.” Theo waved his hand over the keypad. “William’s latest improvement. The keypad is programmed with the fingerprints of whoever is on duty.”

“When did he have time to install it?”

Supposedly, William and his team were rushing to complete the super receivers they were building and conduct

the test that would either prove or disprove Igor's claim.

“One of his guys did that remotely earlier today. It's a nifty trick that saves a couple of seconds.”

It was a waste of time to dedicate resources to such a trivial thing, but it was probably something that William's team had completed a while ago and only needed to upload to the security system.

When the door finished swinging open, Kian strode in, and the rest of his entourage followed.

“Hello, Kian.” Igor rose from his cot and spread his arms wide. “Thank you for the clothing. I feel like a new male.”

“I think we've been duped,” Jade murmured. “That's not Igor. It's either his twin or a clone.”





# JADE

The big redhead chuckled, Andrew smiled, and Kian's brows dipped low. Only the blond's expression didn't change.

While Anandur had chatted all the way to the keep, asking her questions and making humorous comments, Brundar hadn't said a word, and his face hadn't lost its stoic expression even once.

Heck, the only time he'd moved on the ride was when he'd pulled out a throwing knife and started sharpening it with a stone that he'd pulled out of the pocket of his leather jacket.

The first time the four of them had shared a ride, Kian had introduced his bodyguards as brothers, but they looked nothing alike, and their personalities were the exact opposite of each other. The redhead was a mountain of a man, and Jade had no doubt that he was a fierce warrior, but the delicate-looking blond was the one to be wary of.

He was the most Kra-ell-like warrior she'd met so far in the village, and she would have told him that if he'd shown the slightest inclination to converse with her. But he hadn't said a word to her on the previous ride to and from the keep, and he hadn't on this one.

The guy either didn't like her or didn't like anyone, including his brother.

As Kian sat down, the four of them followed suit and waited for him to begin.

“I want to know more about the assassins.” Kian didn’t waste time on preambles.

Igor cast a quick glance at Jade as he sat down on his cot. “Since you fed me yesterday and today, you deserve a couple of answers, but I’ve already told you that I don’t know much about them. Not consciously.”

If the story Igor had told Kian had been a fabrication to cover his real purpose, he would have to come up with even more lies, and they needed to be good enough to seem credible and pass Andrew’s lie-detecting ability.

“I can understand the Eternal King’s wish to eliminate his only legitimate heir. Ahn was probably popular among the young, progressive gods, and if another rebellion started, someone might have sent a ship to collect him so he could make a bid for the throne. Why kill the others, though?”

Igor shrugged. “They weren’t heirs, but they were well-known and popular. If the king killed only Ahn, the others could make a big stink out of it.”

“So could the other gods,” Kian said.

“The others were not influential and could be dealt with more easily. The directive was to eliminate the three main rebels and make it look as if they had been attacked by humans.” Igor smiled, which crept Jade out every time he did it. “I wasn’t told to kill the other gods, but I wasn’t told to spare them either. They were inconsequential.”

Kian winced. “You’re a sweetheart, aren’t you?”

“I am what your relatives have made me. So you tell me, who is the evildoer here? The tool or its creator?”

If Igor’s story was true, his creators hadn’t told him to slaughter other Kra-ell. That was entirely on him.

“Were the other assassins powerful compellers as well?” Kian asked.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think so. Each of us probably got a different ability.”

On her other side, Andrew cleared his throat. “That was an untruth.”

Jade felt the ground quake under her. Did that mean everything else Igor had said so far had been true?

Igor’s gaze trained on Andrew, but he didn’t respond.

Kian leaned forward. “Let’s break your answer into yes or no chunks. Were the other assassins powerful compellers like you?”

“No.”

“That was the truth,” Andrew said.

“Do you know what abilities the others had?” Kian asked.

“No,” Igor answered.

“That was the truth as well,” Andrew confirmed.

“Do you know if any of the other assassins were female?”

Igor cast Jade an amused glance. “Probably not. The gods have a strange attitude toward females. They coddle and protect them as if they are made from glass. They wouldn’t make a female assassin, but Jade would have been a perfect fit if they had. She’s definitely tough and vicious enough.”

That was a relief.

Jade had moments when she wasn’t sure whether her memories of her life before boarding the ship had been real or implanted. It was most likely the result of the long journey in stasis, but Jade hadn’t heard any other settlers complain of a similar sensation.

Kian looked at Andrew, who shook his head.

“He’s not convinced one way or another, so I can’t feel whether it’s truth or lie.”



## KIAN

*K*ian had to know for sure, and there was no way to do that without offending Jade.

“Is it possible that some of the settlers are sleeper assassins and don’t know they are?”

Igor seemed thoughtful for a moment. “You have exceeded your allotted quota of questions for today, and I would like to eat tomorrow as well.”

Kian didn’t have the patience for this game. He’d gotten a text from Merlin that the van with the MRI had arrived at the parking garage, and he wanted to get started on that.

“Don’t worry about that. As long as you are forthcoming, you’ll be fed.”

Igor seemed doubtful. “What happens when you don’t have any more questions for me?”

“I need to keep you alive, right? You won’t starve.”

Igor smiled. “So your people confirmed what I said about the trackers?”

“Not yet. They are still working on it, but even if we don’t need you, and I let Jade kill you, I will not starve you beforehand.”

“Good to know.” Igor crossed his legs at the ankles. “As I said before, the gods always have plans within plans, so there may be sleeper assassins among the settlers.” He smiled. “If that’s the case, I did you a favor by killing those Kra-ell males. Some of them could have been assassins.”

Andrew didn't call it a lie, but Igor was contradicting himself.

"You said that the assassins' directive was to kill Ahn and his half-siblings, and all three are dead. Why should I be worried about sleeper assassins?"

"I wasn't told not to kill other gods, so I assume they weren't told that either. When they find out that their original targets are gone, they might decide to strike against whoever they find, and that includes you and all the other hybrid descendants of the gods. You'd better keep me alive so you'll know immediately when more of the settlers revive and where they are located. You don't want them to find you before you find them."

Kian glanced at Andrew, but his brother-in-law shook his head. "Again, it's speculation."

Igor could be trying to outsmart Andrew, or he could be speculating because he wasn't sure.

"Did the gods give you any other directives?" Jade asked.

Igor turned to look at her. "If you're asking whether the gods directed me to kill the settlers, the answer is that they didn't care if the settlers lived or died. I was given license to do whatever it took to eliminate the King's descendants, including killing whoever stood in my way."

"Truth," Andrew said.

Jade looked ready to tear Igor's throat out with her bare fangs. "Killing the males of my tribe wasn't necessary to help you find the gods or complete the mission. You did that because of your own twisted agenda."

"I've never claimed otherwise."

She opened her mouth to say something but then closed it and shook her head. "I could never understand someone like you."

"No, you couldn't, and that's your weakness. You have to realize that not everyone thinks like you or is motivated by the same things you are."

“You don’t even feel remorse or try to justify yourself. How can you be so cold?”

“The answer to that is easy.” Kian pushed to his feet. “He’s a sociopath. Either born that way or made that way.”

Igor’s eyes were still trained on Jade. “I was made that way by the relations of your new allies. Ponder that for a moment. The gods grew me and others like me in a laboratory, bioengineering us to be the perfect killing machines for them. So again, who is to blame, the tool or its creator?”

Jade rose to her feet as well. “You are not a dumb tool in someone’s hand, and you are also not the sum of your parts. You weren’t made to kill other Kra-ell, and no one put you in charge of creating a new Kra-ell society that was male-dominated. That was all you. So don’t pretend to be a mindless tool obeying its creator’s orders.”

Kian agreed.

“One last question.” He smiled at Igor. “For today, that is. Did you remove your own tracker?”

He frowned. “Why would I?”

Jade sucked in a breath. “Toven said that the first thing Igor said to him was to ask if he came to retrieve him. He’s waiting for the gods to come to get him.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen.” Kian motioned for Theo to come in. “We will take the tracker out of you and put it in a gerbil.”

“Say night-night, Igor.” Theo didn’t wait for them to leave the room before aiming his tranquilizer gun at Igor’s thigh and firing twice in quick succession. “That should do it.”





# JADE

Jade had taken a huge risk asking about Igor's other directives, but she had to know if he'd been sent to kill the twins. Given that Andrew had confirmed Igor's claim, the twins had never been in danger from him.

So why was she still feeling uneasy?

It was probably the Igor effect. She could never feel at ease with him around. During the twenty-three years she'd spent with him, rage, the need for revenge, and fear had been her constant companions. She hadn't feared for her own life, which she would have forfeited in the blink of an eye if she could do so honorably and without endangering anyone else in the compound, or if someone could do what she'd been doing.

Someone had to teach the next generation the Kra-ell way and intervene on behalf of the females and make their lives a little less hellish.

Now that her people were free of Igor, she shouldn't fear him anymore, but she couldn't help it. Whenever she was near him, her body responded the same way it had for the past two decades.

The fear intensified when the Guardian unlocked the bars, and Anandur walked inside. He lifted Igor as if he was a sack of potatoes, threw him over his shoulder, and walked out.

"We are coming, but hold on." Kian stopped him. "You need to leave your weapons behind. Nothing that reacts with magnets can be anywhere near the MRI. That's why we can't

chain him, either. Our chains are made from titanium alloy that contains iron.”

“Damn.” Anandur reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, retrieved a gun, and handed it to his brother. “Can you take out the daggers from my boots?”

Brundar crouched down and pulled out two daggers, one from each of the redhead’s giant boots. The guy had enormous feet.

“You too, Brundar,” Kian said.

“I came prepared. My daggers are pure titanium.”

Anandur shook his head. “And you couldn’t have loaned me some?”

Brundar shrugged. “You didn’t ask.”

Letting out an exasperated breath, Anandur adjusted Igor’s limp weight over his shoulder. “You could have said something.” He cast Brundar a disappointed look before turning to Kian. “Is everyone coming, or do you want me to deliver the trash to Merlin in the parking garage and come back?”

Andrew chuckled. “You’re lucky that Kian agreed to provide him with clean clothing. He really stunk like trash the other day I was here.”

Anandur grimaced. “You would have needed to get another mule to carry him. I have a very sensitive nose.”

Jade stifled a smile. It was kind of funny that a fearsome warrior like Anandur had a problem with bad smells.

Kian followed him out of the cell. “I’m curious whether his tracker is the same as the others. He might have something even more sophisticated implanted.”

“I keep thinking.” Jade fell in step with Kian. “What reason would the gods have to retrieve him? If they can grow people in their labs, they can just make more of him.”

“The compulsion ability,” Andrew said. “He said that the others didn’t have it, which makes me think that it wasn’t

something the gods could genetically engineer. He got it from one of his parents, or rather a sperm or egg donor. A compeller as powerful as him is rare, which makes him valuable. What I want to know is how they made sure he would obey their commands.”

“They probably put a kill switch in his brain,” the blond said, which were the first words Jade had heard him volunteer without being asked.

“Makes sense,” his brother agreed. “If I were a god in charge of Project Igor, I would put a kill switch in him. He’s too dangerous to be let loose without safeguards.”

As they stepped out of the elevator at the parking level, Andrew turned to Kian. “Do you still need me around, or can I go home?”

“Go home.” Kian clapped him on the back. “Thank you for coming. Your talent has proven itself once again.”

“About that.” Andrew smoothed a hand over the back of his neck. “I wouldn’t put too much trust into my truth detecting. There was a moment of clarity when I was sure he was lying and then a couple more when I was sure he told the truth, but the rest was iffy. He’s either very good at masking, or my talent doesn’t work well on Kra-ell.”

“Ask me something,” Jade offered. “Something mundane like what’s my favorite color or movie. Let’s see how your talent works on me.”

“Try to resist me,” Andrew said. “Don’t make it easy.”

Anandur turned around, nearly hitting Jade with Igor’s swinging feet. “I’m going to offload him in the van if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll come with you.” Kian patted Andrew’s back. “I’ll see you on Sunday.”

When the two continued toward the van, Andrew rubbed his hands. “Okay, let’s do it. What is your all-time favorite movie?”

“Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*.” It was her second favorite.

As per Andrew’s request, she wasn’t making it easy for him.

He frowned. “I’m not sure. Let’s try something else. Which movie did you hate most?”

“*The Golden Harp*.”

It was the most boring children’s movie ever made, and she detested the message of victimhood it purported. Andrew should have no problem with that one.

“Truth. That was pretty clear. Maybe negative feelings produce stronger output. What is the most boring book you’ve ever read?”

“*Saving ChoCho*.” It was a children’s book about a kid saving his dog, and the story was nice and encouraging, but it ended up being so poorly written that she hadn’t read it to the children.

Andrew shook his head. “I can’t tell. Did you hate it just a little?”

She nodded. “It seems you can only detect truth or lies when they are clear cut.”

Jade wondered why Mia wasn’t there to enhance Andrew’s talent. Perhaps her enhancing powers didn’t work on him?

“Usually, I can detect it even in shades of meaning, but apparently not with a pureblooded Kra-ell. Your immunity to mind tricks must have been a pain in the butt for the gods.”

“It was. That’s why after us, they improved their creations. They made humans and other species they created on other planets much more susceptible to mind control and mind manipulation.”

“Makes sense.”

“By the way, why isn’t Mia here to boost your ability?”

“She’s resting at home. Toven said that she would be available in a couple of days, but Kian didn’t want to wait.”

When Andrew's watch chimed with an incoming message, he smiled apologetically. "I would love to stay and hear more about the gods and their shenanigans, but I have to go. Are you coming to Kian's brunch on Sunday?"

"He didn't invite me."

Andrew nodded. "Usually, Syssi invites only the close family, but I thought she'd made an exception for you. We are all so curious about life on Anumati."

Jade wasn't looking forward to a family gathering at Kian's, especially since the goddess wouldn't be there. She had barely spent any time alone with Phinas doing anything other than sex and sleep, and she would like to have some downtime to relax and explore the village.

Also, Drova was almost never home, and she needed to find out what her daughter was up to.

"To tell you the truth, I need to slow down a bit." She smiled at Kian's brother-in-law. "I would like to spend this Sunday relaxing at home."



## KIAN

“*Y*ou’ll have to wait until I’m done,” Merlin said as Anandur climbed to the back of the van with Igor slumped over his shoulder. “You can put him on the floor over there.”

Kian followed the Guardian. “Who is that?” He pointed at the male whose legs were sticking out from the device.

“That’s Korvel,” Jay said. “One of the two purebloods that were captured together with Igor. We figured we would be done with him by the time you’d finished interrogating his boss, but you got it done sooner than we expected.”

Kian glanced at Igor’s prone body on the floor. “How long until you are done with Korvel?”

“The scan will be done in a few minutes,” Merlin said. “But then I need to extract the tracker and sew him up. That will take at least twenty minutes.”

“That’s too long. Igor will revive by then. Finish the scan and do the extraction later. We shouldn’t wait too long with Igor.”

Jay pulled out his tranquilizer gun. “We can always tranq him again.”

Kian didn’t have time for that.

Perhaps he should just leave the guy in Merlin’s hands and go?

He was curious about the kind of tracker that Igor had, but he could get a report from Merlin later. He didn’t need to wait



around for the procedure to be done.

Anandur leaned over Merlin and looked at the screen. “So, doc, what are we looking at?”

Outside the van, Brundar leaned against the rear bumper, pulled out one of the many knives he carried all over his body, and removed the sharpening stone from his pocket.

Jade walked over to him and eyed his weapon with curiosity mixed with admiration. “That’s a very nice dagger. Was it custom-made?”

“Yes.” Brundar continued sliding the stone over the blade. “I used to make them myself, but this one was made by an artisan back in my home country.”

Kian’s brows shot up. Brundar was actually engaging in a conversation with someone.

“Scotland, right?” Jade leaned against the bumper beside the Guardian and folded her arms over her chest.

Brundar nodded. “I had it made a couple of years ago when I went for a visit.”

“Can you recommend a place where I can get a good sword?” she asked. “The one I have belongs in the scrapyard. I need one that is sharp enough to take Igor’s head off with one swift slice.” She demonstrated a two-handed swipe.

A rare smile bloomed on Brundar’s angelic face. “I can hook you up. Do you need daggers as well?”

“I need everything, and thanks to your boss, I can pay for it.” She smiled. “Fancy clothes and jewels do nothing for me, but a proper sword and a couple of perfectly balanced daggers will make me feel like a queen. They are worth splurging on.”

Brundar nodded in agreement. “Clothes and jewels will not save your life or the lives of those dear to you.” He offered her his dagger, blade down. “Here, see how it fits in your hand.”

Kian blinked a couple of times to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Brundar never let anyone touch his weapons.

The way Jade's eyes blazed blue, she was having a nearly religious, profound experience. Or was he confusing the colors? Was purple the color of extreme emotions?

Vanessa had texted him a list of what the different colors meant, but he only remembered that red was the color of aggression and excitement.

He hadn't noticed Igor's eyes changing color even once. Did it mean that the guy didn't experience any extreme emotions? Was it the result of the genetic alterations the gods had done to him?

Perhaps his eyes couldn't change colors, and maybe that was why Jade and the other Kra-ell believed he was a sociopath.

Maybe he wasn't?

"It's a superb weapon," Jade whispered as she made several slashing and stabbing moves. "It's priceless." She handed the dagger back to Brundar.

"It is. Not many can recognize the quality."

For some reason, the comment made the small hairs on Kian's neck stand to attention, and as he lifted a hand to rub them, several things happened at once.

An arm banded around his throat, he was lifted off his feet and launched forward as the powerful male behind him leaped out of the van and over Brundar and Jade while holding him by the neck, twisting midair and landing at least twenty feet away with Kian covering his front and the gate at his back.

"If either of you moves a muscle, I'll tear his head off." Igor's claws sliced into Kian's throat, drawing blood, and a moment later, the earpiece was pulled out of his left ear.

"Don't fight me. Tell them to drop their weapons and open the gate." Igor loosened his hold just enough so Kian could speak.

He wanted to tell Igor that if he told them to drop their weapons, they would have to move a muscle, but he couldn't

resist the command, and what left his mouth was, “Drop your weapons.”

Hopefully, the Guardians would refuse the command. Hell, if they didn't, he would fire their asses.

How had Igor gotten by Anandur and Jay?

Neither of them had leaped out of the truck, which twisted Kian's gut into a knot.

Were they even alive?

There was no way Igor had managed to kill them without Kian hearing a single thing.

Except, he'd been wearing the damn earpieces, which translated only some sounds while blocking the others. There could have been an explosion behind him, and he wouldn't have heard it, but he would have felt it, which gave him hope. Igor couldn't have done anything overly violent without the whole van shaking.



# JADE

*This isn't happening.*

Jade watched with horror as Igor's claws sliced into Kian's neck.

Where had her Kra-ell senses been? How hadn't she noticed Igor waking up and disabling the Guardians inside the van?

It was the damn earpieces' fault, but she was thankful for them nonetheless. Things could have been much worse without them. She wouldn't have been able to help Kian, and Igor might have used her to hurt the others.

He could have told her to kill Brundar, and she would have had no choice but to do it.

Were Anandur and Jay even alive?

Jade didn't dare turn around and check. They were immortal and should be able to heal from whatever injury they had sustained. Unless Igor had torn their heads off, but then she would have smelled the blood, so thank the Mother that hadn't happened.

As Brundar lifted his dagger and got into a fighting stance, Igor's fangs punched out and struck Kian's neck. He folded himself behind Kian's broad back. Hence, the only spots Brundar could hit were the top of Igor's head, which would do nothing because the blade wouldn't penetrate the skull, or he could hit the arm he had around Kian, but that wouldn't disable him.

But what the hell? Why was Igor drinking Kian's blood? Did he want to drain him?

That was the most inefficient way to kill an opponent.

Was it a show of dominance?

She didn't have the bandwidth to think about why he had done that. This was her chance to take him down.

Could she leap twenty feet into the air and topple both him and Kian to the ground?

If she made it, she might be able to hold Igor down for the split second it would take Brundar to get there and help her.

*Dear Mother of All Life, give me strength.*

Without wasting another moment on hesitation, Jade shifted her weight to her hips and sprang up, flying through the air and barreling into the two males.

The three of them went down, and as Igor's head hit the concrete with a loud thump, she prayed it would stun him for the moment it would take Brundar to get there and slice his neck off.

The Guardian was there before she had time to take her next breath, one hand on Igor's head, the other slicing his dagger through Igor's carotid artery.

Blood sprayed like a geyser, coating her face and hair, and for a split second, Jade had the disturbing thought that Igor was finally going to die, but not by her hand. Except, she couldn't let him die because he was the only one who could find the other settlers once their trackers came online, and more importantly, the other assassins that were a threat to the immortals.

Cursing under her breath, she slapped a hand on his artery to stem the blood flow.

Next to her, Brundar untangled Kian from Igor's hold and checked his ravaged neck. "I failed you," he said quietly. "You should fire me."

Kian groaned. "I'll be fine in under a minute. Go check on your brother and the others."

"We need a tranquilizer," Jade called after Brundar. "He's going to wake up in seconds."

"Catch." He threw the dagger at her, and when she caught it by the hilt, he added, "If he moves, cut him again."

Kian sat on the floor and clutched his injured neck. "How the hell did he do that? He should have been out cold."

"Maybe his body learned how to fight the chemical in the tranquilizer. Who knows what abilities the gods gave him."

Letting out a breath, Kian lowered his hand to his thigh. "Thank you for saving my life."

Unbelievably, the injuries to his neck were already mending, and if Igor was healing at the same rate, she needed to stab him again.

Lifting Brundar's dagger, she plunged it into Igor's heart in a preemptive strike.

His body convulsed and then dropped. One cut wouldn't kill him, but it would take his body time to heal both injuries.

"Did that feel good?" Kian asked.

"You have no idea. I want to do it a hundred times more until I'm sure he can't heal from the injuries, but I can't. We both need him alive."

Kian pushed to his knees and then to his feet. "I should check on Anandur."

"I'm fine." Holding his neck, the redhead gingerly climbed down the back of the van. "Other than a bruised neck and a shattered ego, that is. The demon moved so fast that it was unreal. He was on me before I even registered that he was awake, and he broke my neck before I could lift a hand to stop him."

Behind him, Jay groaned. "I had a split second longer to react because he went after you first, and he still got me."

"What about Merlin?" Kian asked.

“Recovering.” Brundar jumped down from the back of the van. “Igor bashed his head into the MRI and knocked him out.”

“Get him back inside and chain him,” Anandur told his brother. “We can’t bring the chains out here because of the damn MRI.”





## KIAN

*K*ian lifted his hand to stop Brundar. “We can’t chain him yet. We still need to take the tracker out. Is Merlin in any shape to do that?”

“I’m good,” the doctor said from inside the van. “Just take this stooge out and get the other in. We’d better get some more Guardians in here.”

“I’m on it.” Jay lifted Igor’s bloody body off the floor and carried him into the van. “You’ll have a lot of cleaning up to do after you are done with this one.”

“Call for reinforcements,” Kian called after the Guardian. “We’ve had enough excitement for one evening.” Kian glanced at the dagger still clutched in Jade’s hand. “I think you will get your wish to stab Igor repeatedly. We can’t bring any other weapons in here, and he seems to have developed an immunity to tranquilizers.”

The smile on her face was the brightest he’d seen on her so far.

“With pleasure.” She slanted a look at Brundar. “Is it okay if I keep your dagger for a little longer?”

“You can have it. I have another one just like it.” He leaned down and pulled its twin from his boot.

Her big eyes got even bigger. “Are you sure?” She turned to Kian. “Am I allowed to keep a dagger in the village?”

He chuckled. “You’ve just saved my life, so yeah. You can keep the dagger. And just so you know, I’ve never seen

Brundar part with a weapon for anyone.”

She dipped her head to Brundar so low that it was almost a bow. “Thank you. It’s a great honor.”

“You saved Kian. It’s the least I can do.”

“About that—”

Kian stopped her. “Another stabbing is needed before we continue the conversation.”

Igor’s compulsion was still affecting him, but he knew how to work around it. As soon as he got to the village, he would have Toven release him.

“Yes, sir.” She leaped into the back of the van, and a moment later leaped back out. “Done. As I was saying, I don’t think he intended to kill you. He was just threatening.”

It certainly had felt like the demon intended to kill him when he struck with his fangs. “He was about to tear my throat out. I would have probably recovered from that, but it would have been hell.” Kian rubbed his healing neck. “Then again, Igor should have known it wouldn’t kill me. He heals just as fast.”

Jade nodded. “If he wanted to kill you, he would have twisted your head off, and it didn’t look like he wanted to tear out your throat. He was drinking from you, and that was really odd.”

“Why is that?” Anandur massaged his neck. “Don’t the Kra-ell drain their enemies?”

She grimaced. “No, we don’t. That’s a very inefficient way of killing someone. It takes too long and gives us indigestion. Ask me how I know.”

Anandur’s eyes lit up. “I heard that you drained Igor’s second-in-command. That’s why I thought that it’s a thing.”

“I didn’t have any other way to keep him down. Not only that, I got him to drink spiked vodka to weaken him, and when I drained him, I consumed the drug I gave him. I was woozy and had a bad stomachache for two days.”

“And yet you killed five of Igor’s males,” Kian said. “You are one hell of a fighter.”

He wouldn’t have believed she was that formidable if he hadn’t just witnessed it himself. He had never seen anyone leap to such a height and cross such a distance in one go. But that was nothing compared to the stunt that Igor had pulled.

The purebloods were in a league of their own.

No wonder the gods had done everything they could to keep them subjugated, uneducated, and technologically inferior. Their physical superiority was frightening.

“Time for another stabbing.” Jade jumped into the back of the van.

“Maybe you should appoint her as your bodyguard,” Brundar said. “She could singlehandedly demolish a team of Doomers.”

She probably could, and for the first time, Kian didn’t think he needed to keep the female shielded because of her gender.

“Jade has people to lead. Besides, I wouldn’t replace you two with anyone. You are stuck with me as long as I am regent, and after I retire, you will guard my replacement.”

Anandur frowned. “Do you plan to retire anytime soon?”

“Not soon, but someday.”



## VANESSA

“*Y*ou look happy today.” Aliya handed Vanessa a cappuccino. “The village must be good for you.”

She had been stopping by the café between appointments to get coffee and had gotten to know Aliya quite well. She and Vrog were excellent examples of how well the Kra-ell could integrate with the clan. They were both hybrids, and thanks to their human halves, they had more in common with the immortals than the purebloods, but Vanessa had a feeling that given some time, the purebloods would do just as well.

“It has been a while since I’ve spent any length of time here, and I almost forgot how lovely it is in the village.”

Aliya gave her a look that implied she had something more to say when the toaster oven beeped, and she went to retrieve the turnover she’d popped in there before making the cappuccino.

The happiness that Aliya had noticed must have been the silly grin Vanessa hadn’t been able to wipe off her face the entire way home. It had been ages since she’d enjoyed sexual banter with a male so much.

What made it special was that they couldn’t touch each other. It was like a game with strict rules that had forced them to do things differently.

Well, it had impelled her to be inventive. It wasn’t like meeting a guy in a club and flirting with him for five minutes before taking him to bed. But that didn’t mean that Mo-red

was the same. She didn't know what his usual flirting technique was. Perhaps he'd been a tease.

No, she didn't want to think about him with other females and spoil her pleasant buzz. She still had a couple of interviews scheduled before she could go home and do exactly what she'd told Mo-red she would do.

Perhaps she could reschedule the interviews and go home now?

"Here is your turnover." Aliya handed it to her. "Did you hear what happened in the keep?"

Vanessa's gut instantly twisted in a knot. "No. What happened?"

Aliya leaned over the counter. "I don't know if it's okay for me to talk about it, but since you are working with the prisoners, I guess it's all right."

*Just spit it out already before I have an aneurysm.*

Vanessa forced a smile. "It's perfectly okay. I need to know everything that happens with them."

"Igor attacked Kian. First, he twisted Anandur's and Jay's necks and bashed Merlin's head on the medical device he was supposed to use on him." Aliya frowned. "I forget what it's called. Wonder has just told me, but I can't remember. It's three letters."

Was the girl dragging it out on purpose?

"MRI," Vanessa spat out. "Are they okay?"

"Oh, yes." Aliya smiled. "Jade saved Kian. Well, Brundar helped. He slashed Igor's vein." She tapped the side of her neck. "I don't know what the big one right here is called. Anyway, he could do that only after Jade toppled Igor, who had his fangs inside Kian's neck. So Kian was in bad shape with his neck all torn and bleeding, but Anandur told Wonder that Kian was already doing much better and that by the time he got back to the village, his neck would be fully healed, so Syssi and Allegra wouldn't get scared." Her eyes widened.

“Don’t tell Syssi anything. Anandur told Wonder that Kian didn’t want her to hear it from anyone but him.”

“I won’t say a word. When did it all happen?”

“Anandur called Wonder ten minutes ago, so it must have happened at least half an hour earlier.” She tilted her head. “Weren’t you at the keep this afternoon?”

“I was, but I must have left right before it happened. I was stuck in traffic for over an hour.”

Friday afternoons were the worst to be on the roads in Los Angeles.

Aliya nodded. “It must have happened right after you left. Wonder was so upset that she had to go home. It’s good that there aren’t many people in the café at this hour, or I wouldn’t have managed alone.”

Vanessa lifted her wrist and checked the time. “It’s almost six. You can start closing up.”

Aliya grimaced. “I need Wonder to help me. I hope she comes back soon.”

“She will. Wonder is responsible. By the way, is Igor dead?”

No one would be sorry to hear that. Even his own daughter despised him and wanted everyone to forget who her father was.

“He’s not dead. Apparently, he heals almost as fast as the gods, so his vein stitched itself together before he bled out. It’s such a shame that they have to keep him alive.” As Aliya’s eyes flashed red and her fangs descended over her lower lip, she pressed her hands into the counter until the entire top bowed under the pressure. “He needs to die for all the lives he took and all the lives he destroyed.”

Vanessa put her hand over Aliya’s. “Did you lose people who were close to you?”

She nodded. “For many years, I thought that all the Kra-ell died in the attack, males and females. I still looked human back then, so the pureblooded children didn’t want to play



with me, but I cared about what happened to them. I mourned everyone's deaths for many years, and I was alone in my grief. My mother didn't remember the compound or the people in it."

"That must have been so difficult for you. If you want to talk about it with someone, I can fit you into my schedule."

Her schedule was already too full, but Aliya obviously needed help and had no one else to turn to.

"Thank you, but I'm okay." She let out a breath. "Most of the time, I manage not to think about it. Working here and being with Vrog makes me happy, so I don't think about it often, but sometimes it catches me like it did today, and I feel this aggression bubbling up inside of me." She put her hand over her tiny belly. "I assume it's my violent Kra-ell half. It hates the mostly sedentary city life and wants to go hunting in the wild. Doing something physically exhausting usually helps."

"It's the feel-good chemicals the brain releases during strenuous activity. It's excellent for PTSD."

Aliya's impressive brows dipped low. "What's that? It sounds like a sex disease, and we don't get those."

Vanessa swallowed a chuckle. "That's STD, which is the acronym for sexually transmitted disease. PTSD stands for post-traumatic stress disorder." She shoved the paper bag with the turnover into her pocket and picked up the cappuccino. "I'm late for an interview and don't have time to explain, but you can look it up."



## MO-RED

*M*o-red returned to his cell, desperate to get into the bathroom, and closed the door. Locking it would have been preferable, but there was no lock, and currently, Madbar was occupying the chamber.

“Are you going to be long in there?” he asked.

“I have nothing to read, so no. I’ll be out shortly.”

It was pretty apparent that the cell had been originally designed to hold one prisoner, but the immortals either didn’t have enough cells or didn’t want to bother with monitoring them.

Most of the time, he didn’t mind the cramped quarters. It was better to have someone to talk to and have less space than have a larger place and stare at the walls all day. But today, he would have appreciated some privacy.

He still sported a massive erection, and unless he took care of it, the thing wasn’t going anywhere.

He couldn’t even hide under the blanket because the outer door to the cell was open, and Guardians were patrolling the hallway and peeking in from time to time.

With a sigh, he sat on his bed and reached for the remote control. There wasn’t much to do in the cell besides watching television, which he wasn’t a fan of.

Damn, he missed his books.

He’d been in the middle of reading a high-stakes fictional political drama when the compound had been attacked, and he

would have loved to dive back into that book and forget the world around him for a few hours.

As a commotion sounded out in the hallway, he pushed to his feet and approached the bars. “What’s going on?”

Guardians ran down the corridor, and in seconds no one was left besides the prisoners.

“Does anyone know what happened?” he called out in Kra-ell.

“Maybe someone managed to escape,” Shover answered.

“They took Korvel,” Rovaj said. “He was unconscious, and the guard carried him over his shoulder. When I asked him where he was taking him, he said to remove the tracker.”

“Maybe he woke up and gave them hell?” Berdogh said, or was it Volpath? The two had very similar voices.

“Is anyone with the hot psychologist right now?” Shover asked. “Maybe he got ambitious and tried something.”

Mo-red’s fangs punched out. “She left a while ago. I was her last one for today.”

She’d told him he was the only one she’d come to see, but the others didn’t need to know that.

“Is that you, Mo-red?” Volpath or Berdogh asked.

“It is I,” he answered. “Are you Volpath?”

“No, I’m Berdogh. After over a hundred years of living with us, you should be able to tell the difference.”

He rolled his eyes. “You didn’t know it was me for sure, either.”

“Does anyone know when our trial will take place?” That was Shover.

Mo-red would recognize his raspy voice anywhere.

“They are still collecting information,” he said.

“What information?” Rovaj asked. “There is no information. It’s all hearsay. Our word against the words of the

females, and they will not care that we didn't have a choice. They will blame us for what Igor forced us to do."

"Not true," Mo-red said. "The psychologist already talked with several of the females, and not all of them hold us responsible. Or at least not all of us."

He was sure that some of the females would find him guilty just as others would find his fellow pod members culpable.

"What's all the ruckus about?" Madbar asked as he emerged from the bathroom.

"The guards are gone," Mo-red said. "They all rushed out, and some of the men think Korvel has something to do with it. He was taken to the doctor to get his tracker out."

Madbar shook his head. "I still don't understand how they got the trackers in us. I remember arriving at the silo, getting rushed into a pod, and in moments they had me hooked up, and the canopy started going down. When did they have time to implant us with anything?"

"Maybe it was in the tubes," Mo-red said. "Who knows what the gods' technology can do? It might have gone into our stomachs or even through our noses via the breathing tubes and burrowed its way to where it was supposed to stay. The immortals' doctor showed it to me. It was just a little larger than a grain of rice."

"Smart *bugdads*," Shover hissed.

Mo-red chuckled. "*Bugdads* and smart is a contradiction in terms. *Bugdads* are dumb."

"But they are vicious," Shover said. "I hated the gods before and hate them even more now. They knew what they were doing when they put us in with Igor. I just wonder what I have done to deserve the punishment."

"We were young and inexperienced," Mo-red said. "That was our only fault. Igor could shape us any way he wanted. I'm surprised that some of us managed to retain any honor."



## SYSSI

“*Y*ou could have died.” Syssi shuddered.

Kian had waited until he got home to tell her what had happened in the keep, so his neck was already fully healed, but there were blood stains on his shirt collar, and despite his efforts to make light of it, she could sense that he was still shaken by the attack.

He was probably not telling her everything either, which made her panic swell to such proportions that she could barely breathe.

The thought of losing him was incomprehensible.

“But I didn’t.” He pulled her onto his lap. “I’m completely healed.” He tilted his head and moved his longish hair aside. “See? No mark is left. It’s like it never happened.”

She touched the blood stain on his collar. “I almost lost you today.” She couldn’t control the shaking. “You gave me a peck on the cheek, headed to the keep, and I thought nothing of it. It could have been the last time I saw you.”

She wanted to say more, but the lump in her throat had grown so big that she could barely breathe. Instead, she shook her head and let the tears flow.

“Oh, sweetness.” Kian cradled her in his arms. “I’m not that easy to kill, and I don’t think that was Igor’s intention. He wanted to run away.”

“Then why did he bite you?”

Kian shrugged one shoulder. “After Jade told me that it wasn’t common for Kra-ell to drink from their opponents, it occurred to me that Igor might have wanted a blood sample to confirm that I’m Ahn’s descendant, but we checked him thoroughly, and he isn’t transmitting anything, so maybe it was some stupid show of dominance.”

Syssi swallowed, once, twice, and took a shuddering breath. “I need to thank Jade. She saved your life.”

“Perhaps. I think Brundar could have handled it if she wasn’t there to leap into action. But if nothing else, I’ve learned a valuable lesson today to never underestimate the Kra-ell. They are incredibly strong.” He sighed. “I’ve never felt more helpless.”

Winding her arms around his neck, Syssi peppered Kian’s face with kisses. “I’m never letting you out of my sight again. I’m going to quit work and go with you wherever you need to go.”

He laughed. “We tried that, remember? Neither of us got any work done.”

Remembering those first days in Kian’s office, she smiled. “We couldn’t keep our hands off each other.” She snuggled closer. “We still can’t.”

“We are blessed.” He caressed her back, running his large hand in slow, soothing circles. “This was a unique situation that is not going to happen again. We made a mistake. Merlin had told us not to bring the prisoners in chains because they couldn’t go into the MRI or even be near it, but he hadn’t told us that ten feet or so away from the van was okay. I would have kept Igor in chains until it was time to put him inside the device and tranquilized him again before removing the chains. I would have also told Anandur to bring his gun but stay several feet away from the van.”

“That might have helped, or it might not have. Igor could have bided his time until the moment his chains were removed and lunged for you. Anandur wouldn’t have fired if Igor used you as a body shield.”



“Perhaps. I still feel bad about relying on just one security measure. It’s just that the tranquilizers were so effective in keeping him sedated for days that it didn’t occur to me to doubt their effectiveness on him. That’s another lesson I learned today.”

Syssi chuckled. “My mother used to say that in hindsight, everyone is smart, and that it’s impossible to foresee all potential pitfalls.” She tapped her temple. “I should have foreseen this. What good is my ability when it never shows me anything of value?”

“It’s showed you plenty of things. You saved Ronja from dying in the desert when you saw where they were stuck, and you foresaw the Kra-ell, which is the most remarkable foretelling you’ve ever done, and you didn’t even know that it was a foretelling. You also knew that we were having a baby girl.”

“That was a mother’s intuition. It had nothing to do with my foresight.”

Kian raised a brow. “Oh, yeah? How about all your conversations with Allegra while she was still in your belly? Did you address her as *it* or as *the baby*? No. You knew she was a girl.”

“Given the sensitivities of today’s world, maybe I should have checked with her how she wanted to be addressed.”

Grimacing, Kian shook his head. “I’m too old for that. There are many wrongs that are much more monumental than the proper or improper use of language. The youngsters of today need to open their eyes and see what’s going on around them in the world, and if they want to do something about it, they should volunteer and put in the work, not just talk.”

“Language is important, my love.” Smiling, Syssi gripped his chin between her thumb and forefinger. “And you really sounded like an old man. The youngsters of today? To you, that’s everyone.”

“Don’t remind me.” He took a deep breath. “I should get back to training every morning. I stopped doing that after

Allegra was born, and I'm out of practice.”

“He compelled you not to move. You couldn't have done anything even if you were the clan's number-one fighter. By the way, did you ask Jade if she wants to join the Guardian force? She doesn't even need to go through training. From what you've told me, she can beat our best fighters.”

“It's true that she could teach our Guardians a thing or two, but that's not what she should be doing.” He chuckled. “Brundar suggested that I hire her as my bodyguard, but that was because he felt guilty for failing me.”

“He saved you in the end. Jade just held Igor down for him.”

“I told him that, but he still feels guilty.”

Syssi could understand that. Brundar was their best fighter, and yet Igor had managed to get to Kian on his watch. On top of that, Jade had been the one to leap into action.

“Did Merlin end up finding a tracker on Igor?”

“He did. It was the same kind as the ones he removed from the settlers. He ran Igor through the MRI machine twice to ensure there weren't any other implants.” He smirked. “Jade enjoyed stabbing his heart every few minutes to keep him from waking up. Brundar gave her that dagger as a present.”

“Wow. Does she know what a great honor that is?”

“I made sure to explain it.”

“Good.” As Syssi put her head on Kian's solid chest, the sound of his beating heart soothed her frayed nerves. “What do you plan to do with Igor? Are you going to punish him for attacking you?”

“That would be petty of me. I can't blame the guy for trying to escape. I would have done the same thing if I were in his shoes. The fault is entirely mine for providing him with the chance to do that.”

Sometimes Kian's tendency to assume the blame for everything was annoying.

“He should be punished as a deterrent, so he’ll be afraid to attempt it again.”

“It wouldn’t work. He was designed to fight, and I don’t think he can even feel fear. The gods must have tampered with his ability to have any feelings at all.”

“Or he was born that way. In either case, it’s not his fault that he is like that, but he’s too dangerous to be left alive.” Syssi shifted in Kian’s arms. “It makes me feel awful to say this, but I will feel much safer after he’s put in stasis.”

“We don’t know if he can go into stasis without a pod, and we don’t have one. But that’s a worry for another day. Right now, I’m waiting for William to conduct the experiment and tell me whether Igor has been telling the truth about the signal. His escape attempt makes me hopeful that he’s been bluffing about that to keep Jade from killing him immediately.”



## VANESSA

Vanessa entered her house, kicked off her heels, and padded to the kitchen to search for the bottle of wine she had stashed in the pantry.

She wasn't a great fan of alcohol, but after the day she'd had, she needed something to take off the edge and help her relax.

The arousal that had hummed through her body after her meeting with Mo-red had dissipated with the news about the attack on Kian, and whatever positive energy that had remained had gotten sucked out during her last two appointments of the day.

One was with a young pureblooded female who suffered from depression and most likely anorexia. Megonia refused to acknowledge that she had a problem, and after Vanessa had suggested weekly therapy sessions, she practically threw her out of the house.

Vanessa couldn't force anyone to get help, but she feared for the female, and the only thing she could think of was to tell Jade and have her convince the female to see her, and if that didn't work, to appoint someone to watch Megonia twenty-four-seven to make sure she didn't commit suicide or just starve herself to death. The female hadn't touched any of the bagged blood and had said that she could wait for the farm animals to be delivered to the village.

Given how thin she was, which was significantly thinner than the other purebloods, the recent upheaval in her life

wasn't what had caused the disorder. She'd been restricting her intake of blood for a long while.

Evidently, even the Kra-ell could suffer from disorders like anorexia nervosa.

The bottle of wine was where Vanessa had remembered putting it, but next to it, she found a bottle of fine whiskey that Stella had gotten her a couple of years ago for her birthday. The bottle was still sealed, and she debated whether her lousy mood was worth opening the expensive bottle for. Whiskey didn't go bad after it was opened, but perhaps she should stick with the wine.

Grabbing the bottle of Chardonnay, she padded back to the kitchen, got a wine glass, and continued to her bedroom. Watching some mindless television while drinking wine was what the doctor ordered, even if the doctor's name was Vanessa.

She should call Karen and see how things were going in the Ojai sanctuary, but it was Friday evening, and things were winding down even there.

Getting out of her blouse, skirt, and pantyhose, Vanessa slid under the blanket in her bra and panties and clicked the television on.

A commercial for Perfect Match came up, and as she watched the handsome couple locked in a passionate embrace while a red sun was setting on an alien landscape, her mind wandered back to her own sexy alien, and a smile lifted the corners of her lips.

She had a full day of interviews tomorrow, but she could visit him on Sunday and bring that bottle of whiskey with her to share with him. He'd said that he liked all kinds of alcohol and had mentioned whiskey.

Smuggling it in wouldn't be a problem. No one checked her bag. But pulling it out in the cell she conducted her interviews in was a no-no. She would have to hide the whiskey in a water bottle and bring a couple of paper cups with her. It wasn't ideal, but beggars and choosers and all that.

She and Mo-red were being creative and doing their best under the circumstances. This could be yet another piece of their game.

Had he done what he'd said he would and locked himself in the bathroom for the remainder of the night?

How long would it take him to climax twelve times in a row? Was it even possible?

Immortals had a very high level of stamina, so it made sense that the Kra-ell were virile as well, but twelve times?

He had probably exaggerated.

Closing her eyes, Vanessa imagined him standing naked in the shower, one hand braced on the simple white tile wall, his long black hair cascading down his muscular back, or maybe down his front as the spray plastered it to his hard body, and his other hand palming his impressive erection.

Mo-red had said that he would be thinking about her when stroking himself to a climax, but would he murmur her name as his hand glided up and down his sleek length?

As an ache started pulsing between her legs, she cupped herself over her panties with one hand and clicked the television off with the other.

After putting the remote away, she slid down the pillows and burrowed deeper under the covers. Her panties and bra were gone in the next moment, and as she put one hand on her breast and stroked herself with the other, she brought back the image of Mo-red pleasuring himself in the shower.

She was alone in the house, and there was no one to hear the soft moans leaving her throat, but she bit her lip nonetheless. Caressing the spot between her legs and imagining that those were Mo-red's fingers and not her own that were stroking her gently and expertly, she plunged two into her hot center.

As her climax neared, Vanessa clenched her thighs around her fingers, and when she was right on the edge, she pinched her nipple, and the orgasm tore through her like a tornado.

“Wow,” she whispered after catching her breath.

It had been such a long time since she'd experienced anything so strong. Usually, her orgasms were merely hiccups, leaving her yearning for more, but this was like a mini earthquake, and that was just from thinking about the intriguing and charming male she'd met only a couple of days ago.

What would it be like to actually have him in her bed? Holding her down effortlessly and dominating her so naturally that she wouldn't mind relinquishing control to him during their bed play.

With that thought reigniting her arousal, Vanessa stroked her other breast and returned her fingers to the wet heat between her legs.





## MO-RED

“*I*’m surprised they didn’t kill Igor.” Madbar scrolled through the selection of movies on the screen. “I wonder how close he came to escaping.”

There was a note of longing in Madbar’s voice that had Mo-red worried. “Don’t get any ideas in your head. If he didn’t make it, you won’t for sure.”

“Don’t worry, my brain is still functioning properly despite over a century of his control, but I have to admit it’s tempting.” He shifted his eyes away from the screen and looked at Mo-red. “An escape attempt might be just the way to die honorably and get to the field of the brave. We won’t get that if they execute us. That’s a sure ticket to the valley of the shamed.”

“Do you still believe in that?”

Madbar shrugged. “Our people followed the way of the Mother for hundreds of thousands of years. Were all of them dumb primitives?”

“That’s what Igor believes.” Mo-red rose to his feet and walked over to the bathroom. “He said that the belief in the Mother had held our people back from achieving the same things the gods had, and he was right about that. I just don’t know if he was right about the gods inventing the belief system to keep us from competing with them. We are stronger, faster, and just as smart.”

“So you agree with Igor?” Madbar asked. “I thought that you believed in the Mother.”

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I accept everything the priestesses preached.” Mo-red opened the door. “I’m going to ponder my contradictory beliefs in the shower.”

“Enjoy.” Madbar turned back to the screen.

Mo-red had no intentions of pondering anything other than how Vanessa looked with no clothes and what sounds she made when soaring on the wings of ecstasy.

His arousal had pattered out for a while, but as soon as things had quieted down, images of her gorgeous face and sultry smiles had returned to torment him.

Besides, he’d told her he would climax twelve times tonight while thinking about her. He was a virile male, but that had been just bravado. His all-time record had been seven times with a very demanding pureblooded female, but his usual was four to five times with a Kra-ell female, and no more than two with a human, simply because they couldn’t take more than that without suffering the consequences the next day. The venom he secreted along with the bite had healing properties, but there was only so much it could fix.

As he shucked his clothes and folded them over the toilet lid, he wondered how sex with Vanessa would compare.

She wasn’t as strong as a Kra-ell female but not weak like a human. She was soft like a human and at least somewhat sexually submissive if he got her hints right. She was also indestructible compared to both Kra-ell and human females.

He wouldn’t need to hold back anything with her and could keep going until they were both so exhausted that they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

That never happened with pureblooded females. As soon as the sex was done, they wanted the male out of their bed. Was he a defective Kra-ell male for wanting to cuddle?

Probably.

Entering under the hot spray, he faced the shower head and planted a hand on the tiled wall. He groaned as he gripped his erection hard and conjured the image of the nude Vanessa in the shower with him.

He would spend a long time kissing and caressing her, and then he would go down on his knees, lift one of her legs, and plant her dainty foot on his shoulder.

For a few moments, he would just tease the bundle of nerves at the apex of her thigh, flicking it with the tip of his tongue, and when she was least expecting it, penetrate her with it and show her what a Kra-ell could do with his tongue that no other male could.

As he pumped with his hand, the tension in his balls tightened until he was ready to go off, but he held it back, squeezing his shaft hard and taking deep breaths, but it was no use. Biting into his arm to muffle the sound he was about to make, he pumped one last time, and the orgasm hit him like a bolt of electricity, and for a split second, his mind and his hand were frozen, and everything went quiet, but then it came roaring back, and his seed exploded out of him with the power of a tsunami.

It hit the tiled wall, coating it with his ejaculate, and as more images of Vanessa in different states of satiety flashed through his mind, he kept stroking and coming.

When there was no more, his shaft was still hard, and he grinned with satisfaction through his panting breaths. Given how aroused he still was, perhaps the twelve times he'd boasted about to Vanessa would happen after all.

By the sixth time, his legs gave out, and he had to sit on the shower floor, but his erection was still going strong, and he was determined to reach the finish line victorious or at least break his own record.



## ANNANI

“*I* should not have left.” Annani put down her phone. “I should have insisted on staying and talking to that creature the gods created.”

As usual, she had not heard about the attack from Kian. Did he think that she would not find out? Amanda had called as soon as she had heard about it, and she should have.

Alena leaned back and put a hand on her belly. “I’m glad that you didn’t. And I’m glad that Kian and the others are alright. Frankly, I don’t understand what possessed Igor to attempt an escape. He didn’t know where he was, and he didn’t know what kind of defenses we had in place. It was stupid, and the guy doesn’t strike me as lacking intelligence.”

Orion pushed to his feet, walked over to where Ojidu had left the teapot, and refilled his cup. “Maybe it was a momentary lapse of reason. He was sedated, woke up, saw an opening, and took it without a second thought. It could have been instinctive.”

“Perhaps.” Annani lifted her phone again and called her son.

“Hello, Mother.” Kian’s tone had a note of guilt, as it should. “I assume you have heard?”

“Of course. But I did not hear it from you, and that is not okay, my son. You should have called me as soon as you were able to. Instead, you returned to the village and went home to your wife. You could have picked up the phone and called while en route.”

“I did not want to worry you, but you are right. I should have called.”

“How are you faring?”

“I’m all healed.”

Annani let out a breath. “I am returning to the village, and I am going to talk to that Igor and get him to confess everything.”

“Please, give me a little more time. William says that he will be ready to conduct the test tomorrow, and hopefully, call Igor’s bluff so I can let Jade execute him and be done with him.”

Annani winced. “You know what my stance is on that. You should convince her to let you put Igor in stasis. As part god, he is not fully hers to do with as she pleases.”

Kian chuckled. “Now more than ever, I cannot make that demand. She might have saved my life.”

That was what Amanda had said, but Amanda tended to exaggerate to make a story more exciting, and Annani had suspected that she had made Jade’s role more pivotal than it had been.

“I am certain that your bodyguards could have handled Igor without Jade’s help.”

“Perhaps, but the fact remains that if she hadn’t jumped and taken him down, Brundar couldn’t have gotten to his neck and sliced it before the bastard ripped my throat out. It wouldn’t have killed me, but it would have hurt like hell and taken a long time to heal. Not to mention how it would have scared Allegra to see her daddy with a bandage around his throat and unable to talk to her.”

Vocal cords took a long time to regenerate and would have taken days even for a god.

Annani sighed. “It worries me that he drank your blood.”

“It shouldn’t.”

“Remember what we talked about? What if he did that to ascertain that you are Ahn’s grandson? Perhaps he has a way to transmit information to Anumati?”

The Eternal King’s plan to murder his sons and daughter had greatly unsettled Annani, and so did the new threat to her life.

It was not enough that she needed to worry about Navuh wanting her dead, now she had to worry about her grandfather finding out about her and wanting to eliminate her as well.

At least Navuh was a distant relation, and having him as an enemy did not feel personal. He did not know her, not well anyway, and the only reason he wanted to kill her was to stop her from helping humanity advance and become the free and just society envisioned by her father and the other gods who had come with him to Earth.

The truth was that she and her clan were no longer instrumental in achieving that, and humans were well on their way to doing so without her and the clan’s help.

Navuh’s quest to annihilate them no longer made much sense.

Was that the reason for his lack of hostile activity lately?

Had Navuh finally realized that eliminating her and her clan would not get him any closer to his goal of world domination?

“That occurred to me as well,” Kian said. “But Merlin took out Igor’s tracker, which was the same kind he found in the other settlers. He didn’t find any other transmitters on him, and when we ran him through William’s bug detector, nothing came up either. There is no way for Igor to share information with the gods.”

“I hope that you are right.” She let out a breath. “Is it just me, or did the world suddenly become more menacing?”

Kian did not respond for a long moment. “It’s not just you. I hate not knowing what the gods are up to, or even if they are still around, or what will happen if the Eternal King discovers that he has a living, legitimate heir. I hate even more that I



now have them to worry about on top of Navuh and the Brotherhood, the Kra-ell sleeper assassins, and a shrinking world where avoiding discovery by humans is getting more and more difficult.”



## KIAN

“*D*ada.” Allegra lifted her arms. “Up.”

She was learning new words so quickly now that Kian had no doubt she would soon be talking in whole sentences. Not that she had any trouble communicating her wishes using single syllables.

“Come to Daddy, sweetness.” He lifted her high in the air and swung her around, eliciting a happy giggle.

“Mo!”

Which meant more.

“One more time, but that’s it. You’ve just had breakfast.” He swung her around again and then pressed her against his chest. “Do you want to go back to play?”

She shook her head and pointed at the television. “We-we.” Which meant The Wiggles.

Kian cast a questioning look at Syssi, who shook her head.

“If I let her, she would watch television all day long. I want her to play with toys that engage her mind.”

Lifting his daughter higher, he kissed her soft cheek. “Mommy says no we-we. Do you want to play tea party?”

She let out a sigh worthy of a teenager, not a nine-month-old girl, and pointed at her play area on the carpet.

He put her down and sat on the floor next to her. “Do you want to give Daddy some tea?”

Saturday mornings were the best part of his week because he got to spend as much time as he wanted with Allegra.

Well, unless something came up, which was almost guaranteed to happen. Kian couldn't remember when he'd enjoyed an entire weekend with his family without having to take care of one emergency or another.

Allegra gave him one of those too-adult looks that had the hairs on the back of his neck tingle. "We-we," she said in a different tone than the one she used for The Wiggles, picked up a doll, and started talking to her in her made-up language.

As Kian's phone rang and William's face appeared on the screen, he cast another wondering look at his daughter. Had she known that William was going to call?

Sometimes she called William we-we too.

Rising to his feet, Kian accepted the call. "Good morning, William."

"It's almost noon, and it's not good." William let out a sigh. "Regrettably, the bastard was right about the trackers."

Kian shouldn't have been surprised, but after yesterday's attack, he had hoped that Igor had been bluffing all along, and that was the reason for his attempted escape.

A person would do anything to try to avoid certain death, and if his story proved to be false, his execution would have been imminent.

"What did you find out?" Kian opened the sliding door and stepped outside.

If there was ever a time for a cigarillo, it was now.

"We built two receivers. One of my guys drove a receiver to Pasadena, and I took the other to Santa Barbara. Three other guys drove gerbils that still had the trackers in random directions. We knew the type of signal we were looking for but not the signature of those particular three trackers. The idea was to find them and triangulate their exact location. It wasn't a total failure since I managed to isolate the signals, but we couldn't get the right location on any of them. When the guys

returned, I even checked the trackers to ensure that the signals we identified had originated from them and not from some disturbance, and I confirmed that they had been the source. You know what the next step is.”

“I do.” Kian groaned. “We need Igor to decipher the signals and tell us where they are coming from. You need to bring a receiver to the keep and send the gerbils on another road trip.”

He pulled out a cigarillo from the box and lit it.

“I heard what happened with Igor,” William said. “How are you going to handle him?”

Kian took a puff and closed his eyes, while the nicotine took the edge off. “I don’t know yet. I wanted to let him go hungry for a while, but if I don’t feed him, he won’t cooperate with the signals.”

“He will. If he doesn’t, Jade will kill him.”

“He knows she won’t until she has a definite answer about his ability to locate the signals. I’ll let him squirm and make me an offer.” He chuckled. “Dalhu suggested I take him with me and let him go at Igor. I don’t think he believes me how strong those fuckers are.” He took another puff. “Even he would have been as helpless as a child in that creature’s hold.”

“I bet,” William said. “I still remember Orion’s story about Aliya holding her own against him, Phinas, and Arwel, and she’s just a hybrid and a female.”

Kian exhaled a puff of smoke. “Next time I visit Igor, I’ll take Okidu with me. He’s programmed to defend me, and he’s not susceptible to compulsion. I should have thought of doing that from the get-go, but I fully expected our security measures to be good enough.”

“Taking Okidu with you is an excellent idea. By the way, how did the Kra-ell react to the Odus?”

“There were a few awkward moments, but since they were all born after the rebellion had been quashed, they only knew about the Odus from stories. Jade’s response was suspicion

and dislike, but not fear, and she was thankful for their help building the barn.”

“I wonder how old Igor is,” William said. “If he was born before the rebellion, he might react differently to Okidu.”

“He wasn’t born. He was made. The gods grew him and others like him in a lab.”

There was a moment of silence, and then William cleared his throat. “We know that he doesn’t have artificial parts. He’s a Kra-ell with some enhancements, which means that he has a mother and a father. That he was conceived in a lab instead of a womb doesn’t make him a cyborg.”

“I know that he is a sentient being. But the fact remains that he wasn’t born in a conventional manner. I wonder if he even knows when he was born. I’ll ask him the next time I see him.”

“Who do you think raised him? Even the gods couldn’t have created a fully-grown adult. He had to start as a baby and grow.”

“I have no clue. He and the others like him were probably raised by hired caregivers.”

“That explains a lot,” William said. “What kind of an emotional makeup could a soldier who was grown in a lab have? It’s even worse than what Navuh does. At least he gives the boys thirteen years with their mothers.”

It was a chilling thought that Navuh was more compassionate than the gods.

Kian took another puff from his cigarillo. “Igor kept bringing it up, saying that he was a tool, and that the blame belonged to his creator, but Jade easily rebutted his excuse. The gods didn’t tell him to kill off Kra-ell males and establish a male-dominated colony on Earth. It was his doing.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” William sighed. “It’s so disappointing to learn that our ancestors were not the advanced, benevolent people they claimed to be. I know it’s illogical, but I feel tainted now, as if their sins are on me somehow. Before learning of the gods’ true nature, I was

proud to be their descendant and believed that I was morally superior because the clan followed in their footsteps. Now I have nothing to feel proud about.”

“The sins of the fathers are visited upon their sons,” Kian quoted. “Maybe that’s what the passage tries to convey—that the children feel guilty about the sins of their forefathers. It’s guilt by association, and I feel that too, but we shouldn’t. We are the descendants of Annani, and her intentions have always been pure.”





# VANESSA

Vanessa left Phinas's place with mixed feelings.

Jade had been so guarded that making a thorough assessment of the Kra-ell leader had been difficult. Her impression of the female was the same as Edna's. Jade cared about her people and wanted to do what was best for them. She was also filled with anger and pain, but Phinas had a way of soothing her frayed edges.

They both must have wondered why Vanessa had asked so many questions about their relationship, how they had fallen in love, and how that was relevant to the assessment. The truth was that Vanessa hadn't asked those questions for Kian. She'd asked them for herself to understand how a relationship was possible between two people who were not only the product of very different cultures but were also from two different species.

At some point Jade had stopped answering, and Phinas had taken over. Vanessa hadn't known him well before, but he'd impressed her today with his charm, intelligence, and devotion to Jade.

Was he a missed opportunity?

Vanessa could have explored the possibility if she hadn't been so opposed to hooking up with the former Doomers. Then again, the Fates had other plans for Phinas, and perhaps for her as well. Not that it was likely to be Mo-red, but it was possible.

The Fates had a habit of making strange pairings.

As she climbed the stairs to her next appointment, the door opened, and a pureblooded female stepped out. Like the others, she was tall, very slim, and beautiful in an alien way.

The Kra-ell females carried themselves regally even after decades of subjugation, and each one looked like she could be a queen. Given that their religion claimed that every female was the embodiment of the Mother, they probably believed so as well.

That was the power of a positive belief system, and it was a shame that most human religions had done the opposite for women.

“Hello.” Vanessa smiled. “I’m here to see Sheniya.”

“That’s me.” The female took a step back to let Vanessa in. “And you’re the therapist.”

“That’s right. I’m Vanessa.” She offered the female her hand.

She glanced at it but didn’t take it. “All this touching is a human custom that I don’t understand and don’t wish to adopt.”

“That’s okay.” Vanessa smiled. “Many people don’t like shaking hands, even among humans. Frankly, I never understood the custom either, especially among people who can infect each other with germs.” She followed the female to the living room, where another female was sitting on the couch with her feet propped on the coffee table.

“That’s my roommate, Rishana,” Sheniya introduced her.

The female dipped her head and returned to watching a movie with no sound and with Russian subtitles.

“Hello.” Vanessa waved at her and turned back to Sheniya. “Is there somewhere private you would like to talk?”

“Here is fine.” The female motioned to the dining table. “My roommate doesn’t speak English.”

Vanessa had known that Sheniya was fluent in English thanks to the helpful notes Mey and Jin had added to the

photos they had taken on the ship, but she didn't know that the female had such a good command of the language.

She also knew that Sheniya was one of Igor's pod members.

"How did you learn to speak English so well?" Vanessa asked.

The female pointed at the television screen. "From movies. I have very good auditory memory, and I learn languages easily." She tilted her head to look at Vanessa from under incredibly long lashes. "I was told that the immortals are also talented with languages. Why can't you speak Russian?"

"I've never visited the country." Vanessa shrugged off her coat and hung it on the back of the chair. "I need to spend about three months in a place to learn to speak its language, and if I want to master reading and writing, I need at least six months." She sat down, pulled her tablet from her satchel, and put it on the table. "I don't travel much, which is why I speak only six languages."

"Why not? Are you restricted to the village?"

Vanessa smiled. "Not at all. I'm just not very fond of traveling. I'm a creature of comfort, and I like to have my things around me. The time I spent abroad was not for pleasure."

"What was it for?"

"To learn new languages, of course."

That wasn't the only reason, but she was there to talk about Sheniya and not herself. "I'm sure you are eager to be done with this interview and get back to whatever you were doing before I showed up on your doorstep."

Sheniya nodded. "What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with the basics. How old were you when you boarded the settlers' ship?"

"Twenty-four."

Filling up the intake questionnaire took about twenty minutes, and when that was done, Vanessa was ready to move on to more dangerous ground.

She turned her tablet off and leaned back in her chair. “As you know, eight of your former pod members are currently imprisoned in our jail and awaiting trial. I haven’t had a chance to interview other females who were members of that pod. You are my first.”

“So?” Sheniya folded her arms over her chest. “I didn’t get any special treatment because of that. I was victimized the same way the others were. My dignity was taken away from me along with my Goddess-given right to choose my bed partners.”

“I didn’t imply any such thing. But since you knew these males the longest, I wanted your opinion of them.”

“They should all die.”

Vanessa was taken aback.

Sheniya hadn’t lost family members to Igor’s sword or that of the other males, and her grievances should have been milder.

“I’m surprised to hear you say that. The other females I talked to were more forgiving. They said that the worst offenders were already dead, and that the remaining ones were victims like the rest of you, forced by Igor to do unthinkable things.”

“I don’t deny that,” Sheniya said. “But even though they were unwilling participants at first, their souls have been corrupted by their deeds, and they will never be clean again. They need to die and be reborn again to start anew.”

The Kra-ell were extreme people, but Sheniya seemed more so than the others. “What about redemption? Doesn’t the Mother of All Life forgive sinners if they redeem themselves? Especially those who were forced to commit sins?”

Sheniya shrugged. “I’m not a priestess, and I’m not a devout follower of the Mother either. It’s just common sense.” She leaned her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her

fist. “Igor had over a hundred years to brainwash them and convince them that his vision of a male-dominated Kra-ell society was the way to go. He made them believe that the Kra-ell males had been treated unjustly for far too long and that it was their time to take over and subjugate the females the way they had subjugated the males for hundreds of thousands of years. It’s total garbage, but they believed it because it made them feel better about themselves.”

Both sides were right and wrong at the same time. The Kra-ell society had customs in place that protected the males from being taken advantage of, but it hadn’t assigned them equal value, and they had been right to rebel against the system. As it often happened with social unrest, though, the pendulum swung wildly in the opposite direction before finding an equilibrium, and people got hurt in the process.

It could have happened even without a dictator like Igor leading the revolution.

“I talked with all the prisoners except Valstar,” Vanessa said. “None of them felt good about following Igor’s orders.”

The female’s smile was chilling. “They told you what you wanted to hear. But even if that’s true, it still doesn’t change the fact that the eight of them will spoil things for the rest of us. We have a chance to have a fresh start and try to forget the past. Why bring along a bunch of rotten apples that will evoke bad memories and bad feelings, making the rest of us uncomfortable? I don’t want them around, reminding me daily of what I’ve been through.”

“We can find ways to mitigate the bad feelings. What if they were sentenced to community service?”

Sheniya snorted. “You think like a human. Community service is not going to cut it.”



# JADE

When Phinas's phone rang, Jade had a feeling that the call was for her.

William was busy and hadn't had time to supply her with a phone, or maybe that was just an excuse, and Kian didn't trust her to have one yet.

After she'd saved him from having his throat torn out, she figured she'd finally earned his trust, but the illusion had been shattered when the clan's psychologist had shown up on Phinas's doorstep this morning and then asked her a million intrusive questions.

Jade had no doubt that Kian had sent Vanessa to thoroughly assess her, but what had ticked her off the most was all the personal questions the therapist had asked.

In what way was Jade's relationship with Phinas applicable to her psychological assessment? Was she considered less of a risk because she loved an immortal?

Phinas wasn't even a clan member, so how was that relevant to anything?

"Kian wants to speak to you." Phinas handed her the device.

"Hello, Kian. How is your throat?"

It was probably back to how it was before Igor's attack, but it was a good reminder that she'd saved it from being much worse.

He chuckled. “Other than my ego, everything else is perfectly healed. How about you? Everything good?”

She’d gotten to know Kian well over the past few days, and small talk wasn’t his thing. He probably had talked with Vanessa already and had gotten a full report. “I didn’t appreciate your psychologist showing up this morning and interrogating me, but other than that, everything is good. I’m relaxing at home with Phinas and feeling antsy because I’m not used to relaxing. There is still so much to do.”

Drova was gone as usual, but that wasn’t a reason for concern unless she was hanging out with Pavel at his house. She wasn’t ready for sex, and the guy was much too old for her.

“I have news from William,” Kian said. “You’re not going to like it.”

So the reason for the call was Igor and not the report from the shrink.

Jade closed her eyes and let her head drop back on her neck. “Igor didn’t lie about the encryption on the signals coming from the trackers, did he?”

“William and his team tested three trackers, and they managed to identify all three signals, but they couldn’t pinpoint their location. The next step is to repeat the experiment and have Igor decipher the signals. Perhaps he lied about that part, which will make him useless to us.”

“As much as I want him dead, I hope he can do that and find the other settlers. It’s no longer just about my wish to find the rest of my people. Now that we suspect that there are assassins among them, it’s crucial that you get to them before they get to you.”

“I’m surprised you are so concerned about the clan’s safety.”

Did Kian even realize how insulting that sounded?

Jade might have let it slide if she wasn’t still agitated from Vanessa’s visit, but this added insult to injury, or whatever the phrase was.



As her anger surged, she forced her voice to remain even. “What surprises me is that you think so little of me. Are you accusing me of having no honor?”

“Fates forbid. I meant no offense. Blame my comment on our cultural differences. We haven’t reached a cooperation agreement yet, so you are under no obligation to protect the clan, not yet anyway, but perhaps things are perceived differently in the Kra-ell culture, and an official agreement is not necessary.”

Kian was thinking like a human.

Jade took a breath to calm herself. “First, I’m obligated to protect your clan because you sent a force to free us from Igor. Then you invited us to your community and gave us homes. You are bringing livestock into your village so we don’t have to live on pre-packaged blood. My debt to you is so monumental that I could not repay it during my lifetime. It’s a generational debt, and I’m not talking about money, which by the way, we should talk about at some point. We need to settle our accounts.”

She’d wanted to discuss that since arriving at the village, but he’d been busy, and she didn’t want to bother him over the weekend. If not for Phinas, she wouldn’t have been able to buy a cup of coffee at the café because she had no access to money.

“We will do that Monday morning. In the meantime, you and your people can use the café and charge it to me. The same goes for anything you want to order delivered to you. I’ll text Phinas the credit card number you can use.”

“Thank you. Naturally, you should deduct all the expenses from the funds you are holding for us, but I would really like to have access to that money. Having a wallet again is symbolic of independence. I’m sure it would make a big difference in the mood of my people.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I get it, and I wish we could move forward faster, but there is only so much that you and I can do in a day, and putting Igor’s claims to the test took precedence.”

“I agree. When is the next step of the experiment going to take place?”

“I need to check with William. He and his team have been working nonstop for days and deserve some rest. I can’t ask them to work on Sunday. It will most likely have to wait for Monday.”

“After you check with him, please let me know.”

“I’ll do that right now.”

“Before we end this conversation, I want to make one thing clear. I’m honor bound to protect you and yours. You can trust me.”

“I do, but I’m a cautious man, and I’d rather step on your very honorable toes than take unnecessary risks. You’ll have to bear with my over-caution and overprotectiveness for a while.”



## VANESSA

“Hello, Azaka.” Vanessa greeted the Kra-ell female with a slight dip of her head.

“Hello,” she said with a heavy Russian accent and turned to Toven. “*Vkhodite pozhaluysta.*” She motioned towards the couch.

It was the last interview of the day, this time with Toven as a translator.

When they sat down, Toven made the introductory statement while Vanessa pulled out her tablet. Given the soft smile the female gave him, his delivery was better than Vanessa’s, or maybe Azaka was just fond of the god.

Given that she was one of the original settlers, that was doubtful.

All of them had been born after the rebellion had ended and the relationship between the gods and the Kra-ell had improved, but they were still suspicious of the gods and held certain well-earned prejudices against them.

He continued to ask the female how old she was when she boarded the ship and whether she was excited about having been chosen.

By now, Vanessa could probably ask those questions in Russian and understand the answers, but she still needed Toven for the rest of the intake questionnaire.

“I was twenty-two when I boarded the ship,” Azaka answered in Russian. “I was excited to go.” She continued in

her soft-spoken manner, and Toven translated along with only a slight delay. It was like listening to a dubbed movie, which was much better than the she-said-he-said translations he had done before. “I thought it was an exciting future for us and that by establishing a colony, we would naturally become its most prominent members. When we woke up from stasis and discovered how long we had been asleep, I was devastated. Everyone I cared about had been dead for thousands of years, and we had no way to communicate with home or anyone in the other pods because the ship was gone. We were left to our own devices and had to improvise.”

Vanessa nodded. “It must have been scary.”

“It was.” Azaka let out a breath. “We landed in cold Siberia, not the hot and humid climate we were promised, but the upside was that it was so sparsely populated that we had no trouble staying hidden. We built a small, primitive village and tried to make do. We thought we were the only survivors, and we encouraged our males to breed with human females because there weren’t enough of us, but they refused, and it was decided that we would leave that to the next generation born to us.”

“Why did they refuse?” Vanessa asked.

Azaka shrugged. “Human females are so weak and breakable. I don’t know how a Kra-ell male can enjoy bed play with such feeble partners. If he gets even a little over-excited, he might end up killing the female.”

Vanessa shuddered at the thought.

She wasn’t a weak human, but compared to Mo-red, she was feeble. The good news was that he’d been with human females and found them desirable, so at least he wouldn’t be repulsed by her weakness. But she was getting ahead of herself. He was still a prisoner, they could still do nothing other than talk, and she couldn’t shake the insidious suspicion that he might be flirting with her only so she would provide the court with a favorable opinion of him.

“They never got to see a next generation,” Toven translated Azaka’s whisper. “When Igor found us, another

female and I were pregnant, but no children had been born yet. He froze all of us with one command, and his pod members slaughtered the males.” She lifted a pair of red glowing eyes to Vanessa. “Jade is not the only one who has the right to take Igor’s head off. I have as much right as she does, and since she and Kagra got to kill the first six, the other females and I deserve to behead the rest of them.”

A chill ran down Vanessa’s spine. “Other than possibly Valstar, the others were just as much Igor’s victims as you were. They had no choice but to follow his commands.”

“Don’t let them fool you. They are all cold-blooded killers. I saw their faces when they killed my family. They might’ve not been happy to do that, but they looked indifferent. They committed crimes for which the sentence is death. I will not settle for anything less than their heads rolling off their necks.”

Evidently, soft-spoken did not correspond to soft-hearted, and inside Azaka burned an inferno of rage.



## KIAN

“*T*he receivers are not going to work in the dungeon,” William said. “We will have to take him out to the surface. I can bring the command van to our parking level, load him up in the back, and drive around with him.”

“You said the signal was weak but not impeded by distance or walls. Why can’t Igor detect it from the dungeon?”

“The receivers will not register the signal down there, and Igor needs to see the output to decipher correct coordinates of where it’s coming from. At least, that’s what I understood from the explanation he gave. I listened to the recording twice.”

Kian didn’t get it. “I’m not a scientist, but to me, it doesn’t make sense. The receivers might not record anything else down in the dungeon, but if the signal penetrates through all the layers of earth and concrete, they should.”

“But they don’t. We ran into the problem when we conducted the tests. The receivers had to be free of obstructing materials. My theory is that the signal from the trackers is piggybacking on top of regular radio signals. It can come from the dungeon, penetrate through all the layers between them, and then attach itself to a stronger signal. Don’t ask me how, but that’s the only explanation I can come up with.”

If that was the best William could deduce, Kian wasn’t going to waste any more mental effort on it. The alien technology was so much more advanced than anything they were familiar with that trying to figure out how it worked was



like Neanderthals trying to figure out how a radio produced sound.

It was frustrating.

For so long, Kian had believed that Ekin's tablet contained the most advanced knowledge in the world, and as its custodian, he'd felt superior. He and the clan had been helping human technology advance by drip-feeding knowledge at appropriate times, but it seemed that the tablet had only a tiny fraction of the technology of the gods, and it made Kian feel less significant than he'd felt before.

He groaned. "Even in chains, Igor can attempt an escape, and if we chain him to the van, the bastard could rip the metal out and make a run for it. He's that strong."

"I'll bring along a couple of souped-up cuffs and give one remote to you and the other to Anandur. If Igor twitches the wrong way, he can be neutralized in a split second."

"True. I'll also have Okidu with me."

"Then you have nothing to worry about," William said. "Just make sure to give him clear instructions about what he needs to do in case Igor tries anything."

Since gaining sentience, Okidu had been learning to think independently, but it was evident that his designer had throttled down his learning capacity on purpose. With a computer for a brain, Okidu could have learned everything lightning fast. Instead, he was learning like a child, mastering one thing and then moving to the next.

It occurred to Kian that perhaps human minds were the same. They had the capacity to learn fast but had been designed to do it slowly over time.

"How soon will you be here?" he asked.

"Give me an hour."

"Let me know when you are in the parking level, and I'll send someone to get the cuffs from you. I'm not taking him out of his cell without them."

"I will."

It was said that repeating the same mistake and expecting different results every time was folly, but between having Okidu with him and Igor in chains and cuffs, the risk was minimal.

His butler had been listening to his conversation with William with the same amiable expression he wore most of the time, so Kian wasn't sure he had internalized any of it.

On the table's other side, Jade eyed Okidu with wariness, her lips tight and her brows drawn together.

Kian turned on the large screen behind his old desk and used the desktop to log into the surveillance cameras' feed. Bringing up the one from Igor's cell, he pointed to the prisoner. "This is Igor." He turned to Okidu. "He is very dangerous. He's stronger than four immortals put together, and he's well-trained. I need you to protect me from him."

"Of course, master." Okidu dipped his head. "Should I hold him for you?"

"Only if he attempts to escape or harm anyone. You can use any force needed but do not kill him. We need him alive."

"You can tear his limbs off," Jade murmured. "One at a time."

Okidu dipped his head again. "My deepest apologies, mistress, but my overriding orders are to do no harm. I can detain the prisoner but not cause him bodily harm. Also, I only take orders from Master Kian and Mistress Syssi."

"Of course, you do." She grimaced. "An Odu would never take orders from a Kra-ell."

"Okidu will not take orders from anyone other than my wife and me. Not even from Brundar and Anandur."

He wondered if that was how it had started on the home planet. The Kra-ell attacked, the gods asked their servants to protect them, and the servants ended up paying the ultimate price.



# JADE

“Hello, hotshot,” Kian said as Igor was led out of his cell in chains. “How is your heart doing? All healed up?”

Igor cast a glance at Jade. “The organ is whole again. Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Tremendously.” She moved aside so he would get a good look at the being who had replaced Andrew on their team.

Igor’s eyes flashed red. “An Odu. I have never seen their kind before. I only heard about them.” He turned to Kian. “How did you get one?”

That answered the question of how old Igor was. Since he had godly genes in him, he could be immortal and much older than all the settlers, but if he was born after the Odus had been decommissioned, he couldn’t be too old.

“I have more than one,” Kian said.

The Odu got closer to Igor and eyed him with curiosity. “You are not like the others.”

Igor tried to take a step back but bumped into Anandur, who stood behind him.

The Odu’s nostrils flared. “I smell enhancements.”

“What kind of enhancements?” Kian asked.

The Odu tapped his chest. “Parts are like me.”

Igor bared his fangs. “I’m nothing like you. I’m a Kra-ell pureblood, and my enhancements are genetic.”

“Calm down.” Anandur clamped his hand on Igor’s shoulder.

The big redhead was used to intimidating people with his physical presence, and he didn’t realize he was like a toddler to Igor.

Brundar had his wicked dagger at the ready. The guy had the best toys, and he’d promised to hook Jade up with a quality sword and a couple more daggers.

The Odu resumed his amiable expression and dipped his head. “I must have been mistaken.”

Had anyone else noticed that the Odu hadn’t tacked on the ‘master’ at the end?

Jade glanced at Kian, but his expression hadn’t changed.

Why had the Odu addressed Igor differently?

Okidu had called her Mistress Jade, so it wasn’t because Igor was Kra-ell. It was worth investigating, but not now.

Kian motioned for Anandur to get Igor going. “It’s irrelevant whether you have mechanical or biological enhancements. The gods might have altered you in more ways than one.”

Jade frowned. What if he had a chip in his brain after all? They had all taken for granted his explanation about the gods altering his brain, but maybe he’d bluffed so they wouldn’t kill him and take out the chip in his head?

“Merlin scanned Igor’s whole body, right?” Jade asked as she fell in step with Kian.

“He did, and he would have told me if he found any artificial parts in him.”

“What if they were made to look organic? Or what if they are organic? With the gods’ genetic capabilities, they could have built enhanced organs and incorporated them into his body. Can the MRI even see organic matter?”

“If it can detect cancer, it can detect other tissue.” Kian entered the elevator after Anandur and Brundar escorted Igor

inside. “Perhaps Okidu can sense organic enhancements, and those enhancements were made to look like regular organs. In either case, I’m not putting Igor through another MRI. Once was enough. I’m not letting him out of the cell without chains.”

“I’m right here,” Igor murmured.

Everyone ignored him. He didn’t deserve courtesy from them.

As the elevator doors opened and they stepped out into the parking garage, Jade kept close to Igor just in case he tried to run again. “You can get pure titanium chains. You said that the machine doesn’t have a problem with it.”

“That’s an option I might consider if we keep him alive, which I hope we don’t have to.”

Igor turned his head to look at Kian over his shoulder. “I’m right here, you know. I can hear everything you’re saying.”

Everyone ignored him again, and Kian gave him a chilling smile.

When they reached the van, William got out of the passenger side.

“Hello.” He waved at Jade.

She walked over and offered him her hand. “You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

He had dark circles around his eyes, his cheeks were hollow, and his shirt had food stains.

“I haven’t.” He glanced at Kian. “We have to stop doing things like this. I need time to unwind and think.”

Kian nodded. “If I could, I would send you and Kaia on vacation, but you are irreplaceable.”

Jade had met William’s mate at the village café, and she’d liked her immediately, marking Kaia as one of the immortals she should be friends with. The female was brilliant, and she was mated to William, which meant that she was privy to all the latest technology the clan was developing. Kian might

consider that suspicious, but Jade had no ulterior motive. She just wanted to be in the know.

William turned to look at Igor and grimaced. “Put him in the cage.”

“Sure thing.” Anandur lifted the bound Igor into the van.

“You have a cage?” Kian leaned into the interior. “When did you have time to build that?”

“We had leftover bars, and the guys welded them together to make a cage. If he tries to run, he’ll need to take the cage with him.”

“Is there room for all of us in there and the cage?” Jade asked.

William shook his head. “I suggest that you and Kian stay here. Okidu can stay as well.”

“I’m coming, and so is Okidu.” Kian gave her an apologetic look. “Brundar will stay with you. I suggest that you wait for us in my old office.”

Jade didn’t like it, but she understood Kian’s reasoning.

After what had happened on Friday, Kian wasn’t taking any chances. If Igor somehow managed to bust through the bars, Okidu was probably the only one who could detain him, and the Odu only took commands from Kian.





## KIAN

“Well?” Kian asked when they’d driven around the block twice, and Igor remained silent in his cage. “Do you have the coordinates?”

Igor glanced at the receiver’s display. “There are three signals that keep moving. You need to tell your subordinates to stop in one place, and then I need a pen and paper.”

Kian looked at the receiver’s display and wondered how Igor knew the gerbils weren’t stationary.

William pulled a pen from his shirt pocket and a folded piece of paper out of his jeans pocket. He was about to hand them to Igor through the bars when Kian stopped him. “Don’t get close enough for him to grab you.” He took the pencil and paper and handed them to Okidu. “Give this to the prisoner.”

“Yes, master.” The Odu extended his hand.

Igor took the items. “Before, you underestimated my abilities, and now you overestimate them.”

Perhaps it was true. Igor was bound in chains, and he couldn’t even lift his hands high enough to grab anyone by the neck, but Kian wasn’t taking any more risks with him.

William fired off a series of quick texts, and when he got the responses, he motioned to Igor. “They are stationary now.”

Igor spent a moment writing a series of numbers on the paper, lifted his head, and looked at Okidu. “Come get it.”

When the Odu leaned over, Kian held his breath, expecting Igor to do something violent, but he just handed the items over

and sat down on the van floor.

“Here you go, master.” Okidu gave the pen and paper back to William.

By the way William’s eyes widened, the coordinates were correct, and Kian’s heart sank. He would have really loved to get rid of the scumbag, even though he needed him in case the other assassins revived at some point.

Perhaps he could beat him up instead? Except, to do so, he would have to keep him chained, and he wouldn’t stoop so low as to beat up a chained prisoner.

“Let me check with the guys their exact location.”

Kian arched a brow. “I thought that you had them.”

“In case Igor could read minds, I told them to keep driving so I would only know the general area they were heading to but not their exact locations. They left the hub at different times and headed in three directions. The coordinates match the general areas, but they are eight digits long, which indicates a location point within a precision of thirty feet.”

William pulled out his phone and started texting. “I’m telling Edwin that I need the precise coordinates of where he’s at and how precise I need them.” When he was done, he looked at Kian. “Let’s see how accurate Igor was and if we need to check with the other two.”

When his phone pinged with a returned message, William lifted the paper and compared the numbers. “The coordinates match.”

In the cage, Igor smirked, but he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

With a sigh, Kian texted the news to Brundar so he could tell Jade. It wasn’t bad news because Igor had proven that he could find the other pods, but it wasn’t good news because now they had to keep him alive.

Or maybe not.

As he looked at the receiver, he thought of an idea that would satisfy both opposing needs. William could identify the

signal. He just couldn't find it. If they took all the trackers out of all the gerbils, making them inactive, then the moment any of the settlers revived and started transmitting, William would know.

Naturally, that required constant monitoring of those signals, but that wasn't too difficult to automate. William or Roni could write a program that would do that on autopilot in the background.

The upside was that they could put Igor in stasis and revive him when a signal was identified.

"We are not done yet," William said. "We have two more signals to check."

Kian didn't expect different results from the other two guys, and he was right.

When William compared the numbers that his guys had texted, they matched the other two sets of coordinates Igor had written down.

Now the only thing Kian had to figure out was whether Igor could be put in stasis without the help of a life pod. He had a strong feeling that the gods had given him that ability as well, but he had to test it before accidentally killing the guy and losing the only way to locate the assassins as soon as they revived.

Provided that there were indeed other assassins.

Andrew had admitted that his lie-detecting talent didn't work well on Igor, so it was possible that Igor had made it all up to ensure that his head remained attached to his neck.

They needed to repeat the process with Mia present even though Toven wasn't keen on exposing her to Igor.

Kian could understand that. He didn't want his mother or his wife anywhere near the guy, but they had to know whether Igor had made it all up.

Jade wanted to find the other settlers, so much so that she was willing to give up her vendetta for the chance of locating

them, but Igor was smart enough to realize that Jade wasn't in charge and that he needed Kian to want him alive as well.

Making up assassins who could potentially endanger the clan was an excellent way to hedge his bets.



# JADE

The news update Jade had gotten through Brundar wasn't a big surprise. She'd suspected that Igor had spoken the truth, and the confirmation had left her in an odd mood.

On the one hand, she was glad that there was a way to locate the missing pods, but on the other, she detested the notion that Igor wouldn't die anytime soon.

Her one consoling thought was that his life would be miserable. He was more or less Kra-ell, and being jailed underground in a tiny cell must be torturous to him.

Living like that was worse than dying.

When an hour later Kian walked into the office with Anandur and the Odu in tow, she rose to her feet. "Did something else happen during the drive?"

She'd expected Kian to return as soon as the experiment was done and started worrying when he hadn't returned right away.

"No." Kian pulled out a chair next to the conference table. "But I came up with an idea I think you will like." He turned to the Odu, who remained standing. "Can you please check if there are enough beers in the refrigerator?"

"There are, master. I make sure to always keep the refrigerator in your office stocked. Should I serve four beers?"

"Yes, please."

It was only one o'clock in the afternoon, but Jade was thirsty and not for water. She could use one of those alcohol-rich beers the clan favored.

Jade sat back down. "I can't wait to hear your idea, and a beer is just what the doctor ordered." She winced. "Even your Vanessa would approve."

She was still angry about all those intrusive questions the psychologist had asked.

Kian wasn't impressed with her scowl. "You're welcome."

The Odu put a glass in front of her, twisted the cap off, and put the bottle next to the glass.

"Thank you," she murmured, unsure whether she needed to be polite to the cyborg, but Kian had said please, so maybe courtesy toward the Odu was expected.

It hadn't escaped her notice that Okidu hadn't brought glasses for any of the males, and he hadn't twisted off the caps for them either.

Great, even the cyborg was a chauvinist.

He stood next to Kian and dipped his head. "If you don't need me, master, I can use the time to clean up a little around here."

Kian glanced at his watch. "We need to head back in about twenty-five minutes."

Okidu bowed. "Yes, master. I'm aware of the plans. I can accomplish quite a bit of cleaning in half an hour."

"Then it's fine."

"Thank you, master." He dipped his head again, turned on his heel, and left the office.

Kian turned to Jade. "I wanted to conduct the test as soon as possible, so I had to postpone the brunch my wife organized after I canceled our family's Friday night dinner. We are having a late lunch instead."

It seemed that Kian was about to invite her, and that was the last thing she wanted to do with what was left of the

weekend. It was best to change the subject. “I have to admit that Okidu is useful. It’s a shame what has been done to the Odus.” She took a deep breath. “But it seems that, as usual, the Eternal King found a workaround and didn’t stick to the agreement he made with our queen. He stopped building Odus and switched to building Igors.”

Kian nodded. “Smart. Igor is much more sophisticated, and he and others like him are not part machines, so the queen can’t demand their destruction. They are people. Her people.”

Jade shook her head. The solution was so perfect that she couldn’t even fault the king or his advisors for coming up with it.

It was a brilliant move, but not without risks.

While the Odus obeyed their masters to the letter, Igor had a mind of his own and had come up with his own agenda for the future. She very much doubted that the Eternal King cared about the Kra-ell society and whether it was matriarchal or patriarchal. The gods were supposed to be too advanced to make such distinctions, and they held both genders in equal regard. Still, the fact remained that they had been ruled forever by a male.

Twisting the cap off the beer bottle, Kian leaned back in the chair. “I don’t remember if I invited you to the brunch, but I would love for you to join us.”

Damn. He hadn’t forgotten about that.

Jade stifled a grimace. “I don’t know what Phinas has planned for the rest of the day.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure he can change his plans. His boss will be there, and my wife and sister are eager to talk to you.”

She looked down at her cargo pants and black Henley shirt. “I’m not dressed appropriately.”

“You look fine,” Anandur said. “I’m invited too for a change, and I’m coming as I am.”

The Guardian was dressed even more casually than she, in a pair of faded jeans, a white T-shirt, and a brown leather



jacket over it.

Had Kian invited his bodyguards to his family dinner because he planned to invite her and still considered her a security risk?

“You wanted to hear my idea.” Kian put the bottle of beer down on the table. “We know William can identify the signal but not where it comes from. Still, that’s good enough to alert us when one or more of the settlers wake up from stasis. We don’t need to keep Igor awake until that happens, if it ever does. We can put him in stasis and revive him as needed.”

Jade shook her head. “I don’t know if he can be put in stasis. He doesn’t know which parts of him were altered by the gods, and I don’t think he’s part god. I think the gods started with a pureblooded Kra-ell and gave him some genetic enhancements so he would pass for a pureblooded male.”

“I agree,” Kian said. “After it occurred to me that we don’t need to keep him awake, I texted Bridget, our primary doctor, and asked her opinion. She said that given Igor’s rapid healing ability, he should be able to enter stasis without the help of a life pod. She offered to supervise the procedure, and if his body gets into distress, instead of winding down and going into stasis, she can stop it and revive him.”

Jade frowned. “What procedure?”

Kian flashed her a smile with a pair of elongated fangs. “There are several options. We can drown him, entomb him, or I can bite him and slow his heart to a crawl with my venom. Even though the third option is the least excruciating for him, I like it the best. It will be very satisfying for me to return the favor.”

Jade had wondered about Kian’s reserve, and lack of retaliation for the stunt Igor had pulled. Evidently he wasn’t as forgiving as she’d thought he was.

“I bet.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “What about me, though? How would I get my revenge?”

The venom secreted from her glands was much less potent and was only good for anesthetizing the incisions caused by

her fangs and healing the wounds. There were other positive side effects, like pleasure and euphoria and faster recovery from other injuries and scrapes, but it wasn't enough to paralyze someone into near death.

“You can watch. I know it's not as satisfying as being the one doing it, but watching him say goodbye to life should be at least a little satisfying.”

“You can whip him before Kian bites him,” Brundar suggested. “Or you can stab him a few more times.” His eyes gleamed with excitement, which was very disturbing to witness on a guy who, most of the time, did a great impersonation of a statue. “Even better, we can chain him for you, and you can spend days making small cuts all over his body. He will be able to heal them pretty quickly, but that will just give you more canvas to work with for longer. If we don't feed him, his ability to heal will be diminished, and he will suffer longer.”

No one other than her looked surprised at Brundar's speech. His brother was trying to hide a smirk, and Kian grimaced.

Perhaps Brundar was known to be a sadist?

“I like your idea of carving him up for days before Kian puts him in stasis.” She turned to his boss. “Are you okay with that? Or is it too gruesome for you?”

“If that makes you happy and takes away the sting of having to keep him alive, I have no problem letting you play. But that will force you to spend more time with him, and torture has a way of tainting your soul even more than killing.”

“My soul is already tainted. Torturing Igor would lighten my soul, not taint it further.” The smile she gave him was no doubt chilling. “It will be very satisfying to me.”



## KIAN

As lunch drew to an end, Kian rose to his feet. “Who wants to join me for a smoke outside?” He took a brand-new box of Opus X from the humidor and tucked it under his arm.

As he’d expected, Kalugal lifted his hand. “I’m coming.”

“Me too.” Andrew lifted Phoenix off his knees and set her on the floor. “Go to mommy, sweetie.”

“I want to come with you, Daddy.”

When he cast a pleading look at Nathalie, she smiled and beckoned their daughter to her. “Mommy, Syssi, and Amanda are going to have tea in the television room. Do you want to watch a show with Allegra?”

Phoenix nodded enthusiastically.

Nathalie smiled and mouthed, “You’re welcome.”

“Can I join?” Jade pushed to her feet. “Or is it an exclusive boys’ club?”

Phinas wrapped his arm around her tiny middle. “If you don’t mind cigar smoke, I would love for you to join me outside.”

“I don’t mind it. I actually like the smell.”

Amanda scrunched her nose. “I don’t know how anyone can like it.” She leaned over toward Dalhu and kissed his cheek. “But I know you want to hang out with the guys, so

go.” She shifted her gaze to Jade and winked. “I hope you don’t mind being bundled in with the guys.”

“I don’t. Our language is much more gender-neutral than English, so we don’t run into the same issues you do.”

Kian opened the sliding door and stepped out before he was tempted to say something politically incorrect and have Amanda lecture him about his outdated ideas.

“Just a moment, master.” Okidu rushed by him with a kitchen towel, and Onidu followed him with another.

“It drizzled a little while we were having lunch,” Okidu said.

“The lounge chairs might be wet,” Amanda’s butler added.

“They are showing initiative,” Jade said. “Is that common?”

Kian liked and respected the female, but he didn’t fully trust her yet. He preferred to keep the latest developments in the Odus’ evolution from her.

“Okidu and Onidu are programmed to take care of the house, and that includes the patio furniture.”

She didn’t seem to notice that his response was evasive. Instead, she looked around the backyard, admiring the different seating arrangements and the spectacular gardening job Okidu was doing. The rose bushes were perfectly trimmed, the lawn mowed, and no stray leaf could be seen anywhere. Okidu had cleared two garbage bags’ worth of dead leaves from the water fountain just that morning.

Kian opened the lid and offered the box to Jade first. “Would you like to try one?”

“Sure.” She pulled out a cigar. “I will need instructions. I’ve never had one.”

When everyone had a cigar in hand, and Okidu was done wiping the chairs, they sat around the fire pit table.

“Should I light it, master?” Okidu asked. “It is a little chilly.”

“Yes, please,” Jade said.

“I will bring firewood,” Onidu said.

“California is warm compared to Karelia but pretty damn cold compared to Anumati.” Jade sighed. “I should have settled in the Caribbean.”

“It’s still not too late,” Phinas said. “We were thinking of relocating the village. The Caribbean sounds good to me.”

“We are not moving.” Kian cut off the tip of his cigar and lit it.

“I can’t move,” Andrew said. “Not if I want to keep working for the government.”

Dalhu lit his cigar and returned the lighter to Kian. “During lunch, I heard you talking about Igor and the signals from the trackers. I seem to be missing pieces of the puzzle. What about those signals needed deciphering?”

“Their location,” Jade said. “William was able to identify the signals from the trackers even though they are very weak, but he couldn’t pinpoint their location.”

Kian took a puff of his cigar. “We don’t understand the technology, but somehow the location component is encrypted, and only Igor has the ability to decipher the scrambled information the receiver is getting and translate it into very accurate coordinates. He claims to have it programmed into his brain. Apparently, the gods have the ability to manipulate genes so precisely that they can build organic computer chips.” Kian waved his cigar. “I don’t know if that’s the right analogy. William and Kaia can probably explain it better.”

Okidu paused with a long match lit in his hand. “Are you referring to the noise from the radio in Master William’s van?”

“Right now, I’m talking about how Igor’s brain functions, but before that, I was talking about the signal that radio was receiving and Igor’s ability to translate what was coming from it into coordinates.”

Standing motionless, Okidu looked at Onidu, and there seemed to be some exchange of information between them that

continued until the long match in Okidu's hand had burned down all the way to his fingers, and as he suddenly noticed it, he dropped it into the fire pit.

As one, he and Onidu turned toward Kian and said in unison, "We can decipher the numbers as well."

Goosebumps rose on Kian's arms.

"How?"

"I do not know, master," Okidu said. "I could not do that alone, but when I shared what I saw and heard with Onidu, we solved it together. I can write down the numbers for you."

"Please do."

Okidu dipped his head. "I will be right back with a notepad and a writing instrument."





## JADE

Jade's heart hammered in her chest. Was it possible that the Odus had been programmed with the same deciphering capabilities as Igor?

How?

Igor had been born long after all the Odus had been decommissioned. Then again, the ones in the clan's possession might have been saved by their master and sent to Earth. What if they had been sent to stop Igor?

Except, Okidu's response to Igor hadn't indicated that. He'd said something about Igor being enhanced, but he hadn't acted as if he had recognized him, and he hadn't been hostile toward him.

If the Odu had been sent to protect the exiles from Igor, he would have been given information on who Igor was. Unless that information hadn't been available.

"Did these Odus arrive with the original group of exiled gods?" Jade asked.

Frowning, Kian tapped his cigar to dislodge the ash. "They were found by one of the gods wandering the desert." His brows dipped even lower. "Come to think of it, it's entirely possible that they were sent to Earth after the Kra-ell settler ship had embarked on its ill-fated journey."

Evidently, Kian was thinking along the same lines she was.

"Perhaps whoever sent them programmed them to do the same thing Igor could do." She pinned Kian with a look. "The

queen mother comes to mind. If she wanted to save her son, what better way to do that than to send him Odus, who could defend and warn him when the assassins arrive.”

Kian nodded. “Except, something must have gone wrong with their landing, and their circuits got scrambled because none of them has ever mentioned anything that would imply that their job was to defend Ahn. They were just simple servants who had to be told what to do and how to do it. What you see now is the result of thousands of years of input.”

When Okidu returned with a pen and a notepad, all eyes turned to him, but he didn’t start writing right away. Instead, he and the other Odu did that weird silent communication thing, and only then did he start writing.

“Here are the numbers, master.” He handed Kian the notepad.

“I need to send them to William.” Kian pulled out his phone, snapped a photo of the numbers, and sent them to the tech guy.

The response came less than thirty seconds later, and Jade didn’t have the patience to wait for Kian to speak up. “Do they match?”

“They do.” He lifted his eyes. “The Fates have smiled kindly upon you, or perhaps it was the Mother. We no longer need Igor to find the rest of your people. You can do with him as you please, which I assume is a swift beheading?”

Jade felt the blood drain from her face as anxiety gripped her. What if it was a one-off? What if the Odus could decipher only some of the signals but not all? What if Igor had more information about the twins that he hadn’t shared with her yet?

He knew about them, and that wasn’t a coincidence. He might have been sent to kill the Eternal King’s heir, but he was also supposed to do something about the twins. Jade knew that with the same certainty she knew that the sun would rise the next day.

“I would love nothing more than to decapitate him, but I vowed not to kill him if his information was correct about the

signal being encrypted and his ability to decode it. The fact that the Odus can do the same thing does not negate that agreement. But even if I didn't give him my vow, it would be irresponsible of me. We don't know if the Odus can decipher all the signals, and if we kill Igor, the door will forever close on that possibility. I prefer to torture him for more information and then put him in stasis so we can revive him in case a signal arrives that the Odus can't decipher." She smiled. "I only vowed not to kill him myself or send someone to kill him. Putting him in stasis is something that you want to do, and I can't stop you, right?"

"No, you can't." Kian gave her an appreciative look. "That's very reasonable of you. You keep surprising me."

She cast him a look. "I don't know why you had that preconceived notion of me being hotheaded. I have proven time and again that I'm level-headed and reasonable."

"You are kind of intense," Kalugal said. "But I like that about you. So, what kind of torture do you have in mind?"

She smirked. "I'll start by telling Igor that we no longer need him. The look of sheer terror on his face will be priceless. Especially if I enter his cell with a sword strapped to my hip."



# VANESSA

Vanessa entered her makeshift office in the dungeon, pulled a thermos filled with whiskey from her satchel, and put it on the desk.

The Guardians would no doubt smell the alcohol when they came to collect Mo-red later, but hopefully, they would refrain from asking her about it.

Next came out two teacups and a box of store-bought cookies.

Mo-red wouldn't eat them, but she liked to munch on something sweet while drinking whiskey. Besides, she needed the feel-good sweetness to brighten her mood.

It had taken a nosedive the day before and hadn't improved today, which she'd spent most of in her head.

Her initial interviews had given her hope for Mo-red's future among the living, but the ones from yesterday hadn't boded well for him.

As the door opened and Jay led Mo-red inside, her heart did that stupid little hiccup that she'd previously referred to as a flutter. But unlike the other times she'd met with him, this time she had to force a smile.

"Good evening, Mo-red." She waved at the chair. "Please, take a seat."

His smile faltered, and his expression turned concerned. "Good evening, Doctor Vanessa."

“So formal.” Jay got busy securing Mo-red to the chair. “I thought that the two of you were on friendlier terms.”

“We are.” Vanessa used her professional tone. “Mo-red and I are getting along just fine.” She pointed at the thermos. “I even brought tea to share with him.”

The Guardian glanced at the teacups. “Pretty. Where did you get them?”

“They were a present from my mother. I think she got them in Vienna.”

Unlike Vanessa, her mother loved to travel, which was why she was fluent in twelve languages. Not Russian, though. Daniella didn't like Russia.

Jay finished securing all four limbs, checked that everything was properly locked, and walked out of the converted cell, closing the door behind him.

“What happened?” Mo-red asked as soon as the door clicked shut.

“Is it that obvious? I hoped that I had a better poker face.”

Would he even know what it meant?

The guy was an alien, yet he'd managed to get under her skin like no other male before him had.

What was it about him that drew her to him so strongly? Was it the sorrow in his eyes?

That shouldn't affect her. In her line of work, she'd seen plenty of sad eyes. Was it the intelligence behind the sorrow? His soft-spoken manner that belied his incredible physical strength?

Maybe that was it. The primitive part of her female psyche responded to a powerful male by purring with desire and clouding the logic and judgment of Vanessa, the modern woman.

Mo-red smiled. “You might be able to fool others with that professional mask you put on, but I can see through it.”

Maybe that was the appeal? That he could see her, the inner her, which she shielded with her elegant clothing and professional smiles?

“Funny.” Vanessa leaned back and fought the urge to cross her arms over her chest, placing her hands on her knees instead. “Seeing through the masks people put on to shield their pain is a hidden talent of mine.”

He tilted his head, his long ponytail sliding over his muscular shoulder. “Why hidden?”

His hair was so dark it looked pure black from a distance, but up close, it had dark purple and red hues intertwined in it.

“Because I shouldn’t use intuition in my work. I should use the tools of my profession and stay objective.”

“I don’t know much about psychology or human medicine, but that seems counterintuitive. Intuition is your subconscious mind absorbing information in the background and processing it much faster than your conscious mind ever could. I wouldn’t recommend ignoring it in favor of what you’ve learned in the human university.”

If Vanessa trusted her intuition, she would have asked Kian to release Mo-red into her custody, taken him home, and made him hers. The problem was that it wasn’t her subconscious mind making the recommendation but her hormones.

She hadn’t been with anyone in months, and self-pleasuring was just not enough. She needed hands on her body that weren’t hers, male hands that caressed, squeezed, and restrained...

She opened her eyes, shook off the momentary loss of reason, and forced another fake smile.

“Vanessa?” Mo-red leaned forward as much as the chains on his wrists allowed. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I am perfectly fine.” She lifted the thermos. “I brought you a surprise.”

He arched a brow. “Tea?”

“Not tea.” Unscrewing the lid, she took a sniff. “Whiskey.” She poured it into the two teacups.

Mo-red’s chains had about ten inches of give, so if he dipped his head and lifted the teacup as much as the chain allowed, he could sip on it without her having to hold it up to his mouth.

Although that could be a way to get closer to him without the Guardians guessing what she was up to.

“What are we celebrating?” His wary tone indicated that he’d already guessed she didn’t have good news for him.

The idea to smuggle in the whiskey had come to her before the last four interviews, and even though she no longer felt light-hearted enough to indulge with Mo-red, she had still gone through with it.

She rose to her feet. “We are celebrating being alive and having the opportunity to spend time together and get to know each other.”





## MO-RED

Vanessa was pulling away from him, and Mo-red suspected the reason was the latest batch of interviews she'd conducted with his people.

When she was within reach, he wanted to lift his hands and pull her onto his lap, but the chain was not long enough for him to put his hands on her. All he managed was to brush his fingertips over her narrow skirt.

The fabric was thin, and the feel of her warm body was exquisite.

She looked down at his fingers, and a smile lifted one corner of her lips. "Desperate times, Mo-red." She took half a step back and handed him the cup. "Whiskey in a teacup is all we can share at the moment."

Leaning against the desk, she crossed her long legs at the ankles and her arms over her chest. "I'm afraid my news today is not as positive as that from two days ago. Some of the females I've spoken to yesterday and today are not as forgiving as those I spoke to before. They don't care that you were forced to commit crimes. They still think that you should die for them and that you'll be given a chance to redeem yourself in the next life."

Mo-red closed his eyes and let out a breath. "I can't really blame them when I entertain the same thoughts." He looked up at the beautiful woman standing in front of him. "You were a bright spot in my dreary existence, and I let myself feel

hopeful for a few moments. I don't regret living in a fantasy for a bit, but I cannot ignore reality. What are my chances?"

For a long moment, she regarded him with her intense, dual-color eyes. "I'm not giving up on you, Mo-red. I still believe you deserve redemption, and Edna will back up my assessment. The females who lost their families will not be the only ones who will decide your fate. All the young Kra-ell who are of age will vote too, and they might view you in a more favorable light thanks to Pavel. He's popular, and he tells anyone willing to listen that you are a good guy and that you deserve another chance. I'm sure your two other sons are doing the same."

Vanessa didn't sound sure at all, but he knew that all three of his sons would fight for him. "Elias and Vasily will speak on my behalf, and so will their mothers, but Hilla and Galina are human, so I doubt their opinion counts or that they will be included in the vote."

"I will speak to them. They will not get to vote, but they can speak on your behalf. Are you sure that they will have good things to say about you?"

"Positive. I've never pressured any of the human females to visit my bed. They came voluntarily, and when Galina and Hilla conceived, I showered them with gifts and attention as much as I could get away with under Igor's watchful eye. I continued doing so for many years while the boys were growing up, and I'm still on friendly terms with both women."

"That's excellent." Vanessa uncrossed her arms and turned to pick up her cup. "I wasn't supposed to act as your advocate, and I'm not really qualified, but there is no one else. Edna is our only legal expert, and she's the judge. If you can think of any of your people who might do a better job defending you, let me know, and I'll happily collaborate with them."

Mo-red didn't want anyone else to defend him and take away from the little time Vanessa was spending with him, but if he wanted to survive, he had to think logically.

"One of the young humans studied law, but I don't know how good Lusha is or even if she has finished her studies. She

is the daughter of a hybrid male and a human female.”

“She might have chosen to go to the other location. Only some of the humans came with the Kra-ell. But even so, I can probably get her to come here. You and the others need a defense attorney.”

He chuckled. “All I know about courts I’ve learned from movies, but if they reflect reality, a bad attorney is worse than no attorney at all.”

Vanessa took a sip from her whiskey. “What if she’s good?”

“What if she doesn’t want to defend us?” he countered.

“Let’s not go down the rabbit hole of what ifs.” Leaning back, Vanessa put the flimsy porcelain cup on the desk and took the thermos. “I’ll talk with Lusha tomorrow and see where she stands on the issue.” She pushed away from the desk, and as she leaned down to refill his cup, she looked at him from under lowered lashes. “What I want to know now is whether you accomplished the twelve rounds you boasted about.”

Mo-red’s shaft sprang to attention. “I lost count at some point, and I don’t want to lie, but I believe it was more than five times.”

She arched a brow. “Only five? That’s nothing.”

“I said it was more than five. I lost count after that. What about you?”

“Four.” She smirked. “But they were very good. I imagined you standing in the shower and trying to qualify for the Guinness book of records.”

His melancholy was gone in an instant. “Do you want me to tell you what I thought about in the shower?”

She glanced at the camera and shook her head. “You’d better not. Unlike you, I emit plenty of emotional scents, and as soon as Jay comes in to get you, he will know that I was thinking naughty thoughts.”

“Then he must have already known that on Friday. We’d talked up a storm of suggestively naughty things.”

“True.” She grimaced. “No wonder he was smirking when I walked in today. Nevertheless, I shouldn’t have indulged.”

Mo-red groaned. “Yes, you should. In fact, you should have kissed me and told the Guardians that it was part of your assessment process. You could have claimed that you were testing my self-control.”

“Tempting, but they won’t buy it.”

He pinned her with a look. “You must grant a dying male one last wish, and mine is a kiss.”



## VANESSA

*H*ow could she refuse?

Even if Vanessa didn't want to kiss Mo-red with every fiber of her being, she couldn't refuse a dying man's wish.

She would get hell for this from the Guardians, and since they loved to gossip like the rest of the village residents, soon everyone would know that she'd broken every professional rule and had kissed a prisoner, one she was charged with evaluating.

But perhaps she could use the excuse Mo-red had come up with and claim that the kiss was part of the evaluation process?

There were no other psychologists in the clan, so no one could challenge her claim.

Yep, she was going to do it, call it an evaluation, and stick to her story under a firing squad.

Well, in her case, just wagging tongues.

Fates, did she have to think about tongues and what Mo-red claimed he could do with his?

Leaning back in the iron chair, Mo-red regarded her with his intense black eyes, only they weren't fully black. Red dots danced around his irises—the Kra-ell tell for arousal or aggression.

“You are not a dying male, and I shouldn't do it, but I will anyway.”

The red dots turned into a solid, glowing red light. “Kiss me, Vanessa.”

“Put your hands on the armrests and hold them tight. If you touch me, the Guardians will be here in a split second.”

Tension rolling from him, hopefully the sexual kind, he gripped the armrests so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

Bending down, Vanessa put her hands over his for purchase, and as she brought her mouth closer to his, he stopped breathing, his fingers twitching under hers.

When their lips touched, an electrical shock zinged through her, going straight to her core, and as the pointy tip of his tongue swiped over her lips, she opened for him.

He groaned as he swept inside.

With desire pulsing through her in waves, Vanessa had to grip Mo-red’s hands to stop herself from running them over his chest.

He growled, and her nipples reacted to the animalistic sound by tightening. Moisture gathered in her feminine center, readying her body for what he could give her.

Except, he couldn’t.

Or maybe he could?

It would be easy to free his shaft from the confines of his jeans, lift her skirt, move her panties aside, and ride him until they both came like firecrackers.

With a pained groan, she left his mouth and rested her forehead against his. “I’m surprised no one burst through that door yet.”

He tilted his head and kissed her jaw. “Thank you. Now I can die in peace.” He sounded more amused than resigned.

“Don’t talk like that. Not even as a joke.”

“I’m sorry.” He trailed his lips over the side of her jaw. “I’ll try to stay optimistic.”



“Please do.” She lifted her forehead and looked into his eyes. “What is it about you that draws me to you like this? Do the Kra-ell possess some super powerful pheromones?”

He grinned. “I was wondering the same thing about you. Do immortal females have to beat males off with a stick?”

She crouched in front of him, her skirt riding up her thighs. “Did you feel the same toward Edna?”

His grimace was almost comical. “Mother forbid. Edna is not painful to look at, but there was absolutely no attraction. Not even a twitch.”

“She’s mated. When immortals find their truelove mate, they can’t feel sexual attraction toward anyone else, and if someone tries to flirt with them, they feel repulsion.”

The red glow of his eyes turned blue, and she wondered what he was feeling. Was it reverence for the concept of truelove mates, or was it for her?

“I heard rumors that some gods are like that too,” he said quietly. “I’ve always been intrigued by the notion of having only one partner for the rest of my life, one that was devoted solely to me. It was a heretical thought, so I never shared it with anyone. I thought something must be wrong with me.” He smiled. “I even suspected some wayward godly genes from a distant ancestor who had been a hybrid and had hidden it well.”

She looked into his fascinating eyes, noting slight color changes that corresponded to his emotions. “That was then. What do you think now?”

He swallowed. “Now I think that the Mother was trying to tell me something.”

“Tell you what?”

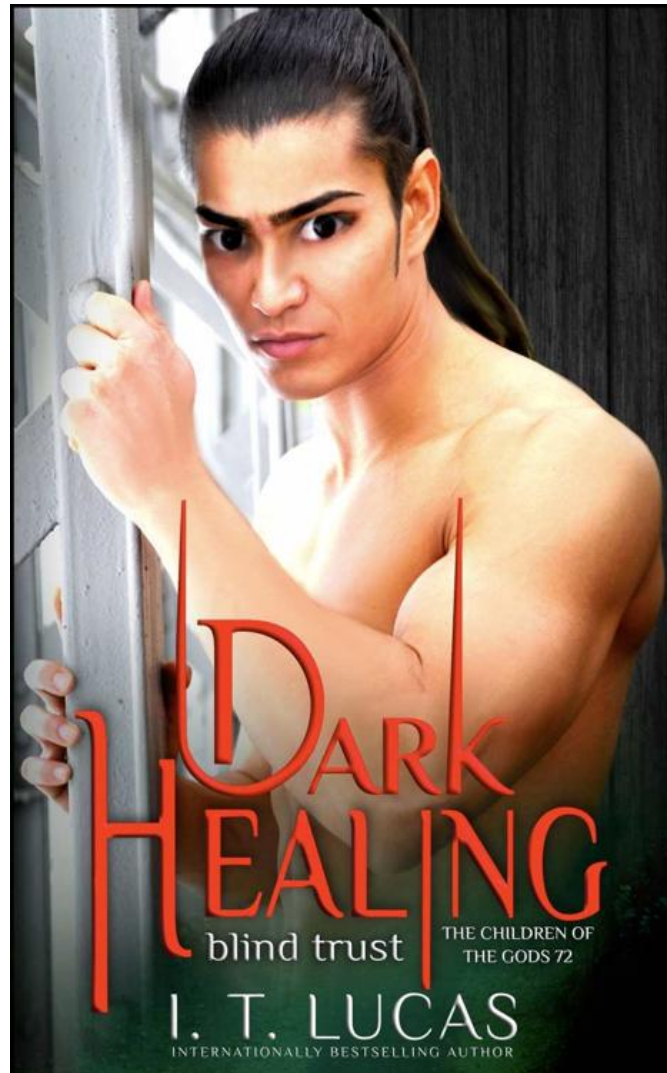
“That one day I will meet a beautiful immortal and want to have that with her.”

Coming up next in the  
**CHILDREN OF THE GODS SERIES**

**Book 72**

**DARK HEALING**

**Blind Trust**



*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.*

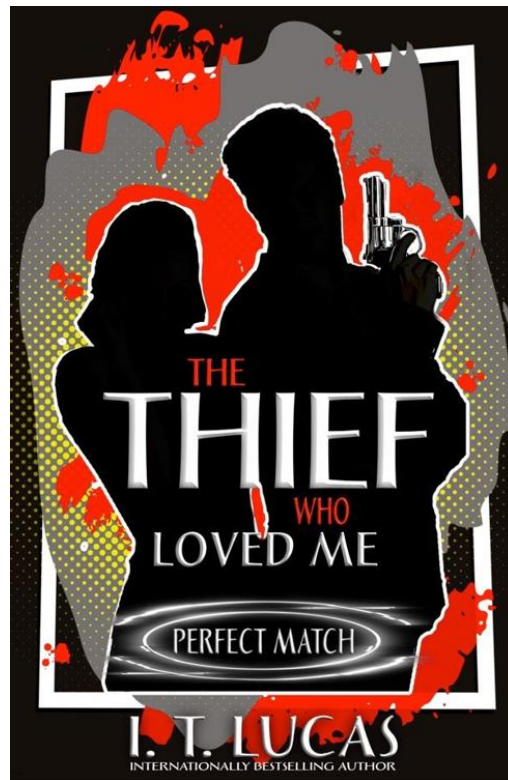
RIDDLED with guilt over the crimes he was forced to commit, Mo-red is ready to stand trial and accept the death sentence he believes he deserves, but when the clan's alluring psychologist offers a new perspective on his past and hope for a better future, he resolves to fight for his life.

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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.

**72: DARK HEALING BLIND TRUST**

Riddled with guilt over the crimes he was forced to commit, Mo-red is ready to stand trial and accept the death sentence he believes he deserves, but when the clan's alluring psychologist offers a new perspective on his past and hope for a better future, he resolves to fight for his life.

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## PERFECT MATCH: VAMPIRE'S CONSORT

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: 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: 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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