



Maid

FOR THE

ALIEN PRINCE

TAMMY WALSH

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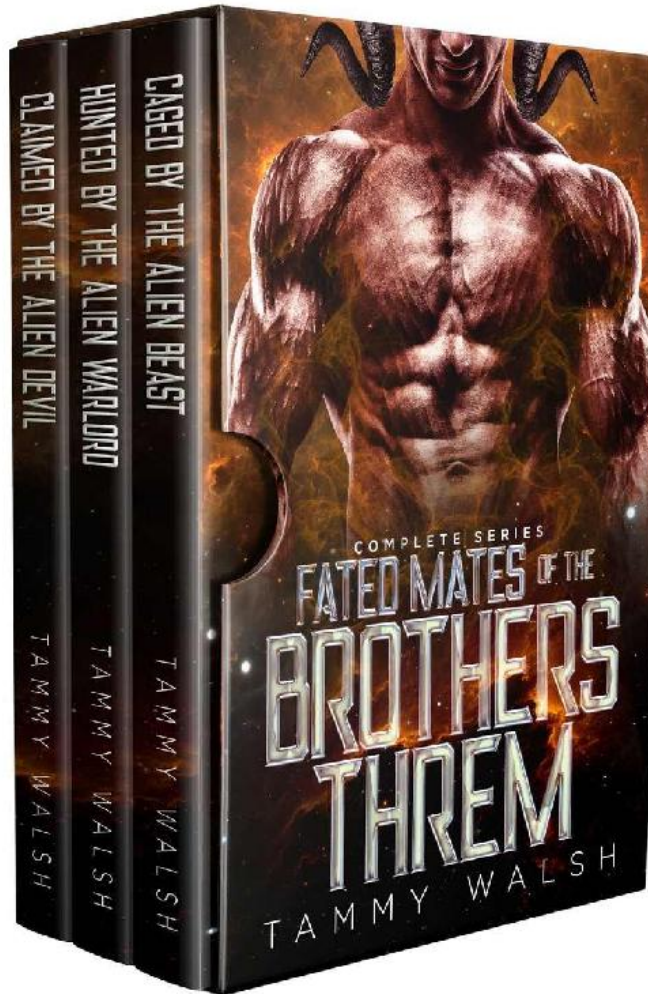
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CAMILA

“Seven days and all your debts are wiped clean.”
Seven days.

It sounded so trivial.

But seven days could be a lifetime when you handed your body to an Ulsen male. And that was exactly what he was asking me to do.

His offer took me by surprise. With all his money and wealth, what was a measly few thousand credits?

But he was insistent. “You will belong to me for the next seven days and seven nights.”

“I... I need to think about it,” I stammered.

“You have until you leave this room to decide.”

“How long is that?”

“One minute.”

He just stood there, peering down at me.

One minute to decide whether or not to do something that might change me and my life forever...

Could I give myself to him?

Could I sell myself like that?

I thought of my father and realized that, for him, I would do anything.

Even this.

I raised my chin, met Rayaw in the eye, and extended my hand. “Seven days?”

“And nights.”

I didn’t want to commit to that, but I had no other choice.

“And nights,” I said back to him.

He took my hand and barely shook it. My hand remained where it was, frozen in place.

“But you’ll hire me as a maid,” I added hastily. “I don’t need gossip circulating about what we get up to here.”

He grinned. “A maid? Are you sure you can play the role?”

“I know I can!” I snapped. “And know this: I will not enjoy a single minute of it.”

“You don’t need to enjoy it,” he informed me. “Just make yourself available to me.”

Available to me.

I glared at him as I passed through the door, leaving me alone in the palace hallway—leaving me to puzzle over how on Earth I was going to survive his attacks for seven whole days and nights...

ONE DAY EARLIER

I put my suitcase down on the front step and rearranged the new blouse I’d bought at Glelle. It was frilly and moved constantly like an octopus’s tendrils. It was all the rage and had been what I’d spent the last of my money on.

What little money I possessed in the whole galaxy.

I’d been away for two months, recovering from a series of operations on my hip that allowed me to walk. I never thought I would get to move freely without the aid of crutches ever again. I was even less sure the insurance would pay for it.

Since the accident, I'd been in a lot of pain, limping from place to place. Worse than the limp were the looks I got from passersby.

It was a sure sign that we were desperately poor. Only those with nothing could afford to get the kind of surgery I'd needed.

I checked myself over one more time in the front door's glass panels. I ran my hands over my pencil skirt and felt at my hip that had, until recently, been the bane of my existence and the source of untold waves of pain.

Sometimes I still felt a twinge—a nipping sensation like some giant monster had seized my leg and twisted it for his own cruel enjoyment. But the pain faded, along with the frown that always came with it.

Ready, I raised a fist and knocked on the door. I could have used the face scanner which would have alerted my father that I had arrived, but I wanted my appearance to be a surprise.

I had returned unannounced and hoped to give him the same thrill that he had given me when he announced the insurance company would pay for my hip operation.

I knocked on the door and waited. I had to repeat it three more times before Dad came to the door.

He opened it and I beamed joyfully, raised my hands above my head, and said, "Surprise!"

It took a moment for him to fully take me in and realize just who I was. Clearly, I was the very *last* person he expected to see showing up on his doorstep like this.

Then his face registered an emotion...

It *fell*.

I'd wanted to surprise him... but I didn't want it to be a *negative* surprise! He turned pale as the blood fell from his face in a mask of horror. He tried to cover it, but I was too used to reading his emotions to be fooled.

I lowered my arms. "Dad? What is it?"

He smiled, though it was a very sad thing and did little to cover his angst. “Oh. It’s you. I didn’t realize... I didn’t know you were coming...”

“I wanted it to be a surprise. Is everything all right?”

Dad glanced over his shoulder at something inside the house before turning back to me. “Now... isn’t a good time.”

His shoulders seemed to have shrunken a great deal over the past two months that I’d been away. His hair seemed thinner, grayer. He might have aged ten years.

I peered over his shoulder into the dark recesses of the rooms at the back of the house but made out only shadows. “I’ve come home. Can I come in?”

Dad looked over his shoulders once again and, as always, couldn’t find it in his heart to deny his daughter. He opened the door and let me in. “Of course. Just... head straight upstairs. I’m... entertaining someone in the front room.”

Entertaining someone?

Why was it all so cloak and dagger? I wondered. Then a thought struck me: had he been *dating* while I was away?

Returning unannounced the way I had could have led to me catching them in the middle of something very embarrassing...

I shook my head of the image and couldn’t bring myself to believe it. After Mom died, Dad had taken no interest in other women.

He was good-looking for his age, in terrific shape, and could hold his own with men ten years his junior. There had been no limit to the number of females interested in him, but he hadn’t responded with anything approaching affection.

I picked up my luggage, perplexed and confused, and entered the hall.

It seemed tiny. There was something about traveling that always seemed to broaden the mind, making the things we knew best back home seem a whole lot smaller.

Here I was, expecting a warm welcome, and instead I got a dour one.

“Your bedroom is made up,” Dad said.

As the twenty-year veteran of the Head of the Palace Household, I expected nothing less. Everything ran on time. He might have served in the military. My room, I knew, would be just as I had left it.

I paused at the foot of the stairs, peering over at the door that led into the front room. My mind was a whirlwind of possibilities, curiosity getting the better of me.

Just when I was about to take the first step, Dad eased up under my right shoulder, a movement that, prior to my operation, was the only way for me to get up the stairs.

I beamed at him and said, “No need, Dad. I can do it all by myself now!”

He blinked in surprise. Habits died hard, especially for someone like my father.

I took two steps up the stairs by myself to show him. “See? I won’t be a hindrance to you anymore.”

His eyes shimmered with tears. I wrapped my arms around him, his frame seeming so small and frail now. He cried with equal parts joy and sadness.

Surely he couldn’t be sad that I had finally gotten the treatment I needed? The surgery that had put me back into contention of being in tip-top shape again?

Dad clapped me on the back. “You were *never* a hindrance. I fear *I* might be the hindrance now though...”

Something was *seriously* wrong. And it had something to do with whoever was in the front room right at that moment. I burned with curiosity to see who it was...

“Dad? What is it?”

He shook his head and motioned for me to go up the stairs. “I’ll tell you later. First, you have to go to your room. I can’t keep him waiting any longer.”

Him.

Waiting.

Any longer.

So it was someone he looked up to, someone he respected. That hardly narrowed it down, I thought, as he respected a great number of people in town.

With curiosity burning a hole in my heart, but my respect for my father trumping it, I nodded and kissed him on the forehead. “I’ll be in my room when you need me,” I said.

I headed up the stairs with my suitcase, peering back at my father. He seemed to shrink with each step, then disappeared entirely as I rounded the corner and returned to my bedroom.

I UNPACKED my things and slid my suitcase under my bed which, before my trip, had been its resting place, undisturbed, for a full ten years. An honest man’s wage was a meager thing on Uhisia, and my father was as honest as they came.

I fell onto my bed and peered around at my room. It’d always seemed so welcoming, so comforting, but now it felt small, cramped, and confining.

What a difference an operation could make...

I hadn’t received a single operation but a series of small ones over a period of a month. My surgeon was a perfectionist and it took longer than expected before he was satisfied.

With cryo-sleep required for me to reach Glelle—the top medical station in the quadrant—and another two weeks in recovery during cryo-sleep on the way back, it left me with a full month to entertain myself in the hospital.

With the regular surgeries happening every few days, I spent my time shuffling through the long hospital hallways, making conversation with the other patients, entertaining myself in the gardens by reading books and getting a feel for the opportunities that were now open to me in the galaxy.

Opportunities that had always been open so long as you were willing and able. Well, now that I'd had my operation, I was certainly *able*.

And after speaking with the other patients, I had become even more willing.

The most interesting patients I spoke to were the older ones. They talked about adventures and excitement and yes, more than a little disappointment with life. But each was at the hospital to get the treatment they needed so they could live a fuller and more prosperous life.

What surprised me most was that it didn't seem to matter what age they were—they were all obsessed with living a rich and full life, no matter their age!

One was a blorack, well past his prime, and wanted to scale the mountains of ghizzark! Reaching the peak would almost certainly kill him—if the ascent didn't do it first. But he was resolute.

Another had the goal of writing a great novel and had been in the process of outlining it before he was put under anesthesia. After he awoke, he was a flurry of activity as he said that while he was under, he saw crazy, magnificent things and wanted to capture them on paper.

I was itching to get started on my own life, although I wasn't entirely sure what direction it would yet take.

Downstairs, a door slammed and a voice yelled. I rushed to my bedroom door, threw it open, and peered down the stairs.

I caught only a pair of long legs disappearing through the doorway and the slamming of the front door.

My father's hunched form stood, barely visible, in the living room. He fell against the doorway, shook his head, and ran his hand through his thinning hair.

I wanted to speak out and reassure him that everything would be all right but by his broken and desperate body language, I didn't think he would want me to see him in such a state.

I backed away from the door and slowly closed it, leaving it on the latch so it didn't make any sound. I wanted there to be no doubt that I *hadn't* seen what had just happened.

I felt angry at whoever had just left. How could they slam the door in my father's face like that? As if he were nothing.

I paced back and forth, clenched my fists, then released them, and repeated it over and over again. It was meant to help release my pent-up anger, but it only seemed to make me feel worse!

I swore I would get revenge on whoever had made him feel this way.

After ten minutes of furiously pacing, I calmed down. Getting angry wasn't going to help Dad.

I wondered why he still hadn't come up to my room to discuss whatever it was that was on his mind. Something serious had taken place while I was away, and I had no idea what it could be.

I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then headed downstairs. I opened the door to the front room and found my father laying in his favorite armchair, sprawled across it in a way I had never seen before.

He was always so straight-backed and alert to his surroundings. Now, he didn't even notice when I entered the room.

"I'm going to make some coffee," I said. "Do you want some?"

His head turned toward me, but his eyes were fixed on some point on the floor. "Hm?"

"Coffee." I made my voice as soft as I could muster. "Do you want a cup?"

"Oh. Yes. That would be... nice. Thank you."

My stomach wrenched, swirling. Something was very, *very* wrong and I had to get to the bottom of it.

I KNEW EXACTLY how Dad liked his coffee. I knew even better how savoring it made him feel better. He liked to take a sip, taste it, and focus on it, concentrating on the sensations as it slid down his throat. Now, he just gulped it down absentmindedly.

He'd always been so mindful of his surroundings, his thoughts and feelings, and what he put into his body. It was the only way a man of his age could remain in such trim shape.

I simply had to get to the bottom of what'd happened.

“How have things been while I was away?” I asked.

“Oh. Fine. The usual.”

His eyes drifted past me before he took another sip of his coffee. This time, he took a little more time with it and tasted it before letting it slide down his throat. He was beginning to relax, I realized, returning to his old self.

I blew the steam off my coffee and looked at him over the rim of my cup. “Who was that who left earlier?”

“Who?”

“The person in the front room. The person you were talking to.”

Dad tightened up once more, his shoulders tensing. “Oh. A... workmate.”

A workmate?

If it was anyone under his command—which was the entire staff at the summer palace, including all maids, mechanics, and everyone else required to run such a large place—he would have referred to them as ‘staff.’

And that meant this *someone* was either at his level or more senior. Or someone completely new.

I couldn't take it any longer and didn't want to keep tiptoeing around the issue. “Something's wrong, isn't it.” It

wasn't a question. "Tell me what the problem is. I can see you're worried about something. It does us good to talk about our problems."

I was reflecting his own advice back onto him. After Mom died from her illness, Dad had to become both mother *and* father to me, a job he was well suited for.

As the Head of the Palace Household, he had to be dominant and in charge, which fulfilled the male role of the father, as well as understanding and caring of his staff's needs, which fulfilled the motherly part of the equation.

He had become everything to me, my entire world, and to see him like this... It made me very, very sad.

"It's not something you need to worry yourself with," he said, raising his cup to take another sip of coffee. "It's my problem. I'll figure it out."

I placed my hand on his knee. "A problem is never just about one person, remember? Your problems are mine, and mine are yours." I smiled comfortingly at him.

His shoulders relaxed a little before he shook his head. "You are young. You don't need to concern yourself with the trials of old men."

"Does it have anything to do with the palace?" I asked.

Dad tensed once more and I realized I had hit a nerve. Before I left, there had been a ton of trouble at the palace due to the new Prince moving in.

The new Prince's behavior was... unusual.

It was hardly a secret. The entire town knew about it. The young Prince used the summer palace as a meeting place for parties, games, and orgies. At least, that was what the rumors described.

I was always too embarrassed to ask Dad the truth as it seemed so remote from my life. But something had bothered Dad ever since the new Prince had taken up residence.

Dad's life had always been about order and control. But there was no controlling the new Prince.

Dad shook his head and rubbed his nose with the back of his hands. He clutched them close like a life preserver on a strong and stormy sea. There were tears in his eyes and he couldn't bring himself to look at me.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought I would get away with it... I thought because the others had managed it... But I didn't... I couldn't... Oh. Please, Camila. Forgive me."

Okay. Now I was really worried.

My father had always been a rock in my life, and it never occurred to me that he had to deal with messy everyday emotions, fears, or concerns. Even when Mom died, he seemed to take it in his stride, pent up his feelings like pegging a sheet to a washing line.

But that was a childish way to think.

Of course he had hurt during those years, and with me being so young at the time, he never had anyone to turn to for help. He must be in very serious trouble if he was reacting this way now.

"What is it?" I said. "I'm sure we can fix it, whatever it is."

I leaned over and squeezed his knee comfortingly, but he didn't seem to feel it.

"I've done something," he said. "I've done something wrong, terribly wrong..."

Now the tears were streaming down his wrinkled cheeks. He covered his face, placing his delicate hands over his eyes to try to prevent me from seeing him cry.

I took the cup of coffee out of his hands as it threatened to spill over with his body shaking the way it was. I placed it on the coffee table and immediately crawled into his lap, bracing my weight on the chair's armrests.

I wrapped my arms around his head, cuddling him close, gently rocking him back and forth, and making soft shushing noises. We had formed this hugging motion dozens of times

over the years whenever I had been in trouble or worried about something.

He would rock me gently in his lap until I fell calm and quiet. But now, *I* was the one playing the role of the adult.

Two months away, and everything had gone topsy-turvy!

“Whatever it is, it’ll be all right,” I whispered. “I promise. Everything’s going to be okay.”

My biggest fear was that he would catch an illness—that he would slowly fade away before me—but he had clearly said that he had *done* something, not that he was sick or injured.

But he *was* injured, I realized. His emotions were tearing him up from the inside.

Slowly, he began to relax, his breath coming in hitched sobs at the back of his throat. “I did something... I did it for the greater good, but I was wrong...” He looked up at me and squeezed my knee.

“What is it?” I said. “I can’t believe it’s anything too bad. You would never do anything to hurt anyone.”

He nodded. “I didn’t hurt anyone. But I... I... stole something.”

The words were like rocks falling into the pit of my stomach.

Stole something.

The greatest sin. My father, the distinguished manager of the summer palace, had punished many of his staff over the years for stealing—often ending in outright dismissal.

“Once someone betrays your trust, there’s no way you can trust them ever again,” he’d always said. It had been his mantra for twenty years.

And now he had been the one to *break his own rules*?

“What did you steal?” I asked in a steady voice.

“Priceless antiques. Although, when I took them to the pawn shop, it turns out they’re not so priceless after all.

Everything has a price when you come to sell them.”

Priceless antiques...

When he told me he had stolen something, I figured we'd be able to replace it. But if it was priceless... and an antique to boot... There might not be another one of its type in existence.

“What else?” I asked, my throat dry. “Did you... take anything else?”

I couldn't bring myself to use the word 'steal' when referring to my father.

“Just antiques.”

There could only be one place he'd taken them from. The palace. Nowhere else in town had so many antiques—besides the museums. And I didn't think he had it in him to steal from a museum.

Then again, I didn't think he had it in him to steal from the palace either!

“I'm sure if we speak to the Prince, he'll forgive you,” I said. “After all, twenty years of service has to mean something.”

“He fired me,” Dad said, his voice quivering, causing another cascade of tears to roll down his cheeks. “He fired me!”

So that was what the yelling was for... Why Dad was so distracted...

The person who had fired him—most likely the new manager of the property, Ges—had yelled and slammed the door on his way out.

But my fear wasn't that he had lost his job. It was a blow, as my father had truly loved his position in the palace, but the real tragedy was that he would never find another Head of the Household job again—for the same reason none of his staff who had stolen from the palace had either.

There was no second chance for trust.

What concerned me was that the new Prince might press charges. Dad could end up being crushed by a prohibitive fine or, worse yet, have to serve time on a prison planet...

My dad was too old and would not survive such a place. It had become a matter of life and death, and no matter what Dad had done—I didn't care if he'd stolen the crown jewels—I could not allow him to die.

Now I was the one with tears in my eyes. They stung but did not roll down my cheeks. I held them back. The last thing Dad needed was to see how upset I was. I kept running my fingers through his thinning hair, clutching him close so he couldn't see my face.

Then I asked the one question that might go some way to answering this entire thing:

“Why, Dad? Why did you steal from the palace?”

“It was the only way...”

“Only way for what?”

Dad wasn't the type to blow it on sporty cars, women, or upgrade his living standards. What else was there for him to spend the money on?

“I couldn't bear to see you in pain,” he said. “I couldn't bear not being able to give you what you so desperately needed.”

What I desperately needed?

All I needed was his love, and that was never in short supply. The only other thing that I ever needed was...

I froze, my fingers coming to a stop, curled in his thin white hair. The words tumbled from my lips. “My operation...”

He gave no sign of affirmation but there was no doubt about it. It was the reason he had taken the risk. It was the only thing that would drive him to commit, to his mind, such a terrible sin as to steal from the royal palace.

To pay for my operation. *To help me.*

“But I thought the insurance paid for it?” I said, feeling stupid even as I asked the question.

“The company refused. They said it wasn’t covered by our policy. I knew I had to do something. I couldn’t let you suffer because of me.”

He’d always blamed himself for the accident, and I always replied the same way, as I did now:

“It wasn’t you,” I said, believing it more than ever. “You were not the driver who was drunk. He slammed into our shuttle and made us fall from the sky. It had nothing to do with you.”

I had been elated when he told me the insurance company would pay for it, that my future would no longer be curtailed by my affliction. It meant there was a chance I could get to live a normal life.

And now that the money had been spent, how was I meant to return it?

“I saw the Prince’s guests coming every weekend, taking what they wanted, stealing from him and the royal family,” Dad said. “They spend it all on drink and drugs and women... and then brag about it when they return the following weekend. They were going to steal everything eventually and I thought, if they were going to take it anyway, why not do something good with it instead? Something that can help someone who deserves it. And I... I did it.”

I stroked his hair as another sob wracked his body. “Don’t worry,” I said, stroking his head. “I’m sure there’s a way out of this.”

“A way? There is no way. I’ve thought of everything—”

I shushed him gently and stroked his hair. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. We’ll pay the money back. Somehow.”

And I knew then, making a promise to myself, that I would not allow my father to go on trial, to be persecuted for a crime that although he might be guilty of, he couldn’t go to prison for.

I would speak with the new Prince and convince him to let us work and pay him back.

He would accept the offer.

He *had* to.

RAYAW

It was difficult to believe I was related to any of these stuck-up bastards. In their vacant, pointless, dull expressions, I saw the full effects of inbreeding firsthand.

Endless lines of portraits—costing the Creator knew how much—lined the long hallways and corridors of the vast palace. Ghosts who thought that by hanging their little frames on the walls, they could somehow put a pin in time so they would never be forgotten and would be remembered forever.

I hated them. Every last one.

Reaching back through the ages, as far as the history books had been written, Alwon was a name to be reckoned with. My ancestors had conquered, killed, maimed, and taken what was not rightfully theirs. And until very recently—in fact, in less than the past two years—I had not known they were part of my lineage.

My father had always insisted I came from noble blood—not his, but from my mother's line. My father had been as common as griash and as I smiled at his memory, I knew he was the richer for it.

He raised me as my mother had died when I was very young. He had a quiet way about him—a Creator-fearing man, who never did anyone wrong.

I shook my head of his memory, fearing that if my anger were to fully control my actions, I would simply burn the entire palace to the ground.

I still might.

My heart was already made up, but my mind was still split. As divided as my blood.

Three days after my father's funeral, when I returned to our shared hovel in the poorest street in the city, I was greeted by a visitor. We *never* got visitors, so I was immediately suspicious.

He introduced himself as Ges, a guard for His Highness, Pluwitz the Third. During one of the royal's drunken rantings, Ges had learned that Pluwitz shouldn't have been eighth in line to the throne at all—but *ninth*. Usually, Ges would have ignored his ramblings, but this time Pluwitz shared something he never had before:

The royal bloodline had been diluted by a cousin of the Emperor, who had fallen in love with a commoner and had a child, and *that child*, in fact, was the eighth heir to the throne.

"It's taken me some time to track you down," Ges had told me, "but now that I have, I come with great news."

He informed me that there was a palace with my name on it, that was my birthright by inheritance, and that this royal fool he was serving was nothing more than a ziizzi (a ziizzi was a creature that occupied the nests of others).

I listened to his story calmly, quietly, not believing a word of it. If someone was going to claim this fantastic story was true, they were going to have to come up with hard evidence. When I put that to the guardsman, he leaned back and smiled at me.

"The proof is right there," he said, gesturing toward me.

For a moment, I thought he was motioning to the stained coffee table between us.

"What?" I'd said.

"You. It's in your veins. Your blood. We can run a test, trace your origins, and I guarantee it will show you are of royal descent."

Royal descent.

Me.

Ha!

Anyone used to working backbreaking labor in the factories had long since learned not to believe in fairytales and make-believe.

“Why are you telling me this?” I’d asked.

Ges leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and spoke conspiratorially: “Because my master is a fool. Because I know you will not be one and you will see talent when it sits before you.”

I leaned back. “You want a job in the palace?”

“Not a job. *The* job. I want to be the manager. I want to look after your palace and the surrounding estate. All I expect in return is fair remuneration, a suite of my choosing, and as much food as I want.”

It seemed fair enough. I appreciated his honesty and opportunism. After all, with the royal fools in charge, there was little chance of scaling the slippery ladder of success without their blessing.

So, we went to the DNA research facility, where it was proven that, in fact, I *did* have royal blood. It came as such a shock that I insisted on taking the test again—and not just once, but twice.

Each result came back the same.

Over lunch, Ges told me the story again, only this time, I paid a lot more attention.

“You are the royal family’s dirty little secret. They hid it as best they could, but it was always going to come out eventually. Better it come out when you are young and able to enjoy it rather than dead and gone, which is what they want to happen.”

“They knew I was an heir all along?” I’d asked. “For how long?”

“They’ve known since you were born.”

That was a bitter pill to swallow but one I didn't doubt was true.

"I told you," Ges said with a self-satisfied smile. "The palace is yours."

"What difference does it make?" I said, fingering the test results in my hands. "They will deny it. What makes you think they will give it to me?"

"Because we'll *force* them to," Ges said.

He told me his plan. He would break into the palace's royal archives and steal the relevant documents I needed to prove my inheritance and take my place.

"And when you announce who you truly are and the royal family refuses to even listen to you—and trust me, they will deny it—we will come out with the evidence. If they continue to deny it, public interest will ensure you take your rightful place."

"What makes you think the people care?"

"They don't. But they are angry. They hate the royal family. They hate their extravagant lifestyles while they struggle in squalor. You can become their poster child. You take your rightful place and show them what you really think of the royal family."

It had a certain attractive quality to it, and with nothing to lose, we instigated his plan. I announced who I was across the media outlets that published the story.

At first, the royal family didn't respond. I thought our plan was doomed before it'd even begun, when a notice was published by the royal PR department.

By reacting to it, they unintentionally validated my claims. And suddenly, we were off to the races.

The royal family did everything in their power to stop me from taking what was rightfully mine, but eventually, they relented.

"If there's one thing the royal family hates more than secret liaisons and defectors to the working classes, it's having

to wash their laundry in public,” Ges said. “Better to let you have a palace than risk an uprising.”

I moved into the palace with my few possessions, and it was where I had been ever since.

Part of the agreement was that all antiques and artifacts would remain on the premises. They were not to be sold, burned, or damaged in any way. So far as I was concerned, it was *my* property, and I could do what I wished with it.

I dipped my finger in my glass of red wine and drew a smiley face across the priceless portrait of my most-distant ancestor.

Like all Ulsen, he bore the twin horns and the powerful musculature of our warrior ancestry. His eyes blazed golden, forbidding and entrancing even in its painted form. The same eyes alighted every portrait along the hall. The same eyes that bled from beneath my own scowling brow.

Initially, I had seen no similarities between myself and my ancestors, but the longer I was resident in the palace, the harsher my brow grew, the more demanding my glares, and the more twisted my cynicism, until eventually, I became like one of the bastards of my illustrious ancestry.

A female Ulsen squealed, giggling as Ges tickled her stomach. She lay across his lap, barely contained within her skimpy dress.

Ges grabbed her by the throat, yanked her toward him, and pressed his lips against hers. She responded in kind, burying her tongue down his throat.

He reached down and seized her crotch, before slipping her underwear to one side and unceremoniously sliding a finger inside her.

She groaned—not entirely with pleasure—and reached down to remove his hand from her, but he was having none of it. He routed around as if looking for buried treasure.

The female had the good sense to let him do whatever he wanted with her. It was what was going to happen later tonight anyway. She might as well get used to that fact.

Ges leaned back, howling with joy, as the female placed a hand to her lips and found not just her smudged lipstick but a little blood from where he had drawn it from her during their passionate embrace.

“Now *that’s* what I call a kiss!” Ges said.

The female got to her feet. Ges smacked her ass hard, making her flinch. Her eyes shot up to mine before quickly looking away.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I have to... use the restroom.”

She took off like a shot.

Ges, unaware of the harm he had done her, leaned back, hands stitched together behind his head, and beamed at me with joy. “This is the life, huh?”

“It’s a life, all right,” I said.

Ges had become more comfortable with living in the palace than I had. I suppose, as a former guard, it was more like home to him than me. No matter my lineage, I felt like a stranger here.

I stuck mostly to my bedchamber, at least four times larger than my previous hovel. For three months, we had lived in the palace, having progressively louder and more bawdy parties each weekend. But this weekend kicked off something special.

It was the week of Steyatt, where we would mate for seven days with a female—or in Ges’ case, *multiple* females—until we were fully relieved. It was well known that if the Ulsen did not relieve themselves, an explosion in violent crimes always happened the following week.

And so, we locked ourselves away in the palace with a female partner each to keep us company. Once the week was over, I would return to destroying everything I had inherited and fouling the royal name I had inherited.

“Where’s Akhi?” I asked.

“She said she would wait in your room,” Ges said, reaching for the pink crushed petals of the Ry’skang and snorting them up his nose, which gave the most thrilling high

known throughout the empire. “She said something about making tonight a special surprise.”

He lay back and let the drug have its effect. He would lay there for two hours, at least.

And with nothing else to do, and my loins already beginning to burn with the Steyatt’s desire, I headed for my bedroom.

I SHOVED the door open and found Akhi sprawled across the bed among a field of pink petals.

“There you are,” she said, not stirring from her prostrate position. “I was beginning to get lonely.”

She was a true beauty; the kind that only the stage could draw. The fame and fortune that would follow her in the coming years was all but guaranteed. Her horns were delicate, strong, and oil-black, as was her makeup, lipstick, and sexy underwear.

I felt myself stir at her appearance, her large, glowing, emerald-green eyes as mesmerizing as they were entrancing. “Well, we wouldn’t want that now, would we?” I said, shutting the door behind myself.

I moved to the table in the corner, removed my jacket and draped it over the back of one of the chairs.

Akhi leaned her head on her palm and watched me closely. “Aren’t you going to undress for me?” she asked.

“That’s your job.” I smiled at her. “After all, that’s what you’re being paid for, isn’t it?”

Even if she was being paid to be there with me for Steyatt week, I had a great deal of respect for the female form. After all, she had likely come from a similar background to me—previous to learning I was a member of the royal family, at least—and did whatever she needed to survive.

Those were the rules of the modern Ulsen empire. Survival was everything.

She ran her tongue over her lips as I drifted closer, her eyes sliding down to the front of my pants. She reached over and lowered my flies before reaching through the gap and wrapping her hand about my girth.

“Big boy, huh?” She looked up at me and traced the outline of my cock with a finger.

“Did you expect anything else?”

“I suppose not. A royal ought to have a ruler-sized everything.”

I pressed my lips to hers, tasting the bitter flavor of her lipstick, and reached down and grasped a pert breast.

She groaned willingly, hungrily. Then I ran my hand down her flat stomach to the mound between her legs. I found her wet and ready, but didn't slide my fingers inside her as Ges had done with his Steyatt partner.

I picked her up and spun her around so her head hung over the edge of the bed. I slipped my cock through my open flies and placed it in her mouth.

She took it as hungrily as she had my kiss, slurping on it with relish.

I leaned over her, pulled her panties to one side, and licked at her sex.

“You're a naughty boy,” she said. “I've heard about royalty taking advantage of poor working-class girls.”

“I've only been a royal for a few months. I'll have to work hard to catch up to my relatives.”

Akhi chuckled around my cock in her mouth.

I pulled back and removed my shirt, letting it fall to the floor—a shirt worth more than I had earned in an entire *month* before. I leaned forward to adopt the same position, but Akhi pulled back and patted the bed beside her.

“Lay down. I have something special to show you.”

More special than the way she already looked? I wondered. I was in for a hell of a Steyatt week!

I did as she asked and laid on the bed, my arms tucked behind my head.

Akhi threw her leg over me, straddling me, holding me firmly in place. She writhed on me, dancing hypnotically, her tight body gorgeous at every angle. She tossed her hair, every inch a temptress, a siren on the high seas.

“Are you ready for your special surprise?” she asked, peering at me through her disheveled hair.

“I thought your dancing was the surprise.”

“Oh no,” Akhi said, pressing her breasts against my chest and stretching out her arms to either side, slipping under the pillows. “Your special surprise is a lot more unique than that...”

She raised her arms high above her head.

Something metallic glinted in her hand.

I instinctively recognized it for what it was—you didn’t grow up on the streets without recognizing a blade when you saw one.

She brought it down, screeching as she did so.

I didn’t roll to one side as most people would have done but immediately sat up, raising my arms above my head to block the blow, and smacked my horns into her face, knocking her clean off me.

I struck her with the force of ten bulls, but the Ulsen skull was thick and wouldn’t daze her for long. My intention had not been to harm her but get her off me.

She was back up on her feet in an instant.

I hastily scrambled off the bed, my eyes sliding over to the table and chairs where I had placed my jacket. I kept a knife in one pocket for protection.

Akhi saw the movement and immediately moved to block any attempt I might make to reach it.

“Why are you doing this?” I said in a strangely calm voice.

Akhi altered her grip on her knife. “Sorry, love. The royal family pays more.”

So, the royal family *did* want me dead. I had wondered what actions they would take, or if they would take any actions at all. Now I could see they had claws.

Ges had taken precautions to increase the number of guards around the palace—but that did little to protect me from those I had invited in myself!

An assassin!

I was going to have to keep my eyes peeled for similar dangers in future, that was for sure!

Akhi lurched forward, swiping at me.

This time, I jumped over the bed in a single bound and grabbed an ornamental shield from the wall. I thought about shouting for the guards, but it seemed too much of a coward’s way out.

I could handle one girl. I faced off against her.

She lowered herself to the ground in a half-crouch.

I moved the shield, following her every move. “How about if I double whatever they’re paying you?” I offered.

“You wouldn’t trust me after this little episode, my dear,” she said.

She sprang at me, flailing like a wild trigar.

My arm was just a little bit faster and deflected the blows. The blade made high-pitched *tinging* noises with each successful parry.

Then—pain!

Her blade bit into my upper arm and immediately drew blood.

Akhi grinned through bloodied teeth and twisted to take advantage of my weakness.

I immediately leapt back and decided that perhaps being a coward was better than being dead.

I turned my head toward the doors. “Guards! Guards!”

Someone would hear me, I knew, and the guards would be on their way. Still, I had to survive until they arrived.

She lurched at me with another assault, her blade hissing through the air.

I was once again on the back foot, swinging my shield, barely able to prevent each deadly strike. My days were numbered—numbered in *minutes* rather than days!

Well, if I was going to die, I’d prefer to do it on the attack. I gritted my teeth and took the offensive. I swung the shield around and caught her, knocking her to the ground.

I noticed a bleeding nick on my other arm, but I ignored it and barreled into her, roaring as I slammed the shield on top of her. I immediately jolted back as her blade filled the space between us.

“Then take the money and leave!” I said. “No one needs to know you tried to kill me! The royal family will just think you failed!”

“Thank you, but I have a reputation to maintain.”

She swung her legs around, catching my ankle and knocking me off balance. She was on her feet again and raced toward me, her blade making a bee-line directly for my chest.

This time, I couldn’t bring the shield around fast enough. I raised one arm instead and swung my fist around.

My instinct saved my life as I caught her across the cheek.

She flew and landed, hitting the ground hard and slid painfully across it, leaving a trail of blood in her wake. Her blade escaped her grip and scuttled across the floor.

She would immediately race toward it, I knew, so I grabbed her ankle and dragged her body across the floor.

She screamed and wailed, her nails leaving deep marks in the expensive floor.

The doors burst open. The guards stood there, stunned. They looked between me and the screeching assassin on the floor.

Her breasts hung out, her pussy all but invisible. She didn't seem to care, but the guards certainly did!

"She's an assassin!" I snapped. "Highly trained. Be careful with her."

The guards shuffled forward, and I rolled my eyes.

They were too young and wet behind the ears to deal with her by themselves. The last thing I wanted was for them to lose her so she could perch over me in the darkness later tonight.

I fell across the assassin and swung my fist down hard, connecting with her cheek.

Blood dribbled from her unconscious mouth.

"You should have taken me up on my offer," I said, rubbing my sore knuckles.

As the guards carried her unconscious form away, Ges hustled up behind them. "You had trouble with yours too?"

"Your actress tried to assassinate you?" I said.

He shook his head. "I wish! There's nothing better than violent sex! No, she just took off!"

It was Steyatt week and neither of us now had a mate. Still, I thought, peering at the scratch marks etched in the wooden floor, there were worse things.

"I'll find us new mates," Ges said. "You can rely on me."

I relied on you last time, I wanted to tell him.

I shut the doors and immediately locked them. I turned back to the room where, just a moment ago, I had been expecting pure, unadulterated pleasure...

And barely escaped with my life.

Unfortunately, that wasn't where the surprises ended for the evening.

I TOSSED and turned that night, waking every few minutes, sensing there was someone in the room with me. Another assassin, perhaps, or one of the guards, sent to turn on me the moment my head hit the pillow.

I thought having money would make my life *simpler*. Instead, I had bigger worries than when I'd been living hand to mouth!

I just lay there on my back, peering up at the ceiling. The ornate design was beautiful in a way, and thinking that way instantly made me growl at myself.

There was *nothing* beautiful about the royal family, nothing beautiful about their culture of stealing innocent people's money, of the way they cared nothing for the people—including their own family.

I couldn't find any beauty in anything they did because of what they had done to me in the past. There was no forgiving the unforgivable.

Family was everything, and the royal family—the First Family of the empire—should have known that.

A floorboard creaked and I froze.

Old houses like this, made from wood of long-dead forests, were known to talk in the middle of the night...

But this was not a natural creak. It was man-made, something you learned to recognize when you were surrounded by thieves and cutthroats.

You learned to sense an impending attack. I had even sensed it with the female assassin—only I had thought *I* was the one who would do the attacking!

My senses were on high alert and I gripped the bedsheet with one hand. And as another creak erupted, grinding like an immense earthquake, I threw the bedsheet aside, hurled myself out of bed, and fell upon the figure I knew would be there.

When I collided with something solid, it shrieked.

Gotcha!

The thing I landed on top of was soft. I immediately reached down, smothered their arms, located their hands, and checked for weapons. I was relieved to find they had either lost their weapon or I had already relieved them of it.

“Get off me!” a soft voice snapped. “Get off me!”

“What the hell are you doing in my room?” I growled.

It was a female—*another* female assassin! Were there any females that did *not* want to kill me?

“Who sent you?” When she didn’t reply, I leaned forward further, crushing her beneath my weight.

The air gasped from her lungs.

“I said, who sent you?”

“No one—” the shadowy figure beneath me managed to say through wheezing breaths.

“Then you sent yourself?” I arched my head back and said, “Lights on!”

The lights blinded me momentarily, but it was worse for the female beneath me as she was looking directly into them when they came on.

I was taken aback by her appearance. She was human. Her eyes were big and wide, her figure fuller than Akhi’s had been. She also lacked her height and, of course, her horns. Her hair was dirty blonde and she kicked and flailed to get me to release her, but she was out of luck. Not until I got some answers.

“Who are you?” I said.

My instincts told me that she was not a trained assassin. In fact, she looked like a normal, regular member of the palace’s workers.

The majority of the servants were human—they were cheap, effective, and formed close knit social groups that

prevented many issues from developing to the point of duels.

Was she one of my servants? I wondered. If so, what was she doing creeping around in the dark in my bedroom?

“My name is Camila!” She became deathly still and glared at me. “I’m Bill’s daughter.”

“Bill?” I said, not recognizing his name.

“The manager you just had fired!”

“Fired?”

Camila rolled her eyes. “If you’re going to repeat everything I say, this conversation is going to take a *really* long time. Can you let me up now?”

I didn’t want to—I quite liked the feel of her beneath my hands—but slowly, keeping my eyes on her closely, I did.

She got up by herself and dusted the dirt and dust from her knees. “You know,” she said, “you could do with lessons in good manners.”

“Tell me, what is the proper way to react when finding a woman in your bedroom in the middle of the night?”

“Well, I doubt jumping on top of her and crushing her to death is part of it.”

“Crushed to death? You look plenty alive to me.”

“No thanks to you.”

I snorted despite myself. “What are you doing here?”

It occurred to me then that perhaps Ges had found a replacement Steyatt mate for me already. I looked her over and admired her shape.

Yes, I thought. She would serve all right...

“Hey!” Camila said, pointing to her face. “Eyes up here, if you please.”

Or maybe not...

“How did you get in here?” I said. “The doors are locked. Don’t tell me you stole your father’s keys?”

“My father doesn’t have any keys now. Besides, no stealing is necessary. This is an old palace. It has all sorts of secret passageways. You learn all about them when you grow up here.”

“You grew up here? When?”

“My father is... *was* the estate manager here. I would come over and help out sometimes with events. I’d get bored, poke around, find little cubby holes, secret passageways, things like that...”

She blinked and shook her head. “Anyway, that’s not what I’m here for.”

“So, what *are* you here for?” I asked. “For the fourth time.”

She glared at me before controlling herself and pointing at me. “Okay. So, you’re new here. You fired my father who, by the way, has been a loyal worker for the past twenty years—”

“I didn’t fire anyone.”

“Well, *someone* did. And you’re the new Prince, aren’t you?”

“I am. But I don’t manage that stuff.”

“*That* stuff? *That* stuff? That stuff is real people with lives and loved ones to take care of.”

“If anyone fired him, it was my manager.”

She glared at me. “*Your* manager, *your* responsibility. I can tell you that you made a huge mistake, but I doubt you’ll take any notice. Anyway. There was a... misunderstanding, and I want to clear it up.”

“You came to my room in the middle of the night over a... misunderstanding?”

“Yes. You see, my father...” And she found it difficult to mutter the next few words. “May have... come into possession... of some of your antiques.”

“Come into possession?”

She whirled and jabbed a finger at me. “Don’t pretend like you don’t know!”

“Know what?”

“You know what.” She folded her arms. “I’m not going to say it.”

I just stared at her. “If you’re not going to tell me what’s going on, how can I help you?”

“Okay, look. My father came into possession of some of your antiques. They got sold and now I’m here to make an agreement with you. We will pay you back everything they were worth. There’s no need to prosecute him.”

She stood with her hands on her hips, glaring back at me as if I had been the one to do something wrong.

“These sorts of matters are handled by my manager,” I said. “If you wait until morning, I’m sure he’ll see you—”

“I’m not dealing with him. I don’t know him.”

“You don’t know me either.”

“Sure, I do. You’re the new Prince. The one that came into an inheritance, right?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, I figure you’ll understand our situation better than some former guard who betrayed his master.”

I ground my teeth. “It was the *royals* that betrayed me and my family. Ges is the only one who told the truth.”

Camila threw up her hands. “Fine. Whatever. But he does what you say, correct?”

I thought about it and realized I’d never told Ges what to do. But, officially, yes, I supposed I *was* in charge.

I folded my arms and let Camila continue.

“So, I need you to talk with him and convince him to let us pay you back.”

“How much do you owe?”

“Two heirlooms. We can figure that out later. But I just need to know—and I need your word—that you won’t send my father to prison.”

I didn’t even know who her father was! So why would I send him to prison?

“All right,” I said. “All right. I promise I won’t...”

And then I began to think clearly. Now that I knew she wasn’t an assassin and that, in fact, she owed me, and by the sound of it, it was a great deal of money, then perhaps there was some other way she could repay me...

I ran my eyes over her again. She was short—or perhaps she was tall for a human, I really didn’t have much contact with them over the years—but she looked pleasing enough.

More than anything, I admired her passion and the fact she clearly cared very much for her father. That was something we shared.

But better than that, she was clearly not a trained assassin who would turn around and stab me at a moment’s notice.

Tomorrow, when Ges found me a new mate, how could I know that she wouldn’t turn out to be an assassin intent on slitting my throat too? I couldn’t—as it was Ges who had been responsible for finding Akhi in the first place.

I pulled my clothes back on, moved behind my desk, and took a seat. I motioned to the chairs opposite. “Please, sit.”

“I don’t want to sit.”

“You might. This could take some time.”

I waited until she—eventually—began to drift toward me.

She wore an expression of confusion. As she walked towards the chairs on the other side of my desk, I noticed a slight limp on one side. It was gone in an instant and I figured I had just imagined it.

She sat on the edge of the seat, as if making the point that she wasn’t exactly sitting, she was *perching*.

I couldn't help but smile. "All right. So, you want to repay me for the stolen heirlooms, correct?"

Camila hissed. "No one used the S word."

"But it was your father who stole them, correct?"

Camila ground her teeth so hard the cords popped out on her chin. "It... could be said," she said.

"And you're afraid he will go to prison if you don't pay me back, correct?"

"That's the long and short of it."

I frowned at her. "Long? Short?"

"Yes," she sighed, waving a hand as if it didn't matter.

"All right. So, I'm going to make you an offer. It's the only offer you're going to get. If you don't accept it, you'll have to take the risk that your father might go to prison."

She stared at me, focusing so intently that I thought she was trying to drill a hole through my skull.

"Have you heard of Steyatt week?"

Camila shook her head.

"It's a period of time in our calendar where our species must mate."

"Good for you. What does it have to do with me?"

"I had an issue with my mate this evening and I am at a loss for a replacement."

Camila nodded as I shared the information with her, and then, very slowly, my insinuation dawned. Her eyebrows shot to the top of her face, her mouth flew open forming an O, and she almost slipped off the edge of the chair she was perched on.

"You *cannot* be serious!"

"I can tell you that I am very serious. Steyatt week is not to be taken lightly."

“So find someone else! You’re a prince for God’s sake! You must have tarts falling over themselves to be with you!”

“Alas, no.”

She shook her head. “I’ll pay you back with *money*. Not with... anything else.”

“You’re in no position to make demands. This is the offer. Take it or leave it.”

“But... But... I came here to pay you back.”

“And you will. By providing a service.”

Camila slammed her tiny fist on the desk. “What am I? A common whore you can buy off?”

I sighed. “The role of the Steyatt mate is a dignified one in my culture.”

“Well, having sex for money has a very *different* meaning in mine.”

“It’s not for money. It’s for heirlooms.”

“Same difference. You’re honestly telling me getting drilled every day for the benefit of the male is somehow a *dignified* vocation?” Camila said, stunned.

“Trust me, you’re not my first choice either,” I snapped. “But here we are. Me in need of a mate and you in need of paying a debt. Now, are you interested or not?”

I stood up and was prepared to drag her out of the room if she answered to the negative.

She just looked up at me, her eyes wide with fear. Her attention trailed down to the front of my pants and then made its way back up to my face.

“Do I have a choice?” she said.

I fell back into my chair. “Sure you do. We begin from tomorrow. Until then, I suggest you move into the palace. I may... require you at a moment’s notice. That is all.”

She opened her luscious mouth again to argue before thinking better of it and closing it. She slowly—very slowly—

got to her feet and glared at me the entire time.

“I’ll show you out,” I said.

I led her toward the door. She trailed me by some distance and made me wait.

Why? To feel like she exerted some kind of control over me? She was to be sorely mistaken.

“Seven days and all your debts are wiped clean,” I said. “You will belong to me for the next seven days *and* seven nights.”

“I... I need to think about it,” she stammered.

“You have until you leave this room to decide.”

“How long is that?”

“One minute.”

Her expression was a fascinating study as she considered a thousand different objectives at once.

“Seven days?” she said.

“And nights,” I added.

She drew up to me, looked me over, and then jabbed a finger in my face. “Fine! I accept. But you’ll hire me as a *maid*. I don’t need gossip circulating about what we get up to here!”

I grinned. “A maid? Are you sure you can play the role?”

“I know I can!” she snapped. “And know this: I will *not* enjoy a single minute of it!”

“You don’t need to enjoy it,” I informed her. “Just make yourself available to me.”

I held the door open for her. She glared at me as she passed through it. I gently closed it behind her.

So, I had found a new mate. The problem was resolved... but how many new problems had I just created?

CAMILA

Well, Camila, you've really gotten yourself into a pickle this time.

I tore my blouses from my bedroom wardrobe and shoved them into the suitcase. They would be wrinkled and crumpled but I didn't care.

I had snuck into the palace late at night, dodging what appeared to be extra security stationed around the palace. It made creeping inside a whole lot more difficult—but not impossible.

I was aware of three secret passages that would gain me entrance to the new Prince's chambers, and as I worked through them in turn, I found the second—located at the base of the eastern wall behind a thick shrub—was devoid of guards.

I hastily crawled through it. It was a bit of a tight fit. I seemed to remember it being a *lot* larger than that. I decided I needed to lose some weight if I intended on using these secret passageways more in future. And with the deal I had struck with Rayaw, I didn't think there was much chance I wouldn't.

I had gone to speak with him, to encourage him not to prosecute my father, to find an amicable way for everyone to get what they wanted.

Prince Rayaw would get his antiques back (or at least the value of them) while my father's reputation would remain intact and he could pursue a similar position at another noble house elsewhere.

Dad would get what he needed—what I wanted for him—and so would Rayaw...

My cheeks flushed red. He would get *everything* he wanted.

I knew I would have to pay a price, but I was thinking more along the lines of a high interest rate, not having to pay with my body!

I could pinpoint the exact moment his sadistic, twisted little mind had come up with his idea to use me as his sex slave. His eyes had alighted with newfound energy. He'd gotten up, dressed, and moved behind his desk, treating our exchange as if it was nothing more than a regular item on his business itinerary.

Next on the agenda: *Find a female to fuck.*

Item progress: *Complete.*

I growled under my breath as I grabbed great handfuls of underwear and jammed them in the luggage's corners.

Why hadn't I put up more resistance?

Why hadn't I insisted on paying back with money?

Because he never would have accepted it, I thought. Because he might have retracted his offer. Because he might have changed his mind and prosecuted my father anyway.

I had thought that by talking with him—as he was a commoner who had come into great titles and wealth—that he might actually be more understanding to a regular working girl's plight.

Boy, had I been wrong!

He was just like every other noble, always looking for his own personal angle, to take advantage as much as he could.

But there was a silver lining to all this craziness. The whole episode would be over in seven days.

Just seven days.

Yes, seven days could be an eternity while living them, but in the greater scheme of things, it wasn't so long. Everything would go back to normal afterwards, although erasing the memories might take some real effort...

Working to pay him back for the priceless heirlooms would have taken me years—perhaps even decades. Although I hated to admit it, what Prince Rayaw offered was just about the only option available to me.

Except for running away.

The idea of being forced to do anything against my will was just about the worst outcome I could imagine. Being manhandled and taken advantage of by that brute was a close second.

I wiped the tears of rage from my eyes and returned to stuffing my bags. I needed to be stronger than this, tougher, or I would be a broken wreck when I emerged on the other side.

Or the bastard was going to destroy me.

“Are you going somewhere?”

I yelped and hopped on the spot, snapping my head around. It took me a moment to recognize the small, shrunken form of my father standing in the doorway.

I let out a sigh of relief and turned back to packing my bags. “Only to the palace. I spoke with the new Prince and he agreed to let me... work off the debt.”

My father shook his head. “No, no. I can't allow it. It should be me who works off the debt. Speak with him again, baby, convince him to let me be the one to pay.”

I'm not sure you're his type...

Then again, I wasn't entirely convinced *I* was his type either. The reason he'd chosen me was through desperation, not attraction. If he had seen me with my limp, he *never* would have looked at me twice. I was as good as any other female that he could use and abuse.

Better yet—I came with desperation on my lips and that would no doubt make it even more exciting when he took

advantage of me.

I shook my head forlornly. “He’s made his decision. I’ll work at the palace until all debts are paid.”

“But maybe he’ll let me return to work for him,” Dad said.

He was desperate to return to his old place of work, I realized. To be with his coworkers and friends again. After twenty years in the palace, he had become a high ranking, respected person of note. Now, having been fired, there was no chance of him returning to his previous esteemed place of work.

“He won’t hire you back, Dad,” I said.

My father nodded sadly. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

The reason hung between us like a thick blanket, the same one he’d mentioned the day before:

Once you break someone’s trust, it’s impossible to get it back.

He slumped onto the corner of my bed and hung his head. “I’m sorry you have to do this, Camila. I swear, as soon as I find another position at another house, I’ll send money so you can pay the debt off faster.”

I fell onto the bed beside him. He was an old man due for retirement, and it was beyond time for him to relax. I wrapped my arms around him and leaned my head against his shoulder.

“You’ve worked your entire life for me. You even gave me back my legs.” And to show him, I extended my injured leg and wiggled my toes. “See? You gave me life, raised me, and healed me. What else could you do for me? You are everything a father should be. And I’m proud of you.”

I took his face in my hands and kissed him gently on the forehead. “I always have been.”

He gripped my arm, holding on tight. “Thank you for saying that.”

I shrugged. “It’s true.”

“For how long? How long will it take for you to earn the money to pay him back? I doubt it will be for the same price I got for them for.”

No, I thought. It was an altogether different price.

I moved back to packing my bags when an idea came to me:

“Why don’t you go on a trip? After all these years of hard work, you deserve it.”

If someone saw Prince Rayaw and me together, there would be no way for me to prevent rumors from circulating. I would do everything I could to prevent that from happening but at the very least, I could ensure my father never had to hear it.

“A trip? Where?”

“How about Ghizzok’s Fishing Hole? You always wanted to go. And you’re always complaining about not having enough time. Well, now you do.”

An excited shine came to his eyes. “I don’t know... I should be looking for another position...”

You’re not going to find one, I thought. Not until this week is over and your history is wiped clean.

I didn’t like thinking that way, but it was the honest truth.

I smiled at my father and pulled him up onto his feet. “You should book it now. Make your travel arrangements and just go. There’s nothing keeping you here. Enjoy yourself.”

My father smiled and nodded. “Yes. Yes, you’re right. Maybe a little trip somewhere would help clear my mind, see things a little more clearly.”

I hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. Already, I began to see a glimmer of his former self—his happy, jovial spirit and his caring, paternal nature.

“I’ll just go for a weekend—”

“No!” I snapped a little harsher than I expected. “Take your time. Take a full week to think things over. I swear, by

the time you come back, everything will be a whole lot better.”

“A whole week...” He grinned like a little boy. “I wonder if Staffar will be available... Or maybe even Jeppax...”

“Good idea!” I said. “Make it a group trip!”

I led him out of the room and watched as he descended slowly down the stairs, mumbling under his breath about the things he would need to pack and organize.

How would I explain to Dad that I had worked only seven days for the new Prince and had fully reimbursed him for the heirlooms he had stolen?

I could say I hadn’t finished paying yet... that we’d mutually agreed that I wasn’t a good fit for the palace, that it was best if I went to work elsewhere and sent him the money over a period of time...

Or I could say I’d discovered forgotten heirlooms hidden about the house that amounted to the same value as the ones that’d gone missing. It was a long shot, but at least then I wouldn’t have to keep lying to my father. I felt bad enough about that already.

There were many options to choose from and I would think more on them later. At least there was one bright side to all of this.

In seven days, after this Steyatt week thing had passed—and I hated even *thinking* about the term and what it entailed—all of this trouble would truly be over.

My father’s reputation would be intact and he would be free to find another job elsewhere. Leaving here on his trip meant there would be no chance the rumors might reach Dad’s ears. Hopefully, there would be no rumors *at all*, but gossip had a way of traveling in tight communities.

I returned to shoving the clothes into my suitcase. I had packed two bags already and was halfway through before I realized I didn’t need to pack nearly so much.

Not because it was just for one week...

Not because they would give me a fresh uniform to wear each day...

But because I doubted I needed to wear much during the next seven days.

My skin crawled.

I CLIMBED from the shuttle and moved to the trunk. I pulled my heavy luggage out and glanced over at the taxi driver, who just shrugged his shoulders.

So much for service with a smile.

I dragged the luggage over to the palace entrance and waited for the staff to greet me. In the old days when my father was in charge, someone was in attendance at all times, ready to welcome guests the moment they arrived.

Instead, I had to wait twenty minutes before the door cracked open and someone poked their head out. At least it was a face I recognized.

“Camila!” Emma said, squealing with joy. She threw the door open and ran at me, almost knocking me off my feet as she hugged me. “It’s great to see you!”

Emma’s eyes were big and wide, her face small and pointed. “It’s been so long!” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Really long.”

She pulled back and beamed at me with a toothy grin framed by fuzzy strawberry-blonde hair. She slid her arm through mine and led me through the open doors.

“After I heard you were coming, I insisted I should be the one to welcome you! I’m so glad you’re here! It’ll be just like the old days!”

I pointed toward my luggage. “My bags...”

“The guards will take care of those,” she said with a dismissive wave. “I haven’t seen you since the accident. And

now..." She gasped. "You're walking completely fine! I guess the surgery must have worked wonders, huh?"

I hadn't spoken to her in ten years and yet she knew everything about me. It was how all small towns worked.

Five years my junior, Emma had always been small for her age. We used to play in the palace—me as the manager's daughter and her as the housekeeper's cousin. She'd always been wide-eyed and fascinated by the splendor of the palace, the sheer riches that adorned every wall and ceiling—a far and distant cry from the everyday homes we lived in.

She'd been cute as a button and hyper-friendly. I could see she had not lost any of those traits as she'd aged.

"What's it like here now that my father is no longer in charge?" I asked.

Emma's face fell but she quickly recovered. "Different. It's very... different."

"Different how?"

"Ges... He's much more... hands on."

Hands on? I thought. My dad ruled with an iron grip when he'd been Head of the Household. *I wondered how much stricter Ges could be...*

For some reason, Emma's cheeks burned red and she quickly looked away from me.

"Where is he now?" I asked. "Usually it's the manager that welcomes new servants."

"He's never up before noon."

I frowned. How did that make him hands on? I wondered.

"We don't follow your dad's old rules anymore. The new rules are a little more... relaxed."

A pair of chef's assistants marched past us armed with boxes of ingredients. They gossiped between themselves as they headed down the hallway toward the kitchens.

I didn't recognize either of them. Strange, I thought, considering I thought I knew every member of the household. It made me wonder. How many people, besides my father, had been fired?

"Are there many servants from before?" I asked.

Emma shook her head. "No. Ges had a real ax to grind. He was never a popular member of the staff when he was a guard. After he fired a bunch of the old servants he didn't like, he realized a lot of the work wasn't getting done. So, he had to hire them back again. Then, after he found replacements, he fired them again."

"That sounds terrible," I said.

"It is. But they're lucky. They only lost their jobs. There are others on the Prince's estate that are losing their homes."

I blinked at that. "What? What do you mean?"

Emma checked over my shoulders before continuing: "The new Prince has doubled their rent. The farmers barely even get by as it is, but by doubling their rent..."

They would become homeless.

"Then what happens to the farms?" I said. "Who runs them?"

Emma shrugged. "Some think the new Prince will hire more workers, pay them a pittance, and skim the profits off the top. By running the farms directly, he can make more money. I'm not sure the extra amount is worth all the effort. But what do I know?"

Things really *had* changed at the palace. I recalled the media articles about the new Prince's plans for the palace and surrounding estate. He promised to make it a haven for the locals and farmers to grow and prosper.

So much for promises.

"But it means more job opportunities for someone like me," Emma said. "I could never get to work here before. No one ever left."

Because they were happy here. Unlike now.

Emma hugged my arm. “Or you. Who would have thought, huh? You, being the manager’s daughter, coming to work at the palace as a maid! Talk about keeping it in the family!”

She gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth. “Don’t be upset at me! I was sad to hear your dad was fired. Lots of rumors have been swirling around about things he might have done to deserve it... Not that there needs to be anything he did. Ges sometimes fires people for looking at him in a way he doesn’t like...”

She peered at me out of the corner of her eye. “No one believes the rumors though. Your dad was always the most honorable man in the palace. But some people say, well, that... some things went missing...”

Silence followed her statement. It was rare for Emma to be quiet, so she’d let the moment lull on purpose.

No doubt she expected me to fill it. If she did, she was in for a long wait. She was the absolute *last* person I would share anything personal with.

Giving up, she shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe later, then.”

If the truth about how Dad had lost his position at the palace wasn’t believed, then there really *was* still a chance his reputation could remain untarnished. It meant it was even more crucial I carried out the next seven days without a hitch.

This entire tragedy could be reversed. And rather than look at it as if I had lost something, I could choose to look at it in a positive light:

I had gotten the use of my legs back and all it would cost me is seven measly days of my life. When looked at through that lens, it wasn’t so bad after all, was it?

“Normally, I’d show new staff the entire palace, all the gorgeous rooms, the library, kitchens, everything,” Emma mused, “but as you already know where everything is already, I suppose I can just show you what we’ll be doing.”

She took me to the storage room where the cleaning supplies were kept and led me from one room to another, cleaning as we went.

I frowned at some of the antique displays, noticing some appeared to be missing. I didn't mention it and carried on cleaning.

It was only when we came to the main drawing room where a smile had been painted on the portrait of the original Alwon ancestor that I pulled up short.

"Have things been very different since my father left?" I asked, curious.

At first, Emma didn't look up, and continued dusting. "A little. Why?"

"Some of the items appear to be missing, others damaged or vandalized. What does the new Prince think of this?"

Emma shrugged. "Not much. Very often, it's the Prince who damages them."

I blinked in surprise. To come into possession of such a beautiful home and then to treat it without respect seemed a little... strange.

If I had discovered I had royal ancestors and then came into possession of a palace like this, I don't think I would have been drawing all over them with red wine.

Emma sidled up close to me and whispered under her breath. "But it's not just him."

She checked over her shoulders. "I've seen some of the new workers pocket items too."

"Stealing?" I said, dumbfounded, before recalling my dad had told me such things had become commonplace in the palace. "Why doesn't someone tell Ges?"

Emma snorted. "He takes more things off the shelves that never get returned than anyone else! I could pocket things myself too... if I had a mind to."

She idly fingered a porcelain figurine before noticing my expression. Her hands darted back like it was red-hot. “Not that I would! I don’t want anyone to think I’m like the others!”

She sidled up even closer to me. “You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

Why would I, I wondered, when my own father had done the same thing? Everyone was stealing from the new Prince and yet he didn’t care at all?

Things were just growing stranger and stranger...

“Don’t tell anyone what?” a deep voice boomed, so close that it made me jump.

I bumped into something behind me. The curve of a hand grasped my ass hard before I bounded away.

“Careful,” the figure said. “I wouldn’t want to be accused of sexual harassment in the workplace.”

I turned to find a thick-set Ulsen, his horns shining, bright and over-oiled. A broad grin was affixed to his face that never seemed to falter, and was all the more sinister for it. His eyes leered, making you feel like he was never really looking directly at you but appraising your body in his peripheries.

Emma instantly dropped her head, bowing as if addressing royalty. I wasn’t sure how to behave, so I followed her lead.

“This is the new maid?” he asked, looking me over. “There’s no need to lower your chin when I’m around. I like to look my servants in the eye.”

My servants. Not staff, coworkers, or equals, as my father had thought of them. But *my servants.*

He raised my chin with a finger and grinned down at me, his tongue poking at the corners of his lips as he spoke. “My, my. Well, you are a tasty little thing, aren’t you?”

I thought he was worried about being accused of sexual harassment? I wondered. Clearly not. Was *everyone* who worked for Prince Rayaw a creep?

“Yes,” he said, “I can see you will do *quite* well in your new position.”

“Yes,” I said demurely. “Thank you, sir.”

His attention shifted to Emma and his grin grew even wider. “How are you finding your time here, Emma?”

“Fine. Sir.”

“I hope you’ve learned not to be so insolent in future?”

“Yes. Sir. Thank you. Sir.”

Her voice trembled. The poor little thing was terrified. I looked between them and sensed something, but wasn’t entirely sure what.

Ges tore his eyes from her and returned to me. He turned on his heel and marched away. “Follow me. I’ll show you to your quarters.”

I glanced at Emma, who hastily motioned for me to follow Ges. I hurried after him, my hip complaining at the speed.

“You’ll find things are different here now,” he said, not checking if I was keeping up with him or not. “Things aren’t so stuffy, so... old-fashioned. You’ll find a more... relaxed atmosphere. I like to think of us as a family. Think of me as your father.”

Not likely!

He seemed to be waiting for a response, so I said, “Yes, sir.”

He turned a corner and headed directly toward the servants’ quarters located at the back of the house. “I recently had to fire the previous manager due to improper conduct. He had been caught stealing. He’d probably been stealing for years. But I put a stop to it.”

I wanted to shout at him, to tell him that my father was an honest and loyal man, but the complaint died on my lips. I had to tell myself that it didn’t matter what this idiot thought of my father. He didn’t know him.

The old palace staff did and none believed he'd been capable of stealing. He actually *was* guilty, but the fact that they refused to believe it belied the respect they had for him.

“If you have any problems, consult with the other servants. You're not to come to me directly unless it is a life or death situation. Understood?”

Life or death? As a maid? I doubted there would be much call for that. Although, with how loose Ges ran the place, I suspected the odds of a tragedy happening were much higher.

“Here are the servants' quarters. And here is your room.”

He shoved the plain door open, revealing a tiny room with a single cot and plain desk. When he opened the door, it struck my piled luggage.

“It's not much, but more than enough for a servant.”

With the way Ges looked down his nose at me, I sensed he didn't consider himself one of us.

Odd, I thought, that he should have such a short memory. It wasn't so long ago that *he* was a regular guardsman. It had only been by turning on his former royal master that he'd gotten the position he now found himself in.

He hadn't earned it the way my father had, slowly working his way up through the ranks, but by dishonesty and deception. He seemed to be waiting for me to respond.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

When I turned, I found him leaning over me, leering, the grin having slid from his bulging face. I'd never felt like hunted prey so much in my entire life.

“But your main duty will be conducted elsewhere. Follow me.”

His strides were long and it was a struggle for me to keep up. The doctors had told me to rest and take it easy. Now I was beginning to see why.

My hip barked as we headed up the stairs, each compounding the pain stabbing at my leg. We came to a more

ornate door which Ges shoved open. He led me inside and I saw it was the Pink Petal Suite.

It had a huge bed, a large open space, a writing table and chairs, and a private bathroom. Far more luxurious and comfortable than my own room.

“Here is where you’ll entertain the Prince,” Ges said.

I snapped my head around and appraised his expression.

“Oh yes, he told me. He told me first thing this morning about your little... agreement. In the wardrobe, you’ll find a collection of costumes and lingerie. If Prince Rayaw tells you to wear one, you will do it immediately.”

It wasn’t a question, never mind a suggestion.

He paused and took me in. “You are actually quite plain, aren’t you? But I suppose that’s why he chose you, isn’t it?” His eyes flashed menacingly. “It’s the excitement of extracting a great deal of value from you. Yes, I can understand the thrill of that.”

He ran his eyes over me, unimpeded by social norms or good manners. He drank in my every curve, every detail. He even licked his lips.

“Yes. Quite plain. But sometimes vanilla is the best flavor, no?”

He stepped toward me, growing larger, towering over me, and grinning maniacally. “I want you to know your secret is safe with me.”

He tucked a wayward strand behind my ear, sending a cold shiver down my spine. “And you should also know...” He leaned in close and whispered in my ear. “That Prince Rayaw and I are close. *Very* close. We share everything. He will not have need of your services every moment of the day. And during those moments, I will come find you and...” He licked his lips. “...check to ensure your services are up to scratch. Do you understand?”

I nodded, the blood having drained from my face.

I understood all right. And wished I didn't. I felt woozy and lightheaded. And then it dawned on me.

When Emma had said he was 'hands on', she wasn't referring to how he managed the palace, but by how he acted around the staff!

"Good," he said. He leaned back. "I'll let you get settled in. Begin your maid duties when you're ready but don't wander too far from this room. If I know Rayaw, it won't be long before he comes knocking on your door."

He knocked on the suite's door as he shut it behind himself and left.

WHAT THE HELL did he think I was?

Some toy he could pass to his friends after he was done with me? Sleeping with his buddies was *not* part of the deal.

I growled at myself, annoyed I had even accepted his original offer. He was like every other 'elite'. Only out for himself. I wasn't owned by *anyone*, damn it! *I am my own person!*

"Um... I think that sideboard is clean..."

"What?" I snapped, whirling around.

Emma just stared at me, eyes wide and scared, moving between the rag in my hand and how aggressively I was attacking the sideboard.

She was right. It shone brighter than it likely had in decades. I'd only succeeded in making the rest of the sideboard seem dull by comparison. I had lost myself in my work, taking out my aggressions on the helpless furniture.

I snapped the cloth and moved on to the next item that needed buffing.

"Is everything all right?" Emma asked.

"Of course it is!" I growled at her.

She physically flinched back and shuffled her weight from one foot to the other.

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t snap at you. It’s just... being here, it brings back so many memories.”

And would doubtless leave its mark on me when I finally came to leave, I thought.

Many dark memories...

Emma leaned against the table and lowered her head. “I noticed you acted differently after you came back from your meeting with Ges.”

The creep!

He was so used to getting away with doing anything he wanted with the staff that he wouldn’t have known what shame or decency were if they slapped him across the face!

In fact, I might just do that next time he came anywhere near me. Give him a nice big *slap* across his fat, meaty maw.

But I knew that would be a mistake.

First, he might fly into a rage, and who knew how someone like that would react. Or, he would react the opposite way, liking the fact that someone had finally stood up to him, and become even *more* determined to take me for his own...

Either way, there was no winning with him.

“Sometimes he can be quite... forceful,” Emma said.

It was only then that I noticed her beaten look, the way a child might act after it had been admonished.

I touched her arm. “Is there anything you need to tell me about him? Anything that he might have... done to you?”

Emma shook her head. “No. He hasn’t... done anything to me. But it has come close. I think maybe his bark is worse than his bite.”

She gave me a smile that was not altogether convincing.

I peered around at the gorgeous furniture and portraits. “This place sure has changed since we were last here, hasn’t

it?”

I couldn't help but compare it with when my father was in charge. Sexual assault would *never* have happened. And if it had, my father would have dealt with it in his usual way: immediately, strictly, and without hesitation. Now, we were at our new masters' mercy.

And I doubted *Prince Rayaw* or his chief goon had much of that to spare.

“Let's get back to work,” I said. “Work always clears the mind.”

We worked hard and this time I kept my attention focused, polishing every surface to a high shine.

I liked that after I was done, each item shone with a brightness and life that it hadn't when I started. I was making things better, improving them little by little. Everywhere I went, I was leaving it better than how I had found it. But it was hard, back-breaking work, and made me pant more than I expected.

Then I heard something behind me, growling, as if a big dog had a fat juicy steak hanging in front of its nose.

“Is that you?” I said, glancing over at Emma.

But she wasn't listening to me. She stood to attention, her rag clutched in her hands, head bowed down. I followed her sightline.

Oh, shit.

And there he stood. *Prince Rayaw*.

Fully dressed now in a sharp suit, his eyes glaring at me with unmistakable hunger. *He* was the origin of the sound I'd heard.

Growling at the back of his throat. His eyes fixed firmly on my ass as I was bent over a particularly beautiful antique table, my skirt hitched up, almost exposing my underwear to anyone who might have been passing.

How embarrassing.

I colored immediately, my cheeks glowing bright red. I didn't need more than one guess to know *exactly* what was running through his mind right at that moment.

I straightened up, pulled my skirt back down so it covered my ass, held my dirty rag in my hands, and lowered my eyes.

He entered the room and completely dominated it. How anyone could have mistaken him for a poor commoner was hard to comprehend.

He walked with a grace, athleticism, and control that no peasant possessed. Perhaps he only graduated into this role after he learned the truth of his birth and heredity.

He stopped in front of me and waited as I gradually raised my eyes to his. He didn't say a word but I heard the high-pitched "Eep!" from Emma's throat at my side.

I met Rayaw's gaze. His golden syrupy eyes melted my own, but I held my resolve.

I would only be here for a week. He couldn't fire me—not if he wanted to keep his Steyatt plaything close by.

He tore his eyes from mine and strode out of the room. Only then did I release the breath I didn't know I had been holding.

Emma let out her own deep sigh of relief. "Thank God he's gone! I always get nervous when he's around. He always makes me feel like he's some kind of predator, and me his unwilling prey." She shook her head. "I feel sorry for whoever he ends up using as his Steyatt mate this week. That's a fate I'm glad I avoided, that's for sure."

She turned and resumed scrubbing at the furniture. She might have avoided his advances... not all of us were so lucky.

I had recognized the hungry look in Rayaw's eye the moment his golden orbs locked on mine.

It is time, they had screamed at me.

That, coupled with the deep growl at the back of his throat, told me just about everything I needed to know. It was time to

carry out my duty—my ‘service’ as he undoubtedly considered it to be.

“I... need to take a break,” I said. “I’ll be... right back.”

I tucked the rag in the front pocket of my apron and left the room.

I moved through the hallways like a zombie, my mind whirring at a thousand miles an hour, knowing that if I wanted, I could just turn, run, and leave the palace right now, and I would not have to go through with this.

But no matter how I turned down those long hallways, I seemed to end up where I had set out to go in the first place:

The Pink Petal Suite.

I took a deep breath and checked the hallway was empty—I was disappointed to see that it was—and straightened my uniform and tucked my hair behind my ears.

As if he even cared what I looked like!

I was a piece of meat to him, I had to remind myself. He hadn’t chosen me because I was the best option. He had chosen me because I was the *only* option.

I ground my teeth. I don’t know why that bugged me so much, but it did.

“That’s it!” I growled. “I just want to get this over and done with.”

I knocked on the door and waited for him to reply. When he didn’t, I knocked again. And when he didn’t respond a second time, I refused to wait any longer, depressed the handle, and entered.

The room appeared to be empty. I shut the door behind myself, crept towards the bathroom, and put my head inside. He wasn’t there either.

I didn’t know if I was relieved or disappointed. My emotions were a jumbled mass of confusion.

So... what exactly did he expect me to do now?

He had given me the eye—at least, I *thought* he had—but perhaps I was mistaken. Maybe he *didn't* want me here at all. Maybe I had completely misread his intentions.

But that searing glare he'd given me, the way it made my entire body relax, feel loose, and tight *down there*...

I couldn't have mistaken it, could I?

The room seemed unbearably quiet—at complete odds with what would transpire there within the next few minutes...

If he turned up.

Maybe it was all a sick, twisted game, and he wouldn't show up at all, but his pal Ges would. I shivered at the thought.

I sat on the bed, my hands pressing into the firm mattress. Should I get dressed in one of the sexy costumes from the wardrobe? No, I decided. I didn't want to make it look like I was too willing.

Then maybe I should lay on the bed and get comfortable? Lay in what he might think was a seductive pose? No, for the same reason above.

I folded my arms across my chest, my knee bouncing with irritation that he should take so long to come to me.

I'm busy! I have things I need to do!

Then I made a decision:

If he didn't come within the next minute, I would leave.

Yes, I thought. At least then, I could delay the inevitable.

That was *much* better than having to go through with this thing right here and now.

I counted down the seconds...

60...

59...

58...

57...

My body began to shake and I could barely control my nerves.

56...

55...

54...

I gnawed on my fingernails, a bad habit that I thought I had kicked ten years earlier.

53...

52...

51...

50...

That's it!

I couldn't wait any longer. The tension was killing me.

I felt relieved that I had carried out my duty—it wasn't my fault he had taken so long to get to me—after all, there was no signal, no secret wink or handshake or word that he needed to activate me and let me know he was ready for bonking.

That was *his* fault. He should have thought the situation through better!

I hurried toward the door for fear he might suddenly arrive when I noticed the door handle moving. The door creaked open like a prop in a horror movie.

Prince Rayaw stood in the doorway, his impressive muscular frame taking up almost the entire space. The palace had been built with the Ulsen size in mind, so he didn't need to duck his head down to fit his horns through.

He shut the door behind himself. "Sorry for keeping you waiting," he said. "Something came up."

"You didn't keep me waiting," I said, folding my arms. "I... only just arrived here myself."

I didn't want him to think I was at his beck and call... even though I *was* at his beck and call.

“Oh. Good then.”

We stood staring at each other for a moment before he cleared his throat and motioned toward the bed. “Shall we make ourselves more comfortable?”

“I’m already comfortable,” I blurted.

He turned back to me and nodded thoughtfully. “Then perhaps you would like a drink?”

He moved for the drinks cabinet in the corner of the room. If I’d known it was there, I would have treated myself to something strong earlier!

“Yes,” I said. “Please.”

“What would you like?”

“Something strong.” *Very* strong.

“We have some Sisqaarth whiskey. Will that suffice?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

He poured a small amount into two glasses and handed me one. I immediately threw it back and extended the glass to him.

Surprised, he checked it was empty. “Would you like another?”

“Yes. No. I mean...”

He smiled and placed the empty glass and his drink on a side table. “There’s no need to be nervous. I’m a kind and thoughtful lover—”

“Can we change the subject?” I said. “We don’t need to make small talk, right? We both know why we’re here. There’s no need to prolong the inevitable.”

He pursed his lips. “There’s no need for us to rush. We can get to know each other a little first.”

I hardened my eyes. “Oh, I think I know enough about you already.”

“Oh, really? And what do you make of me?”

“I know you have this Steyatt week. I know that you have no qualms about who you mate with. And I know you only recently came into your wealth.”

He shrugged. “Stuff you could learn from the tabloids or from our engagements so far. If you want to hear the truth, I’m not much different from you.”

“Sure,” I said, rolling my eyes. “You have a palace. Servants. The similarities are endless.”

“I got lucky. I never knew my mother or grew up knowing my real heritage. But I was born poor, grew up poor, scraping by the skin of my horns.”

Okay, so I didn’t know that. “I didn’t grow up that poor. We always had food, a warm home, someone to love and care for me.”

“I did too.”

“Who?”

“My father.”

“Was he good to you?”

Prince Rayaw’s eyes searched mine and he looked away. “The best. Who did you have to look after you?”

“My dad,” I said, not wanting to admit we had anything in common. “What happened to your mother?”

“She died from the Quissix flu.”

It had swept through many parts of the galaxy, I recalled. Being out in the sticks on a remote planet, we’d been spared the worst of it.

Death was not quick, nor was it painless.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

He nodded. “What happened to your mother?”

“She... didn’t. That is... Do we have to talk about this?”

“No. But we should take a seat.”

We sat on the end of the bed. The mattress seemed to bear down on us like a monster and I couldn't stop glancing at it.

"It's important we form a bond before we give ourselves."

"You didn't mention forming bonds," I said. "I assumed it would be just..."

My eyes moved to the big bed, which seemed a whole lot smaller with him standing beside me.

"That comes later. First, we must get to know each other."

"All right. So what happened to your previous Steyatt mate? I don't believe you didn't have one before stumbling upon me in the middle of the night."

He looked at me levelly. "She turned out to be an assassin and tried to slit my throat."

I blinked in surprise and looked him over, looking to see if there was any hint of a joke on his part. So far as I could tell, there was none. "That's... not great."

He nodded. "She managed to cut me a couple of times on my arms." He reached for his sleeves. "Would you like to see?"

"That's all right."

Having him begin to take off his clothes could only lead to one conclusion.

He placed his hand on my bare knee—my skirt had slid halfway up my thigh and provided easy access. Shivers traveled the length of my body as his thumb gently stroked my skin.

The Ulsen were striking in appearance, with their huge, pointed horns and their squat noses pressed flat against their faces, and looked more like a bull back on Earth than anything else I could name.

His skin was blue, the color of a perfect summer sky, his frame lean, hard, and muscular. From a young age, I had been quite taken with them, and it had taken me some time to get used to their appearance. Now, I didn't even double take.

Except for those golden eyes that glinted like a wolf's in the midst of a hunt.

He turned to me. "Perhaps you could tell me about—"

"I would rather we just get on with it," I interrupted again.

His look became hard. "Very well."

He leaned forward, causing me to fall back on the bed. He stretched across the other side of the bed, reached up... and did something very strange.

He ran his hand under the pillows as if looking for something before lowering his hands to me and running them over my body. Not in a sexy way, but like he was looking for something.

"Um... Do I meet your... standards?"

"Mm?" he said before glancing up at me. "Oh. Yes. That's why you're here, after all. I was just checking for... something."

"What?"

His eyes flicked to mine and then away again as he focused on searching my face. The way he was touching me, groping me, wasn't in any way sexy. If anything, it reminded me of that time at the London Spaceport back on Earth when —

I clasped a hand to my mouth. "You're looking for weapons!" I said. "Aren't you?"

"Better to be safe than sorry."

With his earlier brush with an assassin, I suppose it was a normal reaction. I felt relieved I didn't have a blade on me... and then felt annoyed that I hadn't even *thought* to bring protection! Why hadn't I thought of that?

Finally, he leaned back. "All right. You're clean."

"I could have told you that."

"I want to kiss you," Prince Rayaw said bluntly.

I was shocked at his bold statement. Was this how it was meant to go? I wondered.

“Have we... bonded yet?” I asked.

“There’s more time for bonding later. Now, it’s time for mating.”

His eyes drifted down to my lips and back up again. His expression became misty with lust.

I swallowed in a throat that felt dry as sand. I wanted to argue, to keep on talking, suddenly unsure if I wanted this to happen.

Then he leaned into me and pressed his lips against mine. And all thoughts of fighting melted beneath it.

RAYAW

My Steyatt had been growling at me ever since I had first laid eyes on her.

Her voluptuous frame, her hips, wide and made for mating, her seductive eyes, chisarc brown and obscene beyond all words.

All day she had been in my midst, working somewhere as a maid in the palace. *Always within sniffing distance...*

Her scent filled me now to the brim, so strong I could hardly contain myself. Her skin was soft beneath my touch, nothing like the scales of the Ulsen.

She was nervous, and although there was an obvious resistance on the surface, I sensed that underneath it all, she was willing.

Extremely willing.

I couldn't deny that the situation we had found ourselves in excited me too. She *belonged* to me, and I could do *whatever* I wished with her.

I hadn't even known that her father had taken priceless heirlooms and was not likely to take action against him. Any harm he brought upon the royal family name was all to the good in my opinion.

But what was I to do with a morsel that so willingly stumbled into my midst during Steyatt week? How could I *not* take advantage?

Especially since the mate Ges had prepared for me had turned out to be a whole lot *less* willing.

Willing to slit my throat, perhaps!

When I came into the Pink Petal Suite, I wasn't sure I would find her here. But there she was.

Ready.

I checked under the pillow in case she had stored a weapon there and then checked her person too, just in case. As good as mating with her would be, it wasn't worth getting my throat slit over!

Never tempt fate—at least not twice over the same thing.

Now, I pressed my lips to hers, finding them soft. The whimper that came from them only spurred me on to greater depths of excitement.

I placed my hand on her bare knee and she stiffened beneath my touch. She attempted to pull back, but I pressed my lips onto her further and, eventually, very slowly, I began to feel a lessening of her resistance and an increase in her participation.

She pressed her lips against mine, but it felt robotic. My tongue danced around her lips, begging for entrance, and when finally she permitted it, I found her tongue inside her mouth, still and dormant, but as I caressed it, it too came to life.

I raised my hand to her waist, pulled up her shirt, and reached for the softness of her skin. When I pulled back just a couple of inches, enough to take in her whole face, and she mine, we looked each other over.

I saw in her face the same surprise I was wearing on mine. Surprise that she tasted so good, surprise that she was so willing.

I pressed forward, kissing her on her cheeks, nose, and lips. She opened herself to me.

She leaned back on the bed beneath me and pressed my weight on top of her—not all of it, as I didn't want to crush the poor little thing—but enough for her to feel me. I ground my

hard cock against her leg and she let out another groan of satisfaction.

Satisfaction.

Yes, I was certain that was what I would attain this week.

Then I became aware of something that had not occurred to me before. When I compared the seduction that oozed from the mate Ges had procured for me to how Camila was with me now, there was no competition for which turned me on more...

It was Camila.

And it was due to her being genuine.

Everything Akhi had done had been an act; from the clothes she wore, to the pose she adopted... all of it had been playing a role merely to lure me closer.

With Camila, there was none of that. She was real, genuine. I could reach out and touch her, knowing that everything she muttered or groaned or gasped was because of the effect *I* was having on her.

She was like me. Real, genuine. There was not an ounce of fakeness about her.

I reached under her shirt and began to pull it off over her head.

She waved a hand to stop me. My anger flicked into being and then immediately dissipated as she began unbuttoning her blouse instead.

Yes, I thought with a smile, of course. What was more real than not wanting to have her uniform destroyed—no matter how passionate the lovemaking?

As she unbuttoned her blouse from the top, I began from the bottom. I looked up at her and we watched each other as we undressed her before me.

She leaned back and I gently peeled the wrapping from her body. Her skin was smooth and without blemish, perfect. Her small breasts were pert and hard.

I lowered my lips to her skin and she gasped before I even touched her. I paused, looked up at her, and balanced my chin on her belly.

“I want you to enjoy this,” I said. “This doesn’t have to be all about me, although most of my species think that way. I want you to enjoy this. And if there is ever anything that we do or do not do that you like, just let me know.”

The smile erased the hard lines of her frown, replacing it with relief. She smiled at me and nodded. “Okay.”

And with that, she had given me permission.

Still, I couldn’t help but notice the situation of the deal we had made hanging over us, like a dark shadow. I kept batting it away as I lowered my lips to her skin and caressed her breasts, lapping at them.

She gasped again as she leaned her head back on the bedspread.

I pinched her nipples, almost painfully, and sucked them between my lips. I gently caressed the knobs of her nipples and they grew harder still. Camila reached down and grasped her other breast, pinching it in unison.

Then I kissed down her belly, raised her skirt, and pulled down her panties with a single finger, sliding them down her leg. I kissed its trail inch by inch until the underwear hung from one of her feet. I liked the look of it there, hanging limp.

When I looked up, I saw the most glorious sight I could imagine:

Her sex glistened softly with expectation, her eyes big and wide, her breasts still wet with my saliva. My cock had hardened to the point where it might have been carved from stone.

I growled at the back of my throat and fell upon my knees, like a worshiper at the altar of seduction. I immediately fell upon her sex, lapping at it with relish.

She groaned, her hips already bucking against my face, willing, hungry. As I raised the hood of her sex and lapped at

the small round circle I found there, she let out a high-pitched wheeze.

It appeared I had found one of her spots.

I buried my mouth on her, supping on her juices, taking my time, going slowly, gradually working the speed up faster and faster.

Her hips bucked with my movements and her hands slid through my hair, rising to brace my horns and run a finger around the hard edges.

Although there were no nerve endings in my horns, I could nonetheless feel the soft press of her fingertips against my forehead. It spurred me on to even greater excitement.

As her head flopped to one side and then the other, her whimpers turning to unbridled screams, I buried my tongue into her deeper, lapped at her harder, tasting every sweet drop she gave me.

When she screamed, her legs squeezed my face. I kept my tongue buried inside her, rubbing at the soft ridges on the upper side of her sex.

As I slowed, her orgasm released, and she lay flat on the bed, her arms out to either side, panting.

Her sex beckoned: *Enter me. Enter me now.*

I got up onto my knees before her, spread her legs out to each side so I could penetrate her at the best possible angle, unzipped my flies, and let my cock thud onto the bed.

Camila peered up at me with deep lines on her face—of fear? concern?—I wasn't quite sure what the emotion was but I knew it was one that I did not wish to see.

It was the look of someone being *forced* against their will. Her body might have reacted to my approaches but that did not mean her mind had joined along with it.

She might have smiled when I said I wanted her to enjoy it, but she might have only done so out of politeness, or worse yet, fear that if she produced any other reaction, she might have stoked my anger upon her.

Nothing could be further from the truth, but she wasn't to know that.

The Steyatt growled within me. It roared and snapped at me, my cock mere inches from the warm folds of her entry. My every instinct begged me to finish what I had begun...

But my mind was not in sync with my body any longer. I wanted her—how *desperately* I wanted her!—but I could not take her. Not like this. Not based on the deal we had agreed.

She had come to protect her father, to ensure him and his future, that his freedom would not be at stake. And I had taken full advantage of it. Like the royal “elite” scumbag I was.

I felt disgusted at myself. I turned my eyes from her and pulled back.

“Is... Is something wrong?” she said, easing up onto her elbows to look at me.

“No. Nothing's wrong. It's just...” I looked up but couldn't meet her eyes. “This is wrong. All wrong.”

I zipped myself up and rushed out of the room.

I MARCHED through the corridors and uttered no words of apology when I almost ran over the servants, who hastily dived out of the way.

Twice I spun around, heading back towards the Pink Petal Suite, and each time, I continued my march away.

I tried to ignore the snarls from my Steyatt which, once again, had been snubbed into submission.

Eventually, over the course of the mating week, if it was not satisfied, it would lead to hostile aggression for the rest of the year. Nothing made an Ulsen more aggressive than failing to satisfy himself during the Steyatt.

Why didn't I do what I had gone there to do? What was wrong with me?

I had a sexy female beneath me! And then I did something so stupid as to turn away and leave?

But I knew the reason.

I didn't like coercing her into this situation. She shouldn't have to deal with someone like that—shouldn't have to give herself to someone who would take advantage that way.

And yet, that was exactly what a royal “elite” would have done, wasn't it? They wouldn't have hesitated a moment to go through with what I had planned.

It angered me even more that I could not do what my “elite” family could. Naturally, I wasn't as abusive as they were.

A fine royal I was turning out to be!

I turned the handle on a suite's door and immediately burst in.

Ges looked up from his holo-communicator and raised a finger for me to be quiet for a moment. He nodded into the receiver, ended the call, took a deep breath and... swept the entire holo-communicator unit onto the floor.

He threw back his head, curled his fists into hard balls, and screamed bloody murder. After he had finished, still snorting through his broad nostrils and glaring at the wall as if that was the cause of his hardship, I said:

“I suppose finding new Steyatt mates isn't progressing well?”

He spun and jabbed a finger at me. “Not going well?” He spat. “Not going well? I've called every facilitator on this damn planet and not one of them has a willing mate! Not for *any* price! What is the world coming to when an Ulsen in Steyatt can't find a single female mate?”

His eyes were bloodshot red, his muscles big and huge and tense. And I thought *I* was having a bad day!

I decided not to tell him that I had just given up a willing female as it might just push him over the edge. I knew full well an unsatisfied Ulsen was capable of anything in that state.

“Something will come up,” I said assuringly.

“Come up? I can tell you something that has come up each and every second of every day!” He grabbed his crotch. “You do realize what will happen to us if we don’t mate this week, don’t you?”

Of course I did. All Ulsen did.

“Anger, frustration, and no way to satisfy ourselves for an entire year!” he groaned. “It doesn’t matter how many females we fuck after Steyatt week, we will experience the worst year of our lives—guaranteed!”

Ever since coming-of-age, I had never failed to find a mate during Ulsen week, even though I had been dirt poor. Strange then, wasn’t it, that after I had inherited unimaginable wealth, now was the only time I stood to break my streak?

What did it say about the value of money when it could not buy the things you truly needed?

I crossed to my friend and slapped a hand on his shoulder. “Trust me. You’ll come up with something. You always do.”

He just glared at me, grunting through his flared nostrils, and slowly, he began to relax. “I hope so. If I don’t... things are going to get pretty ugly around here.”

I had seen him lose his temper in the past and it was never a fun experience—even less so for the one his frustration was aimed at.

“I’ll let you get on with it,” I said. “I’m going to sweat it out of my system.”

He waved a hand vaguely before picking up his demolished communicator.

I marched through the corridors until I came to the fitness room. An entire gym—just for me!

Say what you wanted about the royal family—and I often said all of them more aggressively than most—but they sure knew how to live.

I switched into my workout clothes and grabbed a bottle of water. The fitness room of a Ulsen was very different to those of other species. Our gyms did not have carefully calibrated weights to help facilitate muscle growth, and instead preferred to use real-world objects.

Here, a huge rock that we picked up and hurled at the reinforced floor in the corner. It worked your legs, arms, back, everything.

I grunted as I bore its weight, pulled it up onto my back, and held it there for a moment, before tossing it up into the air. I fell onto my back and caught it with the soles of my feet. Then I ran it around in circles, spinning faster and faster, before tossing it up into the air again.

I sprang up onto my feet and caught it in my arms and chest, before hurling it across the room.

There, another favorite Ulsen exercise: felled foorgaad logs that were so dense they rivaled rocks for weight.

I bent down, picked one up, held it in my arms, my body already shaking beneath its immense weight, and tossed it upward. It landed alongside the rock.

Then I picked up a series of smaller rocks and juggled them. The sweat glistened on my body and ran in long rivulets to the floor.

Then I put braces on my horns before running headfirst into a solid brick wall. Again, these were not normal bricks, but solid blocks of bhaak concrete.

They were virtually indestructible—and they needed to be, as I sprinted at them over and over again, slamming my head and horns into them.

The key was to run as fast as you could, without fear and, at the last moment, lower your head so that your neck was in perfect alignment with your spine and—

Crash!

I added a couple of extra head butts for good measure.

Panting and exhausted, I drank some water and peered around the room. I realized with cold certainty that exercise, no matter how hard, was a poor replacement for mating.

My muscles might be relaxed but my mind never would be. I needed to empty myself inside a willing female, needed to expel all my anger and pent up frustrations into her.

And with the difficulty Ges was having in finding another female, I knew I may not have a choice but to use Camila for my own ends.

I needed Camila.

I took a shower and took a hand to myself. I came within moments, my senses already on high alert after my earlier near-mating.

As the water washed over me, taking my come away, I was still not satisfied. I wasn't sure I could control myself much longer. I needed to take action.

Right now.

I would bring Camila back to the suite and finish what we had started. I would explain to her why I hadn't been able to finish earlier. I didn't expect her to understand.

I dried myself off, dressed in fresh robes, and marched through the endless palace hallways in search of Camila. I ducked my head into one room after another, coming across multiple pairs of servants, and each time grunted when I saw she wasn't there.

When I stuck my head into the Games Room, I once again snorted, turned on my heel, and began to march away when I paused and turned back.

It was the young girl Camila had been working with earlier. Camila, apparently, had not yet returned, although it had already been over an hour since I had left her.

I entered the room and Emma—at least, I thought her name was Emma—gave a yelp when she turned and caught sight of me.

She immediately lowered her eyes to the floor. “Your Highness!”

I hardly felt like a highness right then! I wondered if the royal family could control their powerful urges to mate during Steyatt week. Maybe they could, but I certainly couldn't!

“You're not in trouble,” I said. “I'm looking for Camila. Where is she?”

“Camila?” Emma shook like a leaf on a stormy night. “Why... she went to meet you.”

I blinked at that. “That was over an hour ago. You're telling me she hasn't returned to work with you since?”

I imagined Camila splayed wide open and naked before me, ready for me to use as I saw fit... And then her feeling humiliated, needing to immediately get dressed and leave.

I couldn't blame her if she had decided to turn and run from the palace and never return. It was such an embarrassing event that she might have even felt relieved in the knowledge that I would not chase her, for fear that the new Prince could not perform.

If she thought that, she was in for a rude awakening!

I turned on my heel and began to march away when Emma said, “Yes, she came back. For a little while, at least.”

I pulled up short, missing a step and almost colliding with the wall. “She came back? Then where is she?”

“She learned you wished to see her in the Pink Petal Suite.”

Was it already common knowledge? I wondered. Did all the servants now know of our arrangement? Something didn't quite seem right about this whole situation, and I stepped toward Emma once more.

She whimpered.

“When was this?” I asked.

“About... About ten minutes ago, Your... Your Highness.”

She formed an awkward curtsy.

“Ten minutes?” I said. “But I didn’t—”

Then it dawned on me. I was not the only Ulsen suffering from the Steyatt without a female partner. There was one other in the palace...

The blood fell from my face. “Tell me,” I said, my throat dry. “Who told Camila to return to the Pink Petal Suite?”

Emma’s eyes glanced up into mine for the briefest moment, her cheeks flared red, and she looked away. I had never seen pure terror before, but I saw it then in her features.

“Who?” I asked, fearing I already knew the answer.

“Ges.”

I STORMED through the corridors as fast as my legs could carry me. With each step, I asked myself the same question:

“Camila is mine! Surely Ges wouldn’t use her for his own purposes?”

Ordinarily, perhaps not, but these were not ordinary times. This was Steyatt week.

And that meant anything was possible.

During the Steyatt, males had been known to attack—even kill—their best friends and siblings when a female was contested. And as good friends as we had become, Ges was certainly not my best friend.

My *father* had been my best friend. My only true confidant and mentor. And that meant Ges was capable of just about anything.

Even stealing my Steyatt mate from under me.

The closer I drew to the Pink Petal Suite, the more certain I became that he had indeed taken up the opportunity Camila presented.

I came to the door and immediately burst through it, throwing it open wide. And there, standing before me, caught in the act, was Ges, leaning towards Camila, who looked terrified, shying away from him.

Ges peered over at me, brow scowling and creased with anger at the interruption. It took him a moment to realize who I was, and then his expression relaxed—a little.

Camila, thankfully, was still wearing her clothes, her uniform in pristine condition. I had feared I would find them—

I shook my head of the image as I did not need to further stoke my anger at that moment.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I growled at Ges.

“I figured... we could share. You wouldn’t leave a friend without a mating partner during Steyatt, would you?”

“She is not yours,” I snapped. “She is *mine!*”

I drew up to him, less than an inch from his squat nose. I had the superior height advantage and topped him by several inches, but he was broader around the chest. We were each bound with hard muscle.

He met my sneer with calmness. “Then... let’s consider the issue resolved,” he said. “I won’t take action against this female.”

I wanted to beat him, destroy him, and tear him limb from limb... but I knew that would be a mistake. It was Steyatt talking, not me.

“Get out,” I said forcefully.

If he didn’t leave soon, I would carry out my deepest frustrations.

Ges pursed his lips, the anger clearly visible in his bloodshot eyes. He bowed, but it was small and his horns barely lowered. “As you wish, Your Majesty.”

He slowly made his way towards the door and held it open for a moment as he cast a look back at the two of us, before shutting it quietly behind himself.

I was sorry for whoever was going to be on the receiving end of his fury after this little scene. I felt something on my arm and turned to find Camila having reached for my hand.

She flinched back from beneath my scowl. My body was heaving with disgruntlement, but seeing her concerned expression, I began to relax.

“Did he harm you?” I asked, reaching towards her.

She shook her head. “I only just got here. When the door opened and I saw that it wasn’t you...”

The blood drained from her face and I could well imagine what she had been thinking.

I stroked her cheek with my thumb and cupped her chin in the palm of my hand.

“Sharing me with your friends was never part of the deal.”

“Of course not,” I said. “It was with me only. Never Ges. Or any other male. Only me.”

Camila, her eyes wide and fearful, began to relax as she nodded. I was relieved to find she believed me. She *trusted* me.

“I wanted to apologize for earlier,” I said, but Camila waved me off before I could finish.

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“You do?”

“You didn’t know what you would be getting underneath this uniform,” she said, eyes fixed firmly on the floor. “I must be a... disappointment.”

How could she have thought such a thing? She was *everything* I wanted in a mate. “Don’t talk that way.”

“It’s true, isn’t it? If you no longer want me, I will leave you in peace.”

She turned to leave but my hand flashed out lighting fast and grabbed her by the arm. “You will go nowhere.”

She looked from the hand to me and must have seen the keen desperation in my eyes. I pulled her body to me and wrapped my arms around her.

“I don’t want to be your last resort,” she said.

“You are my only resort,” I said. “I would choose you before all others.”

Camila snorted but stopped herself when she saw the conviction in my eyes. I was surprised too that I meant every word I had said.

I pressed my lips against hers and this time they felt even softer, tasted even sweeter. She hesitated—for just a moment—before giving in the same way she had the first time we kissed.

She groaned again, and I grew as hard as a rock once more. The exercise had done nothing but stoke my desire for her to even greater highs.

Our lips didn’t leave each other as I reached down and began to unbutton her blouse—it was the last thing I wanted to do, as I wanted to tear it open, but I knew she would not appreciate that.

The moment it was open, I latched my lips onto her breasts, taking them wholly in my mouth and slathering them with affection. I did the same with her other breast.

She went up onto her tiptoes so I could more easily reach her. Then I slid my hand under her skirt and felt at her sex, already growing juicy with expectation.

I slid my finger inside her, causing her to gasp. She wrapped her arms around me, her face pressed into my chest, as I moved my digit in and out, up and down, growing faster and with more urgency.

I heard the moist squelching of her sex as she wailed under her breath, clutching me closer, grabbing great handfuls of my robes, as she came for the second time that day.

I withdrew my hand, pulling down her skirt and underwear in one single movement. I slurped on her juices on my finger

and picked her up. She was as light as a feather.

She buried her lips on mine as I placed her on the bed. This time, there would be no warm up—I didn't think either of us needed it—and I spread her legs wide enough to cater to me.

I placed a hand on her stomach, holding her down, unzipped myself, and placed my rock hard cock at her entrance.

She nodded to me and I slipped inside her. I grunted as she took me, surprised at the ease with which she did so.

She grunted too, first with pain, then acceptance, as I began to plumb her depths.

I pulled back, holding onto her thighs, as I began to spear her. She shut her eyes and leaned back, her breasts bouncing as I went to town.

This was not how I had envisioned our first time. I had thought it would be slower, more relaxed, but I was desperate to satisfy my urges, to show her just how excited she made me.

Within moments, I felt her tighten about me, her hips bucking as she met my every stroke.

She opened her eyes, wide as saucers, as I folded her legs together, placed her on her side, strode one leg over her, and attacked her from behind.

She screamed with each violent thrust. I bent over her and caught her cries on my lips, matching her screams with my own.

I rode her mercilessly, holding her shoulder and using it to pin her in place and using its leverage to grind ever deeper inside her.

Not once did she cry out with pain for me to stop. Instead, she only looked at me over her shoulder, her juices flowing freely, painting my blue cock white as I slammed into her again and again.

Such excitement cannot be maintained for long, and I felt my own orgasm fast approaching.

This was the first day of a long mating week and it was only that knowledge that prevented me from slowing down and pacing myself, knowing I could take her any time I wished.

And I knew without a shadow of a doubt that it would be every spare moment I had.

CAMILA

He perched himself on his knees, my legs splayed out to either side to account for his large physical size, then he looked at me, a flicker of emotion passed across his broad face, and he pulled back.

“Is... is something wrong?” I said, easing up onto my elbows to look at him.

“No. Nothing is wrong. It’s just...”

He didn’t meet my eyes. “This is wrong. All wrong.”

Then he zipped up his pants and was gone.

I just lay there for a moment, not quite understanding what had just transpired. It almost felt like a nightmare, where everything turned against you, your greatest fears were realized, and you hoped and prayed that it was all just a dream and that you would wake up at any moment. And when you did, you felt a great sense of relief.

When I shut my eyes, told myself to wake up, and opened them again, I found myself still lying there, spreadeagled. Dripping with expectation. My *nightmare* had actually come true.

I quickly pulled on my panties and clothes, doing up my blouse. I felt strange, conflicted. I was there based on a deal we had agreed upon, a deal that I hadn’t been altogether excited about carrying out.

At least, I *thought* I hadn’t been excited at the prospect. But when he told me he wished for me to enjoy the moment

too, to give him feedback and let him know what I liked and disliked...

It was not what I was expecting at all.

And the delicious way with which he consumed me, tasting me as if I were a delicious banquet just for him...

It was a far cry from the hasty pump and dump I had expected.

I hurried to the bathroom and looked myself over. No one would have been any the wiser, I thought. I looked just as I had thirty minutes earlier when I entered the suite.

But underneath it all, I felt different.

Why didn't he want me? I wondered. I thought the Ulsen couldn't control themselves during their Steyatt? Prince Rayaw *had* controlled himself and dismissed me like I was nothing.

I felt equal parts angry and relieved—a strange and heady mix that made my head swim. As I left the suite and threaded my way back through the long hallways, I tried to ignore what had just happened.

I wasn't entirely sure *what* had just happened. I felt insecure, shocked that he had not taken full advantage of me. After all, he had me exactly where he wanted me and—

“Camila?”

I started and turned to find Emma standing in the library leaning against the doorframe with her hip. “I thought you were going for a short break, not taking half the day off!”

She was smiling, but it was curious. She wanted some form of gossip, but I was not the person to give it to her.

“Sorry,” I said, taking the rag out of my front apron pocket. “Time must have... slipped away from me.”

I drifted into a state of flow, losing myself to the task at hand. I thought about running and getting away from the palace—and it wasn't the first time I had considered that!—

but I would be damned if I would be accused of welching on our deal.

If Prince Rayaw decided not to use me during his Steyatt week, that was up to him. But I would not allow him to claim I hadn't fulfilled *my* side of the bargain by running away.

I built up a good sweat and the concerns of the earlier scene in the Pink Petal Suite drifted from my mind. It was only interrupted when I heard the familiar "Eep!" from Emma's lips as she hastily climbed off the table she had been bent over, turned around, and lowered her eyes to the floor, assuming her usual submission position.

When I turned, my heartrate beating hard and fast, I glanced up at the cause of her surprise. I had expected to find Rayaw standing there, but instead saw it was Ges.

My skin crawled at his presence. Distracted by my recent scene with the Prince, I had forgotten all about him.

He leered at both Emma and I, strutting into the library like he owned it. Perhaps, in a way, he did.

Prince Rayaw may have the title and possession of everything at the palace, but he took no interest in any of the wealth he had inherited.

Ges did, and that made him the new Prince in all but name. And he knew it.

Unlike Rayaw, he enjoyed the attention and power that came with such a position. "I see you girls are working very hard."

There was a moment of silence and I realized he was expecting us to reply. "Yes, sir," I said in unison with Emma.

Ges ran a finger over the tabletops. "The library has never looked so clean."

"Thank you, sir," we said again, with a slight curtsy.

Then he cleared his throat. "Camila? Prince Rayaw has requested for you to perform your... duty in the Pink Petal Suite. I trust you know the way there?"

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. That will be all.”

He turned and marched out of the room.

I shared a look with Emma, whose eyes were as wide as mine. Apparently for the same reason.

“Prince Rayaw?” she said. “He wants you to... perform your... duty in the Pink Petal Suite?”

Even Emma had picked up on the not-too-subtle true meaning of what Ges had said.

I couldn't meet her eyes. My cheeks flared red, and I hated that Emma now knew what was going to happen in that room. What other reason could there be for the Prince to want a lowly maid to join him in a private suite other than the most obvious one...

“You won't tell anyone, will you?” I said, fully aware of how desperate my voice sounded.

“Of course not,” Emma said, taking my hands in hers. “My lips are sealed.”

Sealed for about ten seconds, I thought. I knew how much of a gossip she was, and also knew that the moment I left, her “sealed lips” would quickly find a pair of willing ears.

I needed a way to ensure her silence. I could think of only one.

“Good,” I said, peering through my eyelashes at her. “I would hate for it to spread.”

“Of course not! I would never do such a thing!”

“I knew you would understand. I doubt you would want anyone to know about you stealing the Prince's antiques either.”

Emma's eyes broadened with shock. “But I didn't steal anything!”

I shrugged. “The truth rarely matters with accusations. Even if people just suspect it... Well, it would be very difficult

for you to keep your job here. Or find any others in this town. That's why I know, with us being good friends and all, that you would never tell anyone."

"No! Of course not! We're really good friends, aren't we?" she said, clutching my arm a little too tightly.

"Very," I said with a smile. "Sorry to leave you to do all the cleaning again. I promise I'll make it up to you."

She waved a hand. "It's no problem! I like cleaning! It's better than..." Her eyes snapped to mine before shyly looking away again. "Other things."

On that, we could both agree.

I tucked the dirty rag in my front pocket once more, let out a deep sigh, and left the library.

A Steyatt mate's work was never done.

THE WALK back to the Pink Petal Suite felt longer than my earlier walk away from it had been.

I felt nervous that I would have to go through a repeat of the previous scene that had transpired there. I blockaded myself against the negative emotions, knowing that he could only harm me if I allowed it. Whatever happened next, I would be made of stone.

He would not find the same willing female he had the first time we met in secret. I would be as hard as ice, and the moment it was over, I would immediately dress and leave.

I came to the Pink Petal Suite and this time, did not hesitate as I knocked on the door, depressed the handle, and let myself in.

The suite was, once again, empty. I considered turning on my heel and leaving right away—that would teach him to constantly keep calling me to this room!

This time, *I* would be the one to make him surprised at the sudden turn of events. I had hardly formed my thoughts of redemption when the door slammed shut behind me.

I spun around and found a large scaly hand pressed against it. The long arm belonged to a square figure standing behind the door. “Well, you sure took your time.”

I stumbled backward as if his words had physically struck me. It wasn’t the words that had stunned me into silence, but the sight of him.

Ges.

My lips flapped and only vague sounds came from them. “Y-you?”

“Yes. Me.”

He approached with long, confident strides, and smiled down at me like a wolf before a newborn lamb. In many ways, I supposed I was.

He reached down to touch me, but I stepped back and glanced towards the door.

“No one is coming,” he said, seeming to read my thoughts. “And even if they did, they would only be an audience for what transpires next.”

What transpires next...

I pulled myself up and raised my chin. “I’m reserved for Rayaw only,” I said, emphasizing his name meaningfully.

Ges seemed to take my response as a joke. “During Steyatt, males have been frequently known to share their females. And Rayaw and I are *very* close friends.”

He reached out to touch me again, this time managing to graze the front of my maid uniform before I skipped back another step.

“The deal we made was between the two of us!” I spat. “Not with you!”

Ges’ scowl formed deep bridges across his brow. “As I have already told you, what is his is also mine. You can fight

all you like but you will not escape me for long. You will be mine. And there's not a damn thing you or anyone else can do about it."

He licked his thick lips with his forked tongue as his eyes became misty with desire. "Feel free to fight. It only adds to the excitement, I find."

He fell toward me, his hands forming claws to tear at my uniform...

And that's when the door swung open, revealing Rayaw glaring at the two of us.

I had never seen such a look of anger in my entire life, nor felt the immense relief that surged inside me at that very moment.

Rayaw marched into the room and squared up against Ges, who seemed to quail—at first—beneath the Prince's glare.

Ges controlled himself, probably realizing that he had been wrong—that there was *one* who could stop him, and it was this male that had just entered the room.

I heard none of the exchange that followed between them, and was only grateful when Ges made his apologies and approached the door.

He paused in the doorway and looked back at me. In his glaring bloodshot eyes, I saw the expression of someone promising that this event was far from over.

After he shut the door, I fell upon Rayaw, relieved beyond words, all discomfort at our earlier scene disappearing in an instant.

And when he pressed his lips against mine once more, drinking me in, I opened up likewise to him, tasting every morsel of him, knowing that I would rather mate with Rayaw a thousand times before allowing Ges to lay even one finger on me.

I almost wept with gratitude.

AFTER HE EMPTIED himself inside me, I felt his entire body relax, melting like chocolate under the midday sun. He pulled the blanket up over us and wrapped his arms tightly around me.

It had been quick and aggressive, exactly what we both needed at that moment.

I stroked his arm, feeling the soft bumps like goosebumps on his upper arms. His body was breathtaking and belonged on the front cover of a lad's fitness magazine back home. He was muscular but not artificially pumped, as if carved from rock in the form of a Greek god statue.

Each time he moved, his muscles tensed, capable of smashing rocks between his immensely powerful hands, and yet they were capable of handling me so gently that I might have been a precious heirloom.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he said, trailing a finger over my bare arm, causing a series of tiny scale-like goosebumps to rush across the surface of my skin.

I shrugged. "It's all right." I was immediately reminded of how hurt I had felt, how unattractive I had thought I was to him.

"It's not okay. And you deserve an explanation. The truth is... I'm not a royal 'elite'. I wasn't born one and I was definitely not raised one. I thought that after I had inherited this palace that I had to become one and treat people the same way that they do."

"Badly?"

"With disgust and contempt."

I snorted. "Well, that's really something to look up to, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "Yes, I suppose it is."

“But you destroy priceless portraits of your ancestors and let people steal antiques that have belonged to your family for centuries. Is that something the royal family would do?”

“No. But that’s the point. I want to show them that I care nothing for their traditions or ideals, nothing for their antiques or heritage. I want to destroy everything they hold dear.”

“And you think that by letting other people rob you of your inherited wealth, they will realize that?”

“Yes. But I know now I can’t act like them. I care too much. It probably comes from my father. He raised me to be good. I always lived shoulder to shoulder with normal, everyday men and women. I suppose that’s who I will always be.”

His eyes dropped from mine. He seemed sad and disappointed in himself.

I placed my hand on his cheek and raised his face to mine. His golden-purple irises were majestic, powerful and strong; his horns took my breath away.

They were as exotic and as different from me as it was possible to get, and I enjoyed looking at him for that reason.

“That is not something to be ashamed of,” I said. “You are better than the royal family. And you don’t need to let other people steal everything from you to realize that.”

His majestic eyes flickered between mine, but he didn’t smile the way I had hoped after hearing my words.

“I must destroy everything they have given me,” he said.

“Why?”

He turned away from me and lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

“Why do you have to throw away everything that has been given to you?” I said. “It’s rightfully yours.”

“Because of what they did!” he snapped, before shutting his eyes and calming himself. “Or, to be more accurate, what they *didn’t* do.”

Whatever it was, I had touched a nerve, and it was painful for him. There was a depth to him that I had never envisioned.

The way he had cared about how our deal had put me in a precarious position, where he could have taken full advantage of me—as the royal family would doubtless have done—but could not bring himself to do.

And now there was this other aspect, about destroying that part of himself that he had not known had existed even just a few months ago.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

I sensed the poison beneath the surface, but I had no idea how to get at it. Maybe it wasn’t my place to question him, to try to figure out what was affecting him this way, but I couldn’t help scratching at his itch.

“Does it have something to do with your father?” I asked.

His head snapped toward me, glaring and angry, but I knew somehow, on a deep level, that it was not aimed at me.

I didn’t reach out to touch him. I sensed that now was not the time. “It is, isn’t it?” I said softly.

The cords tightened in his neck as he ground his teeth and turned away from me.

I took the risk and placed my hand on his elbow. When he didn’t yank it away from me, I knew he did not identify me as part of the problem.

I gently stroked his arm for two minutes, three minutes, five minutes... And didn’t say a word.

I had pulled at a thread, but I would not be the one to fully unfurl it. He was silent another five minutes before he finally spoke:

“My father. And before him, my mother too.”

I wanted to ask what happened, to push him to tell me it all, but I sensed how sensitive he was on the subject and let him speak at his own pace.

“My mother died at a young age. I never knew her. I never knew she came from a royal family, and although my father suspected it, I don’t think he really knew either. Then, about six months ago, my father succumbed to a cough that he’d had for the past two years. We tried to get medicine but couldn’t afford it. It came down to choosing between eating or him getting the medicine. He always chose the food. He didn’t want me to suffer because of his illness. Sometimes I stole the money and ran to the pharmacy to get the medicine anyway, and although he was angry at me, he soon forgave me.

“His cough got better... for a while, at least. But we couldn’t keep buying the medicine he needed. Eventually, he fully succumbed to it, unable to breathe between wheezing gasps. I worked his shift at the factory, wasting what little time he had left, when I should have been at his side. But it was the only way we could survive. I wasn’t there when he died.”

Tears shivered in his eyes and he turned away from me. Not that he was really looking at me anyway—his mind stretched back years to the origin of all that pain and anger buried deep inside him.

“After his funeral, Ges came to me and told me I was descended from the royal family. I didn’t believe him, but I went through with the DNA tests and when they came back positive, I realized he was telling the truth. I saw a way I could get back at the royal family.”

“Why did you need to get back at them?” I asked. “Up until then, they hadn’t done anything to you that they hadn’t done to anyone else.”

“Yes, they did. Some of them knew the truth. I believe they *all* knew but I will never know for sure. They *knew* my birthright, they *knew* the inheritance I should have had. They *knew* I should have been able to afford to hire the best doctors and surgeons, to pay for any medicine I needed to save my father. I could have saved my mother too. Instead, they remained silent. They told me nothing. And they were willing to let me die the same grisly fate my father had. I’m certain he caught it from all the dust in the factory he had worked in for the past thirty years.

“They stole him from me. They stole my time with my mother, my father, and every opportunity that I might have had. They took it all. Then, when the truth came out about who I truly was, they tried to deny me that too. They used every trick in the book, exploited every loophole they could take advantage of. They might have gotten away with it too, if we hadn’t bribed the judge into making a fair and honest decision.

“That’s why I want to destroy the royal Alwon name. That’s why I don’t care if someone steals from me or this house, because every item they take is another piece of the royal family’s respectability chipped away. Let it all burn.”

It was a lot to take in.

And I realized then why my father had felt comfortable stealing from the palace—because the new Prince no longer cared. Because, to his mind, he was not a real member of the royal family anyway, and everything he had inherited was tainted with their greed and dishonesty.

Tainted with the death of his mother and father.

Still, it didn’t feel right to me, like he wasn’t making the most of the situation. His anger was so visceral, so real, that I wondered if he could ever see through it.

I cleared my throat. “My father was manager at his palace for twenty years. During all that time, he had fired more servants than I can count for stealing. Then, after you inherited the palace, something changed. I think it’s the change in how the palace is run, that he felt okay with taking your heirlooms.”

“What did he need the money for?”

Now it was my turn to look away from Rayaw. *For an operation to fix my hip.* But I didn’t want to share that with him, to lower myself in his eyes, just as he felt lowered in the royal family’s eyes.

After learning the truth about me, he might not want me anymore. That wasn’t something I was willing to lose.

Not right now, at least.

Perhaps later, once our deal was over, I might tell him the truth. But not until then.

“On bills and... other things,” I said evasively. “My point is that by being here under you, you drew out the worst in him and the other servants. By allowing them to steal, you’re doing them a disservice, and doing more harm to them than you are to the royal family.”

“But if your father hadn’t stolen from me, you would not have returned to pay off the debt. Then we would never have met.”

He squeezed my hand. “Yes,” I admitted. “I suppose every cloud has a silver lining.”

He frowned. “Silver lining? But all clouds are purple.”

“On this planet. Not back on Earth.”

“A silver lining... Hm. I think I would like to see that one day.”

“The expression means that even in darkness, there is some light.”

He smiled at that and kissed the back of my hand. “Yes, great light.”

“You know,” I said, “when I read the news reports about how a new royal had been discovered, that you would be taking your rightful place in this palace, I had been skeptical. I think it was a common feeling at the time. I mean, I grew up here. I know as much about the palace as anyone. My father was Head of the Household for more than twenty years.”

I shut out the angry emotions that surged within me at the thought he had been kicked out for a single act of indiscretion and continued on.

“And then I realized the royal family really hadn’t treated us well. We are slaves to them, nothing more. There was never any chance of rising up, of improving our station in life beneath their bootheel. We were born as servants and we would die as servants, and no matter how hard we try, we will never step up the ladder of success. It is always impossible.

“But then you came along. A true half-blood prince, denied his rightful place in the royal hierarchy, and I began to hope—we all did—that maybe you would be different, that you would not be like the other royals. You wouldn’t blindly take advantage but might actually give back to the people.”

His focus was entirely upon me. “And now?”

“Now... you’re struggling to pretend to be something you’re not. That’s not a bad thing. If you’re trying to be coldhearted, merciless, and greedy, but can’t bring yourself to do it, maybe our hopes were well-founded. It means you can become something more than the ‘elites’ could ever be.”

“How?”

I smiled up at him. “By being yourself. By helping the people, the servants, and giving them a leg up, to show the rest of the empire that they don’t need to live under the tyranny the royal family has instigated for the past thousand years, by showing them that there is a better, kinder way.”

Rayaw shook his head. “I can’t forgive the royal family for what they did.”

“I’m not asking you to,” I said, placing my hand on his arm. “What I’m saying is, by helping everyday people, by giving them a chance to educate themselves, to learn, to give them opportunities and positions they never could have attained before, you make the royal family look weak, greedy, and merciless—which is exactly what they are.”

Rayaw looked at me for a long time, in deep thought. He didn’t shake his head, but the frown of thought remained on his brow long after I had finished.

By the time it had faded, he pulled the blankets back, placed his hand on my bare ass, and drew me onto his cock once more. “Then maybe I can practice... and begin by helping this female first...”

I ran a hand through his thick hair.

“Yes, please, my Prince.”

This time, the sex was slow, and built up into a crescendo like the very best songs back on Earth.

He ground deep inside me, making the breath hitch in my throat. I clutched him close as he drilled me first on my side, then on top, and then behind, hitting me at every possible angle.

My eyes rolled into the back of my head three times—*no, four!*—before he grunted and filled me once more with his seed.

He remained on top of me and wrapped his arms tightly around me, like a nut wrapped in the safe cocoon of a shell, warm and protected and sheltered.

I glanced toward the door—the only escape hatch available to me now—but knew I would never use it. Something between us had changed, and it was a change for the better.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I awoke to find the bed empty beside me. On the pillow was a small handwritten note:

“This morning, you looked like a *saaquitch*—which means ‘angel’ in your language—and I did not want to disturb you. You will need your rest for the rest of this week...”

He signed off with his name and a strange little symbol that I imagined meant a kiss in his culture.

I stretched and luxuriated in the cool sheets beneath me. My body ached in a pleasing way, as it was always my preference to feel used in the bedroom. After making love three times last night, I could confirm that I felt *well and truly* used.

I checked the clock and saw that it was eight o’clock, which gave me just enough time to take a nice shower, put on my maid uniform, and get some breakfast in the servants’ quarters.

Then I would continue with my duties—at least, my *pretend* duties as a maid—and think on the activities of last night as well as all the promise of the following six days to come.

My hip ached as I limped downstairs. I needed to remind myself to take it easier with Rayaw in future. There were certain angles that my hip was not yet used to performing and it was best if I could avoid stressing it as much as possible.

By the time I reached the servants' quarters and connected kitchens, my hip was warmed up and moved naturally. I met each of the servants' eyes as I descended the stairs, smiling and saying, "Good morning."

Most responded the same in return but I couldn't help but imagine a glint in their eyes at perhaps knowing about Prince Rayaw and my deal.

Did they know? Or was it just my imagination being hyperactive?

Had Emma flapped her lips as I expected she would have if she didn't have the threat of revealing a secret—true or not—about her in return?

I would have to speak with her this morning. If necessary, I would circulate fake rumors and get the staff focused on something else.

I grabbed some bread—the beauty with the kitchen staff being humans was that they always prepared a delicious buffet-style breakfast. I chowed down on my danish and drained my first cup of coffee like it was water. As I refilled with a second cup, a figure joined me at my shoulder.

By the way she moved, I could tell it was Emma.

"Have a nice night?" I asked with a glint in my eye.

The benefit of having at least one person knowing the truth was that I could still gossip with her about my activities... even if I didn't want her to spread the information among the other servants.

When I clocked eyes on her, I spilled the coffee on the floor in shock. Her eyes were red and bulging—from crying, I thought—but it was the rest of her face that struck me.

Her cheeks were swollen, black and blue, and her hair was dirty.

“Come sit down!” I said, leading her to the kitchen table.

She was slow with her movements, just as I had been earlier with my hip, only for her it was her entire body. She could barely walk. When she sat down on the hard bench, she flinched; no doubt she had similar bruises on her ass.

I grabbed a dish cloth, ran it under the cold tap, and gently pressed it to her face. “Did you have an accident?” I said. “What happened?”

Emma shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I... I don’t want to talk about it...”

Her voice was broken and cracked as she struggled to form the words around her swollen cheeks. She still had blood on her uniform.

I peered at the other servants, who saw Emma and instantly pulled their eyes away. Either they knew the truth or they wanted to avoid it. I didn’t need to worry about creating a false story for them to focus on after all, I thought, as Emma had come with her own already.

“What happened? You can tell me.”

“It was him!” a thunderous voice said behind me.

The Cook’s flabby arms wobbled as she shook her head, her hands curled into fists on her hips.

“Him? Him who?”

“Ges, of course! Every so often, another girl turns up, face swollen, tears streaming down her cheeks. We all know what happened but there’s sweet FA we can do about it.”

I looked to Emma for confirmation. She turned her face away, and it was all the confirmation I needed.

Searing, white-hot anger formed in the pit of my stomach. Ges was not only a creep, but a twisted, sadistic fuck. Scum without any sense of kindness at all.

It was one thing to be stealing from under Rayaw's nose—it was another to do something like this.

I bolted to my feet.

“And where do you think you're going?” the Cook said.

“I have to tell someone about this. I need to do something.”

“And who are you going to tell? No one will listen. You think no one has complained before?”

Rayaw would listen to me, I thought. Surely, he wouldn't want this on his conscience?

Then I recalled how close Rayaw and Ges were, and how he wouldn't even be in this palace if it wasn't for Ges...

But he had stood up to him last night when it came to me. Would he do so again, for his servants? For what was right?

A rock formed in the pit of my stomach as I realized I couldn't be one hundred percent certain how he would react.

I shook my head. I still had to try.

“There is something useful you can do,” the Cook said. “You can get her to the bathroom, get her cleaned up, and dressed in a new uniform.”

“She can't work like this!” I said, aghast.

“She can and she will,” the Cook said, her chin nodding along with her head. “This is not the first time this has happened, and it won't be the last either. Get used to it if you want to continue working here and be prepared for when your turn finally comes.”

With that, she turned and marched away.

Emma whimpered pathetically as I helped her to her feet. I realized why my father had chosen to steal antiques—not only to get the money for the operation I had desperately needed

but perhaps as a way to *deliberately* get caught so he could leave this place.

He was an old-school gent and not the type to quit his duty and give up on his responsibilities. He would have taken action to ensure someone else fired him instead.

“Come on, Emma,” I said softly. “Let’s get you to the bathroom. You can tell me everything that happened. And I mean *everything*.”

I would need to paint a lurid picture for Rayaw to fully comprehend what Ges was up to at the palace.

I would make sure the Cook was wrong—that this really *would* be the last time it ever happened at the palace.

Ever.

RAYAW

The sex had been greater than I had imagined, far surpassing the previous Steyatt weeks by a yiipsirian mile.

Each touch of her skin brought shockwaves throughout my body, each thrust inside her making me feel more and more like I truly belonged with her.

It was too much to hope for any Ulsen to one day discover their fated mate, but I was certain—and grew even more certain as the minutes passed—that she *was* in fact my fated mate.

I leaned back in my chair and let myself get lost in our exquisite night of lovemaking. I was not used to my female mate climbing on top of me and riding me to satisfaction—both hers *and* mine.

The sight of her on top, her legs resting on either side of me, her head tilted back and to one side, her hair spilling over her shoulder, and her breasts firm as they bounced with her own rhythmic movements.

I had laid back and let her enjoy herself—which I was in no doubt she did, as she shivered every few minutes, gasping, as she rubbed at herself while I was inside her.

And when she grew tired, I gripped her by the hips and mercilessly pounded her, the slap of our flesh reflecting off the bare walls.

She took every inch of me—no mean feat considering how small she was—and luxuriated in the sensation right alongside me.

Then, exhausted, sweat trailing between her succulent breasts, she leaned forward and I wrapped my arms around her, and continued to spear her relentlessly from below.

She screamed in my ear and I savored every cadence of her voice. When I emptied myself inside her once again, she moaned with joy, lying there, both of us tired and exhausted and spent, wrapped in each other's arms and sharing the peace of release.

Her hair lay flat and damp across her sodden brow. Her eyes were filled with wonder—no doubt reflected in my own face.

Then we talked all night, across a variety of subjects. The one that was most keen was the discussion about the royal family and the effect they'd had on my life. I'd never spoken to anyone about that—not even with Ges, although I was sure he must have sensed a great deal of it.

I could never bring myself to forgive them for the way they treated my parents, letting them struggle and die in pain. There was no mercy in my heart. But perhaps, just maybe, Camila had been right—that there was a better, more effective way I could embarrass and show them up.

After all, losing my riches could only serve *them*, not me. By losing my wealth, I would lose my ability to have any real effect on them. After all, I didn't see them giving up their wealth to exact revenge on me or anyone else.

Instead, they would have pursued shrewd investments—often to the detriment of the people they were supposed to serve—to line their own pockets, and would then use their riches further against their own people.

A total scam.

I would have to think more on how I might better be able to damage the royal family legacy, although such thoughts

didn't come naturally to me. Vengeance was not something my father encouraged in his education of me.

Instead, he had helped me see that the everyday common man had gifts and talents they could leverage to better effect. Each was born with strengths and weaknesses that, if honed, could lead to far greater prosperity.

I felt excited at the prospect of giving them a hand the way no one had thought to help me in the past. By helping the people, I could truly show the royal family up.

When I awoke this morning, it was as if a new sun had risen, illuminating the world with fresh light that I had not seen before.

I'd spent ten minutes stroking Camila's hair, watching her as she slept soundly in my arms. But I could not afford to spend all day in bed with her, not when there was now so much I needed to do.

Usually, I sat in my office and did very little, wasting the precious time I had. Now, I felt a burning passion in my heart, knowing what I needed to do.

The question was: How? How did I go about helping people?

I began by researching the donations the royal family had made over the years and noticed something very strange...

Every credit they had ever spent had gone towards non-profit organizations that they themselves owned. Although much fanfare was made on how the money had gone to benefit the people, once I began to really look, I found precious little had actually filtered down. So, not only were they only *pretending* to help the people, they were *enriching* themselves as they did it!

Their greed truly knew no bounds.

In that case, I would do what the royal family had only pretended to do—I would set up real organizations and fund them with my own wealth, to somehow create a way for the charities to pay for themselves, which could then be used to fund other charities and organizations...

It would grow and expand exponentially.

I grew excited just thinking about it!

The name of the organization sprang to mind immediately. The James Florian Foundation, named after my father.

I would not include any hint of the royal name in it, as I would not want any of the positive reputation to accidentally spill over onto them.

In fact, I might just use my original name rather than my royal name to make it clear to the people that none of this goodwill came from the royal family. And I would make it very clear about how I was self-funding it too, with not a single credit from those cretinous swine.

Then I would also fund investigations into where the royal family's funds *actually* went, how it was *actually* used. The news organizations were owned by the elites, of course, so I could expect no support from them.

But there were other ways of getting the word out via independent sources. I reached out to dozens of lawyers, many of whom shot back a response almost instantly, refusing to undertake such a task.

Still, there were a couple that were interested, who no doubt wanted to create a name for themselves. Already, I began to feel excited, inflamed by my sense of justice rather than revenge—although revenge would be a sweet side effect!

And it was all thanks to my tasty little human female mate.

I would have to thank her. I grinned broadly about how I would go about doing that.

A knock came at the door. "Come," I said.

I was pleased to see Camila, already dressed in her maid's outfit. She could wear the most unflattering things and I would still find her irresistible.

I imagined bending her over my desk now, hiking up her skirt, and going to town... Then I noticed the expression on her face.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

I feared it was something to do with last night, that somehow I had displeased her—although with her constant cries of joy and her body tightening around my cock, I found that hard to believe.

“This,” she said, stepping to one side and revealing another figure behind her. “This is what’s wrong.”

Standing in the doorway, staring at the floor as was her custom, was Emma.

I barely recognized her. Her face was swollen, beaten black and blue, blood stained her uniform, and an unmistakable trail of tears lined each of her cheeks.

“What happened?” I asked.

“That is what we need to talk about.”

She whispered in Emma’s ear, and the sweet girl nodded once and glanced at me, before lowering her eyes once more and shuffling away painfully.

Camila shut the door, strode across the room with a determined set in her eye, and took a seat across from me. This was not going to be a session of lovemaking, I realized, but something far more businesslike.

I lowered back onto my seat.

“IT WAS GES,” Camila said.

I was both shocked and not surprised in the same breath. I knew how aggressive Ges could be once passion had gripped him, but I didn’t believe he was capable of doing something like that.

“Is that what Emma said?” I asked.

Camila nodded. “And it’s not the first time this has happened either,” she added.

Okay, so that *did* take me by surprise. “Then how have I not heard of this before?”

“Because you’re too distant. The staff report to Ges, not you. And how many people do you think are going to risk losing their livelihoods for another member of staff?”

I frowned. “You have my word that I will look into this. No one should have to work under such conditions. I will speak with Ges and make it clear that from now on, he is not to go anywhere near the female staff.”

Camila folded her arms and looked away.

“It’s not enough?”

“No. It’s not.”

She rubbed at her upper arms as if she were cold.

I got up and moved around my desk and sat on the corner. I wanted to run my hand through her hair, to feel her face, but sensed there was something else going on that she needed to get off the chest.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Do you think it’s okay to beat your Steyatt mate?”

“Of course not! How can you ask me that?”

“Because of your reaction just now. She’s only a female human after all. She’s not important enough for you to take serious action against your best buddy.”

“He is not my best buddy,” I snapped.

“But you wouldn’t be here without him, would you?”

I shook my head and my anger abated. Was that it? Was that the reason for my attention being displaced? That I felt loyal to him and all he had done to me, and it had made me blind to what was happening in my own palace?

I didn’t think so.

“If telling him that he can no longer go near the female staff isn’t enough, what would be a reasonable response?” I asked.

Her eyes rose to mine. “Fire him.”

I threw up my hands.

“He’s beaten many of your servants, many having already left, unable to stay out of fear for their safety. Do you really think someone like that deserves to have the position he holds in your palace?”

“It’s Steyatt. Sometimes things... get out of hand.”

“Get out of hand?” Camila said, incredulous. “Will things ‘get out of hand’ with me one of these times?”

“Of course not!” I said, nostrils flaring.

“Then why is it okay for him to do it?”

“It’s not!” I said, surprised at my own fury. “But without him—”

“You couldn’t cope?”

And there it was. The real reason I had not noticed Ges’ activities. I feared I wasn’t good enough to be a royal.

Camila sighed. “Many things have been happening here that you’re not aware of. He keeps it from you. The servants steal from you. True, they could do with the money more than anyone else, but it’s still wrong of them to take it. And if they feel like they can steal from you, perhaps they feel like they can steal other things from other people too.”

“You’re taking this too far.”

“Am I?” Camila said, glaring at me. “Then how about this: I did a little research into what is really happening at the palace. On your grounds, you have a dozen farms of varying sizes. Some are small, others very big, and each of them pays you rent to farm your land.”

“Yes, so? Do you think I should not charge rent?”

“A fair amount for rent, sure. But how about doubling or even tripling it since you arrived here?”

She might have slapped me for all the effect that piece of news had. “Doubling? Tripling?” I said. “What are you talking

about?”

Camila nodded with more than a little relief. “I thought you wouldn’t know about it. It’s Ges. He’s charging your farmers high rent and when they can’t pay, he kicks them out of their homes and onto the street. These are families we’re talking about. Now he plans on bringing slaves to work the farms instead.”

She sneered at me. “Not even the royal family has sunken that low yet.”

She knew exactly how to hit me, and her comment knocked the air from my lungs.

“I will deal with this,” I said seriously. “I swear to you.”

But she wasn’t finished. “The biggest thief you have in the palace is not the servants. Added together, they don’t come close to a fraction of what Ges is stealing from right under your nose. He’s taking antiques, heirlooms, and I bet if you take a close look at your accounts, he will be stealing your money too.”

I couldn’t bring myself to believe that, but I would take a close look at the accounts to see if what she was saying was true.

Have I really been that blind?

On one hand, I wanted to destroy everything the royal family valued, including their name, but how could I do that without appropriate funds?

I couldn’t.

I would quickly become destitute and living on the street, struggling to get by as I had before, if I allowed the servants and Ges to take everything.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but if proven true, Camila might have just saved my future, and countless others I might have otherwise been able to help.

Camila’s expression broke. She stood up and placed her hand on my cheek.

I pressed my face into it.

“I know you weren’t born into this life. I know everything I have told you has come as a shock. And I know that it will be painful to lose the one friend you thought you had, but trust me, things will get better from now on.

“Get rid of him, change the rules in how you run the palace, and you’ll feel better, brighter, and happier. You can continue your crusade against the royal family, destroying their legacy one good act at a time. But you can’t do it with a leech sucking your lifeblood from you.”

The one ally I thought I’d had, the one who had always been honest with me from the very start... might very well turn out to be the one stealing from me this whole time...

“You don’t have to do this alone,” Camila said. “I’ll help you. But from now on, you will check the books every day and make sure I don’t steal from you—”

I was shocked. “I know you won’t steal from me—”

“You’re too quick to trust. Your father did a good job in teaching you to be a good and kind Ulsen, but you cannot afford to be naïve. Especially not with the royal family as your enemies. You will check the accounts every day. You will question every credit that gets spent and demand that it is accounted for. This is not about being greedy or being a royal asshole. This is about good financial sense.”

I nodded. “I will.”

But still, I was hesitant to fire Ges, not right away at least.

“Look, I need him. He runs the palace, the estate, everything. Maybe if I tell him what he’s doing wrong, make sure he doesn’t repeat it again—”

“Can’t you see how rotten he is?”

I could, but he was still the only friend I’d ever truly had.

Camila sighed. “All right. Then how about this: Make him leave, let him learn from his mistakes and return later. If he comes back a better Ulsen, then—maybe—you can hire him

back. But not in a position of power. He has already proven he can't be trusted."

I couldn't help but grin at her. "How did you get so smart?"

"A lifetime of watching my father at work."

"He sounds like a good man," I said.

"The best. Maybe, if we play our cards right, he could come back and run the palace again for you. But for now, it'll have to just be us."

"Us?"

I wrapped her in my arms and we kissed, our hands exploring each other's bodies—although I doubted there was a single inch of her that I had not already fully appreciated.

She kissed me on the lips and pulled back. "As for firing Ges, consider this. Earlier, you saw Emma's beaten and swollen face. Her whole body looks the same. Now, I want you to imagine *me* looking like that."

I blinked, and in an instant, I saw Camila's body covered with those ugly bruises and sores... all caused by Ges.

And I realized her point.

If I had not rushed to save her yesterday, then it would have been *her* who would have been beaten to within an inch of her life, and not Emma.

Emma had simply been Ges' second choice of victim. He would never have beaten her if he'd gotten his way with Camila.

Dark anger seethed within my heart, and I knew then I was capable of almost anything.

"Let me check the books," I said through gritted teeth. "In the meantime, have him brought to my office."

"He won't be awake yet."

I glared at her. "Then wake him. His Prince demands his presence."

Camila beamed at me and managed a curtsy. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

Very proper, I thought... until she paused at the door, blew me a kiss, and left.

BY THE TIME the heavy knock came at the door, I had finished going through the accounts and discovered exactly what Camila said I would.

Countless withdrawals, made without any note of explanation. In total, it totaled a small fortune. If this was true and what had happened to Emma had been willful aggression, what else was Ges capable of?

The idea of me ultimately being the one responsible for casting innocent farming families out into the street was disgusting to me. It reminded me of the all-too-familiar sensation of me and my father being cast into the streets through no fault of our own.

There had been no one to help us then, but now, perhaps I could repay fate a little.

“Come,” I said.

I shut the accounts and tuck them into one of the lower desk drawers.

Ges poked his head around the doorframe, his thinning hair sticking up at odd angles, his eyes still swollen and groggy with sleep.

“Someone said you wanted to see me now?” he said, with a little bite to each of his words at being disturbed so early.

“Yes. Come in.”

Ges shut the door behind himself. He swaggered into the room, looking every bit like he owned the place.

He leaned towards one of the chairs to fall into it before I growled at him:

“Did I say you could sit?”

Ges’ head snapped toward me and for a fraction of an instant, I saw murderous rage filter across his face. Then he forced a smile onto his face and stood in what he probably assumed to be a submissive pose.

“As you wish.”

He didn’t call me Your Majesty or Your Highness.

Now that I thought of it, I couldn’t remember *any* time he had used it... except when he wanted something from me. Or maybe after he had already taken something from me.

It set my teeth on edge. “Something has come to my attention, and it concerns you.”

“Nothing bad, I hope,” he said around a toothy grin.

I didn’t reflect his grin back at him. “This morning, I was greeted by a face beaten black and blue, a young maid by the name of Emma. She says you beat her after you dragged her to your room and raped her.”

Ges rolled his eyes as if I had just accused him of sneaking a cookie from the kitchens. “Please. She *wanted* to go to my room. Ask any of the servants and they’ll tell you how she’s been drooling all over me. She can’t help herself.”

“Staff.”

“What?”

“They are staff, not servants.”

Ges shrugged his shoulders. “Staff, then. Ask them and they will tell you. Are we done here?”

He looked about ready to turn on his heel, but I wasn’t about to let him go yet.

“She says she *didn’t* want to go to your room, that you dragged her there against her will. In fact, there are witnesses who say they heard her screaming and saw her beating at you with her fists to stop you from taking her.”

Ges peered around the room and chuckled. “What is this? Some kind of joke?”

“I’m asking you a question. A very serious question. Are you lying to me?”

Ges’ expression became stern and the cords tightened in his neck. “When have I ever lied to you?”

“Apparently, every day.”

Ges’ temper rose to boiling point. “You know how it is during Steyatt. Sometimes things get a little... out of hand.” I felt sick at hearing my own words reflected back at me. “But I really did think that she was enjoying it. After all, she was squealing with joy.”

I slammed my hand on the desk. “She was *not* squealing with joy. It was with pain and fear and suffering. You did that to her, and you will make it up to her.”

“With a second round?” he said with a smirk and an arched eyebrow.

“Money will never repay the damage you have done to her but every credit you have earned up until now will be given to her to help her start a new life elsewhere or continue working here, whatever she pleases.”

Ges’ frown was wrinkled and fierce. “You have no right to take what is mine—”

“Just as you had no right to take what was not yours.”

The cords in his neck grew tight, as he ground his teeth hard, before turning his head to one side. “As you wish.”

I bent down to open the drawer and slammed the file on the desk. “Do you know what this is?”

Ges once again shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s a ledger of our accounts. It appears you’ve been making many withdrawals.”

“It costs a lot to run this estate.”

“It does,” I said with a nod. “But what’s interesting is how the fees appear to have gone up ten times the usual amount when compared to the average over the past twenty years.”

Ges made a pop sound with his lips. “Adjustments require funds. The estate was poorly managed before. But don’t worry, we’ll get it running right. Is that all?”

“Some of the farmers have been tossed out and now their families are homeless. What do you say about that?”

“They couldn’t afford the rent. What? Are we supposed to let people stay here for free?” He snorted and shook his head derisively. “They should be making plenty of money. And if they can’t afford to pay the rent, then they’ll have to cut back on their living expenses.”

“The farmers are already poor and struggling to survive as it is.”

“Then they should reorder their priorities.”

“Food and water aren’t priorities?”

“Before a roof over your head? No. These farmers always have money. They just pretend they don’t.”

I fixed him with a glare. “You forget I once worked on a farm. I know how little money they have.”

For the first time since he came into the room, Ges looked unsure. “I’ll... make sure to look into it,” he said. “Have no fear. The poor farmers won’t struggle any longer. Now can I leave—”

I rounded the desk, keeping my body tense and ready to react in case he attacked me. I wanted to peer into his eyes and see for myself if I could identify his lies.

“There’s one more thing we need to discuss,” I said. “I’ve noticed things going missing around the palace. Portraits, priceless heirlooms, things of that nature. Have you been taking them?”

“Of course not!” he growled. “Whoever is filling your head with these things is lying! If Emma said that, she’s wrong! I fucked her so senseless she wouldn’t even know

what day of the week it was, never mind notice what was in my room!”

I remained calm. “So you’re telling me that if I were to send guardsmen to your room right now, they would not find priceless heirlooms?”

Ges shifted his feet, seeming to notice my own offensive stance. “They might. But they’re still in the palace. I decided to add a few to my room to... to make the decorations a little nicer. You know I like nice things.”

I’m sure you do, I thought. Nice things, paid for by me.

I was amazed that Ges denied everything, despite all the evidence to the contrary, and had an excuse for every accusation. I wondered if he actually believed his own lies. Clearly, I had, for the longest time.

But no more.

“Have you always lied to me?” I asked softly. “Or has it only been since I inherited my titles and the palace?”

He blinked in rapid succession, shocked that I had accused him directly. “I’m not lying to you! Everything I have said to you has been the truth.”

I snorted and shook my head. “The books tell a different story. There’s no way you could spend all that money on running the estate, not unless you are pocketing the difference.”

“I swear to you, it’s not me!” he said, jabbing a finger accusingly at the file. “It’s the accountant! If he’s been stealing money from us, we should take action right away—”

“It’s not the accountant,” I said. “He’s been working for the family for the past thirty years. Why would he start stealing funds now? And why is it always in your name?”

Ges licked his lips, the lies coming harder now. “Well, he must not like me. Jealousy is a terrible thing. He knew a new Prince was coming and saw an opportunity—”

I raised a hand, causing him to glower at me as I had cut him off. What came next was the part of the meeting that I was

looking forward to the least. I braced myself, prepared in case he lashed out at me.

“If any one of these things turns out to be true, and there’s no doubt in my mind that most of them are, then we no longer have need of your services.”

Ges just stared at me for a moment, as if I had spoken in a foreign language that he didn’t understand. “Come again?”

“I said, we no longer need your services.”

Then I looked him in the eye. “I don’t need you anymore.”

Those were the truest words either of us had spoken since our meeting had begun. Before, I had been a boy, growing up poor and on the streets, with only my loving father to protect and guide me.

Once he was gone, I latched onto Ges, who assumed my father’s previous role. I had believed in him, trusted him, but he had earned none of it, instead hijacking the powerful emotions I’d felt about my poor deceased father.

Then Camila had opened my mind to what my eyes refused to see. Now I knew the truth. And I had outgrown him.

Ges shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re saying. You need me here—”

“To steal from me? To take my money and antiques? To beat my staff? To rape them? No, I don’t think so. You’ve overstayed your welcome.”

I stepped back to move behind my desk, before turning on him again:

“And you know the tragic thing about all this? You could have lived like a prince here for the rest of your life, could have fed at the trough for as long as you wished, living the life you’ve always dreamed of... but instead, you chose to do what you’ve always done. To live with dishonesty and deception. But I can see your lies now, they are as clear as day, and I will not put up with it any longer.”

“You can’t do this—”

A knock came at the door and I immediately responded with, "Come."

Four guards entered wearing their full armored uniforms.

"You requested us, Your Highness?" the Captain said.

"Yes. Please escort Ges out. And make sure he doesn't return to his rooms. Have maids pack up his things and put them outside. They should also take the stolen antiques they will find there and have them returned to their rightful places."

The guards, taken by surprise, hesitated a moment before marching towards Ges.

"What is this?" Ges growled. "You can't do this!"

"I am the Prince. This is my palace. You work for me. As do the guards."

Ges turned to the guards and snapped a finger at me. "Arrest him! He's an imposter! He's not a real prince!"

The guards formed a square around him. They had a new master now, and it wasn't Ges.

He spun around, growling, teeth clenched tight, his hands forming huge meaty fists.

The guardsmen were Ulsen and heavily built. None were bigger or stronger than Ges but together, could easily overpower him. And I would lend a hand too, if the situation arose.

"It's that bitch, isn't it?" he snapped. "The one you've been mating with? She's been pouring poison into your ears—"

"You will not refer to her that way!" I snapped, bolting to my feet.

"She's really done a number on you, hasn't she? Buried herself in deep, like a tick."

I slammed my fist on the table or else I would end up rounding the desk and planting my fist in his face instead. "You will *not* speak of her that way."

Ges blinked and it was as if he had just awoken from a dream. Or a realization. “I was just making an... observation. That’s all.”

“Well, Camila has made plenty of observations too. Observations that I missed, too consumed with my own problems. But not any longer. Now I see everything the way it truly is.”

Seeing that he was outnumbered and overpowered, Ges glared at me with bloodshot eyes. “You are nothing!” he spat. “Do you hear me? Nothing! You wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for me!”

“And with all your stealing, I wouldn’t be here for long if you remained. Take him away.”

The guards dragged him towards the door. Ges had the intelligence not to fight too hard and only put up a little resistance.

“I swear by the almighty Creator that you’ll regret this!” he bellowed. “You’ll regret this! I swear, you will regret this —”

The door slammed shut as he was dragged down the hall, his howling cries fading.

I fell back into my chair, suddenly exhausted. I had done it. I had forced him from the palace. I felt a great weight lift from my shoulders. I realized then that he had always been an anchor, hanging around my neck, dragging me down.

He had taken advantage of my deepest negative inclinations towards revenge and passive-aggressive actions against the royal family. All the while, he had known it was not them I was really damaging, but myself.

I had been a blind fool. But no longer.

The door opened and Camila stepped in, her eyes brimming with tears. She raced across the room and hurled herself at my feet in the chair before wrapping her arms around my waist.

“You did it! You really did it!” she cried.

I ran my fingers through her hair. “I did. Thanks to you. Thanks to you being brave enough to share with me what no one else would.” I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

“Things are going to change now,” she said. “Change for the better.”

“Yes.”

“Have you looked around your estate since you got here?” she asked.

I grinned at her. “No. Would you be my guide?”

She beamed at me. “With pleasure.”

It would be a great deal of pleasure, but it wouldn't be hers. It was mine.

CAMILA

After a nice hot shower, a change of clothes, and a fresh mask of makeup to conceal the worst of the bruises, Emma looked almost as good as new. That is, if you ignored the broken, lost look in her eyes.

I couldn't help but feel responsible for what had happened to her. After all, Ges had come for me, not her, and it was only thanks to Rayaw that I managed to escape her fate.

She didn't have a blue-skinned hero to come to her rescue and that, perhaps, was the worst part of it all. She was all alone in the palace, where not a single one of her co-workers had lifted a finger to help her—nothing like the former workers who'd operated under my father's leadership.

The majority of them were gone now, having moved back to the local town looking for work. The palace was the biggest employer in the area and they weren't likely to have much luck.

Others would have already moved away, looking for better opportunities elsewhere. They had amassed a lot of experience that ought to hold them in good stead and my father would always give them a good reference—no matter how hard Ges tried to tarnish their reputation.

I had gone to Ges' suite myself and knocked on the door. I only felt scared right before he opened the door as I realized I might have been setting myself up for the same treatment Emma had endured.

But as the handle depressed and the door began to swing open, I straightened my back, and raised my chin.

“What?” he’d growled, running a hand over his dry and dimpled face. “What do you want?”

“Rayaw wants to see you.”

“Who?”

“Rayaw. The Prince.”

Ges blinked against the early morning light filtering through the large windows behind me. I wasn’t entirely sure he had registered who I was, as his brain was only firing a handful of cylinders.

He picked up a glass of water—at least, I *thought* it was water—and downed it with a single chug. “It’s still morning.”

I bit back the smartass retort on my lips and instead said, “The Prince needs you. It’s urgent.”

Urgent that we kick your ass out of here! I thought with a wry grin that I made sure did not show on my face.

Ges stretched his arms, popped his back and neck, shook himself off, and waved me aside. “Duty calls, it seems.”

And off he went, staggering like a zombie.

I wondered if Rayaw would really fire him. After all, he was his only friend—sure, he wasn’t the best friend material in the galaxy, but he was still someone he valued. He might end up just giving him a reprimand, a slap on the wrist, and then letting him go on his way.

That way, he would only fire him after he had proven his unreliability a second time.

But what if he ended up hurting Emma again in the meantime? Or another innocent? Or stole as much as he could carry and took away any chance Rayaw might have for a comfortable life?

He would need to be watched carefully at all times, and with the majority of the staff loyal to him, I didn’t think I was

going to be able to recruit enough people for a round-the-clock offensive.

“What are you thinking about?” Emma said, interrupting me from my thoughts.

I smiled at her and gently stroked her chin—the only spot that wasn’t smothered with bruises. “I was just thinking how pretty you are.”

She wasn’t pretty but she was cute, and that could be pretty in a way.

Emma grinned and then flinched at the pain it caused. “I’m not sure I can work here anymore,” Emma said, looking at her hands. “Not with him here. Every time I see him, every time he looks at me...”

I placed my hand on hers. “I understand. Really, I do. But let’s see what Rayaw does first, shall we?”

“He won’t do anything. None of the royals *ever* do anything against one of their own.”

“Ges is not one of the royals. He’s just a worker, like you and me. And like us, he can be replaced.”

“Even if that happens, who’s to say the next manager will be any better?”

“I doubt anyone could be much worse than him.”

She smiled for a second time, risking the flinch that followed. “No. I suppose not.”

She took my hand. “We’re friends, right?”

I squeezed her knee, grateful it didn’t make her flinch, and returned her smile—with interest. “Of course we’re friends. We’ve always been friends. Even when we didn’t keep in touch.”

A knock came at the door. It was one of the other maids. “There’s a phone call for you.”

She immediately turned and marched away. Yes, I thought, these workers were a perfect reflection of whoever their manager was. Under my father, they had been kind,

considerate, and hard-working. Now, there was a culture of backsliding, laziness, and stealing.

To change the culture, you had to change those at the top.

I sensed a great deal of goodness in Rayaw but virtually none in Ges. By getting rid of him, the palace might actually stand a chance of surviving into the future.

I tapped Emma on the shoulder. "I'll be right back."

I picked up the communicator headset and placed it on my head. "Resume," I said.

A flash of light and the holographic image snapped into view. "Dad? What's wrong?"

My father peered at his communicator like an alien device. "Camila? Are you there? I can't see you."

"I can see you. You have to tell the computer you want to see me."

"I want to see her," Dad said.

I rolled my eyes. Technology had never been his strong suit. "Say 'Computer' first. Then tell it what you want."

"Computer. I want to see my daughter."

The glow from the image of me illuminated his face. He grinned broadly. "How are you doing?" he said. "You look well."

"Not half as well as you! How's the fishing going?"

"Great! I caught a dozen ghleeap, half a dozen squishitch, and two dozen morparks."

"Sounds like a big haul!" I said. "When will I get to taste it?"

"As soon as I get back. It's on ice at the moment. It'll be nice and fresh by the time I get home."

"Glad to hear it."

"How's the palace? Is everyone treating you well?"

I wasn't sure if Dad knew just how many of his old workforce had been fired, but I smiled pleasantly and nodded. "Always."

"Any job openings?" he said, raising his eyebrows inquisitively.

No doubt he wanted to return to the palace to resume his old position, but I imagined he would take just about anything he was offered if given half a chance.

This palace had been his home and his workplace for the past twenty years. You didn't just stop being a part of it just because you lost your job.

"Maybe," I said. "It depends how today turns out."

His face brightened up even more than telling me about his massive fish haul. "Oh? Any drama?"

"You could say that. But it's out of my hands. It's up to those in charge."

He nodded before his smile faded and his expression turned sad. "I'm sorry you have to be the one to work off the debt. I swear to you that as soon as I'm back home, I'll find a position somewhere so that I can help repay it."

I waved my hands. "There's no need to apologize. I would do anything to be able to walk again. This is nothing compared to that."

He smiled but it was distracted.

"Hey, Bill," someone over his shoulder said. "Are you coming this round?"

I recognized the bouncy intonation of Dad's buddy, Jeppax.

Dad turned back toward me and said, "Sorry, babe. I got to go."

"No problem. I need to be getting on with work anyway ___"

Down the hallway, someone screamed and yelled. It was loud but the individual words were inaudible.

“What in the Creator’s name is that?” my father asked.

There was one thing that could keep him from fishing, and that was any news at the palace, and by the sound of it, this was something big and juicy that he could really get his teeth into.

“Nothing major,” I said hastily before adding, “enjoy your fishing!”

I ended the call and my father’s expression froze, then melted.

I turned and ducked into a doorway, just in time as guards wrestled with Ges, dragging him through the hallway and, unless I missed my guess, towards the exit.

“You’ll regret this!” he bellowed. “I’ll make sure of it!”

The guards could barely keep him under control.

The staff stopped what they were doing and peered from around the doorways to watch him being dragged out. If there was a better way to show everyone that there was a new sheriff in town, I couldn’t think of one.

If Ges, a close friend of Prince Rayaw, could be fired for improperly carrying out his duties, then what chance did everyone else have?

Ges spotted me and his head snapped in my direction. His eyes grew large and bulbous and red. He jabbed an accusing finger at me. “You! This is all your fault! I swear by the Creator himself that you will pay for this!”

I couldn’t help but grin. I waved to him and blew him a kiss as the guards dragged him around the corner and he disappeared from view.

“What’s happening?” Emma said.

“It appears you may not have to leave after all,” I said, brimming with joy, before turning and running down the hallway towards Rayaw’s office.

He had done the right thing. And it opened the door to lots of other exciting things to.

THE FAYAM I was riding had a thick bushy mane that reminded me of those papier-mâché dragons the Chinese used during their New Year's celebrations. It always appeared to be grinning and tossed its bushy tail every time it felt excited—which was just about every few minutes.

His back was hunched and dipped down, before rising again in a kind of wave pattern—and that's where I sat, at the bottom of the dip, holding onto his reins.

Owning a Fayam was *waaay* out of the budget of someone like me, but I was fortunate to have had full access to the palace stables—thanks to my father. I loved riding them and always felt free on their backs.

Rayaw, having grown up poor but with no access to the creatures, held on tight to the reins and yanked his Fayam's head hard in one direction and then another.

I sidled up to him and said, “You don't need to lead him. Just let go of the reins and he'll follow me.”

Rayaw looked at me in a way that suggested he wasn't sure he wanted to put his life in a Fayam's hooves. Then, he relaxed his grip and rested his hands on the creature's bushy mane.

He was astonished when the creature actually did as I said and followed me.

I turned back and smiled at Rayaw, who beamed in return. Now all he had to focus on was keeping his knees tucked in tight to the Fayam's side.

I had given him these instructions and was pleased to see he was a fast learner. In other words, he did exactly as I said.

To think he had access to the stables all this time and hadn't even *seen* the Fayam! If I had inherited a palace like this, I would've gone exploring right away!

“Where have you been on your estate?” I asked him.

He kept a close eye on the head of his Fayam. “Uh, just the palace and surrounding gardens mostly.”

“That’s all?”

“Ges always liked to keep a tight rein on me.”

It made sense. You wouldn’t want your charge, who you were taking advantage of, to go exploring and meet the people on the farms, for him to hear their complaints about how they were being unceremoniously tossed out on their ears after failing to pay the exorbitant rent.

I was glad I could show him, finally, everything he had inherited.

I took him across the broad lawn that encircled the palace, something he would have seen from his office windows each day. Then I led him through a thin copse of trees before arriving on the other side where tall a lillarp crop should have welcomed us.

Instead, we came across empty furrows where a flock of azzika tapped at the soil with their feet, forcing the grubs and other alien bugs up to the surface. They quickly pinched them between their beaks and yanked them out, swallowing them whole.

No crops were growing, and it should have been the height of harvest season. It saddened my heart to see the farms in such a state of disrepair.

And there, the farmhouse at the center of the first small farm was similarly in disarray, the azzika having already taken over possession of it. It was a pretty little house with thriving gardens on one side where I used to play with the farmer’s children most summers. Now, it was overgrown, the weeds quickly taking over the flower patches.

I moved to the door, opened it, and an old azzika flew out in a cascade of fluttering scales. I ducked just in time and knew already what I would find inside.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the gloomy darkness and make out the skeletal-like structures of what might have been the remnants of an apocalyptic event.

The place had been stripped bare, with zero facilities for comfortable living. I tore my eyes away as Rayaw joined me in the dull emptiness.

He wasn't affected the same way that I was—but how could he be? He hadn't known the farmers that had lived here, hadn't played with their children, grown older with them.

“Maybe we'll get lucky at the next farm,” I said, climbing up onto the back of my Fayam.

I waited for Rayaw to scramble onto his creature's back before pressing on.

We checked three farms and found them all desolate. Not a thing was growing in the fields. I wondered just what Ges had been expecting. After all, if you remove the farmers, how could you expect to grow any crops?

I'd expected him to bring in slaves that he would buy in bulk from a black market and force them to do the work instead. They wouldn't know the soil on this planet, the seeds we planted, but they would work hard nonetheless.

Instead, there was nothing.

I brightened a little when I turned onto the fourth farm. It was middle-sized and grew the best bhutip on the entire planet.

I should have known that Acis would try to hold out until the very end. Farming was his life. His father had been a farmer, and his father... all the way back as far as records went. There had always been Acis farmers working the soil on lot number four.

When I spotted him, he was hoeing a small section of his wandering fields, but even his plot was not flush with greenery as I'd always known it.

He brightened when he saw me and poked the brim of his straw hat up with his thumb—there was zero chance of it falling from his head with his Ulsen horns jutting up through the middle.

His face fell when he saw Rayaw drawing up behind me. He lowered his eyes and continued hoeing.

I hopped off my Fayam and lashed his reins to the nearby fence.

Rayaw did likewise, although he was a little slower and more cumbersome.

Acis extended his arms to me, embracing me warmly as I kissed him on the chin the way I had since I was a child.

We held each other tight and said nothing for a moment, simply enjoying the moment in each other's arms.

He had always been good to me, giving me candy, toys and, most of all, his time. When I pulled back, I wiped the tears from my eyes.

“How have you been?” I asked.

Acis wiped his own tears from his eyes, but these were not the same tears of joy I was weeping. He looked haggard, tired, and old—much older than I remembered him.

Even though he had been advancing in years, he always seemed sprightly and young, filled with enthusiastic energy. Now, his movements were slow, his enthusiasm for his work having evaporated.

“Things have been... better,” he said.

“Where's Ifat?” I asked, referring to his only daughter.

Somehow, his face fell even further. “She left with her mother. There wasn't enough work for all of us at the farm. There's barely even enough for me these days. But I get by okay. They work in the next town.”

Getting by appeared to be a bit of a stretch of the truth. The small patch of produce he was currently growing was barely big enough to feed himself, much less sell to make a profit.

“How are you still here?” I asked. “All the other farms we passed were empty.”

The farmer shrugged his shoulders. “Farming is my life. Without it, I...”

He shrugged his shoulders once again and it was only then that I noticed how baggy and loose his clothing was. He was wasting away, struggling to survive.

“Is this because of the increased rent?” I asked.

The farmer nodded. “Yes. But I understand. The economy isn’t good, and we all have to struggle for a little while until it improves.”

He gave me a toothy grin, but he must have known the truth—the economy was booming and there was always demand for the kind of quality food he grew. It was only because of Ges’ harsh new rules that he was struggling the way he was.

Rayaw thumped his fist to his chest and bowed his head in the traditional Ulsen greeting. “I’m sorry for your difficulties,” he said. “But I can assure you they will not continue any longer. Can you show me your farm? It looks beautiful. I’d like to learn as much about farming as I can.”

Acis’ eyes brightened, and in that instant, I saw the same excited energy he’d sported since I’d known him.

“Of course, my Lord,” he said, bowing low. “My farm isn’t what it used to be... but I can show you what I have. Please follow me.”

He took us on a tour, showing us the vast acreage he’d once commanded but had since had to cut back as he didn’t have enough money for seed. He refused to blame the new Prince or Ges, and we had to read between the lines to fully grasp the problems he was suffering.

By the time he was done, Rayaw had a good idea of what the problem was.

“I’m about to have lunch,” Acis said. “It’s not much—much less than you’re used to, I’m sure—but you’re more than welcome if you’re hungry.”

Rayaw placed his hand on the farmer’s arm. “I’m afraid we have to be leaving,” he said. “But it’s very kind of you to offer. I’m going to send you a messenger the moment I return home. Everything you have told me has been very valuable. I

promise things are going to get easier from now on. With any luck, your wife and daughter will return to help you and you can rehire your old workers.”

“Many of them have already moved on to other farms on other planets. But I am sure I can hire others.”

He smiled, bowed his head once more, and then turned and waddled towards his small farmhouse.

Rayaw watched him leave. “All this time, Ges never told me anything about the farmers’ plight, how difficult it has been for them.”

“He’s been starving them out, forcing them to leave. None of them wanted to go. They just felt they had no choice.”

“What do you think the chances are that the farmers will return?”

“Good. So long as there are favorable terms. It might be slow going at first as they have to find their feet again. But mostly they will want to see if you keep your word.”

“I suppose Acis will be the giika-mau pig.”

“Giika-mau?” I said. It took a moment for my translation device to interpret it. Then I nodded. “Guinea pig. Yes. He’s always been the most loyal farmer. Both to you and the royal family.”

Rayaw bristled at my mention of the royal family, but it was the truth.

“The royal family means a lot to some people.”

Rayaw nodded absentmindedly. “Are there other farmers still here? I’d like to get a broader view on the problems and issues they face in other parts of the estate.”

“I can think of a couple that might still be here.”

We climbed back on our Fayam and trotted off down the road. I cast one glance over my shoulder, back at the farmhouse, its chimney already billowing a thin plume of smoke.

Hold on just a little bit longer, I thought, sending hope to Acis. Hold on. A new prince is in town and he's worth waiting for.

We ascended the hill, turned a corner, and the farm was wiped from view.

WE GOT HALFWAY to the next farm when the rain began to patter. I knew the rain was coming as my Fayam flapped its ears for ten full minutes before the first drop fell, but I hoped we could reach the next farm before that happened.

The rain grew heavier, and I knew we'd run out of time.

A wet Fayam was a sorry sight. With its long mane hanging drooped around its neck and shoulders, it looked like a cat that had fallen in a bath. It just didn't look right.

"Over there!" I said, hurrying the Fayam over to a barn.

The rain was just beginning to fall harder still, and as I opened the barn door, I led the Fayam inside and tied it up. I patted the Fayam and he whined gleefully at being somewhere warm and dry. I peeled his mane back and saw that the rain had not fully permeated to his skin.

Rayaw struggled to dismount and hastily tied his own Fayam to the barn wall. "Well, at least we're not drenched!" he said.

Then, as if on cue, the two Fayam shook like wet dogs and drenched the two of us.

I looked at Rayaw. He looked back at me.

We burst out laughing and wrapped our arms around each other as we headed deeper into the barn.

It must have only recently been vacated as there was still dry straw in one corner. We removed our clothes and hung them out to dry.

With the soft pat of rain on the roof and draughts through the craggy walls, I thought it was just about the coziest thing I could imagine.

A whisper of wind filtered through the wall's cracks and made me shiver. Rayaw wrapped his arms around me, and I could feel the heat emanating from his naked flesh.

I stamped on the hay and kicked it in case there were creatures already taking refuge within it. Thankfully, nothing scurried out and we laid down.

Rayaw embraced me, his scales offering far superior protection from the prodding hay beneath us. I rolled over onto my front so my breasts pressed against his chest.

I looked up at him, each of us with shaggy damp hair draped about our shoulders.

My lips trembled.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, snapping to attention. “Are you still cold?”

He ran his hands up and down the skin of my back, creating friction, making me warmer still.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just...”

He continued to rub at me, warming me up.

“I’ve... never been so happy.”

He smiled down at me and pressed his lips against mine. “I’ve never been so happy either,” he said.

“Will things change after Steyatt comes to an end?”

My initial fear upon hearing his offer had been me having to come and pleasure him... and now it had morphed into being concerned about once our time together had ended. I didn’t want it to end.

“It won’t change,” he said. “Why would it change?”

“You won’t need me anymore.”

He raised my chin and softly pressed his lips against mine. “I will always need you, my Muri.”

I cocked my head to one side at the strange terminology. I'd never heard it before.

"It means fated mate in my language," Rayaw explained.

"Fated mate? That sounds pretty serious."

"It is. Only one in a thousand Ulsen ever find their fated mate. And when we do, we never let them go."

"Muri?" I said, testing the sound out on my lips. "I like it. Can I call you it too?"

"Of course. If you feel the same way. It's a strong and powerful bond and can never be broken."

He took my hand in his and held me close.

"I do feel the same," I said. "I never want this to end."

He kissed me on my nose and forehead. "And it never will, my Muri."

It was too much. Locked away in a barn while the rain lashed the roof soothingly outside... The Fayam stamping their feet and whining happily... The warmth of Rayaw beneath me... My need to be with him at every moment...

And I thought scenes like these only happened in corny romance novels! But here I was, living my own romance.

"I want to have the farmers return," Rayaw said. "All of them."

"It'll take some time for them to trust you, and that's *if* they agree to come back."

"They don't need to trust me," he said. "They already trust *you*."

I arched my neck and peered up at him, resting my chin on his chest. "They would need to know your offer is real. You would have to come with me."

"Then we'll go together. With your relationship with them and my authority as the new Prince, we can build something really great here. We'll offer them much better terms than they ever had before, much lower rent, maybe even free rent—"

“No, not free. People only value what they pay for. They’ll pay rent but whatever we earn from it, we’ll reinvest in new facilities to improve their way of life.”

He smiled down at me. ““We?””

I was shocked. “Sorry. Not we. I mean you, of course. My ambition got the better of me.”

“No,” he said. “I prefer we. I have the inheritance and authority, but you have the knowledge and relationships. Together, it sounds like a winning formula.”

To live at the palace at Rayaw’s side, helping him grow the estate and farms, to do everything my father had once done... It was too much to expect.

Maybe Rayaw would change his mind. But that seemed unlikely with him calling me his fated mate; it sure didn’t sound short term.

There was just one other thing I wanted to know...

“I want to hire the old palace staff too,” he said, beating me to it. “Including your father. It seems like the palace has never run as well as it did when he was in charge.”

I beamed up at him, tears shimmering in my eyes and spilling down my cheeks. “You really mean it? You really want them back?”

“I’ve been asleep far too long. Now, I can do what I should have done since I got here and take responsibility as the new Prince.”

I frowned. “But what about the royal family? Aren’t you afraid you’ll give them a good name?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll do things my way. Our way. I won’t rip the people off, won’t take advantage of them. Instead, I’ll live to serve, the way the royals are supposed to. I’ll show the people they don’t need to live under tyranny. Somebody wise once told me that.”

He wrapped my hair about his finger, making it curl.

I reminisced about the first time we'd had a deep discussion about his inheritance and how he didn't care about his royal ancestry and how I thought he was missing a trick.

Rayaw had changed. He had changed, and if he lived up to his word, it would all be for the good.

I kissed him on his broad chest, fingered his muscular abs, and peered down to see that his cock was already at full mast. I didn't need to look up into his eyes to see he was gazing upon me with his usual fierce fire.

I lowered my head onto his cock and put it in my mouth. I licked it, savoring it, as I worked his full length.

He placed his hand on my head but didn't force me harder onto his dick. He stroked my hair gently as I went to work on him. He didn't need to force me to do anything because it was what I *wanted* to do.

I slurped on him until his juices filled my mouth, and then let them spill over his enormous member, running over my hand. I massaged the full length of it, making it nice and juicy.

With my other hand, I played with myself, rubbing, probing, feeling, at the same rate I was working Rayaw.

Once I had him grunting under his breath, I knew it was time to progress onto the next stage. I climbed on top, straddling him beneath me. His muscles tensed beneath me the same way the Fayam's had. Strong, powerful.

I took him inside me slowly, one inch at a time, until he filled me completely. Then I rolled my hips back and forth and ran my hands through my hair.

He placed his hands on my thighs but didn't press me down, once again not forcing, but letting me have my wicked way with him.

The sound of the rain faded, along with the earthy farmyard smells. It was just the two of us, two Muri mates, locked together in a single time and space.

With the soft gentle cooling breeze that issued from between the wall slats, I didn't sweat.

I pressed my hands to his chest and bounced harder, driving him deeper inside me. The gasps wheezed from my throat and Rayaw reached up and placed his hand on my cheek, then wrapped it about my throat, feeling each groan as it escaped my lips.

I slipped his thumb into my mouth and gently sucked on it, watching as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. I felt him grow even stiffer, his balls tightening beneath me.

I reached back and felt them in my hand. As he grunted harder, his nostrils flared and his balls tightened further still.

He braced my hips with his hands and helped bounce me harder onto his cock, but he did not pummel me from below as he could have done, and instead let me take him to his full release.

When he exploded inside me, I felt the powerful thrust of his hips until he spilled every last drop inside me.

Out of breath, I lay flat on his chest, the breathy whisper of my own orgasm having come in perfect timing with his own.

Were we Muri? One hundred percent.

RAYAW

Everything Camila told me had turned out to be truer than I wanted to admit.

It had been a shock to see the first few farms empty, bereft of farmers or crops. It simply didn't look right. Fields were meant to be tilled.

As we crossed from the medium-sized lots to the larger ones, we saw that those too were empty. I couldn't believe how blind I had been to give Ges free rein over the entire estate.

All trust had been lost and I was certain there would have been no way I could have healed the rift if Camila hadn't been by my side.

We had stopped at the dilapidated barn, and it was, once again, one of the greatest moments of my life. I was amassing them like pearls on a necklace, one unforgettable moment after another.

What was life if not a collection of unforgettable experiences, creating the life of the person that lived them?

When you survived on the street, struggling simply to feed yourself, you didn't have time to consider other people's needs and requirements. Survival trumped everything else.

I had come to the palace and seen it from the same myopic view. Camila was opening my eyes, helping me see that there was a great deal more to life than merely existing.

You could flourish.

It was also in the barn that I really began to notice Camila's limping. After our sweet afternoon of lovemaking, she tugged the strays of straw from her hair and clothes, gathered herself, and crossed to the Fayam.

She ran her hands through their thick manes and peered through the slowing rain through the gaps in the wall slats. I noticed how she favored one leg over the other, leaning on it as if she needed the support.

I became aware of the fact that I'd seen her limping like that multiple times over the past few days. Once when we made love too, as I added my weight to hers, she would flinch and silently hissed through her teeth.

Was I the cause of the pain? Or had I merely inflamed it?

I wrapped her in my arms and felt her warmth beneath me. I meant to bring the subject up but immediately forgot about it, losing myself to her sweet scent of flowers and the softness of her luxurious hair.

We looked out on the rainy day, fully engrossed in it, every droplet seeming to act like the needle of a tattoo, piercing deeper into my psyche to remind me just how special my time with her was.

I had made her a promise—to make the palace whole again—and I intended on keeping it. But I could only achieve it with her help.

I held her tightly, knowing that the following few days were going to be difficult, but so long as she wasn't far from my arms, everything would work out fine in the end.

THE FIRST WAS the easiest to convert to our cause.

Acis leapt at the chance to attain the farm he'd built before my arrival to the estate. We only managed to convince him thanks to the relationship he shared with Camila.

He packed his things and leapt onto the back of the Fayam that we had brought especially for him.

“Huh,” Acis said. “Looks like me joining you wasn’t much of a surprise.”

Camila shrugged. “I know how much your farm means to you and that you would do anything to get it back to the way it once was.”

We rode our Fayam over the hills and far away.

Acis admitted he had lost contact with many of the other farmers as, despite having far less to farm, he now had to do all the work himself, and didn’t know which lots were still operating.

We traveled from one lot to another and found most of them empty and abandoned. Each one drew an even sadder expression on Acis’ face, no doubt having shared many memories at each home we came to.

The depression gave way to grim determination as the importance of our goal began to instill confidence in him, encouraging him to keep going alongside us, to not give up, and know that things could only get better from here.

I could barely control the Fayam beneath me. I had never ridden one before and I found it unruly and difficult to control. As the hours passed, I began to feel a connection with the beast, which seemed to know how inexperienced I was and simply followed Camila’s or Acis’ lead.

It gave me time to practice controlling it by steering first one way and then the other. Finally, I picked up the reins and took the beast away from the trail Camila made for us and formed my own, drawing alongside her.

She smiled over at me at my improvement. I was far from an expert—how could I be with so little experience of the creatures?—but my natural fear of them had begun to dissipate.

We stopped at each farm that was still occupied and were treated to homemade food, snacks, and drinks. As delicious as it was, it made me sick to my stomach that I was taking what

they couldn't afford to give—mostly due to the prohibitive rents Ges was charging.

The farmers were kind and hospitable and it hurt me to realize that my actions—or in this case, my inactions—had led to difficulties they were struggling to surmount.

They met my eyes with the same look of worry and concern that gradually shifted once they listened to what Camila and Acis had to say, about how the farming terms would not return to how they had been, but would become even better.

“Why?” they always asked. “Why would you pick from your own pocket that which you do not have to give?”

I looked to Camila and Acis, and they nodded for me to say something, and what came from me was nothing if not true and heartfelt:

“Because I have enough money coming in already. I want to do more with it. I want to help those who are willing to work hard and help themselves.”

The farmer's wife looked over at me skeptically. “And why would you do that? No royal has ever given more than they must in the past.”

I couldn't help but grind my teeth at being referred to as a royal, and the farmer's wife was sharp enough to pick up on it.

“Because I wasn't born a royal. At least, I didn't know I was. And when I learned the truth of my heritage, the royal family—my family—tried to take it from me. I am no more royal than you or anyone else sitting around this table. I just happen to have been born into wealth that I never thought I would have. Now imagine it was you who suddenly found yourself owning this palace. What would you do?”

The farmer's wife's eyes sparked, and a smile curled underneath them. “I'd show those dirty bastards up,” she said.

Her husband hissed and hastily waved his hands in supplication. “Forgive my wife. She can be a little... lively.”

The grin didn't fade from the wife's face.

I smiled over at the farmer and squeezed Camila's hand. "Then consider yourself very lucky. I know how fortunate we are to have such women in our lives."

We left the farmhouse and I took Camila to one side. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to speak like that."

Camila cut me off. "You mean, the truth? You should never apologize for saying the truth. Besides, I think that was what pushed them over the edge. It's your story. It's the truth. And it gives them something to believe in."

By the end of the day (and after I had given my little 'truth story' more than a dozen times) we had reached every farmer still active on the estate.

Although some still seemed skeptical that I would really follow through on my promises, as Acis pointed out to them, "What do you have to lose?"

The farmers reacted differently—sometimes chuckling to themselves, sometimes shaking their heads dismissively and shrugging their shoulders—but they all agreed with his point. They really *did* have nothing to lose.

We returned to Acis' farm late. The temperature was cool, and the wind brisk, and I pulled up alongside Camila to block the worst of the wind with my body.

My scales were more effective in extreme forms of temperature—whether that was icy cold, in which case the scales could form tiny air bubbles beneath the surface to keep me warm, or absorbing the worst of the heat and allowing my inner systems to control my internal body temperature separately.

I invited Acis to join us for dinner, but he politely declined. "I have an evening routine for my crops and to leave them in the lurch would be akin to cheating on them. But thank you for your offer. It has been a very... interesting day."

He bowed from the back of his Fayam, climbed off, and walked back to his farm.

Camila and I returned to the palace where we caught the servants snoozing on the sofas and chairs, clearly enjoying

their free time without having to be constantly watched by me or bow with respect.

Upon seeing me return, they snapped to attention, their cheeks flushing red with embarrassment.

I waved off their concern. “You deserve the time off.”

“Would you like us to wake Chef?” a servant asked.

“That won’t be necessary. Just bring us whatever leftovers we have.”

Camila removed her gloves and disappeared into the bathroom to splash some water on her face. When she returned, she was more energetic but her exhaustion was clear in her eyes.

“How do you think today went?” I asked.

“Fine. These farmers are onboard. But they’re the easy ones. They never gave up, although I was surprised at just how close many of them were to it.”

I nodded, sensing the betrayal keenly, even if Camila had not intended to mean it that way. “How difficult do you think it will be to get the other farmers to return?” I asked.

Camila shrugged. “We’ll just have to see and do our best. That’s all we can ever do.”

The servants brought the food in—the leftovers of meals we’d consumed during the past two days. It was just what I wanted.

Although Camila wasn’t a fussy eater, there were certain Ulsen meal items that, as a human, she wasn’t used to.

When we finally turned in for the night, we shared a shower. The hot water eased my aching muscles—particularly those of my ass as they were not used to the saddle’s hard material.

Then we cuddled up close in bed, each of us too exhausted to act on the attraction we had for each other.

It was only in the middle of the night, after recovering a little from the day’s activities, while the meechara crickets

were calling and the giant house groaned mournfully, that we awoke and made gentle love.

We immediately fell asleep again in each other's arms. A perfect end to a perfect day.

THE PREVIOUS DAY, we asked each of the farmers what had become of those that had given up their farming lots.

They gave us all the information they could—in fact, when I asked, they refused to tell me anything, but once Camila or Acis asked, they relented and shared what they knew.

The vast majority of the former farmers were in the local town, having already found work. We made lists of names, positions, and company addresses. I had thought we would leave quickly, but Camila had a better idea.

She drafted a statement explaining the situation—how I had made a terrible mistake, that I had listened to Ges and really had no say in the running of the estate or the rising rent fees, and had been completely unaware of their effects. It was a poor excuse, but it was the truth.

It was the estate's policy from now on to be totally transparent with the staff—both the farmers and those at the palace.

I wrote their name on the statements and signed each longhand, then added the stamp of the royal seal—as much as I hated it, I knew the royal family had a special place in some of the workers' hearts.

I could use what few benefits that might afford me for now, but promised myself I would not make a habit of it.

It took all morning to sign the documents before we handed them to the palace staff who would have them delivered.

We had a big lunch, and then Camila stood up and said, “Are you ready to face the biggest challenge?”

I wasn't sure. We would head into town and confront the workers face to face. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“With you by my side, I can do anything,” I proclaimed.

“That's good, because some of the staff are not going to be as understanding as the farmers. The farmers are used to hard times with nature turning against them at a moment's notice. The palace staff are much harder to appease.”

Great.

Our first stop was the largest hotel in town. There were no fewer than five former palace staff working there in various positions.

I supposed working at the palace came with a certain prestige, as well as a skillset that would be appreciated in the service industries.

The first two worked the lobby's front desk. Petite with big, glowing smiles, they appeared welcoming and kind. When they laid eyes on Camila, their entire countenance brightened.

They were quick to check over their shoulders for a supervisor before running around the desk and embracing her. They conversed about how long it had been since they had last seen each other, squealing between hugs with words I could barely understand.

When Camila introduced me as the new Prince, their faces fell. All happiness and joviality faded instantly.

“We quit and carried out our period of notice,” they announced. “We haven't done anything wrong.”

Camila shook her head. “This isn't about anything you've done wrong. This is about something we want to fix.”

They cocked their heads to one side in unison. “Why would we want to return when we're treated better here?” one said.

“And there's no Ges to sexually abuse us here either,” the second one said.

Camila snapped to attention. “We’re... aware of Ges and his... actions towards the female staff. I can assure you he will no longer be a problem.”

Their eyes bulged in unison. “You’re saying he’s gone?” one said.

“I can’t believe he would quit!” the other one said. “Not with all the... benefits he gets from working there.”

For the first time since we began the conversation, the pair didn’t speak or move in unison. One rubbed her arm uncomfortably while the other rubbed her back supportively.

Clearly, Emma hadn’t been the only one to have been afflicted by Ges’ attention.

Camila embraced the slimmer girl, clutching her close. “I’m sorry that happened to you. It shouldn’t have. We’re making him pay right now. But don’t let him win by not returning to the palace if that would make you happy. If he’s the only reason you don’t want to return, then don’t let him win.”

The slimmer girl wiped a tear from her right eye just as the plumper girl wiped a tear from her left. Once again, they were back in perfect unison.

I stepped forward. “You were right when you said you’ve done nothing wrong. It’s actually me that made the mistake. And it’s something I want to fix. But I can’t do that if I have poor workers or a palace that’s not run effectively. That’s why we came here. You’re the best at what you do. I understand that if you returned to the palace, you wouldn’t want to do so under the same agreement as before.”

The two women folded their arms.

“We’re very happy here,” the slimmer one said.

“Very happy,” the plumper one said.

“We don’t have to work such long hours. And we get lots of time off. Nothing like the palace.”

“Nothing like the palace,” the fatter one said in agreement.

“You worked at the palace for three years before I arrived,” I said. “You must have enjoyed it a little...”

The pair shrugged their shoulders in unison. They were clearly not twins but they seemed to be linked by some form of bond.

I recalled the document Camila had prepared for me, with all of the details of the former palace workers. She told me to memorize it for when we discussed the working conditions with them.

There had been so many that I assumed I wouldn't be able to absorb much of the information but apparently some of it had permeated.

“I'm open for discussions on whatever you want. Do you want shorter working hours? Then it will be yours. Increased pay? Just name your price. More time off? We can negotiate. And we'll provide training too. You can learn or study whatever you wish to improve your chances of being promoted faster, and if we cannot promote you quickly enough, we will give you all the tools and knowledge necessary to do so at a place of your own choosing.”

Camila looked at me and frowned.

The not-twins frowned at me too, before their expressions melted into grins. “We'll have to... think about it...”

I wasn't an expert with human emotions but if they were half as pleased as I thought they were, we would have at least two workers rejoining our ranks soon enough.

When we left the lobby, Camila took me to one side. “It's great they want to join us again but you're giving them too much. You need to leave some options on the table. You need to decide what you're looking for and how much you're willing to pay. You can't afford to hire everybody under the same rules you just gave them!”

“I've seen our income reports. I'm pretty sure I can afford to increase everyone's pay a little.”

“If you keep giving days off, we'll have to hire more staff. And more people means more cost. As for training, that's a

good idea, especially since we can get some of our current staff to be the teachers. They already have the skills. They just need to learn how to teach it.”

“I thought we were supposed to be getting them back at any cost?” I said.

Camila nodded. “Get them back... at any *reasonable* cost.”

I accepted her criticism. “Then what do you think is reasonable?”

Camila outlined the terms her father had always given the workers in the past. They seemed firm but fair. Now that I had some guidelines, it seemed much easier for me to negotiate.

“Who’s next?” I asked.

Camila checked the lobby was empty before leaning forward and pecking me on the cheek.

“Just remember,” she said, wagging a finger under my nose. “We’re here to get our workers back, not bankrupt the palace! And there should be only one female you should be working hard to impress...”

She gave me a wink and I felt the growl roll in the back of my throat.

Two of the other workers operated in the kitchens, the other in the housekeeping station. The housekeeper seemed brisk and sharp, shaking her head and waving her hand dismissively at our proposal.

Her hair was tied back into a tight bun, and she had the appearance of a school mistress about her. As I began my ‘truth story’ spiel, Camila touched me on the arm, silencing me.

She got to her feet, nodded respectfully, and said, “Thank you for your time. My father will be very sad to hear you won’t be rejoining him but I’m sure we’ll be able to train someone to replace you.”

We turned on our heels to leave when the housekeeper bolted upright. Before we even left the room she asked, “Will your father really be returning to the palace?”

When we confirmed that he would, she scratched her chin thoughtfully and drifted off into a world of her own. I didn't know how Camila knew to use her father's name like that, but it appeared to be the magic key to the lock.

The cooks told us how unhappy they were with working in the hotel kitchen and seemed very interested in returning to their previous palace stations—but only if they could take tutelage under the royal Chef.

Camila screwed up her face. “You know how difficult she can be, but I'll see what I can do.”

We moved from one local business to another, even finding some former workers who'd been unaccounted for until that moment. It was like a giant network where each of the workers were in touch with at least a handful of the others.

It struck me just how intertwined the estate truly was, how many lives it touched and how many people I had to take responsibility for... and how I had let them down by not assuming my responsibilities earlier.

The day was another long one and we did our best to recruit everyone back.

“How successful do you think we were?” I asked Camila as we left the Ulsen boutique restaurant.

“We won't know until tomorrow.”

“Why tomorrow?”

“That's when they'll decide whether or not to hand in their notices and join us.

“Is there anything else we can do?” I said, feeling a bit nervous.

“No. We've done everything we can.”

And with that, we returned to the palace, exhausted even more than we had been the day before.

CAMILA WAS slow and stiff as she got up from the dining table, almost seeming to collapse beneath her own weight.

I held out a hand to catch her, but she waved me off.

“I’ll be all right.”

“Today must have been more difficult for you than I realized!”

Camila smiled, but it was distant and didn’t touch her eyes.

As she began to ascend the stairs, I followed behind, watching as she braced the majority of her weight on her arm and took each step gingerly.

I stood ready to catch her at a moment’s notice as I couldn’t help but sense she might collapse.

She made it to the top of the stairs, let out a puff of air, and moved more confidently through the hallways until we reached our shared suite.

Once again, we showered and got ready for bed. We lay there, my body already aching beyond belief—feeling like the Fayam had been the one to ride me, not the other way around!

But all of that faded into the background as I looked Camila over and placed my hand on her hip. I gently slid her silk nightie up to reveal the tiny scars I’d noticed during our earlier lovemaking sessions.

Now there was the noticeable limping.

This whole time, I hadn’t put two and two together. It seemed obvious now that the two were linked.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it? Something with your leg? Or hip?”

Camila stiffened. She looked at me, then glanced away, before grabbing the hem of her nightie and yanking it down, covering herself—or, more accurately, covering the tiny scars. She didn’t look at me again and appeared ready to roll over and change position.

I shifted closer to her, placing my hand on the small of her waist. “It’s okay. Really. There’s nothing you can say that will

change how I feel about you.”

Her eyes flashed up at mine, before sinking away again. “You say that...”

I raised her chin with a finger and stroked her cheek with my thumb. “Tell me.”

She licked her lips, preparing to share the truth, and hesitated twice before she finally managed to get the words out.

“It’s... it’s the money...”

“What money?”

“When my father stole those antiques from the palace, he sold them at a pawn shop. He gave that money to me.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “So?”

“He gave it to me so I could... so I could...”

Her eyes flicked up to mine and held them for a moment.

“So I could get an operation,” she finished quietly.

Seeing I wasn’t afraid, she continued on:

“About five years ago, we were involved in an accident. A drunk shuttle driver hit us and we fell from the sky. Dad wasn’t hurt, but I was. The impact happened on my side of the shuttle and badly damaged my hip. Ever since then, I’ve needed to use walking sticks and wheelchairs to get around. Some days are worse than others. That’s the reason he stole the antiques. To pay for the operation.”

She placed her hand on my arm, more shy and vulnerable than I had ever seen her before. “The money paid for the best hip surgeon in the galaxy. There was no way the insurance would pay for it, but I only found that out after I returned home. It was the same day my father was fired.”

Now everything made sense; her suddenly wanting to pay the money back, her father having worked for the palace for twenty years and never having stolen or broken any rules before then...

It made horrible, tragic sense.

“And I know this is your Steyatt,” she said, “and I know how important it is that your mate is in perfect health. So... I understand if you need to find another mate.”

I raised her chin once more—it was a bad habit of hers to constantly look down like that. “Look at me.”

She didn't.

“I said, look at me,” I said more forcefully.

She did, although it might have been out of surprise at my tone.

“You are my Muri. My fated mate. My *perfect* mate. Everything that happened to you in the past has made you who you are now. If I could take the pain instead, I would do so, and gladly. You are perfect for me. Do you understand? I don't want another mate. I never want any other mate. I want only you. And if your hip flares up again, I will do everything in my power to help you. I don't care how much it costs or how long it takes. You will have the very best care.”

“And if I end up in a wheelchair again?”

“Then I will be the one to push it. You will never have to go through any of this alone ever again.”

The tears streamed down Camila's face. When I tasted her lips once more, they were somehow both sweet and salty at the same time.

I pulled her to me and massaged her hip where her scars were. She shut her eyes and enjoyed the relief I appeared to be giving her.

“Palace or no palace, fortune or no fortune, staff or no staff, so long as I have you by my side, I am the wealthiest man in the galaxy,” I said.

She let out a whimper and fell into me, just as I fell into her, our bodies joining once more and becoming one both physically and spiritually. She completed me and I would do everything in my power to complete her.

“I love you,” I said, giving each word the respect it deserved.

Camila looked up at me and repeated the same words, “I love you too.”

I thrust once more inside her, claiming her for my own once again, filling her with my seed, and joining us together on a deeper, more spiritual level than we ever had before.

CAMILA

I awoke with grainy eyes and a sore, dry throat. I rolled over and smacked my lips, working some saliva into my mouth that simply wasn't there.

I grunted as I forced myself up into a sitting position, my muscles protesting with each movement.

I looked over at Rayaw, his massive blue scaly form beside me, his breath soaring in and out of his throat, deep asleep.

I shrugged my shoulders and leaned my head from one side to the other, working out the kinks from the previous day.

It had been a surprisingly difficult few days—not that the task was hard, but the exertion itself had proven more challenging than I expected.

I thrust the sheets aside, threw my legs over the bed's edge and placed my feet on the floor. I rolled my hips as I had done my shoulders and performed the same routine I had every morning for the past five years.

Ever since the accident had claimed my ability to walk.

Each day began with the same ten-minute exercise regime to work out the kinks from lying prone in a single position all night. It was the stiffness more than anything that caused the problems.

The doctors and physiotherapists had shown me half a dozen movements to help stretch my bones, muscles, and ligaments.

I shut my eyes and took a deep, calming breath. Even just the trip downstairs to the kitchen to get a glass of water was something I needed to warm myself up for, otherwise I could wind up falling down the stairs flat on my face.

I was certain our efforts to recruit the former estate workers would be successful for the most part—there would always be those who decided they now had a better, cushier position and would no longer wish to return to the palace.

In leaving the palace, they had been shaken from their daily routine and seen the galaxy was a large and diverse place where they could change the course of their careers whenever they wished.

Sometimes, the things that seemed like disasters could turn out to be the best things that ever happened to us. It forced us to change our view of things and re-appraise our position in the world and the goals and dreams we had given up on long ago.

Every cloud really did have a silver lining. You just had to know where to look for it.

Now that my exercises were complete, I pushed myself up onto my feet and shuffled forward, taking my first tentative steps. It was always the first few that were the most difficult.

I worked up a little more steam and managed to take more confident strides forward. By the time I had crossed the suite, I was operating normally.

I paused at the door once more to look back at Rayaw, still soundly asleep, blissfully unaware of the waking world. I had thought he'd been unaware of my affliction, but clearly my hip must have been playing up recently.

Riding the Fayam had a bigger effect on my health than I expected. The pain was so common to me now that I barely even noticed it.

When I told him the truth, admitting my physical weakness, knowing that it could very well be the reason Rayaw—as an Ulsen—might not want to be with me any

longer, I hesitated, but I knew that honesty was the best policy, especially since our relationship had developed as far as it had.

To my surprise, he had taken it in stride. It wasn't any more of a concern to him than if I had declared I had the flu as a child.

All that worrying... for nothing.

I couldn't help but peer back at him and smile at how gently he handled me after that. No doubt his desire revved high—especially with Steyatt driving him crazy—and still, he managed to control himself.

I began to wonder if his mating week was affecting me the same way. I had quickly developed a deep, unshakeable desire for him too.

Could things really turn out well for us? Could my life really become everything I had ever dreamed of?

With his big, powerful muscular frame, he fit my physical ideal to a T, and when he showed me how soft and gentle he could be—even during the week of Steyatt—I couldn't help but weep for joy as he claimed me over and over again.

I sent him my love, certain there was some kind of spiritual plane that existed between two souls.

I shut the door behind myself quietly and proceeded down the hallway. At this time in the morning, there were no palace staff. I caught a glimpse of just how quiet and serene the palace could be when it was empty.

The guardsmen would still be operating on a security protocol, but even their numbers would likely be reduced at this time of night.

I tried to gauge what time it was but could only guess it was somewhere in the wee hours. I decided that after I had drunk some water, I would immediately return to the bedroom and 'accidentally' wake Rayaw for another round of soft lovemaking.

I grinned at the proposition, making me hasten my gait down the stairs. I held tight onto the banister as I descended,

taking each step carefully in turn—not that I needed to, but because now was not the time to have an accident—especially since there was no one around who might be able to help me and I could end up laying there for hours.

Once I reached the bottom, I peered around and noticed the ground floor too was silent. Clearly the kitchen staff had not yet begun to prepare for the day ahead.

When I reached the kitchens, I found a gleaming palace of polished metal and heavy marble countertops. Chef was obsessed with having a clean kitchen, and drilled his staff each and every day to scrub, scrub, scrub until the surfaces were clean enough to eat off—not that we ever had cause to do that!

I crossed to the huge fridges that took up an entire wall. I knew they kept chilled water somewhere, and I had to open three doors before I found it.

I picked up one of the smaller containers, found a ceramic cup—as I couldn't find the glasses—and poured myself some.

I took a deep gulp and it immediately soothed my dry-as-sand throat. I let out a gasp of relief and followed it with another two big gulps.

I refilled the cup, put the water container back in the fridge, and crossed the kitchen back in the direction I had come from.

Tink.

It was a soft, subtle sound, like crystal vases being tapped together. Not hard or harsh, but enough to capture my attention.

Perhaps the kitchen staff had gotten up after all, or maybe someone else on the palace staff had awoken as thirsty as I had.

I was now fully awake, the cold water having progressed me onto stage two of the wake-up cycle. I decided I would go see what the staff were up to so early. I turned away from the doorway and headed towards the east-wing drawing room.

The palace had seemed like a maze when I first arrived, but already it was beginning to make sense to me. It was perfectly symmetrical, so you only ever really needed to memorize one quarter of the total pattern and then project out toward the rest of the palace's wings.

I entered the drawing room and immediately realized I had made a mistake.

The lights were off, the room shrouded in shadow. Even the moonlight that streamed through the large bay windows didn't illuminate much.

Strange, I thought. I could have sworn the sound had come from this room.

I shrugged my shoulders and turned to leave. That's when I heard another soft sound—this time, not the kiss of glass or crystal but a soft padding noise, like a heavy footstep.

My instincts leapt into action, and I immediately snapped my head around to peer into the dark shadowy recesses.

I peered closer, expecting something to lurch out at me... but nothing did.

The silence smothered me once again and I felt the sinister flipside of what it meant for the palace to be this empty at this time. It meant no one would come to my rescue.

The shadows seemed even darker than they had earlier, pitch black as if carved from the depths of space. And yet, they also seemed to have some kind of magnetic pull, as if a miniature black hole was tugging me toward it.

Goosebumps writhed across the surface of my skin, and I checked over my shoulders to ensure no one was there.

No one was.

And the darkness did not move.

“Hello? Is someone there?” I said.

There was no response, of course, because no one was there!

I chuckled to myself and couldn't help but notice the fringe of nervousness around it. I was no longer afraid, I told myself, and edged towards that darkness.

Nothing could scare me any longer—especially not some imagined noise.

I stepped toward it gingerly, measuring my steps carefully, and stood on the edge of the shadows, which pressed against the pink digits of my toes.

I peered into it once more and this time made out more of the details; a twin set of shelves with handsomely-bound leather books perched like birds and an office globe in the corner depicting geography very different from that of Earth.

And there, a clock, silently ticking away the seconds. And there, a hat, perched on the shelf.

Nothing abnormal at all. It was a normal scene in a regular house.

Then I noticed something strange about the hat. I cocked my head to one side and gazed closely at it. The angle was slightly off and cocked to one side. There was no way it could have been sheltered on the shelf and instead must have been placed on another structure, something lower down—a hook perhaps?

As I gazed closer, something moved. Not me, but below the brim of the hat I was peering at.

A pair of eyes gazed out from beneath the cap like mysterious floating orbs around a planet. They were slitted, golden and shining, bright despite the lack of moonlight to illuminate them.

My eyes bulged and I formed a scream on my lips. But it was never born as thick scaly hands wrapped about my mouth and yanked me into the infinite darkness.

FEAR PUMPED THROUGH MY BODY, my heart rate doubling, then tripling, as the shadowy figure wrapped one powerful arm about my waist, pinning my arms to my sides while the other clasped my mouth.

I was frozen, limp, and sensed immediately that there was no escape. I was as much at his whim as I was to Rayaw whenever he came to me.

But where the latter was exciting, being at an unknown creature's mercy was terrifying.

“Be quiet and there will be no need for you or anyone else to come to any harm.”

I recognized the scratchy voice right away. It was Ges. At his feet, there was a large bundle of what could only be stolen items.

That had been the source of the soft tinkling noise I had heard earlier, I surmised. He had been busy depositing antique items into a sack that he would take off with.

It was still the middle of the night, and the majority of the guardsmen would not be on duty for several hours. That fact played heavy on my thoughts as I imagined what Ges could do with me until then.

“What is it with you and getting up in my business?” he spat. “Don't you know when you're not wanted?”

And what is it with you stealing Rayaw's stuff? I wanted to snap back at him, but it came out as a low muffle behind his thick scaly hand.

It wasn't difficult to figure out what Ges hoped to gain. He'd been prevented from taking Rayaw's wealth and so he had decided to get it a different way:

By sneaking into the palace and stealing it. I wondered how he had managed to get inside when there were guards stationed around the palace all night.

Probably the same way I had, I realized, when I first came and met Rayaw. *With the use of the secret passageways.*

How he had learned about them, I didn't know—it was possible he could have gotten it out of the staff, forcing it from Emma's lips—perhaps there was another reason she had so many bruises that didn't have anything to do with the Steyatt.

I attempted to shout but my voice only came out as a soft murmur. Ges tightened his grip further around my mouth, clamping it shut tight.

It was painful with him forcing my jaw back as far back as it would go. Any harder, and I thought he would snap the bone.

He seemed to feel the pressure and murmured gently again in my ear: "Don't test me, slut."

A clanking noise like metal grinding against leather scabbards rubbing harshly filled my ears.

"The guards are making their hourly check," Ges whispered in my ear. "If you're smart, you won't make a noise or try to get their attention. If you do, I cannot promise what will happen next. I might kill the guards. Or I might kill you. Or I might slip into the darkness and return another night to slit your beloved's throat while he sleeps."

It wasn't an empty threat. An Ulsen was capable of anything with their immense strength, especially during an unfulfilled Steyatt.

The guardsman drew closer and stepped into the doorway. He peered at the room, from one shadowy recess to another. It seemed strange that I could see him standing there so clearly while he couldn't make out me or my captor at all.

I considered struggling with the hope of making a noise and getting his attention but decided against it. The last thing I needed was a broken jaw.

The guard, seemingly satisfied that there was nothing in the room, turned on his heel smartly, clicked his heels, and marched away.

Then it occurred to me. Ges wasn't going to harm me. If he did, I would be worth nothing to him. He was here to steal

items he could later sell... but how much more was I worth than those things?

If he broke my jaw, how did he know I wouldn't end up bleeding to death? Then he would have to find a doctor or hospital, and he was unlikely to do that with a hostage!

Yes, I was certain he wouldn't want to take that risk. Suddenly, my most dangerous moment became what might become my moment of salvation.

I pulled my wrist back—although I had full control of my hands, my elbows were fixed firmly to my sides by Ges' powerful arm. I hurled the glass forward and it smashed on the floor, the water pooling across the wood.

The guard that had left immediately stopped and turned back around.

Ges, as I expected, didn't crush my jaw—as much as he might have wanted to. I was much too valuable for that. Instead, he growled under his breath.

I felt his body tense as he turned sideways and shifted his body weight. My body flopped like a ragdoll.

The guardsman gingerly peered around the doorframe at the glass inexplicably smashed in the middle of the room in a puddle of its own water.

He seemed confused as to where it might have come from, even glancing up at the ceiling, as if it might have fallen from there.

We're here! I'm right here! I wanted to yell at him.

But he didn't hear my muffles.

Ges threw me into the moonlight, and I landed hard on my ass.

The guard's eyes widened as he rushed toward me.

Ges leapt forward with far greater purpose in his movements as he launched himself at the guardsman.

I heard the guardsman grunt under his breath as Ges seized him and did something to him that made a horrifying crunch

sound, before the guard's body collapsed in a heap beside me on the floor.

His eyes fluttered open and shut, his body shaking. He was already dead. His body just didn't realize it yet.

If I had expected the guardsman to save me, I needed to think again. I needed to save myself.

I leapt to my feet and ran forward—at least, I would have if my hip didn't bark so hard. Instead, it twisted, and I lost control, flopping back on the floor like a fish out of water.

Ges picked me up like a kid who had collapsed and held me tightly in his arms. "I see I needn't have worried," he said, chuckling in the back of his throat.

I glared at him, sucked in a mouthful of oxygen, and screamed. I didn't know what to shout. I wasn't thinking. I was terrified and knew that any noise I made would be better than nothing.

It came out as a raspy whining pierce that held as little meaning to me as it did for anyone who might have heard it.

But it clearly didn't come from the throat of someone in the throes of happiness and joy. It was the cry of someone needing help.

With the guards surrounding the palace and those located down the hallway in their security rooms, I felt certain *someone* would hear it.

Ges slipped his hand back over my mouth, pressing so hard it made my teeth hurt, and growled in my ear, "You never make things easy, do you, bitch?"

Something slapped me hard against the back of my head and I fell to the floor once more.

I was not yet unconscious and managed to crawl away from him a few feet before I felt another meaty thud against the back of my head, and I fell into darkness once more.

MY VISION WAS blurry around the edges, but with how dark and dingy my surroundings were, it didn't make much difference in figuring out my location.

It was dark and damp, and the flagstones beneath me were smothered with some kind of slime. *Not exactly a five-star retreat...*

I grunted as I shoved myself up onto my knees... and immediately regretted it.

The room spun, and I lowered myself back to the floor and laid prostrate. The movement only made my head swim even worse. I grunted under my breath and realized the precarious situation I now found myself in.

Ges had kidnapped me, somehow removed me from the palace. How he had managed to do that, I had no idea. I had *definitely* made enough noise to alert the guards to my location and for them to come storming down on our heads.

Unless the guards somehow didn't hear me?

In which case, Ges would have had plenty of time to carry me and my unconscious body out of the palace and hide me somewhere on the estate grounds—or anywhere else for that matter.

In fact, it was impossible to really know how much time had really passed since he'd dealt me that vicious second blow.

A few minutes? A few hours? Days?

I doubted the latter, as I didn't feel hungry at all. But then again, my stomach was still churning from all the unconscious movement I'd made earlier, my head still continuing to swim.

How could this have happened?

It'd gone from the happiest moment of my life to now being captured and taken hostage... and who knew what would happen next.

My mind swam—unrelated to my internal giddiness—at all the things that *could* happen next.

I pushed them from my mind. The last thing I needed right now was to lose focus.

Still, my ability to concentrate kept slipping through my fingers as my mind swam through treacle. I needed to figure a way out of there.

It was no good being cooped up here, feeling sorry for myself. Or even expecting Rayaw to come rescue me—although that was the ideal outcome. I needed to figure out where I was and how I might be able to get out of there.

Were there any signs of where I might be? I thought I recognized the brickwork beneath my hands... but in my current state, I couldn't place it at all.

From somewhere deep in my childhood, I thought. But that hardly helped. I'd seen many places during my upbringing, and it could be just about anywhere.

It would come to me; I was confident of that. But first, I needed to figure out a way out of there.

I rolled onto my side and then my back. My head swam a little less this time. I lay there, peering up at the ceiling, dark, and yet, the fact that I could see *anything* at all meant that there had to be a light source somewhere.

I turned my head left and right and noticed a narrow, horizontal crack of silver.

Moonlight. It was nighttime. The same night I'd been kidnapped? Probably.

Without the moonlight, the room would have been pitch black. It illuminated the mostly unremarkable concrete walls and brickwork beneath my hands that had the appearance of having been hastily put together.

I took the risk to sit up, and although my head swam, it had a noticeably smaller effect than the first time I had attempted to move.

I shut my eyes and focused on a single point on the wall—a single hairline crack. It became my guiding star.

I waited until the world stopped turning before moving my head once more. With each pass, the world slowed and then stopped spinning.

“Awake yet?” a familiar—but unwanted—voice said.

It was Ges.

Would I never be rid of him?

In my current state, I hadn’t noticed he’d been standing there in the corner of the room. No doubt watching and gauging my condition.

Despite my throbbing skull and painful headache, I was in good shape. My ability to focus was coming back and it was only a matter of time before I was capable of recalling this place and attempting another escape.

Ges drew up close to me so silently that it was only the rustle of his clothes that gave his position away. He zip-tied my hands behind my back and then my ankles.

So much for attempting my valiant escape!

“Why are you doing this?” I said groggily.

“You gave me no choice. You stole my future from me.”

I snorted. “I didn’t steal anything from you. *You* stole it from yourself. If you had done your job properly, there would have been no need to fire you.”

“Everything was fine until you arrived!” he spat.

Everything was certainly something, but it was not fine. Arguing with him this way at least bought me time to recover. I feared he might deal me another blow, knocking me out cold before I was able to reason with him.

Then, like a freight train, it hit me. I knew the location of this room.

I knew where I was!

I wasn’t tucked away in one of the forgotten and dilapidated barns. I hadn’t even been taken off the estate. I was locked up in one of the secret passageways!

An empty room that I had played in with Emma—no, maybe it wasn't Emma, but one of my other childhood friends—and we had a monster game of hide and seek...

And this was where I had found her.

The bricks had been less green then, less slippery, and the crack that the moonlight shone through was north-facing, formed by subsidence in the foundations.

I wondered if I could shout and get the guards' attention.

Possibly.

But I would only have one chance to do that, and did I really want to waste it by yelling randomly? Not if I had the opportunity to make another escape. I might only have one more chance to get help. If I was going to do something, I would need to do it soon.

Ges could strike me at any time, laying me out cold. Who knew where I might wake up then, and how dire my situation would be?

I hastily squirmed against the wall, my back coming to what felt like a thick metal pipe. I grasped at something—anything—that I could use to defend myself with.

Behind my back, my hands scrambled for a stone, a rock, anything... And came across something small and hard. I immediately tapped it against the metal pipe.

It was a deep sound and I felt it reverberate against my fingertips. I was certain Ges couldn't hear it—especially not with his mind occupied with his sinister thoughts of me.

Please, Rayaw. Please, hear it. Please, come to my rescue. Please!

“It's fitting that you should come to me like this,” Ges said. “After all, you are the one responsible for me losing my position. Fate has seen fit to give you to me, offering me a second chance to get back everything you took from me. Of all the heirlooms I took, none are more valuable than you. Rayaw will give me anything I ask. In fact, he will give me

everything. He won't hesitate. He is a fool when it comes to love."

I realized with keen horror that he was right. Rayaw really *would* hand over everything he owned to get me back. I felt sick at the idea of Ges taking everything from him. But there was something worse than that.

There was the knock-on effect of being unable to help the palace staff as we needed the seed money that would now be in Ges' possession.

And if Ges became the owner of the palace and all its associated wealth, well, it was only a matter of time before he squandered it, and then what would happen to the staff? They would have no chance to leave and improve their situation elsewhere.

All of Rayaw's plans would come to nothing.

All because I was thirsty for a glass of water...

I knew I shouldn't blame myself, but I felt responsible for what had happened. I wanted to cry but steeled myself against it. It would hardly help me in my current situation.

Then I became aware of just how quiet Ges had become. He peered down at me through his tiny eyes, an expression coming across his face that I was only used to seeing on Rayaw's face.

It was Steyatt, after all...

Fear shot through me like a virus.

"In the meantime," Ges said, "we might as well enjoy ourselves... Well, when I said ourselves, I meant *myself*. You might not have such a fun experience."

He leaned down and pressed his hand against my mouth. He reached for the front of my nightie and squeezed a breast.

I screamed around his fist but there was little chance anyone would hear it.

RAYAW

The scream was wailing and high-pierced and shot through me like a bolt of lightning. It didn't help that Camila had been in trouble in my dreams, struggling against powerful captors with shining golden eyes.

There was nothing I could do but watch from behind the prison bars of sleep. Instinctively, I knew it was nothing more than a nightmare, nothing but my ultimate fears playing out before me. Such a thing wasn't possible in the palace when we were surrounded by guards on every side.

So, when Camila in the dream opened her mouth and screamed, her mouth forming a terrified "O" shape, I expected for it to be silent, to not really exist, that it was all a figment of my imagination—the same way I never quite found the ground when I stumbled over a cliff—yet another common dream of loss of control that struck me from time to time.

In fact, it seemed to happen a lot more often since I had taken up residence in the palace. Sometimes I thought it was better not to have anything, to live in squalor, because at least then you knew who your enemies were, what they looked like, and how to overcome them.

But the scream was loud and shrill and filled my ears. I immediately sensed it wasn't just an imagined scream, but *real*. The cry shivered with hollow outrage and disgust.

My eyes burst open and my limbs flew out to either side, my legs flailing beneath the silk sheets that had seemed like heaven personified when I'd cuddled Camila up close last

night, but now felt like a prison as they restricted my freedom of movement.

I immediately pulled my arms back for fear I would accidentally strike Camila lying beside me.

I panted and peered about the room, thankful it had all just been a dream, that none of it was real and had been a consequence of the fears I had bubbling up inside me about what might happen to Camila now that she was by my side.

I had too many enemies and they all wanted me dead, or at the very least out of the way, and the easiest way to achieve that now was through Camila.

She was in danger because of me.

I had never thought of our relationship that way before, but as we traveled along the long open roads of the informal dirt paths crisscrossing my estate, I realized just how exposed we were.

I was afraid for Camila. I didn't want anything to happen to her. I needed for her to be safe.

Even if it meant she couldn't be anywhere near me?

No, I knew that wasn't possible. She would have to be at my side, no matter what happened. She would always need to be there so I could comfort and protect her.

I took two deep calming breaths, let them wash over me, and wiped the sweat from my brow before peering over at the other side of the bed.

It was empty, the bedsheets lying like a broken cocoon where she had released herself.

There were many reasons that she might have gotten up and left in the middle of the night. Perhaps Emma had come to her, asking for help with the injuries she'd sustained at Ges' hands. Maybe she herself had overheard something and it made her get out of bed. Maybe she was hungry and wanted a midnight snack... and the Creator knew that we had done enough activities during the night that she ought to have been starving.

My own stomach growled, and I pressed a hand to it. *Yes, I thought. That was the most likely thing to have happened.*

I lay back down, my eyes still focused on the edge of the bed, how the sheets looked like they had taken a dive over the side. I didn't like the way they looked.

Perhaps Camila hadn't gotten out of the bed of her own volition at all. Perhaps she had fallen. She had a sore hip, and it was possible she could have accidentally fallen out.

I scrambled over to the other side of the bed and peered over it.

But she wasn't there.

Her slippers weren't there either, and for a moment, I felt relieved.

Who was going to kidnap her and take her slippers with them? It didn't make sense.

She must have slipped them on and left the room.

But why?

There was a myriad of potential explanations, but that scream, the one that had awoken me in the middle of my dream...

It gave me an edge of fear that I couldn't account for. Something within me, either my instincts or my fears—I wasn't sure exactly what—but it was like stepping over a hot floor with harsh, dry sand, grinding against my skin and peeling it back... except it wasn't grinding against my feet but my heart.

Something was wrong. I knew it in my bones.

I reached over and felt the spot where Camila should have been. It was cool, which meant she had to have left longer than the few minutes it took for the sheets to lose her warmth.

She'd been gone for a while... but how long?

I tossed the blankets aside and pulled on my robe. I slipped on my own slippers. They had a large "R" on the toes in looped golden lettering to signify Royalty. They had been

fashioned from the skin of some creature that I'd never had a problem with and were said to be the most expensive and rare material in the galaxy... but they were not comfortable. I should have kept the two-credit pair I'd bartered for back on Hooerzitz Prime.

I tied the cord around my waist tight and stepped out of the suite. I peered one way and then the other to find the hallways were as silent as the grave.

I immediately shook my head at thinking in terms of sinister death and decay and moved down the hallway toward the stairs.

They were the set we used most often to move up and down the infinite palace hallways. There were really only a handful of rooms we used on a consistent basis, and they all fed off that single stairway.

I paused at the top, fear gripping me once again at the idea that she might have lost her grip on the handrail and tumbled down the stairs, one painful flight at a time.

I would see her body lying sprawled beneath me, her limbs snapped and broken amidst her torn clothing. No one would be awake to help her—and even if she could make a noise in such a condition, no one would hear her, much less rescue her and —

Stop it!

Just because she had a small problem with her hip didn't mean she was fragile and liable to smash like a priceless heirloom! She was as tough as the woman I had met that night in my chambers.

She had come and squared off against me in the middle of the night to argue her father's case—had faced off against a feral Ulsen during Steyatt and lived to tell the tale! There wasn't a weak bone in her gorgeous body!

I peered down at the stairs and identified nobody lying unconscious.

Of course not!

I needed to watch myself, to not be too overprotective of her... although it would go against my basest instincts. She would feel stifled if I overdid it and that was the very last sensation I wished her to feel.

I descended the stairs and got halfway down before I became aware of movement. At this time of night, it could be the kitchen staff preparing breakfast... but all movement was happening *away* from the kitchens and *towards* one of the drawing rooms.

I descended the final few steps like a Ulsen walking towards his own death.

The staff were gathered in bunches, quietly murmuring to each other. One caught sight of me, quietened, and placed a hand on his conversation partner's arm. His partner was a senior member of the staff and I had seen him many times before.

"My Prince," the staff member said, blinking with surprise. "I just sent someone to wake you..."

I felt chagrined that I didn't know his name—that I didn't know *any* of the staff's names. They worked for me. I was their master. The *very least* I could do was know their damn names!

"I was already awake," I said. "Tell me. What happened?"

"We... We're not sure yet, Your Highness. But it appears... Well, it seems that..."

I growled and pulled back the powerful muscles at my neck to snap at him with a bark that would soon get him to focus and pay attention, when the anger died on my lips and the blood drained from my face.

A foot lay turned up, the rich red of the fabric of its sole peering up at the ceiling. A figure lay on the floor just inside the east drawing room.

My heart stopped beating; my lungs stopped breathing.

No, it can't be...

My nose itched and I felt the tears sting my eyes.

It can't be her... It can't be...

“My Prince,” the servant said. “Perhaps you shouldn’t look ___”

I moved through him, shoving him aside as I made a b-line for the body lying face down in the room.

I had to see for myself. I knew it would burn an imprint into the forefront of my mind, would haunt me for the rest of my days... but I had to see.

I simply had to.

My eyes widened and my pupils dilated to take in every element of the horrific scene I was about to witness.

The other staff stopped and stared, watching me and moving aside as I floated past them. They were no more there than the turning of the planets.

It was just me and the body. The *dead* body.

If I had been thinking clearly, I would have noticed the legs were too large and muscular, the uniform clearly belonged to a guardsman, that the weapons still housed in their scabbards were nothing Camila would wear...

But I wasn’t thinking clearly.

I feared I already knew what I was going to see when I rounded that corner, and nothing was going to stop me from seeing it, least of all the obvious evidence.

When I finally came to him and saw the body lying twisted at an unnatural angle, it took a moment for the truth to register...

This *wasn't* Camila. It was a guardsman.

A chief staff member appeared at my shoulder. “It is a night officer, third unit,” he said. “He came here to perform a routine check when someone attacked him.”

“Who?” I said.

“We don’t know yet, Your Highness. But we will find out.”

If a guard had been murdered... what else might have happened?

“Camila,” I said, voice dry and scratchy. “Where is she?”

“We... We don’t know that either, sire. But we found something that belongs to her.”

He motioned toward the middle of the room where, lying in a sodden blanket of carpet, was a smashed glass. By itself it meant nothing, but it wasn’t alone in the room of evidence.

There, to one side, a forgotten uncomfortable royal red slipper lay upended, the letter “R” embossed on the toes...

Camila’s slipper.

She was gone. My deepest fears had come true...

She had been taken.

I WANTED to leap upon the back of my Fayam and search through the entire estate myself, to ensure no rock or tree or stream lay unsearched...

But *anyone* could do that.

I had dozens of staff to search for me—and that was what most of them were doing now—dispatched to all four corners of the vast estate and told to search everywhere for Camila.

They were to block all exits and to not let anyone through. I was at the center of the search efforts, directed from my office.

Once the estate had been locked down, we sent the search parties in a rolling pattern, from one lot to another. I handed most of the duties to my subordinates, which left me with plenty of time to consider other options.

Especially who would want to kidnap Camila in the first place.

I had amassed quite an army of enemies since I had inherited my wealth. First there was the royal family. After their assassination attempt, I didn't put it past them to make another attempt on my life.

This time, their spies could have come and stumbled upon Camila... Or she might very well have been their target right from the beginning.

I clenched my hands into fists and slammed them on the desk. Maybe they realized I wasn't such an easy target... but that my fated mate might be...

And how would they know the significance of Camila to me already?

I glared at the doors as if I could see the staff on the other side, their hushed whispers easily audible to my enhanced hearing.

Which of them were loyal to me? And which were loyal to the royal family? Or my other enemies?

If I had maintained control of the running of the palace, none of this would have happened. The staff would have been loyal to me and—

I pulled myself up and recalled that before I had retaken my rightful place at this palace, there had been another member of the royal family in residence, and had been for over twenty years.

The old staff could easily be more loyal to the royal family than to me, its most recent occupant. It made me suspicious—suspicious of everyone surrounding me within these walls.

But the staff all knew Camila and I didn't believe they would have turned her in so easily. But what did I know?

I didn't know these people and I suspected that so long as there were staff at the palace, there were going to be spies for my enemies.

The worst thing of all was not knowing what the truth was. I was never likely to discover it. They were never going to

reveal the truth of their plans to me. Whatever their goals might have been, the result was the same.

Then there was another enemy, one I had made most recently—Ges.

He was very angry when I retired him from his position, and I knew he would be looking to get some kind of revenge on those he considered responsible for it.

That meant either me or Camila...

After all, she had been the one to make him lose his position at the palace, the one who had opened my eyes to his duplicity...

I scratched my chin. Now that I thought about it, he was the most likely person to have kidnapped Camila.

The royal family were big and vast, their influence stretching beyond borders and galaxies. They were ethereal, everywhere. Ges was a new enemy and one that I knew intimately.

It was also possible that he could have friends among the newer members of the staff. The older ones despised him, but they had been supplanted by these newer workers and they were at least going to be friendlier toward him.

Was that how he had gotten into the palace? It was under armed guard all night and either someone let him in—one of the guardsmen?—or he had discovered another way in...

Perhaps the same way Camila had that night when she came to my room...

The pieces were beginning to fall into place, but I really had no idea what they would add up to. There were too many options, too many possibilities...

Or I could have been completely wrong and the truth was that someone had come to burgle the palace and Camila had stumbled upon them. After all, we had come across a sackful of antiques and heirlooms.

Initially, I had assumed it had been planted there, or else it had been one of the staff that had left it as they had been busy

replacing the items that Ges had lifted and placed around his room, only they got distracted with other tasks and forgotten about it.

Or they intended on picking it up and taking it with them when they finished their shift for the night...

Again, too many possibilities.

And that made making any plans obscenely difficult. I couldn't make plans for *everything*. I needed to choose those that were most likely to yield fruit.

And get Camila back.

I pressed the button for the intercom. "Send the chief staff member in," I said.

"Yes, sir," my secretary said.

By the time the chief staff member arrived, I had decided upon what I wanted him to do.

"I want a ransom put out on Ges," I said.

The chief staff member's tufty eyebrows rose. "A ransom?"

I nodded. "I want him to always be looking over his shoulder. No matter where he goes or what he does, he will never be free. Eventually, someone will turn him in."

"What if he's innocent of Camila's kidnapping?"

"Then he will have to prove it. After his recent exploits in stealing from me, I wouldn't put anything past him."

"As you wish, Your Highness. Is there anything else?"

I ran the other potential options through my mind...

So many damn possibilities!

Then I shook my head. "No. That is all. For now. Any updates on the search?"

"Every available hand has spread throughout the estate, covering all potential exits. If someone is here and they try to escape, we'll spot them."

“Good.”

But it still made me nervous. No one knew quite how long Camila had been missing. Except for the time that had lapsed on the dead guard’s routine, which amounted to just under an hour as the east drawing room was the last he would check before returning to base, there was the possibility that the kidnapper could have already left the estate and be far from here.

There was just no way to know.

“I’ll put out the word for the ransom,” the chief staff member said. “How much would you like to offer?”

To put a number on the safe return of Camila was impossible. She was worth so much more than any number of credits, any valuable item I possessed.

But Ges might have loyal allies somewhere and there was really only one way to ensure they betrayed him and handed him over to me, and that was to offer something so obscene that there was no way they couldn’t bring themselves to betray him instead.

“One hundred thousand credits,” I said.

The chief staff member’s bushy eyebrows rose once more to the top of his head. “Dead or... alive, sir?”

“Alive. I want to know any information he might have before I... deal with him further.”

The chief staff member bowed low and moved toward the door, but paused at the last moment and turned back to face me. “I thought Your Highness might like to know... many others from the local town have come to help with the search. Many know Camila personally and worked at the palace in the past.”

Despite my dark mood, I couldn’t help but smile. Of course they would come to help. Why didn’t I think of that sooner? Every spare pair of eyes we could muster were valuable.

“Thank you for informing me,” I said.

The chief staff member bowed once more and swept out of the room, leaving me alone once more with my thoughts.

Tap, tap, tap.

I turned my head to one side and listened to the house's creaks and groans. It was as if the house itself knew she was missing and was wailing in dismay at having lost her.

I knew exactly how it felt. Every bone, muscle and sinew in my body craved for her the same way. If I never saw her again, I didn't know how I would cope—

I shook my head of the negative thoughts. Of course I would see her again. Everything would work out in the end.

Tap, tap, tap.

I found my foot tapping along with it. I shut my eyes and imagined what it would be like to see her again, to feel her and rub my hands over her body and savor her every breath.

To worship her every night of my life until my final breath was stolen from my body... and then I would make love to her again in the afterlife.

Tap, tap, tap.

I turned my head to one side, the noise now beginning to irritate me. Perhaps someone was in another room, a child perhaps, playing a game as we conducted our search.

When the tapping came once more, I immediately got up and marched toward the door that led to the secretary's office.

I threw it open and the secretary immediately stopped typing on her holo-keyboard and looked at me over the rim of her half-moon glasses.

“Will you stop that infernal tapping noise?” I snapped.

The secretary frowned. “What tapping noise?”

I paused, listening, and when I was about to give up, I heard it again. “That!”

It sounded like it was coming from the next room. I moved to it and threw the door open.

It was my suite. The cleaners had come to remake the bed but I had denied them entry. I wanted this room to exist as a memory to her, the place I had lost her.

I followed the sound to its loudest point—somewhere behind the wardrobe. I shoved it out of the way with a single heave of my arm. I placed my hand to the pipe and felt the vibrations running through it.

“There must be children in one of the other rooms,” I said. “Have them stop immediately.”

“There are no other rooms where this pipe feeds onto,” the secretary said.

“What?” I growled. “Then where is the tapping coming from? My imagination? A room from nowhere?”

The secretary folded her arms and scowled at me disapprovingly. “I understand this is a difficult time for you but that gives you no reason to speak to me as if I—”

I turned away from her and ran my hands over the walls. I felt the reverberations on the palms of my hands.

“Now you’re being rude!” the secretary snapped. “I am talking to you and—”

“Quiet! Can you hear that?”

“Of course I can hear it! That’s the reason we’re here, isn’t it?”

I turned back to her, my mind going a mile an intergalactic minute.

“Emma,” I said. “Bring Emma!”

“Emma?” the secretary said. “But she’s not responsible for the noise—”

“Hurry!” I said, leading her from the room. “Get her here now! And have everyone still in the palace come to my suite immediately! There’s not a moment to lose!”

Peering at me as if I had lost my marbles, the secretary sighed and returned to her desk. She made a call on her holo-communicator.

This was it, I thought. This has to be it!

My comment about a “room from nowhere” had sparked a series of thoughts that, if I was right, might very well lead me to discovering where Camila was.

She was beneath my very feet!

THE MOMENT EMMA APPEARED, I gently took her by the hand and led her toward the pipe. She was hesitant, shaking like a mouse. The majority of her face was still black and blue and began to turn a horrible shade of green as it healed.

“I know you’ve been through a lot,” I said. “And I’m sorry about that. I promise it will never happen to you again. But I need your help. Camila needs your help.”

Emma looked me over before peering over at the half a dozen guards and other members of staff that had heard my order to come here.

More filtered in every second and joined the growing crowd. They always asked the same questions: “What’s going on?” “What are we doing here?” “Has she been found?”

And were always met with the same response: A hiss for them to be silent.

“Do you think you can do that?” I asked.

Emma nodded. “What... What do you need?”

“I need to know where the secret passageway entrance is here in this suite. I think whoever took her knows about them too and used them to get into the palace. After she screamed, he couldn’t escape outside but managed to hide her away somewhere in these passageways. I need you to show me how to get inside.”

Camila seemed unsure.

“You grew up with Camila here in the palace, didn’t you? You used to play with her in the palace hallways? I bet you

found all sorts of secret places to hide. Maybe even some old secret passageways too?"

Emma nodded her head. "Yes."

My heart leaped for joy. "Then can you show me where it is in this room?"

Emma didn't approach the back of the wardrobe as I had expected, but instead approached the unmade bed. She got down on her hands and knees and disappeared underneath it.

"Move the bed out of the way," I ordered. "Be careful not to crush Emma."

The staff braced the bed's awesome weight and grunted as they lifted it and carried it to one side, placing it out of the way. To everyone's astonishment, Emma was nowhere to be seen. She had up and vanished.

Some of the staff bent down to peer at the underside of the bed and shook their heads when they found she wasn't there either.

Just when I was about to call out her name, an intricately carved slab in the shape of a sneering gargoyle's face twisted and lifted upward, attached to some kind of leveraging device.

Emma poked her head out and grinned up at me. With her bruises and wayward hair, I could imagine her the way she must have looked when she was a small child.

I bent down and helped her out. She dusted off her dress and shook the dirt from her hair.

"I need you to think carefully," I said. "How many routes are there from this spot? Where does it lead? Does it lead outside somewhere on the estate grounds? Is there a way for the kidnapper to slip past our defenses?"

"No," Emma said. "The other end opens up onto a boulder on the other side of the lake."

"Do you think you could take some of the staff here? Take two guards too. They will apprehend the kidnapper in case he comes through."

Emma gave a stout nod.

“And how many routes are there from here? Is it a single tunnel or does it lead to lots of other tunnels?”

“It’s like a maze down there. As they rebuilt and extended the palace, some of the tunnel exits were cut off. We weren’t strong enough to get them open as kids but maybe the... kidnapper could.”

She hesitated over the term ‘kidnapper’ for the same reason I had avoided naming who I thought was responsible—in case it triggered Emma and I couldn’t get the information I needed from her.

“Thank you for your help,” I said.

She beamed and led a small party of staff and guardsmen out of the room. That would prevent Ges from escaping, if he made the attempt.

I nodded to the others. “I’m heading down into the tunnel. Who else is coming?”

“Me,” the chief staff member said.

“I’ll go,” another with a terrible haircut said.

“And me.”

Soon, we had another half dozen to go down into the tunnel with me.

“What about the rest of us?” a young waiter said.

“I need you to guard this passageway in case he doubles back. If he does, jump on him and pin him to the ground. Don’t let him escape. If you hurt him, so be it. I will answer for any harm you do to him.”

Their expressions of excitement made me a little nervous that I would re-emerge from the tunnel to be greeted by nothing but Ges’ limbs after he’d been torn apart.

“Just... try not to kill him,” I added.

“I make no promises,” one of the older staff members said in what I took to be in jest... although, judging by his

expression, I wasn't sure I should be convinced about that.

I squeezed into the passageway. It was a tight fit for me, and I had to bend down to keep my horns from scraping the low ceiling inside.

I waited for the first volunteer to come in after me and told him to divide everyone else into pairs and send them down different tunnels.

"I'm not sure you should go down there by yourself, My Lord," he said nervously.

"I'll be all right," I said. "If someone else discovers him, yell, and the rest of us will come running. Do nothing that might put Camila in harm's way."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

He bowed but almost lost his footing as another volunteer joined him.

I turned and entered the dark.

IT WAS a deep and encompassing darkness, pressing on me as if it had real weight. I reached out with my hands, making slow movements as if I were swimming through it.

I heard the mutters from the other volunteers behind me, but the darkness quickly stole their voices, smothering them. Soon, I couldn't make them out at all.

There were a few small tunnels I had to choose from and immediately regretted that I had decided to come in alone... until I checked each one and realized that what Emma had told me was correct—they all ended with dead ends from where the palace had been renewed and extended over the years.

I followed my tunnel until I heard voices. They emerged out of the gloom like monsters from a dream. Soft at first, they were barely audible until I drew closer.

Then I could make out individual words... growing more distinct until I could identify each one.

It was Camila and Ges all right.

I had been right, and he had been the one to kidnap her.

The dirty swine.

I swore to the Creator himself that I would tear him apart where he stood!

But not right now. Not until I could see him clearly.

Two Ulsen fighting could make any place dangerous, but down here, where the foundations could have been weakened over time and the air was thick with dust, Camila could easily become trodden underfoot if I wasn't careful. I would need to move slowly.

I eased forward, one silent step after another, until I sensed the space had opened up. As I turned a corner, a strip of moonlight filtered through a crack high overhead and illuminated the scene before me.

Camila lay on her back, pressed against the wall. Ges stood before her in all his evil glory. Camila looked to be okay—a little beaten up, but otherwise fine.

“In the meantime,” Ges said, “we might as well enjoy ourselves... Well, when I said ourselves, I meant *myself*. You might not have such a fun experience.”

Then Ges fell upon her, reaching, grasping at her chest and exposed legs...

And I saw red.

I might not have wanted to take any chances that she might come to any harm, but I simply could not control myself when another male came so close to touching her that way.

I roared as I bolted forward. The space between us was not large—but it didn't need to be.

Ges turned and his eyes widened at the last moment as I lowered my head and felt something press against my horns. I

threw my head back, tossing Ges through the air and into the wall on the other side.

The impact made dust fall from the ceiling and cracks already present in the fountains splintered deeper and longer.

I wanted to bend down and check on Camila, but I had to ensure she was safe first. I spun around as Ges swung a thick fist at me, striking me on the jaw.

I lowered my head once more and buried the tip of my right horn into his upper thigh.

He threw back his head and bellowed. He thumped me on the top of the head with his balled fist. It landed hard, like a sledgehammer.

But pure bloodlust had already overtaken me, and I pushed forward, burying my horns through his leg and out the other side. Then I kicked with the sole of my foot, pulling him off my horns. His blood splattered the front of my robes.

Ges stumbled back and fell on his ass. He made to get up, but he howled with pain. His leg couldn't bear his weight. I doubted if it would ever truly work the same way again.

Confident Ges was incapacitated and unable to fight back, I bent down to Camila.

“Are you all right?”

It was a ridiculous question under the circumstances, but I needed to hear her voice.

“I'm fine... now.”

I kissed her hard on the lips and tasted the sweat and dirt on her mouth but didn't care. So long as she was going to be all right, nothing else mattered.

Dust fell from the ceiling and dirtied my bloodied horns.

“We need to get out of here,” I said, scooping her up in my arms.

Ges chuckled and shook his head. “I gave you everything and you repay me by taking it all away? You're no better than the royals you despise.”

“Maybe,” I said through panting breaths. “But at least there is a line they do not cross.”

“What line?”

“Even royals don’t kidnap the Muri of another.”

Taken aback, Ges peered between me and Camila. “Muri?”

I nodded. It was the greatest sin in the Ulsen world to threaten the fated mate of another.

Ges shut his eyes and shook his head. “I had no idea... I didn’t know...”

“You *never* know. You gave me back my heritage, my history, but it means nothing when you come between me and my fated mate.”

I paused on the way out of the tiny room.

“The guards will come for you,” I said. “If you have any honor remaining, you will not fight or harm them.”

“I won’t,” he said, and he cocked his lips into a smile that reminded me of the first time we met all those months ago. “But we did have a good time... at the beginning. Didn’t we?”

“Yes,” I said. “We were good friends then.”

“I apologize for failing you. But I am glad I got to see you find your fated mate. At least poverty didn’t make both of us rotten to the core.”

I shrugged. “I had my father. And now, I have my fated mate.”

Ges nodded. “It’s good to have someone. Go. Before the ceiling collapses.”

I hesitated only a moment before stepping back into the welcoming arms of the deep darkness. For all his faults, Ges had been my friend once, and I wouldn’t have been where I was without him. But he was no longer my friend... if he ever truly had been.

As I stepped deeper and deeper into the darkness, I heard a thumping noise behind me. If I didn’t know any better, I would

have said it was the sound of someone banging at the walls with his fist.

When the ceiling finally gave way and crushed Ges beneath it, he didn't bellow or shout. He had dignity in death, if not in life. I wished the good part of him well, but I would not mourn him.

I clutched Camila close and took her into the light. It was where we belonged.

"I love you, my Muri," I said.

"I love you too, my Muri," she replied.

"I swear to never leave your side ever again."

She reached up and placed her hand on my cheek. "And I promise to always let you."

We kissed, and I savored her unlike ever before. I carried her into the light, and the roaring and applause of the palace staff braced us on the other side. It was the sound of love that reverberated in my ears and shook me to my soul.

Camila was my Muri. And forever would be.

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**SECRETARY FOR THE
ALIEN PRINCE | SNEAK
PEEK**

RIVVAC

If I didn't mate soon, I was going to do something bad.
Really bad.

It seemed that with every passing Steyatt, the urges got stronger, bolder, seizing control of my whole mind and physical body.

There was no hiding place because mating was all you could think about.

Your cock grew stiff and hard and your senses heightened until you could smell a female from across the street.

Some Ulsen were known to lose their minds completely by the end of Steyatt week.

It was our time to mate and it happened once every year.

I had always managed to stave off the worst of the effects and mate with a female—sometimes multiple females, but multiple partners were *never* ideal.

It was always better to have a single mate during that period.

The only trouble was I had the position of the youngest prince of the Ulsen Empire and although I was unlikely to ever inherit the throne—save for some freak accident that wiped out the rest of my family (the Creator forbid!)—I was seen as a lifetime meal ticket.

I'd seen it happen more times than I cared to admit. A disinterested female would turn away from me and make

excuses to leave, only to immediately turn back the moment she heard my name and title. Suddenly, they brought out their best smiles and their natural pheromones clotted my senses.

I couldn't think straight.

Before I knew it, they were in my bed, satisfying my every sexual urge—and during Steyatt week, it could be a very... tumultuous period.

My friends' mates had ended up in the hospital to be treated for injuries. They were never done on purpose but sometimes a male could get carried away.

Especially during Steyatt week.

Steyatt week was the single most important event for all doctors and nurses throughout the empire. They made a killing while we killed ourselves in the bedroom.

I'd had several near-misses in the past, as many of my mates wanted to take the relationship further, or worse yet, after they had satisfied me a handful of times, would begin insisting on some form of payment halfway through or demand I carry out a service for them in exchange for the luscious wetness between her legs.

Often, they wanted me to use the Royal military to off a former lover. Which was *strictly* off-limits and easy to refuse.

Mostly, I managed to rein in my urges and leave my bedchamber, but others... I had been less successful.

Sometimes the craving was too strong and I caved, promising them whatever they wished, and was left with a headache I struggled to resolve the moment I blew my load.

Other times, it was a challenge to prove how much I cared for my mate—asking me to fetch them a rare type of flower that grew only on the upper reaches of the Archiaian Mountains.

I always accepted this request as they were my mother's favorite and all I had to do was pluck one from a bouquet she kept in her rooms!

The mate was always angered because she wanted a *fresh* one. It didn't matter that there was a good chance the pursuit would claim my life!

That was why I always weighed the request carefully. Semantics mattered—especially when my life was on the line.

But that was the way it was for a Royal during Steyatt week. You had to play games to ensure you didn't come out promising things you didn't intend on delivering.

Other Ulsen males hadn't been so fortunate, had been unable to control their innate urges, and ended up getting caught and locked away behind bars.

It wasn't only the doctors and hospitals that were busy during that time.

So was the morgue...

And the police stations and prisons.

And the last thing I wanted was to wind up behind bars with a raging hard-on that wouldn't quit... I'd heard the horror stories and didn't intend on living it myself.

My senses were on overdrive as I caught the scent of one juicy female after another.

In the Royal palace ballroom, the females battered their eyelids at me, their gorgeous scent filling my every pore. Many hadn't washed in a week to ensure their pheromones were powerful enough to be picked up from across the large ballroom where we circulated.

Some even ate specific diets to encourage the production of their scent. Others with deeper pockets bought special fragrances said to drive a male wild. Some were scams, others were real and damn near impossible to avoid.

And avoid was exactly what I intended on doing at the Royal Steyatt Ball. And things were going great...

Until I smelled *her*.

I HAD BEEN MOVING through the crowd of guests in the ballroom, greeting them and making polite conversation, playing the part of the dutiful prince.

There were many beautiful females, all with overpowering scents and wanton expressions in their eyes.

I had managed to smile and ignore the growing lust in my loins...

Until I picked up on a scent I had not encountered before.

Thick and strong, with an alien earthy undertone like playing with dirt in the garden as a child... and the strong presence of unknown flowers underneath that promised seduction and pleasure in ways I could only dream of...

Suddenly panicked, I peered around at where the scent might be coming from, then thought better of it.

I didn't *want* to know where it was coming from!

With my Steyatt suddenly peaking and all the sights and smells of the females surrounding me and their deliberate traps designed to ensnare my senses, I was doomed to drag at least one of them to my rooms and mate with them.

All because of that damn smell!

I needed to get out of there. *Now!*

"Excuse me," I said, sidestepping around a very lovely female Ulsen with red-painted horns. "I have to, uh, do something."

I stepped away and was immediately confronted by a pair of gorgeous Ulsen, their horns carved with intricate patterns in the modern style.

"Prince Rivvac," an older voice from behind them said, shoving her daughters toward me. "Have you met my daughters? They just came of age and are very keen to meet you—"

“Ah. They’re beautiful,” I said through eyes that I rapidly tore away. “I have something important I need to do—”

I moved like that from one female to another, but they didn’t make it easy. One reached up and ran a hand over my cheek, smiling seductively at me.

You could never tell when Steyatt would strike most strongly.

I made it out of the room and breathed a sigh of relief that I had managed to escape.

I hustled down the hallway, where half a dozen other guests raised their arms and voices to greet me, but I kept my eyes down low and hustled past them.

Sure, they might think I was rude, but how rude would they think I would be if I were to suddenly grab *their* Steyatt partners and drag them into a bedroom and use them for my own purposes?

And as a prince of the realm, there was *nothing* they could do to stop me.

Oh, their own senses would be triggered and their innate warrior spirit would compel them to attack... But I was better trained than they could ever hope to be, and if I failed somehow, then the palace guards would be on him before he managed to land many blows... And then I would be free to misuse his mate to my heart’s content...

But I had no such inclination to do something so evil to him or his mate.

I turned a corner but found another female wandering listlessly, lost, through the hallway. She saw me and raised her voice:

“Excuse me. Do you know where the ladies’ room is?”

“No!” I snapped, covering my eyes with one hand while clutching my other over my nostrils to keep her natural scent out of my nose, brain, and senses.

I turned another corner and found the hallway empty.

At last!

Free of any females!

Then a gaggle of them appeared around a corner, their gossiping stopping along with their footsteps for half a heartbeat as they looked up and saw me there.

I didn't look at them, but judging by the redness of their cheeks and the massive twirl of the hair on their heads, they could be only on thing.

Sirens.

The very *last* females you wanted to see during the opening salvo of Steyatt week.

They were known to educate and teach other female Ulsens in the ways of manipulation and their sex skills were legendary and a force of nature.

Once you were in their grasp, they could manipulate you to their heart's content, playing you like some kind of living instrument. And for those seven days, it was said you would know pleasure unlike anything you had ever known...

But by the end of it, they would have drained you of everything you were, took up residence in your home, and sucked your wealth from you until you were penniless had lost all respect.

I knew how they worked because that was what had happened to my father.

My mother, the Empress, was a former Siren, and she had wrapped my father around her horns tighter than the tiara that always sat perched upon her head.

She had taken everything from him, everything but his title as that was given by the Creator and could not be removed.

Then the strangest thing happened.

She ended up falling in love with him!

They turned out to be fated mates, which were the most powerful bonding link in the known galaxy.

Once it was formed, it could never be removed, and you were linked with them for the rest of your lives.

It was a true blessing as you would never know sadness or loneliness as that part of you was always wrapped up in that part of them.

But it was extremely rare and not something most people even hoped for these days.

It was like being struck by lightning.

Still, it was definitely not a risk I was willing to take right at that moment when my senses were glowing and spiraling out of control.

I thought all this in that split second the gaggle of Sirens had become silent and looked up to see me for who I was.

I growled at myself that I hadn't thought to put on a costume or wear a mask or... something!

“Prince Rivvac! Prince Rivvac!” they called, and like a pack of hungry wulvik, they broke formation and tore after me.

They sang songs that ricocheted off the bare marble walls and chased me, nipping at my heels as I raced through the palace's infinite hallways, turning one way and then another, my speed hampered by the fact my hands were clenched over my ears to prevent myself from hearing their ancient and powerful spellbinding seductive song.

Thankfully, their scent—harvested from the amigdala of the rare frogghian reptile on Micus Moon—hadn't yet wafted into my nostrils.

And if it did, I was a dead Ulsen.

All right, not exactly dead, but I would succumb to their advances and be unable to fight it.

I would be *doomed*.

I would become nothing more than a scalp as one—or more—of them drained me of everything I possessed.

Except they didn't know the truth of what they would get and would be very disappointed if they did...

I had panicked and lost track of where I was running.

Was I heading back to the party?

If I was, I would be slowed down and the Sirens would snatch me for sure.

I turned again and slammed hard into a waist-high balcony, almost pitching over the side.

I rubbed at my hip where I had struck it, hissing through my teeth. I heard that rolling tune of the Siren's song behind me, I immediately forgot about the pain.

I limped to one side and pressed my back to the wall.

But it wasn't good enough.

They would find me for sure.

I turned and peered down at the balconies arranged along the western wall of the palace, the city of Ulsen-Jirra spread out before me.

Right now, in those small, squat buildings, the Ulsen would be making love to each other in virtually every room they could find.

Some would even discover their fated mates.

Others wouldn't be quite so lucky, and if I didn't hurry and do something soon, I might very well end up being among them.

The Siren song grew louder and I hastily tore small strips from my shirt, balled it up, and jammed it into my ears to block the worst of it.

Of course, there was no real worst of it as it was known to be among one of the most beautiful melodies in the known galaxy—it was what happened *after* succumbing to it that was the ugly part.

“Prince Rivvac?” a soft voice cooed from behind me. “We know you're here somewhere. Come out and play. What's the

matter? Don't you want to play with us?"

Yes. And that was the problem. *I want it more than anything!*

My Steyatt forced me to let go of the banister and turn me toward the opening so the Sirens could find me.

Here I am, ladies! Come and get me!

But I ground my teeth and hastily climbed over the balcony, taking a moment to do what they always told you *not* to do in the Ulsen military, and looked down.

I was five stories up.

The fall might not kill me, but I risked being incapacitated for life...

And if the Sirens found me before the medics, they would take me to their Sanctuary and treat my wounds themselves, burying their claws deep into me.

It was worth the risk if I could escape.

I hurled myself toward the next balcony and latched onto the railing.

A scream went up from behind the billowing curtains as a couple inside, making mad passionate love, turned to see me.

"Don't mind me!" I yelled. "Just passing through!"

"Get out of here! She's *my* mate!" the male bellowed, raging toward me.

It didn't matter that I was a prince, not when it came to mating during Steyatt week.

I didn't confront him—it was never wise to do so in the midst of mating—and ran and leaped onto the next balcony.

This room was empty and I recognized it as my own suite.

I eased the window open, bolted toward the door, and turned the key in the lock.

I pressed my forehead to it and muttered a prayer to the Creator, thanking him for giving me the strength to resist.

“There you are.”

I stiffened, every muscle in my body becoming on edge, ready to explode and act upon the female in the room with me.

The voice was soft and gentle, caressing and feminine.

Her scent filled my nostrils and I felt myself already beginning to fall into the precipice of uncontrollable heat on the other side.

I turned around slowly, the movement seeming to take a lifetime.

Standing before me, almost regal in her silk dress harvested from the giant silkworms of Philliqua 4, stood the most beautiful Ulsen I had ever laid eyes on.

I took one step toward her after another, and soon, I forgot where I was and what I was doing there and all control just flew out the hatch...

I FELL on my knees before her and sank my face into the soft folds of her dress, so close to her sex that I could practically taste it.

“Rivvac?” she said. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t take it anymore. The Steyatt... how can any male stand it? If I don’t claim one soon, I fear what might happen next.”

Flara chuckled before raising my chin so she could peer into my eyes.

It only made my feelings worse, as my cock now raged harder than I had ever experienced before.

“We go through this every year. You succeeded in controlling yourself. That’s admirable. But there is no fighting against the Steyatt. Not for the entire week.”

“Please,” I growled. “I need to bed you. Now. Here. If I don’t...”

Flara smiled and I already knew what her answer would be—the same as it had been the other years I had asked for her to be my Steyatt mate.

She would refuse.

She placed a hand on my cheek and spoke softly, her voice like that of angel—an angel from hell with the way she toyed so easily with my senses. She said:

“I know you’ll choose another for your Steyatt week. Another mate. It is only for a week and it is your right to bed her. But *I* will not be her. I refuse to be the subject of gossip among friends and family. I can’t allow my reputation to be sullied by gossip. My father would never accept it.”

And there was the real reason, I knew.

She was afraid what her father would say.

“But I want to mate with *you*,” I said, almost a cry. “We’re going to be married anyway, so why wait until the wedding night?”

Her smile tightened. “There are no guarantees in life. And if I were to allow you to bed me during your Steyatt, the husband I end up with might not be too pleased that I was bedded by a prince of the Ulsen Empire.”

“Gah,” I said, making the noise involuntarily.

She was right, I knew.

The higher classes of Ulsen society did not lend themselves or their bodies out for Steyatt week as mates.

But still, it hurt that there was still a chance she would end up mating with someone else, and even worse than that—end up marrying them too.

“Who?” I asked. “Is there another male you might marry?”

Flara blinked in surprise—not that I knew there was another potential suitor, but that I had asked so directly.

She looked away and unnecessarily smoothed her skirts. “My father has been favoring Crer recently.”

“Crer?” I spat.

Of course. He was handsome, from an old and powerful family, and better yet, he was *rich*.

More than rich enough to support Flara and her family.

“But you don’t love him,” I said. “You love *me*.”

Flara shrugged. “Sometimes love is not enough.”

That rubbed me up the wrong way as I felt it wasn’t the truth at all... At least, it could be true among the lower classes, where money was a constant worry. When you had nothing, you really could marry for love.

But when you were royalty or part of the elite classes, when you wore your wealth on your fingers and body... it was an entirely different game altogether.

It seemed so unfair that the poor could marry for love while the rich could not.

“I thought being rich meant we could be free to choose our mates?” I said.

“Not when it comes to marriage,” Flara said with a sigh, no doubt tired of having the same conversation with me each year.

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her in close.

The scent of her filled my senses and I could barely control myself.

I planted my lips on her cheek and growled in the back of my throat.

She knew what I wanted. I didn’t make myself difficult to understand.

“We can’t do this,” she said. “You know we can’t.”

“But we *can*. We’re both of consenting age.”

“Yes,” she said, gently pushing me back. “But your family is poor now. And if you want to marry me, you’re going to have to come up with money to do so. My father knows your family has nothing.”

“We have our titles. Our land.”

“And it’s all now controlled by the Empire.”

“My family *is* the Empire,” I countered, parroting the words from the news and propaganda pumped into the minds of the Ulsen every day.

Flara reached up and ran a hand through my hair, gently caressing my horns. “Your family *isn’t* the Empire. You’re just the head of it. And all the titles in the galaxy can’t even buy a single meal. Only money can do that. And right now, you’re poorer than the average merchant in the street.”

I took her hands in mine. “But I will be wealthy. You’ll see.”

She let me kiss her fingertips, then took my face in her dainty hands and kissed me on the cheek.

“It’s not me you have to convince,” she said. “It’s my father.”

We had been betrothed since birth, and although it wasn’t a formal ceremony, it was nonetheless expected.

The thought of losing her now when she was so close, especially when there were other suitors sniffing around her...

It was too much to handle.

“How can I earn the money I need to prove myself to your father?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Flara said honestly. “But you’re going to have to figure out a way. And fast. I’m not sure I can force my father to wait much longer.”

My instincts went on high alert. There had never been a deadline before.

“How serious is he about Crer?” I asked.

She looked up at me through her eyelashes. “Very. But we shouldn’t talk about it now. After Steyatt week, perhaps. You need to focus on finding your mate.”

Flara she was always meant to be mine... and to be so close to her now, now that we had each come of age... it made my stomach churn in a way I had never experienced before.

“But we will be together, won’t we?”

“That depends on whether or not you can convince my father. Now I need to go. He’ll be wondering where I am.”

Now I had the worst of both worlds—the need to mate and without the will to go through with it.

“Choose your mate carefully,” Flara said at the door. “With any luck, this will be the last time you ever need to mate with another Ulsen.”

My cock sprang to attention immediately as she peered at me through her long luscious eyelashes, and the seductive curl of her lips promised everything I had ever dreamed of.

She unlocked the door and slid out, shutting it behind herself, leaving despair in her wake.

How could I have her *without* wealth?

I couldn’t. It was impossible. Her father would never accept me.

Maybe if I spoke with him, made him understand just how much I loved her, he might let me have her...

But I knew what the outcome of that would be.

He wouldn’t back down.

He was the Empire’s treasurer and he believed in reality, figures, fact... not some wishy washy promises of unaccountable emotions.

He would need to see I could provide for his daughter—and not just with titles—but real, hard, cold cash.

I fell onto the edge of my bed and buried my face in my hands.

I was doomed and someone else was going to claim her.

That would leave me alone, with no one...

There was no hope.

And then a knock came at the door.

I DIDN'T SAY "COME" as I didn't want to encourage any females to take advantage of me in my current condition.

The door opened anyway and a figure popped her head around the door frame.

It was a human face and I figured it must have been one of the servants as they made up more than eighty percent of the serving staff.

They were cheap, hardworking, and much smaller than the average Ulsen, so they were easier to feed, clothe, and home.

They had been trained to control their emotions well too, and were often blank-faced and hard to read, although I often wondered what they were really thinking beneath the surface.

Behind her, sawing like some majestic bird, was the sing-song lullaby sung by the Sirens.

Worst still, I thought I caught sight of their bright clothing and high, complex hair designs.

"Shut the door!" I snapped.

The female human did so—after she had stepped into the room.

"What do you think you're doing?" I growled.

The female then turned the key in the lock, turned to face me, her tiny hands balled up into fists, and glared at me.

"I'm not leaving until I get my interview!" she snapped.

"Your what?"

"My job interview!"

I scanned her body language—it was the one thing that I could read when it came to humans—and there was no doubt in my mind that she honestly believed what she was saying.

“I’ve been waiting an hour!” she snapped. “Is this the way the palace runs things around here? Because if it is, I’m not sure I want to work here after all!”

I took an unconscious step back. I had never seen an angry human before, much less had to deal with one.

They were seen and not heard, for the most part.

Only the most senior members of the staff actually spoke to Royal family members.

Had this girl lost her marbles, or was she so new to our culture and way of life that she didn’t know how to address a member of the Family?

Or was she really that angry?

“I’m not sure I understand—” I began but got no further.

The girl handed me a piece of paper with “Resume” written across the top. “I’m here for the assistant position.”

Assistant?

I shook my head.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what—”

And then it hit me.

The scent of her.

Full and earthy and rich, unlike anything I had ever smelled before...

Save *one* time.

She had tried to conceal it beneath some kind of flowery perfume but her own body produced a much stronger, more pungent, and overwhelming scent than anything that could be captured in a bottle.

I unconsciously stumbled back one step and then another, reaching out to brace myself on a side table.

“Are you all right?” she said, her anger for the moment dissipating in favor of concern, although I could see it was still very much being held in reserve.

“I’m... I’m fine...” I stammered, not sure of my own words.

It was the scent—the scent from the ballroom earlier—the scent my nostrils had caught from the sea of writhing masses and shoved me over the edge, threatening to lose control of the Steyatt.

It had been so strong, so powerful and pungent that I could have followed it and sniffed her out at a thousand paces.

In the ballroom, I had been on a mission to escape the effects her scent had on me, and not to pursue its origins.

And now, somehow, it had been delivered to me.

Right here.

In my bedroom.

My cock throbbed so hard against the front of my pants that I thought it might burst free.

I wanted nothing more than to scoop her up in my arms and make sweet love to her, but I knew such soft and romantic gestures would not last long.

They would quickly descend into deep and violent lovemaking that the Ulsen were so well-known for.

“Well?” she snapped, reverting back to her earlier anger.

“Well what?” I said, losing all sense of focus.

“What about my interview?”

“Your interview. Yes. Of course.”

My initial reaction had been to send her away to have her interview with whoever was responsible for such things—I had no idea who that person was as our staff was so large I couldn’t possibly know everyone—but I knew the head of Human Resources and she would doubtless be the one she ought to speak with.

But she was baked into my destiny somehow.

I wasn’t sure how—after all, she was only a human female, what significance could she possibly have in my

future?

The fates had brought her here for me to smell, I had no doubt about that, and you did not ignore what the fates sent you, no matter how much you didn't want to confront it.

“Then let's do it now, shall we?” I said.

She nodded. “Good.”

I led her over to my desk piled high with papers, documents, and pressing business matters.

Having the desk between us also meant I could conceal my throbbing, aching cock from view.

But her scent had no such restrictions and virtually pummeled me into submission, the same way I wished I could pummel her right then and there.

And allowing myself to be led by my own instincts was gave me my idea.

When a human female had so willingly stumbled into my midst during Steyatt week, and as the fates had obviously conspired to bring her to me right here and now, at the lowest and most desperate part of my desire...

There could only be one reason.

Mia (as the top of this flimsy document called a Resume informed me) was destined to be my Steyatt mate.

And I would have her. No matter the cost.

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ABOUT TAMMY

In space, no one can hear you scream...

And where's the fun in that?

I've been reading romance and science fiction my whole life. I always wondered why those genres hadn't been a mash-up years ago and now I'm super excited I get to combine them into a single steamy encounter!

Come with me as we journey through space and time... and the most gorgeous set of hunks this side of the galaxy!

I wrote the #1 bestselling FATED MATES OF THE TITAN EMPIRE and FATED MATES OF BREEDER PRISON series. I write science fiction romances set on far-flung planets and ships traveling at the speed of light.

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MAID FOR THE ALIEN PRINCE

by Tammy Walsh

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