



A SCI-FI  
HOLIDAY  
TAIL

# OZIAS

HOLIDATE WITH AN ALIEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Ozias

**Holidate With An Alien**



Alana Khan

Temptation Of The Horizontal LLC



# Copyright

**O** zias: Holidate with an Alien by Alana Khan  
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Dear Reader

Many Thanks

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# Chapter One

## **P**lanet Hallion

Sometime in the future when humans can fly to the stars...

### **Selene**

“Your boyfriend’s here, Selene,” my co-worker, Layla, says with a smirk and a wink.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I protest. Are we still in high school?

“And keep your voice down. I don’t want him to feel uncomfortable.”

He comes to The Diner for lunch three times a week like clockwork. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. For some reason, he doesn’t terrify me the way he does the other servers, so they elected me the unofficial “demon waitress.”

Since everyone who works here is human, we were all afraid the first time he walked through the door. Red skin, black horns, tail, wings, claws, fangs, slitted glowing amber eyes,

and muscular legs with backward-facing knees that end in hooves... that's everyone's picture of a demon, right?

I was the first to square my shoulders, untie my tongue, and approach him for his order. Since then, the other women have designated him "mine" and joke that he's my boyfriend. I guess it doesn't matter. It looks as though he'll be my last customer.

"Hello, what will you have?" I don't know why I ask. He's nothing if not consistent. Mondays is the Cobb Salad, Wednesdays it's the BLT, and Fridays are...

"The club sandwich."

"Extra mayo?" He must be off his game. He always orders his sandwich with extra mayo. Maybe he's distracted. I sure am.

I came to this planet with the highest hopes. Of course, I followed Zane-the-asshole here with promises of being cherished and taken care of. What I got was jilted for a pretty, four-titted *Lifleura* female.

To support myself, the best I could do was take a job at The Diner. The human owner, Ken, thought he could attract people of all species with his "down-home American cooking." It turned out not to be the best business plan, since we're going out of business. Today.

I'd hoped Ken would be able to eek by until the big winter Jule celebration when thousands of tourists from all over the galaxy descend on our picture-perfect town. An influx of

money was guaranteed to flow in. Too bad the eviction notice arrived before the infusion of credits.

“Yes.”

When I look at him blankly, he says, “Yes. Extra mayo.”

Right. I spaced out there for a minute as I was wondering just how I’m going to pay next month’s rent.

When I place the order using our no-tech system of paper tickets—“just like they used to do on Earth”—I catch Ken wiping his eyes. I think this will be the last order he cooks, since it’s late for lunch and we close in an hour.

I’ve never gotten chummy with demon-guy. He’s an odd duck, that one. Sits ramrod straight, avoids eye contact, and eats his sandwich with a knife and fork. As I serve him his sandwich, I take a good look at him.

He quit terrifying me months ago. In fact, once I got over the horns, red skin, cloven hooves, tail, and leathery wings, I realized he’s kind of handsome. Who am I kidding? He’s gorgeous, with his perfect face surrounded by flowing black hair—even with those fangs peeking out between his ruby lips.

It’s not his looks that have kept me from asking his name or chatting him up when things are slow. It’s his frosty demeanor. Which is frostier today than ever before.

As he eats, I grab one of the last slices of cherry pie, reserving one to put into a to-go box for myself. No use throwing these in the garbage.

“Did you see the sign on the door?” I say as I approach his table, plate of pie in hand.

“Uh, no?”

“We’re going out of business. Looks like you’ll be our last customer. Here’s a piece of cherry pie to celebrate, or maybe it’s commiserate.”

He looks from the plate to my face as though he’s never seen a piece of pie before.

“It’s good.” I exaggerate my smile and nod as though he doesn’t have a translator chip and we have to communicate by miming. “I’m taking a piece home.” Who knows? With no money and no job, it might be the last thing I eat for quite a while.

The other waitresses think demon-guy has a crush on me because he comes in so often and I’m the only one who waits on him no matter if he’s in my section or not. I just scoff when they tease me. He’s never even asked my name. If he was interested, he’d offer for me to sit with him and share dessert since Layla left and, other than Ken, we’re the only people in the place.

Instead, his eyes dart to his wrist-comm, which I would have to be deaf and blind not to have noticed has been blowing up since shortly after he walked in today.

“Thanks for the pie,” he says distractedly as he reads his latest message, then re-reads it.

Shit. Zane-the-asshole abandoned me in space, this waitress job, shitty as it was, disappears, and even demon-guy isn't interested enough to share a bon voyage piece of pie with me. I'm not sure my life could get much worse.



## Chapter Two

**O**zias Why did I come to The Diner? I haven't eaten or been hungry in days, and that was before I got this latest spate of comms.

I scroll back to the original message that arrived 52 standard hours ago.

*Sorry to inform you that your father and three older brothers were killed in a space crash.*

I'm rereading it now to see if I can force myself to feel grief. Perhaps an audience, albeit only one person, will help me dredge up a shred of emotion. No. None. Not like when my beloved mother passed away a few years ago. I still miss her every day.

It makes sense that I don't miss my father or brothers. I never met them.

The moment my father found out my mother, his human mistress, was pregnant and wouldn't get rid of her baby, he

shunted her off-world, arranged a small annual stipend to keep a roof over her and the child's head, and went on about his life without another thought to my mother or me.

No comms. No gifts. No invitations to planet Infernia to meet my siblings or learn my roots. Nothing.

It baffles me why anyone even thought to inform me of their death.

I should eat, but the food here, not particularly tasty on a good day, doesn't appeal. Perhaps my body is experiencing grief, even though my heart isn't.

This morning, there has been an endless stream of requests for information about everything from my legal name and date of birth to how far from the shoulder to cut slits for my wings for shirts and coats. After the first few interactions, I've gone silent. There's no reason for them to pester me like this. It's irritating.

While Selene asks if I want a piece of pie, I receive a new missive. When she walks away, I read it. For a moment, it feels as if all the moisture has been sucked out of my body. My tongue is so parched I couldn't speak if I wanted to.

*Over the last two days we have had our Supreme Barristers pour over the lawbooks. They have definitively concluded that although you are the illegitimate child of Emperor Suetonius, you are legally next in line for the throne.*

Good thing I've barely eaten a bite, or it would be making its way back up my throat. Next in line for the throne? My father



was emperor of the entire planet. A planet I've never stepped foot on. Certainly, this is a joke.

As comms come in one after the other, the picture becomes even more clear.

*We are sending a royal phaeton to your location. It should arrive tonight. We request you board it to arrive on planet Infernia as quickly as possible to complete arrangements for you to ascend the throne.*

Ascend the throne?

*As befits a monarch of your importance, we strongly suggest you take a mate as quickly as possible. To that end, we have arranged gala events leading up to the annual winter Fire and Ice Celebration which will occur in two weeks' time. There will be a plethora of eligible females there.*

Take a mate?

*Your coronation will occur the day after the final day of the Fire and Ice Celebration. Hopefully, you will be mated by then with a female befitting your status of emperor of our esteemed planet. Sincerely, Vizier Abyssis.*

“Headache?” Selene asks.

I'm cupping my forehead, my eyes squeezed closed as if I could make all this go away like a bad dream.

“Uh. Yes.”

I'm not sure what is disturbing me the most. Is it the idea that I, a low-level government attorney on planet Hallion, will now

be responsible for an entire planet, or is it the idea that I'm expected to find a mate in a matter of days?

"You okay?"

For the first time since I met her, Selene is looking at me as if I'm a sentient being rather than animated roadkill to whom she's forced to deliver food. She's made no secret of the fact that I'm unpleasant to look at, although she's gotten a lot better at hiding her disgust than when we first met.

"You, uh, just moaned. Are you ill? Should I call an ambulance?"

"I moaned?" Really? My lack of emotion always worried my mother. She never understood my ability to maintain equanimity in any situation. I guess those last few messages from the vizier were enough to disturb even the most emotionless person.

I respond to the vizier and, in the strongest terms possible, abdicate my position. He informs me, in even stronger terms, that abdication is not possible.

Our comms become more heated, finally crescendo, then descend into more flattery on his part and more statements by me that all I want is to continue my boring life here on planet Hallion.

*So it's settled, the vizier says, you'll come visit, attend all the soirees we're arranging, and make an informed decision after the Fire and Ice Celebration.*

Right before I push “send” on my one-word rejection, I catch Selene’s movements out of the corner of my eye, and a plan forms in my desperate thoughts.

I’m the son of the emperor of an entire planet and have never received one iota of benefit from what should have been my birthright. I deserve to at least see Infernia before I die, right? And shouldn’t I have the chance to meet females of my species?

Yet, it all sounds so daunting. Having a wingman would be nice, and I just happen to know someone who is about to be unemployed.

*I’ll be bringing a guest,* I inform the vizier with all the command of an emperor.

*Yes, sire.*



## Chapter Three

**S**elene

“Selene? Did you say this is your last day working here?”

Okay... that was the longest sentence he’s ever used in my presence. And since when has he known my name? I guess it’s not too weird, considering I wear a name tag.

“Yeah.”

“Do you have another job lined up?”

“No.”

“I have a proposition for you.”

Shit! I knew it. Even though demon-guy has never acted sketchy and I’ve never, not once, caught him looking at my rack, I’m not surprised he’s using the approach-’em-when-they’re-vulnerable strategy.

“Fuck you.”

He looks offended. Not just offended. Aghast.

“Did your communicator scramble my question?” he asks, the picture of innocence. “I have a job offer for you.”

Job offer? My ears perk up. I am, indeed, jobless, with only enough money for a third of next month’s rent.

“Have a seat,” he offers, pointing to the chair across from him.

The moment I pull the chair away from the table, giving myself plenty of head-start room, he launches.

“I need to fly to planet Infernia tonight. I will put you up in good, clean lodgings both during the flight and after we arrive. There will be nightly parties where I’ll be expected to...”

He cups his chin, rubs the corners of his mouth with his fingers, and pauses an interminable amount of time before he says, “Date women in search of...” another ridiculously lengthy pause, “a suitable mate.”

He looks at me as though he’s waiting for my answer. He’s got a long wait coming, considering he hasn’t asked a question yet.

“And?” I prompt.

“And, I...” After another pause, he nods his head as if he’s worked out a very difficult math problem. “Need a wingman. Er, woman.”

“Do you even know what that means?” Hearing the distinctly human phrase coming out of his fanged, demonic mouth would be funny if this conversation wasn’t so damned odd.

“My mother was human. She made me watch old rom-com vids with her. I absolutely know what a wingman is. I need someone to talk to the females in question to obtain private intel, and report back. Perhaps you may have noticed, I’m not good at reading people. Maybe you could interview some candidates? Give me feedback on who might be... nice?”

Not good at reading people? That’s putting it mildly. He’s completely clueless. His main criteria for a mate is *nice*? Any other man I’ve ever known would be seeking big boobs or good in bed or a thousand other shallow criteria. This male is looking for *nice*. It kind of warms my heart.

“If necessary, I will need you to complain of feeling ill so we can escape these gatherings early. There will be a gala almost every night for fourteen days leading up to the planet’s Fire and Ice Holiday Celebration. What do you say?”

What do I say? I say he’s insane.

“Oh, I should have named a price. Uh...” He gives me a helpless look. “What sounds like a fair price?”

There’s a difference between a *fair* price and a *good* one.

Now *I’m* the one doing advanced mathematics in my head. I’m calculating the highest possible price I could ask as well as the lowest I’ll go in my desperate circumstances. The longer I think, the more uncomfortable he gets. Perhaps if I just wait him out—

“How much do you make per month?”

I double the actual figure, then tack on another twenty-five percent. “Nine thousand credits per month. Give or take, depending on tips.”

“I’ll give you twenty-five.”

I arch an eyebrow.

“Thirty. And it shouldn’t take more than two weeks. What do you say?”

Silence seems to be my best friend. I’ll just wait a moment more...

“Thirty, and...” He spears me with a look that, if I didn’t know better, indicates bruised feelings, “since you consider me a demon, I’ll pay for lodgings, meals, and a different gown for every affair we attend.”

Does that mean he heard everything the other waitresses used to say about him? My stomach feels like lead. It’s one thing for my friends to laugh and joke, and another thing entirely for them to hurt someone’s feelings.

“Sorry. I tried to make them...” The thought that he heard my friends make fun of him makes my stomach cramp, but I still don’t accept his proposal. I simply pause, counting my heartbeats as I wait for his final offer.

“Okay. I’ll pay you forty thousand.”

“Just so we’re clear. There’s no expectation of sex, right?”

“Oh?” His red, fanged, horned, demonic face is a caricature of righteous indignation. Even his wings, usually stiff and



unmoving at his back, give an irritated little flutter.

Although I would have been insulted if he'd thought for a minute I would have sex for money, a little pang zings through me when he acts as though the thought of having sex with me never crossed his mind.

“No! I have no expectations of sex with you, Selene. This isn't about that at all. What do you say?”

Suddenly, another fear hits me.

“How do I know you're not trying to lure me off planet just to sell me into sex slavery? You could be a serial killer for all I know, like the Martian Butcher or the Skin Eater from Prime V.”

“How do I know *you're* not a serial killer?” He shifts, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I'm not sure if he's joking or serious. I'll assume it's a joke.

“Touché.” I give him an appreciative nod.

I return to the real issue at hand—the payday he's waving under my nose. I make four thousand credits a month and he just offered forty? For less than a month's work? Add in some new clothes and possibly the outer space equivalent of caviar and champagne?

“Count me in, um, what's your name?”

“Ozias. I'll pick you up at 8 PM if you give me your address.”

I'm not stupid. Not only do I get his comm number, but his full name, his date of birth, and his current address to give to

both Layla and Ken.

“Alright, Ozias. If I don’t check in with my friends every day by 9 PM, they’ll call the Intergalactic Police so fast your head will spin.”

“Certainly. The last thing I want is for you to be fearful. You’re doing me a great service.”



## Chapter Four

**S**elene

I can't believe that two days ago I was worried about Ozias doing heinous things to me on this bizarre adventure. The only heinous thing about this trip has been how deadly dull it's been.

Perhaps it was the swift and utter awkwardness of the offer itself that had me off balance. Otherwise, why would I have ever worried that he had any nefarious motives? This is a guy who eats his sandwiches with a knife and fork, for goodness sake!

He picked me up at the stroke of 8 PM, just as he promised. I'd packed a small hover suitcase, only half expecting him to show up. Between his surprising proposition and his arrival at my apartment, I imagined a dozen scenarios, only one of which was that he was going to actually take me off planet and pay me the credits he promised.

Though his hover was an unassuming five-year-old model, the space vessel we're traveling in could be described as nothing less than spectacular.

It is sumptuously appointed in scarlets and golds. I have no idea what the guy paid for this thing, but we are the only passengers on board. The staff wait on me hand and foot when I leave my room. Their obsequious hovering is so annoying, I prefer to spend most of my free time in my cabin where I read about people whose lives are far more interesting than mine.

I join Ozias for dinner every night, where we don't eat, we *dine*. My mom was a single mother who worked two jobs. I subsisted on packaged food unless one of the fast-food dining chains had good coupons. For the better part of the last year, I've been slinging the most basic Earth food to humans and aliens alike. In lieu of decent wages, Ken sends me home with a doggy bag every night.

What they serve us on this phaeton is as far from any of that as can be imagined.

Tonight, as last night, I'm wearing my only dress. It's emerald green with short sleeves. It's the nicest thing I own. After traveling down polished wood-paneled hallways, I arrive at the bullet-shaped dining room with floor-to-ceiling windows covering most of the walls.

Space. It's beautiful out there, with stars sparkling from every angle and a pink and green nebula shimmering off the port side. Or is it starboard? I can never remember.

Ozias pulls my chair out for me, sits at the opposite end of the table that's big enough for twelve, and the staff serves us course after course.

Eating at The Diner made it easy and cheap for me to stick with Earth foods, so everything I'm served is a new experience. Some of it is delicious, some is okay, and a few are absolute no-goes.

Last night I made it clear: "Nothing with a face. Nope. Don't go there again." Hopefully, they got my message.

We eat as we did last night, in complete silence. In the romances I read, they call this companionable silence. I don't think that's what we have here. What we have here is best described as an *awkward* silence. Oh well, for forty thousand credits, I can handle being awkward. Actually, for forty thousand credits, I can handle a *lot* of awkward.

"Selene."

His deep, mellifluous voice reverberates through this large, paneled room. Because he hasn't said a word yet tonight and we're working our way to dessert, he startles me out of my reverie.

"Yes?"

He pauses, his gaze darting around the room, falling everywhere but on me. He finally gathers the nerve to look at me as he asks, "You grew up on Earth? Tell me about it."

Now that he's gotten the ball rolling, I find he's easy to talk to. It makes sense that our conversation would fall to Earth

movies. It sounds as though he and his human mom used to watch a lot of them.

“The Destry franchise. Please tell me you’ve watched that one,” I say after he admits he never saw one of the seventeen *Planet Luna* blockbusters.

“Not only have I watched every one of the Destry franchise, I have a collection of first edition books.”

“Wow!” I can’t hide my envy. The first and second in the series are my all-time favorites.

“I saved all my money from secondary school odd jobs and bought the leather-bound versions. It is still my fondest wish to afford the ones with the gilt edges.”

To my surprise, our conversation continues pleasantly as I finally get a glimpse of the male I’ve served lunch to three times a week for months. He’s still stiff and formal, but he’s a lot of fun.

Suddenly, he shifts gears, his face becomes serious, and he says, “They tell me we’ll arrive on Infernia in the morning. There’s something we should discuss.”

His demonic face is scarier than usual, possibly because it’s in contrast to the pleasant smile he’s worn as we discussed movies. Is now the moment he’s going to inform me that I’m to be served up as some type of sacrifice for the Fire and Ice Day festivities?

“Okaaay.”

“Perhaps I should have mentioned this earlier.”

Oh, shit. Even if it weren't for those words, I'd know something terrible was coming by the just-sucked-a-lemon look on his handsome, red-skinned face.

"Just say it," I snap. The suspense is killing me.

He gives me that offended look of his, then spares me another moment of waiting.

"I grew up on planet Hallion with my human mother, but..." he motions to his clearly-not-human face and points vaguely over his shoulder toward his wings, "my father was an Infernian. I've never stepped foot on the planet before, but through an unfortunate series of events, I've..."

This time, he pauses so long I have time to debate whether I can do serious damage if I fling my fork across the table to impale it in his broad, muscular chest.

Perhaps it's the angry fireballs shooting from my eyes that propel him to continue. "I've become the successor to the emperor's throne. I'm to be crowned after the round of parties I told you about."

He shifts in his chair, clearly uncomfortable with his new role.

"That I'm to be emperor is why they want me to have a mate. I only tell you this because I've told the staff on this vessel to act as though I'm a commoner to make you feel more comfortable. When we step onto the planet tomorrow, I suspect all of that will change."

I grip the burlled wood tabletop because the room is spinning. For half a second, I tell myself the male is delusional, but I



can't maintain that belief for long. The opulence of the ship, the deference of the staff, the way they back away from Ozias as if he is, indeed, the emperor of an entire planet. The male isn't lying.

I'm overwhelmed. Totally. I'm wearing my one and only dress. I'm a waitress with one year of community college under my belt. Well, half a year if you want to get specific. One of the staff had to clue me in on which spoon to use with the *caramander* soup we had last night.

"I'm... I'm supposed to be an *emperor's* wingman?"

"Wingwoman," he corrects softly. "Nothing has changed. I am the same male I've been since I first walked into The Diner. You will still receive the agreed-upon amount when your job is done. Simply attend these parties with me, help me discern the vipers from the women of worth, and we'll get through this unscathed."

"I'll stick with wingman," I insist. Wingwoman just sounds... wrong. It's easier to focus on what word to use for my job description than to pay attention to the real issue, which is that Ozias isn't just some awkward, uncommunicative demon to whom I served lunch. He's emperor of a freaking planet!

To indicate the discussion is closed, he stands, then walks to my side of the room to gallantly pull my chair out for me, careful not to touch any part of my body.

This new information shouldn't affect me in the slightest, so I have no idea why my stomach is cramping. Perhaps it's something I ate.



## Chapter Five

**O**zias

It's been three days since I received the missive from the vizier informing me I'm to be the emperor of the planet. Other than wondering how the security of an entire planet could be so lax as to allow the ruler and his three successors to fly on the same vessel so they all died at the same moment in a fiery crash, I've kept myself from thinking too much about my changed circumstances.

During the two-day trip, I locked myself in my cabin, reading everything I could get my hands on about Infernia. Its geography, politics, and religions are rich, varied, and diverse.

I'm not starting from zero in my education about Infernia. My mother, despite being forced off the planet in shame, educated me about Infernia so I would understand my roots. I absorbed little of it, though. I was bored and indifferent. Really, who could blame me? My own father had disowned me.

I only half listened to all those lectures my mom gave about how beautiful the planet could be when you got over the fact that it seemed to be on fire for one season a year.

Although I know and appreciate much more about Earth than I do my father's planet, there was a good reason we didn't live on the planet she hailed from. Mother said humans didn't take well to aliens and although I'm half human, all anyone would see is my Infernian half.

When I was a teen, she showed me pictures from Earth's database of their depiction of demons.

“See, Ozzy? This is why I never went back to Earth. You're the sweetest person in the galaxy, but they would never be able to see past your looks.”

When I discovered The Diner here on Hallion, I enjoyed going there several times a week. It wasn't for the food, that was certain. I liked being surrounded by the staff who were all humans.

After my mother died, it provided some comfort, even though it proved she was correct in her choice not to raise me on Earth. The only human who didn't recoil from me was Selene, though it was obvious her ability to look at me without flinching took a great deal of effort on her part.

A respectful knock at the door is followed by, “Your Excellency? May I come in?”

It's Sylas, who has seen to my comfort during the trip.

“Yes.”

“Here are clothes we constructed in the 3D printer. I’ll be providing appropriate clothing for your companion as well. We will land in less than a standard hour.”

Sylas is calm and deferential as he instructs me in protocol I probably would have learned as a child had I been raised in the palace as the emperor’s acknowledged child. I appreciate his kind explanations as he prepares me to fit into a society I doubt wants anything to do with me.

When I tried to abdicate, Vizier Abyssis informed me that my existence had been acknowledged in my father’s will. There was an addendum stating that in the unlikely event all his legitimate offspring died, there was an illegitimate son who was legally next in line to the throne.

I imagine it took a cadre of Supreme Barristers two full days of scouring ancient legal tomes to find a loophole to keep the late emperor’s bastard son from ascending the throne. Evidently, there were no loopholes, which is the only reason I’m here.

One hour later, I leave my cabin, dressed in Infernian finery befitting an emperor. I’m wearing black pants of the finest cloth, as well as a black cape that sweeps the floor and has slits for my wings. Is this why my mother had a fondness for Dracula vids when I was a kid? Was she secretly giggling as she watched the caped vampire dramatically prance across the screen?

Now here I am, striding down the hallway with the black cape billowing behind me.

Selene opens her cabin door, takes one look at me, and her eyes widen. I gird myself for one of her taunting comments. She and her friends must have thought I had inferior hearing because they seldom lowered their voices when they made their mocking jabs at me back at The Diner.

I pause to give her time to get her criticism out of her system.

“You look... imposing,” she says, without a hint of sarcasm. Perhaps knowing I’m an emperor has made her keep her insults to herself.

Until three days ago, I’d never seen Selene in anything but her pink and aqua waitress uniform, her hair pulled into a ponytail. On this trip, I’ve seen her in a green dress when she joined me for dinner.

Standing only a few standard feet from me, she’s wearing a striking dress the exact shade of red as my skin. The dress covers her from neck to ankles. If it was designed to be modest, it fails miserably because it hugs her curves as if she were stitched into it. The gossamer fabric clings and perfectly accentuates her form.

“You look very p-pretty.” Too bad my throat was swallowing so convulsively. I’m not sure that last word came out as anything other than a choked whisper.



## Chapter Six

**S**elene

As we step down the gangway, we're met by a committee of pinched-faced, frowning Infernian males who look as though they would rather be anywhere than here, wearing their finery to greet a male they consider their inferior.

I lag behind, not sure what is expected of me. One of the staff has been tutoring me on proper protocol, but I'm not sure anyone knows exactly what to do with the new emperor's wingman.

I'll just stay out of the way and try not to attract any undue attention.

The moment I fall in line behind Ozias and no one is paying attention to me, I inspect my surroundings.

We exit the docking bay through an airlock. In that one step, I leave behind the gray, techie expanse of the private vessel bay and enter what must be Ozias's palace.

Holy. Shit.

Even though we're mere steps inside an unattractive back entrance, this place reeks of opulence. My feet sink into the plush carpet as we travel through long stretches of hallways. The gleaming, polished walls are covered in paintings that probably document key moments in Infernian history. This place screams of wealth, power, and royal bloodlines.

Ozias is one of the least talkative people I've ever met, but he told me of his mixed parentage. I imagine the Infernians aren't thrilled that a bastard with half-human genes will soon ascend their throne.

The male who seems to be in charge, I think he was introduced as Abyssis, the Grand Brassiere, although that couldn't be correct, is blathering on about the parties Ozias will be attending.

"My companion, Selene, will be joining me," Ozias informs him. I'm not sure the coterie of demons knows Ozias is feeling out of place, because he manages his haughty act pretty well with his condescending tone and lifted chin.

As we tour the palace, a few of the males manage to give me stealthy side-eye. I can only guess what they're assuming about my relationship with their new monarch.

I don't care. What I care about is forty thousand credits.

After our tour of the palace, we're taken on a quick hoverlimo ride to "peruse the city," as the Grand Vizier—I caught his title—called it.

Even though I've been lounging in my cabin for the last two days, doing nothing but eating, sleeping, and getting caught up on romance books, I'm tired. If I'm on overload, I can't imagine how Ozias is feeling. He doesn't look sad about losing his father and brothers, but, still waters run deep. Perhaps he's crying buckets on the inside.

Although the vizier's pride overflows as he shows us some of the nearby sights, I try to hide my extremely-not-impressed face. Infernia is a pit.

No. That's not true. It's not a pit. It's terrifying.

If I was an artist who had been given instructions to paint a hellscape... it would look exactly like this. The sky is blue, but instead of clouds, it's filled with smoke from the nearby volcano.

"The Demon's Breath volcano has been certified as safe by our scientists. It has been smoking off and on for centuries, but will not erupt."

I say nothing, though I imagine that's what the folks from Pompeii assured all their guests. Far be it from me to mention that perhaps building the emperor's palace so near a deadly volcano chugging smoke might not have been the best idea.

It's obvious the people of Infernia enjoy beautiful things. They've clawed back chunks of the foreboding landscape of cooled black magma and created grassy parks filled with flowering bushes and trees. I wonder how long it will take Ozias to get used to the faintly sulfurous smell that has not only invaded my nose, but is already dancing on my tastebuds.



“And that?” Ozias points to the other side of a large lake.

“What is that?”

“Oh, you don’t want to see that.”

I don’t know Ozias well, but I’m not surprised when, his interest piqued, he insists, “Yes. I do.”

We make a quick trip across the lake, then return before Ozias can ask about the slums we just glimpsed. His silence speaks volumes as I observe the tension in his jaw, which reveals that he’s deeply disturbed by what he witnessed.

The vizier must sense it too, because he changes the subject and blathers on, “The Fire and Ice Celebration is a millennia-old holiday with its roots in ancient religions. Usually, within days of the festival, the Demon’s Breath settles down and remains calm until about two weeks prior to the next year’s holiday.”

Despite the vizier’s obvious irritation at showing deference to Ozias, he can’t hide his pride in his planet.

“After your coronation, you’ll see how beautiful our planet... *your* planet, can be.”



## Chapter Seven

**O**zias

Endless. This day has been endless. It's ugly here and reeks of sulfur. It's clear the males who are to be my advisors would happily stage an insurrection to overthrow me if given half a chance.

They only give me the barest information, even when I ask direct questions. They're obviously setting me up for failure, all while smiling and pretending they're thrilled to have me as their new emperor.

The worst part? I have no one to talk to about it.

When Mother was alive, I could talk to her about these things, although I seldom had anything that troubled me this deeply. It pained her to say it, but she felt I was emotionless. Her observations about my dispassionate nature never bothered me. Not only were they true, I felt lucky sailing through life without pain, anger, or sadness.

I miss her, of course. Other than that, I wake, eat, do my job, and sleep. At least I did until I received that first message from the vizier. It changed my life forever.

I shower and sink naked into bed, glad to be blissfully alone. Out of everyone I've met on this forsaken planet, Sylas, his title is The Emperor's Male, seems the most guileless. He indicated that he'd left the adjoining door between my room and Selene's unlocked.

His face held no trace of a sneer when he mentioned it. Although it seems he believes she's my mistress, he appeared unsurprised that I brought her, even though I'm on a scouting trip for a mate. I guess it makes sense they would all assume I'm unfaithful, just like my father.

There's that old saying, the *plentrip* doesn't fall far from the tree. Little do they know I would never do such a thing. I should lock the door to give Selene a sense of security. I'll do it the next time I get out of bed.

A few years before her death, my mother quit asking me about what she called my "love life." She finally accepted that for some reason I was born without a male's natural desire for fleshly pleasures.

I never understood what all of the excitement was about: the songs, the poems, the lengths both males and females would go to for a moment of physical bliss.

When Mother finally accepted that I would never give her grandchildren, she leaned to kiss my cheek, sighed, and said,

“I wasn’t lucky at love, but I’d always hoped you’d have better, Ozzy.”

“I’m luckier than that. I’ll never be hurt like you. Don’t fret,” I’d told her.

If I do find a suitable mate at one of these soirees I’m mandated to attend, I must ensure the female I choose will understand there will be no true mating bed. Perhaps there’s a female on this planet who is just like me. Certainly, there’s someone out there who will be relieved not to have a panting, pawing male tearing off her clothes.

With that optimistic thought in mind, I sink into a dream state, imagining a pleasant life that isn’t filled with smoking volcanoes, black landscapes, plotting viziers, or endless demands to attend boring state dinners.



The vizier and his cronies have somehow managed to throw me into the smoking, belching volcano. Is this a dream? I know one thing—the pain is real.

The lava is no longer confined to the volcano. It’s sliding through my veins, setting every inch of my body on fire. It feels as though my eyeballs are so blazing hot they will bubble out of my head.

This is torture. The agony is so intense I can’t think. My stomach is cramping. No, not just my stomach. Every muscle

in my body is coiling and writhing. Someone should put me out of my misery!

If only I had full control of my senses, I would beg for death.



## Chapter Eight

**S**elene

What the hell? I thought I would have a decent night's sleep here in the palace. My place on Hallion was near Main Street, and sometimes the nighttime partiers would whoop and holler outside my windows until dawn. This is worse.

I sit up in my bed and try to make sense of the noises I'm hearing.

Moaning.

For a moment, I assume it's sex noise. Is it coming from Ozias's room? I didn't take him for a one-night-stand kind of guy. Frankly, I thought he might be asexual.

No. That isn't sexual moaning. That's pain. And from what I can tell, it sounds as though he's being tortured.

I leap out of bed, grab a heavy gold candlestick from the ornately carved dressing table, and head straight to the door that adjoins his room. The woman who showed me to my room mentioned the door between my room and his was not

locked. She didn't look judgy. In fact, she looked jealous. It's been obvious from the start that everyone thinks I'm Ozias's mistress. I don't care what they think, as long as I get my forty thousand credits.

It wasn't hard to read the barely veiled subtext of what was going on during our tour of the city today. There wasn't a male there whose simpering smile managed to hide his supreme contempt. I have no doubt one of those assholes is doing something heinous to Ozias on the other side of this door.

Although I'd made sure to lock my side of the door before I went to sleep, I unlock it and barge through as I scream, "Get away from him."

It's almost pitch black in here, so after I tell the lights to turn on, I see it's just me and Ozias in the room. He's lying in bed, eyes closed, head thrashing against his pillow.

"Ozias? It's me. Selene. Did they poison you?"

I edge closer, looking for telltale signs of blood, wondering if someone stabbed him.

"Perhaps. I'm dying, Selene. M-make sure they pay you."

The male's dying and his first thought is to make sure I get paid? He's a standup guy, that's for sure.

I run to the door, yell for help, and then rush to sit on the edge of his bed and hold his hand. I almost let go, shocked at how hot his skin is. He's burning up.

"Don't you worry about me," I say to the guy writhing and groaning pain.

We didn't eat together tonight. We both went to bed early and ate room service. Who knows what they slipped into the poor guy's food?

Within seconds, Syllas runs into the room, announcing he's already called the royal doctor. I back away to sit in a chair a few feet away. It's far enough to be out of the way and close enough to ensure no one does one more thing to harm a hair on Ozias's handsome head.

Is there something wrong with me that my heart is squeezing in compassion for him? I've gone from being terrified of him, to being indifferent, to realizing I carry some affection for him. While he's not the best conversationalist and is emotionless for the most part, he's been nothing but nice to me. If he died, I would feel terrible.

I watch the doctor's every move, not that I understand what he's doing. He could as easily be harming him as healing him.

"Sire. I need to ask some questions. I know you're in pain, but please try to answer." The doctor sets his gadgets aside and kneels near Ozias's face. "At what age did you go through your Infernian Shift?"

Ozias just pants through his teeth.

"Did you go through your Shift, sire?"

Another moan.

He's not asking what Ozias ate, or if he had any known enemies, like they do in the vids. No, his questions are bizarre.

"Sire? Your Shift?"



“He was raised off-planet. Maybe he doesn’t know the Infernian word for what you’re talking about,” I say.

“Sire. When you transitioned from a youngling to a grown male, usually around age thirteen, did you experience... significant physical changes?”

When Ozias doesn’t respond, the doctor clucks his tongue.

“It would have felt like fire in your veins. Pain in your belly? Your mother would have given you sweet, soothing *franta* juice to drink? Cool baths? Meals of mashed *braniums* would have been spoonfed to you while you went through the worst of it. Do you recall a time like that?”

Ozias’s eyes remain closed as he shakes his head. Just that little amount of effort seems painful because he’s groaning.

“Is your... is your royal member especially hot?”

What the fuck?

Ozias doesn’t nod or shake his head in response. He simply moans.

“Sire. I believe you are experiencing the Infernian Shift. It is said in our religious texts that males must bear the pain of this because of the sin of Xalaxus, the first male on Infernia. He disobeyed God and for his sins, all males into eternity must go through the painful rite of passage at their adolescence.”

I’m not following, which means Ozias, in all his pain, couldn’t be understanding what this male is saying.

“Perhaps because you didn’t grow up here, some part of your body didn’t awaken until you returned to your home planet. I believe you are going through the Shift now. It seems the normally painful process has become torturous because it was too long delayed.”

Ozias can’t speak. Someone’s got to be his advocate.

“Is he going to die?” I ask.

“I don’t believe so.” The medic reaches into his bag and brings out an ancient, stoppered bottle. It’s weirdly out of place next to all the high-tech gadgets that he used to diagnose Ozias earlier.

“Sometimes the old ways are the best.” He shrugs as he draws a dropper full.

The doctor motions me over. “Watch. I’m going to administer his first dose. Normally we would give him a dropperful every twelve hours, but since this is an unusual case, I want you to give him two drops whenever the pain spikes.”

I’m wondering if the doctor is friend or foe, but when he spears me with a searing look, letting me know how serious this treatment regimen is, I believe he has Ozias’s best interests at heart.

Only moments after the tincture hits the male’s tongue, his facial muscles relax.

“I will happily stay with him through the night, but I assume your presence would be more soothing,” the doctor says,

joining the crowd of everyone who thinks I'm the Ozias's mistress.

As the doctor grabs his bag, he tells Sylas, "Have the kitchen mash the best *braniums* and deliver cool *franta* juice. And you," he glances at me, "do what you can to keep the new monarch as comfortable as possible during his Shift. Luckily, as a female, you will never know the extent of the pain he's suffering."

I'm still not convinced Ozias's pain has anything to do with the so-called Infernian Shift. In my opinion, poison by that conniving vizier is still the most likely explanation.

No matter the cause of his condition, I'll stay here and ensure no more harm comes to the male. I'll feed him and pour liquids down his throat. The male may have initially scared the shit out of me, but he's been unfailingly kind and I want to do anything in my power to ease his pain.



## Chapter Nine

**O**zias

My eyes are bleary, my mouth parched, and my skin feels as though it's been scorched. Which means I feel a thousand times better than I did before the doctor arrived.

Selene is here. She's sitting in a chair at my bedside, her ear almost resting on her shoulder as she sleeps sitting up. When she wakes up, she's going to be in more pain than me.

"Selene." My mouth is so dry, the sound is less than a whisper.

"Selene," I croak.

"What?"

She snaps to attention, looking shocked, then her gaze falls on me, and her brow furrows.

"Do you need more juice, more mashed *branium*?" She's out of her chair and offering me a drink before I can say a word.

"You're going to get a pain in your neck. You can go lie down in your room. I'm fine." I've never been a liar before, so I'm

unsure why I felt compelled to say I'm fine when there's a river of lava flowing through my veins.

“Nope, I'm staying here. I'll give you your next dose if your pain spikes.”

That's very nice of her. She's a female of worth to want to—

I can't contain a quiet shriek as it feels as though someone shoved a hot poker through my skull and into my brain.

Selene's at my side in a second with a cool cloth on my forehead, offering me a straw to drink some juice. Even though my eyes are shut tight, I can't keep a few tears from squeezing out. The pain is merciless and unrelenting.

She presses a dropper between my lips, and I slip into a drugged sleep.



I don't know how long I've been in the hazy territory between sleep and wakefulness. It could be hours or days. All I know is that I burn, then freeze, then feel as though someone is stabbing me with hot pokers—sometimes in my head, at others my chest, but often in my cock.

All these sensations are interspersed by the agony of someone squeezing my balls as though they're trying to rip them from my body, although no one is there.

“How long?” I ask after a sip of *franta* juice.

“You've been in and out for two days.”

I wonder if the Shift is ending because, for the first time since this started, I can focus my attention on something other than my pain.

Selene. Look at her. I feel like something I would scrape off the bottom of my hoof, but I doubt I look much worse than her.

“Have you been at my bedside the entire time?”

She nods.

“You shouldn’t have. You need your rest. You’re too kind. I’ll double your salary.”

“You’ve been very generous already.”

“Forty thousand credits was a lot, but that was before you stayed at my bedside sleeping in a chair.”

“I’m going to give you a sponge bath, then I promise I’ll climb into bed.”

Lightning strikes my body as the word “bed” exits her mouth. It’s as though it zapped the tip of my penis and traveled to every cell in my body, lighting it on fire. This isn’t pain, though. Just the opposite.

For the first time in my life, my cock is hard as stone, lifting the covers into a tent as it points at the ceiling. There is nothing subtle about it. This must be what all the songs and poems are about, because the feeling is compelling and cannot be ignored.

When I tear my gaze from the uninvited guest at my hips, I see that it has not escaped Selene's notice.

"Sorry." I'm embarrassed and can't look her in the eye.

"Though I'm not a nurse," she shrugs and dips a cloth into a bowl of water at my bedside, "I imagine these things happen all the time."

I don't know how to tell her no, no they don't. I've never had an erection before. I never imagined my cock was so... strong. The thing is pulsing, lifting the bedclothes as if it were a galaxy-renowned bodybuilder.



## Chapter Ten

**S**elene

I'm tired. Every muscle in my body is aching from sleeping on a chair for two damn nights. I've finally stopped believing someone poisoned Ozias. After reading up on the Infernian Shift, I imagine that's what he's going through. Although it sounds as though his Shift is more painful for him than it is for most of his species because it happened later in life.

It can't mean he's never had an erection before. That would mean he's a virgin. Certainly, that's not possible. Is it?

I'm going to give him a sponge bath because he's been sweating and freezing on and off for days. Then I'll finally slip into my room and stretch out on my own bed.

Standing over him, I rinse the cloth in cool water, squeeze it out, then wipe him off, starting at his forehead. All the while, I try to keep my eyes on the job instead of the galaxy's largest erection lurking under the covers.



I dated lots of guys on Earth, and even followed Zane-the-asshole to Hallion. I've never been with an alien. No matter what the girls at The Diner said about some of the aliens they dated, what I think I see pressing against the covers couldn't possibly be real. Could it? I mean, at some point, size has to become counterproductive for reproduction, right?

The room is quiet except for the water sloshing in the basin and Ozias's ragged breathing.

"Do you need more of the pain tincture?"

"No," he grits out.

"You sound like you're in pain."

"My..."

I've been watching the bedspread above his hips out of the corner of my eye, but force my gaze to his face.

"What were you going to say?" I prompt.

"My body, well, some parts of my body, seem to be out of my control."

"Oh."

*He's* a shy guy, but *I'm* not. Although he probably doesn't want to talk about it, I'm fine with it. "Have you had erections before?"

He hisses through his teeth. This isn't a noise of pain. Nope. I've heard this noise before when I did something particularly thrilling to a bed partner.

"No."

“Nothing to be ashamed of,” I say, as though I’m his confessor. I do everything in my power to hide my shock. This guy is thirty if he’s a day and he’s never had a hard-on?

“I’m not ashamed.”

Liar. His gaze ran from mine.

“It’s just...” He pauses for so long that I finish washing one arm, move around the bed, and start on the other one.

“Powerful. And painful.”

I pull the covers down to his waist, taking the opportunity to watch his cock pulse under them for a second before I go to work on his chest. He said he had a desk job. You’d never know it from his abs. They look as though he spends all day at the gym.

“There are ways to take care of that, you know.” I don’t know why I mention this. No one had to introduce me to masturbation. Like Vasco da Gama, I discovered that all on my own. I guess that makes me a sexual genius.

“There are?”

No, he didn’t. Did he just ask me to teach him how to jack off? This couldn’t be happening.

“Yeah, you just...” I don’t know what got into me. Why am I suddenly shy? “Touch yourself.”

“T-touch?”

“Yeah. Hey. I’ll leave you alone and you can explore.”

I toss the cloth across the bed and it lands in the basin with a splash. I'm turning to leave when he says. "Don't go."

If I was smart, I'd keep walking.

No one ever accused me of being smart.

Instead, I turn toward him.

I've known Ozias for months. Not well, mind you, but I've seen him three times a week, like clockwork, at The Diner. We haven't been out of each other's company for days. I've never before seen the current look that is clouding his face.

The geeky, slightly silly, bland expression he usually wears has disappeared. In its place is the hard, focused look a man gets when he wants to rip your clothes off. Sexy. Hot. Intense.

"Don't go. I want you to watch."



## Chapter Eleven

**O**zias

I've been sick. Too sick to jump on the Intergalactic Database and research the Infernian Shift. But perhaps it causes insanity.

Because I am *not* this male. I've never dreamed of mating a female, never fantasized about sex, never glanced at even one of the thousands of pornography channels that hail from every sector of the galaxy and clog my computer feed.

I've certainly never masturbated. And I never in a million years would have imagined asking a female to watch.

I didn't actually *ask* Selene to watch. It was more of a command. Part of me feels sleazy. In a matter of weeks, I'll be the emperor of an entire planet. What I just said might be considered an abuse of power.

I don't feel good about my proposition, but I wouldn't consider retracting it except I don't want to misuse my position before I'm even installed on the throne.

“I apologize, Selene. That was inappropriate.” My words were contrite, but I imagine the intensity of my gaze was anything but apologetic.

She stares at me for so long, I’m about to offer her even more money just to make this sinking feeling in my belly go away. Just as I open my mouth, her gaze dips to my cock, standing firm and stiff at a ninety-degree angle to my body.

“You’re apologizing for telling me you want me to watch, Oz?”

Her use of a nickname, something that usually happens between people who share affection for each other, gives me more of a gut punch than her focus on my cock, which is insistently jerking under the covers.

Am I? Am I sorry I asked her to watch? Honesty forces me to admit, “No, but I apologize for abusing my power.”

She pauses again, but this time I have no urge to apologize. I don’t think that’s what she’s waiting for.

“I’ve never dated an alien, but my friends tell me you all seem to have a preternatural sense of smell. Do you? Do you have a keen olfactory ability? Can you *smell* me, Oz?”

Fuck. Her emphasis on that word just made my cock dance. And her question causes me to take a deep inhale. Sure as shit, she’s right.

“Yes, Selene.” My voice is deeper than I’ve ever heard it. “I can smell you.”

“And what does your nose tell you? Do I think you’re abusing your power?”

Something is happening to my body, and it’s not subtle. Although I’ve never scented a female before, I know without a shadow of a doubt that what I smell is—arousal.

“No, Selene. My nose has it on good authority that you don’t feel abused.”

She smiles as she nods her head seductively. Well, I don’t know if she’s trying to be seductive. I think blowing her nose would seem seductive right now. But that smile tells me I should give my new body permission to follow its instincts.

“Push your chair against the far wall, directly in front of me.” There’s that new voice of mine—deep and commanding.

If she complied any faster, she’d be a blur.

I take a good look at her for the first time since I opened my eyes. She’s in a thin, white nightdress that covers her from neck to calf. It’s so gauzy, it shows the round shadows of her areolas and the curve of her generous breasts.

“You’re a beautiful female.” My lips have spoken millions of words over my lifetime. Never have I said anything with such heartfelt sincerity.

“Thanks, Oz.”

Is my cock going to punch toward the ceiling every time she utters this new nickname? I guess I can think of worse fates.

“You’re going to watch me.”

I almost, almost asked that as a question, but recovered at the last moment. I managed to make it an order because I will brook no argument. My instincts must be good, because not only does she sit up straighter and look at me as though she's waiting for my next command, but she gifts me with a powerful gust of her arousal scent.

My Shift may be over, or it might just be ebbing for the moment. I don't care. Right now, I feel stronger than I have in days.

I slide backward as I sit up, so my back is against the tall wooden headboard. With the covers tucked at my waist, I slide my hand down my stomach on the journey toward my eager cock.

Instead of hurrying, I take the scenic journey, gliding over the hills and valleys of my muscles until I find the trail of hair that reaches above my waistband.

Every inch of my body is more sensitive than it's ever been. I'm not stupid enough to believe, even for a moment, that this is the highest pinnacle of pleasure my body can experience, although it feels like it. Though every nerve in my body is buzzing with newfound delight, I have no doubt that when my hand moves a bit lower, I'll find a new level of ecstasy.

“Does that feel good, Oz?”

Selene plays a game of acting as though nothing bothers her, but I've watched her over the last months. She has an open heart which right this moment must be having big emotions, because her question was asked with a dry mouth.

“Is that what you want, Selene? You want me to tell you what I’m feeling?”

Though she doesn’t respond with words, her answer is to set the soles of her feet on the seat of the chair and open her knees as wide as the upholstered arms will allow. Her white gown is pulled to her ankles, obstructing my view of her private spaces. Although I’ve never been interested in a female’s secret places before, I believe right this moment I’ll do almost anything to get a peek.

“Selene’s a tease,” I accuse, my voice low and steady. “She wants me to smell, but not see.”





## Chapter Twelve

**S**elene  
Kill. Me. Now.

Maybe Oz wasn't the only one who went through some cataclysmic physical metamorphosis over the last few days.

When we left planet Hallion, I didn't find him appealing despite his compelling good looks. His personality was too bland and passive. Right now, though, my panties are sopping wet for him.

Every commanding word that comes out of his mouth makes my pussy flutter with need. And he hasn't even gotten started.

And me? Why am I throwing gasoline on the fire? The male has never had a boner before, yet I'm playing graduate-level sex games with him. What's that old saying? Play with fire and you'll get burned.

I can think of worse things than getting burned by the handsome demon only a few paces away.

“You’re right, Oz. I’m a naughty, naughty girl,” I admit.

For a moment, something flares to life in his slitted amber eyes, but he tamps it down and slides his hand lower. I know the moment he makes contact with his cock, because he makes that sucking sound through his teeth and slams his lids shut with a full-body shudder.

I can’t imagine dropping into my body for the first time in a state like his. Sexual arousal is something one needs to learn how to control. He has no experience.

There must be something terribly wrong with me, because that thought doubles my arousal.

“My cock is hard,” he announces.

Oz is a virgin. I keep my gaze off his face, imagining that one glance from me will push him off his game. When I finally take a peek, he’s staring at me. It’s as if he’s willing me to respond.

“How hard is it?” My voice is breathy as I watch his hand sliding up the rigid pole below his waist.

“Hard as steel. Hard for you,” he grits.

The outline of his hand moves under the thin sheet as he fists himself.

“And hot, Selene. Hard and hot for you.”

It’s difficult to believe this is his first time at the rodeo. If he gets any better at this, he could compete at the dirty-talk Olympics.

I guess you can learn a lot about a guy by how he strokes himself. He's in no hurry to reach the finish line. He's going to enjoy every sexy second.

“And wet, Oz? Is your tip oozing cum?”

I talk a good game with my girlfriends, but I could never enter the dirty-talk Olympics. In the bedroom, I get a little shy.

But not today. Not here with Oz. I'm determined to give as good as I get.

His other hand slips under the covers and I watch the fabric bulge as he slides his palm over the top of his cockhead. It's accompanied by another hissing in-breath and a hip thrust.

“That's it, Oz. Take your pleasure.”

“Wet. Yes. Tell me what this is for.”

No one in the history of the universe ever figured out how to make asking a virginal question sound so damn commanding. And sexy.

My little clit is plump and needy as I respond. “When we're ready to join, that will help ease the way.”

I'm wet enough for the both of us, although I've yet to see what he's packing under those covers. If it's half as big as it looks from here, we'll need all the help we can get.

“Ease the way?” His chin lifts slightly as if his pleasure spiked and he needs a moment to enjoy it. After a moment, he asks, “Will it hurt you, Selene, when we finally come together? I don't want that.”

“It depends on how big you are.” I assume the unveiling will happen at a later date, considering how new he is to this.

He throws the covers off and they settle at his knees.

I want to take a picture of this. Instead, I’ll just have to commit every single thing about this moment to memory.

Those horns, devil horns, aren’t scary anymore. They’re sexy as fuck. His face is the perfectly symmetrical work of art it’s always been, only it’s enhanced by the glowing amber of his eyes.

His chest and arms are demon-red and pumped with muscles. The abs are the rippling washboard even gym rats can only dream of.

But it’s his cock that is so shockingly beautiful it takes my breath away. It’s a deeper red than the rest of him, almost scarlet. There are three layers of ridges under the crown, under which are ribs and bumps that look like they were built strictly for pleasure—a female’s pleasure.

“I’m this big, Selene.”

I shake my head, needing long moments to recall I’d asked him how big he was a moment ago.

He’s pumping it now, pulling harder than when it was hidden under the covers. The thing is so long and hard it could be a weapon, although by the blissed-out look on his face, I imagine he will only use it for good, not evil.

“Will this hurt you?”

If he's still worried about hurting me, that thought has migrated to the back of his mind. His tone is no longer concerned. It's challenging.

"I've always believed that where there's a will, there's a way, Oz. Do you think you could be patient?"

On that last word, I slide my nightgown up to my calves.

"Do you think we could work together?" I ask.

I raise it another inch.

"Yes, Selene. I do. We could use some of *this*." He slides his palm over the top of that magnificent cock and shows it to me, now glistening with his pre-cum.

I reward him with another five-inch swathe of flesh.

"Could we use your slick seed to work together and cooperate?" I ask, breathless.

He tips his head back as his hand speeds up, palming his cock faster. My answer is to lift my gown higher.

"Together, we could do anything," he says through a moan. He's close.

I slide my panties down and blindly flick them in his direction. Even in his half-crazed state, his hand moves in a blur, reaching high to catch them above his head. I can't look away as he brings them to his nose and inhales deeply. His eyes roll back in his head for a moment before his tongue darts out, tasting them.

Slickness paints my thighs. I never knew that's what a part of me craved—a male's desperate desire not just for sex, but for *me*. With a low growl that makes my toes curl, Oz wraps my panties around his fist and brings them down to his length, then works the slick fabric across his heated flesh.

I pull my gown up to my hips, and in a final act of insanity, I open my thighs even wider, hooking my knees over the upholstered arms of the chair to show him all my pretty pink folds.

“Fuck!” Calm and quiet no more, Oz shouts into the silence of the bedroom, the only noises are the wet slapping of his palm on his cock and the short, guttural barks of pleasure escaping from his mouth in tandem with his cock spurting beautiful streams of glistening cum across the room.

They arc through the air toward me. The first pulse shoots far enough to splatter a few drops on my exposed thighs.

I'm filled with wonder at his display as his wings fully unfurl for the first time since I've known him. The muted-scarlet, leather-textured wings are ribbed with black veins on full display as they extend to their full expanse. Because it's the most beautiful thing I've ever witnessed, my heart stops for a moment.

He slowly regains his composure and finally opens his eyes, immediately gazing in my direction.

“Selene.”

He doesn't have to say more. Perhaps I can read his mind. The words awe, amazed, and magnificent don't need to blurt from his lips. They're in his expression.

"I agree, Oz."

I'm wet and so aroused it won't take much to get me to the finish line. Perhaps we'll both be ready for round two at the same time.

I rise and stride to the bed, planning to let him finger me to orgasm before he gets his second wind. By the time I reach his side, though, he's slumped into a horizontal position, head on his pillow, fast asleep.

I'm disappointed but not surprised. After everything he's been through since his Shift blasted him into a furnace and set his insides on fire, I imagine he needs recovery time.

I pull the covers over his magnificent, sweat-sheened body and head for my bed. While I take care of myself, I imagine all the things we can share in his bed tomorrow and the day after that, and the day after that.

This trip has suddenly become interesting.



## Chapter Thirteen

**O**zias  
When I wake, I take a moment to try to mentally count the days I was in a haze from my Shift. I'll have to ask, but I'm feeling better now.

Selene has been my almost constant companion as she fed me, wiped my brow, and pressed a straw to my lips. When I stay awake for more than a few minutes, we talk. We've shared information about our childhoods, our likes and dislikes, and our hopes and dreams.

And the more I learn about her, the more I like her. Not just her body or her luscious curves that I'm beginning to appreciate but I like being around her. Being in her presence or hearing her hum to herself in the next room fills me with a warm sense of contentment that I haven't felt since I was a child.

"Did you always want to be a waitress?" I've managed to pull myself out of bed and am propped up in a large armchair



across from where Selene is curled up on a sofa. My eyes have been sensitive to the synthetic lights since my Shift, so we've lit a series of candles.

"Funny enough, getting my ass grabbed and busing tables isn't my life's pursuit. I tried college, I really did. I dreamed of studying urban planning, traveling to new planets, and meeting new alien species. It was impossible to study and keep myself financially afloat. I just... couldn't keep up."

"I can imagine how hard that must have been."

"Says the guy who went to the best university and was top of his class, graduating with honors."

"It was my mom's dream. She even got a second job to pay for my tuition. I couldn't let that go to waste, so I buckled down and lived and breathed it until--"

"Until what?"

"Until one day I looked up and saw you standing there."

Even in the dim light, I can see her blush prettily.

When I think of the intimacy we shared several days ago, embarrassment and self-loathing circle my mind for a moment, then I evict them.

It's not just my body that has changed over the last few days. My mind is different. I'm a male. Fully and completely masculine. I have nothing to be ashamed of for exploring my body or allowing it to experience the pinnacle of pleasure.

Should I worry that I shared the moment with Selene? No. She's a grown female who could have left the room if she desired.

Pulling her gown up and opening her thighs wide for me? That wasn't the behavior of a timid or disinterested female. Her body and her words—and her delicious scent—goaded me on.

I was half out of my mind from the Shift and the other half of me was on fire with lust, but I can close my eyes and recall down to the smallest detail what her slick, pink folds looked like in the dim light of my room.

Pretty and intricate, I could liken them to the petals of a flower. And the scent! If my body would agree, I could live on that alone.

When I'm lucid, I think of little other than her body and my throbbing cock, but I don't want to start things I can't finish like I did the other night. When we come together again, I'll be strong and fit and ready to pleasure her so long and hard she'll have to beg me to stop.

She promised to stay on Infernia until my coronation. Every nerve in my body stands at attention as I allow my thoughts to wander to just exactly what pleasures the two of us can explore over the next few weeks.

Although every muscle in my body aches, the rivers of fire have disappeared. I flip off the covers and am about to swing my legs off the bed when I allow myself a diversion.

I grip my cock and pleasure myself quickly, to take the edge off. On my second bout, I let myself explore the subtleties and nuances of my ecstasy. The little dip on the underside of my crown is the most sensitive spot, but a firm grip with my thumb and forefinger sliding over the top three ridges, if performed with the right rhythm, is what triggers my release, causing me to spray my seed on the chair Selene perches on when she visits.

Although I'll be crowned emperor of the planet in a few short weeks, I don't want to leave my spend all over the sheets, carpet, and upholstery for a servant to clean. After taking a stab at wiping everything up, I enter the shower, turn it as hot as I can stand, and let the water wash over me.

I have changed since I flew across the galaxy at the order of the vizier. I may not know much about Infernian customs, rules, or laws, but I resolve to learn them. One thing is clear. The vizier and all the males who took me on a tour the day I arrived are not loyal to me. If I'm to rule this planet, I'll need trusted advisors—none of whom were in the contingent who disinterestedly showed me the capital city of the world I'm destined to rule.

The first party is tonight. The vizier said I need to be mated before or soon after ascending the throne. Because I'm a half-blood, the people will have trouble accepting me. He said if I mate an Infernian female, it will be easier for the people to welcome me as their ruler.

My thoughts drift to Selene. The Shift gave me clarity. Without a functioning cock and male hormones, I was too naïve to realize the reason I went to The Diner three times a week. It had nothing to do with the food and little to do with being in the company of humans. It had a lot to do with having the opportunity to see Selene.

How could I have been so ignorant I didn't realize how deliciously her scent curled around me, or how my gaze was drawn to her lush curves? It took no more than a minute after the vizier's directive to come to Infernia before I invented a reason to invite her along.

I may have been too dense to realize I was interested in the pretty human waitress, but luckily some brilliant territory in the back of my mind was paying attention, because it positioned me to be where I am now.

The vizier's order to mate an Infernian? It's hard to see how that will work if what's happening between Selene and me is as real as it feels. I'll put that on the back burner and proceed as planned. Because of a week in bed recovering from my unexpected Shift, I now have little time to figure out how to deal with my circumstances.

Until that moment in the chair when she opened her thighs for me, I could have sworn she had no more interest in me than I did in her. Maybe her behavior was an aberration. After all, she had been watching over me for days. She was probably sleep-deprived.

I finish my shower and flex my muscles as I dry off. My body feels better than it ever has. *I* feel better, as though this is how I was always meant to be. As I dress, I decide how to proceed.

I'm going to find a few handpicked people to confide in. Since the vizier keeps me on a close leash, I'll begin at tonight's soiree, where he won't be able to shadow me as closely as a second skin.

Once I have a cadre of trusted individuals surrounding me, I'll decide if staying on Infernia is the right thing to do. These people need a leader, and if what I know about my father is correct, a kind and farsighted ruler is long overdue.

If I can be the right person to move Infernia forward, to improve the lives of its people, I will make it my life's work. If not, I'll create a new life elsewhere. One thing is certain, I'll not return to Hallion, at least not to resume the life I'd been living. That was dry, lifeless. I was going through the motions in a boring job with no friends. Resuming that life is not an option.



## Chapter Fourteen

**S**elene

I've always been overweight and a little unsure of myself. Not that an unsuspecting bystander would notice. I project a calm, controlled persona to those around me. No one knows that underneath my tough exterior, all I've ever wanted was to be liked.

Well, that's not true. I want to be loved.

Maybe I'm not so good at hiding my insecurities. Zane-the-asshole figured it out. He sweet-talked me into buying two tickets to Hallion and then manipulated me into working enough hours to support us both. By the time I realized he'd been womanizing every female within a ten-mile radius while I was working extra shifts at The Diner, he'd moved on to greener, four-breasted, pastures.

And he was just the most recent asshole in a long stream of assholes.

My asshole-detector may not work well, but I really don't think Oz is like that. There's something innocent and pure about him. Or at least there was before he went through the Shift. There was nothing innocent or pure about him jacking off while gazing into my eyes the other night. That was pure bad boy.

Hot.

I twirl in front of the mirror and like my reflection so much, I twirl in the other direction. My scarlet dress rises to my neck, yet there's a cutout from just under the collar to the rise of my breasts. It nips just above the waist, then flounces out from there, effectively showing off the best aspects of my figure while camouflaging my tummy and hips.

Alta, the female who brought food and drink to Oz and me over the past few days, presented me with this dress, then tortured my hair into what must be the latest Infernian style. I watched her in the mirror as she performed her magic. While she was working, I wasn't quite sure what the finished product would look like, but I can't deny I've never looked prettier with my long, brown hair in an intricate updo.

I'm about to leave my room when Oz gives a soft knock on our connecting door. After I let him in, my body flushes with warmth. The way his gaze caresses me makes desire coil in my belly.

If I'd had any doubts about what I looked like in this odd dress and unusual hairstyle, all my worries fade away. His leathery wings flutter, and his nostrils flare as he looks me down and

up and down again. He makes that sucking sound that is his tell that he's horny, and when I shamelessly glance south of his belt buckle, there's no hiding the pulsing tent in his black leather pants.

"I know shirtless is the fashion here on Infernia, but do you have a jacket you might want to drape over your arm?" When he tips his horned head in question—adorable—I give a pointed glance at the erection twitching under his black leather pants. "Since you're on your way to shop for a mate, perhaps you shouldn't boldly announce that your cock is fond of your wingman."

He looks sheepish and embarrassed until I step forward and brush it gently with my palm.

This time, his sharp intake of breath is anything but subtle. In fact, he grumbles my name to scold me. He may have been watching me for the past eight months, but he obviously doesn't know me at all. His censuring "Selene" simply emboldens me.

This time I pat his dick affectionately, assuming he might step back, or even remove my hand from his body. Instead, he surprises me by pressing my palm against him as his gaze holds mine in an unspoken dare.

I have a feeling we're going to be playing a game of sexual chicken during the entire party. Heat lightning sizzles through my body at the thought. Perhaps he smells my interest, because he makes a guttural sound from the back of his throat as he pulls me out the door.



Soon we're in the hoverlimo on bench seats facing each other.

"Let's review your duties," he says without lifting his gaze from my boobs, the tops of which are on generous display in the cutout of my scarlet dress.

"Mm-hmm." I nod as I slide my silken hem higher up my legs.

"We will NOT be playing that game right now, Selene. I know exactly how that will end, and now is not the time."

Oh, that statement was exciting for so many reasons. Although I've never been into that dominant and submissive stuff, there's something about his commanding tone of voice that sets every one of my nerve endings ablaze.

The other thing is that his "now is not the time," statement did not take the activity off the table. It simply postponed it. I feel like a kid waiting for the end of her party so she can finally open her presents.

When Oz gets serious, a little jolt of sadness flies through me. He's going to start talking about another woman. No, not another woman. *Many* other women. Women, well, females, he's going to vet as possible mates. In his mind, he may be planning sex games for the limo ride home, but he's going to be doing it while talking to the prettiest, most influential, wealthiest, and most eligible females in his kingdom.

Suddenly, I feel the need to inspect my fingernails.

"I'm in need of people I can trust. It's obvious none of my current advisors have my best interests at heart. Perhaps while you're ensuring no female dances with me more than once,

you could pay attention to the conversations around you? Can you listen for anyone who might be excited about wanting a change in policies? Someone who believes the people shouldn't have to live in poverty?"

"Aren't you looking for a mate?" Although I've been avoiding his gaze, I meet his eyes now.

"I read enough law books today to discover I don't need a mate to ascend the throne. From what I read, the vizier is correct. It sounds as though the people will more readily accept me if my mate is Infernian, but it's not a requirement. I'll continue to assess as I go through the motions, though."

For the briefest second, I could swear he looks...

uncomfortable? Sheepish? My shoulders relax as relief flows through me upon hearing he's not in a hurry to find a mate.

"As your wingman, I should know what you're looking for, right?"

"My body chemistry felt little desire for a female until I arrived on Infernia. I've never before given any thought to a mate, but give me a moment to think."

I can't fathom what's going on in his mind as he contemplates his requirements for a mate. The only movement in the cabin is his amber gaze as it flicks up and down my body. He makes that sexy sucking sound, then continues.

"I want someone loyal. Dedicated to my people... and me. I need to find an ally in a pit of vipers."

He strokes his chin and cocks his head, deep in thought as his gaze once again fondles me from afar as it slowly rises from my shiny red shoes to my fancy updo.

“I want a female who is as comfortable in casual clothes as she is in a red ball gown. Horns, or lack thereof, won’t be an issue.”

I can’t control the hot bolt that courses through my veins. Is he describing me?

“Someone who accepts her sexuality.” He focuses his gaze at the juncture of my thighs as his nostrils flare. When I raise the hem of my dress a few inches, he doesn’t complain.

“A compassionate female who can be nurturing if someone she has affection for needs caretaking.”

*Me!* I want to raise my hand to apply for the job. *I cared for you during your Shift, remember?*

“And, of course, I’d have to be *attracted*.” He gives an almost imperceptible hip thrust as he pierces me with a languorous stare.

“I-I...” I hadn’t realized my mouth was dry until the word barely made any sound. “I’ll keep a sharp eye out for such a female, your almost-majesty.”



## Chapter Fifteen

**O**zias  
When Selene and I enter the ballroom, all eyes turn to me as conversation stops. I'm glad she's at my side because nothing in my life prepared me for this.

My social skills are lacking at best, absent at worst. Until I climbed aboard the vessel that brought me here, I'd never been in a room with more than one Infernian at a time.

"How am I going to get through this?" I whisper.

"Don't worry. You have a wingman."

I've seen this female in many moods, from disinterested back on Hallion, to compassionate during my Shift, to brimming with lust as I stroked my cock in front of her. Right this moment, her tone is full of earnest support. It gives me strength.

The back of her hand inconspicuously grazes mine as she steps to the side so I can be announced and ushered in alone. Soon

the crowd swallows me up in a flurry of fancy clothes, hearty handshakes, and smiles, so many smiles.

If I hadn't spent my entire adult life in a back room reviewing law books and finances, I could discern genuine greetings from those who were only moments ago plotting my overthrow. How will I navigate these churning waters?

The vizier taps his glass with a claw and the crowd quiets.

"May I introduce Ozias Theron Suetonius, son of our late Emperor Caelum Orion Suetonius."

"Harrison," I add, my voice loud and forceful.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Having never been given my father's name, I grew up Ozias Theron Harrison. My official name on Infernia will be Ozias Theron Suetonius *Harrison*."

If the cadre of males who gave me that dismissive tour days ago thought I would be their puppet, I just threw down the gauntlet. When they invited me to this planet, I was a different male than the one standing before them tonight.

"Y-yes. May I introduce Ozias Theron Suetonius Harrison and his... guest, Selene. Tonight is the first of the seven festive galas leading up to the Fire and Ice Celebration. I'm sure you will treat him with the utmost respect over the next week as you show him all the delights our planet has to offer."

Then the hordes descend. They trickle over in ones and twos. Males wanting to shake my hand as they mention they would love a moment of my time to discuss a public works project

they would like to bid on, or a job in my administration, or that they would love to introduce me to their eligible daughter.

My mind is on overload as I try to discern their true natures from the clues of how firm their handshakes are or how close they lean in when they announce their proposition.

All the while, Selene hovers nearby. I've seen this smile on her face before. The fake one I haven't seen in days. The one she always wore with her customers, including me, back at The Diner.

Although she looks vapid and insipid as my fellow Infernians swarm me, it's clear she's not missing a thing. At the end of the evening, I have no doubt she'll fill me in on her observations. She has good instincts.

Announcing her as my guest, the vizier has knowingly or unknowingly put a target on her back as well. Even in my current state of discomfort, I bristle when I pick up the scent of a male's interest coming from the Chancellor for Defense.

He is a large male, taller and broader than me by some margin, with skin so purple and leathery it looks inky. His yellow eyes frequently dart to Selene even as he's being introduced.

Would she consider him handsome? If I hadn't awakened, would she be interested in someone like him? Would... she *prefer* a male like him?

I'm so wrapped up in my own head I don't realize he's asked me a question. "... I am told this is your first time here. Has your little human enjoyed it as well?"

I bristle at his words. Hot anger spikes through me as his eager eyes flick toward her. “She is not a little human, but my *royal* guest.” If my staccato words were corporeal, they would be daggers.

He tilts his head. “Apologies, I did not catch her name. I should introduce myself to her properly. Become acquainted.”

My lips pull back over my fangs in a barely concealed snarl. “That would be... unwise.”

I am still Emperor apparent. With my exposed fangs and wings unfurling into battle stance, the Chancellor bows in submission and makes a hasty retreat.

The better part of an hour has gone by when Selene approaches with a young female who is dripping with jewels.

“Your...” Selene’s voice trails off. I imagine she has no idea how to address me. “Your Highness? I thought you might like to meet Xalvire Hespia. She tells me she’s an excellent dancer and can teach you the basic steps of the Aurora Waltz without anyone knowing you’ve never danced it before.”

“Xalvire,” I say with a nod. Seconds later, we sweep onto the dance floor with her soft voice and gentle hands guiding me through the steps. The entire assemblage has moved out of the way to watch us.

“You’re doing fine, Your Highness. You can lead now,” she says after I tame my struggles and master the steps.

A lifetime ago—last week, when I was a mere paper pusher—I would have faltered, made missteps. I’m no longer the same

male, though. I sweep the female around the dancefloor, happy to let the people watch as I take charge.

The evening continues as I dance with other females, all young, eligible, wealthy, and not as attractive as my wingman. I manage to take a few breaks to grab hors d'oeuvres from the banquet table, which is groaning with food.

There I'm approached by males who, in some form or fashion, want something from me.

My life has completely changed in the span of a few days. I'm soon to ascend the throne and rule a planet full of people. All of this weighs heavily on me.

Why are all those thoughts pressed to the back of my mind when Selene approaches? When that female is near, all I can think about is her.





## Chapter Sixteen

**S**elene

My chest fills with pride as I watch Oz come into his own. When we walked in, his upper lip was dotted with perspiration and he kept wiping his palms on his pants.

I can't say I blame him. If I wasn't sure that all the eyes in the opulent ballroom were trained on Ozias, I'd feel I was on sale in a butcher's shop window. I feel a bead of sweat drip down the back of my neck and the nearest Infernian, a seven-foot hulk with ram's horns curling around his head and a scowl that makes his forehead wrinkle, scrunched his nose in distaste, looking down at me as if I was a bug on the bottom of his hoof.

I keep my chin up, trying to do a circuit of the ballroom without getting elbowed in the head or accidentally skewered by a horn when someone bent low. Some openly glare, others watch me dart and duck through the crowds with a thin veil of amusement as if I was there for their entertainment.

After Oz is introduced, the music swells with brassy horns and an alien version of a trumpet. Rich fabric rustles along the polished obsidian floor and the edges of capes whirl as their owners swirl onto the middle of the dance floor. Infernians begin to mingle, moving about in clutches, huddling with their heads together to gossip as fizzing cocktails are handed out by silent waiters.

“And to think, he brought a sickened human with him,” A ruby-colored female wearing a dress with a billowing gold skirt and leather bodice giggled to her friends, fluttering a handheld fan in front of her face as if it would stop me from hearing.

“They’re *supposed* to look like that. I believe she is one of the boring common colors humans come in,” a beady-eyed male replies haughtily, sucking on a cigar and blowing a bright purple smoke ring the same color as his skin into the air.

“Ghastly,” she sniggers as I catch her eye.

Capes and dresses swirl, some hitting me square in the face as their owners either disregard or fail to see the little human standing under their line of sight. Then the music and the heat and the overbearing noise of derisive laughter gets to me.

Ducking under arms and pulling myself free of a spiked tail that gets caught in my skirt, I retreat to the quietest corner I can find and press my back against the cool glass of a window.

That insulting female wouldn’t be laughing if she knew I just permanently put her on Bride-To-Be-Blacklist, or BTBB as I’d been calling it in my head. Bitches get what they deserve.

The moment Oz announced his full name, daring anyone to say a word about his half-human origins, it was as though something shifted inside him. He's been a different person since then.

It's easy to ignore the way the rude Infernians treat me when I watch Oz. He seems filled with confidence as he listens to the people who approach him with their schemes and requests. He's poised as he swirls around the dance floor with the eligible females I bring his way.

There are a few different types of aliens here, but none of them are human. Several males give me subtle, lecherous looks. The females seem suspicious and hesitant when I first approach them, but become excited when they realize I'm scouting for dance partners for the new emperor.

I know I should feel guilty that, other than Xalvire, I've only introduced him to boring females who I consider unattractive. He's made it his mission to find a mate. If I really cared for him, wanted to do right by him, I'd introduce him to women who are worthy of him.

Worthy of him? Listen to me. A week ago, I didn't want to give him the time of day. Now I think he's the most handsome, fascinating male on the planet.

I can't ignore my feelings for him. Somewhere during the days I took care of him, when he was out of his mind with fever and chills, I developed an affection for him.

When he woke up with the biggest erection on this or any other planet, I realized it wasn't just affection. I'm filled with

more than a modicum of lust.

Although none of the males on Infernia wear shirts, there's only one naked, red chest my eyes follow around the dancefloor—Oz. His horns that rise up, then curve to the back of his head, seem more masculine than any other males here.

His wings, which have been staidly tucked against his back all night, aren't impressive at the moment. It's only when I picture them in my mind's eye as they were when he orgasmed the other night, flared out in all their scarlet glory, that I recall how sexy they are.

Sexy. That male is too sexy for his own good. I'm busy being his wingman, listening for plots to assassinate or overthrow him, but thoughts of what might happen between us in the limo on the way home are pulsing in my brain.

He joins me near the ice sculpture where I've been picking at canapes and eavesdropping. For the swiftest moment, he gives me a boyish smile, then he puts his serious emperor face back on and says, "I'm ready to take my leave."

"Yes, Your Highness." I bite back the retort that his wish is my command, choosing to play the obsequious minion. Didn't I do that as I happily slung food to patrons at The Diner? I have a gift for it.

Soon, we're whisked to the limo and are sitting in the same spots we vacated a few standard hours ago.

The silence is exaggerated after the din of the music and all that forced laughter at the gala. We're cocooned in the

sumptuous hover, with the barest purr of the motor piercing the quiet of the interior.

“Take us over the city,” he announces into the comm, “I want to see it at night.”

When his amber gaze lands on my face, his slitted eyes burning with intensity, I don't need to be told that he won't be looking out the windows to see the sights down below. He's going to be focused on me. My body lights up in response, my nipples beading to hard points, and my channel clutching itself in eager anticipation.

“I assume you have a report for me on anything you heard as to who might be friend and who might be foe?” His clipped tone is all business.

I thought there were other things on his agenda, but I swallow, sit up straighter, and launch until he interrupts with an imperious, “We will discuss it over breakfast tomorrow morning.”

He leans back, putting his arms on the rolled leather seatback, taking up the entire side of the hover.

“And you have summaries and opinions on all the females I danced with?”

Instead of launching into my response, I pause. Sure enough, he says, “And we'll discuss that at breakfast as well. Right now, I'll take the opportunity to tell you the most important things I learned tonight.”

I try to keep my features schooled to hide my disappointment. Darn, I'd been hoping we'd get busy exploring each other in this private, spacious backseat. I honestly hadn't anticipated we'd be working, especially when he told the driver to tour the city.

“Point one, I learned that your gown gaps just the slightest when you lean to reach for a canape at the far side of the banquet table. It shows the swell of your generous breasts. Not enough to be judged indecent by even the most virtuous observer. Yet, that flash, that brief glimpse, caused my cock to take notice on not one but two separate occasions.”

My thoughts feel glitchy, like a computer whose program is having a little hiccup. He's talking about my breasts and his cock, yet he could be describing a report he had trouble downloading.

“Point two, I also found that you have a best side, although all sides of you are lovely. There's something about the little dimple that graces your left cheek that is exceedingly winsome.”

Winsome? Is that word even used outside of historical novels?

“Oh?” I'm so surprised I have little to say, but at least I eked out a syllable.

“My intel is sketchy, but I have it from the highest sources that you enjoyed my dancing.” He pauses, perhaps waiting for me to inquire how he knows. Since I'm unable to form complete sentences, he continues, “I concluded that from the faint but

delectable aroma that spiked when I took a turn on the dancefloor.”

“Oh.” I’m zero for two on witty responses.

“I’m nothing if not observant. Now, for example. If I’m not mistaken, I detect two hard little buttons pressing against the bodice of your dress.”

He says nothing, just pauses, his gaze glued to my nipples. When I tear my glance from his, sure enough, my hardened nipples are so obvious they could probably be seen from the stratosphere.

“I’d like to see them now.”

Another pause. He’s just waiting. Is he going to erase the distance between us and slide my autozip down?

No. He stays where he is, his arms still draped over the back of his seat. Is it the lighting in this compartment, or did his slitted amber eyes just flare with heat? I think my demon is offering me a challenge.

“Take them out. Let those breasts perch on the cutout of your neckline.”

He tips his chin slightly to emphasize his desire for me to comply *now*.

He said his Shift felt as though hot lava flowed through his veins. Perhaps Infernia is messing with my body chemistry now, because that’s exactly how I feel. Live electricity is flying through me as he orders me around as though I was built to do his bidding.

Want and need circle my pelvis and then pool at my clit. Perhaps my brain cells migrate there as well, because I don't think, don't question his command. I simply reach under the cutout and do just as he asked, perching first one, then the other breast on the stiff scarlet material for his inspection.

"I knew they'd be lovely. But they're so much more than that. Beautiful. I've thought of little else, even when I was in the worst throes of the Shift."

He sounds so in control, as though he's flirted like this a thousand times in the past. If it weren't for the tiny quaver in his voice when he called my breasts beautiful, I'd believe he was a player.

Because of his little show of vulnerability, I find my tongue.

"You like these, Oz?" My voice is little more than breath.

Growing bolder, I pluck my nipples, though they needed no additional stimulation to be hard as diamonds.

"More beautiful than any of the jewels on display at the gala, Selene. If I didn't want them all to myself, the pictures I could sell would bring a small fortune."

My clit zings in response. I've always been a sucker for praise.

"Put on a show for me, Selene. I didn't think I could want you any more than I already do, but now that you've started, tantalize me."

He presses back into the seat as he scoots his ass slightly forward. When his cock twitches beneath his leather pants, it's



as though it's desperate to erase some distance between us, even if it's only an inch.

Tantalize him? I've never felt confident enough to do that before, but I can now. With Oz.

I slip the tip of my index finger into my mouth, making a show of sucking it slowly. After repeating it with my other hand, I pluck my nipples, rolling, then flicking them with my nails, making goosebumps rise across my skin. He's mesmerized, his eyes glazed, his lips parted to catch my scent on his tongue.

Instead of just performing for him, I decide to take pleasure in our little game. My lids slam shut when things feel especially erotic. With sparks of need flying along my synapses, I don't hold back my little moans when the mood strikes. My pelvis dances in cadence with my fingers.

I force myself to glance at him when I open my eyes, he's the picture of masculine arousal. His lips are open, his eyelids at half-mast, and his cock is thumping against his black leather trousers.

"You like that, Oz?"

"More than I can say. Don't stop Selene. Show me more."

I lick the center of my palms and work my hardened nipples in little circles as I suck a breath in through my teeth. Somehow I've adopted his signature sound.

"Your scent is heavier, spicier."

He's getting at something, but since I'm not a mind reader, I keep on with my debauched act as I twist and pluck and flick

my nipples.

“I’ve been dreaming about tasting you, straight from the source.”

His gaze dips to the juncture of my thighs and he licks his lips, though I doubt he knows he’s doing it.

I barely give a moment’s thought to what I do next. Keeping the view chaste below my waist, I wriggle and lift myself, all while trying to look alluring and coordinated—a tall order.

Finally, my right hand emerges from under my hem with the prize—a pair of scarlet panties. They’re all lace except for the scrap between my legs. It’s sopping with my cream.

“And if I told you, Emperor, that this was all you could have?” I give him a cocky smile as I tip my head, unwilling to let him get too full of himself.

“I would be thankful for your generous gift.”

After searching his face, it’s clear he’s not playing with me. That was said in all seriousness.

“All I need is one word,” I goad.

“Give.”

“No.”

“Here.” He holds his hand out, palm up, though it’s clearly killing him to come halfway close to begging.

“The magic word, Oz. Your mom was from Earth. I imagine she taught you the magic Earth word.”

“Abracadabra.”

Damn. He's funny as well as gorgeous. "Nope."

His head tips back as though it's only right this moment he remembers the right answer.

"Please, Selene. Please give me those panties."

I reach over, making sure to bend at the waist so he sees my breasts hang like ripe fruit, then daintily place my scrap of scarlet panties in his palm.

He's never been this close to a girl's pussy before. We've established that. Will he pretend to be a player, or be as enamored of this present as a male who gets this close to fourth base for the first time?



## Chapter Seventeen

**O**zias

I don't want her to see me tremble. It's obvious she likes it best when I take control, but I'm desperate to grip my fingers around her offering.

The air is thick with her delicious scent, which has wrapped around us like a silken sash, drawing us together. With an impatient flick of my hand, I slap the air vents closed. I want to be submerged in her, covered in her scent until I can taste it on my tongue. The world outside might be full of the unknown, but in the cozy darkness, there is only Selene and her arousal.

When I finally have her panties in my grasp, the first thing I do is press it over my nose and mouth. As a child, I used to dream of finding buried treasure. Surely finding that wouldn't be nearly as gratifying as what I hold in my hand. I rub the moisture on my lips and cheeks as I breathe through the fabric, perfuming every breath with her intimate scent.

I can't hold back any longer as I thrust my tongue out, licking the fabric to get my first taste of my female. It's delicious and intimate and distinctively Selene.

My female. I may have danced with a dozen Infernians tonight, but there was only one female in the room I would consider as a mate.

“Selene.”

My cock is hard as stone, flexing uncomfortably against my pants. I've been masturbating several times a day since I recovered from my Shift, but it barely takes the edge off. My powerful need for release bears down on me with urgency.

Between her drenched panties and the saturation of her scent in this cabin, the odds are good that if I were to press her for sex, she would agree.

I have no desire to pressure her, though. And truth be told, it's unfair to ask for it considering not three standard hours ago I'd tasked her with introducing me to possible mates.

Still, I need more than the scent and taste of this fabric.

“Lift your skirts.”

I'd leaned forward to accept her precious offering, which will occupy a place of honor in my room from here until eternity. Now, I lean back, the delicious, flimsy fabric in my hand, which still covers the lower half of my face.

Selene doesn't hesitate to comply. However, she exposes little more than her ankle.

“Lovely. More.” Reluctantly, I stop breathing through her panties but keep them clutched in my greedy grip.

“Only if you narrate. Your voice, your thoughts, are so sexy. You tell me how you feel and I’ll keep lifting my skirt.”

Is there any wonder I feel such deep affection for this female although we’ve barely known each other mere days? She drives a hard bargain. I like that about her.

“It’s hard to think with you around.”

She rewards me with another inch.

“You cloud my senses. Between your lush curves and your heady scent, it’s all I can do to string words into sentences.”

Not only does she lift her hem higher, she grants me a smile. She’s smiled all night at the rich and famous of the planet. This is her first genuine smile of the evening.

“I like your smile, Selene. You reward me with it so infrequently it makes me feel special.”

Her response is to lift her skirt higher and smile more brightly.

“My cock aches. My balls gather tighter with every glimpse you grant me.”

She must like my admission, because her garment slides all the way to her knees.

“Even though I was half-crazed when you showed me your secret spaces the other night, I’ll remember how pretty you are down there until the end of time.”

She abandons all pretense of decorum when she hitches her skirt to her waist, then focuses the intensity of her gaze on me.

“You want something from me before you open your thighs? I don’t blame you. I imagine wars have been fought for less. Entire kingdoms have fallen in the pursuit of less than this. Do you want it to come as a request? Or an *order*?”

I lift an eyebrow, waiting for her answer, though I think I know what this headstrong female wants. When she doesn’t answer, her desire is clear. She wants me to be in charge. How auspicious that I discovered my dominant side at the same moment she found she likes to be told what to do.

“Spread your thighs.”

I put such an agreeable tone to my voice that I’m not surprised she doesn’t respond. She wants something more from me as she sits, naked from the waist down, her full breasts resting on the stiff shelf of her scarlet bodice while she is no doubt dripping her cream onto the seat of the emperor’s official hover.

Allowing my tail to cross the distance between us, I slide the heart-shaped plate at its tip from her ankle along the outside of her leg to rest at her hip.

Her green gaze flies to mine. Is it filled with fear? Desire? Perhaps a little of both.

“Spread. Them.” I punctuate my command with two little taps with the flat of the plate against her hip.

Oh, my Selene is a female of worth. Her response is to move her knees less than a standard inch apart, then give me a challenging stare. She's going to make me fight for every finger's breadth of exposure. Good for her.

Leaning forward so my tail can reach, it glides across her waist and up her midriff to rest between her breasts. With precision, I use the blunt point of the tip to flick first one nipple, then the other.

Her eyes fly wider as she gasps with shocked pleasure, then allows the gap between her knees to widen.

“Good girl.”

Her breath hitches at those two words. It's better than abracadabra or even the word “please.” My Selene likes to hear praise from her demon. I will be glad to oblige.

Although I'm trying to focus on her, on pleasing and titillating, and yes, convincing her to spread those knees wide just as she did the other night, it's hard to ignore the pounding in my cock as the urgency to orgasm seems to double every minute.

Usually, I pay no attention to my tail, allowing it to trail behind or lash in irritation without conscious awareness. I'm struck by how graceful it is as it dances between us, how precisely I can make it move as it flicks first one pert nipple, then the other.

When she played with her own breasts, she tugged and plucked, but there's something about this that appears to be even more arousing than her own hands. Is it that the tail is



attached to *me*? Because her bottom is squirming on the seat, her plush lips have popped open, and she's panting for breath. Something changes. Her body shifts, her gaze spears me, and the dreamy look on her face becomes hard.

When I pull away, fearful I've hurt or offended her, she grips my tail above the heart-shaped plate in order to keep it in place.

She grazes the pad of her thumb across the tip, back and forth. It's made up of toughened hide stretched over cartilage, not unlike the texture of her human ears, stiff but flexible.

"Not sharp," she observes.

"No."

"Sensitive?"

"The same as a finger might be. But my tail has a mind of his own."

"Would it shock you if I said I wanted it inside me?"

Yes! Yes. It absolutely shocks me not only that she wants it, but that she feels safe enough with me to ask for it. My shock disappears and hot arousal spikes through me at the thought. I even feel my wings act of their own volition, flaring and arching up behind me as if to launch me across the vehicle toward Selene.

"Would it shock you if I said I never dreamed of such a thing, but that if I can't fulfill your wish in the next minute, I will spiral into insanity?" I reply.

She splays her thighs open, showing me the pretty pink folds I saw the other night. I'm closer to her this time and can see them in better detail. I'm struck again by how beautiful she is.

It seems crazy that we're on opposite sides of the cabin, but perhaps we both know that if we cross the space and fall into each other's arms, we'll be lost in each other forever. This seems safer. Saner.

Her palm still surrounds my tail, and I let her take the lead, fearful that if I'm in charge, I'll hurt her.



## Chapter Eighteen

**S**elene

I've lost my mind. Never before have I done anything half this gutsy. I'm almost naked with a demon, his tail clutched in my hand. Not just clutched. I've got him in a death grip because I want this more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, and I'm not going to stop until the deed is done.

I pluck my nipple with my other hand while I circle my entrance with the tip of his tail. The muscled, rope-like part I'm holding is flexible. The tip is a hardened plate. Maybe it's skin surrounding bone, maybe it's something else. I don't care. I want it inside me.

It was so deft, so skillful as it flicked my nipples. I imagine it will feel amazing sliding against my inner walls.

Perhaps it's because this is so... forbidden that it feels amazing as I skim my entrance, wetting it, tantalizing both of us. I get cold feet for a moment and stop, paralyzed.

“Take me inside you, Selene.” His voice is half silk, half sandpaper as he urges me to short-circuit my fears and follow my desires.

Oz knows just what I need in order to go through with this—a command.

I press him inside me and roll my hips as I release a shuddering moan. The widest part of the flat plate is perhaps the girth of Zane-the-asshole’s cock. It doesn’t stretch or hurt.

Leaning forward, I watch as I feed his flexible red tail into my most intimate spaces. When he withdraws, I can see that I’m so wet his tail glistens with my honey.

When I look at Oz’s face, he’s too absorbed, too fascinated, to notice I’m staring at him.

Pushing my ass to the edge of the seat, I lean back, open my legs so wide they feel stretched, and urge, “Fuck me.”

After a swift look at me to make sure he heard me correctly, the male who seems so comfortable giving orders, complies.

“I’m fucking you, Selene,” he says as he spears into me in a slow, delicate thrust. “Do you like my tail inside you?”

He continues for a minute, allowing me to assess it as if it’s a fine wine and I need to take my time to savor it.

“Deeper?”

He presses in until he hits my cervix.

I yelp, which is all the direction he needs to back off an inch.

“Faster?”

With piston-like precision, he invades in swifter thrusts. When my hips join him, rising to greet each deft drive, he keeps it at just that speed.

“You’re doing so well. Taking my tail as if you were born to it,” he croons.

Why do his praises feel as good as his touch?

“Make yourself come,” he urges. “I’m going to stay with you, Selene. I’m right here. I’m going to keep fucking you with my demon tail until you writhe and moan and spasm on me.”

I get to work, circling my needy clit, which is so sensitive it barely needs any pressure to respond.

“I’m close.” My words are deep and breathy as my fingers move more frantically.

“Wait until I tell you.” His tone is so firm I couldn’t disobey if I wanted to.

“Please.” Damn. I didn’t want that to come out as a needy whine.

“That’s my girl. Wait for your emperor to tell you what to do.”

He was a totally introverted, asexual virgin a week ago. The Infernian Shift has given him divine inspiration.

His complete control is so arousing. My eyes roll back in my head as I keep myself on the edge, just waiting for his permission for my own release.

The faint hum of the motor is drowned out by the wet squelching of the thick part of his tail entering me, the heart-

shaped plate flicking at my walls, then partially retreating.

“Please.”

“Hold on. Wait for my permission, Selene.”

I want to say, “I’ll do anything for you,” but I don’t. That would give too much away. It’s one thing to give him my body, quite another to give him my heart. I’d be an idiot to let him know I even had such a thought.

I don’t know where to look: the red, rope-like tail thrusting inside me, his clawed hands, fisted at his sides, or his beautiful demonic face with those slitted amber eyes staring at me as though I’m a fucking goddess deserving of worship.

I can’t decide where to look, so I slam my lids shut.

“Come for me, Selene.”

His powerful voice is closer to my face, but my lids are now so tightly shut I don’t have the strength or presence of mind to look at him. All my body needed was his permission, his command, and I fly over the edge, my body spasming, my channel clutching and quivering around his meaty tail.

He’s still fucking me, caressing my inner walls with his agile tail as his thrusts stay as steady as a pistoning machine.

My fingers bite into the cushion, then, with my eyes still clenched, I reach out for him and feel his solid body, those granite-hard muscles. It’s only now, tethered to him, that the orgasm strikes its full payload with the force of an exploding volcano.

“Fuck!”

As I come, I pitch myself against him and he catches me. The leathery sound of his wings sings in the cabin before I feel them surround me, pulling us even closer together.

Still pumping into me, he croons in my ear. “Good girl, Selene. Coming so hard for me. That’s right. Ride it all the way to the end.”

I’m mumbling wordlessly, tears squeezing out of the corners of my eyes as the hardest orgasm of my life roars through me until it loses steam and finally leaves me spent in Oz’s embrace.

He slowly removes his tail, then pulls me with him onto his side of the cabin from where he was kneeling in the space between our seats. Sweetly, he settles me onto his lap. After tucking me closer, he kisses the top of my head with such urgency it’s as if it’s his mission to kiss every hair on my head.

I’m crazy and I should force myself out of his arms to the other side of the cabin, but just for a minute, I allow myself to absorb all the affection he’s showering on me.



## Chapter Nineteen

**O**zias Although she just found release, I'm the one who is floating on air. To have this female in my arms, tucked against me, protected within my wings, every muscle in her body relaxed after I provided her such pleasure, it's better than anything I could have dreamed.

I don't want to admit how fond I've grown of her, how much I care. In order for me to be accepted as ruler of this planet, I'll need an Infernian female, born and bred. Yet my affection for Selene is swamping me. With every passing moment, I dread even the idea of mating anyone but this amazing human in my arms.

"So good. Such a good girl," I repeat. My praises seem to fill an empty place in her heart. How natural it feels to want to make her feel good—body and soul.

I can't track how long we lie together like this, me holding her tight, her cuddling against me. My cock is keeping time,



though. It pulses with every beat of my heart, reminding me of my need. I've been on the verge of spilling for what feels like hours.

Finally, Selene stirs against me. Her eyes pop open to gaze at me with open affection. I don't hesitate to return it.

She slides to her knees between my hooves.

"Someone did such nice things for me. I should return the favor." She looks up at me with a beautiful lopsided smile.

My cock bobs in appreciation as her palms glide up and down my thighs.

"I'm going to make you feel good, Oz."

*No.* I say it in my mind, but my lips won't cooperate as she hits the auto-open on my belt and reaches into my pants. We probably shouldn't do this. It's such an intimate, generous act, and if things go according to plan, she'll be returning to Hallion in less than a month.

"You're going to love this."

I'm still trying to force myself to tell her to stop when she moans with pleasure as her fingers grip my thick shaft.

"Oz. So good."

Her touch is light, soft as silk as she grazes lightly from root to tip.

"Nubby bumps," she narrates as her palm tries to fully surround the base. "And these rings..."

I can't control my whole-body shudder as a single finger swirls a circle around the lowest of my three ridges. She repeats the process on the others, one at a time.

She doesn't say it, though I imagine we're both thinking about what this will feel like when I plunge into her warm, wet channel.

Even now, as I promise myself this is the last time we'll be this intimate, I allow myself to fully give myself over to this moment.

I suck air through my teeth, trying to gain control over my urges as her slightest movement sets my body ablaze.

Her grip tightens as she pumps my shaft. Just as I entered her slowly with my tail and thrust with the greatest of care a few moments ago, so she tends my cock. I never dreamed she and I would share this intimacy, but I refuse to ask her to stop. If she's going to grant me pleasure with her palm, I'm incapable of rejecting this offering.

When she bends low and takes me into her mouth, I groan in bliss. I never expected this.

Only seconds ago I couldn't imagine any pleasure greater than what her hand bestowed, yet now, in the warm embrace of her mouth, ecstasy flies through me and explodes in my chest like a starburst.

"Selene!" It's too much. Too intense. Too good. But wild animals couldn't pull those words from my mouth.

I wish time would slow down. I want to cherish every moment as her lips tighten to provide intense bliss.

This feels so perfect, so real. Her affection seems so genuine as she freely engages with me, providing me more pleasure than I ever dreamed possible.

My tail slides slowly between her legs as if it has a mind of its own, seeking her moist heat. Instead of batting me away, she widens her knees, welcoming me inside her.

As she takes me as deep as she can manage inside the warm cavern of her mouth, I enter her channel, still wet from her release, and thrust in slow, firm strokes.

Even though my fingers are clutching the seat cushion so tightly I hear it rip in the quiet cabin, I can't anchor myself to the moment. Try as I might, my balls signal they're going to release.

“Good. Selene. I'm going to—”

Instead of pulling off me, she tightens the rictus of her lips, causing me to spill and spill and spill my hot seed down her throat. She's not repulsed, as I would have imagined. Instead, she reaches to my balls as if she wants to milk even more from me.

I may have been in command earlier, but now I'm her puppet. She wants more of my hot seed? She can have it. Her bobbing head slows as she eases me to the end of my release.

Managing to extricate my claws from the shredded cloth of the seat, I slide them through her hair. My fingers are the only part

of my body capable of doing anything other than wallowing in the aftermath of the most intense ecstasy of my life.



## Chapter Twenty

**S**elene

Only one other time in my life have I woken up, put my head in my hands, and had to quell the urge to vomit. That was after I received the text-comm from Zane-the-asshole that he'd left me.

I'd cried myself to sleep the night before, both broken-hearted and feeling like the stupidest woman in the universe for following a man halfway across the galaxy, even though I knew Zane was a jerk.

I'm feeling worse than that right now. What was I thinking last night?

I wish I could blame it on Infernia's atmosphere. It triggered Oz's Shift, maybe it stripped fifty IQ points from me. What else would explain my behavior in the hover?

Even after I shamelessly rubbed myself to completion after practically compelling him to fuck me with his tail, I didn't

come to my senses. No. I gave him a blow job, then laid in his arms, cuddling him, reveling in the sweet way he petted me.

It was only when we ran down the palace hallway toward his room, using all our self-control not to tear each other's clothes off in public, that I finally found a moment of sanity.

He's going to be the emperor of this planet—and he'll be terrific at it. In order to do that, he needs a female by his side who looks like *him*, not *me*. At least that's what his advisors tell him. I don't want to get in the way of that.

From what my research tells me, millions of people on this planet need adequate food and shelter. Oz will ensure that will happen. Who am I to be the selfish one to steal Oz's ability to be Emperor? Or do something that will cause millions of Infernians to continue to live in misery?

Because of that moment of clarity, I somehow found the strength of will to escape into my room and close the door last night. After running to lock the adjoining door, I tore off my fancy gown, flopped on my bed, covered my face with a pillow, and commenced a marathon crying jag.

At some point I fall asleep and am struck by the realization all over again. I've screwed up.

Hand jobs. I give hand jobs. There's no emotional cost to that. I do not, not even with Zane-the-asshole, give blowjobs except on birthdays and special occasions. I never, no, not ever, swallow.

What. The. Fuck was I thinking? It wasn't Oz's birthday, nor a special occasion. He didn't even ask. I offered!

I've caught feelings for the Emperor of Infernia. My stomach clenches at the thought and although I'd like to deny it, the fact is plain as day.

I'm a terrible judge of these things, but I think he might even have caught feelings for me.

Even more important than that? He needs an Infernian mate.

Since he's a virgin, even if he hated me, he'd probably want to keep my panties as a souvenir of his first trip to third base, but he wasn't faking what happened in that hover last night. He was tender. All those lippy kisses to my head as we settled back to reality after our physical bliss? Those were genuine.

It doesn't matter, though. Our relationship is doomed. I'm just his wingwoman. Just his holidate for all these parties to help him find a suitable mate.

We need to dial it back, and I need to do the job he hired me for. I can't afford to lose my heart in a doomed relationship.

I'm going to find the best female for him. As quickly as possible. Then I'll leave and try to never look back.

He sent me a comm asking me to meet him in the morning room for breakfast. I'll be all business.

I contact Alta and ask her to make me a few "more suitable" outfits. "They shouldn't hug my figure or dip lower than my collarbones," I inform her.

When I leave the bathroom after my shower, a chartreuse dress is laid out on the bed. It looks business-like and hides my figure under carefully sewn peplums. Perfect. There's something about that color that makes my skin look sallow and ghastly. It's an added bonus.

Instead of letting her do my hair in an updo that accentuates the slight uptilt of my eyes, I pull it into a ponytail at my nape and then walk purposefully through wood-paneled halls to meet him for breakfast.

Although I'd expected him to warmly greet me, a sexy look of affection glowing from his eyes, he's clearly had an attitude adjustment as well.

He murmurs, "Good morning," and rises to help me into my seat, but doesn't take an opportunity to graze his hands along my body. I guess we've both returned from last night's detour into insanity.

Breakfast is quick and cursory, then he asks the servants to leave, and we get down to business.

I inform him that most of the partygoers weren't talking politics. They were watching him and the females he danced with.

The few who discussed politics were in two camps: firmly pro-succession-by-lineage, and those who very subtly mentioned they wanted a full-blood on the throne.

"Do you recall the female who taught you to waltz? Xalvire?"

He nods.



“I overheard her and her brother, Kaelen, having a long talk after her dance with you. I don’t know what you said to her, but she felt very positive about you. They spoke about not only throwing their support behind you, but getting their friends to do so as well.”

His posture has been stiff since I walked into the room this morning, but upon hearing this, he takes a deep breath and appears to relax.



## Chapter Twenty-One

### **F**our Days Later... Ozias

I feel as though I've been thrown into a gladiatorial fighting pit and left to battle my way out or die trying. I'm alone on Infernia. The only people I can ask for help would love for me to fail. Except for Selene, who despite the way I've treated her these last few days, has been nothing but kind and supportive.

Every night she wears what Alta lays out for her, lifts her head high, and attends the pre-Fire-and-Ice festivities. She vets females as best she can and introduces them to me to dance either the Aurora Waltz or the Interstellar Shuffle. They're the only dances I'm familiar with.

She always hands me a cup of non-alcoholic punch when I visit the buffet table and not only asks how I'm faring, but seems interested in the answer.

I don't know how I got lucky enough to find her, or smart enough to invite her to come to Infernia with me. One thing is

clear. I don't deserve her. As opposed to her kind and caring ways, I've been nothing but a fucker.

From the bits and pieces she's leaked about her past, I know she came to Hallion with a male, thinking they might be life partners. He left her to fend for herself. She was so desperate she could barely pay her rent.

Although she's not a virgin, I don't think she's the type to have slept around. What happened between us as I lay in my sick bed, or the other night in the hover, was not something she would do with just anyone. She has tender feelings for me. I'm certain of it.

And what have I done with her affection? I've pretended that what passed between us meant nothing to me. I've never mentioned it. Neither to thank her nor to explain why it will never happen again. I've treated her more like a servant than a friend or a lover. And how has she repaid me? To be my most loyal supporter.

Now, for example, she's arranged a clandestine meeting with Xalvire and her brother, Kaelen. Selene just works her magic, taking care of me and never asking for more than I give her, which isn't nearly enough.

As she and I slip down a darkened hallway to meet them, I scold myself for what happened between us in that hover, even as I relive it moment by moment. Though I've danced with a hundred females over the past few days, none are as beautiful or alluring as Selene.

Simply sharing air with her in the hover on our way to and from these fêtes sets my nerves on fire. When I relieve my aching cock before I rise and before I fall asleep, I never imagine any of the Infernians, nor any women from the Hollywood vids my mother raised me on. No. All I picture in my mind is Selene.

Selene's long, silken hair, her pouty pink lips, the little dimple on her left cheek. I shake my head to erase the other thoughts bombarding me, thoughts of her other pink lips, her feminine scent, the wet, warm feel of her channel.

“Psst!”

I follow the noise and arrive at a small cleaning closet. I have to duck to fit, but when I do, I'm face to face with a male about my age with two deep furrows between his eyes as though he's spent a lifetime worrying.

“Emperor... Ozias... Mr. Harrison,” Kaelen says, unsure of what to call me, “I can't thank you enough for meeting with us. We have no time for pleasantries. Let me get right to the point.”

He fills me in with a rapid, staccato delivery. First, he tells me he's part of an anonymous resistance that has been forming for several years. Then he informs us about the treachery that is afoot. I'd guessed as much, but this male has dates, times, and the names of some of the vilest people who've been conspiring to get me off-planet at any cost.

“They're plotting against you, Your Highness. I believe it will happen at your coronation.”

Although this comes as no surprise, it strikes me hard, like a sword to the belly.

“The vizier?”

“Yes, and his whole council. We can’t prove it, but we suspect they are responsible for the death of the former emperor and his sons. When the will was read, they were shocked to find out you existed. Your father must have had his suspicions to have included a last-minute addendum to his will.”

I would be stupid if I took this at face value. “How do I know I can trust you?”

The male gulps loudly. “If I were in your position and had my life on the line, I wouldn’t. I have nothing to gain from telling you this. I only want the corruption on my planet to end. Seriously, sire, you can’t trust anyone right now.”

Good answer. He didn’t try to entice me to believe him, just laid out the facts.

“I have no experience in this. I know nothing of Infernian politics. Until a few days ago, I was an attorney who specialized in financial paperwork on the holiday planet, Hallion. I was content to work quietly in my private office and live alone.”

“You have supporters, sire. Xalvire and I are two of the staunchest, but there are others. Selene tells us you’re a proponent of truth and justice. She said you were livid when you glimpsed the slums at the edges of Blazing City. Is it true you want reforms?”

“Yes. I believe everyone should have food and clean, dry shelter. Free schools and healthcare should be a right, not something only the wealthy can afford.”

He glances at Selene and a look passes between them. My rational brain tells me this means they had a conversation that covered this same content. My irrational side tells me he’s been lusting after her. Perhaps they’ve already crossed the line. Could she have shared intimacies with him?

Even though he wants to be an ally, my hand itches to spear him through and through with the ornamental dagger at my hip.

“There are many of us. Millions who want to see the planet governed by benevolence, so all can have a chance at prosperity. We have a plan.”

For the next few minutes, he lays things out in the simplest of terms. It seems most of the populace has been waiting for an opportunity such as this, so the heavy hand of a greedy emperor would no longer doom the poor to live in poverty and hunger.

“We believe the attempt on your life will happen at your coronation, sire. We believe we can infiltrate the Fire and Ice ceremony the day before and make our move. This will protect you. All we need is your permission.”

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt. This needs to be as bloodless as possible. I don’t want to ascend the throne after a bloodbath.”

“That was always the plan. I’ve spoken with more than half of the generals. You have support in the military sector, sire.”

“Then yes! I agree to this plan.”

“In return, we request you make changes after you become emperor. For the good of the planet.”

These people would risk their livelihoods, their very lives, with not even a promise from me.

“I promise, on my honor, that our desires are aligned. I will do everything in my power to make Infernia a place where every person can grow up with food in their belly, a roof over their head, and the promise of freedom and happiness.”



## Chapter Twenty-Two

**S**elene

Please God, please let me get to the Fiery Peak ballroom before I hurl. Just calm my stomach for ten more minutes. I'll launch out of the hover and sprint to the restroom. Oz won't be any the wiser that I've been vomiting bile off and on for the last twenty-four hours.

We haven't spoken about anything important since that sexy night in the hover. Of course, we've talked. We've discussed not only the taste of our food and the pleasant temperatures, but we've spoken on substantive topics as well, like thwarting the insurrection and where I should hide if a bomb goes off—casual things like that.

What we haven't discussed is the sex we had—or almost had—in the hover. Or that he's going to ask Xalvire for her hand in marriage tonight.

He hasn't breathed a word about it. Nor has he looked at her the way he still looks at me when he thinks I'm not aware.



That mopey, longing, sexy look that's usually accompanied by a glance all the way down and all the way up my body despite that I've taken to wearing what could almost be described as potato sacks.

No. He hasn't told me what's on the docket for tonight, but I'd have to be a complete idiot not to have figured it out.

The night we had our secret meeting in the janitor's closet, he danced with only four females. The next night it was only three, and for the last two nights, it was only Xalvire all night long. How could that escape my notice?

I have ALL the feels for him and can barely look at him and Xalvire when they dance. What's worse? I like her. She's a sweet person who seems incapable of saying an unkind word about anyone. More importantly, she's loyal to Oz. If we weren't rivals, she'd be a friend.

Who am I kidding? We're not rivals. You can only be rivals when there's someone who is choosing between you and the other person. Oz seems to have forgotten I exist except when he makes the most inane small talk in the hover.

Our hover has barely lowered to the ground when I don't even wait for the driver to open the door. I burst out of the cabin and race into the building and to the nearest restroom.

Looking at the glistening glob of spit, I wonder why I made such a big deal out of my intestinal distress. I haven't had the heart to eat a morsel of food all day. All that came out was clear spittle. Certainly nothing to write home about.

After rinsing and spitting a few times, I straighten my shoulders and make my way into the fray.

It's easy to find Ozias. He's now, as he always is, the focus of attention. For the past few days, everyone's gaze isn't only on him, but he and Xalvire—the couple. I'd feel even worse, maybe even need another lurching run to the restroom, if she looked even remotely happy.

Shouldn't she look radiant? Smiling? Glowing? Funny, she's glancing around as if she's looking for an escape.

For the swiftest moment, I'm filled with anger. If she's lucky enough to have landed such a great guy, the least she could do is to be happy about it. If we could switch places, I'd have my palm on his arm, or, even better, I'd be tucked to his side as if he couldn't keep his hands off me.

I wouldn't exactly lord it over everyone here, but I'd sure as hell be proud that I was under the protective wing of the most handsome and compassionate male in the room.

Crap, I have it bad. I can't wait to get him mated, so I can go lick my wounds on another planet.

He's doing it. He's asking her to be his mate out there on the dance floor. I hold on to the sturdy refreshment table to keep my knees from sagging.

Usually, I try to keep my gaze off him. Sure, I watch him like a hawk, but I try to do it surreptitiously, out of the corner of my eye.

Not now. Right now, I'm staring straight at them. He's nervous, a sheen of perspiration on his upper lip. She's pressing against his palm on the small of her back so their bodies aren't touching at all.

If I hadn't just confirmed that there's nothing in my stomach to throw up, I'd run to the restroom right now. No, who am I kidding? I'm not going to tear my eyes from this, even though it's breaking my heart.

I understand where the expression heartbroken comes from. My chest actually *aches*, my eyes are watering, and I've clamped my hand over my mouth so even the closest bystander can't hear my whimper of distress.

When he grasps her wrist and drags her down the hallway where we met with Xalvire and Kaelen a few days ago in that deserted janitor's closet, my mind quits working for a moment. It's like an engine whose pistons simply quit firing. Then my mind blasts me with rapid-fire thoughts. They're going into that closet to kiss, to seal the deal. No, they're going to consummate right now, before anything can interfere.

My mind, ever so compliant, decides it's not enough to goad me, to tease me at the loss of my dream. It steps up its internal warfare and throws pictures at me of what's going on in that dark, enclosed space.

Of course, he would want her. It's the way it should be: red skin on red. Horns clicking against each other, tails entwining as they passionately kiss.

I need to leave. Need to run out of here and make someone take me to the palace. I've done my work, right? I've played wingwoman on all these holidays. He's asked her to be his mate. That was the contract, right? I've done my part of the bargain. Now all I need to do is book a ride off this planet, collect my forty grand, and get the stench of sulfur out of my nostrils.

It hits me like a freight train that I've grown accustomed to the smell. It's as though my body adapted to Infernia in anticipation of living here. Stupid me. It doesn't matter what my body thinks. I'm leaving.

I feel like wailing when I realize I have nowhere to go. There's no job waiting for me on Hallion. I could go anywhere—as long as it carries no memories of a handsome demon with black horns, red skin, wings, and a sexy, sexy tail.

I have to suppress a moan at the thought of that tail. How can I even think of it without remembering my debauched demands that a certain emperor fuck me with it?

The back of my mind is calculating just how long I have to stay on this planet before I can run away? Do I have to sit with a fake smile on my face during his coronation? During his *mating* ceremony? No. That would be too much to ask!



## Chapter Twenty-Three

**O**zias

I can't recall feeling this bad. Ever. My stomach is in knots.

It makes no sense. Although I've confirmed that my enemies are plotting to kill me at my coronation, my nausea is due to what I'm about to do next on this dance floor.

It was the vizier who first told me I needed to take an Infernian mate. Since he wants to assassinate me, I've tossed his recommendations in the rubbish bin. But Kaelen and his friends also informed me the people of the planet would be most comfortable if a half-blood like me was mated to a native of the planet.

They provided me with a list of eligible females who would be loyal to me, who weren't disgusted by my half-blood or bastard status. I didn't fail to notice that Xalvire was on top of the list.

My heart tells me Selene is my female. She's perfect for me. For days, I was certain she was the only one I would consider as my mate. Since then, the reality of my new circumstances has dictated that I ignore my heart and do what is expected of me. Duty over emotion.

It appears that the Infernian Shift not only activated my libido, it woke up all my other dormant emotions as well.

Although little more than a week ago I didn't give a damn about Infernia or its inhabitants, I care deeply now. I've spent the last few days searching deep into hidden parts of the Infernian database to find the truth about what my new subjects want and need. There is a large population of homeless, and many more who are without basics like adequate food and healthcare.

I've been given such a wonderful opportunity. As emperor, I could improve everyone's lot in life. In a short span of days, I've become passionate about championing their rights. Not that I've breathed a word of my desires to the vizier or his cronies. I imagine if I told them my plans, they would hasten their plot to assassinate me.

Up until now, my life has been a comfortable routine. It centered around my mother until a few years ago, when she passed away. After that, other than my three meals a week at The Diner, my world consisted of work, home, and watching vids—mostly reruns of the rom-coms my mother and I enjoyed. Politics never interested me.

When I think about it now, my life was boring and empty.

But now that I've stumbled into such extraordinary circumstances, how can I abdicate the responsibility I've inherited? The ability to improve the lives of millions is a heavy burden as well as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I can't be selfish with so many people's happiness, no, their very lives, at stake.

"You look lovely, Xalvire," I murmur as we begin the next dance. It's not a lie. She's a beautiful Infernian. Her perfectly spiraled horns have been buffed to an ebony shine. Her lips are full and in a perpetual, inviting pout. If I wasn't so attracted to Selene, I would find this female alluring.

"Thank you, sire. And as always, you are a compelling presence. I see you've mastered the intricate steps of the Gravity Glide."

"There's something I need to talk to you about. It's private, but if we go to another room, I fear we'll be spied upon. May we discuss it here?"

"Certainly."

Her tone is enthused, but her smile does not reach her amber eyes.

"You are a fine woman. Pretty. Although we've only known each other a few days, I would like you to be my mate."

Perhaps because this was the least romantic mating proposal in the galaxy, she does not have the dewy, excited look on her face that a suitor would expect.

“I’m... flattered.” As she continues to dance, her gaze flits to anything but my face.

She’s stalling.

“Th-thank you for the proposal. I...”

The Gravity Glide consists of quick steps that take us to all four corners of the dance floor, but I slow our pace to gaze at her. Upon seeing her confused expression, I maneuver us off the floor and into a deserted hallway.

“It was a proposal, Xalvire, not a command. If you aren’t interested, I will withdraw the offer and consider someone else on your brother’s list.”

With each word I utter, she appears more distressed.

“I’m flattered, honored. It’s just...” her delicate features squeeze in distress. “I’ve seen the way you look at Selene. Often when we’re dancing, you can’t pull your gaze from her. When you speak to her at the refreshment table, it’s as if the two of you are drawn together by a magnetic force.”

I thought I’d been careful to hide my desires. Was I so obvious?

“And Selene? She seems to return the interest. When I’ve spoken to her, she can barely talk of anything but you. She doesn’t think of you as a ruler, an emperor, a person with power. She thinks of you as a male. I can practically feel her body hum with interest when you approach.”

Really? I guess I’m not too surprised. She certainly responded to me with desire until I went too far with her in the hover that



night. What was I thinking, defiling her perfect body with my tail?

“Why aren’t you proposing to *her*?”

“Why...?” I pause to make sure I parse my words correctly. The last thing I want is to hurt lovely Xalvire’s tender feelings.

“Everyone I trust, as well as those I don’t, counseled me to take an Infernian mate. I want to improve the life of every person on the planet. With so much power and responsibility comes great sacrifice.”

Shit. Did I just say mating her would be a sacrifice? I have a lot to learn about tact.

“Not that being with you would be a terrible fate, Xalvire. You’re a lovely female.”

“Thank you, sire. Kaelen and I are highborn. Our father is on the Council of Lords. We know our way around politics. Marrying a full-blooded citizen would be best if you were single and unencumbered. But since you appear to be in love with Selene, don’t you think you should mate her? Do you think your future subjects, the ones who are loyal to you, are so petty and selfish they don’t want your happiness?”

I’ve known since the first moment I stepped onto this planet that I was in way over my head. I understand little of politics. It never interested me. I’ve stepped into a nest of vipers and don’t know how to extricate myself.

Even more, I understand very little of all the newly awakened emotions that are bombarding my body and brain.

“I want to do the right thing, Xalvire. And... and stay alive, of course. I didn't aspire to be an emperor, but now that it's been handed to me and I see the needs of the people, I want to wear the crown. It's of utmost importance to me to do good, to be of service to all Infernians.”

Although we've been entwined in each others' arms for hours over the last few days at one party or another, she touches me with true affection for the first time. With her palm solidly on my arm, and her amber gaze looking directly into mine, she says, “You're going to do just fine, sire. You are exactly what this planet needs, what it's needed for a long time. Your subjects will be so happy to have a monarch who cares about their needs that they won't care what your empress looks like, so long as her heart is as generous as yours.”

After a brief pause, she continues, a quiet passion burning in her eyes. “Our emperor mating a non-Infernian would pave the way for more inter-species matings and acceptance of their mixed-blood offspring. The old emperors frowned upon it. Oh, it was okay to discreetly take a non-Infernian lover, but not as a mate. What happened to your mother and you is inexcusable.”

Those words soothe my soul, but they're nothing like what comes next.

“Now why don't you walk over to that pretty human at the refreshment table who looks as miserable as you do? Then you can whisk her into your arms and show her how well you can

dance the Galaxy Glide. Maybe you'll even make her a proposal.”



## Chapter Twenty-Four

**S**elene

Here comes Xalvire. Perking up, I stand straighter and look for a path to run. I have to get my shit together. I don't want her to see the tears in my eyes.

Xalvire is heading directly toward me.

“Selene?”

The bitch has the audacity to smile at me. She's not a bitch. Maybe I'm the bitch, the one with the broken heart. Xalvire is doing what's required of her. Who knows? She might be in love with someone else and is going to mate Oz out of duty. What a wretched scenario.

She must know I have feelings for Oz. I doubt I've hidden my crush very well. Crush? That word seems pale compared to the depth of emotions swamping me right now.

“Mr. Harrison would like to speak with you privately. He asked me to tell you to meet him in the closet. You know the one.”

Somehow, my chest expands enough for me to grab a deep breath. It feels good to know he has the decency to personally inform me of his engagement. I knew he was a male of worth.

“I wish you the best,” I tell her. Those were certainly the hardest five words I’ve ever forced out of my mouth.

“And I you, Selene.” She grants me a stunning smile. I was right the first time. She *is* a bitch.

My feet drag until I’m halfway there, then I jog, simply wanting to get this over with.

I knock, and the moment the door opens, his firm grip surrounds my wrist and pulls me inside.

His face is a mask of pain, which soothes me somehow. I’m glad this is as hard for him as it is for me.

He pulls me into his embrace and clutches me tightly, one palm on the back of my head, one on the small of my back.

“Selene.” The word wrenches from his mouth. That this is killing us both is small comfort.

“I’m so sorry. So, so sorry.”

What a nice male. Being dumped with compassion is a new experience, although I should have expected nothing less from Ozias.

“I’ve tried.” He pulls away to gaze at me. “I’ve tried to banish my feelings for you, tried to pretend our hearts weren’t inextricably tethered as we shared breakfast in the sunroom and sat knee to knee in the hover. It was impossible.”

He tugs me closer, chastely kisses my forehead, then steps back to read my expression.

“How is it possible to fall so deeply in love in a matter of days?”

He’s not just going to marry her? He already loves her? I’m dying. No. I’m already dead. My heart is no longer beating inside my chest. It’s a miracle I’m still able to stand.

“I tried to ignore it, told myself it wasn’t real, tried to quash it for the good of something bigger than me, bigger than both of us. But I couldn’t. And now?”

I wish he’d go ahead and say it already. Get it over with.

“And now, Selene, I don’t have to.”

He’s smiling at me. How can he be so happy when my heart is breaking?

Wait. What?

“What are you saying?”

“I love you, Selene. I love you *and* I can help this planet heal. A very wise Infernian female told me those two things aren’t mutually exclusive. I can have them both.”

He grazes his knuckles down my cheek. That one movement is brimming with affection.

“I’m going to rule in a way that honors everyone, from the richest to the poorest. And on this planet where I’m going to create peace and prosperity, even the emperor will be able to

find happiness. The first order of business will be for him to mate his beloved and make her his Empress. If you'll say yes."

My cheeks feel as hot as the volcano belching smoke to the north of the city. Feeling dizzy, I grab onto Oz so my knees don't sag to the floor.

I don't want to sound like an idiot and ask him to repeat himself, so I play his speech back in my mind. Although I can't do it word for word, I remember the words love and beloved and I especially know I heard him correctly when he said, "Say yes."

"Yes?"

"You'll be my mate, Selene? You'll remain on Infernia with me? Help me figure out how to govern a place that is full of graft, corruption, and unhappiness? Will you stay at my side? Rule with me?"

I'm crying now, not even trying to stop the tears. So my words are filled with emotion when I recite what I recall from a thousand romance vids I've watched.

"Yes, Oz. For richer and poorer. For better or worse. I will stay by your side and help you fix what's broken here. We'll figure out who to trust and who to banish from your inner circle. We'll make things better. And most of all, we'll love each other."



## Chapter Twenty-Five

**O**zias

The moment I asked Selene to be my mate five days ago was the beginning of the biggest whirlwind of my life. There were so many moving parts to organize, and so much of it was dangerous.

I shouldn't have been surprised when Selene shook her head, put down her foot, and refused to let trusted supporters shelter her on the other side of the planet as I suggested.

“Really, Ozias?”

I'm learning she seldom uses my full given name unless she's angry.

“You asked me to be your mate, to remain at your side for better or worse, and your first act is to send me half a planet away? No!”

Needless to say, she's been at my side since then. Because Abyssis had his loyal palace guards watching us every minute and monitoring our comms, I had to put my trust in Kaelen



and Xalmire. Although I'm not long on trust, they've proven time and again that they have our best interests at heart.

For years, the resistance has been putting building blocks in place for a coup. They were ready to fight before I was named the next emperor. It's a stroke of luck they decided to wait for me to arrive on Infernia before they started their insurrection. That would have been much bloodier than what has occurred over the last several days.

Two of the top generals who were on our side simply marched into the palace with a phalanx of soldiers who were armed to the teeth. Subduing our palace enemies was almost bloodless because the vizier and his cronies, though full of bluster, were cowards.

Once the males at the top surrendered, most of their followers laid down their arms. The generals informed me it was the best outcome they could have hoped for because the amount of casualties was small.

It will take months, possibly longer, before we sort out who might still be plotting against me and who is truly loyal. In the meantime, things are peaceful enough that I have already appointed an intra-planetary task force as an advisory committee.

Not only do I have the power to make sweeping changes to our social structure, but I'll also have procedures in place to receive input from the people themselves.

"You ready, babe?" Selene calls from her room.

Ready? I'm ready to burst with excitement. We've had so much to do, so much to worry about. It's been a wild and dangerous ride since that romantic moment in the cleaning closet. My new mate even quipped, "I guess floor wax will forever smell like an aphrodisiac to me."

My very funny mate has a great sense of humor, which we've desperately needed in an effort to keep ourselves from climbing all over each other at the most inopportune moments.

I'm an idiot. Even Selene would agree with that.

She was ready to move into my room the moment we arrived home after my proposal. Perhaps it was my mother's influence, or all those old Earth romance vids we watched, but I didn't want to consummate our mating until our union was officially blessed by the high priest. I also didn't want to mate my intended bride before we took down the rebels.

I had a hunch we were being surveilled, though thankfully not in my bedroom. Cameras were found hidden in the chandelier in my sitting room. Once those were removed, only two days ago, I still wanted to wait for our mating ceremony to be performed in front of all of Infernia before we consummated our mating.

Today will be a double ceremony. First, I'll be crowned, then my beloved will be pronounced my mate. After that, she'll receive her own crown. It was swiftly modified to adorn a head devoid of horns. She hasn't seen it yet, but it will look spectacular on her.

“The question is, are *you* ready?” I finally respond to her question.

“I was ready days ago, as you’ll recall,” she snips, obviously talking about what will come *after* the two upcoming ceremonies.

“Do you ever think about anything other than sex?” I ask, faking umbrage even though her high sex drive is one of my favorite things about her.

“Not when my sexy almost-husband, almost-emperor is nearby.”

I may have been the one whose entire autonomic nervous system went into high gear when we reached this planet, but Selene is the grouchy one who didn’t one-hundred percent buy-in to the wait-for-sex mandate. You could say she’s been irritable, but that would be an understatement.

She opens the adjoining door a crack, tosses me a flirty smile, and then opens it all the way to reveal her standing naked in all her glory.

All the air gusts out of me in one breath, as if I’ve been punched in the gut.

“I’ve learned a lot about you in the few short weeks we’ve known each other.” My voice is low, predatory.

“Oh? Like you enjoy looking at my body?” She wiggles her ass. “You think my breasts are perfectly imperfect?” She shimmies to make them dance. “Even though the left is definitely bigger than the right?”

“Are you sure you aren’t on our enemy’s payroll, Selene? You’re killing me.”

My cock is about to punch its way out of my trousers, not to mention my tail slashing low to the ground. It’s a sign that would cause smart enemies to back off. No one could accuse my almost-mate of being strategic about when and with whom to pick a fight, though.

“No,” I continue, “What I’ve learned about you is that you have a mean streak.”

Did I think this would make her back away? If I did, that makes me an idiot. Instead, she sashays toward me, the sexiest little smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

“*You* have a mean streak, Ozias. Otherwise, what kind of male would make a woman wait for this?” She places her palm on my belly, points her fingers toward the floor, and slides her little hand inside my pants until she has a firm grip on my cock. “It’s a wonder I still want to mate you, *sire*. I’ve discovered you like to *withhold*.”

Her scornful tone is interrupted by Syllas who knocks lightly on the door. “Your Highnesses? Will you be ready in fifteen minutes?”

I’m ready now, although it will take a moment for my instant erection to retreat. Not being a complete idiot, I look at Selene for an answer.

“Yes,” she says as she gives the head of my cock a gentle squeeze. “We can hardly wait.”



## Chapter Twenty-Six

**S**elene

I was never that girl. You know, the one who was making scrapbooks about weddings when she was ten. I never played wedding dress-up. Never pretended I was at my wedding. Certainly, I never imagined marrying a prince.

Now I'm marrying an emperor.

How sweet of him to want his coronation first, so I'd be marrying the emperor of an entire planet. I resisted getting too excited, telling myself it wasn't that big of a deal. Then I had a nice, long talk with myself, and allowed myself to bask in the feelings of living out the dreams of every little girl in the universe. In our heart of hearts, don't we all want to marry the handsome monarch?

And dear god, he sure fits the bill. Whatever happened during his Shift made his already muscly muscles even more pronounced. Considering he can seldom contain his raging

hard-on, his elevated testosterone has not only put his arousal through the roof, but is doing quite a number on his physique.

I'm not complaining.

He's standing on the dais in the largest room in the palace. All the dignitaries we can trust are here. Because of the recent insurrection, there aren't many people from other planets. This is fine. Oz isn't out to impress anyone. He just wants to make Infernia a better place to live.

Not only is every eye in the room focused on him, but this is also being broadcast around the planet. I'm embarrassed to admit how focused I've been on his approval ratings, but as of now, almost every Infernian citizen is happy he's being installed as their new monarch.

I'm half paying attention to all the pomp and circumstance coming out of the officiant's mouth because I'm more focused on my mate—who is soon to be my mate. His wings are extended to their full span, his horned head bowed as he leans to receive blessing after blessing. Some are from the heads of churches and temples, some are from the heads of state of the six Infernian continents.

Finally, the officiant speaks one last incantation and places the specially made gold and jeweled crown on Ozias's head.

When it's seated, circling his horns, it signifies that he has ascended to the throne and is the true and just ruler of Infernia.

I went from teary-eyed to ugly crying a few minutes ago.

Xalvire, who was standing behind me, passed me a lace

handkerchief. I dried my face and gave my new friend a grateful smile. This day feels momentous for so many reasons.

Now the atmosphere changes from serious to joyful as he lifts his head, gazes at me, and extends his arm, beckoning me to join him.

He towers over me, his face full of affection and wonder. I can't imagine for a minute that our future isn't going to be spectacular.

He tucks me to his side and surrounds me with his leathery wing. It's as if I'm cocooned in safety—the best present I could ask for on my wedding day.

Perhaps because both the officiant and the assemblage have already been through a long ceremony, our mating vows are short and sweet. The mood has turned from solemn to jubilant as we are blessed by some of the most important people on the planet.

It feels wonderful to be welcomed. For a while, I thought because of my species, I would be hated by all, but that certainly doesn't seem to be the case.

At last, we're pronounced a mated pair. The officiant places a matching but more delicate crown upon my head, announcing me as Empress Selene to the rousing acclamation of everyone in attendance.

Infernians must not have the “kiss the bride” tradition, but my mate watched plenty of Earth vids with his mother, because he sweeps me into his arms, surrounds us with his wings so no

prying eyes can watch, and kisses me like I've never been kissed before.

It goes on for so long the audience titters, and yet we don't stop. It makes me breathless for him.

"How long do we have to stay at this party, Your Highness, because you've made me wait long enough," I scold.

"Can you give me one hour? One hour to show off my new mate to everyone on Infernia so they can see how much I love her? Then I'm going to carry you to our room and fully make you mine."

I don't have the heart to tell him that the tradition is that he only has to carry me over the threshold. I'm going to enjoy having him tote me through the entire palace.

"We don't have to wait for me to be fully yours, Oz. I already am."





## Chapter Twenty-Seven

**O**zias

I've never been one for theatrics before. Then again, I've never been mated before. Exactly one hour after our vows, I catch Selene's eye and let her see all my ardor and affection from across the room.

She's never moved so quickly as I watch her wind her way through civilians and highborns alike, making her way to me as if it's a military mission. I pause, waiting until almost every eye in the room is upon us, then bow low to my Empress. I hope having the most powerful person on the planet bow to her makes her feel special, because to my heart, she's the most important person in the galaxy.

When I assume everyone in this room and those watching on vid from all across Infernia have seen how much I love my new mate, I scoop her into my arms, surround her with my wings, and run out of the room toward my suite.

Though I'm the one who's running, it's Selene who is giggling so hard she becomes breathless.

"I'm going to be so happy with you, mate," I say, then sprint faster, eager to reach the privacy of my rooms.

Once we've crossed the threshold, I push the door closed with my hoof and set my bride down with care.

Selene tosses me the sexiest smile as she jumps back into my arms, trusting me to catch her. Now that we're in the perfect position for a kiss, her lids droop closed, and she places her pliant lips on mine.

I've imagined this moment dozens of times, even when I should have been paying more attention as we planned how to quell the insurrection. Even though I've pictured it so many times, it never happened like this. In my mind, this moment would be filled with all the fiery passion we've kept banked these past few days.

Instead, this kiss is the perfect embodiment of tenderness. It's lip on lip, punctuated with her soft sigh that speaks so eloquently of just how long she's waited for this moment.

Her eyes open and though our mouths are locked together, I can feel her smile as our gazes connect.

"Set me down, love. There were too many people watching during our official ceremony, but there are things I wanted to say. If I don't say them now, I'm afraid they'll get lost in the moment," she says.

I set her down and wait, eager to hear whatever she feels compelled to tell me.

She grips my hands between hers. It still thrills me to see our flesh side by side. Hers pale, mine fiery red. We're so different, yet it's so clear we belong together.

“Ozias Theron Suetonius Harrison, I love you. Sometimes I kick myself that I didn't see your true worth back on Hallion. I don't know how I saw you three times a week and didn't find the treasure hidden in your quiet demeanor. Luckily, the universe conspired to bring us together.”

She brings my hands to her mouth and kisses my knuckles.

“Now you're mine. And I'm yours. We're going to spend the rest of our lives together, not only making Infernia a better place, but making each other happy.”

It's silent in our room as my heart bursts with love for her. Then the mood changes as she says, “We're finally mated, love. What are you waiting for?”

I spin her around, only to realize there must be fifty tiny buttons in a tidy line up her spine. Just as I unsheathe a claw, ready to destroy the beautiful gown on a mission to undress her more quickly, she giggles and says, “Those are for show, Oz. Don't you dare rip this dress. One of our daughters may want to wear it. Use the autozip.”



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

**S**elene

My speech didn't come out nearly as romantic as I'd practiced, but Oz doesn't seem to mind. He's so impatient to get me out of this dress, I'm lucky he didn't rip the thing to shreds.

The autozip slides downward, exposing my spine, yet the dress stays on my shoulders. It's a chaste pose, exposing none of my erogenous zones, yet the cool air on my skin is stimulating. Hearing Oz's sharp intake of breath is even more arousing.

I'd wondered if our first coupling would be frenzied since we've waited what seems like a lifetime for this to happen. I get my first clue that this will not be a hurried affair when Oz places his claw at my hairline, then draws it sharply down the channel of my spine.

He doesn't break the skin; that wasn't his intention. No. That one touch was to banish all other thoughts and worries from

this room. From this moment forward, we're two people who will be sharing our bodies in any way we see fit.

Usually, he keeps his claws sheathed in my presence, perhaps to allay any fears, so it surprises me when I feel their scrape when he pulls the dress fabric to the edges of my shoulders and watches as the heavy gown slides down my body to puddle on the floor.

Although he spared the gown for a future child we've never even discussed, he's not so gentle with my bra and panties. He pulls my bra strap away from my body, slices it in half with his claw, then chucks it over his shoulder into the corner at the other end of the room. He doesn't even use his claw to cut my panties, choosing instead to rend the air with the shocking noise of ripping fabric.

He doesn't toss these remnants as quickly as he threw my bra. I can picture what he's doing behind me as he breathes in deep gusts of air. I'm certain he's holding the moist crotch over his nose and mouth, just as he did that sexy night in the hover which seems so long ago.

Now that I'm completely naked, he steps close, his fully clothed body hugging me from behind like a second skin.

His warm breath ghosts across my ear as he breathes, "In front of all those lords and ladies, all the subjects across the land who watched our mating ceremony, you are the Empress, a female to be honored, empowered to give orders to everyone on the planet but me."

His hot words in my ear are giving me goosebumps.

“In here, Selene, when it’s just you and me, there is only one person in charge. You know this, yes?”

This. This is why I never gave him the time of day on Hallion. He wasn’t like this then, and this is what I crave. I hate to admit it. I loathe that this male’s dominance makes me weak in the knees, but this is who I am, down to the last fiber of my being. My nipples, already hard, bead to needier points. My channel clenches as I nod and whimper, “Yes.”

Though I should have expected it, I’m startled when his tail possessively wraps around my ankle, then wanders slowly up my leg, the supple, heart-shaped plate on the end meandering unhurriedly until it arrows to the needy place between my legs.

It slides along my slippery folds—just once—from front to back, then lodges in the seam at the top of my thigh as he croons, “Say it. I crave to hear you admit it, precious.”

“Yes, Oz. You’re in charge.”

“Once more, Empress.”

With my other boyfriends, if I’d had this urge to submit, I would have fought it. Giving up power to an asshole is dangerous business. With Oz, my trust is so deep I’m willing—no, eager—to do it.

“Yes, Oz. You’re in charge.”

“What a good girl I’ve mated.”

He rewards me with a fanged nip at my earlobe. There’s something about being on the cusp of danger—with a demon no less—that makes me slick with anticipation.

Those fangs slide down the fragile column of my neck, nip my shoulder, and then forge downward along my spine. With his head tipped like this, I feel those black horns, polished to a shine for his coronation, as they bump down my exposed flesh.

“You’re *mine*, Selene.”

He’s nipping wherever he can reach: my sides, the delicate flesh on the underside of my arm, my hip. It’s as if I’m fighting a war on two fronts. It’s hard to pay attention to those nips when his tail is back at work, teasing my labia, circling near the opening of my channel, then sliding through my lips again.

His hands have glided from where they were lodged on my hips, over my ribcage, and are holding the weight of my breasts as if they are handfuls of gold. When his thumbs strum my nipples in unison, my hips writhe back against him, catching the feel of his thick erection through his clothes.

“Say it, mate. Say you’re mine.” His voice is like velvet covering the steel threat of a blade.

He’s not going to stop tormenting me until I say what he wants. I desperately want to say those words, but there’s some obstinate part deep inside me that needs to deny him.

I shake my head as I wiggle my tush against him, loving the proof that he’s as hard and desperate for me as I am for him.

“Say. You’re. Mine.” He plucks my nipples as he says each word, squeezing harder each time.

A thrill zings down my spine as I shake my head again. We're engaged in a battle of wills. Although I know I'll lose spectacularly, I can't wait to play this out.

"Naughty, naughty, Selene." His voice is honeyed even as the plate on his tail enters my drenched core.

He calls *me* naughty? What kind of male, what kind of loving husband would torture his bride like this? His tail, though it's finally entered my desperate passage, is providing no relief. Instead, its teasing makes me needier as it reminds me how much bliss it can bestow even as it withholds.

"No."

I've angered him now, because he withdraws, leaving me even more empty than before. Just when I think I can't be more aroused, his tail dips inside me again. Little presses, in and out. Every plunge is a promise of more, and every retreat is a wordless scold.

"I can do this all night, beloved."

How could I have spent so much time with him these last few weeks and not have noticed he's a sadist? A demonic sadist.

"Two words, love. Say you're mine."

He's so tempting with his tongue flicking at my ear, alternating with nips from his fangs. His hands have drifted to the juncture of my thighs, telling me they're oh-so-ready to make me feel good. As I try to wait him out, one clawed finger draws circles on the tender flesh there as if it's counting the seconds until I give in.



“I’m yours,” he says. “Two tiny words. Selene, it would be *so easy*.”

I’m whimpering. My ass is wagging against him. My channel is dripping. I can feel my cream sliding down my thighs. My pussy is clenching against itself, desperate for something to fill it because his tail has completely withdrawn.

To sweeten the deal, his hand leaves where he’s teasing me long enough to hit his autozip. He removes his tail from between my legs, then wags his hips side-to-side until his trousers slide down his body and hit the floor. After he steps out of the garment, he steps closer, slips his cock between my legs, and rides my slick slit.

Not slow, not fast, just a relentless rhythm. On every forward glide, he makes sure to bump my clit. It’s enough to drive me insane, just not enough to push me over the edge. I pant between my teeth, then mewl helplessly as I toss my head back to rest against my enemy’s chest.

I forget. Why am I fighting this? I’m dying to say I’m his. Is this what I’ve signed on for? A lifetime of jockeying for control with the male I love? I must admit, I have never been this desperate for anything before. It’s beyond want or need or desire. It’s urgent.

“I’m yours.” I finally say it, but make certain he hears the reluctance in my voice.

“Oh, what a good girl,” he croons. “Too bad it took you so long to comply. Now I’ll need to hear it again.”

He must know he's pushed me so far I'll have to fight back. That's why he pulls out all the stops and slides the tip of his tail all the way inside me. It's decadent and forbidden, and the damn thing is so agile it slides directly to the spot in the front of my channel that will give me release if he just keeps moving in those delicious circles.

Of course, he stops just as my breath hitches and I'm moaning the words, "I'm close."

"Just once more, sweet. I won't ask for a third time."

"I'm yours," I say, unable to resist even one second more.

"I'm yours, Oz. You own me. You own my heart. I'm yours."

"And I'm yours, Selene."

With that, not only his tail gets to work, but his finger nudges closer and circles my little clit adding just enough gasoline to the fire to make me explode.

Pleasure that has been circling and building like a gathering thundercloud explodes inside me with the force of a tornado.

"Fuck!"

His cock is pumping my outer lips from behind, his finger is still titillating my clit, and that tail is deep inside me, doing its demonic magic as my muscles contract with a thousand pleasures.

"Oz!" It's both an accusation and high praise. I love this male. He knows just how to give me ecstasy.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

**O**zias

A month ago, I would have called my behavior evil. Today I take pride in it. The way her channel clenched on my tail as she spiraled up to take her pleasure, then let herself come back to her senses, was beautiful to watch. Although I can't say for certain if she's ever experienced this level of pleasure before, I'd certainly like to believe I'm the first to bestow such bliss.

She's still vertical, but wouldn't be standing on her own two feet if I weren't holding her up. Poor thing, I need to take care of her.

I lift her easily in my arms and settle her on the bed, covering her with care and only leaving her side long enough to grab a goblet of honeyed wine.

“Drink, my love. You'll need your energy.”

I've never shown her my demonic face before, but I blast her with the full force of it. I don't wish to scare her, only to have

her see the fire light in my eyes, the desire in my expression, and the promise that I'm not going to stop until both of us are too spent to experience one more bout of pleasure.

“Bad, bad demon,” she says after she sips the wine. Then she lunges, grips my shaft, and tries to pull it toward her pert, pink lips.

“My mate is already hungry for more? I'll oblige.”

A lesser male, after waiting so patiently for so long, would slide between her legs and mate her. I am not a lesser male. Instead, I throw off her covers, hunch between her legs, and spear my tongue into her wet core. The taste I gleaned from her panties was a pale version of this. This is the ambrosia of the gods.

I lap and taste and find my tongue is long enough to find that patch on her inner wall that makes her practically levitate off the bed. I learn each fold and how to please every inch of her delicate petals. Some like the press of my lip-covered teeth, some like to be gently tugged, but it's the little button at the top of her slit that is the most responsive.

I find the right combination of stimulation and penetration and set her off on what must be the longest rolling orgasm ever experienced. Just when I think she couldn't experience more pleasure, something catches inside her and physical bliss roars through her once again.

During one of her lulls, I lift my head to glance at her and the look of sheer ecstasy clinging to her lips makes me feel more powerful than the moment they crowned me as emperor.

Her little hands grip my horns, urging me back to where I was. They cling tight and clench too hard when another orgasm seems to strike out of nowhere. Then she pulls me off her.

“Save some room for later.” She giggles as she strokes my horns, surprising me with the knowledge they’re sensitive enough to be a pleasure zone.

“Later? And what does my Empress want *now*?” I certainly hope she wants the same thing I want. My cock is jerking, dancing with urgency.

“Sleep.”

My heart sinks to my stomach for the swiftest moment, until she gives me a naughty smile and says, “Fuck me, Your Highness.”

I’m so glad I found Selene. No shy flower. This female is perfect for me.

“You’ll never have to ask me twice.” My voice is so husky it barely sounds like me.

I cover her with my body, my palms gripping her cheeks, our gazes locked, and place my cock at her entrance. I’ve loved taking mastery over her here in this room. But for just this moment, I let her see my vulnerability, let her see how much this moment means to me.

Then I’m carried away by my primitive urges as I slide into her slick channel. Despite my doubts about how difficult this might be, she’s slick and ready for me.

Her tight, wet glove is so much better than my hand. She clenches onto me and we move together, her fists on my horns, those hard nipples sliding against my sweat-slicked chest.

It's a thousand times better than I could have imagined. Better than a mere mortal deserves. I ride her, thrusting with long, slow strokes as I battle to reach bottom. With each bump and each time a ridge disappears into her wet channel we both groan in ecstasy. When I'm fully seated, I pump a few times to make sure she's equipped to take everything I have to give.

As if she read my mind, she says, "So good. Don't hold back, Oz."

Her words unleash the devil in me, and my hips don't wait another second before they piston into her so hard I'm hammering her toward the headboard. When I let up, she scolds, "Give it to me. I want all of you. Everything."

I lose myself to the moment as I feel her inner walls ripple against me as her release explodes.

Those moans? Those moans are for me.

Those words? Neither English nor Infernian? Those words are for me.

The pleasure on her face, her muscles clenched so tight they look like she's in pain? That's for me too, as I do as she asked. I give her all of me. "Everything," I rumble into her ear.

I can't hold on any longer as my balls tighten, then explode. I keep pounding into her and keep coming. Coating her womb with my hot jets of fluid. I arch my back, the muscles on my

neck bulging, keeping my teeth clamped so I can keep pounding her a little longer.

I again do as she asked. I give her all of me, including my bark of pleasure, and then I repeat her name over and over until I fall on my side next to her on the mattress.

Using a claw, I gently swipe a hank of her hair off her moist face.

“My precious mate.” I’m surprised the words flow from my tongue. After the cataclysmic force of my bliss, it’s a wonder my brain is capable of clear thought.

“Beloved husband. That was fun.”

She’s so tired, so sated, she can barely keep her eyes open. The last thing she says before she falls into a deep sleep is, “Let’s do that again.”



## Epilogue

**S**elene

I'm trembling with excitement. I used to tremble from terror when I was flying on Oz's back. Those days are long over. Now, as he coasts on a warm air current, I simply lean as he banks, enjoying the fast-moving scenery down below.

"Are you good?" There's a calm smile stretching across his face as he calls over his shoulder to me.

"Better than good."

I'm snugly ensconced in a harness his royal workmen constructed for me. It's a balmy spring day, the second spring I've gotten to enjoy on Infernia. I've been through two Fire and Ice holidays and can report the vizier wasn't lying about one thing: there are only a few bad days a year when the Demon's Breath volcano chugs out dark puffs of smoke, blackening the sky.

As if by magic, within a day or two of the winter holiday, the volcano becomes inactive, and the planet becomes a lovely



place to live. That's a good thing, because we'll be bringing up a family here.

I press my hand to my barely swollen belly and take a deep breath, feeling like the luckiest woman on this or any planet. Oz is just the male I knew him to be. He's the best husband—and lover—and I know he's going to be the best father on the planet.

He's levelheaded and compassionate as a ruler and has enacted many laws increasing taxes on the uber-wealthy and instituting programs for those who need a helping hand.

In fact, that's where we're headed now.

I grew up in America where, during their tenure in the White House, the President's spouse spearheaded the program he or she was most passionate about. My pet project as Empress is to provide new, adequate housing to inner cities across the world. Today I'll be presiding over the opening of a two-thousand-unit low-income apartment building right here in our own fair city.

I worked with developers to find the enormous parcel of land, and consulted with architects to design housing for families of all sizes that would provide not only shelter, but dignity. I even had input on the aesthetics of the parks and surrounding areas.

Though this isn't the first time my loving mate flew me to the project that we've named The Refuge, this will be the first time we'll be meeting the new residents.

To think that less than two years ago, I couldn't imagine a life other than slinging hash, getting by, and recovering from my last heartbreak to prepare for the next asshole to break my heart. Now there's nothing on my horizon but helping the planet recover from years of despotic rule and raising a family of adorable red-skinned, fanged, winged children.

Leaning forward, I place my lips between Oz's shoulder blades, then snuggle closer to speak into his ear.

"I love you, Oz. You are the best thing that ever happened to me."

He quits flapping his wings, catches an air current, and turns to me, no longer smiling. With the most serious look on his gorgeous face, he says, "You are my light, Selene. You are my light and my life and the reason I rise in the morning. My world would be nothing without you."

My chest squeezes with love as my eyes flood with moisture. Of course, he has to break the mood to put a smile on both our faces, so he grabs my hand, presses my palm on his hard cock, and adds, "Speaking of *rising*, my love. Perhaps we can find a bedroom that isn't accounted for at The Refuge. Without relief, it's going to be a long flight home."

"You're a demon."

He laughs. "But I'm *your* demon, love."

I wouldn't have it any other way.



## Dear Reader

**O** MG! A demon lover! My first, but hopefully not my last. Mild-mannered accountant to alpha emperor! Gosh, I hope it was as fun to read as it was to write.

I have so much to tell you! First, there's a **bonus epilogue**. It features Oz and Selene at the holidays, heartwarming early presents, and I've added an illustration of their adorable pet. Simply [click here](#) and it will be downloaded into your inbox.

Second, this book is a hybrid. It's part of my Arixxia Fields series that takes part on planet Hallion. Each book revolves around a holiday. **[Click here for that series page](#)**.

Also, this book is part of the Holidate With an Alien series with the following amazing books by amazing authors:

Skruj by Honey Phillips

Ozias by Alana Khan

Rixen by Ella Blake

Yool by Tana Stone

Sleye by Ava Ross

Tinzel by Ella Maven

Khane by Rena Marks

If you keep reading, you can read the sneak peek of another of my holiday books here: [Taliz: A Sci-Fi Holiday Tail: Stranded With an Alien.](#)



# Many Thanks

**T**hanks to you, my readers, for reading and enjoying my books.

Many thanks to my early readers, Dr. Lee, Roberta B., Naomi S., and Stephanie A. You keep me on track when I go off the rails.

Thanks also to my beta team: Marianne K., Gill V., Anuschka-Marie W., Anne-Marie S.

Also thanks to the other authors in the collab. It was so much fun to work with you again this year.



# Sneak Peek : Taliz

## **C**hapter One Planet Hallion

### **Sometime in the Future**

#### **Zaydie**

“Sorry. Can not do.”

“What?” I ask the khaki-colored hover driver as he eyes me over his shoulder. “I distinctly asked if you could drive me to this address, wait half an hour, then take me to check in at my hotel in Frosttown.”

“And I say yes. That three hours ago, before winter storm come too soon.”

I roll my eyes. We have interstellar travel, hovers, and food made from machines, yet we can’t predict the weather. Irritating.

“Would an extra...” I’m doing higher mathematics in my head as I calculate how much I can bribe him and still have fun on

this vacation. “An extra 50 credits make it worth your while?”

“No. Look at sky. No time to argue. Will be stranded if waste time arguing.”

He exits the hover and stomps to my door, opening it with a bang, then gives me a get-out-of-the-cab glare. It’s made all the more scary by his large brown pupilless bulging eyes.

When I don’t hop to it, he leans in, grabs my hover suitcase, and yanks it over my lap. Little Syzz gives an indignant yelp when the big alien jiggles his carry bag.

I must be lagged from travel, because the impact of this situation is only now dawning on me.

“So, you’re saying if you stay half an hour, you’ll be stranded here? That means *I’ll* be stranded! Just put my bag back inside and take me to Frosttown. I’ll have to do this interview another day.”

“Can not do. Going home to Diotera. Wrong direction.” He shakes his warty head, making me glad he was facing the other way for the duration of our trip from the transport hub.

“Okay. Just take me to Diotera. I’ll get a hotel there,” I say, seeing my non-refundable Frosttown hotel deposit flying out the window. This allegedly career-enhancing gig is going to wind up costing me money.

“Can not do. I live on farm. No hotels near. Closest is Frosttown.”

Crap. I’d like to argue, but we’re already going in circles and the first fluffy snowflake just landed on his hover windshield.

“Out!”

He grabs my upper arm and is about to yank me out the hover door when a deep bass voice commands, “Take your hands off her.”

I can’t see who the voice belongs to, but when the driver glances over his shoulder, he immediately loosens his grip.

“No problem... Sir.”

Raising his hands in a “don’t shoot” pose, he steps away from the hover.

“Just helping female out. Need go home before storm.”

No wonder his tone softened and he unhandled me. Standing behind him is a Khal-rah. A huge, horned, fanged Khal-rah whose tail is flicking angrily.

“Take me with you,” I eke out in a whisper to the driver.

“Zaydie Mellior? You’re right on time,” the terrifying Khal-rah says, baring his fangs. His long, sharp fangs that look like they’re designed to tear carrion from the bones of his enemies.

Okay. Taking a deep, calming breath, I remind myself I’m in the right place at the right time. I was expected. This male knows my name. I didn’t imagine anyone in Taliz Valquan’s line of business would need to employ a Khal-rah for security, but that should make me comfortable, right? With a Khal-rah around, what harm could I possibly come to? As long as he’s on my side.



The driver has already scurried into the driver's seat and started the motor. Snowflakes are coming down in gusts. I guess I have no choice other than to follow the Khal-rah and depend on the male I came here to interview to hover me to town the moment the snow quits falling. It will be barely an inconvenience.

The six-and-a-half-foot male, well, he's over seven feet if you count his craggy horns, grabs my hover suitcase as I exit the back seat with Syzz in his carry bag. Instead of heading to the front steps of the house, the male gives me the once-over.

This is the least sexual once-over I've had on the entire trip here from Earth, and boy, there have been a lot of them. He's sizing me up.

I might as well size him up, too. Seven feet tall, horns that swoop up from his forehead, those scary as hell fangs, and a body built for just what he is. I mean, what could he be but a security guard? His face, if you can ignore his gorgeous green skin that reminds me of new growth leaves in spring, is surprisingly human. Without the horns, fangs, hooves, and tail, he'd be handsome.

He holds his arm up, palm toward me in what on Earth is universal language for "stop." When a seven-foot Khal-rah tells you to stop, you stop, even when the temperature is dropping like a rock and it's starting to blizzard. Even when you have on the cutest pair of blue peep-toe heels and a baby blue pencil skirt that makes you take tiny mincing steps even when you're in a hurry.

He cocks his head when I just look at him in question.

“You going to make me hang out here until I can get another hover?” I ask with a gulp. It’s freezing and after only a minute in the elements, I can’t feel my toes.

For the first time since I left Earth two days ago in search of this stupid, fluffy story my editor insisted I write, I feel fear. Not when I was cornered in the underground shuttle on Aeon II by a gang of teenaged Hiznats, not when that bug-eyed hover driver left me off in the middle of nowhere.

I figured I could at least wait inside the antique log cabin out in the middle of nowhere. I smelled a fire in a fireplace and figured I’d be safe and warm until the storm passed. But now, with this Khal-rah standing with his palm facing me, barring me from getting inside the house, I wonder if I’ll live through the night.

My breath is rasping and I’m swallowing convulsively. As if our height difference isn’t blatant enough, he’s towering over me from the first step, still looking at me as if he’s expecting something. Does he want me to pay him to spend the night here, or does he want something more nefarious? The blood drains from my face.

## **Taliz**

I resisted doing this interview. I have plenty of work. What need have I for more orders? I’m already booked three years into the future.

All my friends encouraged me to do it, though. “What harm would come from it?” they’d asked. “Maybe you could charge more and work less,” they’d said.

I’ll never work less. What would I do with my free time? It’s not like I have a female or a family to spend time with.

When the Earther offered to stop at my house on her way into town from the transport hub, I relented. She assured me it would take no more than a standard hour. Now here I am giving this little female a proper Universal greeting and she’s snubbing me. Doesn’t she realize I could leave her out in the elements just as easily as invite her in?

I drop my hand to my side, then raise it again, palm out, more formally this time. It’s a visual clue for her to return the friendly greeting. Instead, she takes a measured step back in those ridiculous blue shoes. Whatever animal she has in that carryall is shivering so badly the bag is shaking.

Does she not know the most basic Universal gesture, or is she deliberately being rude? By the terror in her rounded eyes, I’ll bet on the former.

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Once, I watched a vid about the most backward parts of the galaxy and, as I recall, there were places on Earth who still measured distance by the length of an ancient ruler’s foot! I laughed out loud at that. The entire galaxy has used universal measurements for a millennium.

Now, both Zaydie Mellior and her pet are shivering and her teeth are chattering. I decide to skip the formal pleasantries.

“Welcome. Come in.”

“Uh, thanks? If you’ll just tell Taliz Valquan I’m here. Maybe he can hover me into Frosttown before the storm gets too bad. Do you call it Frosttown or is that just a media thing? It’s Arixxia Fields during the rest of the year, Frosttown for the tourists, right? Can he take me there?”

I’m walking up the steps ahead of her when she lets out a shriek. Luckily my reflexes are fast enough I turn, catch her by the waist and set her on her feet before she falls to the ground.

“Thanks.”

I’m taller than many species, so I’m used to towering over people, but this little Earther is smaller than most. It was as if she weighed nothing when I lifted her and placed her back on her feet.

When we’re standing on the stone floor of my entryway and as I’m closing the front door, she stops its forward motion.

“Did Mr. Valquan do this?” Despite her pinkened nose and cheeks and the clearly restless animal in her bag, her fingers trace the outline of the male’s face carved into the heavy *mella* wood door.

“Yes.”

“He’s even more talented than his website showed. On Earth, we have a similar design. We call it the Green Man. This one’s so detailed, so beautiful.”

She slides her hand with appreciation across the male’s carved features, closes the door, then stomps the snow off her feet.

“If you’d just tell him I’m here? I’m sure he’ll be happy to take me to town?”

By the tone of her voice, she doesn’t sound sure.

“I’m Taliz Valquan, Ms Mellior, and I’m sorry to inform you I won’t be hovering you anywhere until the solyris storm is over.”

“Solyris storm?”

I point out the large front window at the solyris brewing off to the east.

“Holy shit. It’s like a tornado from back home, only sideways and made of snow.”

“Now that one of the snow funnels has formed, you’ll see dozens, sometimes hundreds. They pop up and leave just as quickly. All hover traffic stops. Very dangerous. You’ll have to stay here until the storm is over.”

Her bland little face falls into unhappy lines. The corners of her pink lips turn down. Perhaps I’m mistaken, but she seems about to cry.

Whatever’s in her bag decides this is the perfect moment to yelp. Well, it’s a combination yelp and growl.

“Okay, Syzz. I’m sure you have to go.”

She squares her shoulders and walks to the door, but I can’t let her go out and slip on the ice again in those pitiful shoes.

“Does it have a leash? I’ll take it out.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

She squats, sets the bag on the floor, and pulls out a little blue animal. It's the same shade as her shoes.

The little thing takes one look at me and snaps. The only thing keeping it from biting my ankle is that Ms Mellior keeps it firmly in her grip.

"It's okay, Syzz. The big man doesn't want to hurt you." She eyes me warily, as if she's wondering if her reassurance is accurate.

Syzz snaps at me again, wiggling more aggressively, trying to escape his owner's hold and lunge at me.

"We'll need to come to a truce," I say evenly, squatting out of reach of the angry blue thing. "What is it?"

"Ever since aliens first visited and they shared some of their tech with us, we've only used it for three things. Weapons, of course." She shrugs as if this is self-evident. "Medical advancements, and designer pets. It's a multi-billion dollar a year industry. This is officially known as a darlinglove. It's part canine, the forked tongue is from the snake family, and the horn..." Her gaze flies to the top of my head and the rest of the sentence dies in her mouth.

"He really needs to go," she says. "That's his potty dance."

"Have you noticed he only does his potty dance when he's not trying to *bite* me?" I point out.

"I'll take him out."

I stand and say, "I'll take him. You don't have a coat. Let him to the end of his leash."

Backing up, I stay a bit too far for him to reach me. When he makes his next attempt to lunge and bite me, I squat, lean close enough to his face he'll feel the heat of my breath, and roar at him while treating him to a glimpse of my fangs exposed all the way to my gums.

He yelps and practically flies to cower at his owner's feet.

"We've just established dominance," I say levelly. "I'll take him to do his business now."

### **Zaydie**

I watch my new host stride to the door, Syzz balking at the end of his leash. Forcing my mouth to close where it's been hanging open, I grab my computer pad and look up Taliz's website. Though my hands are still shaking from his establish-dominance display, I manage to scroll through the pages.

There he is, that same handsome face as the male currently walking my pet, but any sign of hooves, horns, tail, fangs, and claws have been photoshopped out. It seems like bait and switch, but he lives out here in the back of beyond and never sees his customers. I imagine if people knew he was a Khal-rah, it might affect his sales. I guess photoshopping himself to look less menacing was a smart business move.

Knowing he'll be back any minute, I hurriedly look up his species. At the top of the page are a dozen pictures of males and female Khal-rahs. All of them in the same position I just witnessed: mouth open, eyes narrowed, fangs exposed. It is a quintessentially predatory pose. Threatening.

*The Khal-rah are one of the most feared species in the galaxy. Known for their warring local tribes, their hunting skills, and their taste for battle, killing, and weaponry, they are among the most aggressive, belligerent, and hostile of all species.*

*Few leave their planet, but those who do are prized as gladiators and mercenaries.*

Dear God, what have I gotten into? I'm stranded here on a planet where I know no one. There's a deadly solyris storm brewing outside. Syzz and I are at the mercy of a male from one of the most feared species in the galaxy.

My heart is jackhammering in my chest. I wonder if Taliz can hear it from where he is, like one of those predators in the movies. A picture flies through my mind of him using those claws to rip my heart right out of my chest and eat it while it's still beating.

His footsteps are mounting the porch. Each thunderous step is bringing me closer to my own doom. How am I going to make it out of this alive?

Continue reading TALIZ





## About Alana Khan

**A**lana Khan is a Pinnacle Award-winning, USA TODAY Bestselling author whose pen traverses galaxies and explores the extraordinary.

In a life as diverse as her stories, Alana boasts IMDB film credits, thrilling Harley adventures on open roads, and a stint as a professional spoon player—because, why not?

With a background as a psychotherapist, she delves into the human psyche, enriching her storytelling.

Join her on fantastical journeys through her novels, where cosmic romance and monstrous love merge with spice as hot as a Carolina Reaper chili pepper.

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Want more of my books?

### **Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series**

This 19-book series can be read as standalones, although it's fun to read them in order because the books are full of that rich, delicious found-family trope where people with nothing in common form connections that are stronger than blood. You'll grow to love this ragtag bunch of escaped slaves and the human women they rescue. Or do the women rescue them? Full of action, romance, and spice.

### **Galaxy Pirates Alien Abduction Romance Series**

As the name implies, these alien Robin Hoods are scoundrels and rascals. Opportunists all, they've never met a human damsel in distress who wasn't worth saving. Full of action, romance, daring capers, and spice. P.S. The bad guys always lose their money and our pirates walk away all the richer.

### **Galaxy Sanctuary Alien Abduction Romance Series**

There's one thing about flying across the galaxy righting wrongs (the Gladiator series) or stealing from people who

deserve it (the Pirates series)—you can't have kids on a fighting ship. Some worthy freed gladiators end up on planet Fairea and find themselves on a safe parcel of acreage, yet in desperate need of funds. Between jostling for control of the operation and the lengths they must go to stay safe and keep the lights on, there is plenty of action, romance, and steam.

### **Galaxy Warriors Alien Abduction Romance Series**

What was I thinking writing 19 books in the Galaxy Gladiators series? Call it temporary insanity. This series is similar to Gladiators, but lets new readers jump in without knowing any backstory. Action, adventure, my trademark spice, and romance.

### **Galaxy Games Hostile Planet Alien Romance Series**

All the heart-pounding passion and gut-clenching action I could cram onto the page. This series will grab you by the throat from the first page and never let you go. More action and hotter than previous series. And love. Did I forget to mention love?

### **Rescued by the Monsters Reverse Harem Romance series**

In a future dystopian Earth, males have been spliced with animal DNA. Human women have been reduced to chattel and when they say no, even once, they're banished Down Below to where the "monsters" live. This series will soon have you wondering just who the monsters are as the human women each bond with three adoring human/animal hybrids.

## **Arixxia Fields: A Steamy Small-Town Alien Romance Series**

Are you ready to party? I imagine so, after reading all the drama in all my previous series. Each of these books is short, sexy, romantic, and FUN. Each revolves around a holiday. Check them out.

## **Hybrid Hearts Series**

Bred to be soldiers, these rescued genetically engineered males are all given a new lease on life. How does the United States military plan to do that? They create an isolated town with cute shops and train the males in new jobs. How about a sexy lion-man baker for starters?

## **Galaxy Artificials Series**

Packed with passion and spice, USA TODAY Bestselling author Alana Khan brings robots to life in this science fiction romance series. Oh yeah, she manages to give the metallic buckets of bolts smokin' hot humanoid bodies, too.

## **Orcfire Series**

Twenty-five years ago, thousands of Others (orcs, nagas, minotaurs, and other species only known in fairytales) fell onto the burning sands of the Mojave Desert with no way to go home. They were rounded up by the U.S. Military and placed in a fenced enclosure on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The OrcFire series features one hot, green, tusked orc as the hero of each book as they battle fires and so much more to find

their happily ever after. The OrcFire series will be hot, hot, hot in all ways.

### **Cosmic Kissed (Earthbound Alien Romance Series)**

This fun duet manages to make reptilians sexy (trust me). Two alien brothers are abducted to Earth. Each gets his own book and manages to get the girl in this upside-down take on alien abduction.

### **Monster on Board (written with USA TODAY Bestselling author Ava Ross)**

What happens when two USA TODAY Bestselling sci-fi romance authors get together to have some fun? We write these entertaining, short, and sexy books set in space. They're all standalones, so take your pick of an orc, an ogre, a merman, or a hunky blue-winged alien. Or take them all!

### **Treasured by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series**

The US government gave the Zinns permission to take human women as wives. Let's just say the unsuspecting women, who know nothing of this unsavory deal, are none too happy—until they fall in love.

### **Billionaire Doms of Blackstone (written as Deja Blue)**

Alana's only contemporaries. The heroes are all doms, the women are only happy to serve.

### **Boxed Sets**

Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series Books 1 to 10 plus bonus

Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series Books 11  
to 19

Galaxy Pirates Alien Abduction Romance Series

Galaxy Sanctuary Alien Abduction Romance Series

Galaxy Games Hostile Planet Alien Romance Series

Galaxy Warriors Alien Abduction Romance Series

First In Series : Zar / Sextus / Arzz

First In Series : Zar / Sextus / Arzz / Thran

Treasured by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series

Mastered by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series

Cosmic Kissed Duo Box Set