

VENERY

A SMUTTY REVERSE HAREM ALIEN ROMANCE

FOR THE LOVE OF ALIENS

*Fake fiancée.
World Eaters.
Intergalactic mother-in-laws.
What could possibly go wrong?*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C.M. STUNICH

I've been abducted by an alien in a cowboy hat.

He needs me to play the role of fake fiancée to appease his family of tentacle-tailed *cops*.

I'll keep up the charade as long as I need if it means being reunited with Abraxas and Rurik.

Shouldn't be too hard, right? To play pretend ...

My life force is now inextricably tied to handsome, gun totin' Officer Hyt.

But do you know what happens if my new in-laws find out that I'm mated to three different males?

Intergalactic war, that's what.

Eve Wakefield here, currently stationed on the water planet, Yaoh. I've been subject to all sorts of unimaginable cruelty since landing here: family drama, ill-fitting bathing suits, and Hyt's horrible childhood friend. This woman is not only in love with my (fake) mate, but she's disturbingly perceptive. If she tells the Chief of Police

that his son and I are liars: we're dead. Did I mention that liars are *executed* here?

And what about the king and queen, the ones stuck on that horrible spaceship?

Liars might be killed on Hyt's planet, but Rurik's people won't stand for adultery.

If they find out, they'll do worse: they'll start *eating* planets and they won't stop.

Ah, hell.

I did not intend to be crowned the queen of aliens.

It sounds like the dumbest dumb-dumb alien romance plot *ever*.

But if that's the only way to save the people that I love, can I do it?

Wear the crown, take the throne, save the universe.

Yeah, I got this.

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FOR THE LOVE OF ALIENS

VENERY

C.M.  STUNICH

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Venery

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No AI was used in the creation of any part of this book
The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious.
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this book is dedicated to freedom of thought.

one person's nightmare monster is another's wet dream.

*you bought the book with tentacles on it, so we know which
one you are, you **A.S.S.***

*(**A.S.S.** = alien smut slut, aka the author of this book)*



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Author's Note (Contains Minor Spoilers):

Welcome to the final installment of Eve's story.

Don't forget to read *Pheromone* and *Seminal* before you start this one. The journey is just as valuable as the destination itself, don't you think? So, we started on Earth and we're going to end ... somewhere in this vast and incredible universe.

I've loved writing these characters so much that I'm having trouble saying goodbye. Because of that, I've often wondered: what does romance look like for Eve's friends? Jane. Avril. Zero. Kayla. Tabbi Kat? Nah, Eve would never let me write about Tabbi Kat (for good reason).

Unless, you know, her love interest was something weird like a ... a blob ... or something. I digress. In this volume, we'll watch Eve and Hyt build a relationship, see what it looks like when all three males come together, and finally understand what it means when *The Korol* eats something.

Welcome back to the weirdness that I call the Noctuida. And, for the love of aliens, trust your author. I do so love to tease.

Love you fierce, C.M. Stunich

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

venery - *noun*

1

hunted people, animals, or aliens, aka prey

2

fucking, aka sex, aka mating, aka getting it on, aka doing it,
aka rutting, aka screwing, aka making love, aka ... yeah, all of
that shit

3

the vicious pursuit or raw indulgence of either hunting or
fucking



Hyt lays me out on the bed with the use of his tails, putting me flat on my back with him above me. He has a palm on either side of my head, a knee between my thighs. My breathing's a bit quicker than it should be, but I'm sure I'm staring up at him with something that looks like irritation.

“Did you really think I was such an unlikeable shithead that I'd let you die as thanks for saving me?”

He smiles at me, dropping his mouth to my ear. I shiver as his hot voice sweeps over me.

“Of course not. Do you think I'd save a girl who was that heartless?” He presses a kiss just below my ear, and I squeeze my eyes shut. His mouth feels good, like a sweep of wet flame on my jawbone. But this shouldn't feel good. It should be perfunctory, and ... it's not going to be perfunctory.

There's too much chemistry between us. I felt it at the World Station when he swept me into his lap, when we almost fucked right there in his office. I wasn't thinking clearly then, but I'm thinking almost too clearly now.

“What would've happened if we'd had sex in your office that day?” I ask as Hyt draws back to stare down at me. The last thing I want to be doing right now is asking questions, but it feels impossible not to. I *have* to know. I have to. “Like, could it have just been casual sex or would it have been something more?”

He tucks his head, like he's looking down the length of his own body. When he looks back at me, he has a slutty smile on

his face. I'd like to kiss it off, but I'm not sure that we should keep kissing. It's ... way personal. I've already done it once, but maybe it'd be best if we didn't do it again. I'm trying to be respectful to Abraxas and Rurik, as much as I fucking can be.

Hyt uses his tentacles to unhook his belt, tossing it onto the floor with a loud thump. He's now naked above me, wearing a cowboy hat and see-through boots with water inside of them. After a moment, he uses his tentacles to pull those off, too, sloshing water onto the end of the bed and the floor. He doesn't seem to care about that. Why should he? Apparently he can flood his house with the click of a button.

"Let me show you." Hyt sits back on his calves, and there it is. His cock. In his hand. Fisted tight in long fingers. He keeps his gaze on me—keeps his cowboy hat on—and works himself with hard, merciless strokes until the second part of his shaft emerges from the base. He plants his purple tongue at the corner of his mouth, flashing his vicious upper teeth. It's a saucy expression, one that's undercut with resignation and excitement both. He's all conundrums right now, Officer Hyt is.

I sit up on my elbows to watch, my nipples furled into tight, painful buds beneath the fabric of my borrowed t-shirt. The thong is riding up my ass and truthfully, between my folds, too. I can feel the stupid silky material rubbing against all my swollen and needy parts, and I force my lower lip between my teeth for a little bit of pain, just so I can ground myself in the moment.

I'm sorry, Abraxas. Again. I'm sorry, Rurik.

Neither of them deserve this.

But ... Hyt doesn't deserve this either, does he?

My eyes take in the image of him greedily, and I fully and completely understand why the Falopex are renowned for sex. Just *look* at this male, his tails slipping around his own body to find mine. Suckers pop against my skin here and there, a few pheromone bubbles escape. When they pop next to my face, my head spins and my lips part greedily. *I want this. I've wanted this since the moment I first saw him. Shit.*

Hyt glides an expert finger under the white part of his shaft, rubbing the sucker at the tip. The small tentacles around the base unfurl like the petals of a blooming flower, wafting as if they're underwater. In short-order, he works the tentacles from his tip, too.

“Here.” He rubs a thumb over them, and they cling to it, wrapping and squeezing him. I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’m fascinated. “These mating tentacles don’t often come out. I have no control over them. I’ve only ever had them erect the one time, in my office.” Hyt gives me a meaningful look. “If we’d had sex then, I might’ve accidentally given you the pearl while we kissed. I wouldn’t have meant to, but it just sort of happens sometimes. Like ... a human getting pregnant after a one-night stand.”

He stopped us. Either for that reason or because he knew that Abraxas was coming and that it’d be wrong to carry on with it. I appreciate the effort, regardless.

“And the mating tentacles ...?” I wait for the rest of the explanation to follow, my eyes on his hand, on his cock, on all the extra bits that I want to play with. *Shit*. I’m hot and wet between the thighs, and I feel like if I don’t get fucked now, I’ll be sick from it.

“The pearl will come back to me through here.” He takes a finger and pushes it into the center of the tentacles at his tip, dropping his head back with a wild male groan. Yeah. I can tell. Officer Hyt is going to be a pleasure to mate with. He slips his entire finger in as I watch, wide-eyed and panting, fucking himself in a way I didn’t know he could be fucked.

I wish my hand was there in his place.

He drops his chin then to stare at me with half-lidded eyes.

“The tentacles will coax your body to open up, to give me back the pearl. It’ll feel good. It’s designed by nature to feel good, so don’t worry.”

I don’t let myself think of Rurik, of how painful it was initially, of how much I miss him and want him and love him. I definitely don’t consider that I’ll be here for seven days

before Abraxas even shows up, let alone Rurik. I don't consider what'll happen if Abraxas *doesn't* show up.

Hyt drops back down over me, his tentacles teasing up the insides of my thighs, sneakily removing my panties as he stares into my eyes. I look right back and then reach up to put a hand on the side of his face. His skin is smooth but scaled. I can only feel the ridges if I brush my fingertips a certain way. Otherwise, they're difficult to see or feel. My hand drifts to his long hair, to the pink strands braided into a plait that falls over his shoulder. They feel almost like human hair right now, but I imagine they'd be much different underwater.

"May I?" I ask, choking on the words. I'm a tad disoriented here. I swear, like an hour ago, I was in the chapel. My assumption was that I'd mate with Abraxas, kiss him a tearful goodbye, and go back to Rurik to deal with the issue of the sentient spaceship and its creepy prison-like throne. This is ... it's outta left field for sure. "Touch your ears, I mean?"

Hyt laughs at me and then nuzzles the hollow of my throat, not like this is a quickie thing done out of necessity but like he's looking forward to it.

"If we're gonna fuck, I would say you should touch all of me." He gently glides his teeth over my pulse, and I'm reminded of Rurik. Abraxas. *Shit. No. Don't go there. Don't do that, Eve.* I reach up and snatch both of his ears at the same time, rubbing my thumbs against the shimmery scales and the frills on the sides. "Oh, I like that," he admits, as if he's never had anyone touch his ears before. I clear my throat, and Hyt gives me another odd look. "I get that you don't want to do this, but you're being far too clinical, Earthling."

"I'm not being clinical; I'm being practical." I cough a little on the words, far too aware of his hot, hard body stretched out over mine, his wandering tails. The single sucker at the tip of each. I'll admit: I've never been a fan of suction cup/tentacle shit. But this is, well, this I like. "You don't have any alien STDs, do you?"

I should probably explain the acronym—who knows how the translator is handling that one—but Hyt just laughs at me

again. He tucks his head close like we're lovers, not strangers, and his words are warm and comforting against the side of my throat.

"Sweetheart, I can't possibly have any diseases." He pauses there, like he's waiting for me to get it without him having to spell it out.

My eyes widen, and I grab hold of his ears, jerking his head back, so that I can look into his eyes.

"Are you trying to tell me that you're a *virgin*?" It comes out a bit harsher than I meant it. I'm not trying to be judgmental. I'm just surprised. Hyt wiggles his body on mine, and I bite my lip as his warmth settles fully between my thighs. There is nothing between him and me now but space. All he needs to do is push his pelvis forward and that's it. Done deal. I exhale.

"Yeah, well." His voice drops and his eyes shift over to one side. When he looks back at me, his expression is cocky, but it sits like a mask on his handsome face. "When you're only attracted to human women, and human women are hard to find, and even when you do find them, they ... they need your help." He stops for a second and then sits up, straddling my thighs again. I try not to look at his dick, but it's like *right there*. I feel bad since what he's telling me is pretty deep, but it's so ... fascinating. Sexy, actually. "And then, knowing that if I mated a human, she could never go back to Earth?"

Ah. It all clicks into place.

"You're a good man, Officer Hyt." The words are softer than I intended them to be. "I mean that."

He stares at me strangely, like that's the first time in his life that he's ever heard something like that.

"You think?" he asks absently, more to himself than to me it feels like.

"I've seen it with my own eyes," I admit. I offer what I hope he can tell is a genuine smile. "More than once."

Hyt's tails slide up my body, covering every inch with smooth, hot skin and suckers that pop. He grabs hold of my

shirt with them, still straddling my legs, his hand fisted around his cock. I lift my arms to make it easier, but I needn't have bothered. Those tails are as dexterous as fingers and twenty-fifty times stronger than my arms. Hyt pulls it off of me and tosses it aside. The shirt manages to land on top of his companion who I'd forgotten about until just now.

The tiny octopus takes off out the door with the shirt still stuck on its head, billowing bubbles in its wake.

"Dead Kings, I'm going to kill that son of a bitch," Hyt grumbles, peering down at me as he trails his fingers along the length of his cock. He hooks another grin. "He liked you straight off, you know?"

I nod, but I'm having trouble concentrating. Who would be able to with an alien sex machine sitting on their legs and touching himself? Touching *me*, more accurately, with all of those tails.

"Here." I grab onto two of his tails, redirecting them to my bare breasts. Our eyes meet again, and Hyt's smile shifts into something confidently male, a stirring of sensuality in his crooked expression. I tug until his suckers are right where I want them, over the two furred pink points of my nipples.

Hyt presses down hard with both tentacles, and I let out an involuntary whimper as the suction takes, slicking across those sensitive points and causing my hips to buck up off the bed. With him trapping me as he is, I don't get very far. Hyt squeezes his thighs more tightly against mine, keeping my legs shut when all I want to do is spread them.

I want him back in that vulnerable position, hovering just outside of my opening. Somehow, I think he knows that.

"Tell me what a human woman likes," Hyt breathes, eyes bright with excitement. "Tell me what *you* like."

I grab onto another tentacle and push it down to my pussy, spreading my folds so that my clit is exposed. And then I shove the suction cup onto it. *Oh*. I rock upwards and push downwards simultaneously, hoping for a little friction. Hyt

groans, and for the first time, it occurs to me that he probably gets off on his tails being touched.

I'm panting a little bit now, and my body is slicking with more than just sweat. He notices, skimming more suckers over my belly, curling some under me to grip my ass. With nine of them plus two hands, he has more than enough appendages to touch every part of me at the same time.

"I want ... this." I push at the tentacle on my clit, and he takes over, lifting it up so that the suction pops, and my head spins with pleasure. I've never felt anything quite like it, and it's spectacular. "More, please," I choke out, and he chuckles.

"Will do, little Earthling," he says huskily, the sound of his voice twisting my stomach into knots. Hyt lifts a sucker to my lips, brushes it over my mouth. I take the initiative and suck the tip in, running my tongue in a circle around his suction cup. "Oh, fuck." Hyt's head falls back, and he reaches up with two more tentacles to yank on the sides of his hat. "More of that, Eve."

I suck earnestly on his tentacle, surprised that there's a taste to it. *This is where his pheromone bubbles come out, after all.* I wonder if that's the faint taste I'm getting—a delectable toe-curling sweetness. And then it happens, and I don't have to wonder anymore.

Hyt releases his pheromones from all nine tentacles at once. The ones that aren't attached to anything send bubbles into the air that pop around us, slamming into my senses like a hard punch. The others ... the others ... Sweetness explodes across my tongue, sparking straight to my brain like a hit. The ones on my skin spread an oil of some sort, like lubricant, that tingles and warms and causes my tissues to swell—in a good way.

I shove his tentacle away from my mouth, not because I don't want it, but because I have to let him know how good this is for me. He's the sort of person who'll take this like a kick to the nuts if he thinks I'm only doing this performatively. I mean, I have to do this performatively because I'm already with two other guys, but ... but ...

“Christ, Hyt. *Fuck.*” I’m gasping now, shaking all over. If he pops his sucker on my clit again, I’m—

And then he does it, and I’m coming so hard that I actually lose time for a few seconds there.

My head is tilted back on the one remaining pillow, and I’m staring at the curtains and the faint sliver of sunlight that’s falling between them. I’m shaking, and my body is *this* close to having another orgasm.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I whisper, acutely aware of the supernatural stillness in his tentacles. “I need a minute.”

“I can *smell* you,” Hyt breathes. “Not just in my nose, but in all of my tails.” He withdraws them all suddenly, and I choke on another gasp. And then his lips are on my stomach, kissing his way up between my breasts, heading straight for my mouth.

When he gets close, I turn my head away, and Hyt freezes above me.

“I ... maybe we shouldn’t kiss?” I whisper, hating the words even as I’m saying them. God. Fuck. All I want to do right now is kiss this guy, but shouldn’t something be sacred? Shouldn’t I try to be as respectful to Abraxas and Rurik as I can be?

“Ah, right,” Hyt says, like it doesn’t bother him at all. It does. I know it does.

He adjusts himself, kissing my neck instead, causing my eyes to flutter shut. I lift my hands to his hair, savoring the texture of it, pulling his cowboy hat off and tossing it aside. That gives him pause for a moment, but he doesn’t stop. He keeps his tentacles aside for the time being, his attention focused on his mouth and the way it travels down to my breasts. His purple tongue flicks across one of my tender nipples, and that strange pheromone-laced oil that he left behind.

That does it.

I have *another* orgasm right there in his arms, before he’s even penetrated me. *First Abraxas then Rurik and now ... this.*

I am a huge A.S.S. Alien smut slut for the win, right?

Hyt is looking up at me from between my breasts, and I see that all six of his pupils have blown wide enough to obscure much of his pink irises.

“Am I turning you on, little human woman?” he asks me, as if there could be any doubt.

He presses all nine of his suckers against my skin at once, and that oily stuff, it’s all over me. My body spasms, legs straining to open wide, clit and nipples throbbing. Hyt lifts one of his legs, pushing his knee between my thighs, and I spread myself for him. I’m wet and swollen and desperate. I don’t want to wait a second longer.

“Please,” I pant out, sliding my palms down his chest when he pushes up to his palms. “Fuck me. Take your goddamn pearl back.”

Two of his tentacles sweep around to grab my thighs, holding them open. Two others snatch and brace my ankles in the air. Another two to press my hands to the mattress. Two on my breasts. One on my clit.

Officer Hyt teases my opening, and I feel the strange softness of his mating tentacles first. He plays with me a little bit, rocking his hips and slicking his body over my opening.

“I’m not the only one who makes lubricant, am I?” he asks, completely and utterly fascinated with the sight of my cunt. “Holy shit, Eve.”

“Keep calling me that,” I murmur, giving a faux thrash against his grip to see if I can’t escape. I can’t. He looks at me, like he’s waiting to see if I’ll ask him to move or stop. “Or call me Earthling. Keep saying them both.”

“That’s an easy request to grant,” he purrs, slick suction cups sliding over my skin, rubbing my clit, playing with my nipples, holding me exactly the way he wants me. He keeps his palms planted on either side of my head, and then he angles himself to enter me.

The taut muscles in his thighs and abdomen contract, and then he’s plunging deep into my swollen, achy body.

The sensation is so intense, so powerful, that I can't even make a sound. I am dead silent, lips parted, eyes wide, watching him. And oh, the expression on that man's face. He drops his own head, using tentacle tails to squeeze me hard around the thighs, the ankles, the wrists.

"Earthling, *fuck*." I have no idea what he's actually saying on the other side of the translator and the synchronicity contacts, but I like the translation of it. I like his parted lips, and his bright eyes, and the way his body convulses in another almost involuntary thrust. "Fuck."

We sit like that for a few minutes, both of us struggling to breathe, staring at each other.

I can feel a soft coaxing inside of me, those mating tentacles working as promised. On the outside, I can feel the tentacles at the base of his shaft straining to touch my folds.

"You're not in all the way," I whisper, and he hooks a smile.

"Not yet." Hyt pushes his hips forward, nice and slow and firm. I arch my back as my body adjusts to accept him, muscles stretching to welcome him in. It takes everything I have to get him fully seated inside of me, enveloped in my slick heat up to the base. I can feel his tight testes against my cheeks, those small base tentacles stroking and petting my folds, teasing my ass.

He's all over me, touching every part of my body at one time. I can see now why the Falopex are so revered for their sexuality. The hot, sweet, sticky oil. The pheromones. The tentacle tails. The suckers. The muscles. The smooth skin. The multi-talented cock with all its extra parts.

"Hard and fast." My voice is barely more than a breath, but he hears me. I know he does because every single one of his tentacles tightens before he starts to move. His cock slides slowly out at first, testing the waters of my body, of our first joining. *Our only joining, Eve*. But somehow I don't believe that. And it's not just his cock that's moving, it's everything. He's petting my inner thighs, stroking my ankles, rubbing the painfully swollen nub of my clit, sucking my nipples, rubbing the pulse points in my wrists. All at the same time. "*Hyt*."

The sound of his name on my lips gets his body moving a little faster. Then a lot faster. A hard and fast fuck that has the bed slamming into the wall.

“I want to kiss you so goddamn bad,” he growls out, looking down at me with heat in his face and a shine of sweat on his beautiful pink skin. He stays the same color when he says it. *A truth*. I close my eyes against the statement, but it doesn't matter. He doesn't let me forget that he's there, talking to me in low, sharp tones that make me wonder how he's still holding it together. “What a slick, hot little human you are. What a fantastic fuck. *Dead Kings*, those are some nice tits.”

He releases my wrists, so that he can stroke and play with my mouth, press a sucker tip to my lips. A kiss that isn't a kiss. I press my tongue against him, encouraging the behavior. His other tentacle strokes through my hair, a soothing touch layered against the hard grip he has on my legs and breasts, against the pressure on my swollen clit.

Not only am I stretched around him, I can feel his body coaxing me gently open, asking for something that I'm not sure how to give. But ... a strange warmth coils in my belly, and I relax completely into his grip, my legs spread nice and wide. When the pearl leaves me and goes into him, I feel that, too. It's like climaxing, but more visceral, deeper, an act of true joining. I let myself give into that sensation with reckless abandon, surrendering everything I am up to Hyt.

I could've kept that pearl and lived twice as long. Though I never would, there are a hell of a lot of people that'd take advantage of something like that. I feel suddenly and fiercely protective of Hyt, throwing my arms around his slender waist. He's so much taller than me that I can't reach his neck or I would've grabbed him there instead.

He slows but only for the space between two of my panted breaths, and then he's bracing a hand on the wall and fucking me like the alien sex god he promised that he'd be. I come before him—for a *third* time—screaming and thrashing and fighting his hold on my legs until I go entirely limp, awkward and shaky and pliant underneath him.

It's a treasure for me to tilt my head back, to watch the expressions on his face as he uses his hands to brace himself against the windowsill. I watch as his own orgasm overtakes him, tightening every muscle in his perfect body. He pins my hips to the bed with his final, frantic thrusts and then ... I have no idea what he's doing, but my fingers dig hard into his skin as I feel my body give something else up, something precious that I don't quite understand. Whatever it is, he's taken it from me, and I feel this strange tenderness at having shared it with him.

Hyt groans, deep and low and rough, filling me with hot seed before he rolls off and onto his side on the bed.

Neither of us speaks for quite some time, long enough that I can tell the angle of the sun has changed outside.

"Are we late for dinner with your parents?" I murmur, eyes shut as I hear Hyt groaning beside me. I look over to see him halfway onto his knees, a fist pressed into the bed, eyes shut tight.

"Aw, *fuck*," he's murmuring, burying his face into the pillow next to my head. His tentacles sway in agitation behind him before he finally lifts his head and looks over at me. There's an odd expression in his gaze that I can't quite make out.

"Was it not ... was it not good?" I'm suddenly terrified that I've just wasted his mate bond *and* showed him a bad time. Maybe he isn't as into humans as he thought he was?

"Hey, Earthling," he whispers, pushing up onto all fours. My body reacts to the sight of him like that, and he notices, releasing a sea of pheromone bubbles that pop and absolutely scramble my brain. "It was amazing. *You* are amazing." Hyt sits back on his calves, one tentacle darting off the bed to snatch up his hat. He yanks it onto his head, using several tentacles to arrange it just-so. "But, uh, I do have a question for you."

"What's that?" I'm still sex-drunk and dizzy, and he's staring at me like he has no idea how to approach this.

“Were you pregnant by chance?” he asks me, and I cringe. I should’ve told him before we fucked, huh? “I do remember you mentioning the possibility of it at the Station ...”

“Am pregnant,” I correct, and he smiles tightly at me, running a finger along the brim of his hat.

“Yeah, well. You’re not anymore—but I am.”



“I don’t understand.” I’m sitting with my knees pulled up, arms around them. I’ve got the red thong and the tank top back on. It’s just ... things were weird between us for a second there. And they’re getting weirder, not better. “How are you pregnant? You’re a dude.”

Hyt is sitting on the edge of the bed, a look of satisfaction on his face that he can’t shake even with the weight of whatever this revelation is sitting on his shoulders. He turns toward me and smiles again, and the expression is both excited and terrified in equal measures.

“Once a fertilized egg is at a certain stage of development, a male Falopex takes it from his mate through the same opening where he takes the pearl.” He gestures at his loincloth. I made him put it back on even though it doesn’t do much to hide the swollen shape of his manhood. He’s already prepped for another round, and I can’t say that I’m entirely against it. Though I should be, shouldn’t I? Once was utilitarian, but anything more than that is pure decadence and betrayal. “I wasn’t aware that it worked with eggs fertilized by other males, but ... so it does.” He laughs and lets his head fall back. “Oh, my parents are going to *love* this.”

“How ...” I can’t even make the words come out. I’m so confused. “The egg that Abraxas fertilized, that Rurik supposedly took over, it’s ...” I point at him, and he cracks a single eye to look at me before nodding. “Holy shit.” I try not to like the idea of this. Hyt can be pregnant, and I can get a baby without going through all the pregnancy shit that goes

with it? Marvelous. Fucking marvelous. Jane'll be tickled pink when I tell her. Then again ... this is my baby with Abraxas and Rurik. I guess. I don't know. But it's certainly not Hyt's responsibility except ... now it is. "Do you give birth to it, too?"

Hyt gives me a sharp look.

"You're smarter than that, Eve. I don't have the parts to give birth. I'll carry it for a while, and then give it back to you." He gestures at me. "Same way you put it in me, I'll put it back in you."

Once again, I have nothing to say. I'm just staring blankly at him.

"Whose ... whose baby is it then?" I ask, trying to get a handle on this. "I mean, clearly it's mine. But are you the father now? Is Rurik the father? Abraxas started all of this."

Hyt shrugs his shoulders and then lifts up hands and tentacles both in an admittance of confusion.

"No idea. I guess, if you wanted to be fair, you'd just say it was *our* baby." He stares ahead at the wall and then curses wildly under his breath. "Fucking hell, human woman. You knocked me up on the first go? How did you even know to do that?"

I think about the strange sensations when we were having sex, the way I gave myself up to him completely. I'm not about to admit that aloud, so I say nothing to answer his question.

"Will you get a belly?" I'm so curious about this. I have about a million questions.

"Nope." He just keeps his gaze straight ahead, lost in thought.

"Then how would your parents know you're pregnant?"

Now that makes Hyt laugh. He turns to me suddenly, scooping me up in his tentacles and pulling me into his lap the way he did in his office. I put my arms around his neck and try to ignore the way he's staring at my mouth.

“They can smell it. They’ll know right away.” He sighs heavily and closes his eyes. I tell myself it’s because my mouth is too beautiful and swollen and hot, and that he probably wants to kiss me but is too gentlemanly to press the issue. “That’s the thing about the Falopex, we have *excellent* sense of smell.” Hyt opens his eyes again, looking right at me. “In order for this to be believable, we’re going to have to fuck regularly. Constantly. In order for this to be believable, I’m going to flirt and tease and throw myself at you the way I would if you were actually my mate. It’s not just the fate of the Noct that’s up for grabs.” He forces another smile, and I feel sad about it. Like, I want him to smile for real. He shouldn’t have to suffer because he saved my life. “It’s my reputation with my family. My community. My job is on the line. Eve, on Yaoh, liars are *executed*.” He takes my chin in his fingers and makes me really look at him. “I don’t come home often. Mostly, I live on Jungryuk. But ... if it’s not too much trouble, let’s keep this thing going. Even after you leave with Rurik and Abraxas, if you could just come home with me a few times a year to keep up appearances ...” His voice breaks with a strain that absolutely digs into my heart. “We have to exchange the pearl at least twice a human year anyway or ... you know.” He waves a tentacle absently. “An untimely death.”

Stupid aliens and their stupid mate bonds.

“What about the baby?” I can’t imagine that he’d never care to see it; he’s not the type. “Don’t you want to be a part of its life?”

“That’s up to you,” he says, and this time, his voice is steady. It feels a bit like bullshit to me, but we can unpack that later.

“Your parents ...” I start again, and he sighs, locking his arms around my waist.

“My parents,” he repeats, using his tentacles to set me on my feet. Hyt stands up, towering over me, and I tilt my head back to look up at him.

The heat and tension are unbearable.

I feel it. I know he feels it.

When I crawl onto the bed, and slip the panties off, he joins me without a word.

This time, he doesn't even take his belt off. He fucks me in his hat, loincloth pushed to the side, and it's a much quicker, sweeter burn than last time.

Afterward, we lie on our backs staring up at the ceiling.

"I can't believe you got me pregnant during our first time." Hyt pauses and turns his head to look at me. I turn mine to look right back. "My first time—period."

"You're a walking, talking thirst trap. How was I supposed to know that you were a virgin, too?"

"Virgin thing aside," Hyt continues, rolling onto his side and propping himself on an elbow. His tails sway behind him in a gentle, soothing wave. "I didn't think you'd know *how* to give your egg to me." He stops talking and waits for me to fill in the silence which, you know, I don't. I am not admitting that I gave myself up to him, that I opened up completely and utterly, relaxed into him like he's somebody I know and not a perfect fucking stranger. "I'll tell you how," he continues, and I groan, rolling away from him. Hyt is right there, sliding a tentacle around my waist and tugging me back against him. He strokes my hair with yet more tentacles, pressing a sucker to my lips. "A female has to relax, has to trust the male she's with completely, trust him enough to give up her baby for a little while."

"Yeah, well." I figure my dignity's out the window, and it's too late now. I turn back to look at him, and already, I can tell that playing fake fiancée with this guy is going to wreck me completely. Him, too, maybe. "You've proven yourself to me over and over again. You saved my life and, in doing so, saved the lives of the men I love. I *do* trust you."

Hyt smiles at that, a wry, bemused twist of his pretty mouth. He has lips, but they're the same color as the rest of his face, and they blend in a bit. I lift a finger to touch them and they're

oh-so soft. I wish I could kiss him again. I wish I hadn't made the rule about not kissing him until I'd gotten my fill of it.

"Usually, it wouldn't happen this fast. I'd have to fertilize your egg, let it grow for a little while, and then take it for a second fertilization." He sounds contemplative, like our situation is particularly unusual.

"Am I a one-off?" I groan, tucking my head against him. He holds it there with his fingers woven into the hair at the back of my head. "Is this going to get the pair of us stuck in a cage with scientists watching? Are we going to be dissected and studied?"

"Only if we go to Earth together," he says with a raw laugh. "No. It's just ... Falopex don't often mate outside our own species. And I honestly had no idea that I *could* take an egg fertilized by someone else." His voice gets rough there for a few seconds. "Especially not a *Vestalis* embryo."

I look up to see that he's watching me.

"Will the baby have your DNA?" I ask, and Hyt shrugs with his tentacles and his shoulders both.

"I have no idea," he admits, and then he reluctantly releases me as I sit up. I'm still wearing the tank top, but the panties have gone missing.

"If these are the only human clothes you have, what am I supposed to wear to your parents' house? I'm guessing the dressing gown I had on in the chapel is not an option."

Hyt cringes.

"Dead Kings, *no*. It's clearly *Vestalis* made." He sits up in bed to look at me, and I try not to feel self-conscious as his gaze sweeps my body. He likes what he sees. That much is obvious when he lifts his eyes to mine. "Not sure if you've noticed, but the *Vestalis* and the Falopex aren't friends."

I decide not to touch that one, at least not right now.

"Okay, well. Still doesn't solve the problem of my first meeting with my new racist in-laws."

Hyt barks a laugh and then whistles for his companion.

The creature appears in the doorway, Hyt's tablet suctioned to his tiny tentacles, and drops it onto the bed. The little creature trills happily and twirls, spreading bubbles. And then it draws yet *another* heart, and Hyt gives it a look.

"Don't you make me come over there," he warns, and it shrieks at him. "Get out. This is my private time with my mate." He waves his tentacles in annoyance. "Go on. Fuck off."

"What even is that thing?" I ask as the octopus flits out the door. I can hear it chirping in frustration, bubbles drifting lazily around the room. "And does it have a name?"

"Mm. We don't give them names. According to Falopex lore, it's because the companions have their own names, and it'd be disrespectful for us to name them in our tongue." He scoffs as he scrolls on his tablet, using his fingers rather than his tentacles this time. "I think that's dumb. A name is just a marker we use to delineate a specific being, a sound that makes identification easier. Personally, I just call my companion Shithead. Aha." He finds what he's looking for on the tablet, and then looks back up at me.

It happens again.

The sex thing.

My breath hitches and I tuck my legs together. There's a lot of, um, cleanup needed. I turn away and take a quick peek to see that Hyt's fluids are clear, but very, very sticky.

"You still ejaculate even if you're ..." I trail off, and he makes a slight sound.

"I'm such an asshole," he mumbles, but I can tell he's talking mostly to himself again. "You're a human, and I didn't explain anything. Of course you didn't know you could get me pregnant because I didn't fucking tell you." He sighs, and I finally look back at him. We're staring at each other again, and my heart lurches strangely behind my ribs. "I, uh. Yeah, I'll continue to ejaculate, but my body will emit a special pheromone, so that you won't get pregnant again."

“Right. Great.” I sound so awkward, not like an A.S.S. at all, but some gun-shy college girl on a second date. Jane would be disappointed. “Since you’re pregnant and I’m not, I’m gonna make myself a drink.”

Hyt narrows his eyes at me, but the smile on his face is pure sass.

I ignore him, standing up and searching around for the red thong. I find it, but I don’t slip it on until I’m out of the room and out of sight. I put my back to the wall in the hallway and exhale, slipping the underwear on and trying to get a hold of myself here.

Hyt is ... carrying the baby I made with Abraxas. That was, I guess, inseminated or something by Rurik?

“Aliens are fucking weird,” I tell both the companion and the cat. Cats? Is it one or two cats if it has two heads? I ignore them both and grab the whiskey bottle from the counter, carrying it back up the stairs with me. There’s a bounce in my step though, one that shouldn’t be there considering the circumstances.

There is some heavy shit going on, but it’s also heavy shit that I can’t do anything about. I can’t go back to Rurik until I mate with Abraxas. And I can’t mate with Abraxas until Jane’s new boyfriend brings him here. Might as well have a drink and relax.

When I walk back into Hyt’s bedroom, I see that he’s already up and buckling a fresh belt into place (brown this time). *Shame*. Or ... well.

Hyt looks over his shoulder at me, and I do my best not to stare at him. It’s weird, okay? It’s really weird. We’re strangers. We have hot chemistry. I’m technically a cheater. He saved my life. He’s pregnant with the baby I made with two other men. I ... there are no words. *Bet Jane would happily keep her copulatory plug if this was the only alternative.*

I rub at my face as Hyt forges on through the sex trap swirling in the air around us.

“I need to forewarn you: my parents are going to be *furios* with the pair of us. Mostly me. But they might be racist toward you for being human. Just keep that in mind.”

“Sounds like a grand ol’ time.” But I’m committed to this. Hyt saved my life. If he needs me to act a certain way or say certain things in front of his family, I’ll do it. He may as well keep his dignity and social standing since I stole his mate bond. “And again, sorry that I got you pregnant.”

“Eh,” he says with another shrug. He opens the metal lockers on the wall and I see guns. Lots and lots and lots of fucking guns. Damn. He selects a handsome old six-shooter and tucks it into his belt. “I can only have children with the female I’m mate-bonded to, so I guess this is my best and only chance.” He grins as he tosses another saucy look over his shoulder. “Let’s hope it’s a Falopex girl. Wouldn’t that piss his Imperial Highness off?”

I chug the whiskey. I chug enough of it so that this strange situation looks suddenly normal.

Hyt closes that particular locker and opens another. He draws out a small bundle of fabric, turns, and uses one of his tentacle tails to hand it over to me.

“What is this?” I ask, still greedily clinging to the whiskey with one hand and reaching out with the other to take the fabric.

It’s a bikini.

My eyebrow twitches.

It’s a pink string bikini that’s about four sizes too small for me.

I look up to see that Hyt’s got his thumbs tucked under his belt. It’s slung far too low for my comfort, and I can’t keep my eyes away from the waistband, can’t keep my thoughts from considering what’s underneath it. I drink more whiskey.

“Falopex don’t wear clothes. I told ya that I was modest and conservative.” He gives his belt a little tug. “I mean it. Nobody else will be wearing clothes, so ... when in Yaoh, do as the Falopex do. Shall I turn away while you change?”

I glare at him, take another sip of whiskey, and set the bottle aside.

A thought occurs to me.

“Shit, Hyt, what about my ...?” I let my voice taper off, gesturing randomly over my shoulder as he blinks at me in confusion. With a sigh, I slip out of the shirt that I just put on and turn, revealing the blood lace designs on my back.

Two perfect moth wings etched into my skin like a tattoo. Rurik did say he could monitor me through the marks, didn't he? Can he feel what I'm feeling now? Does he know I'm okay? Does he know this mark is a curse as much as it is a blessing? Ugh.

“Lucky for both of us that I've got a plan.” Hyt smiles knowingly and turns away, raiding one of the lockers against the wall of his bedroom until he finds what he's looking for. When he turns back, he's got an opaque jar in hand. I cover my breasts with my arm and watch as he tosses that jar from one hand to the other, catching it with a flourish and a wink. “There's nothing I can do about your glowing lady parts, but I *can* cover up the prince's mate marks.” He smirks at the idea as my entire body rebels against it.

I can feel my mate bond with Rurik in those marks, pulsing even when the marks themselves remain dark.

“What are you planning on doing?” I ask, voice edged with suspicion. Hyt uses a single tentacle to gesture at me, spinning the tip in a circle to indicate that I should turn around. I narrow my eyes on him.

“Oh, come now. Don't look at me like that. It's just sunblock.”

“You think that's going to work?” I lift a brow. “What if it gets rubbed off? Aren't we both screwed in that case?”

“I'd say we were both screwed already, darlin'.” He grins at me again and steps forward, using his tentacles to forcibly spin me in a circle until my back is to him. I close my eyes at the feel of his body heat on my bare skin, wearing skimpy panties and nothing else. *Don't think about sex*, I chide myself, but it

doesn't work. I can hear Hyt unscrew the jar, and my body tenses in anticipation of his touch. "But not because of this. My family spent years trying out custom formulas on my sister's fragile human skin, so she wouldn't get burned. She spends most days outside and in the water; this is what we came up with."

Hyt's fingertips glide over the sensitive skin of my back, and I bite my lip hard enough to bleed. *No Rurik here to lick it off, no Abraxas to heal it with magic spit.* I try to remain as still as possible, but Hyt is massaging an oily substance into my flesh, and it feels so damn good that I tremble under his touch. He's gentle as he rubs it in, but whenever his fingers brush the blood lace, it thrums. I can feel him in ways I'm not sure that I'm supposed to feel him, like he's more than just a fake fiancé.

He doesn't press the moment—even though he could, if he wanted to—but he does end the session with a little massage on my tight shoulders, working the knots loose with scaled fingers.

"All done," Hyt breathes against my ear, and I'm oddly relieved to hear the taut sexual tension in his words. I'm not the only one thrumming from this vibe between us. "Want to see?"

I nod, but I can't quite force myself to summon words just yet.

I let Hyt lead me into the hallway so that I can turn and put my back to the mirror on the wall, glancing over my shoulder to see the magic he's worked on my body. There's nothing but smooth, unbroken skin where there should be a blood lace tattoo.

"Holy fuck," I murmur, thoroughly impressed with this latest bit of alien tech. "It's even the right color."

"Nope. It changes color to match the wearer's pigment." Hyt turns his palms out for me, but I don't see anything. I give him a look, and he grins at me again. "Exactly," he says, tapping me on the nose. "Can't see the lotion, can you? But it's there. It'll last several days before it needs to be reapplied."

Actually, it's sort of a pain in the tails to get it off. Might need a fresh sponge from the ocean floor and plenty of tentacle grease."

I take the phrase to mean something like *elbow grease*, and I refuse to think about his oily suction cups.

"Then I'll rely on you for that, my dearest mate." It's meant to be a joke, but once the words are out, the tension is back, and it gets weird between me and Hyt. I keep my eyes averted as I move back into the bedroom and slip out of the red thong, doing my best to pretend that I don't hear him cursing in Falopex bubbles under his breath.

"You wouldn't happen to have a shower, would you?" I ask, and Hyt's brows raise. I'm sure he gets the meaning behind my question: *I've got Falopex cum between my thighs, and I'd like to rinse it off.*

"I have a toilet." He strides past me, pushing open a door to reveal a quaint little powder room with a sink and a toilet. No shower though. Not even a tub.

"That's a no then?" I ask, but I am grateful for the toilet (even if it isn't gold-plated and embedded with diamonds).

"It's called the sea, my little Earthling. Shall we take a quick swim?" He holds out his hand to indicate the deck. I head outside, find the break in the railing, and without a lick of hesitation, I jump.

I'm naked and swimming in an alien ocean, I think, relaxing and letting myself drift down. In a rare fit of bravery, I force my eyes open and expect a sting of salt. Only ... there's no salt in this water. *A freshwater ocean?* Well, fuck me.

Turning around in the water, I see that Hyt's house goes all the way down to the ocean floor. Four, maybe five total stories, the bottom of which is half-buried in the soft white sand underneath. The water is so clear that I have no problem taking in the details, the windows on the various floors, the schools of fish or ... whatever they are that dart by. Some of them look like insects, some like snakes, others frogs or toads.

But they are all ‘ish’ as in, they only look a bit like their cousins on Earth.

Hyt enters the water beside me, also naked. Guess he doesn’t like to swim in a cowboy hat and a belt decorated with weapons. He swims right up to me, and I find myself absolutely mesmerized.

If he was beautiful on land, then he’s preternatural in the water.

This is his element. This is where he belongs. His hair comes alive under the surface, fine pink strands swaying and dancing in the current as they attempt to escape the confines of his braid. His tails drift prettily, and his slick, scaled skin shines like it’s been lit up from within. I don’t let myself look at his cock. I don’t need to. There’s plenty to look at as he darts his smooth, muscular form around me, spinning like an acrobat or a dancer until he’s right there in front of me again. His hands touch either side of my face, and he leans in, like he might kiss me.

My lungs are starting to burn, and I feel like maybe I should kick up to the surface, but then Hyt opens his mouth and shows me the pearl. His brow cocks in a look that says, *are you sure you don’t want to fuckin’ kiss me?* When I don’t pull away, he leans in and his mouth finds mine, his tongue depositing the pearl before he pulls away.

It’s a kiss that doesn’t last nearly long enough.

I swallow and down it goes, and then ...

“Breathe,” Hyt tells me, his voice reverberating strangely in the water. “Trust me on this one.”

I don’t want to do it. Every instinct I have is telling me what a terrible idea this is. But you know what? He wouldn’t go out of his way to save me if he was intending on drowning me, now would he?

I do as he asks, sucking in a huge breath of water, and finding that it hits like a breath of fresh air instead. My chest tightens, some sort of mammalian panic at the liquid in my lungs, but then I exhale and the water leaves with it. Inhale

again, and it's like breathing during a particularly humid summer afternoon. Wet, but doable.

"What the hell?" I ask as Hyt uses his tentacles to keep me from floating away from him. Bubbles explode from my lips, but the sound somehow carries anyway.

"If you've got my pearl, you can breathe underwater. Useful, isn't it?" He releases me then and swims down and around me, teasingly, playfully. *Damn it. I like this guy's personality as much as I like his ... Well.*

"Won't you die without it?" I ask, and he reappears right in front of me when I swear he was just behind me.

"We'll both die in six Earth months if we don't swap." He grins and more bubbles escape his own mouth. "We reset the clock each time we switch. The pearl isn't *my* life force anymore; it's *our* life force." Hyt snatches me up by the waist and pulls me with him as he swims back to the edge of the deck. He uses his tails to lift me from the water, setting me down and then putting his palms on the wood planks to haul himself up next.

I swipe a hand over my face to clear droplets from my lashes, and in that brief second, he turns blue. So ... he told a lie just now? Why? I didn't hear him say anything.

Muscles bulge in his arms, his shoulders. That chiseled chest and midsection appear like an offering out of the alien sea, droplets rolling down slick blue skin. Hyt ends up on his knees, looking up at me and then mimicking me by sweeping his own hand down his face.

He stands; I stand.

Way too close. And we're both way too wet.

It gets even weirder when he smiles at me.

"You're ... blue." It's the best my loquacious mouth can do with his nakedness less than a foot away from my own.

"I whisper random lies or truths under my breath if I want to change color." He turns pink and then puts his hands on my shoulders, leaning down so that his mouth is against my ear. "I

don't want to fuck you right now." Hyt flashes blue and sweeps me up in his arms at the same moment, my feet lifting right up off the deck. His lips and mine brush, but this time, it's him who turns his head away. "I *definitely* don't want to kiss you right now." He says the words, and he stays blue.

Liar:

Hyt smirks as he looks back at me, tugging me tightly against him with a consortium of tentacles. He uses them to drag my naked form in a torturous slide down the front of his own bare body. He's so much taller than me, there are no worries about trying to kiss him in this position; I can't reach.

"Don't kiss me then: fuck me instead." The words are steady when they leave my lips, but on the inside, I'm a hot mess.

Hyt slams me hard against the wall and slips inside of me at the same time, his alien cock powering into a slick channel that resists the intrusion—at first. And then, as if by magic, my body relaxes around the masculine heat of her invader. *Stars, he's good.*

"You're a strange little human," he whispers, looking down at me with those bizarre eyes of his. He blinks, and he's only got two lids, but damn does it seem like he has six eyes. Also, he stays blue.

"Not as strange a human as you are a Falopex," I pant out, and his entire expression changes. He quirks the corner of his lip up.

"You wanna bet?" he asks me, slipping a tail between us and putting the sucker at the end of it over my clit. He rubs it around as I bite my lip and writhe under him, his other tails doing their best to consume my everything. Ankles. Thighs. Snatching my waist. Poking at my mouth. I suck on that one again as Hyt rocks his hips hard and fast into me. The sound of us fucking echoes across the peaceful water, reminding me how alone we are here.

I release all the sounds that I was unconsciously holding back, moaning shamelessly as I taste that hot sweet oil on my

tongue again, giving Hyt a blow job on his tail. He must *really* like that because he moves his hips even harder, and then he *rolls* them. He rolls that lean, perfect body of his like he's giving me a lap dance. Only, this is way better because he's actually inside of me. This isn't empty flirtation.

"Hi there, Eve," he breathes, slowing down and putting a palm on the stone above my head. Hyt uses his tentacles to keep us latched at the pelvis as he pulls me from the wall and leans over, tilting my body back and arching his spine so that we're staring right into one another's eyes. "Did you like that?"

Hyt drops to his knees, holding me up against him as he braces himself with his hands on the floor of the dock. He's on all fours. I'm suspended off the deck by his tails. They're like seat belts, locking my body up against his. I'm staring at his midsection again by this point, but that doesn't matter because he fucks me hard with nothing to brace against save his own tentacles. Still, we manage to slam together fiercely enough that I can feel him coaxing at my body again, asking for the pearl.

I climax and give it up at the same time, sagging limply in his grip as he chuckles and rests me on my back in a nest of tentacles, cushioning me from touching the hot ground. He works himself up to his own orgasm, and then curses as he finishes inside of me.

We're both panting now, and it's oddly silent. Sunny. Pretty. The gentle sound of waves sloshing.

"I'm going to hell," I murmur with my eyes closed. Hyt adjusts himself, sliding out of me and causing us both to groan. We'll be at it again soon enough, I'm sure.

"Why?" he asks me, genuinely curious. I open my eyes to see that his face is right above me now, and I'm still lying with his tails as a soft, warm bed beneath me. I could get used to these tentacles.

I don't answer him. He must know that I'm thinking about Abraxas and Rurik now. For some reason, I don't want to admit that out loud.

“Shit, dinner. My parents. Fuck.” Officer Hyt climbs to his feet, taking me with him. I’m essentially floating in front of him now, his tails holding me up. He seems to realize what he’s doing and sets me on my feet.

We both take a quick dip in the water to rinse off, and he helps me onto the deck again. This time, I don’t look at him as he gets out of the water. I pick up the pink bikini and stare at it. Bubblegum pink. I can’t escape the color. I put it on quickly, aware that Hyt’s eyes are all over my goddamn body.

“Would you quit looking at me like that?” I snap at him as I spin around. He lifts his eyes apologetically to mine, and I wish I didn’t have to tell him to stop doing things that I like. I try to explain, somehow, the mess of thoughts swirling through my head. “If the king and queen find out about this, they’ll kill Rurik, me, and you all in one swipe.” I pause with the swimsuit bottoms on, the top pressed against my breasts but untied still, held up only by my hands. “I saw them knock the heads off their own son *and* his pregnant mate.”

Hyt just stares at me for a minute, as dressed as he ever is in his belt, hat, and boots. He touches the brim of the hat with a single finger. “Pardon me?”

“You heard me: Rurik’s parents slaughtered his brother along with his brother’s pregnant mate *right in front of us*. Heads off. Blood everywhere. And then they tried to kill us.” I shudder and then turn, casting a look over my shoulder. “Tie me up?” I ask, and then we’re both just caught on the words.

“Fuck.” Hyt steps forward to take care of the bikini ties, his fingers nimble and warm against my already sun-soaked skin. “They broadcast it, you know? But I hadn’t fully considered the implications. They killed another possible heir and *now* you’re missing?” He groans and makes these odd sounds under his breath that cause bubbles to spiral into the air. “It’ll be a miracle if we get out of this alive.”

He steps back and then turns, hitting a screen beside the back entrance and scanning his palm. He types in some stuff, and I hear the sound of a door opening on the other side of the

house. I step to the railing and look over to see something like a garage door rolling up. Huh.

I turn around and Hyt is standing far too close to me. He looks deadly serious, and I wish he didn't. I wish he were being playful and fun so I wouldn't have to think about how dangerous this situation actually is.

"Are you sure we have to go to your parents' house right this very second?" I ask, picking at the bikini bottoms, positive that I'm showing too much. It's too small, so tight that the strings dig into my flesh, and the breast cups barely cover half. I have underboob, overboob, sideboob. "And that I have to wear this? Hyt, this is a dumb-dumb alien romance plot."

"Don't be so self-conscious," he breathes, and there's a new light in his eyes that wasn't there a few hours ago. Of course there is. He's a dude. He fucked me. He's feeling pretty good right now. Also, he got his damn pearl back. He teases me with it now, rolling it on his tongue and winking. Cheeky bastard. "You look like ... what is it that Kayla says ..." He frowns hard in concentration and then snaps all nine sucker tails at once. "A puritanical nun."

"A nun?" I choke back, turning so that he can see my ass cheeks. I point over my shoulder at the thong bottoms I'm wearing. The girl whose bag he raided must've had a nice ass since none of her undergarments covered her cheeks whatsoever. "How is this nun-like?"

Hyt takes in my ass appreciatively, and then clears his throat.

"We ... or you ... one of us needs to put the sunblock on the rest of your body." He whistles under his breath and adjusts his hat. "What sort of man would I be if I let your pearly skin get burned? Besides, a single unburned patch on your back might look suspicious. I know I'd take note of it."

"Right. Yeah. Good idea." I nod stupidly as Hyt retreats to retrieve the sunblock, offering it to me and then taking the task on personally when I shake my head at it.

It's okay for a minute there: sunblock on my face that he gently applies with a single fingertip, sunblock on my legs that he applies with his tentacles, sunblock on my belly ... on my chest ... on my breasts ...

The situation devolves once again to its most basic parts.

Hyt bends me over the railing at the edge of the deck, my feet propped up on one of the lower rungs to give me some height. And then he's tugging aside the string-like bikini bottoms, and entering me. My entire body curls, back bowing, hands squeezing the top railing of the deck.

There are tentacles all over me now, pulling my top down to massage my breasts, suckers on my nipples, on my clit, on my belly and my legs. A loud moan escapes me, swallowed up by the gentle sloshing of the waves.

"Remember what I said, sweet thing?" Hyt whispers as he leans over and puts his mouth against my ear. "The more times we fuck, the better. My parents need to believe it. Our life *depends* on them believing it." He slams his hips into me, pinning me against the railing.

Things go quick and fast and messy there, but hey, I'm already in a swimsuit so I dive right back in after. Hyt and I finally, finally make it out the small gate on the side of the deck and down a narrow wooden pathway suspended above the water. I look to my right, into the shadowed garage area, and spot what I'm pretty sure is Zero's Cartian-made bike.

Silver, with horizontal handlebars, a hot pink seat, and four clawed feet.

"Oh, you found the bike," I blurt as Hyt slips past me, very careful not to touch me. His companion whizzes in alongside him, and he carefully tucks the creature beneath his hat.

"Well, I did." He pats the side of the bike and then swings a leg over, raising a fin-brow at me. "But this isn't it. I kept the one you left in the market at my house on Jungryuk. This is a different one."

"Also confiscated from the black market?" I guess, and Hyt grins at me.

“You know it.” He scoots back from the handlebars and then pats the pink seat with a single tentacle tail. “Come and sit, Earthling. We are beyond late, and this is a welcome home feast for me, so ... I’m the guest of honor and I’m three Earth hours behind schedule.” I cringe and Hyt laughs, making room for me to swing onto the seat in front of him. I’m immediately wrapped up in tentacles, a blanket of them over my belly and chest, holding me firmly in place. “Ready?” he asks, voice bright, like he’s excited about something.

“Ready,” I reply, and then my heart is in my throat as he sends the bike flying out of the hold area and onto the water. The glowing pink balls in the clawed feet of the bike keep us up above the water the same way they floated me over land. Damn, the Cartians were brilliant. Too bad they got nuked by the Vestalis.

Even though we don’t hit the water, there’s a splash anyway. Water clings to my skin for a scant few seconds before the speed of the bike clears it all away, and then we’re darting across an alien ocean on a hoverboard jet ski.

Hyt is behind me, wrapped all over my body, holding me tightly against him.

“Watch this,” he whispers, leaning down to put his mouth near my ear. He turns the bike sharply, and I scream, adrenaline surging before the laughter hits. We’re spinning in a crazy circle, and the front of the jet ski is lifting up, like it might dump us backward into the ocean. But then Hyt maneuvers it back around, and we splash into the water again. He turns us into the waves next so that we’re darting across the surface like a skipped rock.

Jet skiing with an alien. Breathing water. I really thought I’d seen it all, but I haven’t seen *shit* yet. The Noctuida stretches out around me, an endless source of adventure, and although I figured it out awhile ago, I know for sure now: I would never be happy if I tried to go back home.



I'm enjoying the ride so much that I don't want it to end. I'm disappointed when it seems like we're actually approaching one island in particular. I'd rather stay out on the water until dusk, head back to Hyt's place, eat, fuck, sleep. Sounds magical. *Is this a vacation, Eve? What the hell is wrong with you?*

I metaphorically slap myself back to reality, hands clutched on the inside of the handlebars just so that it feels like I have some control over the Cartian tech.

As we get closer to the island, I see that it holds a massive house, surrounded by thick, waxy green foliage. It's the only island that I can see in any direction, but Hyt was right: it isn't far from his place.

The house itself seems like it's made out of ... coral? Coral and glass? There are curtains on the insides of some of the rooms that are pulled to obscure the view, but the rest ... it's all wide-open. I'm so focused on the structure that I almost don't notice the girl.

We pull right onto the sand and Hyt turns the bike off, lifting me over the seat to set me on the beach. He releases me and stands up, hands on his hips, huge grin on his face.

"Hyt?!" The human girl calls out, dropping her surfboard on the ground as she takes off in our direction. She's wearing small black bikini bottoms and a white and teal short-sleeved rash guard. I appreciate that I'm not the only one in a swimsuit.

Also ... is this Kayla? Hyt's sister?

"There's my girl." Hyt grunts as she launches herself into him, hugging him tight as he hugs her right back. I shift strangely in place on the sand, telling myself that it's silly to be jealous of the girl. She's his *sister*. But then ... he's only twenty-five. This girl looks to be of a similar age. If he met her when she was thirteen, then they've known each other for like ten-ish years? What if ... Fuck. I'm not just an A.S.S., I'm also an asshole.

Hyt sets his sister down on the sand and then ruffles her hair as she stands on her tiptoes to slap at the brim of his hat.

"You're so late that not only did we watch a movie without you, but Mom and Dad started complaining how you're a disgrace to the family and how you should've been drowned at birth."

"Fantastic," Hyt replies, smiling tightly. I can't quite tell how much of what Kayla—this just has to be Kayla—said is a joke. That bothers me. "Is everyone still here?"

"Everyone. Grandma G and Grandpa H. Grandma Layna. Mino. Flen." Kayla grins and wiggles her shoulders suggestively. "Minae." She pronounces that final name like *min-nay*. "She can't wait to—"

Kayla stops suddenly, looking over to see me standing there. I guess she was too distracted by her brother to notice me until now. She stares at me, looks to Hyt, blinks several dozen times.

"What ...?"

"Eve." He turns to me and then reaches out a hand for one of mine. *Fake fiancée, remember? Be the mate he should've brought home to his parents, not the Vestalis princess he stole from her honeymoon.* "This is my little sister, Kayla. Kayla, this is my mate, Eve."

I grab Hyt's hand in one of mine, and then hold out the other for his sister to shake.

"Hi Kayla," I say, just before she squeals and throws herself at me, choking the life out of me in a desperate hug. I drop

Hyt's hand, and I wrap my arms around her, squeezing her as tightly as I can. She's *crying* now, and I understand far too well what she's going through.

We're both human, and we are *not* the dominant force in the Noctuida.

"I'm so happy. I'm so, so, so happy," she whispers, and then, "I love my family, but please get me out of here." She draws away as I gape at her, wondering if I heard what she said right or if I'm losing my mind. Kayla swipes her tears off and then gives Hyt a feral grin. She's a cute girl, short sandy hair, bronze skin, a smattering of freckles on her small nose. "You finally did it, huh?"

"Finally," Hyt agrees, and Kayla turns suddenly, putting her hands to her mouth.

"Mom!" she calls out as Hyt grits his teeth and makes like he's going to grab her.

"Don't you dare, you little shit," he breathes, but it's too late.

"Hyt's home, and he has a mate!" Kayla dances out of Hyt's way as he groans, dragging his hat over his face with a tentacle. His companion escapes, twirling and chirping excitedly. "What? She was going to find out anyway."

I feel so profoundly awkward standing there. I belong with Rurik on Dome, exploring the woods and making love in a fairy-filled cave. Or in the jungle with Abraxas, on my back in a pile of furs. I do not belong here, and it shows. I can *feel* it.

"Incoming," Hyt murmurs, looking back at me and holding his hand out again. I take it and he drags me close against him, putting his mouth near my ear as his tentacles stroke all over my nearly naked body. He's nearly naked, too. And ... I'd probably end up fucking him again if we weren't standing there on the beach with his sister twenty feet from us and his family somewhere close by.

Kayla falls into step beside us, leaning over to whisper to me.

“This might not go well for you, and I’m sorry. The Falopex don’t like other species.” She pauses and looks across me at her brother. “Well, except for Hyt.”

“Except for me,” he agrees, voice edged. His gaze is on the house now, and not on me. Kayla, on the other hand, doesn’t seem like she can bear to drag hers away.

“Sorry,” she says as we walk, tucking some of her short hair behind an ear. It escapes immediately and then blows messily across her face in a breeze. I try not to think how tangled my own hair is, especially after that ride on the bike. I could use a pound of conditioner, a high quality hairbrush, and Jane to help me through all of it with a glass of wine in hand. “It’s just, I haven’t seen another human in ...” Kayla trails off, counting time. “Ten years.”

I nearly choke on that.

“Ten years?!” The words come out a little too loudly, but Kayla just laughs at me. She has a nice laugh, open and carefree and fun. I wonder if that’s really her personality, or if she’s putting on a show? Why else would she ask me to get her out of here? “Are you ... I mean, do you have access to what’s going on back home?”

She gives me a funny look and then shakes her head.

“Dead Kings, no. Earth news is spotty and rare, usually only delivered by captives or slavers, and oftentimes inaccurate. It’s just better if I don’t pay any attention to it at all.” She hesitates slightly before looking over at Hyt. He manages to tear his gaze from the house to return her stare.

“Go on. Whatever you want to ask, ask away.”

She grins bright and turns back to me.

“Please tell me you’re going to be here a while?” She looks from me to Hyt again. “Or that I can *finally* go with you when you leave?” Kayla leans in to whisper to me. “I’d rather live on Jungryuk than live here. It’s pretty, and it’s peaceful, but it gets boring after a while. Ten years is five years too long.”

Err. I seem to have stumbled into a family disagreement that I know nothing about.

“Next time I leave for Jungryuk, I’ll take you with me,” Hyt says absently, and Kayla clamps both hands over her mouth to hold back a squeal. “For now, let’s all just pray to the Dead Kings and hope that we escape this feast alive.”

“The Dead Kings are—quite literally—old dead Falopex folks who once built the World Station.” Kayla points a finger up at the sky, and I lift my head. I ... somehow didn’t notice that we can actually *see* the World fucking Station from here. It makes me dizzy to look up at it, so I don’t for very long, but holy shit. There’s a space station visible from where I’m standing. How trippy is that? “And despite the word ‘kings’, they were both male and female. Just FYI.”

“Thanks for the update,” I tell her, setting aside that phrase to use later. Dead Kings. I like it. Rurik says ‘Oh, Stars’ and Abraxas ... snarls. Works for me.

We approach the front entrance together to find both glass doors wide open.

I nearly stumble when I catch sight of the room. There are anemone-esque chairs with little tentacle feelers, metal sci-fi tables with screens inset into them, and a giant hole in the center of the floor that’s filled with water.

“It’s a lot to take in, huh?” Kayla says, giving me a pat on the shoulder.

“Hey Hyt!” somebody calls out, walking by absently and waving with an orange tentacle. The Falopex male disappears down a hallway without even looking our way.

“Welcome home, Hyt!” someone else calls from the table across the room, again waving a pale blue tentacle in greeting but not bothering to look up from his phone screen.

“About time you got here,” a female voice snaps, storming into the room from an entrance across the way. I look over to see a purple-skinned Falopex with a scowl on her face. She’s looking at me with six irises of her own. Same ears. Nine tails. But most definitely female. She’s wearing a skirt made of coins and jewels and nothing else. She has no nipples, very small breasts, but still. Hyt was right: he looks *clothed* in

comparison. “What is this?” she asks, her voice faltering slightly.

The tone of it draws the orange Falopex male back into the room, causes the powder blue one to turn away from his phone for a split-second, and sends Kayla into a fit of giggles. She clamps a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound.

“This?” Hyt echoes, and his voice isn’t very nice either. He’s already annoyed, and we only just got here.

“You brought work home with you again,” the woman says, her attention moving to him as she frowns. Kayla cringes at that statement, so I can only assume that ‘bringing work home’ is referring to her. Ouch. Already, I am not a fan of this person, whoever she is.

“I brought my mate home with me,” Hyt retorts, putting his hands on his hips.

The room goes still, and the air pressure changes. It gets stifling and strange in that room really fucking fast.

“That isn’t funny,” the female growls, storming around the water hole in the center of the room. But then she gets close to us, and her nostril slits flare with a sudden intake of breath. I see the moment that it hits her, the sharp realization that Hyt is telling the truth. I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that this is his mother?

“It’s not supposed to be funny.” Hyt’s voice is low, a warning. “Mom, I’d like you to meet, Eve. Eve, this is Anih.” He pronounces her name like *uh-nye*. Lovely. Another mother-in-law that hates me. Personally, I’m just thrilled to bits that this one isn’t a galactic millipede monster who lives in a sentient throne room with a giant moth king. But still. The hatred burning in her eyes is startlingly familiar. *Let’s hope that when I meet Abraxas’ mom, things go differently.*

“Nice to—” I start, but then Anih is turning and walking very quickly in the opposite direction.

“Farin!” she calls out. More like screeches. I’m reminded of Tabbi Kat, and my eye twitches. “Farin, get in here *now!*”

The orange Falopex wanders over to us, blinking his many-iris eyes and grinning in a way that convinces me he must be closely related to Hyt.

“Wow, look at you,” Orange Guy says, tails swaying. He’s wearing a narrow belt decorated with shells, and that’s it. No shoes. No shirt. No cowboy hat. *I can see my fake mate’s brother’s flaccid alien junk.* Lovely. “All domestic and mated off.” The guy scents the air, and then his expression shifts strangely. “Oh. You’re already expecting a child?”

“You *what?*” Kayla chokes out, and Hyt cringes, reaching out with his tentacles and tucking me close against his side. “Hyt, she’s pregnant?”

“He’s pregnant,” I correct, and Kayla chortles with laughter. She’s got tears as she stumbles over to the wall and puts a hand out to keep herself upright.

“No, please,” she’s choking as Hyt rolls his eyes. “This is the best day of my whole life.”

“Moving a little quick there, eh?” Orange Guy says as Pale Blue comes over to stand beside us.

“These are my brothers, Mino and Flen.” Hyt gestures first to Orange Guy and then to Pale Blue.

“Nice to—” I’m cut off yet again as a blue-skinned man strides into the room with the bearing of a king.

I’m not the only one who notices. Kayla stops laughing. Hyt’s brothers turn abruptly and fall into military salutes, and Hyt ... just stands there with me wrapped in his tentacles, his thumbs hooked on his belt.

“Hey Dad,” he says with an odd smile, a challenge in his gaze.

I have ... walked into some family drama shit that I’d rather be left out of. Yet, here I am. There’s nowhere for me to go, and nothing to do but play along.

“What is this?” Hyt’s father asks as he storms across the room to stand in front of us. We haven’t even made it past the entryway yet. I can see that this is going to be a long and

trying afternoon. *At least it's better than the millipede queen*, I tell myself, but ... is it though? I'm not entirely sure. "You're mated?"

His father inhales, and I guess he must catch the same scent that Orange Guy—err Mino—did because his mouth drops open in surprise.

"You're pregnant," he whispers, staring his son straight in the face.

"Excuse me?" his mother chokes out, not far behind. "Dead Kings, no." Her voice warbles and she turns away, putting both hands over her mouth in shock.

"How ..." Hyt's father trails off, staring first at him and then turning that intense gaze of his over to me. I straighten up in the cocoon of Hyt's tentacles and realize that I actually do prefer the millipede queen over Hyt's family. Rurik's mother might not like me, but at least she accepted me as his mate. I have a feeling that Hyt's people aren't going to extend me the same courtesy. "You got pregnant without my permission?" Daddy Hyt growls, and I cringe.

"No offense, sir, but we don't need your permission to have our own kid." I don't know why I say that. I really am TSTL, and this situation is not going in a good direction. But still. I'm not about to stand around here and be insulted because I'm a human. I didn't ask to come to the Noctuida. Kayla didn't ask for it. How dare these snooty Falopex treat us like we're the enemy.

The room falls silent again, but when my eyes flick to Hyt, I see that the corner of his mouth is lifted in a slight smirk.

"Hyt!" A rose-skinned Falopex female emerges from the pool in the middle of the room, and my heart gets stuck in my throat. I'm not sure that I've ever seen a creature more beautiful or feminine than the one I'm looking at now. She shoves up to her feet with a huge smile on her face, her body taut and muscular and sleek, tails thick and short, giving them the appearance of being fluffy. She's entirely naked and nobody else seems to care, but I can't help but notice the, um, plump folds between her legs.

I force myself to turn away as she sprints over to us, wet feet slapping on the floor, hands pushing back the gauzy strands of her hair. Her smile is bright, gaze eager, and I can see right away that she has a thing for my new mate.

Uh-oh.

“What’s going on?” she asks as she comes to an abrupt stop, her eyes falling on me in my nest of tentacles. Hyt squeezes me just a little more tightly, like he’s bracing for a serious shit storm. “Hyt, who—” The female inhales deeply, gathering our scents, and then her eyes widen and she’s stumbling back like he’s sucker punched her in the gut.

“Hey Minae,” Hyt says easily, flashing a panty-melting smile. “I’d like you to meet my mate, Eve.”

Nobody moves. Nobody talks. Everyone just *stares*. Not at Hyt this time, but at me. All eyes are on me.

Hyt’s brother, Flen, seems quietly contemplative. Mino is grinning like a shark. Kayla is choking back bemused laughter. Hyt’s mother is weeping softly. His father’s nostril slits have flared to ridiculous levels, and he has both hands and all nine tails clenched in frustration. Minae is ... heartbroken, I think.

“I thought this was a welcome home feast for yours truly?” Hyt asks, putting his fingers to his chest. I see now that while all of the other Falopex are tight, slender, and well-muscled, that Hyt is the only one with a body that feels like a kick in the teeth. He’s gorgeous not just because he’s a Falopex, but he’s gorgeous *for* a Falopex. “And here I brought my new mate home with me and y’all are lookin’ at us like a pair of Oku slavers.”

“You’re with child without my permission,” his father repeats, his voice very close to a low growl. “Do you know what this is going to do to my standing in the community?”

“Then say you gave us your permission and be done with it.” Hyt smirks, releasing his coiled hold on my body as he looks my way. “Care to meet my grandparents?” He winks at me then, and my body flushes hot. I’m sure he notices, his tails

wrapped around me as they are. “I promise they’re much nicer than my parents.”

“Come with me *now*,” his father grinds out, turning and gesturing toward the pool of water in the center of the room. “We’re going to have a discussion in my office.”

Hyt sighs and turns to me, his tails wafting around my body, brushing and petting my arms and legs, suckers pressing into my skin before he retracts them with a pop. It’s a simultaneous rush of sensation that I imagine I’ll need to get used to.

“Are you ready to take my pearl again?” he asks, bringing it to his tongue and then taking it between his teeth.

“Hyt, no!” his mother shouts, stumbling up to his dad and using the man’s massive bicep to keep her feet. Hyt is ripped, and his arms are guns, baby, but his dad is like Mr. Olympia huge. Not trying to throw shade or anything, but it’s not my jam. Interestingly enough, Hyt’s father’s ‘truth color’ is the same as Hyt’s ‘lie color’.

Hyt gives his mother an exasperated look, like he’s so utterly disappointed in her that he doesn’t know what to do with his shame.

“Don’t be dramatic, Mom.” He looks back to me, and there’s a sharp challenge in his gaze.

“You and I will have a conversation without the human present,” his father continues as tears well in Minae’s eyes and an involuntary sob escapes her. Hyt never breaks eye contact with me. *God, he deserves so much better*, I think as I stare back at him. I’m not even his real mate, but I can see that he’s willing to do whatever it takes to have my back. Even at the expense of his family’s approval.

“If you call her *the human* one more time, we’ll head home to Jungryuk tomorrow.” Hyt reaches out for me, and I step in, tilting my chin back. *This isn’t a kiss. It’s a pearl transfer.* But also ... that’s bullshit, too. He drops his mouth to mine, and everything else falls away. His mother’s gasp. Minae’s whimper. His father’s growl.

Hyt gently takes my face in his hands, kissing me with more intensity and care than I deserve. He leaves the pearl on my tongue when he pulls away, and I swallow nervously, cheeks heating with pink.

“Aw, there’s that color change that I like so much,” he says with a chuckle, reaching out with a tentacle to tweak my nose. I slap him away playfully, forgetting for the briefest of seconds that we’re standing in his family’s ... living room? Watering hole? Alien entryway? Whatever.

“How could ...?” Minae chokes out, stumbling forward and grabbing onto Hyt’s arm. His face is sympathetic but not apologetic as he turns to look at her. “But ... I thought ... one day ...”

Um.

I turn away, but Hyt takes a finger and puts it to my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“Minae and I are childhood friends,” he says, and I swear that there’s an emphasis on the word *friends*.

“I love you!” she shouts at him, and her voice echoes around the cavernous room.

“Alright, that’s my cue to leave,” Mino says, waving all nine of his tails and both hands at me. “Nice to meet you, sister-in-law. We’ll be seeing plenty of each other, I’m sure.” He chuckles and takes off down the hallway he left through before.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Flen tells me, bowing horizontally. “May the Dead Kings bless your mating.” He turns and takes off, phone held up in front of his face as he makes a quick beeline out of the room.

“I’ll go tell the G-parents that you’re home.” Kayla escapes the room with a well-practiced sneak meant to deflect attention.

Then it’s just me, Hyt, his parents, and his childhood friend who’s beautiful and feminine and pink and in love with him. Fun times. *Jane, I’m telling you right now, I do not feel sorry for you and your copulatory plug. Not at all.*

“I’m really sorry, Minae,” Hyt begins, but she’s already sagging to her knees beside him, still clinging to his arm. She’s literally *weeping* now, and I can’t help but wonder if Hyt didn’t have a thing for her, too. He hasn’t given any indication that that’s the case, but the girl is downright *devastated*.

“You’ve broken the poor girl’s heart, ruined twenty-five years of friendship, and for what?” Hyt’s mother snaps, coming over to squat beside Minae. “Oh, honey,” she whispers, brushing wet hair from the Falopex girl’s face.

“For what?” Hyt echoes, and he gives me a look that feels so much like a real couple look that my heart breaks. He saved my life, and this is his thanks for that? He goes out of his way to rescue humans that nobody else cares about. My fury rises like a wild thing inside of me, and I clench my hands tight at my sides. “For love, that’s what.”

I whip a look his way, but he stays pink. *For love*. It’s just a partial statement, isn’t it? It’s ... well, there are a lot of ways that could be interpreted. I try not to let my belly butterflies take over.

“I’m not a shameful thing,” I snap out, turning away from Hyt to face his mother as she helps Minae to her feet, then dragging my own glare past them to his father. “I’m Hyt’s mate, and the mother of his child.” *Sort of*. “You will either treat me with respect, or we’ll leave.”

I can feel Hyt’s surprise from behind him, but I’m not backing down. He wants me to act like this is real, like we’re in love, like we’re mates by choice and not circumstance. Fine. I can do that. I don’t care if his family consists of alien police water foxes with tentacle tails that could snap my neck, I’m going to stand up for myself. For him. For us.

I cross my arms, feeling a bit ridiculous in the teeny tiny bikini. I’d have felt better in my Vestalis dress. *If only these idiots knew that I’m scheduled to be the next queen*. That is, if I don’t die. Dying is still a possibility. Hyt must have a lot of trust in Rurik, leaving him to clean up the mess of my kidnapping.

“Then leave,” his father growls at me, flashing sharp teeth, tails clenching behind him.

“No.” Minae pulls away from Hyt’s mother, swiping her arm over her eyes. “Please, Chief. Don’t send him away; we haven’t seen him in an entire solar year.”

I still have no idea what a solar year is, but I pretend like I do.

“Minae.” Hyt’s father softens his expression as he looks her way, but then he’s scowling again as he casts his son a look. “Mm. A mate and ... well, isn’t it nice that you remain consistent. At the very least, you’re good at that.”

“And that means what?” Hyt retorts, stepping up beside me to take my arm. I see now that when Kayla was talking about his parents wishing they’d drowned him at birth, they weren’t kidding. Not at all.

“Once a bitter disappointment, always a bitter disappointment.” Hyt’s dad—the name his mother was screaming was Farin, wasn’t it?—turns on his heel and dives into the water at the center of the room. I’d chase after him for another word, but I’m not a Falopex and while I might be carrying Hyt’s pearl again, I can’t dive for shit.

“Don’t let him get to you,” Hyt murmurs out of the corner of his mouth. When I look up at him, I see that he’s staring at the water rather than his mother or Minae. “If you try to respond to every insult he hurls my way, you’ll run out of breath.”

I whirl on him, furious on his behalf.

“You risk your life on a regular basis to save people who have no power, no voice. Trust me: I was one of those humans for sale on Jungryuk, and I got lucky compared to the rest of them. Without you, nobody would care. They would truly be alone in the universe, separated even from the most basic dignity of dying on their home planet.” I put a hand to my chest as Hyt turns his attention to me. I can see that a smile is slowly building on his lips as I continue my rant. “While the rest of the Falopex prance around acting like their truth-telling

skin and their noble ideals make them special, you take action to *be* special. With no thanks from fucking anyone.”

Hyt raises his fin-brow at me.

“Are you done yet?” he asks, clearly trying to hold back a laugh.

“No!” I whirl on his mother and Minae. The former is *glaring* at me while the latter is standing there with her mouth hanging open. “You smelled it for yourselves. He’s fucking *pregnant*, and he’s in a delicate, tender state. If you stress him out and he, like, somehow loses that embryo, I will drown the pair of *you*.” I snatch Hyt by the arm and yank him in the direction that Kayla went. “I literally have no idea where I’m going,” I whisper as Hyt throws his head back and howls.

He’s laughing so hard that he actually stops at the entrance to the next room, putting his hand up on the wall.

“Oh, Earthling,” he breathes, turning to look at me as his tails fluff around my body. “You’re adorable.” He stays pink, and so I turn pink in response.

“Right. Um.” I gesture randomly at the room we’re facing. Seems to be a kitchen. There’s plenty of food around to indicate that’s the case. Seafood, mostly. I’m not a huge fan personally—especially not of the giant lobster-ish thing with way too many legs that’s steaming on a platter nearby—but my stomach gurgles, and I realize suddenly how fucking hungry I really am. “Now what?”

“Hey Hyt.” Minae catches up to us first, ignoring me completely. He glances back at her, waiting to see what it is she’s going to say. *Goddamn, she’s pretty*. I try not to notice all the places she’s flat and I’m squishy, the way her muscles move beneath her skin like a well-oiled machine, the sweet rose blush color of her skin. Even her ears are cute, more rounded than Hyt’s and currently swiveled to either side in what might be irritation. “Can we talk?”

“Minae,” he replies carefully, but I wave my hands, trying to be as accommodating as possible. What if he really is in love

with this girl, and I just took his pearl right out of her mouth (metaphorically speaking)?

“If you just point me in Kayla’s direction, I’ll make myself scarce.”

“Yeah, no.” Hyt looks back at me, lips curving in another smile. “That’s not happening, my little human mate. My family is made up of mannerless beasts. You’ve seen them. I’m not about to leave you and watch them swarm.”

“*Hyt*,” Minae chokes out, grabbing his arm. My lips flatten into a thin line, and Hyt notices. His smile gets a little wider as he carefully extracts his friend’s hands.

“Maybe later, okay?” he says, and then he takes my arm and leads me through the kitchen and into a yard with a beautiful patio crafted of shells and what look like the bones of giant sea creatures. I squint at them and try not to wonder too hard what sort of animal leaves a jawbone as long as a house—complete with teeth. It’s embedded in the ground, just a part of the design now.

There are dark green waxy plants all around, massive orange and yellow and hot pink flowers with overpowering fragrances. Furry animals dart through the treetops, eyes glinting back at us from the shadows. Since Hyt seems oblivious to them, I ignore them, too.

There are pools of water here and there with Falopex lounging in them, platters of food set on the ground with pitchers of drink alongside them. People are laughing and talking and the atmosphere is generally pleasant. Even Kayla is seated on the edge of one pool, legs in the water. She waves us over, and Hyt heads straight for her.

As we walk, the chatter dies down and then everyone is looking at me.

I try to focus on the World Station in the sky above our heads, but I can’t resist the urge to meet the curious gazes around us.

“You survived,” Kayla says with a massive grin. “Thank the Dead Kings. I’m tired of being the only human around here.

Don't I deserve some same-species companionship?"

The Falopex in the pool with her are all staring at us, but with much less hostile expressions. Companions in varying colors whip around one another, mini-alien-octopi-UFOs in flight. They trill and chirp and spew bubbles. Lots and lots and *lots* of bubbles.

"Oh, Hyt," one of the Falopex females says. She looks older. It's hard to say why because she doesn't have wrinkles per se, but her skin is a bit less shiny, her body a bit less toned, and there's some white at the roots of her green hair. "Is this your girl, son?"

"This is my girl," Hyt says proudly, hooking his thumbs on his belt again. He turns to me with a crooked smile. One would never know how full of shit we both are. Also, he's still pink. Can he lie and keep the color he wants? Or is there something about that statement that's true enough? "Eve, these are my grandparents." He points to them with a tentacle, starting with the green female. "Grandma Layna." He moves his tentacle to the others, both of whom are in shades of blue. "Grandma G, Grandpa H."

The latter climbs out of the pool and, like Layna, he looks to be older, but it's hard to say why exactly.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Miss ..." His grandfather trails off, and Hyt chuckles.

"Eve. This is Eve."

"Miss Eve." Grandpa H reaches out with two tentacles and takes my hands, giving them a gentle squeeze. I notice that he's careful to keep his suckers from touching me. Hmm. Hyt has never bothered to keep his off of me, and I can't help but wonder how free he was being with his naughty parts. After all, they make sweet oil and pheromones. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

The other Falopex in the pools emerge, surrounding us. Everyone is talking at once, but at least nobody's insulting me or Hyt this time. They ask polite questions, touch my hair with tentacle tips, peer at my eyes like I'm the strange one. I

suppose to them, I am. I'm the alien here. If anyone is having an alien romance right now, it's Hyt.

"Do you love her?" Grandpa H asks when the chatter has settled down a bit. I notice Hyt's mother standing off to the side with Minae, watching. As soon as that question leaves the old Falopex's mouth, the atmosphere shifts and everyone waits in tense silence for Hyt to answer.

Personally, I'm in a slow tailspin toward panic. How the fuck is he supposed to answer that question? With another question? They're Falopex; won't they notice the subtle deception?

"I do love her," Hyt replies, and he stays pink, and then I'm dizzy on my feet as he turns to look at me, still smiling. "Shall we eat?"

We end up in one of the pools, seated on benches on either side of a long table. It's made of metal, embedded in the ground on either end, and way too high for me. I look like a child sitting at the adult's table. I notice that Kayla is sitting on her knees.

"Here." Hyt uses his tails to lift me up to a proper height. He looks over at me before I can ask. "I can keep you here all night. Fear not." He winks at me, and I blush again.

"Tell us how you met," Layna says eagerly, leaning in to smile at us. "I want to hear everything." She gives me a look. "Hyt is an exceptional man. He's destined for great things."

"He's destined for an early grave," his father grumbles, seated at the opposite end from us, thank the Dead Kings. See? I'm already blending into Falopex society. Reminds me a bit of my mother's uptight family in Massachusetts. It's honestly not all that different having dinner here than it is when we visit my grandparents at their overblown mansion in the Berkshires. "Now that you're mated, you're also setting your female on a course for an early death. Stop *lying* and find yourself a respectable position."

Hyt's face twitches, and I puff up with air to start another tirade.

“I would *love* to know how the pair of you met,” Minae inserts, bringing us right back to that horrible question. It occurs to me that anything that needs to be intercepted and lied about it, well, that’s a question that I should tackle personally. This one, though, I think is okay. I already blurted shit about Jungryuk and the black market, so the cat’s out of the bag on that one.

“Eve was for sale at a slaver’s tent,” Hyt explains, making me a plate with his numerous tentacles, and then setting it in front of me. He leans over to offer a stage-whisper. “All of what’s on there, you can eat. Trust me, we had Kayla as an experiment over the years to see what does and doesn’t work on humans.”

Kayla tosses a bit of ... uh, fish bone? ... at Hyt. He catches it with a tentacle and stuffs it into his mouth as I stare at my plate. I don’t recognize a goddamn thing on it except for the ... Oh. It’s a pink dumpling, like the one he bought for me to eat when I was in his cruiser with Abraxas. I pick that up first and take a bite, eyes widening. If the one on the station was good, this one is *phenomenal*.

“Anyway, she was abducted from Earth, sold, passed from here to there.” Hyt goes about fixing his own plate as everyone else stares at us. It’s not just his parents, siblings, and grandparents in attendance; there are cousins and aunts and uncles and family friends like Minae. It’s a lot. I’ll be lucky if I remember half of the names or faces here.

Hyt’s companion lands on my shoulder with the *pop* of tentacles, and I reach up absently to give his little beak a stroke. I can see Hyt trying to hide a smile with a bite of food.

“I assume she was ... unable to return to Earth prior to your mating?” Grandma G offers a gentle suggestion and the whole table falls silent. Kayla stops eating, eyes fixed on the piece of strange fruit in her hand before she lifts a broken gaze to me.

“*Kayla had spent time in the brothel, so she wasn’t allowed to go home.*” God. Hyt told me that, but it didn’t sink in until just now. Kayla was abducted, raped in a brothel like the one I narrowly escaped, and banned from going back to Earth. I dig

my fingernails into my thighs, and I promise myself that this will all work out, that I'll become queen of the Noctuida, that I'll change the laws, that I'll make things better than they are now.

Lofty. Foolhardy. Plucky.

Sigh.

But a pet-meat-mate human can dream, can't she?

"We'd rather not discuss the specifics," Hyt supplies, his voice a warning.

"Dead King's crowns, Hyt," another girl says. She's a pretty violet color, similar to Hyt's mother. She hasn't been introduced yet, but when she stormed out of the house earlier and launched a piercing glare in my direction, he let me know that she was his eldest sister. *Studying to be the next Chief of Police*, is what he told me. But I still don't know her name. "What if she'd taken your pearl?"

Hyt sighs and slams several tentacles down on the table's surface, ripping his suckers off with a sharp pop that makes both of his grandmothers cringe. I get the idea that maybe he just cursed in Falopex body language.

"Moot point: she didn't." He glares at the girl in question and then leans forward, tails swaying. "You know as well as I do that just because someone is telling the truth when they speak, it doesn't mean they're not plotting behind your back."

The entire table goes silent.

I shouldn't be here, my brain reminds me all over again. I'm being included in intimate family moments that I'm not qualified to be a part of. In my family, we don't bring home lovers to holidays or celebrations for at least two years. Anything less than that isn't worth it.

I ... am here after two days. Or, more specifically, on day two. If you count the night in the chapel as day one. Suffice it to say, I'm uncomfortable.

"When did you know you were in love with her?" Minae asks, and my jaws drops.

“That’s a personal fucking question,” I snap at her because, if I were in love with Hyt, that’s what I’d do. This bitch is literally sitting over there implying that our relationship is fake. And she’s right. It is fake. But hell if I’m going to let her find that out. I’d take this shit to my grave.

“I wasn’t sure the first or second time we got around to meeting, but by the third, I was sold.” Hyt remains pink as he talks, and then he looks over at me, smiling like he’s trying to tell me something. I remember his attitude in his office when he stopped us during our heavy petting foreplay. I’d asked him what the fuck he was doing, and he’d told me that Abraxas was arriving to see what my reaction would be.

You would’ve given me your pearl in the office that day, I’ll bet.

I exhale. If he’s telling the truth then our third meeting would’ve been ... the World Station. The doors sliding open. Him throwing his arms out and calling me his oldest and dearest friend. I mean, he stayed blue—he was lying—when he said that, but the warmth in his eyes was real enough.

Shit.

“Excuse me for a second.” I stand up and take off for the house, sending Hyt’s companion into a twirling frenzy. It’s not like taking off at a family dinner back home where I can slip into a conveniently located and empty guest bedroom to have an emotional crisis. I’m just walking back in the direction we came from until Hyt shows up and gives me a look.

“Are you alright, Earthling girl?”

I stop walking and turn to glare at him, but he’s already offering me a wry expression in response. I decide to be as blatant as Jane would be in this scenario. As in, completely shameless.

“Are you into that Minae girl?”

Hyt lifts his hat from his head with a tentacle tail and then leans in to peer at me, like I’m crazy.

“Would I have given you my pearl if I were?” he asks, and I almost choke.

“You were saving my life,” I reply quickly enough, hoping that that’s the end of it. I was dying; Hyt had no choice. He takes a step toward me, and I take one back. I nearly slip off the edge of one of the hot spring pools, and his tails snatch me around the waist, tugging me right back to him.

“Except I could only ever save one human by doing that, one out of the hundreds I’ve watched die. And then I’d be sharing my entire life with that human, betting on her dying later rather than sooner, if you know what I mean. If you die, I die. If I die, you die. We are stuck with each other, Earthling. What does it matter if I crush on you or not? Would you deny me the pleasure?”

“Someone might hear you,” I reply, but he shakes his head.

“So what? You’re my mate. I gave you my pearl. Nothing else is important or relevant.” He releases me suddenly and steps back. I almost reach for him, catching myself at the last moment. “If you need a minute to be alone, I’ll show you where my room is.”



Hyt guides me up a winding staircase with shiny white metal steps and decorative coral railing. It's an odd mix of rugged natural and antiseptic unnatural.

“Here.” He scans his fingerprint on the door lock at the end of the hall, and a white metal panel in the wall slides open. On the inside, there's a massive glass tube in the center of the room. It leaves a circular space around it with a random chair, a small desk. But that's it. Mostly, it's that glass tube with the water inside of it. I look back at Hyt, and he swivels one scaled fox ear back. “What?”

“Nothing.” I turn back around and step into the room. All of the curtains are drawn, but there's enough ambient glow to see by. The automatic door slides shut behind Hyt, trapping us together as my eyes find the tube and stick here. “What is this?” I ask as his boots clack across the metal floor behind me.

For a split-second there, I forgot that we had ‘the sex thing’ going on between us. I cough into my hand as he slides his palms around my belly from behind. All nine of his tails come around me and stick themselves to the glass, caging me in.

“It's a tank,” he leans down and grins near my face. “For Falopex to mate in. Want to try it?” Hyt draws all of his tentacles back suddenly as I turn around to face him. I do my best to steer the subject back to more serious matters.

“Fine. I hear what you're saying—about crushing on me and all.” *After all, I've been there, done that with Rurik.* A strange

mess of feelings tangles up inside my chest. Feelings for Rurik, Abraxas, for *Hyt*. “But if Minae finds out the truth, will she see it the way you do?”

Hyt sighs, playing with his hat. He rolls it back and forth between two tails before putting it back on his head.

“Probably not. But what can she do? I don’t care if she tells my entire family that I’m a liar. They already think that anyway, and they’ve *seen* me give you my pearl. It doesn’t matter if we wanted to be bound together; we just are.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I move on. Sort of.

“What’s a Falopex vagina like?” I ask, and Hyt blinks wildly back at me.

“Huh?”

“What are their vaginas like?” I repeat. It’s a fair question. I want to know where I stand here, what they can do that I can’t, and vice versa.

“I don’t have personal experience, Eve. Remember? I told you that you were the first female I’d ever slept with.” He remains pink and then exhales, walking away from me and around the tank. In the back of the room, there’s an alcove with a normal bed. Hyt sits provocatively at the end of it, crossing his legs. His belt shifts, and I nearly get an eyeful. Which, you know, is the point. “Eyes up here.” He snaps his fingers near his face and then grins like a sly fox. “You want to know how you stack up?” He hesitates and then adds with a scoffed laugh. “How do I stack up to a human man? Or is that even a question you want to answer?”

“I’ve had better than you on Earth,” I tell him, and his brows go way up. Hyt leans in toward me and puts his elbows on his knees.

“You would dare *lie* to me right now?” he says, and that makes me laugh. “No, no. I’m serious. How dare you lie to my face.”

“Fine.” I huff. “You’re very talented, but—”

“Butt?” he asks and somehow, I just feel the extra T in there. He leans back on his hands and waits.

“Minae is gorgeous, like one of the most beautiful creatures I’ve ever seen. She looks like something out of an Earthen fairy legend or something. She’s stunning.”

Hyt thinks about that for a moment, rocking his foot.

“I could fuck her anytime I wanted,” he says, and I just stare at him.

“What?”

Hyt smiles.

“Our mate bond doesn’t stop us from fucking other people. Lucky you, right? Or else this wouldn’t work with Abraxas and Rurik.” He stands up from the bed and walks over to me, seemingly frustrated that I haven’t moved from my spot. Thought about it. But didn’t do it. “So if you’re worried about Minae’s feelings, I could invite her in here right now and—”

“Seriously? This is the tactic you’re going to use on me? It’s pissing me off.”

“So it’s working?” Hyt takes my chin in his fingers. “Falopex are sex symbols, remember? Most mated couples sleep around. But you don’t care, right? Since you’re only playing a part for me.”

“I ...” I have no idea what to say. “Fuck, Hyt.”

I put my hands on either side of his face and kiss him hard, this desperate bruising of lips that encourages him to drag me down to the bed. I’m put on my back, legs spread wide, tentacles dragging my bikini bottoms aside. Hyt takes me quick and hard, shaking the bed underneath us with his first thrust.

“You’re good, Earthling. Damn good.”

“Keep going,” I moan, pulling at his tentacles and encouraging them to touch me. All nine hit my skin at once, rubbing oil across my flesh. The smell of pheromones surges in the small room, lighting up my body and all of my senses.

Lighting up everything except my brain.

I'm not thinking; I'm just fucking. I hope Hyt feels the same way. Pointless, biological fucking.

His body rolls against mine, putting on a show and offering deep penetration at the same time. I feel the coaxing for his pearl, and I let him have it. That sensation hits me, bowing my back, my hands digging at the sheets. He presses his suckers tight to my skin, tugs them off, and then releases a cloud of pheromone bubbles. Hyt waves his tentacles through them, purposely popping them and drenching the air with his scent.

I gasp, drawing more of that smell into me, filling my lungs with it, letting it settle heavily on the back of my tongue.

"That's my good Earthling girl," Hyt breathes, burying the fingers of one hand in my hair. He presses a kiss to my forehead that has me writhing. *I'm supposed to play fake fiancée with this guy? How? When this is what's on offer?*

I wish that it was shitty to be with him, just like I wished that it could be shitty with Rurik. Doesn't Abraxas deserve that, at least? To know that I did it because I had to, but that I didn't enjoy it. We have no choice, and I know it, but ...

Coupling with Officer Hyt is *fire*. It's incandescent. It's life-changing. It's—

Interrupted.

"Hyt." A voice sounds from behind my lover as he comes to a sudden stop and whips his gaze around. Minae is standing there in his bedroom, staring at us. She looks from him to me, back to him. "Whatever happened, for whatever reason you mated with her, it doesn't matter. Hyt, I'm here to help."

"Get out," he breathes, turning back to me and leaning over, hands on the mattress, tentacles wrapping my entire body. Hyt holds me against him like he did on the dock earlier, and he doesn't move. "*Out.*"

"I know you, Hyt. I've always worried about this." Minae stumbles into the room and goes to her knees beside the bed. "You, giving your pearl up to save a human. This is the one

you felt responsible for, isn't it? The one you called us about during the Homecoming Festival?"

"Last time I'm going to ask nicely," Hyt growls at her. "*Get out.*"

Minae steels her expression.

"I won't let you ruin yourself for your fucked-up morality, Hyt. You made a huge mistake by coming back here." Minae shoves up to her feet and takes off, the door swishing shut behind her.

Hyt is just sitting there, and I feel suddenly like we should stop.

"We should ..." I start, and then Hyt uses his tentacles to slide my body along his cock.

"Yeah?" he asks me, pausing his movements again. "We should what, Earthling?"

"Keep going." My voice is a bare whisper, more like a breath.

"Thought so." Hyt lowers us both to the mattress, braces himself, and rolls his body into me again. "Just so you know ..." Another deep, hard thrust. Nice and slow but *heavy*, like a promise. "Falopex females have a channel, but it isn't like yours, all swollen and hot and sweet." Hyt pulls out so that only his mating tentacles are touching me. He rubs them along my folds, and they manipulate me in ways I didn't know that I wanted to be manipulated. *Can he control the small, individual tentacles down there?*

I get the idea that he can. One of them tweaks my clit, and I arch my back, pressing my bikini-clad breasts against his midsection. Hyt makes a noise that I can only describe as a man being tortured, but he doesn't thrust back in. I wiggle in protest, but he's holding me down with too many tentacles. My arms are pinned, ankles snatched, ass cheeks being played with.

"They like their outer slit played with, like this." He rubs his length against me, my folds rubbing against either side of his shaft. Then his base tentacles are touching me, too, poking at

both entrances. I exhale, skin flushed, and gasp as Hyt uses his tails to drag me up his body so that we're now face-to-face.

My hands touch his cheeks, and I'm afforded the rare opportunity to really look into his eyes. I'm so much shorter than him, always looking up from a distance. We're only a breath apart right now.

Six irises in a dark blush pink, flashed with rose quartz and gold. Six black pupils. Two almond-shaped eyes with heavy lids.

"Tell me a lie." I swallow hard, aching and empty on the inside but unwilling to let whatever this moment is slip past us. I should be panicked about Minae and the things she said, but I ... honestly don't give a fuck right now. "Hyt, tell me something."

He hesitates, attention slipping to the side for a moment. All nine of his tentacles adjust themselves on my body, suckers popping, a few pheromone bubbles drifting into the air. They pop, and I sneeze, and Hyt flicks his eyes back to mine.

The smell is so strong right now that I'm having trouble remembering what I just said.

"You're too much trouble," he says wryly, and for a second there, I don't think he's going to change color. But then his skin blooms in a burnished sapphire, a lighter blue streaking across the pink of his irises like shooting stars. *So pretty*. He doesn't try to kiss me even though I almost wish he would.

With our gazes locked, he works one of his tails between my thighs, brushing his sucker gently down my clit and to my opening. When he pushes inside with it, I go white-hot all over. Hyt releases the sweet oil of his pheromones *inside* of me this time, and that's it for me.

I finish with the tip of his tail clenched inside my tight pussy. He waits it out, drawing back only once I've stopped shaking and panting. Hyt then uses his tentacles to sit himself up. He relaxes back on his haunches, tails tracing over me tenderly.

“I’m gonna finish myself, okay?” he says softly, and I nod. I watch as one of his tails slips around the base of his shaft, squeezing and jerking mercilessly on it as Hyt laces his hands behind his neck. His head falls back, eyes closed. Just before he comes, he opens them up and looks right at me. He ruins my bikini with his climax, ropes of clear sticky fluid spattering all over me, and then collapses on his back next to me. “We’re going to live on Jungryuk as husband and wife. Just us. All alone,” he breathes, but his skin stays blue while he says it. *A lie.*

I turn away from him and stare up at the ceiling. There’s a lizard crawling across it, and big tufts of waxy green foliage growing around the edges of the windows, none of which I noticed before now. Guess my attention was on other things. Namely Hyt. Namely that we’re acting really weird together.

We are *not* a couple. We can’t be a couple. Rurik and Abraxas don’t even know I’m here.

It’s a bucket of cold water to the face.

“What are we going to do about Minnie?” I ask, and Hyt turns his head to look at me.

“Minae,” he corrects, and I shrug because I can’t be fucked with it. I’m not like Jane. See, Jane is the absolute best person to cast as a main character in a book because although she rages hard, she forgives quickly. She’s willing to look past what a person’s actions are making her feel, and focus on *why* they might be making her feel that way.

I am not that person.

I hate Minae. I remembered her name. I just wanted to see if Hyt would correct me, and he did.

“Sorry. I didn’t actually learn the name of your childhood sweetheart until like an hour ago.”

Hyt sits up to stare at me.

“You *are* jealous.” He grins. “That’s fabulous.”

I look over at him, and that grin relaxes into a confident, gentle smirk. I act like I’m not embarrassed, but I’m not sure if

it works.

“I need a new bikini, and we need to deal with Minnie.”

Hyt doesn't correct me this time. Instead, he stands up and fixes his stupid loincloth.

“Yeah, I'll go ask Kayla if she has any clothes.” He gestures at me, smiles again, and chuckles. “Isn't this funny? You're completely at my mercy here. A human in a strange and confusing world. You wouldn't even know where to go to clean up if I didn't show you. Here's a hint: there are no showers *or* toilets here. Kayla goes in the sea or ... digs and buries.”

“I hate you,” I tell him, and he nods, flicking the brim of his hat.

“I'll be back for you.” He pauses. “Or not.”

Hyt struts out of the room, leaving me in a bikini with his cum still all over me. I look down at myself and then lift my gaze up to stare through the water of the tank at the wavy image of the door beyond it. *If he leaves me here, I'll have Rurik ship him to a hostile alien planet. Or to keep it simple, I could just let Abraxas eat him.* Another lizard skitters across the ceiling, and I jump.

Great.

I decide that his leaving me in here means he has absolutely no qualms about me going through his shit. Which, you know, I am going to do.

I start by examining the drawers embedded into the walls. Each one has a thumbprint lock on it. Makes me *extra* curious as to what's inside. I move onto the only other furniture in the room besides the tank itself, a single chair, and a small desk.

His nightstand.

I open the top drawer to find that masturbator that I saw on his ship. Or maybe not the same one, but a human-shaped one nonetheless.

“Having fun?” Hyt asks from behind me. I turn slowly around to see that he has a basket of clothes in his hands. I step

forward and offer my arms out for it, but he uses his tentacles to lift it way above my head. “You really have no shame, do you?”

“You really like human pussy, don’t you?” I ask with a grin of my own, but the joke only goes so far because the only human pussy he’s tried is ... mine. I flush a bit and then drop my arms. He’ll give me the basket when he wants to give me the basket, not a second sooner. I roll my eyes. “Come on, Hyt. You left me in here. What else was I supposed to do?”

He hands me the basket with a half-smile on his face, tapping a finger against his hat as he watches me go through it.

“Kayla said she’d find more for you if you give her some time. We’ll have to try to buy you clothes from the market when we get home.” Hyt stops talking, and his face falls. “Ah, fuck. I’m not taking you home with me.” He turns pink, and my heart cracks a little. *Truth*. “Sorry. This should do until you go back to His Imperial Majesty.”

Hyt turns away, giving me time to get dressed without him looking at me.

I swallow the strangeness, and shake my head. Whatever. Doesn’t matter. What *does* matter is that there’s a black hoodie and some sweatpants. I haven’t seen anything resembling a hoodie in what feels like a million years. Also, it’s not a string bikini.

“Oh, thank the Dead Kings.” I shed the dirty bikini and then pause, naked and wishing I were dressed to stave off some of the awkwardness. But also ... I want to clean off. Hyt glances over his shoulder to find me standing there in silence, and then turns around.

“Here.” He grabs the damp towel that was slung over his shoulder. It’s still slightly warm when he takes his tentacles and uses them to clean me off. He doesn’t rub too hard at my skin or linger too long anywhere. I both love and hate that. “As I said, we don’t have showers here, but I do have one in our Jungryuk place.” Another strange pause. He just looks away and doesn’t correct himself this time.

I quickly pull the clothes on, feeling about a thousand times more confident. I'm wearing a gently worn hoodie with the string missing from the hood, and sweatpants with a small bleach stain on one knee. I've never missed humanity more than I do in that moment. *Fuck, I do miss Earth.*

I dash the tears off, and look up to see Hyt staring gently back at me.

"Kayla cried every night for a year," he tells me softly. "Sometimes all day, too. But she didn't *start* crying until it'd really hit her."

"How long did that take?" I ask, fearing the answer. I thought I was okay out here. Up here. Wherever this planet is in relation to Earth. I tuck some hair behind my ear. "Was it ... maybe two months in?"

"Two Earthen months," he agrees, slinging the towel into an empty basket next to the nightstand. The basket looks like it's made from the upside-down and dried-out body of a massive crab. Its legs serve as the sides of the basket, pointed feet facing the ceiling. Weird. "But you'll be okay. You'll be the Imperial Queen. When I say your power as queen of the Vestalis is absolute, I mean it. You will have the power to do and be anything you want." He looks right at me. "Associate with whatever people you want to associate with. You won't miss Earth near as much."

"You're sure of that?" I ask, and he smiles tightly.

"I'm sure you'd miss it more if the Vestalis ate it." He gestures with his head toward the door. "Shall we?"

"How did you know about that?" I whisper as I move to catch up with him. "That they're planning to refuel on Earth." *If they ate it, he says. Whatever that means. World eaters. Just a turn of phrase, I guess.* "Or was that just speculation?"

Hyt stops walking and turns to look at me in surprise.

"They said that?" he asks, and then pauses to rephrase the question. "Rurik said that? He said *refueling*?"

"His father's decided that," I correct, and Hyt whistles sharply, shaking his head. He walks up to his bedroom door,

and it slides open automatically.

Minae is waiting. I assume she wasn't before because Hyt went and came in relatively short-order.

"You two aren't fooling anyone," she says, arms crossed over her chest. "Hyt, this isn't the end of the world. You can *still* have a mate. The mate bond is old-fashioned and possessive and codependent—"

"We're sharing a life force," he says to her, like he's surprised she's still on this subject. Hyt laughs. "We're having a baby." I notice he stays pink when he tells her all this, and she doesn't seem to care. I thought it was like, super taboo for a Falopex to change colors. They're supposed to be in truth-color and never change. Hyt flips frequently between the two.

"Unless she was already pregnant with a baby when you mated her," Minae retorts sharply, and she's so eerily right about everything that it makes me want to be obstinate.

"Did you *smell* the pheromones he put out?" I ask her, smiling meanly back when she glares at me. "Those were for *me*. You were obviously drawn to them which is why you thought it was alright to barge into his private bedroom."

"I've been invited into his private bedroom all my life!" Minae yells right back at me, and Hyt looks so unbelievably surprised that it's actually comical. I chuckle at Minae's retort, smirking back at her. See what I mean? I am *not* Jane Baker. I am not dumb-dumb-alien-romance-character nice. I'm kind of a cunt.

"As a friend. He was a virgin before me. Seems I've taken home the whole package."

Hyt laughs at that, and Minae turns to him in shock.

"You're going to let her talk about you like that?" she grinds out, all fluffy rose pink and pretty. *She doesn't have a sexy channel like yours, right?* I remember belatedly what Hyt said to me, and I can't resist taunting her with the facts.

"Wait." I hold up a hand. "I just thought of something." I turn to Hyt, ever the innocent, ignorant little human. "If Falopex vaginas don't milk their dude's shaft, how do they—"

“Oh. Well.” He offers me a slight smile. “They don’t contract and clench and beg with their bodies; it’s up to the male’s mating tentacles to coax his female into exchanging pearls or breeding or climaxing. The end of their channel is essentially their clit.”

“This is highly inappropriate,” Minae hisses under her breath at him. “Humans are an endangered species, Hyt. They’re illegal to steal from Earth. They’re under protection from the whole Noctuida. How is this not you taking advantage of a helpless alien?”

“How are you not taking the hint?” I ask, even though I’m only supposed to be here on pretense. I should let Minae and Hyt flirt. If she doesn’t care that I have his pearl, and she still wants him, that’s admirable, isn’t it? He could find love and companionship with her in a way that I can’t provide, even if I wanted to. “Can we go home soon? I’m exhausted.” I look at Hyt instead of Minae.

“Let’s go home, Earthling,” he says softly, giving Minae a look before he passes by her and puts his arm around me. “I’ll let my parents know we’re leaving.” He escorts me back down the stairs and then pauses when he finds his father and mother in the living room area. Well, the room with the giant pool in the center. That room. “Can we help you?” Hyt asks, sounding unamused. I think he’s reaching the last of his patience. No wonder he doesn’t like to come home.

“Is it true that you saved this human from death with your pearl?” the chief asks, his wife standing just behind and to the right of him, almost like he’s acting as a shield between us and her. “I want to hear the truth, son.”

Hyt smiles back at them.

“I am not obligated to stand trial in front of you, Chief Officer.” Hyt steps forward with a mean frown etched into his face. “When you banished me to Jungryuk and stripped my Yaoh citizenship, you made that choice for me. I am a free agent registered to a lawless world. I am *not* beholden to your orders.”

“Then you can get on your cruiser and leave. Tonight.” His father curls his lip at his son. “I’ll revoke your permit for travel, and you won’t even be able to get on the World Station.” He snaps these last two words out.

“Do you think I give a fuck?” Hyt growls right back, and my jaw drops. Damn. I didn’t get the impression that he stood up to them much. I guess I was wrong. “Do it, and see what happens. You won’t see me again; it’d be my privilege.”

“Hyt!” It’s Kayla now, her hands over her mouth. She shakes her head vigorously, and he stops. Hyt turns away and takes my arm, making sure to keep me alongside him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” he calls out cheerily, looking past his father to his little sister. Hyt’s mother is frantically trying to calm her mate down while Hyt’s eldest sister stands in the kitchen doorway and glares at me.

“Don’t you dare forget!” Kayla calls back, and then we’re outside on the beach and making a quick beeline for the bike.

“You have a challenging family,” I tell him, and he cringes slightly. “I get it. I have a challenging family, too. We have gatherings just like this, and the drama is almost exactly the same.”

Hyt pauses and turns to look at me.

“Is it?” he asks, tails swaying gently. One creeps forward like maybe he wishes he could put his sucker on my shoulder. He holds himself back, and I want to scream. Is the fucking over? Did we do it enough to convince everyone? Minae walked right in on us. If we’ve done it enough, we should stop. “I’m glad you think so. Only, my father once marched me to an execution block personally, locked me in, and told me the doctor was on the way to administer a lethal syringe. Only when I was on the floor crying and screaming did he let me out.” Hyt smiles tightly. “I was sixteen, and I’d told my first lie. Now, I lie whenever the fuck I feel like it.” He holds out a hand to indicate the bike. “Off we go, Earthling.”

I don’t say another word.

We climb on the bike and, with the setting sun at our backs and the World Station in the fading twilight sky above, we head back to Hyt's place.



“Be honest with me: was my family worse than being trapped on *The Korol*?” Hyt laughs at that as he stands in front of me on the deck, hands on his slender hips. The dying light catches the shiny, smooth planes of his body, making me fidget all over again.

“Hyt, the queen is a giant *millipede*,” I choke out, and he throws his head back in a laugh. He claps his tentacles together like hands in front of his body.

“Oh, that must’ve been a shock. The Spirobolida are fucking weird. Tell me how you reacted. I have to know.” He drops his head to grin at me, and I get warm all over. I seriously like this guy. It was instantaneous. It’s worse now, considering that he’s carrying my baby and we’ve fucked like twenty-five times. What am I supposed to do with these feelings?

“I slapped her.” I say it blandly, but then Hyt is laughing again, and I can’t help another smile. *Millipede queen aside, I miss Rurik like crazy; I miss Abraxas like a gunshot to the heart.*

“You want a drink while you can still have one?” he asks, and then he guides me inside and encourages me to head down to the next floor. His companion accompanies us in a swirl of bubbles.

“Hey, can I explore your entire house?” I ask, because come on, I may never get another chance to see what a Falopex house looks like. I’m perversely curious as to what it would feel like if I were truly Hyt’s mate, and if we were learning to be a couple while trying to live here. Would I be excited to move back to Jungryuk or would I jockey for Hyt to make nice with his father to get a better posting? *Nah, I’d be excited to*

leave. Hyt seems to like Jungryuk, and even if I didn't know it the way I do—*Abraxas*—I'd still want to go.

“Why the hell not?” he replies, handing me my drink. Hyt guides me down another set of stairs in the corner and then to a room with vaults on either end. “You want me to open one?” he asks, and I shrug. I was going to ask, but I never expected him to say yes.

Hyt scans his hand and waits as the door opens automatically.

Inside, there's an array of weapons that I can scarcely comprehend. Some are so alien that they make me feel uneasy just *looking* at them, like they were built for a body entirely foreign to my own, something that would make a spider look normal.

“All of this.” Hyt gestures at it. “Black market finds. I confiscate what I want and kill the dealers.” He pauses to give me a meaningful look. “But only if they deserve it.” He lifts up a finger and all nine tails, like he's trying to emphasize a point. “Anyone selling illegal weapons in the Jungryuk market deserves it, just to be clear.”

“What do you do with all of it?” I ask, approaching the vault and downing half of my whiskey in a single swallow. I use the cup to indicate the breadth of weaponry within. “Have your friend—good ol' Cap'n Kidd—sell this shit for you?”

Hyt sighs, stepping forward and letting the vault door slam shut behind him.

“He hands over live cargo unharmed—namely humans—and then I quietly allow him to keep all the treasure. Most space pirates execute, use, or sell their human captives. This is a better chance than most get.” Hyt walks away from me and proceeds down another set of stairs.

This time, there's a room with a low ceiling and windows half-buried in the sand.

Pretty sure this is the bottom floor.

Cushioned lounges fill the room, facing a screen on one wall that looks a bit like a mounted glass tablet—entirely see-

through and paper-thin. There are pools in here, too, scattered in various spots throughout the room, in places where a human might place a chair or a couch.

“Lounge pools,” Hyt says, pointing around. “Falopex don’t like to be out of water long. Our houses can be flooded with the touch of a button. Most of us live in the water full-time, and land is the exception. My family’s a little different because of Kayla.”

I walk over to one of the pools and dip my toe into it. It’s cold. I’m assuming the pool is somehow getting its water from outside. Creatures move past the windows, strange enough that I could spend an entire day looking at them. It’s getting dark fast though; I won’t be able to see them for long.

“You don’t seem to be around water much,” I reply as Hyt heads back up the stairs, and I follow. We end up in the kitchen again, and he pours me another drink before answering. I’d almost forgotten what we were talking about.

“I’m not around water much, no. It’s why I wear these”—he lifts up a foot and uses a tentacle to tap one of his water-filled boots—“to keep me hydrated and breathing easy. My gills are on my calves. I can breathe air, too, but water is easier to siphon oxygen from.”

Oh. Damn.

“Good to know,” I murmur, already wondering if he might let me play with his gills a little. I want to see what they look like. *Not your business, Eve. Not his real mate.* I take another drink to quell the voices inside of me. There’s one begging me to leave emotional distance between me and Hyt. The other wants me to close that distance and let him kiss me. Hyt’s companion lands on me again, and I give him a little pat for comfort. “A necessity for living on Jungryuk then?”

“Pretty much. After I got caught lying the first time, my father stripped my Yaoh citizenship and sent me to Jungryuk in exile. I think he thought I’d change my ways and ask for forgiveness.” He smiles tightly, crossing his arms as he leans back against the countertop. He’s almost too pretty to look at.

“He gave me a job when he got tired of waiting around for me to break. We’ve been in a standoff ever since.”

“My parents were too nice,” I tell him, sipping my drink. “To the point that my siblings and I were crippled as adults with no idea what to do. Well, except for my eldest sister. The rest of us floundered around, and I only just recently got it all together. I own my own business.” The pride in my voice is pretty much gone. I won’t have a business anymore. After months of being gone, missing all my bookings? Yeah, it’s over. Besides, I’m not going back to Earth for more than a brief visit ever again. *Ever again*. “Does the word ‘caterer’ translate?”

“Food preparation?” he clarifies, and I nod. “Interesting.” He can’t seem to resist smiling at me. “And now you’re going to be Queen of the Noct. What will you do first? Take my suggestions and help me clean Jungryuk up for example?”

“I want to eliminate the law that says mated humans can’t go back to Earth.” I give Hyt a meaningful look and he nods.

“Good start.

“And I don’t want *The Korol* to refuel at Earth or Jungryuk.”

“It has to refuel somewhere,” Hyt says with a tired sigh, dragging his hand down his face. “The *only* other option for the Vestalis would be something in the Geometridae.”

“The ... what the fuck?” I ask, and he shakes his head again.

“The universe next to the Noct. Ruled by the Vestalis’ cousins, the Atrata. They have some lifeless mineral planets that *The Korol* could eat without, you know, slaughtering billions of intelligent creatures.”

“You sound tired,” I offer teasingly, and he chuckles at me.

“Do I? If so, then I think I’ve been tired for *years*.” Hyt gets himself the entire carafe of water from the icebox and chugs it with a tentacle wrapped around the glass. Something that Minae said occurs to me.

“Did you call home to Minae to tell her about me?” I ask, and he sighs.

“I talked to her once over video chat for maybe fifteen minutes. She could tell that I was stressed-out, so I mentioned how you’d been taken by the Aspis, and that I was worried for you because of the prince.” He pauses. “Only, I didn’t tell her that he was the prince, just a Vestalis. And there’s no way she could know the girl I was talking about was you.”

“She’s going to be an issue, isn’t she?” I ask, but Hyt just shakes his head.

“She better not be,” he breathes, but he doesn’t sound entirely convinced.

I finish off his stash of whiskey and collapse into the upstairs bed, exhausted. Hyt uses his tentacles to pull the blankets up around me, and then he mutters a soft command and the lights dim.

“I’m going for a swim, but I’ll be back, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper, head buried in the pillows.

I don’t fall asleep until he comes back in and climbs into bed alongside me.



Hyt is gone when I wake up, but the doors to the deck are open. Warm sunshine streams in, and I can hear the gentle slosh of the waves against the sandy shore. I snuggle back into the bed and close my eyes, forcing my anxious body to relax. I'm here in a tropical paradise. I might as well take the chance to enjoy the vacation that I was craving.

Back home, I told myself I was going to take time off, go somewhere tropical, sip colorful drinks in the shade and people-watch while Jane sneaked a romance novel on her phone. But god forbid she see a hot guy out of the corner of her eye. She's always been so desperate to be a main character that she looks for romance with dudes who are less than side characters. Nameless background noise, more like. Here's hoping that Captain Kidd is different.

The sound of voices drifts from downstairs, and my ears perk up when I hear Minae's laughter.

That snake.

I'm up and out of bed, creeping into the upstairs hallway to listen. Yeah, I'm eavesdropping. So fucking what?

"You can't keep stirring him up like that, Hyt," Minae is saying, and I see that she's sitting at the table in the kitchen area. Luckily, she isn't here alone; Kayla is sitting next to her. And then I hear Hyt's mother next. *Ugh.*

"If you push him hard enough, he'll make tough choices," she says softly, a tinge of fear in her voice. "Your father is the

Chief, son. If he has to make an example out of you, he'll do it."

"Oh?" Hyt's voice is high-pitched, an iciness edged with hysteria. "You mean like the time he locked me in the execution block and told me I had minutes to live?"

"You know I'd never let him hurt you, but ..." Hyt's mom—Anih, was it?—trails off. "He could ban you from Yaoh for life. He could ban you from the World Station."

"Hate to tell you this, Mom, but the Noct doesn't revolve around either. I could live a happy, fulfilled life and never come back here ever again. I come here for *you*." Hyt pauses for a second, and I get the sense that he's gesturing at his family. "All of you." His voice cracks a little, and I bite hard on my lip to keep quiet. Jealousy spikes through me in an ugly wave, but I have absolutely zero reason to entertain such a feeling.

God, I'm an idiot.

Hopefully this fake fiancée thing is working. Seems to be working on me, too. Which, you know, is not good at all. My mind touches briefly on some of the things that Hyt said yesterday, about how I'd have absolute power as the Imperial Queen, that I could associate with whoever I wanted to associate with.

"But not for Dad," Hyt corrects, and I hear another female voice sigh. It's his older sister, the one who's training to be the next chief. "Besides, if I were banned, you'd come and visit our baby on Jungryuk, right? Mom, a grandchild, your *first*."

"Stop that," she says, like maybe he's doing something else to tease her. They all have such an easy, carefree camaraderie, one that Minae fits right into. I feel guilty about that. I feel guilty that Hyt is talking about a future we aren't going to have. *But I'll be damned if I keep him away from his baby. He has a stake in this kid, just like me, just like Abraxas, just like Rurik.* "Do you even know what happens when a Falopex and a human breed together?"

“Well, clearly.” I can just imagine Hyt gesturing at himself with his tentacles. “We’re pregnant, remember?” I can picture his grin, sharp and cocky and full of teeth. “This didn’t happen by accident.”

“Dead Kings, Hyt,” Minae snaps at him. Even her voice is pretty. Pisses me off. “What life does some random half-breed have ahead of them?”

“Excuse me?” That’s Kayla, incensed on our behalf. “That’s my fucking niece or nephew that you’re mouthing off about, Minae.”

“Yeah, and my *kid*,” Hyt growls, and I shiver in response to the anger in his words. He really is a good catch, isn’t he? Nice but ... not too nice. “The Noct is full of mixed critters which you’d know if you ever left Yaoh. Very few people care.”

“I think what Mom means is, what sort of functions will the child have? What will it look like?” That’s his older sister again, but she’s gentled her voice some. I really should just go down there seeing as this discussion also involves me and my baby, but I get the feeling that the dynamics of the conversation will shift greatly with my appearance. Falopex might not lie, but they also aren’t under any obligation to volunteer their honest thoughts the way they are now.

With my back to the wall, I close my eyes and gently slide to the floor. Hyt’s companion cuddles into my lap like he was meant to be there, and the stupid double-headed cat joins us, pressing itself to my thigh. When it purrs, it purrs with two heads. Guess even the bite-y second head likes me now.

Our baby. A baby with three dads. I almost laugh. Such a dumb-dumb alien romance plot. But also ... it’s not. I have an actual real-live child on the way.

I haven’t given any further thought as to what the baby might look like. When Abraxas first mentioned that he’d seen an Aspis/human mix, I was excited. Then Rurik came along, and I just assumed that he was right, that the baby would be a Vestalis male. Now, with Hyt in the mix, I have no idea where we stand.

“Don’t let them intimidate you,” a voice says, and I open my eyes to see Hyt crouching down in front of me. I didn’t even hear him come up. We stare at each other, and he offers a tight smile. “And you don’t have to eavesdrop. I’m your mate, this is our home, and this is *our* baby,” he adds with extra emphasis that I can’t quite figure out. “If my family wants to talk shit, they can talk shit in front of you.”

“Hey Eve!” Kayla calls from downstairs as Hyt stands up and extends his tentacles to give me a helping hand. More like, nine helping hands complete with slick suckers lifting me from the floor. He actually *carries* me down the steps behind him, and sets me down on the floor next to the table. His companion—Shithead, was his name I believe—follows us, but Two-Face the alien cat does not. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” I reply, gaze sliding past Kayla’s smiling face to the three decidedly *unsmiling* faces surrounding us. “And whatever the proper Falopex morning greeting is,” I add wryly, doing my best to keep it together. I’m tempted to start something with these women over their harsh words to Hyt.

“Take a seat.” Hyt sweeps in behind me, pushing a chair against the back of my legs and knocking me into it. And then he leans over, arms crossed on the seat back, tails wafting gently around me, suckers sticking to the backs of my hands, the sides of my neck, my cheeks. I try not to smile, but who wouldn’t under that sort of attention? “The girls stopped by just a bit ago. I was trying to let you sleep.” He sounds annoyed, but not with me. With his family for barging in, I think.

“I’m sorry if you overheard our conversation,” Minae offers, but she doesn’t sound sorry. She sounds patronizing, and she’s about *this* close to seeing how a human woman throws down. “But these are practical considerations, and Hyt has a tendency to let his dreams guide him.” Her mouth purses as I narrow my eyes. “No matter how *impractical* those dreams might be.”

“Well, as his mate, I think *I* will be the judge of that.” I cross my arms obstinately, aware that my hair is a hot tangled auburn mess around my face. I hope my green eyes make me

look venomous. How would Minae know? She doesn't seem to know shit about humans. But if she keeps pushing me, I'll threaten to bite her, and I'll tell her that I'm, uh, hemotoxic. Or something. "Hyt is a big boy—a big boy who has his own family now." I look over to see him staring back at me, eyebrows raised, face rife with bemusement. "You don't need your childhood friend telling you what to do."

"I agree," he says easily, a warm affection in his words that I know is meant entirely for me. I practically preen over it.

Minae stands up suddenly, chair scraping across the stone floor. Hyt's mother is the one who calms her down, putting a tentacle on the girl's arm.

"Whatever the reason, they *are* mated. They *are* expecting a child." Anih's voice is so low, so morose, that it sounds like she's declaring her son dead.

"Try not to sound so excited, Mother," I reply, with a mean smile on my face. *This isn't a real mating, remember, Eve?* But now I'm on the warpath and I could no more stop than I could fix the rat nests in my hair. I wonder if the Falopex have anything remotely resembling shampoo or conditioner?

"Mother?" Anih replies on the end of a sharp gasp. Meanwhile, Kayla is grinning wildly, looking from me to Hyt to Anih. Oh, she is *loving* this drama.

"Sorry, I don't know how the Falopex do it, but back on Earth, we often call our husband's mom, well, Mom." I keep smiling as I look over at Hyt's eldest sister, the violet-colored one with the bitchy stare. I cock a brow. "I don't think we've been introduced properly." I thrust my hand out. "Hi, I'm Eve. The human girl who didn't keep your brother's pearl."

His sister stares at my hand like it's diseased.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Nya." Hyt is *mad* now, and he's making no effort to hide it. "You've lived with Kayla for ten Earth years. You know what a goddamn handshake is. How are you supposed to be the next Chief if you can't even pretend to respect another species? Falopex aren't gods, you know."

Nya's eyes flash and then narrow in challenge. She launches a tentacle at me, squeezes my hand with it—but keeps her single suction cup away from me—and then releases me. Her tails are thin and tapered at the tips, giving off the appearance of an array of purple knives fanning out behind her. I'm sure she knows it, too, because she stares me down like we're in an interrogation.

“Do you love my brother?” she asks, gaze locked on mine.

Luckily, for me, I'm not a Falopex.

“I do.”

“She's sitting here lying to our fucking faces!” Minae yells, and she paces around the table in time for me to get out of my chair and face her down. Hyt tries to step between us, but I hold up a hand and he stops where he is. “You were dying; he saved you.” She goes to poke me in the chest with a tentacle, but I slap it away and she gasps like I'm the one that started this. “At least have the common decency to admit that you don't even *know* him.”

I hate how right this girl is about everything.

“Were you the one naked on his bed yesterday?” I ask her, resisting the urge to punch her in one of her small, pink-scaled boobs. “Were you the one he gave his pearl to? Is he carrying *your* child? No to all of those things? *Then leave us alone.*”

“Hyt is a good male,” Minae whispers right back, and he groans beside us, yanking his cowboy hat down on both sides with a pair of tentacles. “He'd give his last breath of oxygen to a dying child, his last bite of food to a comrade, and his pearl to a human in need of serious help. You are a pet project and nothing more.”

Hyt steps in then, using his tentacles to easily lift me off my feet and move me behind him. I only see the briefest flash of his expression before I'm at his back, but I can see that he's gone ice-cold again, just like he did when I called him a bad cop.

“Minae, you are my oldest and dearest friend, but if you continue to insult my wife, myself, or our future child, I will

kick you out of this house, and I won't see you again for a dozen solar years."

I wiggle in his grip, but he's got nine strong tails holding me in place. I manage to snag a peek around his body at Minae's expression. She's near to tears, but what else did she expect? That she could show up here, call him out, and Hyt would invite her into his bed?

"Even *if* that's the case," Kayla says loudly, speaking up in the suddenly quiet space. "Even *if* Hyt did give his pearl to a dying human, you know that he'd make the best of it. He'd court her and kiss her and try to fall in love with her. And he wouldn't sit around and let himself regret any of it. Who *cares* how and why this girl has his pearl. The only thing that matters is that he liked her enough to give it to her. We all know he's seen hundreds of humans die—many of them begging for mercy in his arms—and he's never given up his pearl. Why now?"

Why now indeed.

Hyt gently sets me down on the floor and steps back so that we're standing side by side. For whatever reason, I want to put my arms around him, so I do. I hug him from the side, and his tails sweep in to surround me, sticking to every available bit of my exposed skin. *Damn, this body.* He's hot and hard and slick, and when I run a palm down his midsection, I'm not the only person who pulls in a sharp breath.

He does. Minae does. The two sounds are entirely different animals.

Shithead chitters joyously and draws another heart bubble around the pair of us. I didn't notice the other companions at first—a small purple octopus clinging to Minae and a yellow one perched on the armrest of Anih's chair—but neither of them flits and chirps and bubbles the way Hyt's does.

"We didn't come here to insult either of you," Anih assures her son, turning her attention to me next. "We came here to invite your mate out as a member of the family." The words scrape past her throat; she practically chokes on them. "We thought we could have a female-only day together."

Ah. She's inviting me for a girls' day out. Only, there's no way in fuck that I'm going to accept the invitation. Hyt whistles, like he's come to the same conclusion. I look up to see him flick the brim of his black cowboy hat up with a finger.

"That's not happening," he says, and this time, it's his sister, Nya, that frowns and speaks up. She's sans mini-octopus, so it appears that maybe she doesn't have a companion of her own.

"Why not? You brought home a female you were already mated to, got pregnant without Father's permission, and now you won't even allow her to come out with us?"

"So y'all can circle her like *siarkhs*?" Hyt hisses this last word, and I have no idea what it means, but it sounds like *sharks* when he says it. I'm just assuming he's referring to some predatory beastie that's native here. "Fuck no. You've already proven you can't be trusted."

"Hyt," his mother chastises gently, but Kayla is grinning again, leaning over the table in a hot pink rash guard and black swim trunks. "You truly think the worst of us?"

He looks from his mother to his older sister to Minae, and then laughs.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"You know where they were planning on taking you, Eve?" Kayla asks, and now her grin is truly manic, splitting her face like Abraxas. A deep pang settles in my chest, and I close my eyes against the depth of my need for him. When I open my eyes, I see that Minae is peering carefully at me, and I vow not to show a drop of emotion for the rest of the day. "To the shooting range."

Hyt gives a bitter laugh.

"Right. A girls' day out that just so happens to be vaguely threatening." He turns to me, his tails all around me in a pink silhouette. "Do you want to go? I'll go with you." Hyt leans down and puts his mouth near my ear. "Might actually be fun. I'll teach you to play with some big guns."

My cheeks heat, and my hands automatically come up to press against his chest. The contact is anything but casual between us. I should've known when I ran headfirst into him at the market that we'd have problems fighting this chemistry. Not ... that I have to fight it right now. Or ... maybe we've fucked enough to convince his family that we're legitimate? Maybe we do need to stop?

I look into his eyes, but he isn't smiling anymore.

"You guys go ahead. We'll meet you there."

"Hyt," Minae begins, but he just turns to look at her with an expression that is fresh out of fucks to give. He raises a brow, and she huffs in frustration, turning and heading for the staircase. Her bare feet slap up the steps, and I can't help but notice that she's only wearing a belt with some seashells hanging off of it. They don't cover anything at all; they're just decorative.

Then Hyt's sister, Nya, stands up and I see that she's wearing a skirt made of *bones*, like the rib cage of some long-dead sea creature. Um. Her bra cups seem to match, these two bony plates suspended on a thin string from her neck and around her back. Thankfully, when Hyt's mother stands up, she's got on a belt with enough fabric to cover her front. But that's about it. Nobody wears shoes or hats or anything else. Even Kayla is missing shoes.

"Don't take too long," Anih warns, and then she gives her eldest daughter a look before the pair of them leave the same way as Minae. I just assume they swam here then?

"How do you get around?" I ask Kayla, genuinely curious. Now that the Falopex have left, the mood in the room has shifted into something much more jovial. My limited social circle of humans desperately needs this girl with the bright grin to be substantially less bitchy than the other kidnappees. Avril is a bit of a shit. Zero is a cynical dickhead. Connor was an ass *before* he was a princeling; I can only imagine how much more annoying he'll get. And Tabbi Kat? Let's not even go there. Hopefully she finds her alien soulmate on the

opposite side of the Noctuida and then we can both be happy never seeing each other again.

“Oh, yeah,” Kayla replies with a laugh as she comes around the table. “You would be wondering that, wouldn’t you?” She hooks a thumb at the staircase. “Want to come up and see my board?”

I shrug.

“Why the hell not?”

Kayla takes off up the stairs like she’s excited to have another human to show her shit off to. I start to follow after her, but Hyt gently grabs my arm with a single tentacle.

“Sorry, I ...” My voice trails off as I see him peering at me strangely.

“Wait, *you’re* apologizing?” he says, like he can’t quite figure me out. “Earthling, I’m confused.”

I turn back to look at him, and I try really hard not to stare at his nearly naked body. I can’t help myself. Now that I’ve felt it, touched it, had it inside of me, I ... I want it again worse than ever. I rub my face with my palms and then press the heels of my hands against my eyes.

“I know we’re ... that this isn’t ...” I stop and then glance over my shoulder.

“Only Kayla is up there now, and she can’t hear us.” Hyt grins at me. “I have an excellent sense of smell, remember? Whatever you need to say, Eve, you can just say it.” He plants his hands on his hips as he waits, but his tentacles never stop roaming my body.

“I know that we’re playing the fake fiancée game, but I keep messing up and acting like it’s real. I shouldn’t have gone after your friend or your mother like that.” I sigh heavily and try to offer him what I hope is a truly apologetic smile. “You don’t deserve any of the shit they give you, you know that?”

Hyt says nothing at all, but he looks troubled.

“Hey!” It’s Kayla, calling down from upstairs. “Are you two fucking down there? Should I leave?”

“We’re not fucking,” I call back as I catch Hyt’s gaze. “We’ll be right up.” Kayla doesn’t come into the house, so I continue. May as well get this information out now. “Do we ... I mean, have we mated enough to satisfy your family that this is real?”

Hyt’s slow grin is wicked, but the expression in his alien eyes is unsettled.

“Earthling, we haven’t mated near enough. Probably why they’re all still so suspicious of you.” He reaches out and ruffles my hair with one of his hands, a rare gesture for somebody who seems to prefer the use of his tentacles. “Come on then, let’s go admire the confiscated Cartian hoverboard that I killed a guy for.”

“Truly?” I ask, but Hyt just laughs. His skin is still pink, so he’s not lying about any of it. Not the hoverboard *or* the mating. Right. Okay. I try not to be too excited about it. I’m technically cheating on Rurik and Abraxas here, and the feeling leaves *me* unsettled.

More so than the mating, what *really* freaks me out is how much I like Officer Hyt as a person. Not his gorgeous body or his incredible dick or the protection he’s given me by pretending to be my mate. Him. The way he smiles, his laughter, the jokes he makes, the way he stands up to Rurik and Abraxas and his father and the slavers on Jungryuk.

Fuck.

I’m in big trouble here.

“You okay, Earthling?” he asks when I pause at the top of the staircase to look over at him.

“No,” I tell him honestly, and I wonder if he can see in my eyes how upset I am. “I like you too much.”

I turn away from him before he can respond, before I can even see the expression on his face, and I lose myself in Kayla’s acrobatics on her silver surfboard, the one that glows pink and floats above the water. Hmm. I feel like I owe Zero an apology, and a right to gloat. The Cartians might’ve been obsessed with hot pink, but they were brilliant, too.

When Hyt joins me on the deck, it's been several minutes too long and the awkwardness has set in. Doesn't stop him from adding to it. I look over to see that he's turned blue again.

"I like you, too, you know?" he says, but it's a question, and there's no way for me to tell if it's a truth or a lie. Not that it matters. He claimed all sorts of other things last night and never changed color. "*I do love her.*" Ugh. "Why don't you change clothes, and we can go?" Another question.

He hits the screen on the outside of the house, and I hear the garage door opening.

"Is the sunblock ...?" I don't quite finish the question, lifting my hoodie so he can see my back. He nods, but says nothing in words that could be interpreted as either truth or lie.

I have a feeling that Hyt is going to stay blue for the rest of the day, and that he isn't going to answer any question that I ask him with directness of any sort. So be it. Maybe it's all for the best?

I head into the room to find a black bikini and some sneakers waiting for me.

A sigh escapes me as Hyt's companion whips into the room, spinning around me with more happy chirps and bubbles.

"When we see Jane," I tell it, because when Abraxas gets here, so too will Jane Baker, "we are going to *mercilessly* tease her about that copulatory plug." I snatch up the clothes and the shoes, change quickly, and meet Hyt outside for another ride on his Cartian bike.



The shooting range is not what I expected. Maybe I *should* have expected that it'd be unexpected seeing as this is an alien planet and all that. But in my head I never imagined a gleaming white tower protruding from the water like a massive metal cock. It's even *rounded* at the top.

Huh.

“Here we are.” Hyt uses his tentacles to lift me from the bike, setting me gently onto a dock that’s attached to the tower at water level. He hops off beside me as I study the other vehicles. There are only a few, including Kayla’s hoverboard. Hovering surfboard? Call it what you will. I see a couple of boats, a few pod-like things with enclosed interiors.

“Transports for older people,” Hyt explains, pointing at the pods, his skin flashing pink. “Like my grandmothers. They don’t swim everywhere like they used to.”

A thought occurs to me, one that I probably should’ve considered sooner but didn’t.

“Um, how long do Falopex live?” I ask as my new mate parks his hands on his hips in what I like to call his thirst-trap pose. I can barely handle looking at him when he stands like that, showing off every ounce of that slick smooth skin and the muscle underneath. “If we’re sharing a life force, then I think I should probably know the answer to that question.”

“Humans live, what, a hundred years?” he asks, and I shrug. Close enough. Some people make it longer than that, and some make it way less. “You have nothing to fear. Falopex live well into the hundred-and-twenty Earth years range. If anything, *you* will be cutting our lives short.” He winks at me, flicks his hat brim with his finger, and saunters past in a way that just has to be purposefully suggestive.

I jog to catch up, but that doesn’t last long because my tits are *bouncy* in this top. It’s a better bikini than the teeny-weeny porn star one from yesterday, but it doesn’t keep the girls from doing their thing. Hyt notices and gets stuck on the jiggling as I flush and cross my arms over my chest.

“Are all Falopex toned and tight?” I ask mildly, but it’s a loaded question. I’m thinking about Minae. Hyt chuckles and turns to face me.

“Falopex don’t have fat cells like humans do.”

“Seriously?” I ask, and he nods.

“Kayla’s volunteered for a bunch of different studies comparing Falopex and humans. We’re completely lacking in fat cells.”

That explains a lot.

“That’s ... interesting,” I tell him, and he laughs at that, letting his head fall back. *Fuck, he’s hot.* I try not to fixate on the way the sunlight catches on his scales and makes them shimmer.

“You think?” he asks, dropping his head back down. His eyes sweep me, a brush of fire that makes me shiver even under the heat of the midday sun. “I disagree.” His lips curve, and I wet my own with my tongue in response. “We can’t store food for long periods, so if we don’t eat regularly, we die. There is no three Earth week period where we can live off of fat.” Hyt takes a step forward, and I take one back; I almost end up tumbling off the edge of the dock. His tails wrap me up and keep me from falling. “I love your soft curves, Eve. It’s one of the things I like best about humans.” His smile darkens, twists into a primal promise. “So if you’re feeling self-conscious, don’t. *You* might think Minae is attractive, but I do not.”

“Seriously?” I whisper as he places his hands on the curves of my waist. The black bikini I’m wearing today is sportier than the last one with much bigger cups, a skull-and-crossbones on the left breast, and full-coverage bottoms. Paired with the sneakers, it actually looks sporty and cute. I can see that Hyt agrees with that sentiment. “You don’t find her attractive at all?”

“I’m only attracted to human women,” he says with a loose shrug, and then he releases me, and I’m frustrated that nothing else happened between us. He taps me on the nose with a tentacle. “You ready to handle some big, sexy alien weapons, little Earthling? It’s time for you to show my mother who’s boss on the shooting range.” He turns blue, like that’s a lie. I’m sure that it is. I’m no great marksman. My mom, on the other hand ...

“Alien?” I repeat, and he snorts.

“I keep a locker here with my favorite guns in it. Most of them are alien to *me*. Some of them, I don’t even know where the fuck they came from. Outside of the Noctuida, that’s for damn sure.”

He’s still blue, so I call him out on that.

“A lie?” I query, and he shakes his head, adding a sly smirk into the conversation.

“Perhaps they’re not my favorite guns? Maybe I can speak the truth and lie at the same time? Consider that *a few* of them might be alien to me, and that I’m truth-telling and lying to your face all at once.”

Hmm.

“How much do you know about the other galaxies?” I ask, remembering what he said about, uh ... the Geometridae? He mentioned that Rurik might ask them to give up an empty, mineral-heavy planet for us to refuel on. Wouldn’t that just be ideal? Seems to me that maybe it’d be *too* ideal. Like, what would they ask for in return? Our firstborn child? I almost snort, but then I think a little harder about that, and it’s not funny anymore.

“Enough to know they’re hostile,” Hyt replies with a tight smile that quickly morphs into a thoughtful frown. “As much as I dislike the Vestalis in general, they’re better than some of the neighboring alternatives. If it weren’t for *The Korol*, the Atrata would be over here abducting citizens for food, sex, and slave work from every planet in the Noctuida.” He raises a fin-brow at me to emphasize his point; his skin is pink again. “I’m not going to stand here and praise his Imperial Majesty”—a wry twist of lips—“but Rurik is a *far* better alternative to what’s waiting at the edges of this galaxy.”

“What if the Vestalis are full of shit?” I ask, just trying to play devil’s advocate. Hyt is cynical and smart. I’m sure he’s thought of these questions and a million more before I ever showed up. I’m under no pretense that I’m the smartest or most cleverest being in the whole of the Noct. “What if *they* are the hostile ones and the Noct is the unlucky corner of the universe?”

“The Geometridae is only a hop, skip, and a star-jump away,” Hyt says, and I wonder if he didn’t adopt that phrase from something he heard Kayla say. “I’ve been there, and I will tell you this.” He leans down to look me in the eye, and I can’t decide which of his pupils to focus on. In the end, it doesn’t matter, because he captures my gaze regardless. “It was what humans like to refer to as *hell*.” Hyt stands up with a shudder, briefly closing his eyes and then fluffing his tentacle tails around himself for comfort. “Come on now, enough of this. We’ve got big, hard objects to play with together.” He holds out a tentacle like he’s holding out a hand, and I take it.

I make sure to rub my thumb across the sucker at the tip, and a bit of that sweet oil gets onto my skin. *Oh holy fuck*. Hyt looks as distressed as I feel, so I decide not to do that again. Pretty sure I just gave him the equivalent of a quick finger flick to the dick, and we’re both suffering the consequences.

The doors swish open and we walk in to surprised faces, barely concealed disgust, and not a little bit of flirtation, awe, and obeisance. Huh.

“Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt,” a female purrs from behind the front counter, offering a bit of a bow. “Welcome back.” She winks at him, blatantly, while I’m fucking standing right there. “Your mother is waiting in the penthouse.”

“Fantastic.” Hyt’s voice is dry and inflectionless. He ignores other Falopex as they bow, scrape, giggle, flick their tails at him, or scowl openly at the pair of us. That is, until he pauses and looks in their direction. The expression on his face is that ice-cold stare that I’ve gotten used to. I wonder what he can really do if he’s furious enough. “Is there a problem?” he asks loudly, and the naysayers quickly turn away or flee down one of the many hallways branching off from the room. “Racist fuckers.”

“How often does a Falopex give his pearl to a non-Falopex?” I ask, still holding onto that single tentacle. Another has wrapped itself around my ankle while a third suction itself to the back of my neck. I don’t complain. The *only* parts of my interactions with Hyt I don’t like are as follows: the feeling of guilt I have for Abraxas and Rurik, and the

discomfort of his family. That's it. Everything else ... well, he's likable and charming and *fun*.

"Three times in all of recorded history," Hyt explains as my eyes dart around the room. There are windows here and there, letting in the sunshine and showing off the sea, but there are more hallways and doors than anything else. I get that this is like, a lobby or something. "Including us," he adds, just in case I didn't get it. He murmurs something else under his breath, skin flashing blue.

"Better to make history than simply suffer through it," I offer, trying to sound deep and likely failing. Hyt laughs anyway, slapping his hand on a scanner and then using his tails to yank me into an elevator. He turns on me as soon as the doors close, bringing all nine of his tails around his face and then suctioning his cups to my neck, effectively trapping the pair of us in a cloud of blue.

"Don't let them get to you, little Earthling." He yanks a sucker from my neck and puts it against my nose, popping it off my skin like the tentacle version of a gentle tap. "Because they'll *all* try to get to you."

A command and then a statement that isn't completely true. Kayla isn't going to try to get to me, so the word 'all' makes it a lie. I'm getting good at recognizing this pink-blue-lie-truth game that Hyt plays.

I wave him off, but really, I like the closeness so I'm not particularly aggressive about it.

"I can handle your family," I tell him, as his eyes drop to my lips again. *Why did I make that rule about not kissing him?* Oh, that's right. Because I'm technically cheating on both Abraxas and Rurik by being here. Being a kidnapped alien princess is tough business. "Although, I *really* hate Minae."

Hyt laughs at that, withdrawing his tentacles and making the sensitive skin of my throat ache for more of his touch. He wraps me up in them and drags me close, putting us front to front. He strokes my cheek with one of them, a saucy grin taking over that sharp-toothed mouth of his.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I continue, giving him a soft thump on the chest with my palm. “As if you didn’t know Minae was into you before bringing me here.”

“Well.” Hyt reaches out with a tail to adjust his hat. “I’ve always known she was interested in becoming mates, but I guess I assumed that she’d get over it once I had a female of my own, you know? Her friendship was always worth the unwanted advances.” There’s a long pause here where Hyt’s face falls, and I feel a sharp bite of sympathy for the guy. Everybody—including me—wants to fuck him. He probably just wanted a friend he could count on without having to repay her loyalty or kindness with sex. And then, to my surprise, he says as much aloud. “I guess ... I thought our relationship was stronger than that. I’m fucking disappointed, if I’m being honest.” He turns pink.

I run my palms down his chest, my skin pebbling at the contact, and I try not to let my arousal get the better of me. I clear my throat, trying to figure out how to say what I need to say without, you know, spilling the beans about our fake fiancée situation. You never know who might be listening in. Hyt’s companion escapes out from under his hat and lands on my head.

Hyt’s expression goes soft, and things get weird quick in that elevator. I was so focused on my new ‘mate’s’ face that I didn’t even notice the gorgeous views outside the windows. On three sides of us, the sea sparkles in all directions, broken up only by the occasional island. The elevator stops with a bright ding, and the doors swish open behind us.

“You know,” Hyt tells me, without bothering to turn toward the open doors. “Shithead’s liked you from moment one. Not once has he ever landed on or even approached another female.” There’s a pause there where Hyt’s mouth twitches in amusement. “Not even Minae.”

“Yeah, well.” I clear my throat and force the words out that I’ve been trying to say for several minutes now. “If you need someone to be your friend, you’ve got me. I won’t ... there aren’t conditions attached to my friendship either. You were a good friend before we mated; I’m determined to be a good

friend even after.” I lift my chin and look him in the eyes, hoping he can hear all the unspoken things I’m trying to say. *No matter what happens after this, I’ll be your friend. Even if we only have sex twice a year for logistical purposes, I’ll have your back.* Hyt has put himself into so many tough spots trying to help your girl out. “I’m here for you. Whether it’s just to talk, whether you need something—”

He captures my face between two tentacles, rubbing hot oil on my cheeks. Another two tentacles wrap me in a hug, and his hands find my hips. My own arms swing around his neck as he hefts me up to press his lips to mine. My feet are no longer touching the ground, and I can’t quite resist the urge to wrap my legs around him. Pretty sure the Falopex have different rules surrounding PDAs in public than any human culture I know of.

Our tongues meet, a desperate encounter that feels like drowning.

I don’t want to give him up. Shit. How did I end up in this mess?

He kisses me like he’s been searching for me forever, but it’s not like it is with Rurik. It doesn’t feel like a destined thing. What it feels like is the most organic meeting of like-minds, like we just so happen to have perfectly compatible personalities, sexual preferences, and senses of humor. Hyt feels like a soulmate in the way that another human might feel like a soulmate. There’s no fated-mates-alien-magic telling me that he’s the one, but oh my fucking God, if he doesn’t feel like he is anyway.

His mouth is perfectly fitted to mine, and he tastes sweet, like maybe those pheromones he produces on his suction cups are also produced by his lips, his beautiful purple tongue. *I’m captured. I’m captured. I’m captured.*

“Hyt,” I whisper, breaking away from him slightly, tears stinging my eyes. Fuck. I’m trembling as he holds me close, and I realize with surprise that he’s trembling, too. He sweeps hair back from my face with a tentacle, wraps my thighs tight

with two others, adjusts his hat with a fourth. His companion dances circles around us, spilling bubbles.

“I know, Earthling,” he breathes, putting his forehead to mine. “I know.” He stays pink.

We stand there for so long that he has to slap a tentacle on the elevator control pad to keep us where we are.

“What are you guys doing?” It’s Minae, her voice tight with frustration.

Hyt ignores her, adjusting my body with his tentacles so that he can bury his face in my hair. My head is tucked under his chin, snuggled up against his neck. He murmurs softly into my ear.

“We’ve got this, okay? Whatever comes, we’ll handle it.” He very gently sets me down, untangling all nine tails from my body until they fluff behind him. He’s still pink as he adjusts his hat and winks at me, his companion chirping happily beside us. “Come on then. You can kick my ass on the range.” He turns blue, and I narrow my eyes.

But I’m only playing coy on the outside. On the inside, I feel tender and weird, and I don’t know what to do with all these new feelings. Why did I have to be rescued by the nicest guy in the whole of the Noctuida? *Also, arguably, the sexiest guy in the whole of the Noct, tied with Rurik and Abraxas for first place.* Shit.

Hyt finally turns around, flashing a bright grin at Minae.

“Oh, you’re still standing there?” he asks, and even though he’s smiling, there’s an edge to his words. “What did you think we were doing? We’re mates.” He turns pink again. “Don’t most new mates kiss and fuck and touch at every available opportunity? Why would you think we’d be any different?”

“I ...” Minae trails off as I step up beside Hyt to stare at her. When his companion lands on my head, her eyes narrow. I see that her own companion—in a beautiful purple color—is dancing around her in agitation. When it flits a little too close to Hyt, his own shrieks in anger and rushes toward it. The two of them end up in a not altogether friendly game of chase and

dash, like the territorial hummingbirds in my mother's yard back home.

Home.

I brush the feeling aside as Hyt takes my wrist in a tentacle and strides forward, blowing past Minae.

“Better hurry,” he says as we walk by. “Wouldn't want to start without ya.” He turns blue, and even though I'm not looking at her, I can *feel* Minae tense up behind us.

We head up a flight of white stairs and find ourselves in a galley, windows to the sea on our right, the gun range on our left. Hyt's mother is there, holding a sleek black weapon in her hands while she uses her tails to reload several others. I watch as she fires a dozen shots into the head of a ... something-shaped target. I think it might be one of those bony cloak-wearing creatures.

“That's a Bás,” Hyt explains, gesturing in the target's general direction and turning pink simultaneously, like he's already anticipated my question.

“Filthy, nasty things,” his mother grumbles, and then she fires several more rounds—how many fucking rounds does this alien gun have?—into the target's chest.

Hyt makes a disgruntled sound of annoyance as he passes her by.

“Like any other species, there are the good ones and the bad ones,” he says, but his mother ignores him and on we go, past his older sister who's wielding a device with more triggers than I could press. It takes both of her hands to steady the large weapon on her shoulder and all nine tails to pull the triggers to fire it. An electrified *zing* cracks the air before a glowing blue ball bursts out, bounces down the galley like a tennis ball, and incinerates the target at the end of it.

A human-shaped target.

Ah. Ah-hah.

“You're so very subtle, Nya,” Hyt says, and he turns blue again. I can't decide which color I dig more. They both suit

him. Although, I'm kind of into the compulsive liar bit. What does that say about me as a person? He ignores her and pauses behind Kayla. She has a small, silver gun that glows hot pink at the tip.

"Let me guess: Cartian tech?" I ask, and Kayla throws a bright grin over her shoulder.

"A gift from my brother for my seventeenth birthday." Kayla turns back to the range, locates the Falopex-shaped target at the end of it and fires a literal hot pink laser that *melts* it. A mechanical hand comes down and replaces the target automatically, like a bowling alley replaces pins.

Mm-hmm.

"I'd rather we shot live marks," Hyt's mom explains, loading her weapons with her tails as she turns to look at us. "But we weren't sure if your new bride could handle it." She stares me down with purple eyes, like this is a challenge to be met head-on. I have no idea what 'live marks' means, but Hyt isn't like the characters in the books that Jane reads. He doesn't get mad at me for not knowing shit that I can't possibly know, and he fills me in immediately. This time isn't any different.

"Live marks ..." Hyt trails off as he looks at me, and Kayla lowers her Cartian weapon. I wonder if I couldn't procure one of those for Zero who—shockingly—I'm actually starting to miss. She's been with me since the beginning, and as alone as I first felt in the Noctuida, I know she must feel even lonelier. No mates. No friends. No other Cartians. No home planet to miss. *Shit, I owe that girl an apology.* "It's when prisoners who've been sentenced to death are offered up for target practice."

I just stare at him.

"Um." That's the only word that comes out. I scratch absently at my cheek, trying to gather the right words. "And the Falopex think they're morally superior to the Vestalis?"

Gasps of outrage explode from behind me, and there's Minae *again*, stomping over to stand beside me with her hands

and tails curled into tight balls of anger. She clenches her teeth and *glares* at me.

“You’re a Vestalis sympathizer?” she hisses, eyes flicking to Hyt. “You married a Vestalis sympathizer?”

“I’m a Vestalis sympathizer,” he says, turning pink, and Minae just throws up her hands—and tails—in exasperation.

“Hyt told you what the Atrata are like,” Kayla explains, turning back to the gun range. “The Vestalis aren’t great, but they didn’t slaughter the Dehvas, and they really do believe in true love.” She incinerates her next target—also Falopex in shape—and I wonder if there isn’t some unresolved anger there. Also ... Dehvas. The cat creatures on Dome, right? Like Two-Face. See, I had the same thought myself.

“Only criminals are executed,” Hyt’s sister, Nya, explains to me, as if this should resolve all of my disregard or contempt for the practice.

“Yeah, but on Yaoh, liars are considered criminals. Lying isn’t a crime worthy of death in and of itself.” I do hope I’m not bungling up this entire afternoon, but when I look back at Hyt, he flicks his cowboy hat and grins at me.

“Liars deserve a painful end,” he says, turning blue again, lying even as he’s condemning lying. Cheeky bastard. I love him.

Err.

Love that he said that.

Love a lot of things about him.

Am not crazy enough to fall in love with a *third* alien dude in such a short period of time.

“Who else gets executed?” I ask, because clearly liars *do* get executed. By their own kind. In a *shooting range*. For fun. The Falopex are not keepers of morality the way they pretend to be. No wonder Hyt has issues with his own people.

“We don’t execute adulterers the way the Vestalis do,” Minae breathes, and I can’t figure out why the fuck she’d even say something like that. I turn to look at her, and my face

clearly says that I've had enough. If she doesn't know how to take a hint, I'm going to borrow one of Hyt's guns and shoot her in the foot. "Murderers, rapists, thieves, and liars."

"Except for one liar: Hyt." I point at him as he crosses his arms, waiting to see where I'll go with this. Based on the glimmer in his eyes, I imagine that I'm making him proud. "He gets a pass because he's the Chief of Police's son?"

"Or maybe because he exiled me to Jungryuk, so I only fall under the most basic rules of the Noct and not the hard-core Yaoh dictates?" Hyt shrugs and nobody else offers up a response, so it appears that what I've said is true. Basically, Hyt is as much a prince as Rurik is, and he gets special treatment. I'm not complaining about that part necessarily, but I'm so honestly freaked-out that the Falopex come to the shooting range to actually kill people for fun that I don't know what to say.

Murderers and rapists are one thing, but thieves and liars? Dead Kings help us all.

"Here." Hyt approaches a locker on the wall between two of the large windows. Now that I'm taking in more detail, I see that there are several lockers, evenly spaced out along the length of the hall. He scans one of his suckers in place of his hand on the lock, and then opens the door. Hyt withdraws a massive black weapon, one with spikes and extendable blade-like wings on either side. It unfolds like a bat as he manipulates it with his tentacles, and then he's stepping up to the range and giving me a look. "Didn't I tell ya that I'd let you play with some big guns?" He winks at me, and I try not to look down at his belt and that flimsy piece of cloth covering his dick. "Aw, Earthling. That big gun is for playing with *later*." He stays blue, by the way. *A lie*. An executable liar.

Fuck.

I move up to stand beside him, and he uses a tail to point out a button on the side of the weapon.

"This is the trigger," he explains, and I lift a brow as he uses another one of his tails to play with a touchscreen on his right side. A target is lowered at the end of the range, this one in the

shape of a Vestalis. Hah. I see what he did there. Also, it's not a trigger, it's a button. So, that's another lie, and he stays blue. I see how he plays word games. He's pretty goddamn clever.

"You're hilarious," I grumble, acting as if the sight of the Vestalis silhouette doesn't make me ache for Rurik so badly that I want to cry. And when I think about him, I inevitably think about Abraxas, too, and I'm upset all over again.

I press the button.

Nothing happens.

"That was anticlima—" I stop talking. The target at the end of the range is on fire, covered in blue-black flames. Uhhh.

"Do you like the Atrata tech?" Hyt asks, lowering the weapon. "I'd let you hold it, but it's almost as heavy as my dick."

"You're on fire today," I tell him, and Kayla chuckles at my terrible pun. Hyt surprisingly gets it, too, and throws back his head with a laugh, nearly dislodging his cowboy hat. His right ear swivels in Minae's direction as she takes up the spot next to us.

"Shall we play a little game?" she asks innocently, blinking thick lashes in our direction. Her stupid fluffy-ish tails waft around playfully. "Target Practice: Expert Mode." She slaps her touchscreen with a tail, and the one on our right lights up with a prompt.

"Let's do it," Nya agrees with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, I'm not nearly as good a shot as I used to be." Hyt's mom plays coy, but I can see the fierceness in her face before she steps forward into her firing lane and out of view.

"I always lose these damn things." Kayla grumbles, but I see her slap her own screen, accepting the prompt.

With a sigh, Hyt opts in, and all five targets are replaced with identical bull's-eyes.

"Hyt, don't be greedy. Let your new mate play," Minae offers sweetly, and my eye twitches. *These stupid fucking tentacle foxes.*

“If you’re trying to prove something, you needn’t bother. I’m a terrible shot.” I cross my arms and shake my head. Hyt can engage in this nonsense. I’m not going to. And I’m not intimidated.

“Come on, my sweet little Earthling mate, play with me?” It’s a loaded question, one that makes my skin prickle and fires up my blood. He passes by me, tails drifting over my body, suckers popping on my bare arms and legs, and exchanges the Atrata weapon for something else.

This, too, has numerous triggers on it, more than I could ever press.

“It’s only fair if you get my help,” he tells me, turning pink again and leaning down so that his mouth is pressed up against my ear. “Besides, don’t you want to learn how to shoot properly?”

He uses his tentacles to whirl me around, snatching up my ankles and yanking my legs apart so that they’re shoulder-width. The move knocks the wind out of me, but before my knees can go weak, before I can sweat and swoon, Hyt’s stepping up so close behind me that I can feel his erection through his loincloth. He places the gun in my hand, positions three tentacles on the extra triggers, and then uses another two to adjust my arms. The eighth tentacle turns my head to face the range while the ninth wraps my waist in a tight grip.

A floating prompt appears in the center of the lane—similar to the one I saw at the Vestalis restaurant—counting down in an alien language. At least, I think that’s what it’s doing. It takes a minute for the synchronicity contacts to melt the numbers into something I can recognize. *Ten ... nine ... eight ...* Hyt’s tentacles tense around me as he presses his lips against the side of my neck.

“Ready,” he whispers, and I have to hold back a gasp as the tentacle on my chin drops down and sneaks between my legs, giving my inner thigh an enticing stroke. “Aim.” He pets a little higher and my body starts to quiver. “Fire.”

He uses one of his own fingers to cover mine, pulling that trigger along with the three others and firing off one round

after another into the target. Each hit is dead-center—each hit on the bull’s-eye *and* each hit on my cunt as he strokes me through the thin fabric of the bikini bottoms.

The round ends, signified by another floating prompt that appears in midair, like a hologram or something. Who cares what it is when Hyt removes his tentacle from between my legs? *This son of a bitch*. He leaves me there to stumble a bit, and switches out his gun. The women do the same and off we go for round two. This time, I get a small Cartian pistol that looks similar to the one Kayla was using. Only difference is that hers was silver with a pink glow while mine is just ... all-over bubblegum pink, like the headset. Or that damn space suit.

Hyt takes hold of me with his tentacles again, clutches me to his body, strokes my pussy, and fires pink bullets into the head of a Falopex target.

By round three, I’m dripping and wishing we were back at his house, fucking on the rooftop deck while drinking whiskey (at least, *I* can drink whiskey; the poor bastard is pregnant with my child), and listening to the gentle shush of the ocean waves.

“What is this?” I ask when he places a gun that’s nearly invisible into my hands. Like, there’s a blurred outline, but that’s about it. A ghost gun. That’s what it looks like.

“Fuck if I know. Took it off a slaver. Forgot to ask before I killed him.”

We finish the round—on an *Aspis* target this time—and I try really, really hard not to think about Abraxas. Minae zeroed in on me the last time I let myself go down the route of my missing mates, and I’m not letting her sus me out again. I will *die* before I ever admit to that bitch that Hyt and I are fake dating.

“Well, you win again,” Minae says with a laugh, coming over to clap Hyt on the shoulder. I bristle at the sight of her touching him. She throws me a saucy look in response. “Hyt always wins. We’ve been coming here our entire lives, and he’s never once lost a game.”

“Not true,” he corrects, stepping out of her reach to stand a bit closer to me. “I was just evening out the handicap for my mate. *Eve* is the winner here which means you’re buying her lunch.”

“Grandma Layna and Grandma G are already on their way to the Pearl,” Kayla says, bouncing over to our firing lane with a smile. “It’s the best restaurant in the city.”

“It’s the only restaurant with a dry dining room that’s open today,” Minae corrects, and since I can guess what ‘dry dining room’ means, the urge to punch her in the boob intensifies a thousandfold. I would absolutely *love* to not see this woman’s face ever again. I might even hate her more than Tabbi Kat, and that’s really saying something.

“The Pearl?” I ask Hyt, ignoring his childhood friend and his glaring sister and his mother who sighs every two or three seconds in disappointment. Companions zip around in the air above us like birds. “What an inventive name.”

“Isn’t it? It’s a famous spot for couples to propose to one another.” Hyt smiles at me, and I wonder if he ever had dreams of taking a human girl there and proposing ... however it is that Falopex propose.

“You never did tell us how you proposed to Eve.” Minae is seriously striking all of the fake fiancée tropes, and my patience is wearing very, very thin. “I’d love to hear how my oldest and dearest friend found himself mated and married to a human woman.”

“I have a fetish for human women, Minae.” Hyt stays pink, irritation tainting his voice as he places the ghost gun back in the locker. “Ask stupid questions, get stupid answers.”

“She has a point.” Nya struts up to us, hands on her hips, her bone skirt flared around her curvy hips. “We want to hear everything, from the moment you met to the moment you proposed. You’ve only told us the bare minimum, Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt.”

He cringes at the sound of his full name, and then smirks at his sister.

“I suppose you’ll hear the story at lunch, just like everyone else.” He turns to me with a look that clearly says *let’s get the fuck out of here*, and since I couldn’t agree more, I step forward to take his arm. “Meet you there,” he tells the others.

“Race me?” Kayla asks excitedly, but it’s me who answers.

“You’re on.”



“Care to explain to me how a Falopex generally proposes?” I shout over the wind in my hair. It whips my face and probably whips Hyt in the chest, but I think he likes it because he keeps making these rough, male sounds in my ear. Water sloshes against my legs as he hooks a sharp right and guides us around an island entirely composed of sand and giant dead crabs, like the one Hyt uses for a laundry basket at his parents’ house.

“Why? You want to make up a lie?” he asks, but he doesn’t shout. Instead, he dips his head and puts his mouth against my ear. And then he tongues it. My back arches against him, and I find myself unbelievably thankful that he has all nine tentacles wrapped around my body. “Don’t bother. Tell the truth, and I’ll confirm it.”

I smile at that, even as I close my eyes against the sparkling blue of the sea and the distant shape of a building on stilts.

“Should I tell your family that you tongued me in the Cosmic Chapel? That the next thing I remember clearly was waking up in your bed?”

“Oh yeah,” he replies huskily, licking the shell of my ear again. “They’ll *love* that. They’ll believe it, too, because it sounds just like me.”

I open my eyes just in time to see Hyt swing us sideways, the Cartian jet ski/bike/coolest piece of tech in the Noctuida sliding into place beside the dock. Kayla glides in seconds after us, crouched on her bike with her fists pressed into her reddened cheeks.

“How is it that you beat me every time?” she grumbles as Hyt laughs, lifting me up and setting me on the dock. He joins me, hopping off the seat to land next to me with a grin, and then plants his hands on his hips as Kayla makes a similarly graceful exit off her own board.

“I told you: the bike is just better than the board. It’s not you: it’s the tech.”

“Uh-huh.” She moves over to me, taking my arm and guiding me down the length of the dock to a set of glass doors, open to the breeze and the sunshine. “I know he’s just telling me that to make me feel better, but I want to believe it so badly.”

I look back to see that Hyt is, in fact, blue in color. Aha. I look at Kayla again to find her grinning. She smiles a lot, it seems.

“What was it like growing up with these people?” I can’t resist asking, especially after her initial comment on the beach when we met yesterday. Or her use of Falopex-shaped targets at the range. She seems happy and well-adjusted, but also like she’s at the end of her goddamn rope.

“Do you have time to listen to an overly long and boring novel?” she retorts with a snort, guiding us into the restaurant and up a small set of stairs to an upper level, and then outside, to a balcony area. The restaurant is moderately crowded, but the conversation dies to a whisper when we walk in. All eyes are on us as we head outside to find a table waiting under a shaded ... erm. Well, it’s not an umbrella, but there is a giant leaf that’s about as big as an umbrella, and it’s currently stuck in a metal stand and being used to shade the table.

Colorful flowers spill out of pots and along the edges of the balcony, over the railing, even into the water, creating a floral cloud atop the sea for a good fifty feet behind the restaurant.

Damn.

There are companions everywhere, filling the air with bubbles and rainbows, their big, round eyes shiny, tiny breaks chirping, tentacles drifting lazily as they spin above our heads.

“Yaoh is beautiful,” I breathe as Kayla gestures to a chair, and I go to take a seat. Hyt beats me to it, using his tentacles to pull the chair out for me. I cast a look over my shoulder and cock a brow. “Is this polite for Falopex or did Kayla give you lessons in courting human women?”

“I ask human women,” he admits, turning pink with the truth of his words. Other Falopex grumble disapprovingly at the color change, like it’s as scandalous as a human guy flashing his dick in a restaurant. “When I find them on Jungryuk, and we’re waiting around for Earth transport, I ask questions.”

“Besides, he knows I’d kick his ass if he disrespected his human mate.” Kayla flops into her seat and then immediately reaches out to grab some sort of shelled appetizer thing that’s waiting in a bowl at the center of the table, like a basket of bread or something. Hyt’s mother appears seemingly out of nowhere, dripping wet, and slaps her daughter’s hand with a tail. Kayla yanks her hand back, narrows her eyes, and glares.

“Elders eat first, Kayla-Kanala-Mynerah.”

Oo. I’m guessing that’s Kayla’s full name, and it’s *hilarious*. Just not as hilarious as Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt. Snort. I must make the sound aloud because Hyt’s mother—Anih—is glaring at me as she takes her seat across the table, and Hyt grabs the chair on my right.

“They’re always late, and I’m starving,” Kayla growls out, giving me a look. “Oldest females eat first on Yaoh. Which means I’m already skin and bones by the time the grandmas arrive and deign to take bites of something, by the time Mom takes a bite of anything, Nya, Minae.” Kayla pauses and offers me up a quizzical look. “Wait, how old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-five,” I tell her, and she sighs. Still the youngest in the room it seems. “My birthday’s coming up. If we’re talking Earth days here, then it’s on September thirtieth.”

Now that perks Kayla up. She shoves sandy hair behind both ears at the same time, but it escapes immediately and blows around her face in a gentle breeze.

“Dude, that’s Hyt’s birthday!” She’s giving me an Abraxas grin again as she grips the sides of her chair and leans toward me. “What are the chances of that? In the whole of the Noct, you guys have the same goddamn birthday?”

“It’s not particularly difficult when there are only three-hundred-and-sixty-five Earth days, is it?” Minae asks, sinking into a chair while dripping wet. Nya is right behind her, sitting on her left side so that all three women are seated across from me, their backs to the floral-draped water.

“That’s still pretty incredible,” Kayla inserts, standing up for me before I get a chance to. “Must be fate.”

“What’s fate now?” a voice asks from behind me.

“Grandma Layna,” Hyt greets, rising to his feet. “Grandma G.” He uses his tentacles to hug them both at the same time, and I find myself standing up, too. It just feels respectful. When I glance back, I see that everyone else is doing the same. Looks like I did the right thing.

Hyt steps back, using his tentacles to pull out the chair at this end of the table, waiting for one of his grandmothers to take a seat. Neither does. They’re both too fixed on me. Grandma Layna—the one with the mint-green skin—has a sly smile, and I imagine she was probably a tour de force back in her day. Shit, with that expression she might be a tour de force even now.

“My newest granddaughter,” she says with a sharp-toothed grin. “You’re so very beautiful, and this *hair*.” Layna’s tentacles roam over me—minus the suckers—playing with my hair and tugging at my swimsuit. “Will the baby have this hair?” she wonders aloud, her smile growing even wider. “It’s like fire.”

“I, err, thank you.” I scratch absently at the back of my head, but I’m not exactly sure how to answer that. At this point, my future kid is a big, fat question mark. Part Aspis? All Vestalis? Carried by Hyt? I have no idea what to expect, and I find it interesting that the technologically advanced space traveling aliens have no idea either.

Layna pats my cheek with a tentacle, sliding into her chair, and then flattening her ears when she sees that everyone is still standing.

“Sit, sit, we’re not so formal as all that, are we, Garnella?” she asks, but Grandma G seems to have a much softer, but much more proprietary disposition. She studies me, but she doesn’t touch me. She does, however, keep a very genuine looking smile on her face.

“Please, sit,” she offers magnanimously, spreading her tentacles out to indicate that the others should take their seats. “And for goodness sake, Kayla, *eat something*.” I hear a snicker from behind me as Kayla digs into the clam-ish things that are waiting in the bowl. Hyt’s mother, Anih, sighs dramatically. “How are you faring, little Earthling?” Grandma G—Garnella, I guess?—asks me kindly, her scaled fox ears perked up as she studies me. I wonder if Hyt didn’t get his ‘little Earthling’ nickname from his grandma? “You’ve been through a lot since leaving Earth, haven’t you?”

Her voice is so kind, almost like a trap. I want to tell her everything all of a sudden, and since the urge is so intense, I just let the first real thing pop out that comes to mind.

“I miss my family,” I admit, and she softens further toward me. I didn’t expect my breath to hitch or my shoulders to sag, and I know I shouldn’t show this emotion in front of Minae, but I can’t help myself. “My mom, my dad, my ... I have four siblings.” I rub a hand over my face. “My best friend, Jane.” I look over to Hyt, but he doesn’t seem alarmed that I’m revealing any of this. “She was abducted alongside me. I ... I’m not sure where she is now.”

With Captain Kidd somewhere. With Abraxas. Trying their damndest to get here before I keel over and take Hyt and Rurik to the grave with me. Abraxas ... he’ll choose to go to the dirt at my side, even if I’m the only one who’ll technically die without us mating.

Grandma G straightens up, using a tentacle to tap her grandson on the shoulder. Her companion—a tiny white one with a black beak—bumps up against Hyt’s to match the

gesture. Gotta say: these alien dumbbo octopi are pretty dang cute.

“If anyone can find her, it’ll be your mate. Hyt is the best damn officer in the whole of the Noctuida—even if my own son refuses to admit that.” Garnella sighs and gives Hyt a look as he adjusts his cowboy hat (with his actual hands this time). He smiles and winks at me before turning to his grandma, his tails drifting around him and ... I don’t even know what to call it. Fluffing, I guess? They fluff around him, the scales bristling like fur.

“Are you tryna to flatter me, Grandma G?” Hyt asks, his skin blue again, the color similar to his grandmother’s. “I’ll find my mate’s friend, yeah? Don’t either of you worry your pretty heads about it.”

“He acts like I wasn’t the seventh ranked officer in the Noctuida.” Garnella snorts and then reaches up with her hands to cup my face. Her eyes, all those extra irises and pupils, stare into mine. “I am truly sorry about your family,” she tells me, her smile more empathetic than joyous. “Perhaps if you apply for a permit, you could pay them a visit one day?”

“Permits should never be issued for Earth.” Anih scoffs from her position at the table. “It’s a primitive planet, and it’s protected for a *reason*.”

“It’s protected because its people can’t communicate with us, can’t travel like us, and because Earthlings are good breeders. Not because they’re animals. Stop acting like they are.” Hyt is angry now, and when I look back at him, I see that he’s turned bright pink with the truth. Other Falopex in the restaurant behind us gasp and turn away, some of them even hiding their eyes, like they’ve just seen something salacious.

“You should really try not to do that in public,” Minae whispers, trying to get Hyt’s attention. He ignores her.

“Whether you think permits should or shouldn’t be issued doesn’t matter,” Granella answers with a look in her daughter-in-law’s direction. “It’s up to the Imperial Court to make those decisions.”

“You guys know the next queen is a human, right?” Kayla blurts excitedly and, luckily, I am not as TSTL as I thought I was. I don’t spit out the water I just sipped, don’t widen my eyes, don’t react at all. If Hyt says that his family won’t recognize me, then I believe him. But ... he claimed it was because Falopex aren’t as familiar with human faces—read: they don’t like any species much except for their own—but what about Kayla?

“Oh, who cares who the next queen is?” Nya snorts, sipping her own water. I find that interesting, that the Falopex drink so much water. Don’t they get enough when they’re swimming around? Huh. A mystery for another day. “One Vestalis ruler is much the same as any other. She might be human, but if she’s mated to one of those parasites, she’ll become a parasite herself.”

On the inside, I burn with *rage*. On the outside, I smile knowingly.

“Actually,” I insert, lifting my chin imperiously, “the next Vestalis queen was abducted with me.” I smirk, deciding that it’s better to face this head-on than hide from it. If I ignore the subject, it’ll only make me more suspicious. “We’re pretty much best friends.”

“I thought you said your best friend was abducted and missing?” Minae corrects, and this time, it’s Hyt who rolls his eyes. What a sight that is, watching all six irises shift in exaggerated annoyance.

“Don’t split hairs, Minae,” he tells her, a warning in his voice again. He’s giving her chance after chance after chance, but I suspect that if she keeps pushing, he’ll cut her off clean and won’t look back. “Eve is telling the truth: the next queen of the Vestalis is one of the abducted humans I’ve been searching for.” He stays pink as his whole family turns to look at him, hanging off of every word. “I tried to save her, you know me, but ... the prince tasted her blood within *minutes* of her arrival on Jungryuk.” There’s a roughness to Hyt’s voice that he doesn’t have to fake.

My own heart jumps in response, and my throat gets tight. I pick up my water glass again and down half of it in one swallow.

“You can’t feel bad, Hyt,” Kayla tells him, her voice softening as she leans around me to look at her brother. I have to say, if I hadn’t already liked the guy, hadn’t already found him charming, then his relationship with his little human sister would’ve sealed the deal for me. “You go out of your way to rescue as many humans as you can. Sometimes ... Sometimes bad shit happens.”

Kayla shoves up from her chair and takes off for a ladder on the side of the balcony, ignoring it and leaping into the water like she was born on Yaoh, like she’s part Falopex despite her appearance.

“Is she okay?” I whisper as Hyt looks after her, dropping his gaze to mine and giving a little shake of his head in response.

“Not really,” he replies gently, reaching out with one of his tentacles to brush my cheek. No sweet pheromone oil this time. The subject is too heavy, I think. “This is deep trauma for her. It’s going to take a lifetime for her to get past it.” He looks back at the water as Kayla performs the most beautiful breaststrokes I’ve ever seen, parting the glistening blue surface as she takes off in a random direction. “When she leaves like this, she wants to be left alone. If she needs a hug or someone to talk to, she asks for it.”

I nod, but I feel tears pricking my eyes anyway. Thirteen and she was in one of those awful Jungryuk brothels? My heart is shattering at the thought.

“When my friend becomes the next queen of the Noctuida, she’ll change things for the better,” I declare, turning back to the table to see that everyone—even Anih, Nya, and Minae—are subdued and empathetic. It’s a nice reminder that as much as I’m struggling with Hyt’s family, they aren’t all bad. It looks like, despite their dislike of humans, they’ve done an admirable job of caring for Kayla all these years.

“How so?” Layna asks gently, leaning forward and putting her elbow on the table along with a couple of tentacles. With

another tentacle, she pulls one of those weird glass tablet phone things from a pouch on her decorative belt and sets it in front of her.

“Well,” I start, mulling over the question and resisting the urge to nibble on my lip. “We had some time to talk on the World Station, and she told me that she thinks the whole ‘mated humans can’t go home’ bit is bullshit. She’s going to strike that rule from existence. Any abducted human that wants to go home will be allowed to do so.”

Anih laughs skeptically and shakes her head.

“It’s a lovely sentiment but entirely unrealistic. There are far too many complications resulting from a mating that cannot be undone.” She gestures at me. “Look at you for example. You and my son are sharing a life force. If you don’t exchange the pearl on schedule, you’ll both perish. Besides, you are the *only* female who can bear his children. What if you suddenly decided to return home? Where does that leave him? Earth is not kind to Noctuidan visitors, Eve.”

“I guess Hyt is lucky that he picked a girl who loves him,” I shoot back, putting my foot in my goddamn mouth yet again. *Gah, Eve! What part of the fake fiancée trope don’t you understand?* I find my gaze impossibly drawn to his only to discover that he’s smiling like a sly motherfucking fox.

“Lucky me,” he breathes, and he stays pink, gathering me up in his tentacles and yanking me onto his lap. I blush all over, but nobody at the table seems to think there’s anything inappropriate about what we’re doing. Minae is annoyed, Nya is ambivalent, Anih sighs, and the two grandmas smile knowingly.

“What other rules does this human queen have in store for us?” Minae asks sourly as several waiters approach the table, placing platters of steaming seafood down the center. And when I say seafood, you know what I mean. Ish. Seafood-ish. There’s a vibrant pink eel on a bed of ... purple kelp? Fuck if I know. I’m not usually the sort of girl who likes a guy to make her plate up, but in this case, I’ll defer to Hyt’s expertise.

“She’s going to clean Jungryuk up, free the human women from the Tusk Guys, close and burn all the brothels,” I explain with my chin held high.

“You and Hyt, you must’ve bonded over your love and concern for Jungryuk,” Granella says gently, and I nod. It’s true. I fucking love that planet. I mean, I’m not a huge fan of the double suns or the acid rain or the purple Venus flytraps or the shadow monsters that tried to eat Abraxas ... but hey, Earth has blobfish, naked mole rats, typhoons, wildfires, Portland traffic, and human beings. It’s pretty much fucked, too.

“She’s going to burn all the brothels?” Kayla whispers, returning to her chair and plopping into it. She looks eagerly into my face, and I feel my resolve strengthen. As much as I wish things had gone differently, that I could’ve lived with Abraxas in the jungle for the rest of my life, or maybe with Hyt as my one and only husband, I love Rurik and I want to make change. I have that power, and I’m going to use it, damn it.

“She is,” I affirm, and Kayla grins, retrieving her phone-ish tablet thing from the table. She taps around a few times and then squints down at the screen.

“Dead Kings, I just wanted to see the girl’s face, but they painted her up like a doll.” She whips the phone around on me, and I see myself in the blood lace wedding dress, striding down the hall with Rurik by my side. Hyt takes his sister’s phone with a tentacle and peers down at it.

“You’d think the Vestalis would want to show off the beauty of their foreign mates. Why do they always paint them up to look as much like themselves as possible?” He tsks his purple tongue and passes the phone back.

Minae presumably looks up the same thing on her own phone, but I see her eyes glaze over almost immediately and she sets it aside.

“We’ve suffered under the current king and queen for many years. I hope your friend is as magnanimous and kindhearted as you claim. We could certainly use a ruler with a

conscience.” Minae gives a haughty sniff to punctuate her words.

“Enough of politics,” Grandma G suggests gently, smiling as Hyt carves her up a piece of eel meat and passes it over. “Thank you, sweetheart.” He sets the plate in front of his grandmother with a tentacle and then proceeds to make another plate for Layna. “I’ve been told we’re due to hear an engagement story?”

I narrow my eyes at the three women across the table. I wonder which one of them brought that up to the grandmas? *God, I would love to kick all three of their asses. Only, that would never happen because they could snap my neck with a single tentacle tail.* I sigh and look to Hyt, but he just lifts a fin-brow at me.

“Do you want to tell it?” he asks, and this time, it’s Nya who interrupts.

“I’d rather hear it from you,” she informs Hyt, offering up a challenging stare from across the table. “No offense, but we just met your mate. I’d love to hear such a special story from my baby brother personally.”

“I agree,” Anih says, looking over at Minae who nods in agreement.

Yep. I would *really, really* love to kick their asses. Goddamn it.

“I swept her off her feet,” Hyt says with a grin, lifting his cowboy hat off his head and setting it aside. I’m still in his lap, and I am more than aware of how little fabric there is between us, how hard his muscular body is behind me, how slick and beautiful his skin is. “She didn’t see it coming, I don’t think. I mean, we both knew we were into each other, but—”

“But you turned *me* down the first time,” I add, and a surprised, happy laugh bursts from his throat.

“Okay, fair point, little Earthling.” He tweaks my cheeks with his tentacles as we stare into each other’s eyes. It’s not like with Rurik, like there’s no compulsion. I just enjoy looking at him. *I wish I could have them all. I mean, neither*

Abraxas nor Rurik can stop me from being with the other, circumstances being what they are.

But Hyt? I ... I need to talk to Abraxas so damn badly. I need to tell him how I feel, how I'll choose him over anyone and everyone else because he was first, but how my heart aches at the thought. If anyone could understand, if anyone could help me, it'd be him. Also, I would not mind a long, private chat with Jane. I need it. I crave it. I've never dated a guy without getting Jane's opinion first. She seems to like Abraxas, but I want her to meet Rurik, too. Hyt, she's already met, but I want her thoughts on him as well.

"He turned you down?" Kayla asks, struggling to hold back a laugh. "When? How? I need to hear this story."

"We got a little frisky on the World Station," Hyt admits, tapping his fingertips on the table and preparing me a plate. His mother makes a strange sound as he places it in front of me and then nips my earlobe.

"Maybe I should be making *you* a plate?" I grumble back, but we both know I wouldn't have the faintest idea of where to begin with this food. "Seeing as you're the pregnant one."

"I'll only be pregnant for about an Earth month," he tells me, biting my ear again and sending my hormones into overdrive. *Don't think about your pulsing heat with his grandmothers at the table. Don't do it, Eve. Just don't.* Now that I've told myself not to think about it, it's *all* that I can think about. "You're the one who'll be doing most of the work."

Wait ... did he say an Earth month? He did. I haven't quite considered the implications of Hyt's pregnancy. We're stretching the issue as it is waiting around for Abraxas. What are we supposed to do when I return to *The Korol* sans pregnancy? And then we'll have to meet up with Hyt again to transfer the embryo back ... Dead Kings help us all. I hope these males know a way out of this mess.

"Can I have alcohol then?" I ask, realizing that this would be a super great time for me to get drunk. Lunch with my

fascinating female in-laws. “Like is there anything here that a human can get drunk off safely?”

“My favorite drink: the Wild Nectar. Just don’t ask what’s in it,” Kayla tells me, tapping out something on her phone. “There. I put in an order for four. I get three, and you can have one.”

Hyt laughs at that as I raise my brows, assuming that she put the order in on her phone.

“If you’re having three, I want four. I’m bigger than you,” I tell her, and she gives me a skeptical look.

“I can hold my Falopex liquor. Trust me: it’s going to knock you onto your ass.”

“Can we get back to the story?” Minae asks through gritted teeth. “About the World Station.”

I just stare at her. She must be a masochist. Nothing wrong with that, but like, why is she bringing all this pain on herself? If I were her, I wouldn’t be able to sit there knowing that I’d lost any chance of being with Hyt.

He fixes his own plate as I take a tentative bite of the pink eel. The meat is sweet, but not in a bad way. It tastes like it was slathered in a spicy-sweet barbeque sauce or something. Hmm. I take another bite and decide that I like it. When I pair it with a bit of purple kelp, the taste reminds me of my mother’s secret barbecue pork recipe, the one she always couples with garlic-butter greens. Her recipe is even better than mine, and I’m a professional foodie.

“Right.” Hyt barks a laugh as the others go about making their own plates, waiting to take a bite of his food until all the females at the table have done so first. *What a cutie*. “You know how fickle mating tentacles can be,” he says, and I choke on my food. He pats my back with a tentacle-tail and then rubs a comforting circle as I chug my water. When I finish it, he uses another of his tentacles to pour me a fresh glass, talking all the while. His multitasking skills are next-level. “Are you okay with me talking about this, little Earthling?” he asks, and I realize right away that it’s a genuine

question. “Falopex are open with these sorts of things, but if you’re not comfortable, I won’t talk about it.”

“No, I’m ... I was just surprised is all. I’m good.” I clear my throat and gesture magnanimously with a hand, wishing I, too, had nine tentacle tails with which to express myself. “Continue.” I focus on my food and do my best to ignore my heated cheeks and traitorous body. Hyt is just oh-so fuckable, and he knows it, too, shifting underneath me so that the hard base of his cock rubs against me.

“Your mating tentacles wouldn’t come out?” Nya asks, sounding disturbingly pleased by the idea. “So your body rejected her?”

“The opposite actually. My mating tentacles came out without my knowledge or consent.” Hyt chuckles at that, and his skin remains a glorious hot pink with paler portions over his midsection, chest, and face. His hair, too, is a gorgeous rose color. “I might’ve accidentally given her the pearl that day.” He turns blue, and the others gasp before he corrects himself. “I *wanted* to give her the pearl that day.” He turns pink again, and my heart rate redlines in my chest. Too fast. Way too fast. His words are making me dizzy. His presence is making me dizzy. “But I wanted her to make an informed decision, so I put a stop to it. The second time, well, like I said, I swept her off her feet.”

I grin and fill in for him, looking up to see six sets of curious eyes on me.

“He tongued me in the Cosmic Chapel on Dome and the next thing I knew, I was living in his house as his ... mate.” I’m not sure what the right word is here. Girlfriend? Fiancée? Wife?

“You were on Dome?” his mother asks tightly, and Hyt chuckles.

“As I keep saying, I’m a Jungryukian citizen, and I’m not bound to the laws of this planet. If I want to visit Dome, I’ll visit Dome. The *only* part of the Vestalis occupation of Dome I don’t like is their ban on anyone but themselves and the Falopex visiting. That’s it.” He finally takes a bite of his own

food. “This is disgusting,” he says mildly, flashing blue and causing his entire family to gasp in surprise again. Well, everyone but Kayla. She seems to find his lies as amusing as I do.

“May I ask about the pregnancy?” Grandma G begins gently, and Hyt shrugs his shoulders and tentacles both.

“Accidental. I should’ve explained to Eve how it worked beforehand, but ... I didn’t, and I guess she liked me enough to give herself up completely during our mating.” He goes pink, mutters a lie under his breath, and switches back again. We turn to look at one another, but what might’ve been a tender moment is interrupted by a waiter bringing out our drinks. He—a yellow-skinned Falopex this time—places the four cups on the table between me and Kayla. I notice that he’s only wearing the equivalent of a grass skirt, and that I can see his flaccid cock, but nobody else seems to care, so I don’t focus too much on it.

The cups are made of milky sea green glass, and the liquid inside is thick and bubbly on the surface with a single decorative pink flower perched on top. It’s a beautiful opaque golden color, like honey, but far less viscous. I don’t think too hard about what it might be, and tip the glass to my lips.

It tastes ... awful. Like the wheatgrass smoothies with raw bee pollen that Tabbi Kat forces Jane to make for her. I made the mistake of trying to drink one after she rejected the glass that Jane made, and I vowed to never, ever do that again. But, in the name of happy intoxication, I force myself to take another sip.

“I wonder if it suits your human tastes?” Minae asks mildly, her fluffy pink tails swaying behind her. “It’s made from the blood of a giant insect, something equivalent to your Earth fly, based on what Kayla tells us.”

I gag, but I swallow the reaction back and pound the rest of the glass in two swallows. *Try me, bitch*, I think, just before the rush of it hits me straight in the skull like a shot of moonshine. *Oh dear*. I blink through the blur of intoxication and suck in a deep breath.

“It’s ... *amazing*,” I whisper, which is true. The taste might be awful, but the head rush is *fabulous*. I find myself grinning from ear to ear.

“Told ya,” Kayla breathes with a chuckle of her own, and then she knocks back an entire glass, too.

“Hyt, you know it’s tradition for the females in the family to get together after a new mating,” Grandma G suggests gently but firmly. “Why don’t you excuse yourself to another table and give us some time to get to know Eve?”

I’m immediately certain that this is a really bad idea, but I want to prove myself to these people, so I turn to him with a smile, putting my hands on either side of his face.

“Go,” I tell him, leaning in to press a hot kiss against the side of his mouth. His cock stirs beneath me, and I chuckle. “I’ve got this.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” he whispers back (and turns pink), kissing me fully this time, his tongue diving into my mouth and swirling that hot, sweet pheromone taste through me. I swallow, and it coats my throat, and I feel my breath catching on the powerful need thrumming through my veins.

I want Hyt, and I want him *now*.

He lifts me up as he stands and then uses his tentacles to put me back in the chair, pushing it into the table and offering me a gentle kiss on the crown of my head. He uses two tentacles to put his hat back on, flicking the brim up and away from his eyes.

“Good luck,” he whispers, and then, “you’re gonna need it.” But he turns blue which I take to be a good sign. Right. I don’t need luck. I can handle these women on my own.

Hyt saunters off and finds himself a little two-seater table across the deck, leaning back in his chair with his legs spread in a way that can’t possibly be anything but a subtle seduction. Or rather, a not so subtle one that I’m meant to notice.

I stare down at my food and take another bite, blinking through the alcohol or ... whatever it is. Alien fly juice, apparently. *Stupid Minae*.

“So, Eve,” Layna begins, folding her hands together, elbows on the tabletop, tails draped over the back of her chair. “Has Hyt bothered to explain to you what a Commitment Ceremony is?”

I look up at that as Minae makes a choking sound in her throat and Layna pats her hand gently but absently with a tentacle.

“Not ... exactly,” I begin, hoping this isn’t a trick question.

“They’re already mated *and* pregnant,” Anih whispers, as if this is the greatest scandal to ever rock the Noctuida. If only she knew that Hyt and I are, quite literally, the very definition of outrageous. I’m the future queen. The Vestalis execute adulterers. I’m already mated to an Aspis, and if I don’t fuck him before the week is out, we’ll both probably die. The woman already doesn’t like me. Imagine if she knew the whole truth of the matter. “What point is there in holding a Commitment Ceremony?”

“Because we’re two old women who are proud of our grandson,” Grandma G inserts, and I get the idea that she and Layna aren’t just family by marriage, but also good friends. They play well off of each other. Also, they’re both down-to-earth and kind and way less judgemental than their own children. I wonder what the story is there?

I try to surreptitiously look over at Hyt, and he catches my eye with a wink, taking a sip of his water and allowing a fair amount of it to dribble down his chest and stomach. *This son of a bitch*. I look back at his family, but my brain is no longer functioning, and my lady parts have taken over all of the decision making.

“The Commitment Ceremony ... it’s like a human wedding?” I ask, looking to Kayla for the answer to my question. She’s nodding enthusiastically at me, her cheeks pink with drink.

“Oh yeah. It’s a wedding. Usually it’s held just after a pearl exchange but before a pregnancy.” She chuckles, and I find myself chuckling, too. Yep. We’re both plastered. “But it’s not *so* unusual to do it after. I think you should. Commit to each

other in front of the whole family and the community and show everyone that you're serious about your relationship.”

“Fortunately,” Layna continues with a grin of her own, flattening her cute pointy fox ears against the long green hair coiffed on her head. “The commitment center has an opening on Hyt’s birthday. We could do the ceremony then.”

“Fortunately?” Anih repeats, giving her mother a look. “Did you reserve the center, Mom?”

“I made some calls, pulled some strings, and found us an opening that makes sense. Birthdays are important. Matings are important. The arrival of my first great-grandchild is even *more* important.” Layna sits back in her seat, arms resting on the sides of her chair, smiling and swaying her tails. “What do you think, Eve? Would you be okay with something like that?”

I give Hyt another look and find him stroking his fingers absently down the hard planes of his belly as he stares into the distance, like one of his fox ears isn’t turned our way and eavesdropping on the entire conversation. *This is all supposed to be fake*, I remind myself yet again, but it doesn’t seem to matter. I can’t separate myself from my feelings for Hyt, from the things I want to do even though I know I shouldn’t. The alcohol isn’t helping much either, I’ll admit.

“Let’s do it,” I declare, sitting upright and flicking my eyes back to Hyt. He’s looking at me now, running a finger along the edge of his belt and sliding his purple tongue over his lips, a small bit of metal flashing on the underside. *Christ. Hell. I’m going to fucking come just looking at him.* I pick up my water, force a mouthful down, and clear my throat. “I *want* to do this.”

“Oh, we were hoping you’d say that.” Grandma G claps her hands and eight of her tentacles together, using the ninth to pick up her own water glass and lift it to her lips. “Layna has the perfect dress, too, but we’ll need to see a tailor first.” She gives my curves a curious look, but then smiles again. “I’m sure the whole family will be thrilled.”

She says that, and she must believe it, too, because she doesn’t change color. Looking across the table at Hyt’s mother,

sister, and childhood friend, I'm not personally convinced that the *whole* family is into the idea. I look back at Hyt again, finding him in that lazy, splay-legged sprawl on his chair, tails drifting, mouth half-parted, eyes heavily-lidded.

A pheromone bubble escapes, pops in the air, and the heads of nearly every female in the restaurant whip in his direction. The only ones that seem unaffected are his family members—minus Minae.

“Are you planning on a closed or open marriage?” Layna asks, drawing my attention back to her. It feels like I'm swimming through molasses or something, like my world is sticky and I'm glued to Hyt. *What was the question again?* I've already forgotten.

“She means, are you guys planning to sleep around like most Falopex couples or are you committed only to each other?” Kayla pokes me gently in the shoulder, breaking me out of my sex and alcohol stupor.

Um.

What?

God, Falopex are weird.

“Hyt is never going to sleep with another female,” I slur, and it's hypocritical as fuck, hearing those words come from my mouth. I'm clearly going to be sleeping with Abraxas and Rurik again and, well, Hyt deserves to go and find another lover, doesn't he? I can't keep him hostage forever. I can't even keep *him*, period. “Never.” I look Minae dead in the face, and then I *smile*. See? I am a bit of a bitch, can't help it.

She shoves up from her seat, breath coming in harsh pants. Layna tries to take control of the situation, but it's too late. We're at each other's throats again. Minae's companion screams at me, bubbles exploding from its small break; Hyt's companion takes up the gauntlet on my end. They fight in midair, slapping at one another with tiny tentacles.

“Just let him go!” Minae cries, and I hate that she's always fucking right about everything. “You're only here because he wanted to save your life, that's it. You don't know him. You

don't love him. Leave him alone, and maybe if the new human queen does change the laws, we can try to find a way to send you back to Earth. That's what you want, isn't it? To go home?"

I'm on my feet, too, knocking over my water glass and spilling liquid across the table.

"I want to stay with Hyt!" I shout back at her, words slightly slurred. "And I am *done* with you. If you can't respect our mating, then *you* stay away from him."

"Minae, honey, I'm sorry, but you need to let this go," Layna tells her, trying to tug on the girl's arm with a tentacle. "If the two of them want a closed marriage, it's time to step back and be respectful."

"Is that what you want?" she asks, tears pouring down her pretty face. I feel Hyt move up behind me, and my body and my heart react in two entirely different ways. The first part wants to find some secret alcove or bathroom or hell, dive under the water together, and fuck until we're both out of breath and exhausted. The other part is excited that he's standing up for me, for us, even as I'm feeling guilty about the entire scenario. "A closed marriage with this *human*?"

Everyone in the restaurant is staring at us now. I can't see them since they're all behind me, but I can feel them. There's an imploring, curious heat at my back, something separate from the carnal rush I feel from Hyt's body. He wraps his tentacles all around me, pressing his front to my back.

"I want this human woman, and I don't want any other female," Hyt admits, and he turns pink again. "Minae, maybe it's best if you don't attend the ceremony?"

Her eyes widen, and she turns suddenly, leaping over the railing at the edge of the balcony and scattering the flowers that are floating on the water as she disappears underneath.

"Was that really necessary?" Hyt's mother snaps as his sister, Nya, glares at him. Kayla, on the other hand, is struggling to hold back some drunken chuckling. Both grandmas appear sympathetic.

“It was necessary,” Hyt responds, lifting me off of my feet. “Now, if you’ll excuse us. I brought Eve home last night, and I took her out to spend the day with you all, but really, what we want and need is alone time as a couple.”

Hyt takes off, still holding me in the air with his tentacles. He exits the restaurant to the dock and puts me on the bike before climbing on behind me.

“Let’s go home, Earthling,” he grumbles, and then he starts the bike and off we go.



“Ugh, I’m so glad to be home,” Hyt grumbles once the Cartian bike is safely back in the garage, and the pair of us are standing on the deck together in the fading vestiges of twilight. The sunsets here are *spectacular*, the sun a hot pink ball on the horizon, dipping beneath the sea and dyeing it with an array of vibrant, golden-edged colors. Hyt leans his elbows back on the deck railing as his companion flitters around us with happy chirps, and that stupid pink cat with the two heads comes sauntering our way with a double yawn. I bend down and give both heads a pat. “Not that this is home, not really. Not when we have a perfectly nice place back on Jungryuk.”

Hyt lifts his head with a smile, and then stops cold, like he’s been punched in the gut. His smile fades away to a depressed frown and he turns away with a curse, rubbing a tentacle over his face and putting his hands on his hips.

“Shit.” That’s him again, cursing as he strides over to the edge of the deck and looks across the sand to the forested portion of the island behind it. “I keep forgetting that this isn’t real.” He gives a harsh laugh and then rubs his hands on his face next.

I walk up to stand beside him, still just a little bit drunk, a little bit sad. No, no, a *lot* sad.

“I’m sorry I keep fucking things up,” I say honestly. “I shouldn’t be opening my big mouth the way I’ve been doing.” I pause beside him and even though I know I also shouldn’t say what I’m about to say, I do it anyway. “I also wish this was real, you know?”

Hyt turns so suddenly that I'm startled by the move. His companion squeaks in surprise, coating us with slippery bubbles as Hyt grabs my shoulders and spins me to face him.

"Eve, you keep apologizing for saying the wrong thing when you're only being yourself." He swallows hard, his eyes searching my face. "Not only that, but you're saying everything that my dream girl would say. How is it that with each word that leaves your mouth, I fall for you even harder? You're the perfect woman for me." He lovingly caresses my cheek with a tentacle, and I close my eyes.

"I really hate Minae," I whisper, tears crowding the words out so I end up muttering something that I'm not entirely sure is decipherable.

Hyt chuckles as he gathers me to him with his tentacles, lifting me up off my feet and tucking my front against his. Our mouths find each other like it's the most natural thing in the whole of the Noctuida, and then he's kissing me like he's asking me to stay, and I have no good answer other than *yes*. I kiss him like he's mine, and I'm his, and we don't have a care in the world.

"I hate her, and I really, really fucking like you," I choke out, and Hyt makes this sound in his chest that activates every feminine instinct inside of me. I wrap my arms around his neck and, even though I know I shouldn't, I kiss him. Our tongues wrap together, a twist of saliva and heat with no end and no beginning. We blend together as he squeezes me even more tightly with his tentacles, the warmth of his body burning the bare skin of my belly and chest and legs.

Suddenly, this swimsuit feels cloistering and I want it *off, off, off*.

"Hyt," I murmur, more of a plea really.

He carries me into the bedroom, laying me out on the bed and using his tentacles to untie my top, to remove my sneakers, to play coy against the crotch of my swimsuit bottoms. I want so much more than that. I thrust up against the touch, and he withdraws in response.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, panting as he sits back on his calves and looks down at me, using a single finger to play with the brim of his hat. “Please don’t stop,” I groan, arching my back and bucking my hips.

“No chance little human,” he murmurs in response, dropping down to all fours so that he’s hovering above me, all nine of his tentacle tails playing across my skin. Several pheromone bubbles drift into the air, popping and perfuming the room with the scent of his desire. My aching cunt throbs harder, and I feel tears of need prick my eyes. Why does it feel like I’ll die if he doesn’t fuck me? How overdramatic is that?

“Don’t leave,” I groan when he withdraws several of his tentacles from me. It seems he’s only undoing his belt, but it sure as hell feels like the end of the world. I blame the fly-juice alcohol.

“Never gonna happen,” he tells me, and he stays pink. I don’t examine that too closely. I don’t think about all of the issues between us. *I’m Abraxas’ mate. I’m the next queen of the Noctuida. Rurik’s parents might kill us. What am I supposed to do when Hyt is carrying our embryo for the next month? We are never going to get away with this, are we?*

Hyt makes me forget all about that when he tosses his belt onto the floor, and I push up onto my elbows for a better view of his cock. Just the base is hard currently, and an idea comes to me. I wet my lips and put a palm up against his chest.

“Relax in the pillows for me?” I ask with a little pout that makes him shiver all over. He does as I ask, flopping onto his back, his oiled suckers sliding all over me, poisoning me with his scent, his need, his fucking toxic-ass pheromones. I exhale and tuck my hair behind my ears, looking down at his naked body. I have never in all my life seen someone so tight, so lean, so perfectly athletic and muscular. Hyt isn’t big and bulky, just streamlined and strong. “Do Falopex ...” I trail off briefly, but then ... I’m a tad drunk, so the words all come tumbling out without much shame. “Do you guys do oral sex?”

The smile he gives me is both knowing and curious, all wrapped up in one.

“We do,” he says, smiling just a little wider, just a bit slyer, a whole lot sexier. “But I’ve never tried it before, obviously.” He stays pink, and I grin at him.

“Tell me a lie,” I whisper, and I lean down as he leans forward, our mouths brushing briefly, just enough contact to tease and entice but nothing even remotely resembling enough. Is there such a thing with Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt? No. No there fucking isn’t. “Lie to me, please.”

“I’m going to let you go without a fight,” he breathes, and he turns that beautiful burnished sapphire. I groan and, apparently because I’m a weirdo who gets off on being lied to, my thighs clench together and I force an exhale through my teeth in an attempt to relax. At this point, I’m tempted to roll onto my back, spread my legs, and beg him to fuck me.

But I want this to last.

We have, what, a handful of nights to be together?

I’m going to make the most of every single one.

I wrap the base of one hand around the thickness of Hyt’s cock, giving it an experimental squeeze as I watch his face for cues. He flattens his fox ears against the brim of his hat, offering a shuddering exhale in response to my actions. My thumb drifts in a circle around the tip, edging the slit where the second half of his shaft emerges. It peaks in response to my touch, the bone-white tip thrusting up a half-inch from the base. I use one hand to jerk him off like I’m giving a hand job in a college dorm, quick and fast and sloppy. With my other hand, I bring my thumb to my lips, dripping saliva over the tip, and then I use it to trace slippery little circles on his crown.

“Earthling, *fuck*,” Hyt groans, thrusting up into my fist. His hands yank at the sides of his cowboy hat while his tentacles trace over my body, committing any number of frisky felonies on my hot skin. He sticks a suction cup to either nipple, dips a tentacle into my bikini bottoms from behind, squeezes my thighs, wraps my waist, curls another gently around my throat,

plays with my hair, and sends the last to my lips. I kiss his suction cup when he presses it against my mouth, but I don't stop playing with my hands.

Slowly, the slick whiteness of his secondary shaft emerges until I'm able to take it, too, into my hand. With the other, I manipulate his base tentacles, letting them wrap around my fingertips, mini suction cups grasping at my skin. When his mating tentacles emerge from the tip, I find myself absurdly pleased by their presence. *Fickle, huh?* I think as I drop down and suck one of them into my mouth.

Hyt absolutely loses his shit, all nine of his tails tightening around me. The one inside my bikini bottoms fucks my folds, pushing up against my clit and spreading slickness and pheromone oil between us. I'm gasping even as I suck on that small tentacle, drawing my lips along the exterior of his shaft, using my teeth to gently scrape his skin. I swirl my tongue in a circle around the single sucker on the underside of his cock.

He punishes me for that, removing a tentacle from around my ankle and snatching my bikini bottoms in a tight grip. He tears the fabric and thrusts the rest of his mating tentacles in my mouth at the same time. All nine of the small but prehensile appendages fit between my lips, but they're more than just a mouthful. I'm stuffed with them, and now ... it feels more like *I* am the one being fucked orally and not the other way around.

Hyt's tentacles take over my tongue, smooth across my gums, flick against the roof of my mouth. And each one of them has a tiny little suction cup at the tip, spreading more pheromone oil. That close to my brain, it hits like a rush, like I've just taken a massive drag on the bong that Jane keeps in her car and only uses on evenings when Tabbi Kat has public speaking events. One inhale and it crashes into me like a wave, spreading through my body like poison. I find myself frantically rubbing against the tail that's tucked between my thighs as the one that tore my bottoms off finds the slick well of my heat.

I'm groaning shamelessly, and I'd blame that strange drink Kayla ordered for me, but I know that Hyt isn't drunk at all

and he's moaning just as loudly. He nudges my opening with the tip of his tail, oiling me up, and then he's inside and I'm gasping around a mouthful of smaller tentacles. My right hand stays fisted around the base of him, jerking and tugging and pulling. With the other, I play with his base tentacles, those nine blue petals that unfurl when he's aroused.

Normally, I'd need at least one hand to hold myself up.

Not with a Falopex on the other end of the oral.

He uses his tails to keep me right where he wants me, on my knees with my thighs spread, my head bent over his crotch, my mouth dripping saliva down the length of him to meet my own fist. That smell of his—male and musk and gunpowder—perfumes the room, thick and wild and just as impossible to resist as Rurik's, as Abraxas'.

I want him to come in my mouth, I think desperately, my cry of pleasure muffled by his mating tentacles as he drives his tail between my legs so deep into me that my thighs quiver and my clit throbs painfully. I jerk back, and his cock slips out of my mouth, my lips shiny and wet with saliva and pheromone oil and maybe the alien version of pre-cum? I'm not entirely sure. I don't exactly know how his body works, and I don't care. I just want it. I want *him*.

I'm making these little whimpering sounds as he fucks me, nice and slow, the one tentacle-tail inside of me, another playing with my folds.

"My clit ... please," I breathe, looking up at his rock-hard body slumped in the pillows, cowboy hat tilted down, lips parted, alien eyes fixed on me. "Please touch it."

"Eve," he whispers, and then he curses in his own language and the air is filled with bubbles that escape his lips and hit the ceiling. "Why do you have to be ... so ... *fuck*." Hyt's voice is rough, husky, impossibly sad but also immeasurably hopeful.

Mostly, it's thick with arousal.

He pushes a suction cup against me, sealing it over my clit as I drop my head, my hair falling around his cock.

“Shit. More,” he gasps. “Dead Kings, Eve. I’ll give you whatever you want, but don’t stop doing that.”

I look up, my hair tickling over his shaft, and he bucks his hips violently toward my face. I redirect my right hand to the base of him, finding his balls plump and tight against his body. They throb as I play with them, and they’re impossibly hot, like if he doesn’t come soon, he’ll explode in other less pleasant ways.

“You feel fucking virile for a guy who can’t get me pregnant at the moment,” I whisper, and he forces his heavy bedroom eyes to open wide so that he can stare at me.

“Are you kidding me?” he asks, and then this beautiful, confident male laugh escapes him. “It’s *me* who exudes pheromones to keep *you* from being fertile. If I wanted to, I could reverse that and get you pregnant all over again. We could exchange embryos at the end of my fertilization period, and we could have *another* baby together in short-order.” He huffs out several breaths as he turns pink, reaching up to bury his hands in my hair, like he can’t get enough of the feel. “I’m fertile, Eve. So goddamn fertile.” He swallows. “And so are you; I can *smell* it.”

I groan, even though that statement shouldn’t make me all hot and bothered. *He’s carrying the baby I made with Abraxas, the one that Rurik took over when we mated the first time, and still ... I don’t feel anything but pride and love toward him.* That’s weird, isn’t it? It’s weird. I’m weird.

I am fucked. I am so fucked. I’m way too into Hyt to play an innocent, nobody-gets-hurt fake fiancée game. But that’s the point, isn’t it? Because who the hell would play a game with such high stakes? This isn’t a fake dating scenario where the worst case ending is *oh no, our families might be totes annoyed with us*. This is a game that involves two other men that I love, a planet-destroying ship, a galactic millipede mother-in-law, a Falopex Chief Officer father-in-law, and a baby with three dads.

Suffice it to say that the outcome of this fake fiancée shit, it *matters*.

“I shouldn’t get you pregnant again,” Hyt mumbles absently, but he turns blue. I ignore him. The statement turns me on, even though that, too, is a dangerous game to play.

I lower my mouth and tilt my head, running my tongue up the length of him, from base tentacles to mating tentacles and everything in between. Hyt fists my hair, moving two of his tails to my breasts, suctioning my nipples. I’m moaning shamelessly as I lick him, paying extra special care to the spot where the white part of his dick emerges from the thicker blue base, and then lingering over the suction cup at the tip. I exhale against it, and Hyt thrusts up toward my lips, brushing it over my mouth, smearing oil.

I moan and then suck it into my mouth, flicking my tongue against it until a frustrated snarl rips from him, and his lean body is bowing up off of the bed. The tentacle that’s inside of me doesn’t stop moving, not even as he climaxes, muscles taut, hands clenching the sheets, eyes closed and head thrown back.

It’s the most erotic sight I’ve ever seen, watching clear fluid pump not only from the tip of him but from all of the tentacles down there, all eighteen of them. Nine at the base. Nine at the tip. Leaking sticky, fertile fluid all over him, spurting up around me, smearing my lips. When he pops the sucker on my clit, I unwind in a frantic, terrifying way.

I’d collapse if he weren’t holding me up with his tails, and I scream shamelessly, the sound echoing in the small room, drowning out the slosh of the sea. I pulse and fist tight around the tentacle inside of me, dripping my own arousal around it and wishing that Hyt’s cock was inside of me instead.

He gently removes the tentacle from my pulsing cunt, gathering me up in the mass of them and tucking me up close against his side. We’re both breathing so hard that it sounds like we’re in the middle of a high intensity interval training session. Not that I’d ever be involved in something like that. Exercise and Eve don’t go hand in hand. Unless, of course, you count fucking a Falopex as exercising in which case, I am more than happy to become a fitness guru.

“We should go again,” I whisper against his chest as his tails pet and stroke and love all over my sweaty skin. Hyt chuckles as his companion zips into the room, and I’m not sure if I should feel like my privacy’s being invaded or ... if the little creature is simply an extension of my new mate.

My mate.

I shove aside the messy tangle of my feelings and try to exist only in the moment. Right now, this is all I can do. Abraxas isn’t here. Rurik isn’t here. It’s just me and Hyt and the softness of the sky as the sun melts below the horizon.

“We *will* go again,” he promises me as he turns pink, petting my hair with his fingers, like he’s addicted to the feel of it. His companion lands on his knee and Hyt bares his teeth at it. “What? What is it?” The creature chirps and buzzes, and he rolls his eyes. “It’s Minae again. I guess she swam past here not too long ago, circled a few times, and then left.”

I sit up, frustrated and angry and knowing that I shouldn’t be either of those two things. Hyt isn’t ... he’s not supposed to *actually* be mine.

“She’s a stalker,” I tell him, and he grins as I reach out and lift his cowboy hat from his eyes so that I can see his face better. “Dude, you better get a handle on that.”

“Didn’t I? She’s not invited to our CC.”

It takes me a second to figure out what he’s referring to. Ah, yes. The Commitment Ceremony aka wedding that I just agreed to attend in ... like two Earth weeks? Now that the alcohol and the sex are fading from my blood a bit, I’m starting to wonder if maybe that wasn’t the best idea in the world. How the hell am I going to get away from *The Korol* to attend a wedding to my third husband? Stupid.

I ignore the pesky whisper of common sense and pretend like this is all one-hundred-percent legit and aboveboard. I just want to do that, you know? I just want to be Hyt’s fucking mate for five seconds without reality butting in.

“True,” I hedge, because uninviting his oldest friend from our wedding is sort of a big deal. “But she came over here

after all that? Like what the hell?” I turn to look at him, only to find a saucy, cocksure grin that reveals his beautiful if vicious teeth. His half-lidded eyes are tinged with thick lashes and the promise of more sex. “You find this amusing?”

He uses a tentacle to tap me on the nose again. Another squeezes my ass cheek. A third hefts my breast but leaves my aching nipple to fend for itself.

“I find *you* amusing. I find your jealousy endearing. I think it’s adorable that you think you’re playing a part for me when really, all you’re doing is being yourself and then apologizing after the fact.” He uses some of his other tentacles to push himself up into a seated position, and his companion takes flight with an annoyed hiss. “You really do like me, don’t you?”

“Didn’t I say as much?” I retort, but it’s as much a non-answer as the ones he likes to give.

“Well, I certainly don’t like you.” Hyt turns blue as he grins at me, leaning forward to run his tongue across my lips. Ugh. My body rebels against my brain again, and I have to slap both of my (face) cheeks to ward off the rush of desire. The urge to be fucked is almost painful, but it can wait at least a few minutes, can’t it?

“This Commitment Ceremony thing, is it okay that I agreed to it?” I ask, and Hyt’s expression shifts into something more serious. He looks away, toward the back doors and the deck, and I wonder what would happen if we spoke too freely and like, Minae was outside bobbing in the water and listening in.

“Don’t stress,” he tells me, turning my face back to his with a tentacle, suction cup stuck to my cheek. “If she comes back, he’ll tell us.” He gestures with his chin in the direction of his companion. I eye the little creature, but ... I do trust it. Him? I trust the tiny octopus. He doesn’t seem to like Minae anymore than I do.

“Where did he come from anyway?” I ask, trembling and hot and sweaty but wanting to draw out the moment. If we mate all night, we won’t get a chance to talk, and I want nothing more than to spend some quality alone time with Hyt.

I like Kayla, and I like his grandmas. His brothers seem cool. But if I have to spend even two more seconds with Nya, his mother, his father, or Minae, I'm going to drown myself in the freshwater ocean.

“Ah.” Hyt sits up a little more and then uses one of his tentacles to snag the whiskey bottle that I left in the room earlier. He hands it over to me, unscrewing the top with yet another tentacle so that I can take a nice, long sip. “After a Falopex child is born, we put the afterbirth on the ocean floor and wait. A companion will come along and lay a single egg in it. We take that egg and raise it with the child.”

I mull that over for a minute.

With the child.

“Our ...” I'm having trouble getting the words out. Hyt's face softens as he catches onto my meaning.

“Will our child have a companion? I guess that depends on whether or not we leave the afterbirth in the Yaoh sea.”

I change the subject as quickly as I can.

“What if a companion *doesn't* come along and lay an egg?” I query and Hyt gives me this knowing smile in response, hitching one of his knees up and wrapping his arms around it.

“Then that child is considered unlucky from birth—like Nya. Haven't you noticed that she doesn't have a companion of her own?” I think about that, but I guess it never occurred to me. The tiny octopi are all over the place when we're in public or with his family, so it's hard to say whose is whose. Well, except for Minae's. Her stupid companion is as easy to spot as she is. “That's why my sister has always worked ten times harder than everyone else, because she feels like she has to prove herself.” He scoffs and shakes his head. “Not only that, but the male she gave her pearl to tried to keep it. Maybe my poor sister *is* as unlucky as everyone thinks?”

“He *what?*” I ask, gaping at Hyt as I lean forward. I snap my fingers and Hyt grins. “Alright, that's it. Give me the tea.”

“The what?” he asks, tilting his head to the side. “This is human slang that I've never heard before. My translator says *T*

as in the letter or *tea* as in the beverage or *tee* as in a shirt or ... Well, it doesn't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"Tea, as in the gossip," I reply with a chuckle. "At least maybe I can take it a little less personally when Nya insinuates that I might've been a pearl thief."

"He was a Falopex," Hyt tells me, even though I should've guessed that from his whole *there have only ever been three recorded mixed species matings* comment from earlier. "They dated for five years before she gave him her pearl and then he took off with it." Hyt watches my mouth as I take another drink of the whiskey, liquid beading on my lips that I lick off with a lascivious tongue. He closes his eyes tight for a moment to collect himself and then opens them back up. "Anyway, he ran for the Geometridae, but my father chased him to the edge of the galaxy and dragged him back to stand trial just hours before Nya would've died."

"What happens to pearl thieves on Yaoh?" I ask, wondering if they, too, are slated for the shooting range. But then ... that would mean Nya would die, too, right?

"They're given two options: give the pearl back or be executed. Since it'll make no difference to the person they stole the pearl from. Usually they choose to give it back. He did, and now he's living the rest of his life in prison, monitored to ensure he doesn't commit suicide. Fed. Watered. Kept as healthy but as miserable as possible. Nya mates with him when it's time to exchange the pearl."

Honestly, that seems like a pretty fair punishment.

"But Nya is bound to him forever, huh?" I ask, and Hyt nods. "What about children? She can only have babies with her mate, right?"

"If she wants them, the prison will make him available for her needs." He says this with zero emotion in his voice. "She can breed him or they'll milk his seed for her. Either way." He shrugs. "If it's a female in prison, the same arrangement is made, only she's forced to carry the child."

I work through the rush of information, morbidly curious about it all.

“What about him? Doesn’t he have a pearl, too? Like to give to Nya?” I’ve been wondering about this. If I were a Falopex, wouldn’t I also be able to gift my pearl to Hyt? He must sense the direction of my thoughts because he gathers me up in his tentacles and sits me on his lap, his cock pressed up against the front of my pussy, fully erect and staring right at me. *Shit*. I take another long swig of the whiskey.

“When a pearl is given to a Falopex, that Falopex’s pearl dissolves. There is only ever one pearl involved in a mating.” He tweaks my cheeks with his tentacles, and I slap him away. “Don’t worry, Little Earthling, I am missing *nothing* by having you as my mate.”

Those words are so lighthearted when they come out of his mouth, but they very quickly turn heavy as the reality settles in around us. We both choose to ignore that.

“Except the respect of your fellow Falopex,” I correct, trying not to sound so salty about it. It’s not that I care about that sort of shit for myself, but how dare these fuckers treat my man like that. I drink some more whiskey and pray that my pelvis will stay perfectly still. If I move at all, my slick folds will rub along his length and we’ll be fucking before you can say *alien thirst trap*.

“Did you think I had that before?” he queries, tilting his hat brim down and winking at me. “I’m a liar, remember? Exiled to Jungryuk? I have *never* had the respect of my fellow Falopex, but you know what? They’re all uptight, morally outraged control freaks, so I have zero interest in having them like me.” He sits up, and it’s his fault when our hot, sticky genitals rub together and shift the mood in the room like *that*. I force the whiskey to my mouth, a trembling hand held around the neck of the bottle. Hyt tucks hair behind my ears with a pair of tentacles, his hands on my waist, his attention on my lips. “I consider it a badge of pride, how much they all dislike me.”

“Also, I have a better pussy,” I say, just to clarify.

“A *much* better pussy,” Hyt assures me, sliding his hands around to my front and then dragging his palms up my sweaty midsection to my breasts. He hefts the heavy weights in his hands, fingers kneading my pale mounds as he drops his mouth down to kiss the side of my neck. “Beautiful breasts. Curves for gripping. A mouth that begs to be fucked. And those eyes ... when you bat your lashes at me, I want to give into whatever it is that you want.” He sighs against my neck, and I give up. I rock my pelvis against him, and we both groan. Hyt steals my whiskey bottle with one of his tails and sets it down on the ground beside the bed. “Why are you so fucking soft?” he chokes out, kissing my throat again.

“Why are you so fucking hard?” I choke back, my voice just as broken, as needy. I lift up on my knees, but he snatches me around the waist with a tentacle, holding me there. We end up looking into each other’s eyes again, and my throat closes up. Hyt positions me so that his mating tentacles are teasing and playing with all of my sensitive girl parts. “You can totally control those, can’t you?” I whisper between shaky gasps.

“I absolutely can,” he promises me, and then he gingerly brings me down so that our lips are almost ... not quite ... could touch ... aren’t touching ... why aren’t they touching?! “I thought we weren’t supposed to kiss?” he teases, and I reach out to pinch one of his fox ears.

“We aren’t ...” I hazard, but we keep doing it anyway, and I’m about to walk back the rule when Hyt uses his tentacles to turn me around, placing me on all fours facing the glass of the doors and the deck just beyond them. “What are you doing?” I whisper, even though it’s pretty goddamn obvious.

“Removing temptation,” he drawls, wrapping my middle with a tentacle, curling two more around my breasts, gathering up my hair in another. Hyt mounts me hard and fast, his base tentacles spreading to play with my rear opening, my ass cheeks, my folds, while his mating tentacles coax and tease across my sensitive insides. I can easily see how he was able to get the embryo out of me. All I want to do is give in to him right now. Whatever he wants, it’s his. *Even if he wants you? What then, Eve?*

But *even if* is a poor choice of phrasing. There is no *if*. Hyt wants me.

He wants me.

“Tell me that you want me,” I groan as he rocks me forward and back, smearing pheromones on my skin with his suction cups, claiming my entire body with his own.

Hyt laughs at that, and I can just barely see his reflection in the glass door. He throws his head back, reaches up with his hands to jerk on the sides of his cowboy hat.

“Oh, Earthling ...” he breathes, and then he drops his head back down and stills the movement of his hips. Our eyes meet in the reflection. “I’ve wanted you from the moment you slammed into me at the market.” He lets a slow smile simmer over his lips, wrapping all nine tails around me in a possessive hug. “I like you,” he says, skin still pink. “I want to be in the running, Eve. To be your mate. Maybe it’s because you’re the most unattainable female in the whole of the Noct, and that makes you a challenge. I’ve always *loved* a challenge.”

“I ...” Words won’t come. I wish he’d told me these things *before* he was inside of me again. Now, it’s my vagina that’s in charge, and I hear myself whispering a word that I can’t possibly say. “Yes.”

I’m not entirely sure what I mean by that. Yes? Yes to what? Yes to being his mate? Yes to him being in the running? I didn’t even know there *was* a running, but I ... Shit. Rurik and Abraxas are *not* going to be happy with me, and I don’t blame them. This is so bad. This is so, so, so bad.

“Fuck me.” I gasp out the words, biting my lip hard enough to bleed when two suction cups find my nipples. Hyt pops them on and off the furred pink points, purposely ignoring my clit as he slaps his suckers all over my naked skin and moves his hips in these rolling motions that show off how athletic and muscular he really is.

And *oh*, the slide of his scaled skin against mine, the way his hands grip and knead my ass, the sound of his breaths, his moans, the words he mumbles that defy translation. I’m

drowning in pleasure, pushing my own body back to meet his thrusts, frantic and wild and primal.

“That’s my good, little human girl,” he whispers to me, sliding his tentacles around me so that I’m caged in them. Hyt has a firm, unyielding grip on my waist, my hips, my chest, a slightly gentler grip around my neck, my arms, my right thigh. I am completely and utterly trapped in him. And in every spot that he’s placed a sucker, that sweet oil seeps into my flesh, heightening the sensation of being held, coaxed, fucked.

My lips are parted in a pant, my pupils so dark they obliterate the green of my eyes, and I look absolutely wanton and wild in the reflection of our joined bodies.

With silver moonlight spilling across the deck, and the gentle crash of the waves outside, with the creak of the bed and the husky whisper of Hyt’s moans, I find myself trapped in a bubble of ecstasy, a perfect moment that I wish would never end.

And then ... and then ...

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

I smell Rurik before I see him.

Cardamom and honey.

“Hyt, wait!” I choke out, voice laced with fear, and then—



Glass shatters and blood lace unfurls into the room fast enough that it appears as crimson-streaked gunshots in the gloom. Hyt catches most of the threads with his tails, gritting his teeth and cursing as his muscles strain against the press of it. And then sheer force isn't all that matters, and the blood lace explodes down Hyt's tails and across his body, wrapping him in a shroud of red, like a cocoon.

Rurik is straightening his gloves as he strides across the broken glass to me, boots crunching across it, wings billowing like a white cloak behind him. He snatches me by the arms and yanks me away from—and off of—Hyt. The prince hauls me into his arms, eyes locked with mine.

It's so sudden and so unexpected and yet ... I couldn't look away from him if I tried.

My eyes fill with tears as my palm presses against the side of his face.

We fall into each other.

I've never even considered that I wouldn't see you again. There is no world in which I don't see you again. There is no existence in which we don't meet up, lifetime after lifetime. We are the very definition of soulmates.

“Princess.” Rurik's voice is rough with strain, and I feel like if the floor weren't covered in broken glass, he'd drop to his knees. “I have come too late.” Rurik tears his attention from me, staring across the room at Hyt. Then the star-crossed soulmate magic dims at the edges and I'm shoving at his chest.

“Don’t kill him!” I shout, realizing belatedly that this isn’t the first time I’ve made that request. Only, last time it was between Abraxas and Rurik. I have *really* got to stop collecting alien lovers. “Rurik, let him go.” There’s a beat too long there where nothing changes, where the violence in the room only escalates. “If you kill him, I’m dead, too.”

That does it.

The blood lace melts around Hyt, leaving him drenched in sticky crimson on his own bed. He shakes out his hands and tails both, blood pooling on the brim of his hat and dripping to the mattress. Carefully, slowly, *violently*, Hyt grits white teeth that show through the mess of red, and he lifts up a single finger, tugging down the front brim of his hat and draining the blood off of it. Liquid spatters on the mattress where I was being fucked mere seconds ago.

His companion wheels into the room, screaming, bubbles spraying from its tiny beak.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Hyt growls out, attention snapping over to Rurik. Hyt grins wildly, but it’s all teeth. Next thing I know, he’s up and out of that bed and pointing a half-dozen six-shooters at the side of Rurik’s head. “Explain to me why I shouldn’t blow your brains out tonight.”

“Explain to me why I shouldn’t have my parents eat Yaoh and remove it from existence,” Rurik replies easily, ignoring his rival to look down at me. His dark eyes flicker with the red of his blood lace, and his horn-like feelers press tight against the sides of his head in distress.

“I said *stop*,” I snap at them both, but then Rurik and I are looking at each other again, and I can’t breathe. Stupid insta-love Vestalis mating crap. “I really missed you, you know?”

“I know.” The words are much rougher than they should be. Rurik studies my face with wonder, like he’s seeing me for the first time all over again. He’s more relieved about finding me than he is upset that he caught me fucking another male.

“Are you hungry?” I continue as Rurik breathes heavily, blinking his all-black eyes like he’s coming to some other

horrid realization.

“My child,” he whispers, and then he turns around so that Hyt’s guns are pointed directly at his forehead. Rurik doesn’t appear to be concerned about them or the Falopex police officer holding onto the triggers with his tails. “What have you *done?*”

With a sigh, Hyt lowers the weapons and then disappears them into various places all at once. A few in the locker. Some under a basket full of discarded linens. Another under the bed itself while the final goes between the mattress and the frame beneath it.

“If you’d relax for a minute, we can explain.” Hyt picks up his belt from the glass-and-blood mess on the floor, shakes it out and sighs. He ends up tossing it aside and getting himself a new belt and hat from the locker. Once he’s dressed in the crimson ensemble (fitting color choice), he gives me a look next. “Do you want your sweatpants and sweatshirt, little Earthling?”

My heart absolutely thrashes me with guilt. For Abraxas. For Rurik. For Hyt.

Why does this keep happening to me? At this rate, there’ll be a fourth boyfriend in my future. But even as I think it, I know that’s not true. I am done. I am at my limit with mate bonds. Next time, either I’m dying or the guy in question is dying because *I am not doing this again.*

“You’re upset, and you have a right to be,” I tell Rurik, touching my hand to the side of his face. He won’t look at me. His attention is fixed on Hyt, waiting for him to gather the clothing from the locker and pass it over. Rurik snatches it up in a gloved hand and then carries me out of the room and away from the broken glass.

We end up at the top of the stairs before he sets me down, holding out the clothes and spreading his wings as if to block Hyt from leaving the bedroom. I’m shaking as I struggle into the hoodie, my brain flickering and short-circuiting from the shock of seeing Rurik here.

He's here. He's right fucking here. My mate is here.

"I ... can explain," I tell him as I struggle to get my leg into my sweatpants three times and fail, spectacularly, three times.

"My Princess." Rurik's voice is clear and calm as he takes my hand in his gloved fingers and gently puts it on his arm to help with my balance. "Please breathe and do not give yourself a panic attack. I am upset, but I will be doubly so if you harm yourself because you are afraid." He pauses and swallows, closes his eyes as I slip into the pants, and then opens them again. "Because you are afraid of *me*, in particular."

Now that I'm dressed, I feel a bit more in control. But only a *bit* because Hyt was balls-fucking-deep inside of me all of three seconds ago, and I'm horny, and confused, and totally shocked to see my husband here.

"I can explain," I repeat, sounding like a textbook cheater. A groan escapes me and I slap both hands over my face, dragging them down with a sigh. "Stars, Rurik, I am *so* fucking sorry." Then I realize I not only sound like *a* textbook cheater, but like my son of a bitch ex, Mack. I turn and let my back hit the wall, closing my eyes as my heart goes wild in my chest and I feel like I'm being pulled in two different directions simultaneously. Three, actually, once I see Abraxas, I'm sure. "I sound like my stupid ex-boyfriend," I grumble, wondering if that phrase will translate correctly.

"The moth breeder?" Rurik asks, softly enough that I know in my heart that everything is going to be okay. Might not feel like it now, but it will be. Rurik and I are ... a forever sort of thing. A no matter what sort of thing. I look over at him.

"No, my most recent ex-boyfriend. He was a cheater. Caught him with his dick buried in—"

Yeah, I can't finish that sentence because Rurik just caught me with Hyt's dick buried in yours truly.

"Are you certain you do not want to let *The Korol* eat Earth?" he asks dryly, and even if he's still pissed, even if the air is fraught with uncertainty, it's clearly meant to be a joke. I almost smile. "After evacuating your loved ones, of course."

I open my eyes.

The prince and princess (aka me) stare at one another in silence, and I can feel and hear Rurik's thoughts even if he isn't speaking them aloud.

I am glad you are safe. I was worried for you. I trust you: if you have mated the handsome police officer, then it is for a very good reason.

It is, but ... I didn't have to like it so much, did I? I didn't have to love it. I didn't have to—

“Could you maybe move?” Hyt growls out from behind Rurik, and the prince turns like he means business. The blood lace pattern on my back throbs painfully, matching the heat and fire in the marks on Rurik's wings.

“Wait, wait, wait!” I scramble to get between them, holding a palm up to either of their chests, panting like I've run a marathon, a throbbing heat at the apex of my thighs that I'm sure won't be slaked for quite some time. “Rurik, you need to know that if you kill Hyt, it'll kill me.” I look him dead in the face as I say this next part. “We're sharing a life force.”

“And there ain't anything but common decency keeping me from killing *you*.” Hyt points at the Vestalis prince with all nine tentacles, folding his bloodied arms over his strong chest. He's got that cold, edgy look to him again, the one that promises he damn well knows how to throw down. “How dare you break into my house in the middle of the night and assault me.”

“You're concerned about my breaking and entering?” Rurik asks, his voice pitched high and strange. I can almost hear the whisper and hiss of his real language beneath the translator. “You have kidnapped and mated the next queen of the Noctuida. Do you have any idea what you have done, Falopex?”

Hyt chuckles and shoulders past Rurik, pausing next to me to look down. His expression softens slightly, and my heart aches painfully for him as he adjusts his hat.

“Bring his Imperial Majesty downstairs, and I’ll make you both something to drink.” He pads down the stairs without waiting to see if I’ll follow, and my eyes track the movement before peeling away to return to Rurik. As soon as our gazes meet, I feel it, that sense of *knowing* followed by an overwhelming surge of love. And then he adjusts his wings, and his pheromones powder across my skin in a seduction so powerful that on my end, it feels like a surrender. All I want to do is give in to him.

“You ... must be hungry,” I repeat, reaching out for him. Rurik lets me touch his chest, curls his fingers around my wrists, but he doesn’t let me get any closer. I don’t blame him. If I were him, I wouldn’t want me to touch him at all. “You can’t starve yourself.”

The words sound so hollow, so insincere. I was planning on running with Abraxas once upon a time, on leaving Rurik to starve to death just so I wouldn’t have to face the truth of him being my mate. My eyes prick with tears, but I don’t acknowledge them. I’m the one in the wrong here. Period.

“I am not going to starve, Princess,” Rurik breathes out, closing his eyes. He can’t seem to resist dragging his feelers over my hair, sprinkling me with more pheromones and smelling me at the same time. He makes a pained sound—likely because he can smell Hyt all over me—but he doesn’t pull away. When he opens his eyes to look at me again, a sob escapes my lips that I try and fail to choke back. “I can survive three or perhaps four Earth weeks without feeding from you.”

“But—”

He reaches out with a single finger and places it against my lips.

“Let us go downstairs.” His voice is gruff, but not unkind. I have no idea how or why he’s taking all this in stride—he literally found me on my hands and knees for another guy—but if he feels like I’ve just cucked him, he isn’t acting like it. He takes my hand and pulls me down the steps with him, gaze roaming over Hyt’s dining room/kitchen area.

For his part, my Falopex mate is bent over the kitchen counter, palms flat on the surface, eyes closed, while all nine of his tails go about mixing a pair of cocktails. There's a shaker, a tentacle removing the lid from it so the other can pour, several bottles of liquor, a tray of ice, two glasses, and another tentacle placing star-shaped cubes into them both. It's all very sophisticated and lovely, and ... I slump into a chair and shove the heels of my hands into my eyes.

"I wanted to contact you," I tell Rurik, trying to figure out what to say first and realizing there are literally *hundreds* of things that I need to say and, because my brain is a mess, they're all going to come tumbling out in random order and in the form of semi-aggressive blurts. I drop my hands to see him pulling out a chair and sitting down heavily in it, wings draped over the back, face tilted toward the ceiling, eyes closed. "But Hyt thought it'd be a bad idea."

"It would've been," Rurik agrees, and the sound of his voice warms my blood and makes me ache for him in a way that's impossible to explain. Like, I've been missing him these past few days, but because I knew it would hurt, I didn't let myself feel it. I'm feeling it all now and *fuck*, but it's weird to miss someone who's sitting right in front of me.

He's so distant. What we had together, it's over. It's over, and it's my fault.

"Here." Hyt sets our drinks down on the table with his tentacles and then he, too, slumps into a chair. All three of us look boneless and dejected and sad which is weird if you think about it. Isn't this a self-imposed despair we're all working under? It doesn't have to be like this. We could ... come to some sort of arrangement, right? Only, we can't do any of that until we a) figure out how to not die at the hands of Rurik's parents and b) talk to Abraxas.

Rurik lifts his head and then scowls at the drink in front of him, eyeing it like it might be poisoned. With a sigh, I reach out and take a sip first from my own cup and then from his. He tries to stop me, but I jerk back and nearly knock the chair over.

“If I die, Hyt dies. He wouldn’t put poison in either of these cups, Rurik.”

“Hyt, is it?” he asks, his voice a biting, frustrated thing. And I don’t blame him. “Not *Officer* Hyt? Just Hyt.”

“It was just Hyt before,” I grumble back, pushing his drink in his direction. He stares at it before lifting his dark eyes to mine, almost apologetically.

“You’ve been here all this time?” Rurik asks, as if it’s been weeks and not, like, two days. Although ... I’m not sure how two days on Yaoh translates to two days on Dome or two days on *The Korol*. Feels like it’s been eons. In reality, I was abducted two months ago from Earth. Two months. My life now and my life back then aren’t even remotely synonymous anymore. Everything has changed. Everything.

“Of course we’re here,” Hyt says, his voice edging on a growl that he quickly bites back, sipping a glass of water and looking sullen as fuck. He won’t look at me. Won’t look at Rurik. Just stares in the general direction of the kitchen as his companion flits nervously around and the two-headed cat comes in to lick its genitals right next to us. Even alien cats will be cats, I guess. “Where else would we be?” Hyt offers up a humorless laugh. “It’s you who should leave, before anyone else realizes the crown prince is on Yaoh without permission.”

“I was given permission,” Rurik says calmly, placing his palms flat on the table. I sip my drink and only belatedly realize that I not only have no idea what it is but also that it’s delicious. It’s bright orange, slightly fizzy, and tastes like a hibiscus flower fucked an orange and then christened their baby with smooth vodka. Hopefully it’ll take the edge off because, believe you me, there is an *edge* in this room. I feel like I’m dancing on the finely honed blade of a scalpel. “By my parents as well as your father.” He curls his lip again, and my heart skips a beat. I missed that expression on his face. I missed the way he softens when it’s just me and him in a room together. Mostly, I just missed *him*.

Hyt can tell. I know he can. He’s looking at me now with the most forlorn expression that I have ever seen on a man.

Like he's lost. Like he's drowning. Like he can handle the politicking shit in his sleep, but he has no idea how to handle the romantic mess.

"What was your official reason for coming here?" Hyt asks carefully, tearing his gaze from me to look at Rurik. I can barely handle that, shifting in my chair and trying to ignore not only the ache between my thighs but also the stickiness on my face and lips, the smell of Hyt's skin and his release and the way his pheromones are now mixed up with Rurik's.

Oh, and they mix well, don't they? Their scents are absurdly compatible.

I exhale strangely, and both men catch the need in my voice.

Neither of them acknowledges it.

"I suspect that my new bride has been spirited away by the Collector." Rurik looks at me, not Hyt. Although something about this news has sparked my new mate's attention. Hyt's tails sway as he blinks rapidly and then frowns at the prince's words. Personally, I have no clue who this 'Collector' guy is so ... The meaning is lost on me.

"Do continue," Hyt encourages pensively, pressing a sucker against the side of his glass and working the condensation in lazy circles. Something about that move is oddly sexual, so I don't look at it. I watch my husband instead. What he's saying, this stuff is important.

"The Collector would, more than likely, take a stolen princess to his facility on Jungryuk." Rurik grits his teeth and works his jaw, gloved fingertips sliding across the table as he turns his hands into fists. "You are the principal and sole officer of Jungryuk. You will be dispatched to search for her, and we will eventually discover her together. Either in the Collector's home or, if further excuse is needed, in an Oku settlement filled with unwilling human brides."

Silence falls heavily over the table as I finish my drink and then, seeing as Rurik has no interest in touching his, I start on that one next.

“Mm. Could work. Maybe.” Hyt thinks that over and then sighs. “It’s better than nothing, but we can’t make a move without Abraxas, and your parents ...” He laughs and rubs several tentacles over his face, tearing the suction cups off his cheeks with loud pops. “They’re crawling all over the Noctuida. Kidd is having to take the most roundabout and dangerous route I’ve ever seen to get here. I’m going to have to let him sell off every black market weapon that I have to pay for this shit.”

“This is why he was not on Dome when specified?” Rurik clarifies, and I’m relieved that, at least for a brief moment, the pair of them are collaborating peacefully. Won’t last though. The way they keep looking at each other, it’s with these provocative and violent male gazes that promise future bloodshed.

“Funny you should bring up the Collector.” Hyt offers a wry smile and then downs his water glass, shoving up to his feet to retrieve the glass pitcher from the icebox. “Because he’s the reason I was at the rendezvous point sans a virile male Aspis.”

I see Rurik’s shoulders stiffen, and he curses in his native language, feelers tucked tightly behind his head like rabbit ears.

“Wait ... this Collector guy is the one who attacked Jane, and Kidd, and ... Abraxas.” His name has no sooner left my lips than there’s a presence in the room with us. The other men can sense it: they are not each other’s rivals, not necessarily. *Just wait until Abraxas gets here.* “And we can pin my kidnapping on him? That’s brilliant.”

“I will absorb the Collector’s ship into *The Korol*, slaughter his mate in front of him, and then chain him up so that I may watch him *starve*.” Rurik’s words are so vicious, said in such a low, rolling growl that I know that he means them this time. This isn’t a joke like when he asked me if I wanted him to eat Earth. Oh no. Not even close.

“Better late than never,” Hyt quips, likely having borrowed that phrase from Kayla. “But it won’t undo what was done.” He sits down again and leans in with his elbow perched on the

edge of the table, holding his water glass absently in one of his tentacles. His gaze is all for Rurik right now. “Kidd’s ship was attacked, and by the time they recovered from that, it was too late to land on Dome.” His expression tightens, nostrils flaring.

Rurik doesn’t move. He’s a statue, frozen and beautiful, dressed in a white military jacket and black slacks, shiny red boots. I want to bury my hands in the fur at the base of his throat, rub it against my cheek, reach for his coremata. *My coremata, more like.*

“I met your new bride at the chapel only to find her quite literally *dying* in my arms, and I ...” Hyt trails off and then his expression softens and he looks over at me instead. My hand is trembling so badly that orange liquid sloshes over the edge of the glass and spatters on the tabletop. “I couldn’t bear not to see that smile of hers again. I couldn’t stomach the idea of such a fierce, bright, compassionate woman fading away as I held her close and did *nothing*.” He swallows and closes his eyes, tentacles playing with his hat, with his chair, his water glass, sticking to the wall, like maybe he doesn’t know what to do with them. “More than that, I was attracted to her. Even more than that, I *liked* her.” He opens his eyes, still staring at me. “So I gave her my pearl and made her my mate.”

Rurik hisses in Vestalin and picks at his gloves, his stiff body not so stiff anymore as he trembles and then shoves up to his feet.

“I wouldn’t have had to do it if you and Abraxas took care of your own mate.” Hyt’s eyes snap up to Rurik’s. “So, her protection, her safety, her *life* ... it fell to me yet again, and I took it. I took care of her, and now she’s here, and we’re *mated*.” Hyt stands up, too, palms flat on the table. “I’m carrying Eve’s child. That’s going to be a problem, isn’t it? Because I can’t give the embryo back until it’s properly kindled.”

My poor prince. He’s absolutely fucking seething, but he doesn’t move. He doesn’t lash out. Like always, he takes it upon himself to be the one who loses out while everyone else wins at his expense. Just like he was planning on letting me

live happily ever after with Abraxas, he'll do the same with Hyt. He'll be happy that I found yet another person to love because he doesn't expect to be around.

I stand up, too, slamming the alcohol glass on the table.

Both men turn to look at me, and all I can think is *we need Abraxas. We fucking need Abraxas for this shit. And he isn't here because he's been chasing me all over the galaxy while I sleep with other men.*

“Then we need to go to Jungryuk, and we need to wait it out,” I whisper. I keep my voice low because I'm afraid of what'll happen if I speak any louder. Rurik avoiding me? Dancing away from my touch? Barely looking at me? Barely talking? No. I hate that. I hate all of that. “Together. Me, you, you.” I point at the two men and swallow hard. “Abraxas. This is *our* baby now, and you're all my goddamn mates in one way or another.” I lift up a hand and start ticking fingers. “If Abraxas dies, I die. If I die, then Hyt dies. If I die, then Rurik dies. If Rurik dies, we are *all* fucked because his parents are going to seek us out and slaughter us as retribution. They *just* killed another heir and his pregnant mate because they didn't want a civil war. Well, what happens if Rurik dies or I stay missing for too long? That means they're stuck on the goddamn ship without an heir and it seems that—despite the power that comes with it—nobody wants that stupid throne.” I'm huffing now, out of breath, agitated, desperately in need of private conversations with all of my dudes. “So, Jungryuk it is. Pretend to be tracking me. Make it take a while. Drag this out until I can get the embryo back. If you need to kill this Collector guy to keep the story going, kill him. We can pretend I escaped or something, and the Tusk Guys got me.”

“Easier said than done, little Earthling,” Hyt tells me gently, and I know he thinks that he fucked up, that this is his fault. He saved me from dying on Dome, but he didn't tell me how Falopex pregnancies worked, and I ended up giving completely into him and ... Damn it.

“Easier said, maybe. But it *has* to be done. What other options are there?” I turn to Rurik and I steel myself for what I have to say. I don't meet his eyes though. Instead, I stare at his

beautiful mouth and wish fervently that it were stained with my own blood. It's not that I don't want to look into his eyes, I just know that if I do, I'll get lost there and forget what it is I'm trying to say. "I need you to understand that I wouldn't have chosen to mate with Hyt, to betray you like that." Hyt cringes at my words, but I don't mean them quite the way they came out. "Not that I didn't like him: I did. I do. I was attracted to him enough before, on the World Station, to nearly go all the way. But I'm not an unfaithful person, Rurik. You know that. My commitment to Abraxas was what made it so difficult for us to be together." I look at Hyt since I still can't look into Rurik's eyes. "I wouldn't have chosen this, but now that we're here, I ..." My voice catches again. "We're all going to share a baby. We're all tied to one another through life-and-death circumstances. As you said, Hyt, what does it matter if I crush on you now?" I make myself smile at him, and he smiles back, but there's still a deep sadness there. I turn back to Rurik, and this time, I do meet his eyes. "Initially, I did what I had to do in order to survive. But I wished all the while that I didn't like it so much, that I wasn't having so much fun while you were suffering. And I'm sorry, Rurik. I am so fucking sorry."

I step over to him and grab his arm, and he allows it, letting me lead him up the stairs and out the broken back door. We cross over from the deck to the island—which I've never been on before—and Hyt's companion follows us. I trust it to keep us safe from prying ears and eyes, and when I look back, I see Hyt standing on the dock with his arms crossed, tails swaying.

He says nothing, does nothing, as I lead Rurik through the sand, onto the grass, and into the trees.

My fingers tighten around his bicep, and his breathing stutters.

I let my eyes water then. I can't help it.

"Why are you acting like we're not mates anymore?" I choke out, squeezing my fingers even more tightly on his arm. "I went to the chapel to meet Abraxas, and only Hyt was there. He saved my life by giving me his pearl, and I couldn't let him die by keeping it. I *had* to give it back, Rurik, but I'm still

sorry.” The tears are flowing freely down my face now, and I think that’s what breaks him.

He steps forward suddenly enough that I step away, my back slamming into a tree as he puts his forearm above my head and leans down to look me in the eyes. His fangs are a brilliant white in the moonlight as he parts his full lips, feelers sliding forward to play over my hair.

“My princess,” he breathes, peering into my eyes like they hold the secrets of the universe. “While I am upset, while I wish for nothing more than to blow up this miserable planet with that miserable Falopex on it, I do not blame you.” He cups the side of my face with a gloved hand, and I lean into his touch, wishing he’d take the damn glove off so that I could feel his skin against mine. “I am ...” He can barely get the words out. “I will have to take the throne in order to salvage our situation, and so I am ... I can only be happy that he makes you happy.”

“You don’t care that you caught me on my hands and knees for another guy?” I whisper, and I’m not trying to be cruel, but I want to see him angry. I want him to grab me and crush his mouth to mine and then bite me. I want him to fuck me. I want him to *fight* for me, goddamn it.

He punches his fist into the tree, shattering the bark and raining shards of wood down around us both. His lip is curled into a scowl, and his expression is so fierce that I actually wonder if I’ve pushed him too far this time.

“Of course I care!” he shouts back, voice guttural and thick with rage. He takes a sudden step back and then runs both of his hands down his feelers. His black eyes blaze with red, and his attention is so obsessively fixated on my mouth that I can’t breathe. He lifts his gaze back to mine, and I can feel all of his emotions. Every single one of them. Can essentially read his thoughts.

You were meant to be mine and mine alone from the beginning, but I fucked up. I didn’t take you from that tent as I should have, and now we are here. I want nothing more than to be by your side for eternity, but if I do not take the throne,

we will be slaughtered. If I do not take the throne, your family will die. If I do not take the throne, there will be no jealousy to be had because we will both be dead.

Rurik edges forward again and then exhales, his breath ruffling my hair. My hands find the front of his jacket, and I flick a button open obstinately, sliding my thumb inside to stroke his bare chest.

“If I allow myself to care to the point of having a fit, then we will all end up dead and I will have to search for you all over again in the next life.” Rurik catches the side of my face with a hand, and I tremble under his touch. “You traveled trillions of Earthen miles through the galaxy, and our paths crossed by the merest shred of coincidence.” His breath catches as he finally gives up and pulls me into his arms. I burrow into him, into his smell, his warmth. “The chances of finding one another again are slim, my love. I will do nothing to risk that.”

My hands get a little grabbier, sliding around his waist and heading straight for his coremata ...

Rurik jerks back from me again, nearly stumbling over an exposed root. I see his coremata push out from beneath his jacket, unfolding in ribbons of glimmering red. He gives me a dark look as he tucks his feelers back against his head and hisses his next words at me.

“I *cannot* mate you or my parents will know. Already, I wonder how I will wash your scent from my body.”

We both pause at the sound of shredding fabric, and Rurik and I both look down to see his claspers digging through the black of his pants. Those clawed tips rip right through, exposing themselves to the moonlight, and my jaw drops. *Oh*. I go white-hot all over as I lift my gaze to his and meet it.

“You have zero control over those, don’t you?” I whisper, and my eyes drift to his coremata, full and proud and fanned out around him like a peacock tail. He takes another stumbling step back and puts his hand out on the trunk of a tree, breathing hard and closing his eyes. His claspers have broken

entirely through the fabric now, reaching for me so that they can pin my body to his.

I want them to.

I want *him*.

I step forward, and he doesn't move away from me.

"I do not, and you well know it." He watches me warily as I approach, staring down at my hands as I reach out and grip his claspers in two tight fists. Rurik grits his teeth, flashing those pretty vampire fangs.

"You don't have to bite me—though I know you want to—but we can have sex. What difference will it make? I'm sure you reek of me anyway. Maybe even of me *and* Hyt together. You'll have to scrub down good either way." I lean into him, giving his claspers a rub, like I'm jerking them off.

"I will never get used to the fact that you have mated with anyone but me," Rurik breathes out, and then he's snatching my face in his hands and slamming his mouth against mine.

It's less of a kiss and more of a claiming, and it almost, almost, *almost* hurts. But not quite. He softens his lips immediately, almost like an apology, carefully tasting my tongue with his own and trying to keep his teeth from making me bleed. I want to feed him so bad, almost a compulsion on my part. My blood sings—it *screams*—pushing against my skin, fighting to find its way inside of him, to nourish him, to give him life.

"If it helps, when we're together, I forget that was ever the case myself," I mumble against him, and he groans, turning us around so that he can push me into the tree instead. A cluster of brightly colored coconut-ish things crash to the ground beside us, their pretty hulls splitting and perfuming the air with a tropical, nutty tang. In the distance, the ocean waves sing.

"I ... that Stars-damned Falopex," Rurik snarls, yanking my sweatpants down my ass. I release his claspers and they immediately grip my hips, jerking me to him. I gasp as I feel the impossible hardness of his cock through the fabric of his pants. The claspers dug their way out on either side but,

unfortunately, the crotch is still intact. “That Stars-damned Aspis ...” he trails off, running his fingers through my hair.

When he kisses me this time, it’s with such a gentle softness that my eyes sting again, and I worry that I might cry. The idea that he’ll be leaving me again after this, it’s too much to bear.

“I’ll see you right after I see Abraxas, right?” I ask, my stomach twisting into a curl of nervous excitement. *Me, on Jungryuk with Abraxas, Rurik, and Hyt at the same time? With Jane, too? And no Tabbi Kat? I ... if heaven as a concept exists, that might very well encompass it.*

“Once you are on Jungryuk, I will come immediately,” Rurik promises, kissing the corner of my lips, my cheekbone, my forehead. He trails his hot mouth down the side of my neck, tasting my pulse with an agonized, hungry sigh. “I wish to make you bleed,” he murmurs, and I shudder all over.

“Fuck me instead.”

Rurik has clearly given up trying to resist. He takes me into his arms, claspers still firmly locked around my hips, and he drops to his knees, laying me back into the soft earth and kissing me as his hand slips down to undo his slacks. I grasp frantically at his coremata, pulling two of them close and then sucking the tip of one into my mouth.

Pheromones burst bright across my tongue as I lick the fine red hairs and then rub them against the side of my face, poisoning myself with that parasitic Vestalis essence that I love so much. If he weren’t such an upstanding, honorable person, maybe it’d bother me. But because I like him, it’s *exquisite*.

His hands shove my sweatshirt up, exposing my breasts, and he actually looks away like he’s in pain.

“My Princess, you are absolutely pornographic in nature.” He turns back and forces his gaze open, thumbing one of my pretty pink nipples and making me writhe. “Your female sex characteristics are so blatant, so hungry for attention.”

Rurik lifts his gloved hand to his mouth and uses his teeth to remove his middle finger first, followed by his ring finger, his

pointer finger, pinky, thumb. He tosses it into the debris, and I whimper shamelessly when he drops that naked hand between my legs. His ring finger finds the plump pinkness of my folds and strokes my slick seam gently. My hips try to thrust up, but they're snatched in his claspers, and there isn't much room between us. I can feel the heel of his hand pressing into the soft hair above my clit as he licks and kisses my neck, cursing in rapid-fire Vestalin that defies translation.

"I ... want to ..." I tap at my ear and he lifts his head to look at me, feelers swiveling. "Your language." I swallow. "Raw and unfiltered."

He considers that for a minute, and then removes his hand from between us, making me cry out in frustration at the loss of touch. He takes my own hand and presses my finger to a spot just beneath my earlobe, taps it three times, and then ...

When he drops his lips to my ear and whispers against it, I can't understand a word that he's saying.

Oh. Shit.

The Vestalin language is absolutely beautiful, like the wind in the trees, whispers and hushes and ruffles of the tongue, a few hisses, a slight clicking. I have no idea what Rurik is saying to me, but it *feels* dirty, and I react like it is, wrapping his neck with my arms as he rocks his hips forward. I can feel the head of his cock seeking, pressing, testing the readiness of my body.

He reaches up then and very purposely taps beneath his own ear, switching off his translator, too.

I tell him with body language that I'm ready, undulating against him, stroking one of his coremata, sighing with pleasure when he spreads his wings. The white fabric spills open and settles in pools on either side of us. Rurik *growls* as he rubs himself against my folds, stroking my clit with his cock. He seems so much more alien now that I can't understand him.

And damn it, but I love that.

I dig my fingers into the fur at the base of his throat, pushing my hips against him, begging for it without words.

“*Please,*” I groan, but he can’t understand me either or even if he did, I have a feeling he’d hold back and make me beg for it anyway. My hands slide around his neck, fingers playing with his hair, searching out his feelers. I snatch the heavy bone in my hands, and then I rub the fine black hairs underneath with my palms. He growls again, the sensation breaking what little control he has left. His cock dips into my molten core, sleek and hot and tight around him.

The sounds he makes then are *phenomenal*.

Purrs, more whispers, very male groans that rock me to my core. I arch my back and press against him, reveling in the way his claspers tug at me, tuck me close, dig at my skin with frantic, alien fervor. Pheromones rain down from his coremata, shifting over my skin like silky powder, and I moan shamelessly under the assault.

Rurik snarls again, and then he’s thrusting his arm over my neck and biting *himself*. He digs his teeth into the white fabric of his jacket and stains it with crimson, his eyes on mine, his emotions and thoughts flickering through me.

I need you. I want you. I have to feel every part of you or I’ll break.

With another growl of frustration, he tears his teeth from his arm, shoves my head to the side, and *bites me*.

“No, no, wait,” I moan, but I love it too much to make him stop, even if it’s a bad idea. A really, really bad idea. Rurik’s fangs sink deep, slicing my skin but pouring happy pheromones in at the same time, so that it feels less like being bitten and more like being fucked raw. I clutch at his horns, but instead of trying to push him back, I pull him closer. Blood lace slithers into my veins, winding its way through my entire body, curling around my heart and claiming it.

My prince is in every part of me, every limb, every digit, in my head, in my heart, in my cunt.

Lines blur. Existential reality shifts. He lifts his head to stare at me, blood lace spilling down his stained mouth, unwinding from the wounds on my neck. We look at each other, and it's the most perfect instant of *knowing* that I've ever experienced.

I'm barely conscious of reality as I lift my hands to his face to touch his cheeks. His thrusts have stilled—the connection between my cunt and his cock isn't nearly as important as this—and all we do is drift into one another.

You're very handsome, I think, and his mouth shifts into a smile. Some of the blood lace threads snap, but that's irrelevant because there are so many. Blood drips down his chin to land on my chest, but neither of us cares.

It's fortunate that you think so, he replies, the thought fleeting and coy. *Even when I do not douse you with my scent, you seem to feel the same. Your attraction to me is not mandated by pheromones like some mated couples. I am, coincidentally, very lovely to you by accident and not necessarily by design.*

I don't believe you, I tease, but he knows that I do because he can see everything that makes me, me. All of it. I have absolutely no secrets. I feel him rifle through my heart and soul and brain, and I do the same to him.

Rurik is sitting at the edge of a deep cliff, looking down at rivers in various shades of gold. There are six suns, but they have mostly set. He is lonely. He thinks the scenery is beautiful, but he has no one to share it with. He knows the universe would hit differently with a friend, a companion, a lover. He longs for one, but the timing is not right.

He considers traveling to Jungryuk to view the Aspis. They are stubborn and defy the slavers. They defy the corruption of their planet. Rurik thinks they are fascinating. He decides to go, though he knows he will not find his mate there. He does not want to find his mate yet. He does not want to be king.

I blink a few times and shift away from that memory, searching through myself to see what it is that Rurik's looking at. He's browsing through memories of my family now, watching my mom as she whips up a batch of buttermilk

pancakes. My father comes up behind her, wraps his arms around her waist, kisses the side of her neck. I'm a teenager in this memory, and I gag at the sight, turning away and not realizing how lucky I am to have parents who truly love each other.

My brother, Nate, is on the couch playing a video game. My cat, Annabelle, is a kitten, darting down the hallway like her tail is on fire. I smile, in both memory and reality.

The prince digs deeper and my back bows as he licks gingerly at the wound, tasting me in so many more ways than just one.

Abraxas. He's looking at Abraxas. Abraxas is above me—us—and we're fucking him. Rurik is there as I take his mating cock first, then his pleasure rod. He's there as we cuddle beside the fire. He's there as I cry in my fancy four-poster bed on *The Korol* because I miss him so much.

Memories flash through me too quickly to follow, and then I'm laughing on the Cartian bike as Hyt turns us in a circle, splashing water that glints in the sunlight. Rurik is there when Hyt and I look at each other and despair because our mating came too late, and after two other males. He's there when I tell Hyt *yes*, and mean it.

Then it's me and Rurik, in that glass bell jar room at the top of the ship, making love with moths covering the glass on the outside, blood lace on the in. He can feel how much I care about him and vice versa. We're sharing the same memory, but from opposite viewpoints. He is me. I am him.

Rurik snaps the blood lace off, and what's left turns to liquid. Crimson on his chin, smeared across his mouth, on my neck, on my chest. He steals my hand and presses my finger to the spot below my ear, taps it three times; he does the same for himself. When he speaks, I can understand him again.

"My princess," he whispers, recovering far more quickly than I do from whatever the fuck that spiritual journey was. And then he begins to move. His hips undulate into me, sliding us together with obscene wet sounds. Everything down there is slick and swollen and primal. In less than a minute we've

switched from the most spiritual experience of my life to the most basic. Now, it's all about sex, and the way his body responds to mine, the way mine does to his. Male and female. Mating. Breeding. Fucking.

My ass digs a divot into the dirt as Rurik plows deep, bottoming out before he withdraws, shoving into the hilt. He gets a little wild, a little sloppy, slips out of me and ruts my folds before shoving back in. I'm absolutely nuts for him, clawing at his shoulders, the fur around his neck, his coremata, his wings.

When I come, I lose myself again. I'm not a person. I'm just a mess of sticky pleasure and cobbled-together cells with their own basic, simple agenda. *Fuck him, breed him, claim him.* And I did. I do. Only ... because of Hyt's pheromones, I can't get pregnant again which is a relief. Or ... it will be later once I come to my senses.

In that barbarous moment of orgasm, I'm *frustrated* that I can't have his seed take root again.

I collapse into a boneless, whimpering heap as Rurik takes his pleasure with deep, hard, final thrusts. He spills hot, red cum into my body as his claspers tuck me close, as he rests his forearms on either side of my head, as he stares down at me with eyes the color of the Noctuida, an endless black flecked with distant stars and planets.

We're both breathing hard, staring at each other again, when I hear footsteps in the leaves.

"Your Majesty, I take it that all is well?" Zero asks, and Rurik groans, burying his face in my hair. It takes me several breaths to remind myself that I do *not* want my bodyguard dead.

"*Leave us,*" Rurik snarls, his voice so feral and edged with violence that if I were Zero, I'd run. Instead, I turn my head to see her offer up a horizontal bow, Avril by her side. The bitch gives me two thumbs-up and a wink before the pair of them scurry off.

“I ... hate them ...” I pant, holding Rurik to me and wishing that I never had to let him go. “I want ... them both ... jetted into ... a collapsed star.”

“Yes ... my princess ...” he pants right back.

It takes us a little while to recover, to sit up, to figure out how to put my pants back on, for him to stare down at his shredded slacks with a tired sigh.

“How, um, are you going to explain the feeding to your parents?” I whisper, sitting up on my elbows with my sweatpants roughly jerked up over my sex but not quite covering my mons-area. Rurik is leaned back against the base of a tree, one knee propped up, the other leg extended in front of him. He stares at his boot instead of my face. He looks mildly upset, but when his attention shifts to me, there’s nothing but tenderness and understanding and love in his expression.

“I will have to find an excuse not to return to *The Korol* for the time being,” he tells me gently enough, and then he crawls back over to me on all fours, straddling my legs with his body. He presses a soft kiss to the corner of my mouth, and I reach up with one hand to stroke his horn. His feeler. Whatever. “Regardless, it was worth it.” His stained mouth twitches slightly. “You are always worth the trouble you cause, human.”

“May I make a suggestion?” a dark voice asks from the shadows, and I startle before realizing that it’s only Hyt. He pads over to us on bare feet and then squats down beside me. He’s only looking at Rurik though, like he either can’t bear to look at me or simply doesn’t want to. “Visit the prison. Nobody wants to come home with the smell of a criminal on their skin. There’s a sterilization room there that’ll at least take care of the scent. As for the feeding ...” He lets out a sharp bark of laughter. “Well. It’s your messy bed; sleep in it.”

“Pardon?” Rurik asks with a violent frown on his crimson lips, but I wave my hand to dismiss the modified human idiom.

“Why are Avril and Zero here?” I interrupt, struggling to sit up. Hyt uses his tentacles to help prop me into a better position as Rurik draws reluctantly away, dropping into a crouch of his own. I try not to love the way I feel with both of them so close to me. I try even harder not to miss Abraxas, but my chest pangs anyway, and I rub at it with the heel of my hand. Broken heart indeed.

“Ah, yes.” Rurik rises to his feet, holding out a hand. I take it, but it’s mostly Hyt’s tentacles that get my shaky legs to stand properly. He follows along, but still, he doesn’t look at me. “They will remain here with you.” Rurik turns to Hyt, and the edge of his lip curls. “It would not be appropriate—were you to find the princess before my return—for the two of you to be alone together.” He laughs, this high, strained sound that he quickly banishes by running his hand over his face. Rurik turns away to gather his missing glove from the debris. “Stars help us all. We will truly require a miracle of the universe to survive this.”

“Shall I tell my family what I’ve been tasked with? Or do they already know?” Hyt asks mildly, but his voice is cold and limned with an icy rage that I want to soothe away with my tongue. I tuck my hands into the pockets of my bleach-stained sweatpants with the hole in the knee.

“Your father was informed.” Rurik sighs. “You will need an excuse to wait here for Captain Kidd and Abraxas, rather than going straight to Jungryuk.”

“Our wedding should be excuse enough,” Hyt says mildly, and when I look at him, I see that he’s offering a wicked smile alongside his words. “That, and travel to Jungryuk on the week of the lunar tide is a bad idea. That’s when the majority of ships crash. Only a fool would try to land there for the next few days.” He shakes his head and finally, fucking finally, turns to look at me. He’s bright pink, but when he sighs, he turns blue. I don’t understand that, how a sigh can be a lie. But I guess it is.

“Wedding?” Rurik’s voice is sharp-edged and dangerous.

“Commitment Ceremony,” I squeak out, rubbing at the back of my head. “His grandmother suggested it and ... I agreed to it. Hyt doesn’t deserve to suffer because he saved my life.”

“He will suffer if he cannot marry the Imperial Princess?” Rurik chokes, giving the other man a look, like he knows he can’t kill him but is fantasizing heavily about it. “Explain, please. The mating between you, I understand even if I do not like it.” He grits his teeth. “Even if I *abhor* it. But a ceremony?”

“He can keep his standing in the community,” I offer lamely, “and his standing with his family.” *Also, I just want to.* Rurik knows that. He can feel what I feel, knows vaguely what I’m thinking. If he’s biting me, then he knows *exactly* what I’m thinking. “Because no matter what, we’re mates.”

“We’re mates,” Hyt repeats, and he turns pink, tilting his head up to look through the trees at the triple moons in the sky, at the distant gold ribbons of the World Station.

Rurik yanks on one of his feelers with a hissing curse, and I remember the sound of his natural voice in my ears. My body prickles all over, and both men turn to look at me, nostrils flared. I pretend not to notice.

“Why can’t you stay here with us?” I ask, and Rurik’s expression turns tender and sweet again when he steps close to me. Hyt makes an annoyed sound under his breath, tentacles nervously picking and plucking at random sticks, the bark of a tree, my ankle. Suctioning to my ankle. Rubbing *oil* on my ankle.

“With you missing, my parents believe we may try to run. They are suspicious enough as it is. If I do not come back, they will start blowing up planets until we do.”

“Fantastic,” Hyt grits out, turning blue again. “Please tell me this little slipup”—he gestures with a tentacle in the air then spins the tip in a circle to indicate the rabid fuck I just engaged in—“isn’t going to cause a disaster like the Cartians experienced.” He shudders, and I swear that I hear Zero gasp from somewhere in the trees.

“I will not allow that.” Rurik is dead-serious, standing there with his wings tucked, hands fisted, pants shredded at the hips. “I will *not*.” He strides forward and captures my face in his hands, sweeping his thumbs over my cheekbones. “I will clean up, visit the prison under the guise of interviewing someone, and I will report to my parents remotely from the Vestalis embassy.”

“You’ll still be on Yaoh?” I ask hopefully, but Rurik simply lifts a gloved finger to indicate, I guess, the World Station. My heart sinks, and I lean into the remaining hand on my face, closing my eyes. I can feel Hyt watching us, but I don’t care. He knows that Rurik and I are together. He might know and understand that fact better than anyone. “I don’t want you to go.”

My words cause a ripple effect in Rurik, and he shudders like he’s been slapped. He presses his forehead against mine and sighs heavily. I love the smell of him, that spicy-sweetness, like chai tea spiked with honey, and I breathe it in as deeply as I can. As hopeful as I am that we can work things out, I’m terrified, too.

The stakes are high. Sky-fucking-high. World Station high.

This may not end well for any of us.

“I must go. Already I have been away from the face monitor for too long.” He grits his teeth again. “My excuse to leave without it was that Officer Hyt would not appreciate being woken in the middle of the night *and* spied upon. It is a flimsy excuse that will not hold.”

“Flimsy perhaps,” Hyt replies caustically, coolly. All of that playfulness I love in him is temporarily dimmed. “But accurate. I do *not* enjoy being spied on. And I most definitely don’t enjoy being attacked in my own goddamn bed while I’m buried in my mate’s cunt.”

Rurik bares his teeth and Hyt does the same, but neither of them make a move. Because, maybe, they have respect for me and my feelings. Or, more likely, because they can’t. They are literally in checkmate with one another.

“I will clean up what I can before I go.” Rurik holds out his arm, and I take it, trying not to focus on Hyt too much while he’s here. Once the prince is gone, we can ... we can talk. We head back in the direction of the house to find Zero and Avril posed on the deck together.

“This place is *amazing*,” Avril breathes out, starry-eyed and smiling out at the water. I see now that she’s got wanderlust in her blood, and I feel even sorrier for her than I did before. And Zero ... I’ve come to a lot of realizations about Zero lately. She watches us pass by with bright red eyes, the blood lace collar at her throat glowing, and I wonder how fucking weird it’ll be to have her and Avril here alongside Hyt.

I’m kinda pissed about that if I’m being honest. I just ... I want to enjoy my last few days alone with him.

Rurik picks me up so that I won’t get glass shards in my bare feet, but it seems like while we were mating, someone—Hyt, surely—cleaned it all up. Could still be glass splinters or stray bits here or there though.

My prince sets me on the bed, right in the messy, bloody puddle on the mattress, removes his glove with his teeth and then presses his hand into the sheets. He’s positioned his palm directly between my legs, leaning in with that glove still dangling from his mouth. The blood draws up and into him, absorbed by his skin. Rurik lets the glove fall, and I gather it up, hugging it against my chest.

We stare at each other.

“We will see one another again soon enough,” he whispers, voice ragged with emotion. “I do not like the idea of this wedding, but I ... I will be bound to a throne room and enslaved by a ship, and you will have needs for companionship and conversation and love. You will have your Aspis, and I suppose you will have your Falopex, too.”

“Don’t do that,” I choke, grabbing at his feeler again, yanking him close. Our mouths brush, and then he turns away sharply, like he can’t bear another second of this torture. “Don’t fucking say things like that.”

“I must go. I love you, princess. I have loved you for many lifetimes, I will love you for many more, and I will see you again shortly.” He stands up suddenly and heads for the empty pane where the door used to be.

“I love you, too. And, most importantly,” I add, before he can get too far away, “I will have my Vestalis as well.”

I see Rurik’s wings ripple, catch sight of the beautiful pattern etched into them, and then watch as he meets up with Hyt in the dark. They exchange words, too low for me to hear, and then Rurik retreats to one of those closed transport taxi things that the Falopex use for the elderly.

I bite down on my lip until it bleeds, watching as the water parts and the transport zips away into the moonlit night.



“Majesty, may we come in?” Zero asks from the doorway, and I nod. I don’t trust myself with words right now. *I need Abraxas. I need to talk to him. He’s the only person that I can talk to, the only person that I know will be able to figure this out, and certainly the only one that has the right to dictate what happens with me and Hyt.* He can’t stop what’s happened with me and Rurik, never could. But ... if he doesn’t want me to be with Hyt, I can’t be, regardless of what Rurik says.

Hyt’s companion zips into the room, chittering happily and spraying bubbles around me, hissing a bit when he whips circles around the pair of women in the doorway. I see Hyt outside, hands on the edge of the deck railing, head lowered, cowboy hat blocking any view of his face.

Shit.

I look back to Avril and Zero, still hugging Rurik’s glove to my chest. Avril notices and offers up the barest quirk of a smile.

“I told you that you’d like him,” she says, acting as if her belief in me and Rurik was the reason our ship sailed. Ugh. I miss Jane. And Connor. Speaking of ...

“How’s my boy, Connor, doing with Brot?” I ask, forcing false cheer. This is a fantastic change of subject, one that doesn’t involve me or my love life or the fact that I’m slowly dying without Abraxas or blowing up planets or Hyt being pregnant or ... Yeah. This is better. Uncomplicated.

“Head over heels, completely smitten.” Avril draws her hand across the room as if to indicate the burgeoning relationship between her ex and the bitchy Vestalis princeling. “They’re honestly insufferable together. They make you and Rurik seem bearable to be around, as a couple I mean.”

Hyt saunters back into the room, wearing only his belt and his hat, blood smeared in random crimson swatches all over his body. I imagine he’d love to take a swim to wash it all off.

“Ladies,” he greets, inclining his head and tipping his hat, and they both offer nods in return. “You can sleep on the bottom floor, but I swear on the Dead Kings’ crowns that if either of you even *think* about walking up those stairs at any point without my say-so, I’ll give you tents and send you out to camp on the island.” He grins at them, like it’s a big joke, but his eyes are hard and serious and pissed the fuck off.

Avril gives me a *look* that I purposely ignore, and I wonder how much she saw when she got here. Like, did she see Rurik smash through the glass and basically tear me off of Hyt’s dick? Did she overhear our conversation in the kitchen? I’m hoping the answer is a big fat *no* to both of those questions.

“It would be easier for me to guard her majesty if I were unrestricted in my movements.” Zero turns to Hyt, her feet still bare, her white dress long and shapeless, the antennae on the top of her head like a big, red bow. “I will accept the offer of a tent and remain on the island.”

“Uh, okay.” He blinks at her and then shakes his head, giving me a look before he heads out of the room and down the stairs, muttering under his breath.

“Dude.” Avril runs forward, her red dress swishing, her face painted up like a Vestalis, hair braided and slung over one shoulder. “What the hell happened at the chapel?”

“Long story,” I grumble, crawling over to Hyt’s nightstand and tugging the drawer open. My mouth twitches. There’s a masturbator in here too, in the same shape and color as the others I’ve seen. I stick Rurik’s glove alongside it and close the drawer before either of the other girls can see. “TL;DR

version: I almost died, Hyt saved my life, things are even more complicated than ever.”

“We nearly died as well,” Zero tells me matter-of-factly, like it’s not important, just something I should know. “The king and queen *wanted* to kill us, but the prince would not allow it. He fought for our lives.”

I cringe and slump back into the pillows, rubbing at my face again. Here I was, eating family dinners and hitting the shooting range, having mind-blowing sex with Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt, and my friends were nearly killed because of it.

“I’m sorry.” I drop my hands into my lap as Avril sits down on the edge of the bed. “I didn’t know. Honestly, I thought it was all over—it almost was over for me—and then I woke up here. We couldn’t contact you without Rurik’s parents finding out so ... we waited.”

Avril takes my hand and gives it a squeeze, and I find myself squeezing hers right back.

“It’s not your fault,” she tells me and, this time, I can see that she actually means it. “We just thought you should know that Rurik, he stuck his neck out for us when he didn’t have to.”

“I appreciate you telling me,” I whisper, voice tight.

“Which, I guess, is why we’re wondering about all of, um, this.” She swings her finger around in a circle the way Hyt did with his tentacle just a few minutes earlier. “You, sleeping in Officer Hyt’s bed.” Avril narrows her blue eyes on me. “I thought we talked about what a really, really bad idea this was.”

“He gave me his pearl to save my life.” The words are flat, but not because I’m not feeling anything. Because I’m feeling too many things altogether.

Zero gasps, covering her mouth with both hands, and Avril gapes like she actually knows what I’m talking about.

“Falopex—” I begin, but Avril waves my words away with a flick of her fingers.

“I know all about the Falopex and their pearls and ... shit.” Avril stops talking, Zero slowly drops her hands from her mouth, and we all sit there in silence. I pray that Hyt comes back quickly and saves me from the tumult of mixed feelings tangling in my chest.

Instead, it’s my bodyguard who breaks the tension.

“While we are waiting, the prince has a gift for you.” Zero approaches the side of the bed and kneels on the edge of it, denting the mattress as the mood in the room shifts suddenly. She brings her mouth down near my ear, lifting her fingers up and pressing two of them beneath my lobe, in the same spot where Rurik used my own fingers to switch off the translator.

I can tell right away that it isn’t Zero controlling the actions of the cyborg body: it’s Rurik.

“What are you—”

My words cut off abruptly as Zero whispers in my ear, her voice the arrogant, haughty lilt that I’m so used to hearing roll off the prince’s faultless lips.

“For when you next see the Aspis,” he breathes in the android’s voice, and then he’s gone and Zero is back, her low voice becoming a rapid-fire murmur that gives me the chills. I think she’s speaking in code, but it could be an alien language, too. Sounds a little like a possessed person whispering in tongues. I am not a fan.

The end result is that I feel the translator embedded in my skin flare to life with a bit of heat, and then another, more robotic voice echoes inside my skull.

“*New language pack successfully installed,*” it says, and then both the voice and Zero are gone, the cyborg rising to her feet beside the bed.

“So ... can I understand the Aspis language now?” I ask, trying not to get too excited. My mate and I have always had a bit of a language problem, but things went well when I spoke to him before the star-jump. Maybe the tablet itself was translating the words for me then? Doesn’t matter. I’m more

than a little bit excited at the idea of removing our language barrier—permanently.

“There will be no further issues with communication.” Zero sweeps a bow, long white hair sliding over her shoulder before she stands up straight again, chin held aloft. She stares me down, and it’s like having that hot pink cursor pulsing on the screen in our long-ago den. Because it was her den as much as it was mine, as much as it was Abraxas’, maybe more.

On a different day, I’d ask her about it, how that ship went down, how she got injured, what it was like to serve on a research vessel sent to such a dangerous, hostile planet.

Just ... not today.

Hyt’s footsteps sound on the stairs again, and I’m flooded with equal parts relief and nervousness.

“Here you go.” He hands Zero a small metal circle with a button in the center. How, exactly, that becomes a tent, I have no idea. In his tentacles, I see that he has a sleeping bag, a jug of water, and a box of what I think are like protein bars or something? He hands it all over to Zero and gives Avril a look. “I assume you’re sleeping in the house?”

“So I can listen to the two of you fuck? Gross. No.” Avril stands up from the bed and heads over to Zero, looping their arms together. “We’re pretty close, so ... we’ll bunk together.” With a scowl, Zero unthreads her arm from Avril’s with a sigh and a roll of her red eyes, and then she turns and heads in the direction of the island. “I’ll be back to help you bathe and dress in the morning,” Avril assures me, and I narrow my eyes on her.

“I’m sure I’ll manage just fine on my own,” I quip, and she gives my mussed hair a quizzical look in return.

“Really though? No. I’ll be here.” Avril takes off after Zero, kicking her shoes off before running across the sand with a giggle that I can hear from here. She’s excited to be on Yaoh, and as annoying as I find her, it’s actually a little bit ... cute.

Hyt lets his head fall back and rubs his hands over his face the way I did not two minutes prior.

“Lights off,” he says, and the entire house goes dark.

Silence falls between us, awkward and heavy and weird.

I’m ... wet between the legs with Rurik’s cum. Sitting in Hyt’s bed.

“Shall we take a swim?” I ask gently, and Hyt drops his hands, lowers his chin, looks at me across the gloom. There’s so much hesitation in him that I wonder if he isn’t going to refuse altogether, but then his hand comes out, and I stand up to take it, his tentacles bunching around me and hauling me from the bed.

Hyt lifts me up so that we’re eye to eye in the dark.

“Earthling ...” His voice trails off just before he kisses me, offering up his pearl on the tip of his tongue. Relief floods through me and I throw my arms around his neck, kissing him hard and stealing the pearl. We part, just barely, to look at each other again.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, and he raises a fin-brow at me, using one of his tentacles to pull his hat back so that the brim doesn’t get between us.

“Me?” he asks, like he’s surprised I even posed the question. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

I give him a look.

“Tell me you aren’t traumatized by getting attacked mid-fuck, and having me stolen off of your dick. I’ll wait. If you say it, you’ll turn blue. That’s a fact.”

Hyt works his jaw, and he doesn’t look at me, using his tentacles to hold me close as he turns and takes us both to the edge of the deck. He strips our clothes off with his tails and chucks them aside. We fall into the water together, bubbles billowing around us, faces close. I fight that initial panicky feeling that tells me I can’t possibly breathe down here, and then I suck in a massive breath.

Water fills my mouth and lungs, but the pearl keeps me going, makes it seem like I’m breathing air instead. Not sure I’ll ever get used to such a thing. Hyt floats in front of me for a

minute, and then he performs this slo-mo back spin, twisting in an elegant loop with his tails dragging behind him. He finishes the spin and comes to a stop in front of me again, our faces pressed close.

We're both naked. It's moonlit and umbrous down here. It's the perfect spot to fuck.

"Hyt, I—" Bubbles rush out of my mouth, but I don't get to finish what I was going to say. He shushes me with a kiss and then drifts closer, putting his mouth near my ear.

"Don't talk freely down here," he whispers, bubbles escaping his lips to tickle my skin. I nod as he draws back, floating gracefully while I tread water clumsily in front of him. Hyt chuckles and more bubbles escape his mouth. "Don't fight it so hard. Relax." His tentacles sweep around me, one of them drifting between my legs, and I let out a gasp. And ... yep, more bubbles. "Shhh, my mate."

He keeps his gaze on mine, his voice an echoing, reverberating comfort underwater. Hyt cleans me gently but thoroughly with his tentacle, erasing any trace of Rurik from my cunt and then, after I'm making these pathetic little gasping sounds, the rest of my skin. *Might have to reapply the sunblock after this.*

I grab onto his shoulders for support and ham-handedly swipe at the blood on his scaled pink skin. He's being careful not to say anything about what happened, doesn't want me to say anything, but ... wouldn't the smell be in the water? I don't know how any of this works.

His companion swirls around the pair of us, spinning in cute little circles, tiny tentacles drifting in the current. Hyt glances its way and then looks at me again. He pulls his braid over his shoulder, removing the tie and reattaching it to his wrist. His hair doesn't come undone right away, but the current picks at it like it's trying to tug it all free.

"Shithead's making certain that Minae—or whoever else—doesn't bother us right now." A slight quirk of his lip. "I still wouldn't say anything down here that you don't want

repeated, but we can at least bathe in privacy.” He lifts a brow, and I find myself nodding.

Awkwardness settles between us, and I hate it. I want to go back to an hour ago when he was fucking me and telling me that he wanted to be in the running, that he liked me, that ...

“Can we have sex down here?” I ask him, and he blinks at me in surprise, like he didn’t expect that. His gaze shifts to the side, looking toward the windows of his house, tails swaying around us like the plants on the sandy bottom down below. “I mean, if Falopex are primarily water-dwelling creatures, I’d assume that they also primarily mate underwater. That’s what the tank in your room at your parents’ place was for, yes?”

Hyt hesitates before answering, his expression emptying out before he turns back to me.

“You want to have sex with me right now?” he asks, like he assumed the answer would be ‘no’ but is now second-guessing himself. “I didn’t ... well, shit. You know.”

And I do.

He thinks because I saw Rurik, talked to Rurik, fucked Rurik, that I won’t want him right now.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

I missed Rurik, and I was glad to see him, and I wish he were here, but what happens with him, how I feel about him, and what I do with him have no effect on how I feel about Hyt.

“We were interrupted,” I offer cryptically, shrugging my shoulders and loving the way his tentacles keep me anchored to him in the deep blue of the water. It’s warm, too, by the way. Just like the air above us. Balmy, tropical, soothing. And the sound of it in my ears, it’s like a hot pot of soup being boiled on the stove, a comforting burble of liquid on my eardrums. “I hear it’s a virtue to finish what one starts.”

“Ah hah.” Hyt releases my body and then swims a beautiful circle around me, tails drifting, obscuring my vision like I’m trapped in a forest of pink kelp. “So, sex with me would be akin to character growth for you, huh?” There’s a bit of that

playfulness back in his voice, and I'm so fucking glad to see it that I could cry.

“Question,” I burble, unused to the sound of my own voice underwater. “And it's not even random. In our house on Jungryuk, remind me: do we have a bathtub or shower for situations like this?” I query, my chest tightening with a fierce ache that I can't explain. *Fuck, it hurts. Fuck, it feels good. Fuck, I need to chat with Abraxas ASAP.* “Because if we don't, I want one. And if we do, may I inquire about bath bombs and ___”

I'm going to say *bubble bath*. I am. But then Hyt kisses me, wraps his tentacles around every inch of my body, traps me in his embrace, and my mind goes blank. Hyt kisses me like he's saying thank you, and I don't understand why. Don't I owe him an apology? Don't I owe all three of the males in my life apologies? They each deserve to be committed to, wholly and completely.

But ... circumstances being what they are, what are we supposed to do now?

Hyt wraps me up nice and tight, cuddling my body against his with his tentacles. His hands play with my hair, combing through the strands as it floats around me in a wash of ruddy fire. He takes his time kissing me, his own lips as soft as anything I've ever touched, pillowy and plush and made for tender moments and sex. I feel my legs being spread, his tails adjusting my body for penetration. Unfortunately that also means we can't kiss very well with the height difference between us.

I'm lowered down the front of his body, my back pillowed with tentacles, his hands on my breasts. Hyt's expression is one of gentle determination, but he can't hide that lick of ardor glimmering behind his multi-hued irises. One of his fox ears flattens back, and then he's drawing me to him, and I look down to see his mating tentacles enter me first. The sight is almost as exquisite as the feel of them, burrowing into me, stroking and petting with mad precision. He drags me down the length of his cock, filling me completely, consuming my folds and clit with his base tentacles.

“So beautiful,” I gasp out as he holds us together like that, and I study the play of small pink petals wrapping my cunt. Each one has a tiny sucker. Each one makes water-resistant pheromone oil. Both inside and out. So many extra digits of pleasure. I exhale another wave of bubbles as Hyt’s companion makes another sweep around our joined forms and then disappears above the water’s surface.

I look up to see Hyt watching me, our bodies drifting lazily in the current. We’re tilting so that he’s above and I’m below, but because we’re underwater, it doesn’t matter much which direction we face, does it? There’s a freedom in that, but there’s also no give, nothing for him to fuck me against.

I want to see what he does to rectify that problem.

With a far too serious expression on his handsome face, Hyt uses his tentacles to slide my body along the length of his cock. I gasp, spilling bubbles, and he makes a show of biting down on one to pop it.

“You’re so tense, little Earthling,” he whispers, his voice a beautiful underwater echo, his hair fanning out around him. He looks like some fairy-tale creature meant to lure humans underwater, something so beautiful that you go to it even knowing it’s going to drown you and eat you. That’s Officer Hyt. “It’s good for me since you’re so damn tight, but I want you to enjoy this. *Relax*, sweetheart.”

I breathe out in time with his words, with the slow drag of my cunt along his shaft as he pushes back in. And then I reach up to tap my translator the way Rurik showed me. Hyt pauses, tilting his head quizzically, and the current shifts us gently so that we’re both horizontal with the ocean floor and then, a little further than that, so we’re nearly upside-down.

“Talk to me.” My words are soft, imploring, curious.

Hyt smiles, sliding that sexy purple tongue from his alien lips. He curls it up so that I can see the underside, a small metal piercing glinting silver in a stray shaft of moonlight.

“Tongue translator,” he tells me with a wink and a few stray bubbles. “Just in case I need to talk to a perp or a human that

doesn't have their own; I'll switch it off for ya." He flicks a finger against it, plunging us both into the strange beauty of lost translation.

Hyt says something that very much feels like an admission from the heart, something that I wish I could understand, but don't because ... you know, I fetishize the sound of my alien mates' voices. The Falopex language comes out so beautifully underwater, like it was designed to ripple out like raindrops on a pond. It's mellifluous and ethereal, something out of a storybook.

I want to read every fucking page, I think, and then I reach for him, and he lets me. He tucks me against his body, but uses his tentacles to move my hips while he thrusts his own. The effect is less in-and-out and more rubbing, but goddamn does it feel good. He's taken over my pussy the way he's taken over the rest of me, wrapping me up in his tentacles, branding me with his suckers, cuddling me with his arms around my upper back.

We drift and roll in the water, but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter where we go or how we float or whether we face up or down or sideways. Hyt rubs and rolls against me, using his tail tentacles for more friction when we need it, massaging and caressing all of my female parts with his base tentacles. Inside of me, he coaxes with his hard heat, his mating tentacles—not so finicky after all—petting and stroking and caressing.

And his hair, I come to find, is reminiscent of the ethereal, flowing tentacles of an Earthen jellyfish. Strands of it wrap my skin, holding tightly to me and offering a mild, superficial stinging that leaves me feeling relaxed and easy in his arms. If Hyt had done this to me before, taken me in the water and wrapped me up as thoroughly as he's doing now, I couldn't have ever denied him anything. It's almost as bad as when Rurik throws his insta-love soulmate shit over me. Or when I touch the sticky pheromones on Abraxas' battle-ready skin.

I let out a small yelp of surprise when my ass settles against the sandy bottom, and then Hyt is stabbing four of his tentacles into the ground to hold us in place. He bows his back

to lean down, cups my face in his hands, and kisses me until I can't breathe. And then, with a solid surface finally underneath us, he ruts me into the ocean floor, our bodies slick together even with the press of the water. I give him credit for that, for his slippery, oily pheromone nectar.

With my eyes wide open, staring up at him, I arch my back in a deep curve, and I come hard enough around him that he makes a sound like a typhoon. Water swirls around us in a whirlpool, Falopex words that sound like raindrops, like a flood, like the gentle settling of mist on leaves, all come pouring out of him. I give him everything, open myself up completely.

On the next inhale, I find myself with a chestful of water and begin to suffocate.

Hyt wraps all of his tentacles around me again, cocooning me in a swirl of pink ribbons, and then he whisks us up toward the surface so quickly that I get dizzy. We spin as we go, and then he's putting his palms flat on the edge of the deck and using strong arms to drag us both onto the wood surface.

He drops me hard, tilts my head back by lifting my chin, and seals his mouth over mine. My eyes are wide, staring up at the moons as he inhales and draws all of the liquid from my aching lungs. Hyt turns to the side and spits the water over the edge of the deck, panting as I cough and choke in the aftermath. He turns me onto my side and pats my back, rubbing and soothing until I've recovered.

He waits patiently until I've coughed enough times to reassure my terrified body that we're not drowning, that our Falopex mate has literally siphoned the water directly out of our lungs. Only then does he push me onto my back, gather me into his tentacles, and tuck me up close against him. I'm lifted from the rough wood of the deck until our bodies are sealed, pelvis to pelvis.

Oops. I may have ... yeah, I gave the pearl back when I climaxed.

Hyt stays on his hands and knees above me, my smaller form locked to his with his tentacles, strapped to his chest and

abdomen, my own legs wrapped around his waist. He drops his head to look down at me, and I tilt mine back in an attempt to meet his gaze, the pair of us panting in time with one another, our breathing matched. Hyt quirks a sideways smile at me.

He relaxes his tentacles and then uses one to lift my arm up, encouraging me to press my finger against the underside of his tongue, restarting his translator so that I can understand him again. I do, and then he tucks me right back up in the nest of his tails like he never wants to let me go.

“Earthling,” he says gently, as I start coughing again. “I appreciate your enthusiasm at giving the pearl back to me, but you don’t have to rush it.” Hyt releases a single tentacle to stroke and pet my wet hair away from my face. With our bodies pressed tight at the groin, I can tell he’s still hard, that *he* didn’t come even though I did.

I blush all over as the reality hits me again.

I gave him the pearl back when I came, might’ve fucking drowned myself in my orgasm.

“You’ve always got my back, don’t you?” I whisper against his chest.

“I’d like you *on* your back, if that’s alright,” he chokes out, and I laugh which only makes him groan more deeply in his chest. The sound vibrates against my cheek.

“Permission granted.”

Hyt lowers me to the deck, yanks my legs wide with his tentacles on my ankles, and then rises above me so that I can see him, scales slick and pretty in the silver light of the moons. He snatches his crimson cowboy hat up off the deck and places it onto his head, his ears sticking up through the small holes on either side. He reaches up with a hand to adjust it, and then smirks at me.

“I’ll let it go this time,” he says, and at first I think he’s referring to the pearl incident. “But next time someone snatches you off of my dick ...” He trails off with a deep laugh

of his own, and then rams his hips into me, filling up my slick channel with his own stiff need. “I’mma fuckin’ kill ‘em.”

Hyt drops down, palms slamming into the deck, and uses his hips to grind me into the wood planks. He slides all the way out and then shoves deep, moaning as my fingers trail down his muscular arms, as my head tilts back, as my eyes close, and my body latches around his. I fist him with my cunt, sleek and hot and sticky with our combined arousal, and he curses a storm as he orgasms, bottoming out with gritted teeth and fingertips digging into the surface of the deck.

When he’s finished—just shy of me getting a second orgasm from him—he collapses on top of me, and I close my eyes, relishing the weight of his body. He’s heavy, but not as heavy as I imagine he really is. I think he’s keeping some of the weight off with his tentacles.

“You are more trouble than you’re worth,” he grumbles again, skin flashing blue. Hyt gently pushes himself up to his hands and knees again, sliding his cock out of me and then standing up. He takes me with him, and I swear, cuddling up in his nest of tail tentacles is like snuggling into a warm, soft bed. “Let’s get some sleep. I bet you the crown of every long Dead King that my family gets up in our business again tomorrow.” He carries me into the room behind his back, strapped to him with tails in the Falopex version of a piggyback ride, and then goes about hanging his hat up. He adjusts the blankets while I float there, wrapped in his warmth, suckers stuck all over my skin. “Here we are.”

Hyt tucks me into bed with his tails alone and then climbs in beside me, trapping me against his body with them again. He’s lucky I’m a cuddler. Jane would hate this. She likes to be freezing cold, curled up on the very edge of the bed, not touching anyone at all. Me, I like a nice, codependent nighttime cuddle. Now, that is. Now I like it. Never did before. *Because I didn’t have the right ... guys. In the plural.*

“You mind if we listen to some Jungryuk night sounds?” he asks me groggily. “I usually put them on to sleep when I’m not at home.”

“I can’t wait to see our house,” I whisper, because in some fucked-up corner of my brain, I imagine this all working out in a way where I can live at least part of the time with Hyt and Abraxas on Jungryuk. *But no matter what, I will not abandon Rurik to a lonely and fucked-up fate. I’m too stubborn to ever give up on that.* “And yes, put them on.”

Hyt makes a strange sound and cuddles me even closer, tucking me up under his chin and stroking my hair with his fingers. I think he got all the tangles out to be honest. *Take that Avril, you brat.*

“Play *Soothing Sounds for Sleep: Jungryuk in the Dark* at medium volume,” Hyt murmurs, and his sound system complies. “Our house,” he whispers a moment later, and then his fingers still and he’s the first to fall asleep.

His easy breathing drags me under, and I drift off to the nighttime sounds of Jungryuk.

I dream of—and terribly miss—Abraxas.



Hyt's gentle fingers drift through my hair, bringing me back to the world of the living with a lip-smacking yawn and a gloriously delicious stretch. Sunlight digs into my blurry eyes and gentles across my exposed skin. I'm naked and mostly uncovered, but the air is pleasantly warm and Hyt's body is just the right sort of hot.

"Good morning, little human mate," he murmurs, rubbing strands of silky auburn hair between his fingertips.

"Mm," I mumble, burrowing into Hyt's muscular thigh. That sort of, kind of puts his naked dick near the back of my head but I'm still too drenched in sleep to pay much attention to it. The waves seem a bit louder than usual, and it takes me several minutes to remember that Rurik was here, that he broke the glass doors to the deck, and that Avril and Zero are on the island in a tent that apparently comes out of a metal disc with a button in the center. "What time is it?" I grumble, my lips brushing Hyt's inner thigh and making him shudder.

"Uh, two past the solar mid-center hour. That mean anything to you?" he teases, but he knows it doesn't. "If we were on Earth, it'd be about ... three-sixteen in the morning, so that's not particularly relevant, now is it?"

I crack my eyes to see that his skin is blue. For all I know, it's probably three past the solar mid-center hour, some slight deviation from the truth that counts as a lie but is close enough.

“Does that mean we slept in?” I query back, forcing myself up with a palm on the mattress. My fingers brush his cock, and he makes another strange male sound that has my female parts very, very excited to be awake. I lift my head to look up at him and I most definitely do not stare at his dick to see if it’s erect. *It is. There’s just a bit of white protruding from the base. I want to lick it.* Instead, I meet his eyes and watch as his mouth widens into an impossibly beautiful smile.

“It means I’m shocked that we haven’t been swarmed by my family yet.” Hyt flashes pink with the truth and then reaches over to the nightstand with a tentacle to pick up his glass tablet, studying it for messages and then quirking a brow. He shakes his head and tosses it aside. “I was planning on staying in bed with you all day, but my dad wants to see me in his office, just like I fucking knew he would.” Hyt sighs tiredly and rubs at his forehead with a tentacle tip. “The news broke this morning that the Vestalis have lost their Imperial Princess. Everyone in the Noct is looking for you—those with good intent and especially those with bad.” He snags my chin in his fingers and gives me an imploring look. “It is absolutely *vital* that we keep our business as *our* business, okay?”

I nod, and then gasp when Hyt uses his grip on my chin to tug me forward for a kiss. I tumble a bit and fall into him, and the side of my knee just barely grazes against the base of his dick. We both release a sharp exhale of breath and stare at each other. He’s the first to break the look, lifting his head up to stare past my shoulder with a frown.

“Knock, knock, sorry,” Avril says as Hyt gathers up the blankets with his tentacles and very quickly covers our nakedness. “But I’m starving, and I wondered if—”

“Kitchen is downstairs. Hurry up and go.” He points with a tentacle and then lifts a brow. “And for fuck’s sake, shut our bedroom door on the way out.”

I look over my shoulder in time to see Avril make a face at the word *our*, but then she’s scurrying past with a bland-looking Zero on her heels. The cyborg girl pauses to study me in such a way that I wonder if Rurik might be looking through her eyes.

“Majesty,” she greets, and then she’s gone and closing the door behind her.

I glance at Hyt to see that his eyes are squeezed shut, and his jaw is locked in frustration.

“I’d say they weren’t so bad once you get to know them, but ... honestly, I think they’re worse. I thought I liked them both once upon a time.”

He smiles at that and cracks his eyes, six pupils staring fixedly down at me as I sit up and the blankets tumble around my naked body. Between us, his cock is fully erect now, sans mating tentacles. I bet if I touched it, I could bring them out to play. Too bad his weird stinging jellyfish hair only works underwater. Just the memory of it is making my skin tingle. Alas, it’s freshly braided and tucked behind him in the mountain of pillows.

“We’re terrible fake fiancés, you know,” I tell him, picking at a fiber in the blanket instead of looking at his face. “Really, I mean, god-awful at it.”

“I never wanted it to be fake,” he says easily. “Not even for one single second. I was just trying to leave space for you to be okay with this. I’m still leaving space for you to be okay with this.”

I force myself to look up at him, calm and relaxed and handsome in the sunshine, an alien sea framed outside the window behind the bed. His arms are crossed, expression pensive.

“Our circumstances might affect what we do and where we end up, but they don’t change how I feel.” I keep our gazes connected, opening myself up to him as fully as I do during sex. “What I do with Abraxas and Rurik, my love for them, has no impact on my ...” I can’t find the rest of the words that I need to say, so I repeat myself. “My love for them doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

“And how is it that you feel?” Hyt asks softly.

“I really, *really* like you,” I whisper, eyes filling with hot tears. Hyt softens toward me and grabs me up with his

tentacles, bringing me against his chest. He tucks my head under his chin and holds me there, waiting, I think, for the *but* to come after that sentence. There is one; he's right. "But I also really like Abraxas, and I can't betray him. There's no other defining factor that I can use to make this fair other than that he was first. Rurik was ... I can't escape my fate with him, and Abraxas knows that, but ... I ..."

"Hey." Hyt uses his tentacles to maneuver me back a bit, flicking the underside of my chin with a finger and offering up a teasing smile to go along with the motion. "Let's relax and worry about this as a problem for another day." He leans in and brushes his lips to mine, tasting tears, I think. "Whether we have a good time together or not changes nothing, don't you agree?" I nod, and he hesitates. I watch his face as he works through his feelings and forges on. "Just so you know: I'll pursue you until you tell me *no* in no uncertain terms." Hyt forces another smile, but it's static and a tiny bit sad. "The only person that can get me to back off is you."

He taps my nose with a tentacle and the suction cup gets stuck for a brief moment before popping off. I frown at him and rub at my face with my wrist.

"What about the baby? You keep saying it's my choice, but I don't see you as someone that'd back off so easily. I have no idea what the kid will look like or if it'll even have your DNA, but ... you've got a stake in this, don't you?"

"If you don't want me around, I ... you'll be the Queen of the Noctuida, Eve. There won't be a goddamn fucking thing I can do about it. We'll have to meet up to exchange the pearl every now and again, but that's it." He grits his teeth and looks away from me, searching around with his tentacles for a cowboy hat and then flopping a brown one onto his head. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Go for it." I scoot over so that I'm sitting beside him, one of his legs and one of mine stretched out side by side. We each have the other knee tucked up.

"What's so great about them?" he asks, running his purple tongue over his lips. He seems genuinely curious, so I think on

that for a minute in order to give him a proper answer. When I close my eyes, the sound of the shushing waves helps calm my thoughts. Hyt doesn't have to specify who *them* is. He means Rurik and Abraxas, of course.

I open my eyes again, staring at my toes and wishing I had nail polish. Maybe Kayla has some? Maybe Hyt could get some from the Jungryuk market? Maybe there's an AI robot that can paint them for me? Who the hell knows?

"Abraxas was there for me when nobody else was." As soon as I say the words, I almost regret them. Hyt flinches, but it's not his fault. He can't keep track of every single trafficked human being on the whole of Jungryuk by himself. "He took care of me, tried to keep me safe, even at the cost of his own life. He used the last of his strength to make sure I'd survive, and he was willing to die to make sure my choices were respected." I rub at my chest again. Now that I'm sitting up, I feel a little groggy, a bit dizzy, and it's not because I didn't get enough sleep. It's because sharing a life force with Hyt only bought us so much time. If I don't get to Abraxas soon, we're all dead. "I mated him to save his life, but I also mated him because I just genuinely like his personality." I turn to look at Hyt. He's watching me carefully, waiting patiently for me to finish my story. "Like you and me, I guess."

"Like us," he agrees, and there's an understanding in his voice that I'm not sure was there before. "Abraxas, I get. Truly, I do. You forget that I spent some time with him on my cruiser, that I took him back to Captain Kidd's ship." Hyt toys with the brim of his hat. "But his Imperial Majesty?" He snorts and flicks the brim up and away from his eyes. "Are you sure about him? The Vestalis mate pull is like a compulsion. It drives sane people to do completely insane things." He looks over at me apologetically. "Although, you hold the Noctuidan record for longest holdout. You should be proud of yourself for that one."

"Yeah, well." I scratch absently at my cheek. "That's what I thought at first, too. I was going to run away with Abraxas and leave Rurik to starve." Thinking about that now fills me with shame and guilt and this weird fear of something that didn't

come to pass but could have. It's a horrifying idea now. "But I like him, too. He genuinely cares about how I feel." I turn back to Hyt. "He basically told me that I could have you even though he hates you. That can't have been easy, especially when the guy expects to spend the rest of his life trapped in that hellhole they call the throne room on *The Korol*."

Hyt looks genuinely shocked by my words.

"He said you could *have* me?" he asks with a bitter laugh. "What an arrogant son of a bitch." He yanks me into his lap yet again, settling me so that I'm straddling his thighs with his rigid cock between us. Lo and behold, the mating tentacles have come out. I do my best to ignore them, clearing my throat dramatically. "Maybe it's *me* who says you can have *him*? Hmm?" He uses a tentacle to tilt my chin up. "Ever think of it that way?"

I smile, and Hyt smiles back.

And then his tablet rings with an incoming call.

"Shit, that's Kidd's ringtone," he tells me apologetically, snatching the tablet up in a tentacle and answering it with a suction cup. I turn over my shoulder to see the space pirate's face fill the screen. Looking at him, I'm finding it hard to believe that Jane not only fucked this guy but accidentally perma-bound her vagina to the dude. He's ... very alien looking, that's for sure.

Big round ears, a fluffy gold Mohawk that tumbles all the way down his back, the solid amber eyes of a predator, tattooed skin that appears spotted, like a hyena's. Wearing a fucking tricorne hat. I flick my gaze to Hyt and his cowboy hat, and try to remember what he might look like to someone who isn't a certified A.S.S. (alien smut slut). Hot pink skin, at the moment. A nest of tentacle tails originating at the base of his spine. Scaled fox ears with fins on the sides. Two eyes with three irises and three pupils inside of each.

Yeah ... I think ... I *know* that Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt is weirder than Captain Kidd.

“Everything okay?” Hyt asks, voice tense. He’s bet a lot on me, on Abraxas, on his friend’s ability to get Abraxas to me. No wonder he’s stressed-out. I tap my finger just below my ear, restarting my own translator before the captain starts talking and I end up missing out on crucial information. *But damn, Hyt’s tongue translator piercing is amazing. Also, it’s sexy as fuck.*

“The Vestalis are making a star-jump,” Kidd says as I turn fully around in Hyt’s lap to look at him. Without my even noticing, Hyt’s pulled the blankets up around us so that all of my bits—and his—are covered. “Thought I’d check in with you now. We likely won’t get another chance to do so.”

“Why are they star-jumping?” Hyt asks, tensing up behind me. “Are they coming back over here?”

“Do you really think the Imperial Court would want the whole of the Noct to know their princess was missing? Someone leaked the news, and now they have no choice but to show they’ve got an easy solution to a complex problem. Apparently, they bought some crap story about the Collector landing on Jungryuk with their girl in tow. They’re headed full speed in that direction.” Kidd laughs, but it’s humorless. “Somebody’s getting executed for this. Just hope it’s not us.” There’s an angry pause there as the captain taps two silver-tipped claws against his temple. “I truly hope you know what you’re doing.”

Hyt grumbles and hugs me more tightly with his tentacles, but he doesn’t answer. When I look back at him, I see that he’s working his jaw in thought.

“She’s my mate, Kidd,” Hyt says this like a reminder, like a *warning*.

“May I reiterate—as nicely as possible—that you are the dumbest motherfucker to have ever existed in the whole of the Noctuida,” Kidd says kindly, leaning in toward the screen with his patterned face (the huge black spot over his right eye looks like an eye patch) and massive fangs. They’re nearly as big as Abraxas’—in his smallest form. Still, impressive. “We’re

making good time, but it'll be at least another sixteen solar days."

"Sixteen days?!" I choke out, but Hyt strokes the side of my face with a tentacle in a calming gesture.

"Eight Earth days ... equivalent to four days on Yaoh or Jungryuk," he tells me, but ... damn, that's cutting it close. "The timing isn't great, Kidd. Think you'll have any problems getting past the World Station surveillance with all this hubbub?"

"I'd rather land on Jungryuk, but now that the Vestalis are moving *The Korol* into position?" Kidd snorts. "Not to mention the fact that it's lunar tide." He curls the corner of his lip in a growl. "Of course it is. Most Stars-damned inconvenient time for it, too. I can handle the surveillance, but are you sure that *you* can handle the landing?"

"I'm sure," Hyt replies easily, and his confidence, it bolsters me. Sexy as hell, too.

There's a pause there where I'm not sure either man knows quite what to say.

"I figured ... well, I thought ... I'm sure *that woman* would love to speak with your human," Kidd grumbles, and I roll my eyes. Yeah. He's *exactly* Jane's type which means that he and I will probably butt heads. I decide to make an effort. I usually don't with her boyfriends since they never stick around for more than five seconds, but this is big news. A commitment has been made. Doesn't get more serious than a copulatory plug, am I right?

Then I remember that I have a glowing vagina and shake the thought from my head.

"Hi, Kidd," I tell him, waving at the screen. "I'm Eve, by the way. Future Queen of the Noctuida and Jane's BFF. Nice work, giving her that plug. If you wanted to lock my girl down, you've probably done it. I'm not sure that she could live without penetrative sex."

Kidd just stares at me, but then Hyt laughs, and the captain shakes his head in disgust.

“I see easily how the two of you became close,” he grumbles, and then he’s pausing and looking off to one side. The expression on his face tells me that it isn’t Jane who’s just entered the room.

I stop breathing, and then I scramble off of Hyt’s lap. I can’t face Abraxas like that, not just yet. He doesn’t need to worry about me and Hyt until *after* we’ve mated, and I’m not at risk of dying, and he’s not jetting around in space on a ship belonging to a wanted pirate.

Kidd steps aside as Abraxas prowls into view, big, powerful, sleek, *male*.

My throat closes completely, and I cough dramatically until I’m able to suck in a sharp breath.

“My *female*,” Abraxas growls, mouth rippling, his face splitting in half in that devil’s grin of his. God, I’ve missed it. I’ve missed him. I knew it was bad, but as soon as I see him, all of that missing comes tumbling into me, and it feels like I’ve been punched, kicked, and throttled all at once.

“Abraxas.” I can barely get the word out, tugging the blankets up and biting down on the fabric. He studies me, his purple eyes taking in my obvious state of undress, the window with the view behind me, the rumpled pillows at my back. “I hear you saved Jane’s life,” I whisper and then, before I get tongue-tied again, I put all of my feelings into my voice so he knows what’s going through my head. “Thank you. And I love you. I fucking love you, Abraxas.”

I’m all too aware of Hyt sitting next to me, stiff and uncomfortable, but I can’t hold back. Not with him. Not with Abraxas. Not with Rurik. I can’t hold back with any of them.

“My feelings for you cannot be encompassed by human words,” Abraxas growls out, stalking back and forth briefly before using his wing-hands to pick up the tablet so that he can bring it closer to his face. He licks the screen, and I shudder all over, thighs clenching. “Only through actions and a rough but tender fuck will you see that *I love you* is not nearly enough.” He pauses and his laugh is like that of a demon, a deep growl

layered over the translator's sultry male laugh. "But still, I love you as well, my tiny female."

I'm getting teary again which is just *annoying* seeing as I'm not a crier. I swear, *Jane* is the crier, but it's hard for even me to believe that bullshit when all I've been goddamn doing is crying. I yank my arm across my eyes as he studies me again, like he knows there's a hell of a lot more to this story than I'm letting on.

"We don't have a lot of time, do we?" I ask Abraxas, but it's Hyt who answers.

"Thirty Earth minutes at most," he says, voice stilted and hesitant.

"The Sucker Tail," Abraxas remarks, still holding the tablet as he sits back with his tail wrapped around his legs. His horns pulse with a faint glow, just enough to shadow his dark face but not enough to light the dimness of the room. He could really use some time on Jungryuk rolling around in a thermal vent. "You are naked with him." He bares his teeth, his black scaled skin splitting in half to reveal white fangs as long as my pinky finger. As I said, even in his smallest form, he's a beast. "I understand that I owe him my thanks for saving you, but it is difficult for me to say such a thing when all I wish to do is eat him."

"You know about that?" I whisper, and Abraxas tilts his head at me, tail tip twitching as he leans back on his palms, wing-hands on the tablet's edges as he grips it tightly.

"When we were unable to make our rendezvous, I feared us both dead." Abraxas slides his long tongue over his lower teeth and then draws it back in so that he can snap both sets together with a clack. "Although, it appears that only you are falling ill between us." He seems so supremely confused about that, but I'm too wound up to explain my venom theory just yet. If he knows that it's *his* venom that's making me ill, that it's because of *his* mating marks that I might die, he won't ever forgive himself. I'll have to tell him the truth eventually, but I want to be with him in person when I do. "Still, I know you would not have lived had the Sucker Tail not given you his

mating pearl.” Abraxas lets out another low growl, one that causes the picture on the tablet to break up and blur, like our connection might very well be lost.

I can’t handle that. I’m not ready to say goodbye to him yet.

“Oh thank fuck.” I put my hand over my face and try to breathe. “Abraxas, I feel like a cheater. I’m sorry. I’m so goddamn sorry that there are no words to—”

“Tiny female,” he growls out, but not unkindly. “I know and understand your heart; it is why I chose you to be my mate out of many fertile and powerful females. You did what was required of you in order to survive, so that we might see each other again. There is nothing wrong with that.”

“It’s not just that,” I blurt out before he can take this any further. My attention shifts over to Hyt, but he’s not looking at me. He’s got an elbow propped on his knee, tails wrapped around his own arms, suction cups pressed into his own shoulders, and he’s staring out across the deck in the direction of the island.

I shift over to sit in his lap, and he blinks rapidly at me, like he’s coming out of a trance. One fin-brow goes up and he uses a tail to tilt his cowboy hat back from his face. Abraxas and Hyt regard one another warily, like neither is quite sure how to react.

“You say I only did what I had to, but that isn’t true.” I sniffle a bit, but I’m not going to cry over this, not when I’m the one who made conscious choices. “You know that I like Hyt, that I liked him from before. We’ve been ... having fun together.” I swallow as Abraxas’ gem-like gaze shifts to me and the screen flickers once again. “We had to mate, yes, because we needed to exchange the pearl. And we had to keep mating so that his family wouldn’t suspect who I was. But ... he’s carrying our baby.”

Silence.

I think ... I hear Jane choking off-screen, and then I see her, making eyes at me from behind Abraxas. She mouths *girl, what the actual fuck is wrong with you?* But I ignore her.

Except ... is that Madonna the possum she has clinging to her shoulder? Huh.

Abraxas' mouth ripples in a snarl as he adjusts his hold on the tablet, moving it from his wing-hands to his regular ones.

"It does not matter; my seed will hold. We will have a female Aspis child." I don't respond to that because well, he doesn't know better than anyone else does what's going to happen. "Perhaps she will have Falopex traits? It is hard to say."

"Why aren't you pissed off?" I ask, just like I did to Rurik, and then the look that Abraxas gives me ... oh my fucking God, the *look*. Unhinged, wild, primal, deadly. If he truly could kill and eat Rurik and Hyt without killing me in return, he'd do it. He means it. Those are not empty threats.

"I am *enraged*," he growls out, tail smashing through several wooden crates set off to one side of the room. They shatter, sending splinters and shards all over the place. Captain Kidd curses in a foreign language that my translator struggles to pick up on. "But it is not your fault. You were pregnant when you mated him; he is a Falopex; it is in your nature to trust." Abraxas closes his eyes, and I get the idea that he might just throw Hyt and Rurik around a little when he sees them. He opens his eyes again to stare at Hyt, and the two of them regard each other once more.

"I'm in love with your mate," Hyt says simply, shrugging his shoulders, tails searching over my skin like he's trying to commit me to memory. His skin is a brilliant pink which, in turn, makes my skin go a brilliant pink in response. "I'm not sure how you want to handle this, but we both live on Jungryuk so ..."

"Mm." Abraxas lets out a rumbling growl, pushing up to all fours as he takes the tablet in his wing-hands again. "My mate and I will make all of our decisions together. For now, I care little about you, even less about the World Eater, and only about reuniting with my mate so that she does not die." Abraxas *stares* Hyt down through the screen. "Do not lose my

child. If you do, I will make you suffer even if I cannot kill you. Do you understand me, Falopex?”

“I will do everything in my power to protect my child,” Hyt replies simply, and I cringe.

Shit.

I can only imagine how fucked-up this situation is going to be when the three males in my life are in one place at one time. Should be a testosterone-fueled shitstorm. Or ... do they even have testosterone? They're aliens for fuck's sake. *Very, very male aliens*. I have no idea.

“I love you,” I tell Abraxas again, wishing I could speak to him in private but knowing that isn't going to happen today. “I miss you. I'm sorry that we didn't get the life together that we were supposed to have.” Ouch. Now *that* almost makes me tear up for real this time.

“We will have a beautiful life together, even if that life looks different from the one we had first envisioned,” Abraxas promises me, nuzzling the screen and chuffing softly. He doesn't seem to give a shit that Jane and Kidd and Hyt (and Madonna the possum) are all watching him be affectionate with me. “Even knowing all of this would come to pass, I still would have selected you as my mate.”

The screen ripples with static, and my breath catches in my throat. No, no, no. It's not enough. I want to see my mate fucking *yesterday*.

“Anytime something happens to me, all I want to do is talk it out with you,” I tell him honestly, heart aching. I feel like I'm betraying Hyt and Rurik when I say that, but where should my loyalties lie? How do I go about doing this the right way? Is there even a right way? “This is no different.”

Abraxas blinks slowly at me.

“We will talk, female. Do not despair. I do not wish for you to suffer poison of the mind as well as the body.” He releases this low rumbling sound, caught somewhere between a purr and a growl. “If you desire extra males to be happy, then extra

males you may have. Whatever you wish, my mate, I will provide it for you.”

I can’t fucking breathe when I look this man—this dragon dude—in the face. I cannot. Fucking. Breathe.

“I would never have betrayed you otherwise,” I tell him on the tail end of a sob. I can feel Hyt watching me, but I can’t help myself. Abraxas *chose* me, and now he’s stuck on an intergalactic pirate ship fighting off creepy Vestalis nobility and wondering if his mate is going to end up dead. Knowing that she’s fucking other men in his place. He doesn’t deserve that. “I don’t want to betray you now.”

“Choice and circumstance are different things,” he tells me as the connection falters, and his face freezes in place for a moment. I wait with my heart in my throat but, two, three, four weepy blinks later and he’s back. “You were put into these circumstances, but you did not choose them. Do not think I misunderstand the difference. I know your heart to be pure.”

“I won’t add anymore males,” I promise him on the end of a strange, gaspy hiccup. I draw an X over my chest. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Abraxas snarls violently and then headbutts the screen. I can feel my body priming itself for him, can even see the purple glow between my thighs when I gently part my legs. Hyt can see it, too, and his own breath catches before he looks away.

“No. No hoping to die. If it is between adding extra males and dying, you will add extra males so that you can return to me.” A scowl follows that statement. “Though I would prefer if they were expendable males that could be eaten at a later date.”

“If this sort of crazy shit *ever* happens again, you can eat the new males,” I tell him with all due seriousness. “But I ... I really like Hyt, Abraxas. I really like Rurik.”

He snorts and licks the screen once more.

“When I see you, I will fuck you as you should be fucked. I will ensure you are aware that you are *my* female.” He spreads a massive shark-toothed grin for me. “You will forget the other

males while you are beneath me; this much I can promise you. And I have never *once* failed to keep my promise.” The screen shifts with static, and my heart lodges in my throat, choking me with tangled emotion. I could use a good hour or ten with an alcoholic beverage, seated beside Jane on the beach while we talk through our boy troubles. Nobody knows how best to handle boy troubles than a true BFF. “When we see one another, we will talk.”

I want to ask Abraxas if he means what he says, if he truly is gifting me Hyt and Rurik or if my overeager heart is reaching for something too fantastical to be believed. I’m a one-man sort of girl. Always have been. And I know that if our positions were reversed, I would be fucking devastated. Shit, I wouldn’t *allow* it. I would tell Abraxas that he wasn’t permitted to sleep around, that Hyt and Rurik had to go.

“Don’t ... don’t sleep with any other females,” I whisper, knowing I can’t really ask that of him but unable to keep myself from doing it anyway. “Please.”

“I would never; I have no desire to do so.” Abraxas inclines his head briefly before looking back up at me, his eyes as deep and fathomless as a nebula (you know, one of those purplish dust cloud things in space). “You needn’t fear such a thing.”

I nod at him, opening my mouth for another sickeningly sweet statement, some profound goodbye made up of sticky *I love yous* and promises for wild sex in the future. Jane snatches the tablet from his hand, either unaware of the wild snarl he offers in response or simply convinced that my mate would never hurt her. Abraxas opens his mouth wide, as if he wishes he could bite her head off, and then he snaps it shut with a grumbling sigh. He folds his massive body into his ‘dragon pose’ curled on his side with his arms tucked like the front paws of a cat.

I don’t let myself think about the time I was eaten alive. Do not have the headspace for that trauma.

“Your sister-human is lucky that she means so much to you,” Abraxas rumbles, but we both ignore him. Sort of. My body is absolutely primed for his, swollen and slick and ready.

I'm glad the blankets are pulled up to my chest so Jane doesn't catch a hint of my furred nipples. She saw enough when my orgasm face went mega-viral in the Noctuida.

"I couldn't not say hi to you," Jane tells me, voice cracking, Tabbi's pet possum clinging to her shoulder like a parrot. My own weepy eyes swell with fresh tears, and I realize only then that Hyt is rubbing my back with oiled suction cups, has been rubbing my back with oiled suction cups for some time. He leans into me, and offers up a smile for Jane. "Well hello there, Officer Hyt," she says with a snort, giving me *the eye*, the one we reserve to use on one another when making questionable but admirable romantic judgments. Madonna hisses at me. "Interesting turn of events, don't you think?"

"Interesting wouldn't be the word that I'd use," Hyt hedges, and he stays pink in color. "But hello again, Jane. I imagine we'll be spending quite a bit of time together, seeing as I'm mated to your friend, and you're mated to mine—"

"I am not mated to anyone," Jane bursts out like one of those weird Jungryukian birds with the curled orange-gold tails, the ones that squawk and squeal at the slightest whisper of danger. The more she protests, the louder her voice gets in pitch, the more her brown eyes bulge from her pretty face, the more in love she must be. Or at least in the deepest possible throes of lust. Cap'n Kidd must be solid in the bedroom. Jane waves her hand to dismiss the subject, but she's freaked the poor possum all the way out and now its hair is standing on end all down its spine. "Anyway, I just wanted to say that I miss you, I love you, and when we see each other again, I want to hug you before your barbarian-dragon-alien-dude drags you off to teach you the basics of what it means when a man loves a woman."

"Pretty sure I've already taught her those," Hyt chips in, and I give him a look only to see him sliding a tentacle along the brim of his hat, his face a challenge. Something about this conversation with Abraxas is stirring him up. Abraxas whips his tail out like he might very well crack the screen in half with it, and then slowly, painstakingly draws it back before he can break the tablet.

Jane ignores him. My cheeks flame. *Did Hyt just ... yeah, he just said that.*

Wow.

“I always thought I’d be the one to have six or seven husbands,” Jane adds with a snort, reaching up to adjust the black tricorne hat she’s wearing today and sparing a nice pat for Madonna. Jane’s got on what appears to be a leather space suit? I have no idea. “Hell, I could use six or seven husbands.”

“More accurately, I could use six or seven wives,” Kidd murmurs from the shadows on Jane’s right. I see her bristle, see her teeth clench, her fingers drag roughly across the surface of the desk where she’s placed the tablet. “Hurry up. You have thirty seconds left, at most, before *The Korol* regains its ability to hack into our communications.”

“I love you, and thank you; your man, he saved my fucking life.” Jane stands up, tapping at her chest with her palm. “Stay safe so that we can see each other again, okay?”

“Okay,” I tell her, struggling with the word a bit. “And I love you, too.”

“Goodbye, babe—” she starts, but then the transmission cuts and I’m left to stare down at an empty screen. The waves never cease their religious thumping against the shore, and I look up to see the stupid two-headed cat thing lounging in the sun on the deck.

“That was ...” I can’t even finish the sentence. It’s so awkward in this room right now. In ... my mate’s room? In *our* room? Is this actually happening? Did Abraxas give me the go-ahead? And even if he didn’t, now that it’s just me and Hyt, it feels like *we* need to have a talk. Like, *we* are the primary couple in this mess. Come to think of it, that’s how I felt with Rurik last night, too. When I’m with each of these men—aliens? seriously, can I just call them men?—I feel like he’s the one.

“Elucidating?” Hyt asks, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. A slight smile quirks his lips. “Enlightening?” His smile grows a little wider. “Awkward, for Jane and Kidd in

particular. You know, since they're in love and are both refusing to admit it."

"Hey, you know Kidd, and I know Jane, how long do you think it'll take them to confess? If it's just her side of the story we're going with, it could be *years*." I keep my voice light because it's so much easier to joke about Jane and Kidd than it is to talk to Hyt about the conversation that I just had. Not only that, but we haven't really hashed out the Rurik stuff either.

But, as he said, a problem for another day.

Hyt lifts his head up and opens his eyes to look at me, and I can't resist. I turn and put my arms around his neck, snuggling deeply into his lap, and finding myself pleasantly surprised when he grabs at me the way I'm grabbing at him. Tentacle tails wrap around my body, suckers on my skin, lips in my hair.

"Hyt," I breathe out, and he makes this soft, desperate sound.

"Eve."

We hold each other like that for so long that it becomes impossible to ignore how wet I am, how close to his cock my opening is, how much we like each other. I draw back slightly so that I can look into his eyes, and he uses his tentacles to lower me down the length of his body.

Our lovemaking is slow and painfully awkward, but beautiful too. It's ... I don't even know what to make of it. There's a lot of rocking, a lot of slow, gasping breaths, a lot of staring. He orgasms first, and I hold him tight through the spasms of his muscles, the emptying of his sack, but I know that I'm not going to come personally.

I move to draw away from him, and he makes a face at me.

"Oh hell no, Earthling." Hyt flips me over, pins me down with his tentacles, and then disappears down my body to bury his head between my thighs. That purple tongue hits my swollen cunt, and I lose consciousness, I swear. I'm tingling and sparkling and cramping in my lower abdomen, and then

I'm boneless and weightless and melted into the pillows on his bed.

Hyt sits up and adjusts his hat.

"I'd like to actually eat you, not just taste you," he teases, but I can't move.

"Post orgasmic paralysis," I whisper as he sits back on his calves to study my naked body.

"I told you we could talk shop later, and I meant that, but ..." Hyt trails off, mulling over his words. "Are you entertaining the thought of making this real?" He points between us with a tentacle, crossing his arms over his flat chest. "Because if so, I need to know. I'm trying not to get attached to the idea, but fuck if it isn't hard. You want me then?"

"I want you," I whisper, closing my eyes and just letting myself bask in the idea that I could have Abraxas, Rurik, *and* Hyt. This is the Noctuida, after all. We're not limited to ideas found only on Earth. "If you're okay with sharing."

He snorts at me, but I can't open my eyes, not even when I feel the mattress dip as he moves up to sprawl on his side next to me.

"You do realize that none of this is weird for me, right?" Hyt asks, and I have to look at him now, just to gauge the expression on his face. I blink heavily lidded eyes at him, not quite getting it. "You understand more about the Falopex now, don't you? How we work? Closed marriages make up less than twenty percent of matings on this planet. If I were anyone else, I'd expect you to fuck other males." His jaw clenches. "I'd fuck other females and—"

I sit up suddenly, heart thumping wildly. Hyt pauses and waits for me to speak, stroking my legs and belly and arms with his tentacles.

"Well?" he asks, but I can't make myself say it. "Eve ..."
His voice is a warning for me to spill it.

"I know that I should be okay with you having other lovers, that ... Minae ... if you ..."
I hate the words even as they're

coming out of my mouth.

“Just say what you want to say, Eve. I think, of all things, what I want most is for us to be honest with each other.” He hooks a sideways smile, fox ears flattening on the top of his head. “I like to lie, sure, but not to you. If I could, I’d like for you to be the *only* person that I never lie to.”

I inhale sharply and groan, falling into the pillows and scraping my hands down my sweaty face.

“I don’t want you to have any other lovers. Ever.” There. I said it. I’m a hypocrite, but it’s important to lay these things out. It’s the only way a relationship as complex as this could ever work.

When I drop my hands away from my face, I see that Hyt is smiling softly down at me.

“Yeah? I’m with you there. I always wanted a closed marriage. Always. I thought that if I married a human then ...” He reaches out with a tentacle and uses his suction cup to literally cup the side of my face. “I met you, and I knew you were already mated when I first saw you.” He shrugs. “I couldn’t help myself. I guess I’m a Falopex after all.”

“So, we tell Minae to fuck off together?” I ask him, and he chuckles.

“Earthling.” He kisses my forehead, kisses my mouth, and then pulls away before I can get my tongue between his lips. Hyt swings his legs over the side of the bed, using his tentacles to push himself up to a standing position. With a groan, he stretches his arms over his head, flashing me long, lean muscles, a perfect ass, and hips for *days*. He has the most beautiful fucking hips. And those thighs? I want to lick them. He even stretches all nine of his tentacle tails upwards, sticking his suckers to the ceiling before he drops them back down. “If you think you were subtle about telling her to fuck off before, you weren’t.” He grins over his shoulder at me. “You jumped into this day one very much *not* like a fake fiancée.”

I sputter as I sit up.

“I ... I was trying,” I admit, shrugging my own shoulders loosely. I hate watching Hyt put clothes on—as pathetic and skimpy as those clothes might be—and a pang of sadness hits my chest when I remember that he’s leaving to speak with his father.

Right.

The whole universe knows that the Imperial Princess is missing now. I’m the Imperial Princess. Hyt kidnapped me. Rurik is in big trouble. I’m dead without Abraxas’ cum. Important shit like that.

“You were trying?” Hyt repeats, turning around as he buckles his belt. He parks his hands on his hips as two of his tentacles remove some sort of holster thing from his locker, and the others go about collecting the guns from around the room that he leveled (sexily) on Rurik. He tucks them into the holster after draping it over his shoulder, lining them down his back for easy access. “Well then, I’m excited to see what happens when you *don’t* try.”

Hyt flashes a smile at me, but it fades quickly enough that I wonder if something isn’t wrong.

“I don’t want to leave you right now,” he says, gritting his teeth. “But it’d be worse for you if you came. You’ll be safe here.” He pauses, looking in the direction of the door before dragging his gaze back to me. “If my family shows up, handle them like you’ve been handling them, alright? Don’t take any of their shit.”

“I’m not capable of taking shit,” I admit with another shrug. “One of those Tusk Men douchebags dragged me by the hair into that brothel, and I still talked back to him. Got a fist to the face for the effort.”

Hyt’s jaw clenches even tighter, and he works it back and forth for a moment before sighing.

“You’re one feisty, little human, you know that?” he says, and then the moment shifts, and I sense that he’s about to say something profound.

That is—obviously—when Avril chooses to knock on the door and then immediately open it without waiting for a response. Now it’s my turn to tense my jaw and grit my teeth.

“Question: how do I get on the Noct-net from here?” she asks, and it takes me a second to realize she’s talking about the alien version of the internet.

“I’m on my way out; I’ll show you,” Hyt says with another sigh. If he thinks she’s this annoying now, wait until he has to spend a few days with her living at his house. Not sure that Rurik and I have ever had an intimate moment together without her interrupting it. “I’m assuming you’re looking for alien porn?” He snorts a laugh at that, gaze slipping to mine, and I blush, the covers tucked up under my chin to hide my body from Avril. “We have access to *plenty* of alien porn here on Yaoh.”

“Alien porn?” I ask, stopping him before he gets a chance to leave the room. Avril has disappeared, but Hyt stays, tentacles on the doorjamb all around him, like a web of pink.

“It’s alien porn to me, too, if it’s anything but a Falopex.” He winks at me, flicks the brim of his hat, and then grins. “Including and *especially* you. Apparently I’m hot for aliens.”

Hyt takes off, and I groan, throwing my body back into the pillows.

A whole day without him. At his house. With me as a wanted ... fugitive? Not quite. But wanted, certainly.

And Hyt’s family ... Dead Kings help me when it comes to his fucking family.



Since I’m a very capable adult, I dress myself before heading downstairs to see what Zero and Avril are up to in Hyt’s house. I expect to find them snooping, but instead, they’re both on the

bottom floor watching ... porn. On the large screen at the front of the room.

Vestalis porn.

My eye twitches as I snatch up what I think is a remote and stab random buttons until the damn thing shuts off. Hyt's companion (we have got to come up with a better name than Shithead) and Two-Face the alien cat are both in here, too, though it seems neither of them was interested in the explicit footage.

"I see you two are making productive use of your time here as my faithful and doting servants." I chuck the remote onto a side table as Avril gives me a look over her shoulder, taking in my holey sweatpants with a sigh.

Hey, it's the most conservative outfit I have and, shockingly, I'm starting to realize that like Hyt, I, too, am a modest person. And by modest, I just mean I'd like to not wear a too-small bathing suit every day. Hyt's companion seems to like my choice of clothing. He chirps happily at the sight of me, and then settles comfortably inside the hood of my sweatshirt, trilling and cooing bubbles. The cat scratches its nails on one of the cushioned lounges.

"This is a smart-house. You can just say *screen off*, and it turns off," Avril chastises, like I'm some Stone Age creature. She stands up from the couch, dressed in a much simpler dress than she was wearing yesterday. It's red and silky and its only adornment is a gold belt at the waist. "His Imperial Majesty left us with plenty of luggage; it's currently stacked on the beach. Do you want to change into something less ..." She searches for a word. "*College-student-living-on-ramen?*"

"No." I cross my arms and stare her down. "Because if I start wearing the clothes of the Imperial Princess, don't you think people would wonder if, possibly, *I* might be the Imperial Princess?"

Avril rolls her eyes at me.

"Just tell everyone that I, as the princess' lady-in-waiting, took pity on your slovenly dress and sought to make amends in

the name of all humankind.” Avril waits for me to change my mind, but it’s not happening. I’m not taking any risks. Although I would love a hairbrush. Hyt got most of the tangles out last night, but my hair has since reverted to a bit of a red-brown frizz puff around my head. I blame the lovemaking. Is it really good sex if your hair doesn’t end up a little mussed? “Can I *please* fucking brush your hair?”

I sigh.

“You may.”

Avril claps her hands and scurries over to a weird silver suitcase on a side table. She places her finger on a touchscreen and whispers *hair detanglers*, and out comes this glass vial, sliding from an opening on the side. Huh. Oookay.

“I cannot wait until humans develop an AI powerful enough to wipe themselves from existence,” Zero says absently, staring out the window at the sea life. She stiffens up, waiting for a punishment from Rurik possibly, but none comes, and she smiles sadly.

“Did the Cartians have AI?” I ask, taking a seat on one of the chairs as Avril pulls several bottles of Dead Kings only know what from her sci-fi Mary Poppins bag. I’m just trying to stir up conversation with Zero here, but I hope it’s not too much. *God, what would it feel like to be the last human left in the entire universe? Or at least, one of the last ones. No Earth waiting out there in space somewhere. No family to worry over.* I swallow a lump of feelings as Zero turns back to look at me, her red eyes shiny. *Please don’t cry tears of blood again. It’s so damn creepy.*

“We did, but we understood that a tool is only good when it *assists*, not when it dominates. A machine is not a person.” She lifts her hands, staring at her palms, and then her eyes shut tight. “I am sorry I even made such a joke. It was not funny.” Zero opens her eyes again and goes back to watching fish. “A biological being may be a slave to its natural processes, but artificial intelligence will always be the slave to those who created it.” She grits her teeth in frustration and then shakes

off the emotion with a sigh. “One of those things will *always* be more savage than the other.”

“We were trying to see if there was any Cartian porn out there, but the only stuff we could find has Vestalis in it,” Avril whispers, misting my hair with a spray bottle and then uncorking the glass vial. She dumps whatever it is on my head, and I go stiff all over as I feel something—many somethings—begin to move in my hair.

“Avril, what the fuck?” I whisper as she chuckles, coming around to stand in front of me with her arms crossed.

“Relax.” She waves her hand dismissively at me. “I just put hair detanglers in your rat nests. Give them a few minutes, and they’ll have it all sorted out.”

Chills skitter over my skin as one of these ‘detanglers’ scurries over the lower half of my face, over my nose, past my cheek. It *looks* like a silver spider with a billion legs. I almost puke. I have a thing about legs. Anything more than like six, and I am grossed all the way out.

“You poured *spiders* in my hair?” I whisper as the creatures do whatever it is that they do.

“They’re not spiders,” Avril corrects, squinting. “More like ... ticks?”

“Oh, well, that’s *soooo* much better,” I choke out with a deranged laugh. *I am so drowning this bitch in a sea of neutron stars.* “I hate you.” I give her a look. “You are the *worst* lady-in-waiting ever.”

“They feed on blood which is what I’ve sprayed into your hair. But don’t worry: as they make pathways to get to the blood droplets, they take out all the tangles without causing split-ends. Pretty cool, huh?” Avril grins at me, but then her gaze shifts back to Zero and she’s frowning softly again. “Poor thing,” she whispers, and if I weren’t *this* close to having a mental breakdown over the blood-eating multi-legged spider-ticks in my hair, I’d have agreed with her.

Avril takes the glass vial, pours some of the blood from her spray bottle into it, and then holds it up to my hair. The tick

things leave, and my scalp prickles with goose bumps as I probe around, making sure that none of them have tried to hitch a permanent ride.

“They only drink Bás blood, so don’t worry. No chance of getting bitten.” Avril puts her supplies away and then steps up behind me, separating my now very silky, very untangled hair into three parts. She plaits it with expert fingers, making me wonder if she doesn’t have sisters of her own back home. Kids? I don’t actually know anything at all about her or Zero, and I feel like maybe I should. “Macarons?” Avril asks, presenting me with an open silver tin when she’s done. “I told his Imperial Majesty that it was vital fresh ones were baked in case we found you.” She gestures with the tin again, and I sigh, hoping that the gold-colored one I just picked up is the ‘happy bee’ flavor.

I bite into it, and my eyes widen. It’s not the one I was looking for, but I feel like I just bit into a sleepy sun-drenched nap on a blissfully worry-free afternoon. Damn it but the Vestalis chefs are true artists.

Shithead the Mini-Octopus explodes out of my hood, startling me, and then takes off up the stairs, trailing bubbles. I’m still finishing off the last of my cookie when he floats back down to us, chirping excitedly.

“Hyt! Eve!” I hear Kayla’s shout from upstairs, tilting my head to look up at the ceiling. She comes sprinting, breathless into the room, and then stops short, eyes widening at the sight of Avril and Zero.

Probably because Zero has just risen to her feet and sprinted across the room, snatching Kayla up by the neck to pin her to the wall.

“Let her go!” I shout, shoving up from my seat and hoping that I haven’t given away my identity by ordering around the princess’ bodyguard. Shithead screams as he twirls around the room in agitation. “Please. That’s Hyt’s little sister.”

Zero releases Kayla and steps back, offering a bow of apology.

“I am sorry, little human girl. My mistake.” Zero takes several steps back as Kayla gapes at them, her attention shifting over to me. I do my best to smile to relieve some of the sudden tension.

“Have you heard about Hyt’s new assignment?” I ask her, but I assume since she’s here and shouting that she already does. Kayla looks at me before returning her attention to the others. “He’s been tasked with finding the Imperial Princess. These are her servants.”

“More like her advisor,” Avril offers up, and I reaffirm my intention to fling her into a quasar (I barely know what this is, but my baby brother Nate likes to play trivia games, so I’ve got some weird facts stored away). “Nice to meet you ... Kayla, was it?” Avril holds out a hand and Kayla’s eyes well with tears.

“Oh my God.” She throws her arms around Avril and hugs her in a similar fashion to the way she hugged me. “I haven’t seen any other humans in ten years and now, there are two right here in my brother’s house.” She draws back, looking Avril over with a smile before her attention shifts warily to Zero and her expression falters.

“This is Zero, the princess’ bodyguard. She’s a Cartian,” I state proudly, and Zero gives me a surprised look in response before offering up a slight nod of thanks.

“Oh.” Kayla’s breath releases in a rush as she stares at Zero with as much awe as I felt when I first realized the bitchy computer from Abraxas’ den was now a cute young woman with too much hair. “What the Vestalis did to your planet ... I ... I’m sorry you have to serve them.”

“I do not serve *them*,” Zero bites out angrily, lifting her chin. “I serve the future queen of the Noctuida. Perverse she may be, rude at times, not particularly intelligent”—I grit my teeth but I say nothing in my own defense—“but she is intrinsically kind without being morally outrageous like, say, the Falopex.” Zero crosses her arms and nods briskly, as if that’s the end of that.

I sigh and relax my jaw. Kind? Why do people keep calling me kind? I'm a bitch. Sometimes. Maybe.

Hyt's companion drifts up the stairs and disappears, and I wonder if we aren't about to get another visitor. *Anyone but the childhood friend. I'll pray to the Stars or the Dead Kings or to whatever Abraxas prays to: please don't let it be Minae.*

"That's true," Kayla says, beaming at Zero. "About the Falopex being morally outrageous." She turns to me, clutching a tablet to her chest, dressed in a white swimsuit with bright pink shorts and flip-flops today. "And if Eve trusts the future princess, then I trust her, too." She holds out the tablet, like she came over here to show something to me specifically. "They scrubbed her images entirely off the Noct-net. I was going to ask Hyt if he knew anything about what might've happened to her, but ... where did he run off to?" Kayla snaps her fingers before I can answer and then points at me. "He went to see Dad, didn't he?"

I nod.

"Macaron?" Avril offers, lifting the tin up for Kayla.

Her eyes go wide before her hand lashes out, snatching a handful before she cringes and forces herself to select just one. I walk over and take the tin from Avril's hands, putting it on top of Kayla's tablet.

"Eat them, all of them. The princess doesn't even really like macarons," I say as Kayla looks to Avril for confirmation. She nods at the other woman to continue, and Kayla groans like she's having a total food-gasm.

I smile, but the expression only lasts until Hyt's companion returns, shrieking a warning.

More footsteps sound from upstairs, and I brace myself for the big reveal.

It's Minae.

Of course it's fucking Minae. Stupid Stars. Stupid Dead Kings. Stupid whatever it is that Abraxas prays to.

She rounds the stairs, padding over to us with wet feet and absolutely no clothes today. I can see her, um, female folds between her legs. Her only adornment is a crown of shells on her head and a belt of them around the slimmest part of her already slim waist.

“Where is Hyt?” she demands as she narrows her eyes on our visitors.

“Thank you for asking before coming into my house,” I retort and oh, shit, you would think I’d just thrown the gauntlet at this bitch’s feet. She looks at me like she wants to rend the flesh from my bones. Zero tenses, but doesn’t move. “Hyt isn’t here, but even if he were, he’d tell you the same thing: *leave*.”

Minae stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. Her companion chirps angrily at Hyt’s, and they get into another hummingbird-like fight that takes them up the stairs and out of sight. There are bubbles *everywhere*.

“I’ve known Hyt my *entire* life. We were born within a week of one another. There’s never been a day that I haven’t known him.” She walks right up to me, emboldened now that Hyt isn’t here. Minae spares the briefest of glances for Avril and Zero before turning back to me. She’s taller than me by a good eight inches, staring down into my face as I glare up at her. “Is there a reason this entire house reeks of Vestalis?”

“The prince was here last night,” I say, refusing to back down as Kayla watches with wide-eyed anticipation, Avril gapes, and Zero looks like she might just beat the shit out of Minae on my behalf. “He came to see Hyt and *personally* ask for our help.”

“Our?” Minae repeats, like I’m stupid for even suggesting that I might be a vital part of this investigation. *Oh, one day when the truth finally comes out, I am going to make you suffer for being a bitch to me.* “You mean, the Imperial Prince knows that Hyt is the best goddamn officer we have.” She steps away from me with a sigh, offering Kayla a surprisingly nice smile. “Hey Kay. What are you doing here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be here? Why aren’t Mom and Nya here? Hell, why aren’t Flen and Mino and everybody else over here?”

Our brother was chosen *personally* by the next king to find his missing princess.” She sighs and stuffs another macaron into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully before she keeps talking. “This is the coolest fucking thing to happen to our family since, well, I joined the family.”

“Who are you?” Minae asks coolly, glancing dismissively at Avril before turning to Zero and curling the edge of her lip. “Ugh, you’re one of those Vestalis blood-bag robots, aren’t you?”

“Don’t you dare fucking talk to her like that,” I snarl out before realizing that maybe I shouldn’t defend Zero—whom I presumably met last night—so vehemently.

“What do you care?” Minae’s voice is prying and quizzical now, and that does not bode well for me or my secret. Still, I can’t help myself.

“Nice to meet you,” Avril says cautiously, bowing at the waist. “It is my greatest pleasure and infinite privilege—”

“I can’t handle listening to meaningless Vestalis greetings.” Minae flicks her tails in Avril’s direction. “You’re one of the princess’ servants, I take it. Interesting. Why would the prince leave you here?” Her gaze shifts to me, and I feel my lip curl up.

“Why he left them here is none of your business.” I take a step closer to her. “Get out of my house.”

Kayla chokes on a bit of macaron as Avril lifts a brow and Zero braces for action.

Minae smiles meanly at me, and then she lashes out with all of her tentacles at once, tearing my sweatshirt over my head. On reflex, I wrap my arms over my chest and stumble away from her.

“Let me see your back,” she commands as a sickening realization sweeps over me. *I sure as fuck hope that sunblock is as good as Hyt says it is.* “Or ...” Minae pauses, tapping at her lips with a single tentacle before she turns to Kayla. “Go home, Kayla.”

“What are you doing?” Kayla asks her, peering at her friend like she’s more than just a little disappointed. “Minae, what the fuck?”

“I advise *you* to leave,” Zero suggests, taking another step closer. I understand why she feels the need to intervene, but also ... shit, shit, shit.

“Kayla, go!” Minae yells, and, shockingly, Kayla turns and leaves, pounding up the stairs the way she came. Minae turns back to me as Avril brings over her discarded cloak, offering it up to me. She hooks a scowling glare in Minae’s direction.

“I don’t know who you are, but humans are *not* like Falopex. Being naked around strangers is uncomfortable for most of us.” She slips the cloak onto my shoulders as Minae and I lock gazes. *She knows. She fucking knows. I don’t know how she knows, but she does.*

If Minae tells someone her theory—someone important, like say, Hyt’s Dad—then we’re fucked. Rurik’s parents will drag me back to *The Korol*. Either they’ll cause me to miss my rendezvous with Abraxas or ... they’ll just cut out the middleman and lop our heads off the way they did to Ranet and his mate. If Minae cares about Hyt even a fraction as much as she claims, she’d let this go.

“It was nice of his Imperial Majesty to leave your servants here with you.” Minae crosses her arms, fluffing her pretty pink tails behind her as she stares me down. “Did you fuck the Vestalis prince in my friend’s bed, too?”

She is ... so freakishly right about everything.

Crap.

“Minae, I’m flattered that you think I’m the Imperial Princess, but I don’t think Hyt will find your accusations nearly as amusing. He told you in no uncertain terms yesterday that you are *not* invited to our Commitment Ceremony. And you know what? You are also no longer a welcome guest in this house.”

“You want me out?” Minae asks with a sharp laugh, looking over at Zero. “Have your cyborg kick me out. Go on now,

blood-bag. Drag me out. I'll wait.”

Zero doesn't move, thankfully. But I imagine that if Minae touches me again, she might kill her. Much as I'd like to see Minae dead, it'd break Hyt's heart. I can't do that to him. I just need this stupid girl to leave before her cleverness gets her killed.

“Look, I don't know what's going on here,” Avril begins, trying to play peacekeeper, “but I can assure you that this girl is *not* the Imperial Princess. I mean, just *look* at her.” Avril gestures at me in my holey, stained sweatpants, and I swear, Minae's expression flickers with uncertainty as she takes me in. But then she blinks and shakes her head in disgust.

“You're using my best friend—the love of my fucking life, my *soulmate*—to hide from a hellish fate trapped aboard *The Korol*. Everybody knows that being the ruler of the Noct is power that comes with a hefty, horrible price. You commanded Hyt to give you his pearl—or maybe he really did just save your life—and now you're here, using him as cover. I won't stand for it.” Minae lifts her chin proudly, tails wafting around her. “Leave now. Take your servants and your bullshit and go back to the Vestalis scourge where you belong. As Principal First Officer of Yaoh, I revoke your planetary privileges here and now. You have until the day of the ceremony to leave or—princess or not—I will have you arrested and prosecuted under the Imperial Laws of the Noctuida.”

Damn, damn, damn.

This girl is good. Too good. I'd be impressed if she wasn't directly at odds with me.

“You can't revoke my planetary privileges,” I mumble, flicking a look over to Avril and then Zero as if to verify the validity of my statement. “She can't do that, can she?”

“If she is truly the PFO of Yaoh, then yes, she can.” Zero turns to Avril. “She cannot revoke *our* rights to be here as we were granted permission by the chief. But she can certainly kick Eve off.”

“Oh.” Avril blinks rapidly and then grimaces, shrugging like she doesn’t care. I can see in her gaze that she’s *this* close to freaking out. “Sorry girl. It was nice knowing you, I guess.”

“I will remain here until Hyt returns home and explain things myself.” Minae scowls at me, but I don’t have the energy to scowl back. I’m freaking out a little myself. Even *if* there was doubt in her mind as to my identity, she’s truly kicking me off the planet. Can Hyt fix this? Can he undo this? I have no idea. “Dead Kings only know the stories you’d feed to him if I didn’t deliver the news directly.”

“You might be able to kick me off this planet, but I can also kick you out of *my* house. Get out.” I fling an arm out and point in the general direction of the staircase. “Now.”

“No.” Minae simply stares me down, waiting for me to sic Zero on her.

But ... I can’t do that, can I? I’m not the princess, right?

“I do not follow your orders, Miss Eve, but I can remove this female from the dwelling if you would like. I do not appreciate the way she behaves toward someone that she believes is the princess.” Zero takes several steps forward and Minae at least has the grace to take one back. “If Eve *were* the princess, you would regret this moment terribly when I removed your tentacles one by one.” Zero smiles prettily. “Followed by your *head*.”

“Kill me then,” Minae challenges, squeezing her hands and tails into fists. “Do it. I’ll become a martyr to the Falopex, and we can go back to war with the Vestalis. It’s as it should be anyway. I do *not* accept parasitic monsters as my rulers.”

Avril gasps and clamps both hands over her mouth, and I imagine that a statement such as that—especially from a high-ranking Falopex—is akin to treason.

Minae turns away and heads for the stairs, leaving the three of us alone in the media room.

It isn’t until Zero confirms that she’s out of earshot that I collapse onto one of the sofas, clutching the cloak more tightly

around myself. The two-headed cat watches this all unfold with royal disdain.

“What am I supposed to do now?” I ask as I look up at Avril and then over at Zero. “What the actual *fuck*?”

“I can kill her and dispose of her body in such a way that no war will be provoked,” Zero promises, and I shiver all over. The girl is standing there barefoot in a billowy white dress with a red ribbon in her hair. She’s *terrifying*. “Please allow me to do this.”

“I agree with Zero,” Avril says, sitting down beside me on the couch and taking my hands in hers. “I don’t see any other way out of this.”

I bite my lip, and they both sigh. Because they know I can’t do this. Damn it.

“I told you that you were kind,” Zero grits out, reaching up to run her fingers through her stupidly long white hair. “But perhaps when I said you were not morally outrageous, I spoke too soon.” She levels a red-eyed glare on me, and I can’t help but wonder if Rurik isn’t looking at me through her eyes again. “A ruler who is too kind is one who is soon dead. Please remember that lesson, my princess.”

It’s him. I can hear it in the cadence of the words, in the softness of the address.

“I can’t kill Hyt’s best friend, no matter how much I hate her.” I press the heels of my hands into my eyes and lean back against the sofa. “For now, keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn’t leave. When Hyt gets here ... he’ll know what to do.”

Zero considers me as I drop my hands to my lap, and we stare at each other.

Rurik is most definitely looking back at me.

“Yes ... my princess,” she says, her voice gruff with his emotions.

When she sits beside me and takes my hand, I let her.

And then we wait.



Hyt

Ah, of course my asshole father would want to see me today of all days.

Eve is finally mine. And for today—for just a few more precious days—she’s mine alone. I can have her in my bed, at my house, sleeping on my chest, and I don’t have to share with anyone. And for the first time, I can imagine a future with her that doesn’t feel like I’m being gutted from groin to grin.

So, yeah, it makes perfect sense that the Chief of Police would demand my immediate presence this morning. I’ve already fucked with his timeline a bit by refusing to come when summoned, so I know he’s going to be furious when I get there. Not that I give a shit. The man pretended he was going to have me executed at age sixteen. I stopped caring about his opinion a long time ago.

I jet through the deep blue current, using the suction cups at the ends of my tentacles to manipulate the water, to push bubbles in a white wash behind myself so that I’m propelled forward with little effort. I don’t usually swim like the other Falopex—perfunctory, in a straight line, as quickly as physically possible. I like a little flourish, a spin here and there, a backflip, a whirl.

But not today.

Today, I have a singular mission: get this shit over with as quickly as possible so that I can spend the day in bed with my mate. My soon-to-be wife. In Falopex law, she already is my

wife, but the Commitment Ceremony will give it that official shine that my family so enjoys. *Also, come on, Hyt, you know you're excited to see her in your grandmother's dress.*

I dart down toward the ocean floor, skirting the exterior rock walls of my father's office, and slip effortlessly through the concealed entrance behind a large rock. A quick sprint through a tunnel and then I'm using my arms and tentacles to drag my body out of the hole in the floor.

My father is sitting across the room, staring at a screen on the wall and tapping his fingers against the white metal surface of his desk. He hates having a dry office, but he takes far too many calls with foreign species, and they're more often than not bothered by seeing him in the water. He realized at the start of his career that he'd be taken more seriously if he were dry and—believe it or not—dressed when he spoke with the Vestalis.

“She had tracking proteins injected into her blood,” Farin—I'm not in the mood to call him Dad—says as he stares at a medical scan of Eve's body. My mouth flattens into a line as I drip water across the floor, coming to a stop on the opposite side of his desk. “And yet, *The Korol* can't track her.” He turns to face me, seated on a stool with his tails stuck to the wall and floor behind him—a sign of stress. “Any idea why that might be, son?”

I smile.

“Did you hear the rumors that the princess was mated to an Aspis before she was discovered by the prince?” Just saying the words pisses me off. Abraxas, I could deal with. We could live on Jungryuk, and I wouldn't mind sharing her with him so much. But Rurik? He just *had* to be the crown prince, didn't he? “That'd do the trick, don't you think?”

Farin frowns at me, his blue skin similar in hue to my own, but much darker. His face is more harsh than mine, square and angry with a perma-frown and several deep stress lines in his forehead. He's got on a blue jacket, unbuttoned, and a pair of matching pants with no shoes. If he takes a call, he'll put his boots on, button himself up, slip his official cap onto his head.

“The Vestalis executed their only other viable heir in order to prevent civil war; they’ll do *anything* to get the Imperial Princess back. If it comes down to it, they’ll start threatening planetary annihilation.” My father stands up and turns around to face me, the corner of his lip curling as I cross my arms over my chest, using a tentacle to adjust my own hat. “Tell me a truth *now*.”

I sigh.

“I’m your son—unfortunately.” I turn pink, and his scowl deepens even further.

“You’re also late. I called you here hours ago.” Farin picks up a tablet from his desk, scrolling through it. “What you *should* have done was contact me as soon as the Vestalis prince left your residence.” He looks up from the tablet, disappointment rife in his gaze. Before he threatened to have me executed for telling a lie—a small one wherein I lied to get out of a test at the police academy—I used to care. I wanted my dad to like me, to be proud of me the way he’s proud of Nya.

But after that? I wear his disappointment and his disgust as a badge of pride. If my dad doesn’t like it, well, probably means I’m doing the right thing. *Pound sand, old man*, I think with a flick of my tongue against the corner of my lip.

“Why would I contact you?” I ask, genuinely curious. “His Imperial Majesty selected *me* to find his missing bride.” I smile in the way I know my father doesn’t like, cocky and arrogant and totally full of shit. “I have my suspicions about where she might be. Namely, Jungryuk. Convenient, then, that I’m the sole and only officer in charge of the planet.”

I step a little closer to the desk, leaning down to put my palms on the surface, the scales on my tentacles bristling in a warning. I’m telling my father with body language that Jungryuk, that this mission, that they’re *mine*. I’m the dominant male in my own circle, and I don’t bow down to him. I’m even making my own fertility dampening pheromones. His nostrils flare as he smells it, and his own tails

bristle in response. If this were, say, a thousand years ago, we'd probably fight one another to the death.

The Falopex are a *fraction* more civilized than that now. But only a fraction.

"I will find the princess on my own." I fling my hand out at Eve's medical scan, wishing I could delete all the data on my father's computer. He doesn't need to be looking at reports regarding *my* mate. It's making me downright homicidal, the idea that the entire Noct is thinking about Eve, that *The Korol* is searching for her. She's mine. I'm hers. I just wish we could be left the hell alone.

"You actually believe that you can find her by yourself?" Farin laughs at me, a deep bass sound that used to comfort me as a child. Back in the day, he was *nice* to me. Before I started the academy, before I started lying, when he thought I might be the child who'd take over his position as chief one day. "You'll need every resource our people have and then some. I've already made some calls."

I stand up, waving my tails at him dismissively.

"No need. I have my contacts, my methods." I give him a look from under the brim of my hat. "If you'll recall, the prince came to see *me* personally. He chose *me* personally. Because he knows that I can do this, because he trusts me."

"And why is that, son?" Farin demands, coming around the desk to get in my personal space. He's still angry that I'm mated without his permission. Angrier that I mated a human. Angriest that I'm pregnant. I love it. Mating Eve was the best decision I've ever made. Yeah, in the moment, I made the choice because I was afraid. I was afraid that I'd never get to see her again, that she'd die in my arms, and I'd wonder for the rest of my life if I'd lost the one woman who was meant to be mine.

But now? It's a bonus that my old man is upset by the very idea.

"Why does he trust me?" I repeat, standing up straight so that I can face him. "Because we met in the market on

Jungryuk long before this ever happened. Because I've helped him with tasks regarding his mate many times before. Without me, she'd *already* be dead. It doesn't seem like much of a stretch to me that he'd ask for my help. I am, after all, the only expert on human beings on the force."

"You certainly are, aren't you?" my father taunts, and I know we're about to switch over from talking about the princess to talking about my mate. Little does he know they're one and the same. I let a scowl take over my lips, hooking my thumbs on my belt.

"What is it that you want to say, *Chief*?" I growl out, all three of my hearts thumping wildly in anticipation of a fight. He turns away from me and moves over to the window, frowning when he sees that several sucker fish have latched onto the glass.

"Clean window," he says to the office system, and a wiper flies violently across the glass, dislodging and, simultaneously, slaughtering the poor creatures with the move. Sucker fish have to be gently removed from their perches; the suckers they use to anchor themselves are extremely delicate and bleed easily. The window blurs with the red of their blood as I struggle to battle my own rage. "There are no pictures left of the Imperial Princess on the Noct-net." He turns to look at me, the scales on his tails lifted in a bristle of warning. "I understand that the Vestalis don't want her image out there. It's a valuable move, ensuring she isn't taken advantage of or assassinated. However, I find it quite bizarre that they would withhold her image from *me*."

Ah, so Rurik isn't entirely useless after all.

"Why would you need her picture? This is *my* job. I'll leave for Jungryuk at the end of the lunar tide." I allow a dramatic pause to fill the air. "And after my Commitment Ceremony."

"You think it's wise to engage in a Commitment Ceremony when you've been tasked by the Vestalis heir to find his missing mate?"

"Lunar tide," I repeat, voice cold. "Would *you* try to land on Jungryuk during the tide?"

“There are other things you could be doing. Cancel the ceremony now so your poor grandmothers can stop fretting over it, and get your ass to the World Station. Make nice with the Vestalis when they dock.”

I wave my hand and tails dismissively.

“Nah. I think my grams are looking forward to the ceremony. I don’t want to let them down.”

“You’re going to make a complete *ass* out of yourself,” Farin snarls and, when another sucker fish tries to latch to his window, he opens his mouth to command the wipers, and I lose it.

“You mean I’m going to make a complete ass out of *you*.” I stalk forward, pointing at him with both my finger and several tails. “Listen up, *Chief*. I don’t give a flying *fuck* what you want me to do. I am a citizen of Jungryuk, and I don’t have to do a goddamn thing you say.”

“You are a citizen of Yaoh!” Farin screams back at me, his tails gathering hydrogen and oxygen molecules from the air, turning them to water. His suction cups drip puddles onto the floor, ready to launch an attack that doesn’t come. He won’t hurt me like this, alone in his office. I’m not sure that he wants to hurt me at all. He just wants me to fall in line with his wants, be a pillar for his standing in a community that has its head shoved up its own ass. “Your position on Jungryuk is symbolic at best. Whether you like it or not, you *are* a Falopex. You are subject to our traditions, our laws, and our expectations.”

“You might think that, but it isn’t how Imperial law works. And, now that I’m all buddied up to the next king of the Noct, maybe I’ll ask about it specifically? When I find his bride for him, I bet he’ll shower me with favors. I could ask him for *your* position. Maybe he’d give it to me?”

“This rebellious attitude needs to stop.” Farin drops his tentacles to the floor and water rushes out around him, flooding the small room with cool liquid up to my ankles. “You’ve given your pearl to the human; there’s nothing we can do about that now.” He takes a step toward me, softening his

expression. “But we *can* mitigate the damage. Don’t go through with the ceremony, Hieronymus. Minae loves you, son. She’s been waiting for you her entire life. You’d abandon her now?”

Rage boils inside of me, hot and fierce. I channel it into a wicked smile and a flick of my hat.

“So, let me get this straight: you want me to abandon my human mate instead? Maybe I should wait for our child to be born first, and then sell them both in the black market on Jungryuk. Would that please ya, Chief?”

“Don’t be facetious, son. Keep the human female close, obviously, to ensure your own good health. Just don’t parade her around like a mate. Minae would make a wonderful partner. You might not be able to share a pearl or have children, but she’d stay by your side. You know that.”

I’ve never wanted to hurt my father the way I do right now.

I’m not sure how to channel all of that well-deserved fury, but then my communicator goes off and saves the day. *Thank the Dead Kings; I needed a distraction.* I flip open a pouch on my belt to look at the screen. It’s Kayla.

“Ignore it. We’re not done with this conversation.”

“Too bad I don’t give a fuck what you have to say.” I answer the video call immediately, worry seizing my chest. *I shouldn’t have left Eve alone. What the hell was I thinking?* “Kayla, what’s wrong?” I ask, immediately catching on the sweaty, waxen cast of her face. “Is it Eve?”

“No, no, nothing like that. I just ...” She worries on her lip with her teeth, a very human expression that tells me how stressed-out she is. Her green eyes shift back to mine, a much paler shade than Eve’s rich tones. “Could I talk to you in private for a second?”

“Hyt and I are busy, Kayla. Hang up.” Farin strides in our direction, but I ignore him, turning and heading for the single door in the wall. I can’t take this call back to the water. Sound carries far down there, and I swear, on Yaoh, somebody is *always* listening. The door opens automatically and I stride

into the hall, knowing that Farin won't yell at me with his staff around. He doesn't want to present anything but perfection to the community at large.

I pause just down the hallway, outside the closed office door of one of my father's subordinates. This is about as private a spot as I'm going to get here.

"Kay, if you don't tell me what's—" I start, but she's already waving her hand to shut me up.

"You need to get back to the house *now*," she breathes, eyes wide. I see my house in the background behind her, can hear the waves. "Minae is here, and she's being weird as hell. She ripped Eve's sweatshirt off and is demanding to see her back. What—"

I shove the communicator back into my belt and take off running, dropping down the nearest hole into the water. And then I swim like my tails are on fire, Kayla's words echoing in my head. *She's demanding to see her back*. Kayla might not understand why Minae would demand something like that, but I sure as hell do.

She knows.

I don't know how she found out—and I'll deny it till I'm quite literally blue in the face (thanks Kay for that phrase)—but this is bad. I left my mate at our home to keep her safe, and then I find out that she's being bullied in it? Hell no.

I'm not sure that I've ever swam this fast in my entire life. My muscles burn as I drag myself out of the water onto the deck, and my stomach cramps painfully, reminding me that I haven't eaten yet today. I wasn't kidding when I told Eve that the Falopex have no fat cells. We don't. We have to eat a lot or we suffer for it. As my body cramps up, I know that I'm in the beginning stages of starvation. My stomach's going to start eating my muscles if I don't get breakfast.

I storm into the bedroom to find Eve waiting on the bed, knees up to her chest, arms curled around them. Kayla's sitting beside her on the edge of the mattress, and they both look up at me when I walk in. I love my little sister to bits, but in that

moment, the only other being in the world that exists for me is my mate.

“Eve, fuck.” I storm over to her as Kayla quickly and quietly exits the room, closing the bedroom door softly behind her. I drop down on the bed, using my tentacles to pull Eve into my lap, to tuck her close. My companion swirls around us with gentle coos and plenty of bubbles. “What happened?”

“Hey, it’s okay,” she says, even though her voice is strained, even though I could read the stress on her face from the other side of the Noctuida. “I mean, it’s not, but you look like you’re about to kill somebody.”

My jaw is clenched, muscles taut, scales lifted in an angry bristle. Eve puts gentle fingers on the side of my face, brushing them up along the length of my jaw into my wet hair. A strand of it curls around her finger, and she lets out a small sound of surprise. I almost smile, but I’m too pissed off.

“Tell me what happened. Everything. Now.” I’m not trying to boss her around, but I have to know quick. I’ve got a feeling that Minae might just burst in here with accusations, and I need to be prepared. “She tore your sweatshirt off?” The thought of that makes me want to hurt Minae as badly as I wanted to hurt my father. I don’t ask the obvious question—*did she see your back?*—because the last thing we need is Minae to overhear it and get the wrong idea. Or ... the right idea? Anyway, we don’t need her to get that idea at all. The sunblock was still in place last I looked, but if Minae already has it in her mind that she’s searching for Vestalis mate marks, she’ll know we’re using it for cover. “Then what?”

“Avril covered me up quickly, but then Minae started making accusations about how both she and Zero were behaving, that they must be my servants.” Eve swallows hard and tries to avert her gaze. I use a tentacle to turn her head back toward me, forcing myself to soften my expression. It’s not Eve that I’m angry with. *I shouldn’t have brought her here. I should’ve gone straight to Jungryuk. What was I thinking?* “Also, she ... revoked my planetary privileges? I mean, after she accused me of being the Imperial Princess, that is. I have until the day of our wedding to leave Yaoh.”

My entire body *aches* in the worst possible way.

This is what betrayal feels like.

I work my jaw, thinking about Minae and what a good friend she's always been to me. She was supportive when I was sent to Jungryuk, came to visit me more often than anyone else, went out of her way to make me feel at home when I found myself drifting further and further away from Yaoh and its culture. I've always loved her, but I've always loved her the way I love Nya or Kayla, the way I love my brothers, Mino and Flen. Like a sibling. Like a family member. I've never felt anything toward her the way I feel toward Eve.

I guess that's worthy of a death sentence?

A harsh, hysterical laugh escapes me, and then I'm scooping Eve up into my tentacles and carrying her to the bedroom door.

I open it in time to witness a fight in the making.

"I am going up those stairs and into that room *now*," Minae growls out as Avril, Zero, and Kayla all block her from the staircase. My companion rushes down to meet Minae's, starting a secondary argument in the air above the crowd of agitated females. "Move."

"When Hyt's ready to see you, he'll see you," Kayla pleads. She's always liked Minae, too, but she knows I've never wanted her the way a male should want a female. My mating tentacles never emerged for her. More so than that, I've never even gotten it up for her. Human women do it for me. And it's not just the way they look, though that helps. Their female sex characteristics are *shameless*. Big, round breasts. Curvy bodies. Plump cunts with patches of hair that just scream *look at me*. Perky asses. Hot, wet mouths. Slick nectared channels.

I shiver and try not to pay attention to the way Eve's hands rub my shoulders from behind. I've got her bundled up against my back, wrapped in my tentacles in an unmistakably possessive way.

"You can put me down," she whispers in my ear, but the only effect that has on me is to make me shiver. I'm not

putting her down. Not yet anyway.

Minae spots me at the top of the stairs, eyes widening, lips parting.

I come down slowly, my companion returning to settle on my shoulder. I hope she can tell by my expression how pissed off I truly am.

“Kayla,” I begin, forcing a smile as I reach out with a tentacle and gently caress the side of her face. “Go home, please.”

“But Hyt—” she starts, and I put my tentacle up to her mouth to stop her, careful to keep my sucker from touching her lips. They’re not sexual per se, but it’s considered impolite to touch anyone but a mate with them.

“Eve and I have spent way too much time trying to entertain and please others. It’s time for us to be alone.” I give my sister a look. “But first, I have to deal with all of this.” I wave another tentacle in a circle to indicate Avril, Zero, and most especially, Minae. “I don’t want you to hear our conversation.”

“Hyt ...” Kayla trails off, looking past me toward Eve. They must share some sort of silent human communication because my sister sighs and grumbles under her breath. “Fine, I’ll go, but I *am* leaving for Jungryuk with you.” She turns a disappointed look on Minae, and at the very least, Minae has the grace to look back at her. “In four days or less, apparently, since you’ve just kicked Eve off the planet.”

“I’m doing this for his own good,” she says, but Kayla just shakes her head.

“You’re doing this for yourself, Minae. Make no mistake about that.” Kayla glances over at Eve’s servants and inclines her head. “Nice to meet you two. I’m not sure if I’ll be seeing you around or ...?” She trails off and shrugs her thin shoulders, offers a little wave, and then bounces up the steps.

I don’t bother to check and see if she’s hanging around to eavesdrop. That’s not Kayla’s style. If she wanted to stay and listen, she’d just plant her feet and tell me so.

“Hyt ...” Minae’s voice is so gentle, so tender, but so misplaced. Her companion lands on her head, its own coos equally soft and pleading.

I know that unrequited love hurts, but nobody ever admits how badly it hurts to be the person that turns the interested party down. I love Minae—like a sister. I’m essentially breaking my sister’s heart right now, and there’s nothing I can do to fix that. I cannot let her continue to suffer in this delusion that we’ll somehow be together.

More importantly, I can’t and won’t allow her to insult or bully my wife.

“Minae,” I begin, but she cuts me off, darting forward and causing me to take a step back. She tries to grab my hand, but I snatch it away. Her expression darkens like a Jungryukian storm.

“Seriously?” she breathes, like she can’t believe this is actually happening, like *I* am the crazy one in the room. “I can’t even touch you now?”

“You revoked my mate’s planetary privileges?” I ask in response, and Eve wiggles in my grip in such a way that my brain short-circuits, forcing me to set her down or fuck her. Since the latter option isn’t a particularly great idea in light of the circumstances, I put her feet on the floor but leave a tentacle around her waist and another wrapped tight on her ankle.

“We *cannot* have the Vestalis’ princess on Yaoh!” Minae snaps out, reaching up to rub at her ears in a nervous gesture. I watch her impassively, realizing that she’s right. Hating that she’s right. Wishing that she wasn’t. If only Eve wasn’t Rurik’s mate, everything would be so easy. Abraxas and I would learn to get along, I’m sure. We’d all be happy on Jungryuk together. This is ... I don’t even know that I have the vocabulary to describe what this is.

What would Kayla say? *An absolute shitstorm.* Yep, that.

“Even if she were the princess, she’s my mate,” I return patiently, crossing my arms as I look Minae over. She’s

assuming that the Vestalis—namely Rurik’s parents, the king and queen—are going to discover that their son’s bride is on Yaoh. That’s not going to happen. We’ll move her to Jungryuk before that happens. “Did you not think about that?” I wait for Minae to drop her arms by her sides, her eyes fixed on mine with so much want that I don’t know what to do with. I glance over at Eve, and she smiles. She smiles at me and ... shit, everything feels so much easier all of a sudden. I smile back. “We share a life force.” I turn to Minae again. “By banishing her, you’re banishing me.”

“That was never my intention, Hyt. She’s the Imperial Princess. She’ll be kept healthy. She’ll have an entire armada of ships to guard her. She’s going to live a very, very long life. You don’t need to worry about sharing a life force; she’ll live. In the meantime, we can figure out a way to schedule discreet meetups to exchange the pearl—”

“You think that’s the only reason he wants me around?” Eve growls out, stepping partially between me and Minae. My childhood friend hates that, but I get a kick out of it. My little Earthling is feisty as hell. She makes a sound of surprise as I lift her up in my tentacles again, moving her slightly behind my right shoulder. I love the way she stands up for me, but I’m also her mate: I’ll take care of this for the both of us. That’s my job. It’s what male Falopex are supposed to do for their females.

“Should we excuse ourselves?” Avril asks, reminding me that both she and Zero are watching. And if Zero is watching, that means Rurik could be watching. I shake my head gently. For the moment, I’d like them both to stay. I *want* the prince to hear all of this.

And *then* I want his blood-controlled cyborg and the other human female to fuck off.

“I think that you feel obligated, Hyt,” Minae continues, crossing her arms to mimic my pose. Her tails swish behind her as she closes her eyes. “I know you *so* well, better even than you know yourself.” She cracks her gaze to stare up at me. I cock a brow.

“Do you? Because if you did, then you’d know that I cared too much about you to lead you on.” When Eve reaches over to take my hand, I accept it, loving the soft feel of her flesh against my scaled palm. “But you don’t care enough about me to look past your need to fuck me.”

“That’s not it at all, Hyt. I’m in love with you; I’m worried about you.” Minae slams her palm against her chest, scales bristling. “You mated the next queen of the Noctuida!” She narrows her gaze, steels her expression. “Say it so that I can watch your truth color. Tell me that this girl is *not* the missing princess. I’ll wait.”

I laugh at that, reaching up and pulling my hat down over my face. I want to scream into it. So I do. I scream into my hat and then, as if nothing at all has happened, I lift it back up and drop it on my head.

“Somehow, you seem to be stuck on the issue of whether or not Eve is the Vestalis princess. But, again, if you knew me as well as you think you do, you’d understand how little that matters. I’m supposed to be your friend and yet, you’re hellbent on destroying the woman that I love—no matter the cost.” I nod with my chin in the direction of the stairs. “This is the last time that I’m going to tell you: get out.”

“You’ll destroy yourself trying to save another human,” Minae whispers, tears welling in her eyes. The crazy thing is, humans and Falopex both weep water. Only, humans weep salt and we weep fresh. Still, the similarities between our races are striking. I find it eerie how I seem to be one of the few that notices.

“I love Eve; Eve is my mate. That should be enough for you. This princess shit? What the fuck does your crazy theory have to do with anything?” I point at her with a tentacle as Eve studies my face. I think she’s the only person in my family who sees how hard this all is on me, who cares. My mom wants to criticize, my sister Nya wants to pick at me, my father wants to order me around, Minae wants me to do what she wants me to do.

But nobody gives a fuck about what I want.

Except for Eve.

My little Earth wife.

“It matters because this girl,” Minae points at Eve with her own tentacle, “is going to get you killed. You won’t even live long enough to transfer that embryo back to her.” She purses her mouth. “If I have to, I’ll take my concerns to the chief.”

“You go ahead and do that,” I growl out, flicking several of my tentacles in the direction of the stairs again. “And let’s assume you’re right: what do you think will happen? A move like that? It *would* result in my death, don’t you think? I see where you stand. If you can’t have me, nobody will, eh?” I smile, and it’s not a happy expression. “Get out, Minae. Now. Next time I ask, I use force to remove you.”

I gather my tails behind me, pulling oxygen and hydrogen molecules from the air the way my father did in his office. I’m not messing around: if needed, I will eject my childhood friend by force.

“I’m not trying to hurt you, Hyt. I’m trying to *save* you.” Minae has tears streaming down her face now, but I’m not interested in listening. She knows *exactly* what she’s doing, and what she’s trying to do is bully me into leaving Eve. Or, at the very least, bully me into becoming my lover. Either way, I’m not interested.

“Whoa.” Eve is staring at me, blinking rapidly as she points a finger in my direction, at the water dripping from my tentacles. “Are you ... is that *magic*?” The awe in her voice makes me smile (Jane once asked the same damn question of me), but I don’t look her way. Not yet. Minae is nothing if not stubborn, and if I look away now, she’ll take it as an invitation to keep going.

“You’re going to regret this, Hyt,” Minae whispers, voice soft. “Not because I’m going to sabotage you, but because the Vestalis are going to destroy you. In the end, *you* are going to lose. Not Eve. Not his Imperial Majesty. But *you*. I’ll do as much damage control as I can, but you will never be safe with her by your side.”

Minae heads up the stairs without looking at anyone else, but then she pauses near my bedroom door and turns back.

“Eve, if you truly love him, you’ll let him go. You’ll go back to *The Korol* and encourage Prince Rurik to take the throne. After that ...” Minae swallows hard. “You’ll be queen of the Noctuida and you’ll be able to do whatever you want.” She gives me a pointed look. “*Except* commit adultery. The mating bond is the most sacred of all things to the Vestalis, and if they find out about Hyt, even Rurik as king might not be enough to save him.”

Minae leaves with her companion, not bothering to close my bedroom door as she goes. I can hear the splash of her body hitting the water, and then nothing. For several minutes, nobody talks. Nobody moves. When I look over, I see Eve staring at the floor with wide eyes and an expression that says she’s precariously close to tears.

“How ... how is Minae always right about fucking everything?” she asks, whirling on me. Dead Kings, she’s cute in that oversized human outfit with her auburn hair braided and her green eyes wide. The single iris and single pupil in each one drive me crazy. They’re so damn alien to look at, and so, so fucking intense. I feel like I could get lost in Eve’s eyes forever.

I turn toward her, dropping the water I was gathering to the floor. It floods the room up to Eve’s ankles, and then filters out through special drains in the stone. “Hyt, she’s figured it all out. All of it. Everything. And you know what? She isn’t wrong. You could die. Even Rurik and I might die because of this. If his parents find out that you kidnapped me or *why* you kidnapped me, we are dead.”

“My princess.” Zero steps forward, and I glance over, suspecting Rurik. Takes everything I’ve got not to curl my lip at him. *Just remember: if this all works out, he’ll be stuck in the throne room on The Korol, and you’ll have Eve.* I don’t know why that never occurred to me before. I guess I wasn’t sure that she’d want me or, even if she did, that her other mates would make space for me in her life.

Color me shocked.

“Rurik,” Eve offers warily, glancing his way before looking back at me. “Hyt. No matter how much I hate Minae and—believe me, I *despise* that woman—she’s right.” Eve stares at me, all weepy-eyed and adorable, and it takes all of my self-control not to kick the others out so that I can drag her into the bedroom.

“Honey, look at me.” I lean down, putting my hands on my thighs so that I can stare her straight in the face. My tails come around us, creating a shield of pink. I tap her chin so that she doesn’t drop her head. “I’m an adult male, far past emotional, sexual, and intellectual maturity. I knew what I was doing when I got myself involved with you. I have *always* involved myself with humans anyway. This would not be the first time that my ass—or Cap’n Kidd’s ass—was on the line because of some harebrained scheme.”

Eve gives me a look as Zero takes another step toward us, still obviously under the control of his magnanimous and powerful majesty. I try not to roll my eyes as I glance his way. I succeed—but just barely. Although, I gotta be frank: he’s as good a Vestalis as there ever was. I doubt there’s a more compassionate or understanding prince in the entire royal brood. In a way, we’re lucky. The *Noctuida* is lucky. He’ll make a decent king.

“Even were Officer Hyt inclined to withdraw his involvement, even if you were willing to put yourself on the line to save him, there is nothing you can do. The pair of you are linked. If you do not live, he does not live.” Zero’s voice is oddly soft, tender, intimate. I know it’s all coming from Rurik, but the jealousy I feel doesn’t change. Blood-powered Cartian cyborg or Vestalis prince? I honestly wish it was the former that was in love with Eve. A Vestalis mate bond is a powerful, powerful thing.

“Where are you?” Eve asks Rurik, surprising me. “Like, right this very second. Where are you?”

He—or rather Zero—sighs heavily.

“I am on the World Station meeting with pilots in an attempt to convince my parents that landing on Jungryuk at this time is an impossibility, that we must wait.” Zero plucks at the ends of her dress sleeves, and Eve gives her a quizzical look, and then an odd, sideways half-smile.

Oh, and the jealousy inside of me? Fuck, it *rages*. I tamp it back, but just barely.

“*The Korol* could approach,” I admit, and Zero whips a sharp Rurik-esque look on me.

“Yes, but I am on the verge of convincing my parents to refuel in the Geometridae. We cannot approach Jungryuk *and* refuel from Pradzny. If we approach Jungryuk now, we will consume Jungryuk.”

I curse under my breath, rubbing my chin with the tip of one tentacle.

“Prah-diz-nee?” Eve asks, trying out the word on her tongue. “The hell is that? Wait, is that the mineral-y planet you were talking about?” She’s looking at me now, and I get caught on her strange single irises all over again.

“It is. Mineral heavy, but no signs of life other than single-celled organisms. *The Korol* needs to be refueled somewhere, and I’m of the opinion that Pradzny is where it’s at.” I look back at Zero/Rurik. “Do we need to throw them off the trail a bit? Make them think that perhaps Eve *isn’t* on Jungryuk?”

Zero lifts her hands up and rubs at her temples, closing her eyes for a long moment as the other girl, Avril, saunters around and peeps into my icebox, opens my kitchen drawers, does what humans do, I guess, and snoops shamelessly with me standing there. I almost smile. Humans are hilarious, aren’t they?

Doubt she’s shameless enough to go through my personal items the way my mate did though. *I wonder if Eve would use one of my human masturbators on me?* I want to tell her how many times I jerked off to thoughts of her, how I worked my cock up with her image in mind, how I blew my load hard into the bit of heated silicone and wished it were her.

Also, I'd *love* to tell her how woefully dissatisfying—not to mention anatomically inaccurate—those toys are. How much better she feels. How she's the culmination of years of dreams coming true.

“Do not worry about anything other than uniting Abraxas and Eve; I will handle the rest.” Rurik—through Zero—sounds exhausted. I almost feel sorry for the guy, but then I remember that he's mate bonded to my mate, and the reason we're in this mess in the first place is technically his fault. Well, you know, and Abraxas' for slowly poisoning her to death. I can feel it myself today, too, the beginning of those effects.

Mild nausea, dizziness, a headache, muscle aches.

“Four days,” I tell him, holding up four tentacles. “That's all we need. Then you and I can heroically save the princess and ... figure it out from there.”

“I will take command of the ship,” Rurik states, and Eve's eyes go wide.

“You damn well will not!” she shouts back at him, but then Zero is shaking her head with a groan.

“His majesty has retreated for the time being,” she mumbles, blinking her way out of a trance. “My deepest apologies.”

Eve curses under her breath as she looks back at me and then, past me, to where Avril is going through my kitchen.

“Girl, are you in need of something?” she asks, and Avril glances back with a grin, a whiskey bottle in her hand.

“Not anymore. Need a drink? After all of this shit, it feels like you could really use one.” She picks up a glass and brings it over to Eve, pushing it into her hand. “Zero and I will make ourselves scarce, give you two some time to talk. And if that woman comes back—”

“She won't,” I assure them all, turning to my companion as he floats near my head. I give him a look. “Make sure that Minae stays away from the house. In fact, make sure that *everybody* stays away from the house.” I give Avril and Zero another look. “If you guys want, I can scan your biometrics

into my bike so you can take it for the day. There are a few dry restaurants nearby, some even better beach spots. I'll give you Kayla's comm info, so you can get recs from her."

"Your ... bike?" Zero whispers, red eyes lighting up, the blood lace choker around her neck throbbing. She clasps her hands together as she peers at me. "Is it ... it can't be."

"Cartian-made," Eve tells her, and Zero's entire face breaks into the purest joy I've ever seen on another being. Minus ... the joy I feel when I look at Eve. Nothing could beat that.

"Is there a place I could go to hit on Falopex males?" Avril wonders absently as Eve rolls her eyes.

"Actually, there is," I admit with a shrug. "Falopex might refuse to mate bond with other species, but when it comes to sex ... there's a fair number who have no issues sleeping around with consenting adults from any planet. Come on, let's get you guys hooked up with the bike."

Eve and I take the others upstairs and send them on their way.

And then it's finally, blessedly, thankfully just the two of us standing on the dock and staring out at the sea. Zero whoops and Avril screams as the bike zips back and forth, creating wakes that rock the dock beneath our feet.

I turn to my mate and she turns to me.

"Do you think Minae is going to rat us out?" she asks softly, an adorable gasp escaping her lips when I reach out with my tentacle and curl it around her fingertips.

"No." It almost hurts to say the word because I had more faith in Minae than, apparently, she deserves. "Not yet. She isn't sure that she's right, and she won't go to my father until she's cleared away any shadows of doubt. The repercussions of her being wrong about this are as severe to her as the repercussions of being right would be to us. But make no mistake." I let out a sharp, hollow laugh. "Don't think that she'll hold back out of affection for yours truly."

"Hyt, I'm so sorry," Eve whispers, stepping close to me. My tails come up automatically, wrapping around her small, soft

form. And beneath my loincloth ... shit. My secondary shaft is emerging, hot and slick, and my mating tentacles are going buck wild. I can't seem to help myself when she's around.

"Sorry?" I choke out. For a precious few solar seconds I think she's apologizing for stirring me up. But then I realize that she's talking about our current situation, and a bit of that wild fervor in me dims. Only a bit though. With Eve around, it's a fire I can't put out. "Eve, you don't have to apologize to me for—"

"I'm sorry about Minae," she corrects, holding eye contact with me, even when I would really, *really* like to look away. I swipe a tentacle over my face, nibbling on my own suction cup for a minute. "I'm trying to imagine how I'd feel if Jane pulled this shit on me and ... well, I'd honestly feel like my heart had been ripped out and stomped on."

I drop my tentacle down and then snatch her around the waist with it, lifting her up to my face so that I can stare into her pretty alien eyes. Ah, and the sounds she makes when I grab her like that? So fucking worth it.

"Minae cannot rip my heart out and stomp on it because I've given it to you," I tell her, and Eve laughs at me, grabbing me around the tentacle with both of her small hands. She slaps playfully at me, too.

"Don't, don't even." Her words, though, are barely a breath. It wouldn't take much more than a kiss to steal them away entirely. "Be serious: are you okay?"

I think about that.

"Not really. But I will be." I pull Eve just a little closer. "Especially when I see you in my house on Jungryuk. I ... that's more my home than this place will ever be."

Eve swallows and looks away for a second, bright gold rays of sunshine catching on her hair and turning it into a wash of flame. My own breath catches and I yank her front against mine, noting the moment she recognizes how hard I am for her.

She tilts her head back, and I touch a tentacle to her chin. I lean down, eyes sliding shut, mouths close enough to kiss—

And then her stomach grumbles loudly, and Eve gasps. My eyes open wide to see her staring back at me with a blush on her face.

“That was you,” she accuses, and I laugh, a bit of dizziness hitting me all of a sudden.

“Nice try. Kayla used to pull that one on me, but human stomachs growl, Falopex stomachs most definitely do not.”

“Since you had to go all caveman on me earlier—which I didn’t entirely dislike—why don’t you put your money where your, uh, tentacles are and get your mate something to eat?” Eve frowns again. “Though, I’m not super keen on the idea of swimming to a restaurant. You know, since the bike is gone—”

She stops talking when I flick four tails into the water and reemerge with four *mulgi*. Kayla calls them fish with legs, so I know that Eve has at least some frame of reference for the creatures.

“Oh.” She gives me a look, like she’s suspicious about something. “You’re not going to eat those raw, are you?” Another pause. “Or shove them down my throat?”

I cringe and set her gently on the deck, leaning down to tickle her chin with my fingers.

“Not exactly, little Earthling. But I sure as hell can cook them up for ya.”



Ta-da! It's Eve!

Hyt is cooking for me, and he's doing it *naked*. Save for his hat and an apron that shows off his perfect ass. I'm amused, elbow parked on the surface of his dining room table, wearing an apron of my own. And nothing else. He convinced me that this—the whole being nude bit—was vital to understanding Falopex culture.

Really, I think he just wants to fuck me in an apron which, you know, is also what I want. We're pretty dang compatible, me and Officer Hyt.

“Hey Hieronymus,” I call out, struggling to pull my gaze away from his ass. It takes several seconds for me to realize that he's looking at me over his shoulder, tails swaying, cowboy hat tilted low over his eyes.

“My, my Earthling,” he says with a low, husky voice. “If I didn't know better, I'd say you were drooling over me.” He gives one of his tight cheeks a slap with a tentacle before turning fully around to face me. I groan with disappointment at the loss of such a perfect view. “What do you need? I mean, you called me *Hieronymus* on purpose, so there must be something.”

He crosses his arms and waits, waving around this metal *thing* that somewhat resembles a spatula—with a small iPad stuck to it. Also, it glows pink. Also, I'll allow three guesses for you to figure out where it came from. If it doesn't rhyme with *martian*, then you've lost the plot. Cartian tech for the

win. Apparently it's an AI-powered cooking device that detects parasites, bacteria, or other food-borne illnesses, alerts the user to when the food is thoroughly cooked, and can even identify the item if it's unknown. According to Hyt, if you program specific data into it, it'll also tell you if the food you're scanning is safe for your species to eat.

Again, Cartian tech is *legendary*.

“So ... Falopex actually use aprons on the regular? This isn't something you borrowed from Kayla?”

Hyt sets the spatula-ish thing aside and saunters over to stand in front of me. The man never just walks. He struts. Or sways. Sashays. Any number of s-words that describe walking with sex dripping off his body. This walk though, it's definitely a *saunter*.

He puts a palm on the table beside my elbow, his other hand gripping the back of the chair, and he leans in close enough to kiss. Only, he doesn't. He just studies me and then allows his mouth to simmer gently into a saucy smile.

So many s-words.

I choke on my own salacious thoughts.

“Because *most* Falopex are *mostly* naked *most* of the time,” he begins, his eyes on my mouth. “We wear aprons when we cook. It's merely to protect the genitalia, as you can see here.” He stands up suddenly and holds his arms out to either side of his toned body, giving me a *very* good look at the tented front of his apron.

I swallow any further questions as Hyt chuckles and, this time, sashays back to the old-fashioned flame burners on his counter. They were hidden until he pushed a button and out they popped. How very sci-fi of him. I shift uncomfortably in my seat, wondering if he can smell my arousal the way that Abraxas and Rurik can.

Don't ask, Eve. You'll regret it if you do. Don't do it.

“Hey, can you smell me when I'm turned-on?” I blurt, and Hyt freezes, one hand on the spatula-ish thing. He stays facing away from me which is fine since I can see his ass, but ... his

tails are weirdly stiff and they've stopped drifting back and forth the way they usually do.

Without answering, he takes the fish-ish things—already gutted and skinned—and tosses them into a pan with the bright sizzling pop of oil. He then wedges the Cartian spatula-ish thing into the pan with them, wipes his palms on his apron, and turns to look at me yet again.

When he parks his hands on his slender hips, my body responds by flushing hot, pumping blood to the apex of my thighs, going sweet and liquid and slick. My nipples hurt, and my skin is too tight, and ... why did I ask that stupid question? What I *should* be doing is having an adult discussion about the future of our relationship, asking him questions about Minae, and working on possible solutions to our many, many problems.

Instead, I just want to mate with him.

“Can I smell you?” he repeats, and then he huffs out a laugh, running one of his tentacles along the brim of his brown cowboy hat. “Eve, of *course* I can smell you.” Hyt winks at me and crosses his arms. “Question is: can you smell *me*?”

I clear my throat and sit back in my chair, crossing my own arms to mimic his pose. I'm about to open my mouth and admit to having an inferior sense of smell when he releases an entire sea of bubbles from the tips of his tentacles. They pop and fill the room with a hot, musky scent that makes me groan.

“Okay, yes, yes, I can smell you, too.” I cover my face with my hands, embarrassed. Hyt just chuckles at me and picks up the Cartian spatula-ish thing, turning the fish-ish filets over in the pan. I watch him through parted fingers, leaving my hands over my face until he looks back at me. He sees me peeking and grins.

“So, we've got the sex thing down,” he purrs, studying me intently as I finally drop my hands into my lap.

“That's what Jane calls it when there's ... you know.” I swirl a finger around to indicate the tension in the room. Hyt's smile softens slightly as he looks back at the food, checking

the pink screen on the spatula before he plates the sizzling meat. And when I say *plates*, I mean, *puts the food onto large upside-down seashells*. He picks them up in two tentacles, using two more to retrieve utensils, and another two to grab water and whiskey. Cups go in another pair of tentacles while the last adjusts his hat as he sashays over to me, whisking the items onto the tabletop.

“This isn’t all about sex for me,” he clarifies gently. I look up to meet his gaze and find an earnestness there that shouldn’t surprise me after everything we’ve been through. But ... it does anyway. How can Hyt look at me like that, full of curiosity and wonder? I’m not all that interesting. “I wouldn’t *want* it to be all about sex. My people *love* to fuck, and they do it often. So for me, a mate means something more than that.”

My cheeks heat as he tugs out the chair kitty-corner to mine and takes a seat in it. Hyt reaches up to rub at his forehead with a hand, closing his eyes briefly on what looks like a wave of dizziness.

That cracks the moment in half for me, and I find myself leaning forward to press my hand against his forehead. He opens his eyes to stare back at me, using a tentacle to lift his hat so that he can give me a bemused look.

“What on Yaoh are you doing?” he asks, like *what on Earth are you doing?* but ... Yeah. Seems like the phrase works here, too.

“Checking your ... temperature,” I trail off, realizing how stupid this is. I don’t even know what Hyt’s core body temperature is supposed to be. He feels hotter than I am, but hasn’t he always felt that way? I wouldn’t know if he was running a fever or ... do Falopex even run fevers? With an embarrassed groan, I sink back into my chair and pillow my arms on the table’s surface so that I can rest my forehead against them. “TSTL,” I mumble as I turn my head to the side to find Hyt imitating my position, staring right back at me.

“You were checking to see if I was ill?” he inquires, tails fluffing around behind him. I nod, and he smiles, reaching out

with a tentacle and suctioning the cup to my forehead. “Based on the data we’ve collected, humans have a core body temperature of about ten solar heat units. Falopex run a little hotter, at around eleven solar heat units.”

I have no idea what a *solar heat unit* is, but I can do math. If humans run around ninety-eight-point-six degrees then ... er ... he’s like one-oh-eight? One-oh-nine? The maths aren’t mathing right now in my brain place.

I sit up and Hyt does the same, still staring at me.

I tuck some hair behind my ear and pretend like I don’t notice the suction cup still latched to my forehead. Instead, I pick up my ... err. I grab the small pair of tongs and give them an experimental click before shrugging and using them to pick up some of the flaky coral-colored meat on my plate. Hyt’s decorated it with spices that he already had in the cabinet and topped it with ... something. Slices of some weird bright yellow fruit with a pink rind.

He extracts his tentacle with a pop, rubbing it against another the way a person might rub their fingers together.

“I love that you were trying to check on me,” he says, staring down at his own food before turning his gaze back to me. “I’ll admit: I don’t feel fantastic. One, because I haven’t eaten all day and Falopex need to eat *constantly*. Two, because I’m pregnant with your mysterious mixed-species love child. And three, because we’re both being slowly poisoned to death by Aspis venom.”

I choke on my bite of fish-ish as I glance over at him. It tastes like an odd mix between salmon and alligator (I tried that once in New Orleans) with a dash of thyme, a hint of rosemary, and a kiss of orange zest. It’s definitely not something I’ve ever eaten before, but it’s good. Better than it sounds.

“Do you know that for a fact? Or just guessing?” I pour myself a whiskey, giving Hyt a minute to take a huge bite of food. He closes his eyes in bliss, and then the scales on his tentacles raise up like hackles. Poor guy. He must’ve been starving.

“Just guessing,” he admits before taking another bite. “On record, no other species has ever mated with an Aspis. It’s a theory of mine.”

Hyt continues to eat as I think on that, and also on Abraxas’ words about the human/Aspis girl he saw.

“Maybe not on record, but it’s happened.” I down my entire glass of whiskey and go for another. Once Hyt gives the embryo back to me, it’s game over. You better believe I’m drinking my fill while I still can. “Besides, I don’t think it matters whether it’s cross-species mating or not. Aspis females die without their mates, same as me. Only ... if Abraxas isn’t ill, and I am, then maybe we’re onto something. Maybe it’s because when we mate, he gives me venom, but I don’t give him any? Maybe it’s the mate marks in my pussy? That’s basically my theory, too: envenomation.”

A slight smile takes over Hyt’s mouth.

“So, what, when you fuck him, you’re all cured?” He’s not mocking me, just curious. “I mean, on my cruiser, is that what happened?”

“Pretty much. When we have sex, I get an energy boost and all of this lethargy and dizziness and nausea, it goes away completely. The thing is, when Abraxas was attacked by a female Aspis, he was dying from her venom. It’s originally why I agreed to mate him in the first place. He claimed it would save his life and, apparently, that wasn’t just a cheap ploy to get me into bed.” I snort at the memory, and then my fork stills, and shit. I’m missing him all over again.

Just a handful of days left, Eve, I tell myself, but then I’m thinking about how much I’ll miss Hyt. How much I miss Rurik. I ... guess I’m in a poly relationship with aliens? Provided, of course, that Abraxas definitively agrees to all this *and* we can find a way to save Rurik from being perma-bound to the throne.

Hyt chews thoughtfully, using a tentacle to lift his water glass to his mouth for a sip.

“Antivenom then,” he theorizes, gaze slipping past the tabletop to the naked stretch of my thigh visible beneath the apron’s seashell bedecked ruffles. It’s truly a hideous piece of clothing. “Also to do with your glowing vagina, eh?”

I narrow my eyes on him, but he just smiles as he takes another bite of his food.

“I would assume. I mean, I’m not the one that poisoned Abraxas the first time, but sex with me still cured him. I can only guess that you’re right, that the glowing marks he gave me make antivenom—or something like that—during sex. What else could it be? I’m not an Aspis, but I still cured him while mating. I’m poisoned, but he’s not. I mean, it adds up.” I look up at Hyt suddenly, a slight grimace taking over me. “If you could just ... not tell him that at first, I’d appreciate it. Let me tell him. I don’t think he’ll take it well.”

Hyt pauses with his tongs halfway to his mouth, clutched in one of his tentacles, and he looks over at me like he’s worried about something.

“You’re not afraid of him, are you?” he asks, voice gone cold.

It takes me a second to parse those words.

“Oh, shit. No. No, no, no. I didn’t mean it like that. I think he’ll be ... devastated.” I poke at my food a bit before picking up the fruit slice and taking a bite of that instead. Definite orange vibes. Orange and pomegranate and maybe a bit of pineapple. I take another bite. “He’ll hate himself for hurting me. He’ll wish he’d let himself die that night instead of mating me. That’s what I mean.”

Hyt continues eating, and we sit in silence for a while.

“Do you like music?” he asks, surprising me with the change in subject. I look up to meet his eyes again, and find him smiling softly back at me. “We don’t have access to human music on Yaoh, but sometimes you can get bootleg shit on Jungryuk or illegal transmissions on the World Station. What I can do for you is play Falopex music.”

Music.

Something I never thought I'd hear much of in the forests of Jungryuk, but everything's changed now. The Vestalis have music and movies and books. Of course the Falopex do, too. I nod, my throat briefly clogged with emotion.

"Play *The Soft Shush*," Hyt commands, and a sweet sound begins to roll into the room. It's not like any music I've ever heard, and it takes me a second to recognize it as such. At first, it comes across like some meditation soundtrack, like a recording of a creek or something. But then a female voice lifts in a haunting chant, and goose bumps steal across my arms and legs. Hyt reaches out with a tentacle to touch them, and then sighs. "I love your skin," he tells me, voice low, and I shiver.

"You said this wasn't supposed to be all about sex, but you're making it very difficult for me to think of anything but." I point at him with my tongs, and he grins like a sly fox, one ear flattening back against the brim of his hat. "You cannot tell a woman *I love your skin* in a husky voice and expect anything but arousal in response."

"Okay then, let's talk about your family instead. I want to know everything." He takes the last bite of his food, and I pass my plate his way, too full to eat anymore. He gives me a look. "No, if I'm hungry, I'll go catch more. I'm not stealing my wife's food."

"You're eating for two," I tell him with a wide grin, still barely able to grasp the concept. His stomach is flat and perfect and brimming with delicious abs, so ... him being pregnant seems pretty far-fetched. Then I remind myself that an embryo—at least a human embryo—at this stage is like, the size of a poppy seed. "I'm full up. I promise. It'll go to waste if you don't eat it."

Hyt appears skeptical, purple tongue teasing the corner of his mouth. He reluctantly accepts the plate as I pour myself a third glass of whiskey.

The singing of the Falopex on the recording is ethereal, almost haunting, the sound of a ghost crying across open water for a lost loved one. It's one of the most beautiful, most

visceral songs I've ever heard in my life. Also, it's not translating as anything. Not sure if that's because she isn't actually saying words or if the translator doesn't do music, I have no idea. I like it, either way.

"My family, huh?" I say, leaning back in my chair and studying the rock-like walls of the room. There are barnacles stuck here and there, something resembling a ten-pointed starfish, a bit of water dripping from an outcropping. There are crystals embedded in the walls, in the stairs, in the ceiling, the floor, some of which have a faint glow. To be honest, I really like this fucking house. I hope we get to come back here and visit. I also like Hyt's grandparents, and his brothers, and the other rando family members we met the other night. Basically, I like everyone except his eldest sister, his parents, and fucking *Minae*.

I sip my drink.

"Well, you've become intimately acquainted with mine," he teases as the song switches over to something else. Like ocean waves now, with a male's voice woven into the sound. Still, doesn't translate. "Not for the best, maybe. But I'd like to know about yours, too." He takes a bite of the food I gave him, tapping his tongs against the edge of the seashell that serves as a plate. When he looks up and sees my face, he must recognize the deep melancholy in me, the knowledge that no matter what happens after this, life will never be the same. "Or I could try to distract you with more useless info about my own family. Did I ever tell you why I waltz around like a cowboy?"

I give him a look, unable to shake the sense of loss but briefly distracted by curiosity.

"Because you're an eclectic weirdo who likes humans even more than I do?" I ask, and Hyt chuckles. The sound dies off rather quickly, and I wonder if this isn't a more intense subject than I first guessed.

"Because Kayla was into cowboys, because cowboys reminded her of home, because I wanted to make her as comfortable as I could." He shrugs, like it's nothing. But oh, damn, it's truly something. A swell of emotion rises in my

chest for this man that I barely know but that I ... that I love anyway. “It’s a little hokey,” Hyt hedges, but he turns blue, so at least we both know that’s a lie.

I pick at the edge of my apron as I think about poor Kayla, suffering through the same shit that I suffered through but at a much younger age. Those brothel chains ... she didn’t have an Abraxas to save her from them, did she?

“I’m one of the lucky ones, aren’t I?” I don’t need Hyt to answer: I know that I am. Doesn’t mean I miss my family any less. Knowing that I’ll never wake up to my mother’s hot breakfasts, never play golf again with my dad, never make fun of Nate for staying up all night playing video games, that hurts. I clutch my drink tight with one hand and rub at my face with the other. *Fuck, I’m selfish.*

“Hey.” Hyt reaches out and wraps several tentacles around me. He snags my ankles, my arms, presses a suction cup to the back of my neck. I drop my hand to my lap and look into his eyes. “You’ll be the next queen of the Noct, Eve. You can grant yourself a permit to visit Earth.” *Pink skin. Truth.*

“I can only get so far away from Rurik, and Rurik can only get so far away from *The Korol*, and I’m just assuming *The Korol* can’t be near Earth all the time ...” I trail off and close my eyes. The idea of a permit is great. So—provided we don’t end up dead at the hands of Rurik’s parents before taking the throne—I’ll get to see my family again. Up to twice a year, was it? But it’ll never be the same. I’ll never be able to give them the truth that they deserve, and as time goes by, we’ll end up becoming strangers.

I open my eyes to see Hyt watching me, and force a smile to my lips, lifting my drink up in salute.

“At least Jane got herself a hottie space pirate and a copulatory plug so ... she’s stuck out here with me.”

“Unless you change the law,” Hyt reminds me, and I frown.

“No. No.” I shake my head and sip my drink. “I mean, I *will* change that law. It’s the stupidest fucking law ever, but I know Jane far too well. If that plug keeps her from having sex with

anyone else, and Cap'n Kidd is the only guy she can have sex with, well, she's marrying him."

Hyt grins brightly back at me, relaxing into his own chair.

"You know, Kidd was a bit of a slut before he met your friend. This'll be good for him, I think."

I nod.

"Jane was a slut, too. I'm excited to see them work this out together."

I lift my whiskey glass, Hyt lifts his water glass, and we clink them in honor of our slutty friends.

"How about you?" Hyt hedges, wetting his lips and leaning forward to put his elbows on the table. "How many lovers did you have before you were abducted by those god-awful fucking twins who—by the way—I'm planning on executing as soon as I get ahold of them."

I snort, thinking of the *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates* sign.

"Did I tell you that a Tusk Man bought me off the twins? I knew he was full of shit about three seconds in. And then Abraxas killed him and ate him right in front of me." I smile and shake my head. "Anyway ... lovers ..." I consider for a minute and then toss Hyt a wink and a saucy grin of my own. "Would you believe me if I said I was a virgin before Abraxas?"

"Bullshit," Hyt snorts. "You are so full of it, Earthling. Come on now, give me your number. I won't judge. The average Falopex fucks a hundred different people in their lifetime."

Now it's my turn to snort in disbelief.

"A hundred? Seriously?" I shake my head, but then I think about Jane and ... well, she's not at a hundred, but I mean, it's possible that she could get there one day. That is, she might have gotten there if she hadn't fucked an alien who gives out copulatory plugs. "My body count is nowhere near that." I tally up lovers inside my head. "Not including you, Abraxas, and Rurik ... four." I sigh. "My highschool sweetheart who

turned into a jobless, peaked-in-high-school loser. This dude who bred vestal tiger moths that Rurik is weirdly similar to. My sister's husband's brother—don't ask, it only lasted six weeks—and Mack.” I curl the edge of my lip and then take another drink. “Stupid-ass motherfucking Mack.”

“I'm desperately trying not to get jealous and failing miserably.” Hyt purses his lips and taps his fingertips on the table. It's only then that I realize he doesn't have any fingernails. Not sure how I failed to notice this until now, but his fingertips are perfectly smooth. I reach out and touch my own fingertips to his, and he goes still. Not in a bad way, but like he's absorbing the moment. “Falopex treat hands like humans treat their breasts. They're not solely sexual in function, but ... they can be sexual.” He turns his hand to clasp mine and then leans in, stroking his smooth, scaled fingers over my knuckles. “You're not getting out of the Mack story.”

I roll my eyes.

“He's a cheating douchebag, what else is there to say?” I shrug. “I met him on a job, dated him for a while, liked him well enough.” I swallow another mouthful of whiskey, avoiding Hyt's gaze for the moment. “Only, what I had with him—with any of them—is nothing like what I have with ...” I don't have to finish. Hyt knows. “I've dated many more guys than I've fucked. Didn't like them either.” I force myself to turn back so that I can see him watching me. “And yet, here I am, all-in on an alien when I don't even know what your core body temperature is, if you get fevers, if we're even going to live to see what species our baby will turn out to be.”

My mind drifts back to Minae and the galactic clusterfuck we're now involved in.

“Seriously though,” I continue before Hyt gets a chance to speak. “I really, really, *really* hate Minae, but I'm shocked by her level of perception.”

He strokes my knuckles, turns my hand over, traces the lines in my palm.

“Minae is a talented officer,” he admits, staring down at his pink skin against my peach-colored flesh. “I’m not surprised. I just figured she’d work it out in her head, confront me about it, and keep my secret as a friend.” He lifts his eyes back to mine. “Don’t worry about her just now. Like I said, she won’t do anything until she’s sure, and she isn’t sure yet. This is all hypothetical on her part, and she’s probably wondering if she didn’t just make it all up out of jealousy. We’re going to relax for the next several days, get ourselves married, and scurry off to Jungryuk.”

My breath catches, and my heart does this weird scuttle thing in my chest, like it’s trying to scurry away from the impact of Hyt’s gaze. *He’s so handsome. More than that, he’s fun. He listens. He’s open with me.* I couldn’t like him more if he were human. Actually, I think I prefer that he’s not.

“I’m excited to see our place on Jungryuk,” I whisper, and something about my statement makes *his* breath catch.

“Earthling, you know what that does to me, don’t you?” he asks, stroking my knuckles and my fingers, turning a simple touch into something promising and erotic in nature. “When you talk to me like we have a future, I believe it.”

“We have a future, Hyt,” I tell him as he collects me in his tails, this nest of beautiful pink scales that draw me in, that promise me I’m safe in his arms, that I’ll always have a place to call home with him. “Do you ... do you want to watch a movie?”

It’s an innocuous question, a simple, easy act, but it holds so much power because this moment between us, it’s so tender and raw and hopeful. *Dead Kings, please don’t mess this up for us.*

“I would love to watch a movie with you, Eve.” Hyt sounds like he’s promising me his soul as he lifts me up and carries me up the stairs to our bedroom.



Hyt plays us a movie using his tablet, aiming it up at the ceiling and projecting the film onto it like a projector or something. Well, like a projector with ultra-HD tech. It's surprisingly easy to understand the plot, especially after Hyt tells me that most Falopex movies involve a couple who say they want a closed marriage, but actually want an open one. They cheat on each other, each feeling guilty about the acts, and then confess in a dramatic show of tears near the end.

That's the plot of the film we're watching now, lying side by side on our backs.

"This is seriously the most common Falopex trope?" I ask him, and he shrugs one shoulder, eating a bucket of these weird shrimp things he caught and then fried. I guess it's supposed to be like popcorn or something? They taste like chicken nuggets to me.

"What would you prefer?" he asks, his cowboy hat put away for the night, both of his fox ears laid flat against his head in thought. "Something truly romantic? Vestalis films are best for that. If you want to watch something wild, a Yaena movie will rock your world. Or ..." Hyt reaches out and taps the screen, switching our film out for a row of covers featuring—

"Porn?" I query back, turning my head to look at him. He turns his head, too, a sly grin on his lips, and uses one of his tentacles to set the shrimp bucket down on the ground beside the bed. His companion chirps and dives into it, using its beak to eat from the leftovers. "For real though?"

"I'm not the one who confessed to watching Falopex porn in front of a Falopex," he tells me, turning onto his side and pillowing his head on a hand. His tentacles slip around his body to seek mine out, suckers sliding pheromone oil across my skin. It catches at me. Grabs me. It locks me down.

What the fuck is going to happen to me when I'm getting pheromone-blasted by Abraxas, Rurik, and Hyt all at the same goddamn time?

Yeah ... I am ... straight-fucked.

Literally.

Meaning, of course, that I'm a very lucky lady, and should probably win an award for *best abducted by aliens human being in the whole of the Noct*. Who else could possibly be this lucky? I turn onto my side, mimicking Hyt's position so that we can stare at each other. He lifts a fin-brow and then casually-not-so-casually uses a tentacle to hit play on what I guess is an X-rated cover? My eyes flick up to the ceiling where the porno is now playing. Not even really sure what's happening there or what's going on in the—

“Oh my fucking God.” I choke on the words, rolling onto my back and gaping in abject shock at the ... well, I *think* it's supposed to be carnal. Sounds carnal. There's a lot of liquid. There are ... things and stuff ... doing ... things and stuff. “Hyt, what the *fucking fuck fuck?*”

“Fucking fuck fuck?” he repeats, glancing casually in that direction. He gives me a naughty fox grin. “Oh, this? Never seen two *adorgaeloracs* mating before?”

“Adore-a-whats?” I breathe, still trying to figure out what's happening on our ceiling-screen. I point at it, cocking my head slightly to one side the way Abraxas does. “What is even happening there?”

Hyt rolls onto his back and then shimmies close so that our bodies are touching all down one side. He's warm and smooth and my fingers itch to pet and stroke his scales, but ...

“I gotta tell you,” I start, wetting my lips and turning my head toward him. He turns his toward me, and then our mouths are just really, *really* close together. “This might be considered porn out here in the Noct, but it's not doin' it for me. In fact, I think my lady parts are drying up.”

A tentacle slicks up along the inside of my leg and presses tight against the crotch of my holey sweatpants. I wasn't aware

that there was a hole, um, near my hole until just now, but ... there is. And Hyt is using it to stroke my folds. My toes curl into the sheets, and I suck in a sharp breath.

“No ... you’re not drying up,” he says bemusedly, turning again so that he’s hovering over me, one hand pressed into the mattress near my face, tentacle tails swarming my body to pluck at my clothing. His smile is slick and messy, a tad lopsided, dark with humor and dripping intent.

If I hadn’t liked him before now, that smile would’ve sealed the deal.

“But,” Hyt continues as I pant up at him like some inexperienced coed, pink-cheeked and shivering slightly. “I can understand if you’re not into the *adorgaeloracs*; their sexual activity includes a lot of spines and viscous goop.”

“Spines and viscous goop?” I whisper as Hyt leans down toward me, more or less doing a goddamn push-up over my body. He puts his nose right up against mine, purple tongue poised over his bottom lip as he wets it with a tempting swipe. “You thought spines and viscous goop was gonna do it for me?”

“I bumped the wrong title,” he whispers cheekily, one tentacle straying back to the tablet. He taps the screen, and then shifts so that I can see what’s happening on the ceiling above him.

A male Falopex—one with mint-green skin—is lounging in a shallow pool, head thrown back, water glistening on his smooth-scaled skin. He’s jerking himself off with one of his tentacles, using the others to pet and stroke over his own body.

“Oh.” The word slips out of me as Hyt chuckles, shifting onto his side on my left this time. “Is that how you like to do it to yourself?”

“Mm. Sometimes,” he says, and my mind immediately goes back to the masturbators I’ve seen in like, every single one of his drawers. His drawers in his room at his parents’ house, his drawers on his police cruiser, his drawer here ...

Hyt uses his tentacles to simultaneously rid me of my sweatshirt and sweatpants. He chucks them aside and then leans in, running a smooth fingertip down from my clavicle to my belly button. He teases a smooth circle around it, fox ears perking up.

“Falopex have these, too,” he whispers, and then he’s dropping down so quickly that I don’t get a chance to respond. The softness of his breath feathers over my skin, causing my stomach muscles to contract in retaliation. He breathes out, I contract in. He inhales, I relax. We play that game for a moment before Hyt drops his lips down to kiss my skin, swirling his tongue in a circle around my belly button.

“Hyt, shit,” I groan, arching my hips up off the bed. He pins them back with his tentacles as I stare up at the adult film playing on our ceiling. The Falopex male has lifted one leg up on the edge of the pool, jerked off the tip of one tentacle like a cock, and slicked it with enough pheromone oil that ... Wow. Okay. He’s inserting it into his ass.

Hyt pauses to glance up, so he can see what I’m seeing.

“Never done that before,” he admits, and I’m relieved to see that alien porn is as unrealistic as human porn is. Good to know. He looks back at me, naked in his bed and shaking with anticipation, and smiles again. “I’ll do it, if you want me to. Whatever you want, Eve. Let’s play.”

“Ah, so you *are* a Falopex at heart,” I tease, swallowing down my trepidation. It’s not easy to ask for what you want during sex, even more so when your partner is an alien with an entirely different body from your own. I sit up on my elbows and reach out, touching my fingertips to his. “I ... now that I know your hands and fingers are special, I want them in me.”

Hyt inhales strangely, using his tentacles to push up so that our faces are close again. He exhales against my lips this time, and I close my eyes, wishing he’d kiss me. How stupid was that, making a no-kissing rule? How long did that last? Ten seconds? I force my lids open to find him watching me with those insanely beautiful eyes of his.

“And?” he queries patiently, tentacle tails tracing my naked skin. He shed his loincloth along with his hat earlier, so I can also feel his mating tentacles teasing my thighs as if trying to part them. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

My eyes flick over to the nightstand before moving back to him again.

“I want to use that masturbator on you,” I tell him firmly, and he lifts his fin-brow, reaching up to scratch at the side of his head with a tentacle.

“Yeah?” he asks, gaze shifting to the nightstand drawer where one of his tentacles is already deftly removing said item. “I’d much rather be fucking you, but—”

I sit up and snatch it from his tentacle, but only because he lets me. The strength in each of those tails is more than enough to snap my neck. I know that. Should scare me, but it absolutely doesn’t. At least ... not with Hyt around. I’m honestly surprised that Minae hasn’t tried to kill me. Yet. Would she even be punished for it? I’m not sure that human beings are considered ‘people’ in the Noct. Probably she’s only restrained herself because my death means Hyt’s death, too.

I lean against the headboard as Hyt scoots back to sit on his calves, watching me as I poke a finger into the hole of the faux vagina. I mean, that’s what it is. It’s a silicone pussy-shaped thing with sculpted lips and skin that’s oddly similar to my own shade of pale pink-peach. Hmm.

“Officer Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt, I think you have a type,” I tell him, and then I slide my finger inside.

The device turns on—I wasn’t aware it had that function—and begins to suck. Hard. Not only that, but it heats up nice and quick, and it’s *wet*. I’m not sure how, but ... holy crap. I just sit there gaping as the thing yanks on my finger like my poor digit owes it money.

“What is ... what the hell?” I probe the inside, but the texture is plain weird, almost perfectly smooth with a single scalloped ridge on the top. Also, I see that there’s no clit

sculpted onto the damn thing. “This is not anatomically accurate,” I tell him, but he already knows. I mean, now he does. I look up and our eyes meet. “But it probably feels good, doesn’t it?”

“It feels fine,” Hyt tells me, still staring at me in an unnerving sort of way. The sounds from the tablet are so disturbingly base and carnal that I get goose bumps, but I don’t look up at the ceiling. I couldn’t possibly look away from Officer Hyt, not right now. “But it isn’t a female. It isn’t a wife. It isn’t *you*.” He smirks again, tails swaying lazily behind him. “It’s also loosely modeled after the channel of a Falopex female, so it’s not nearly as fun, now is it?”

He climbs up to sit beside me, sliding down so that he’s lying on his back.

I let my gaze trail down his svelte form to his cock. He’s completely erect, the secondary white part of his shaft thrust proudly up from the thick base, the nine lower tentacles and the nine mating tentacles all waving gently as if to invite me to come play.

“Lie to me,” I tell him, slipping my finger out of the toy and moving over to straddle his legs. He helps me with his tentacles all over my body, getting me situated comfortably so he can stroke and pet all over me while I examine him.

“You are not the most beautiful female I’ve ever seen,” he says, his own skin flushing blue while mine turns a pretty pink in response. “Eve, I—”

I refuse to let him say anything else, taking the masturbator and slipping it down the length of his dick. That stops him right in his tracks, his breath shuddering out in a staccato swirl, his tentacles tightening around my arms and legs, suction cups stuck to my ass cheeks.

With my eyes on his, I move the item up and down the length of him, surprised to find that he doesn’t fit all the way inside of it. When he fucks me, I make sure he gets balls-deep. His base tentacles grip and grab at the toy, so I slip the fingers of my other hand in there to give them something to play with.

They wrap around each digit, yanking on me and smearing my skin with pheromone oil.

“Earthling,” Hyt warns me straight-off, forcing himself up onto his elbows. “This toy feels like *shit* compared to you.” He growls the words a bit, his skin turning pink, but all that does is make me grin. “Toss it aside and let’s fuck.”

“Not until you show me how you like it,” I start, but then Hyt is using his tentacles to flip us both over so that he’s on top and between my legs. I lose control of the toy, but I can feel it pressing against my opening. He pins me down with his hands on my wrists, spreading my legs with his tentacles, and then he fucks the toy into my cunt so hard that *I* feel like I might actually come. The motion of his hips, the heat of his skin, the way he’s gritting his sharp teeth at me. “Harder,” I manage to grate out, and he complies, rutting that goddamn masturbator into me while my vision crackles at the edges and my hips buck up to meet his.

There’s a strange sound, like something tearing, and then I feel not just the masturbator but *Hyt* at my opening. We both pause to look down, only to see that he’s fucked straight through the toy and out the other side. It’s now impaled on his dick like a sleeve. He stares at it and then lifts his attention to me.

“You ... fucked it so hard you broke it,” I whisper, and then a thought occurs to me. “Do that to me next.”

Hyt makes a dark, male sound, dropping his mouth to the side of my neck and licking the sweat from my thrumming pulse. He nudges my opening with the tip of his cock, but the stupid masturbator keeps us from getting closer.

Somehow, that makes this moment all the more tantalizing.

“I would never fuck you that hard,” he lies, skin turning blue again. The color change just does it for me. I can’t get enough.

I curl my body toward Hyt’s and he helps prop me up with tentacles against my back. My hands come around to grip his

ass, encouraging him to undulate nice and slow, teasing us both with that inch and a half of penetration.

“If you weren’t already pregnant,” I growl at him, feeling very female and very possessive of this male in my arms, “then I’d get you pregnant right now.”

Hyt pauses again, and then he laughs, and the sound vibrates right through his nine tails and into me.

“Oh, female,” he purrs out, using his entire body to roll against me, pressing hard muscles to my soft stomach, my breasts, rubbing his firm thighs against the silken insides of my own. “Don’t think I’m any less *male* because I’m carrying your embryo for you.” He lifts up to smile silkily down at me. “I’d get you pregnant again right now if I wasn’t worried for our lives.” And ... Hyt is pink again with the truth of that. He slips a tentacle between us, using his suction cup to turn me into a thrashing, mindless mess. “The only thing keeping you from getting pregnant right now are my pheromones.” He lifts a hand up and taps a single finger against the side of his head. “All it takes is me flipping a switch in my brain, and you’re fertile again. I’ll stop giving off dampening signals to your body.”

“Do it,” I whisper, lost in a frenzy of lust, drowning under the sultry haze of it. I can smell notes in his pheromones, like I’m sampling perfumes or something. *A bite of musk, a kiss of floral, a hint of bourbon and gunpowder.* I want to know what it smells like when he’s not trying to keep us from getting pregnant again.

“You’re reckless,” he tells me, stroking my face with his fingers, tracing my parted lips, slipping a single digit inside so that I can attack it with a hungry tongue. “I love it.”

Bubbles bloom from Hyt then, swirling up from the tips of his tails and popping in the air around us. His companion trills happily and sweeps past, heading outside to give us some privacy. I appreciate that. I make a note to give the little guy a special snack later. He seems very food-motivated.

I inhale sharply, and I can *taste* the difference in the air.

The heavy weight of *promise* sits on my tongue, and I almost choke on the ripe flavor of it. Like fruit in the height of summer, juicy and sweet and ambrosial. I thrust my hips against the tip of Hyt's cock, his mating tentacles stroking my folds, my ass, my inner thighs.

Fucking Officer Hyt is like engaging in a carnal carnival of sensations. There's something going on everywhere, in every single part of my body. There's no scrap of skin left untouched, and I know exactly why other aliens—including myself—are so hot for Falopex sex. I'm consumed by him. There's no part of me that he isn't touching, isn't stimulating. It's almost overwhelming.

"Hyt, *please*," I breathe, but I'm not entirely sure what I'm begging for. Luckily, he seems to know. He mounts me with that toy as a barrier between us, fucking me with just the tip, making me feel empty and frustrated and desperate for him until I know *exactly* what it is that I want. "Fill me up. Get rid of that stupid thing."

He smiles lazily, dreamily, like he knew I was going to say that.

"Consider it done. I'll get rid of every single fucking one." He sits up with a grin and then *slowly*, slowly, fucking *slowly* slides the toy up his cock. Hyt drops his head back, reaching out with a tentacle for his damn hat and shoving it back in place. I don't want to admit it, but I'm excited. While spines and viscous goo might not do it for me, the cowboy hat certainly does.

He drops his chin to look down at me, and then he turns and throws the toy as hard as he can at the wall. It breaks into pieces, bits of silicone and computer chip-things flying everywhere. He's on me before I can fully process the move, his mouth on mine, his shaft rubbing between my legs but staying maddeningly away from the one place that I want it.

"Dude, you are seriously pissing me off," I howl at him, clawing at his arms as he wets his lips but keeps those as far away from my mouth as his dick is from my opening.

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder,” he teases, and I can only assume he learned such a stupid phrase from his sister. *She is also getting sent into the nearest imploding sun.* Hyt licks and kisses the side of my neck, tentacle tails sweeping over my body, making my skin glisten with oil. He rubs it into my breasts, teases that slickness over my nipples, feigns entering me from behind. I can feel the tip of one tentacle probing that entrance, but I’m convinced it’s too big.

Until he pushes in to test the theory.

I gasp, back arching, fingernails buried in Hyt’s strong arms. I’d be worried about hurting him if I hadn’t already tried this trick before. His scales are far from delicate. I’m not sure that I could break his skin if I tried.

“Relax, Earthling,” he tells me gently, tails touching either side of my face. “My tentacles are ... *malleable*. I won’t be any bigger than you need me to be.” Hyt withdraws the tip, stroking me again until my entire body relaxes. He kisses me full on the mouth then, and I sigh with pleasure at the feel of his tongue. It’s smoother than a human tongue, but really, it’s the *teeth* that give away his alien nature.

I tease my tongue over the sharp rows, tracing the slightly larger canines in the front, wondering if I’m not going to cut myself and bleed into his mouth. Hyt uses his own tongue to guide my exploration, taking his time petting and probing my ass until my hips thrust up to welcome him in.

A slippery tip pushes in just enough to ignite my nerve-endings, but not enough to hurt. Officer Hyt is a very patient and considerate lover.

“How ...” I whisper, wrapping my arms around his neck, finding myself lost in his focused attention. He looks right back at me, a permanent half-smile etched into his mouth. “How did you ...” I have to pause to take several panting breaths. “Stay single for so long?”

“Mm, why?” he murmurs, wiggling the tentacle against my ass so that my pussy clenches and clamps, wishing he was filling that channel as well as the other. “Because I was waiting for you?” He makes it into a question, either out of

habit or because he's nervous to show the truth in his skin. "Because I was waiting for you." He repeats the words with a definitive period at the end of his sentence, and his skin ... remains a rosy pink.

"Please," I beg against his lips when he kisses me again. Hyt settles his strong body between my thighs, letting his mating tentacles play with me a bit before he nudges the tip inside. Our eyes meet, and then his muscles contract all over with a hard thrust, hips slamming into mine. Tentacles curl around my breasts, squeezing them as his suckers fling waves of fire into my body through my nipples.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I come *hard* around him, completely lost to the agonizing foreplay he just put me through. I go limp underneath him, but Hyt doesn't stop, keeping my legs open wide with his tails, fucking me through the aftershocks with slow, sensual undulations.

I fall through the pleasure, coming out the other side a panting, sweaty mess, and he pauses.

"Are you ready?" he asks me, and it takes me several blinks to make sense of those words.

"Ready?" It's meant to be a question, but it comes out more like a statement.

Hyt smirks.

"Good."

He drives deep into me, as fast and wild as he was with the toy between us, and I can absolutely see how he broke the damn thing. My body softens underneath his, a natural response to his possessive mating, and I sigh with deep contentment, head tilting back, lids heavy with satisfaction.

He looks absolutely *beautiful* as he fucks, all of those tight, strong muscles sliding beneath his scaled skin, control in every single one of his tails, in his base tentacles, in his mating tentacles buried deep inside of me. They coax and tease my cunt, offering sensations I've never experienced before now.

I relax further, one hand stroking down his front and finding his skin just as slick as my own. Sweat? More pheromones? I

have no idea. I lift up and lick him, just for a taste, and he groans like I've done something magical. So I pull him to me, kissing and licking his chest when I can't get access to his mouth.

“Shit, I need to see you,” he says frantically, suddenly, and then we're flipping over, and I'm on top.

Hyt takes control of my wrists, wrapping them together in front of me with a tentacle, and then he puts his hands firmly on my hips and uses the others to slide me up and down the length of his shaft. That tentacle in my ass, it gently probes and teases and softly fucks. Another tentacle drapes over my shoulders, gently wraps my neck like a warm scarf.

“Fake fiancée?” he whispers as I blink in a sex-induced stupor at him. He smiles again, and it's absolutely wicked. “No, I don't think so.” Hyt brings me closer to his face, leaning forward to meet me halfway. “You're my wife, aren't you, Eve?”

“You're my husband, aren't you, Officer Hyt?” I pant back at him, and, satisfied and smirking, he leans back and uses his tails to grind me on his shaft. He reaches up and grabs at the sides of his hat with a groan, pounding me down against him harder and faster and deeper until I cry out again, climaxing hard enough that he has to put extra force into getting past my tight muscles.

I can feel his orgasm deep inside, right down to the tips of those mating tentacles, and I only have a fraction of sense left to remember what I asked of him. *I should've made him pull out*, I think, but that's the last rational thought to leave my brain, and then it's just me and him, wild and sticky and hot.

Hyt yanks me against his chest, all wrapped up in his tails, both of us struggling for breath.

It takes some time—one of his suckers rubbing a lazy circle between my shoulder blades—for either of us to speak. I clear my throat and try to sit up. He relaxes his hold on me, but he doesn't let me get far. Our faces are six inches apart at best. Mostly, he's staring at my mouth.

“You don’t think ...” I trail off, feeling the hot slickness between my thighs from his cum. It’s clear, which is interesting, but it’s also *copious*. Meaning, of course, that there’s a fucking lot. “We’re not going to end up with another kid, are we?”

“Uh.” Hyt rubs at the side of his head with a tentacle, blinking like he’s trying to draw himself out of a stupor. “I don’t think so. It usually takes some time for the dampening pheromones to wear off.” Another pause. “Usually.”

We both just sit there for a second in silence.

And then I wrap my arms around his neck, and he wraps his around my waist, and we just hold each other. A moan rips through the speakers on his tablet, and we both glance up at the ceiling to see that the porn is still playing, and that the male Falopex that’s starring in it has just started fucking a Vestalis.

“Just so you know,” Hyt whispers in my ear as he strokes my hair back. He places a gentle kiss against the side of my cheek. “That’s *never* happening.”

I try to imagine him and Rurik and— Nope. Nope, nope, nope. I’m way too jealous and hypocritical anyway.

All I do is laugh, and kiss him, and steal his cowboy hat.

And then I navigate back to the Spikes and Viscous Goo aliens, but only for research purposes.

“Let’s see how many weird mating rituals we can watch,” I tell him, and we stay cuddled in bed together for the rest of the night.

Well, we stay in bed.

Cuddling ... is not all that we do.



Migraine.

That's the only word that'll come to mind when I rouse to consciousness. Migraine, migraine, migraine. Somebody—hopefully Hyt—is poking me in my naked ass cheek. I'm on my stomach with the blankets haphazardly slung over my lower back, tangled around one leg, leaving my butt entirely bare to the world.

“Pardon me, your majesty.”

I crack my eyes open to waves of dizziness, horrific nausea, and *a migraine*.

“Why are you touching my ass?” I grind out as Avril pokes me in the right cheek with a single finger. She crouches down beside the bed and smirks at me.

“One, because it's funny. Two, because you have a nice ass.” She winks at me, but I know the girl is straight as fuck, so her words are nothing but a tease. That's not how Rurik takes it.

Zero's hand snatches my handmaiden around the wrist, hauling her up to her feet. All I need do is *glance* Zero's way to see that my husband is the one who's completely and utterly in control of the cyborg.

“Please refrain from touching my female in her private areas,” Zero grinds out in her own voice, but with Rurik's mannerisms and speech patterns. He releases Avril and then squats down in her place. “Oh, princess,” he breathes, just

before Hyt walks into the bedroom, wearing an apron and holding a giant round shell that looks like it's functioning as a mixing bowl.

He's smiling, but only until he notices that Rurik—in Zero's body—is there. Hyt gets his icy officer voice on as he moves into the room.

"Is everything okay?" he asks, coming over to sit on the edge of the bed next to me. Meanwhile, Avril is digging around in a large metal case and withdrawing a blood lace robe. She drapes it over my naked body as I struggle to sit up. "Eve, are you alright?"

"I'm ..." I trail off and cough a bit as I sit up, groaning and tucking the red lace robe around my shoulders. I don't even have the strength to put my arms into the sleeves. "I'm okay."

"You're as big a liar as I am," Hyt murmurs, reaching out to tuck some auburn hair behind my ear. I shake my head slowly, but then immediately regret the motion, sitting back on my calves. I may very well throw up.

"You're suffering, too," I remind him, but he turns my head his direction with a tentacle on my chin. Rurik—through Zero—looks between the pair of us with a tightening of his lips.

"I'm only experiencing a fraction of your symptoms. We share a life force, but we don't share every ailment." He grits his teeth, clenches his jaw, and looks over at Rurik. They share a long, silent exchange before the latter turns to me again, reaching up to press one of Zero's small, soft hands against the side of my face.

"I need you to be honest with me, my princess." Rurik leans forward as if he might kiss me, but then seems to realize whose body he's inhabiting. He, too, grits his teeth in frustration. "*Okay* tells me nothing. I want specifics."

"I haven't passed out yet," I tell them both, trying to keep my voice nice and cheerful. I know it's been five days since I got here, but what that means, exactly, in terms of time, I don't know. Ten Earth days, right? It's like a two-for-one deal? The days I experienced on *The Korol* and the World Station, on

Dome, I don't know how to compare those to these either. What I do know is that on the fourth day of my seven-day wedding ceremony with Rurik, I started to get sick. By day seven, I was nearly dead. "If I haven't passed out, we've got some time."

"When is Abraxas expected to arrive?" Rurik asks, adjusting Zero's body so that he's in a comfortable squat, the white dress pooled on the floor in a circle around him.

"The day after tomorrow," Hyt says with a worried look, one that's reflected in Rurik/Zero's gaze. "But if I have to, I could ... maybe we could jet off and meet him midway?" He passes the bowl from his hands to his tentacles and then holds it absently off to one side, like it's unimportant. He places his hands on his strong thighs, drumming his fingers in thought. "There are about a dozen reasons why that's not a good idea, but, obviously, if it's between losing Eve and taking those risks, I'll do it."

"And when does the lunar tide on Jungryuk end?" Rurik uses Zero's body to stand up, absently yanking at the fingers of one hand like maybe he's playing with his gloves up on the World Station.

"Tomorrow night," Hyt says, absently using one of his tentacles to stir the mixture in his shell bowl. "Well, tomorrow night Yaoh time." He stops stirring, gaze shifting to mine. We end up staring at one another, my fingers clenched tight around the lace of the robe. "That's when it starts to wane." He sticks two of his suckers together and then peels them apart with a sharp pop, like the snapping of fingers. "But it's not like an instantaneous change in gravity. It's gradual. The farther we get from the waning tide, the better."

"Timing is crucial here," Rurik continues, turning to look out the empty glass pane that used to be the back door. He stares blankly at the island, mind clearly elsewhere. I mean, he's looking out through Zero's eyes, but he isn't here. Not really. That makes me feel sad as hell, and I wrap the robe even more tightly around me. Hyt notices and shifts slightly. "Eve must meet with Abraxas, and then we need them both

down on Jungryuk as soon as possible.” He gives Hyt a sharp look. “*As soon as possible.*”

Hyt exhales heavily and nods.

“We could leave the morning after the wedding,” he offers, gaze as distant as Rurik’s. “It won’t be easy to land, but if there are only two people in the whole of the Noct capable of such a feat, it’d be me and Kidd.”

“Why do we need Abraxas on Jungryuk?” I ask, not because I don’t want him there. I think that’s where he should stay for the time being, but ... I’m curious. It feels like there’s more at play here than Rurik is saying.

He locks me down with a stare and ... I’m lost. I’m floating in his eyes, even if they’re not really his eyes at all. The effect is diminished somewhat with Zero standing between us as a buffer, but ... there is no doubt that Rurik is the one looking back at me.

“We will need to make it look like a true search and rescue, like a triumph of the Imperial family and not a failure. We will need someone to blame—the Collector, in this case—and we will be there for some time. You will have need to ... meet with Abraxas more than once.” He flicks Zero’s tongue against the edge of her mouth to convey his distaste at the idea.

Personally, I’m thrilled.

“So ... we need to keep Abraxas and me together so we can fuck more?” I ask cheerily, and Avril snorts in the corner. I ignore her. Mostly because I can see the effect my statement’s just had on the other two males in the room. “Right. I’ve got this. I haven’t even ...” I fling the robe out of my way, swing my feet over the edge of the bed, and make to stand up to prove my hale nature.

I blink, and then I’m lying cradled in Hyt’s tentacles, and the mixing bowl is spilled across the floor. Rurik/Zero hovers over me, passing his hands over my body like he wants to touch me, but doesn’t dare to while borrowing another’s body.

Shit, I passed out, didn’t I?

“Earthling ... I can’t believe you suffered through this all alone.” Hyt strokes the side of my face with a tentacle as Rurik holds back, hands trembling.

“To be fair, I didn’t know when I mated Abraxas that I’d end up dying for the privilege.” I try to chuckle to lighten the mood, but it doesn’t work. What I need now is an app that can convert days on *The Korol* to days on the World Station to days on Dome to days on Yaoh. I need to figure out how much time, exactly, that I have left.

It isn’t just my life on the line here.

It’s Hyt’s. It’s Rurik’s. It’s Abraxas’.

“If you had,” Hyt offers gently, staring down at me with fear in his eyes, “would it have changed anything?”

I swallow and then shake my head as he helps me into a sitting position on his lap.

“I have to go, my princess, but we will see each other as soon as you land on Jungryuk. I will be days behind, at most.”

“Days?” I clarify, raising a brow. It’s the only body part I feel like I have control over at the moment. The rest of me feels sluggish and inert, but I can at least cock an eyebrow. “What kind of days?”

Even on Zero’s face, Rurik’s smile is heart-shatteringly beautiful.

“Earth days,” he whispers, and then he very gently, very tentatively places a kiss on my lips. He draws back and then Zero’s head goes limp, chin sagging to her chest before she sucks in a sharp breath and shudders all over.

She very quickly rises to her feet.

“Shall I take over breakfast?” Avril asks, gathering the mixing bowl and the wooden spoon-ish thing from the mess on the floor. “I don’t know much about Falopex food myself, but Zero knows everything.”

“I would be happy to assist with meal preparations, your Imperial Highness,” she tells me, and I nod, my attention on Hyt’s face and not on my roiling stomach. I know that I have

to eat, that if I don't eat, I'll feel worse, but right now? Not sure I could keep a single bite down. From past experience, I know the symptoms come and go, so ... I'll work through it.

I can do this.

Both Hyt and I wait until the girls leave before either of us speaks.

"I can't stand seeing you like this," he breathes, and his expression mirrors the one he had in the chapel when he held me against his chest and looked at me like he was dying right alongside me. "All of this shit could be avoided if it weren't for the goddamn Vestalis."

He's not wrong, but ... I love Rurik. I think there are a lot of wonderful aspects to the Vestalis that are overlooked. Hyt must know that, too, since he's a 'Vestalis sympathizer, but I'm sure it's hard to remember that right about now.

I nuzzle into the hollow beneath his chin, and he squeezes me even more tightly in his tentacles.

"I'm glad you're here with me," I tell him honestly, "that we're doing this together. When I was first abducted, I felt so alone." I wet my lips, but they're so damn dry. Another side effect of being poisoned. Err, envenomated, I guess. "Back on Earth, I sort of felt that way, too."

Hyt exhales, ruffling my hair with his breath. Before he can respond, I blurt out a question. I know how serious things are. I know how wrong this all might go. I'm aware that we might not live to see what a long-term relationship might actually look like. But I can't dwell on that. I have to keep busy and pretend that everything is going to work out okay as long as I take the proper steps.

"Hey, can you help me with some tricky math?" I ask, adjusting myself so that I can look at Hyt's face.

He flattens his fox ears against his head, reaching out with one of his tentacles to retrieve his tablet.

"Tell me what you need, wife, and I've got you."

So I tell him, and he crunches the numbers, and ...

Ah.

Days on Yaoh are long, similar in length to the nights on Jungryuk. And the days and nights on both *The Korol* and the World Station? They're based on the days and nights on Dome.

Which means ... I have about seventy-two Earth hours before it's lights out.

For me ... and for all three men that I love.



By the end of breakfast, I'm feeling better. Much more like myself. Which, of course, is to say I'm eating macarons and listening hungrily to Avril's gossip about Connor and Brot.

“So then, I come around the corner and there they are, bare-ass naked in the hallway. Connor is absolutely *railing* Brot from behind and—”

Hyt interrupts by lifting a single tentacle, pausing beside my chair at the dining table to place a pot of steaming tea-ish liquid down beside me. Apparently, it's called a dry leaf boil here which doesn't sound nearly as pleasant as it smells. I'm on my fourth cup; the first one pretty much took care of all my nausea. He uses a tentacle to pour fresh liquid into the cup-shaped shell that serves as a mug.

“When you say *railing*, what do you mean by that exactly?” Hyt pours himself a cup next and then sets the pot down, taking the seat beside mine. Zero refills her own cup while Avril talks, gesturing rapidly with her hands. We've been sitting here gossiping for several hours now (at least to my best estimate), but I want to go out with Hyt and see the capital city of Yaoh. Apparently it's not overly far from here.

“Connor was topping Brot from behind.” Avril pauses, seeming to realize that might not translate correctly either. “As in, Connor was giving it to Brot in the ass.” She snorts. “No

surprise there. When we dated, he was submissive in the relationship department, but a big ol' dom in the bedroom.”

“Ah,” Hyt says, relaxing in his chair, a black cowboy hat on his head, brim pulled low. He uses a tentacle to lift his tea to his mouth while the fingers of his left hand stroke absently over my thigh. I’m wearing one of the blood lace bikinis that Avril packed for me. Apparently, Rurik made me several new outfits while waiting for his chance to come down here to see me. I can’t wear them in public, but I can certainly wear them in my own house, can’t I? I’ve got the robe slung over my shoulders, pooling prettily around my chair. “I understand. Should I add the word *railing* to my vocabulary?” he wonders absently. “Or *topping*?”

“Please do,” I tell him with a grin, taking another sip of my tea. The closest thing I can think to compare it to is hot apple cider mixed with black tea and spiced with orange zest. “So we can talk shit about all of my friends.” I set the cup down and give Avril a look. “For example, did you find a Falopex male to sleep with last night?”

Avril sighs and redirects her sapphire gaze to the tabletop.

“Not exactly. I mean, we found the spot that Kayla recommended just fine.” She looks up and her attention slips over to Zero.

“I slept with a Falopex male last night,” Zero says unashamedly, shrugging one shoulder. “I prefer them because there’s no questions about who I am or where I came from. It’s sex, plain and simple. We both left satisfied and that was that. Long-term relationships with Falopex—unless one is a Falopex themselves—are non-existent.” She gives me and Hyt a somewhat apologetic look, and he leans in, putting his elbows on the table’s surface. He rests his head in his hands, gaze sliding my way. “No offense meant, Your Imperial Highness.”

“No offense taken,” I say as my eyes meet Hyt’s. He smiles at me, and he doesn’t seem offended either.

“She’s not wrong. I’m the exception not the rule.” Hyt looks back at Avril. “So she found a friend, but you didn’t?”

Avril sighs and plays with a bit of condensation on the table beneath her water glass.

“It’s not like I expected a relationship or anything, but I do expect *some* conversation before getting to the deed. I couldn’t get a single answer about the simplest thing from any of them. I was very clearly a checkmark on some mating bucket list and not really a person at all.”

Hyt cringes slightly and sits up, dragging his tablet close with a tentacle and searching for something before he holds it up to show Avril.

“Hate to admit to this, but ... there really is an app for that.”

The three of us lean forward as Hyt’s companion chitters and sends bubbles up toward the ceiling as he flits around our heads.

Lo and behold, there it is: an app with pictures of different species in a long list and very obvious blank boxes on the side. Hyt taps one to show us, and it fills in with a check mark.

I see. *Jane would love this*. Or, she would have loved the app if she didn’t have a copulatory plug and could actually get some use out of it.

“I might sign up for *Affiance*,” Avril says, leaning back in her chair and pushing her red hair back from her face. “That is, if you actually do become queen and we don’t all end up dead.”

“What’s *Affiance*?” I ask, glancing over at Hyt.

“It’s a dating app,” he says, but he’s not looking at me. He’s still staring at Avril. “You do know that *Affiance* isn’t for casual dating, right? It’s for mates. As in, something permanent like Eve and I have. Or that she has with Abraxas or Rurik. Mating pairs that can’t be undone.”

“I know that,” Avril says, picking up her water glass and taking a long drink. “I just, um.” She clears her throat. “I just think it sounds interesting. That’s the sort of life that I want, an interesting one.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to go back to Earth?” Hyt asks her, pouring me another cup when I’ve drained my drink again. I feel better with every sip, I swear.

“Definitely not,” Avril breathes, and I sense a backstory lurking behind her words. She stands up suddenly, her red velvet dress swaying dramatically. “Can I get you something else to eat, your majesty?” she asks me, but I shake my head.

Hyt and I exchange a look, but if Avril doesn’t want to talk about it, the conversation is over.

“Do you think we could go into town today?” I ask, turning to Hyt as Avril approaches the indent in the kitchen counter that may or may not be a sink. The dishes are piled there, so ... She rolls her sleeves up, preparing to dig in and wash them when Hyt offers me a sideways smile.

“Wash dishes,” he says loudly, and Avril lets out a surprised shriek as a glass cover slides over the sink indent, and the dishes disappear from view. Hyt sits back, satisfied, and crosses two tentacles over his chest like arms. “Go into town?” he repeats, sweeping his gaze over me. There’s worry and compassion both in his eyes which makes me feel warm and fuzzy but also ... restless.

“Oh, come on.” I grab his hand off my thigh and squeeze it between both of mine, leaning in toward him in just such a way that I know my breasts are pressed together and tantalizing, two pale mounds with a nice dark line of cleavage down the center. *Come on, tits, convince him to take me out!* “We’re leaving soon, aren’t we? When will I get another chance?”

Hyt’s eyes are stuck on my face. They haven’t flicked down to my breasts once. I know the phrase is usually *hey man, my eyes are up here* but, but, but ... I scoot my chair a little closer, lean in a little further. One of his tentacles dances over my chest, and I suck in a surprised breath.

“I don’t come to Yaoh often,” he admits, studying me. His smile slips a little, but not because he’s unhappy. Hyt looks contemplative, like he’s really giving our future together

consideration. “Now that I’ve got you, we’ll probably visit a bit more than once every few solar years.”

“And a solar year is ... what exactly in Earth terms?” I ask, trying not to get too excited by the words *now that I’ve got you*.

“One solar year is approximately six Earth months,” Zero explains effortlessly, sipping her drink. I nod in appreciation, but my gaze remains on Hyt.

“Even if you doubled your visits because of me,” I start, my own mouth twitching into a smile. “To show me off to your family?” I guess, but Hyt doesn’t respond. Instead, he just smiles back at me. “Anyway, we still won’t come here often, will we?”

“Try not to forget that you’re also the next queen of the Noct,” Avril calls out, trying to find something to busy herself with. When she realizes there’s nothing to do to clean up, she sighs and comes back over to the table to slump into her chair.

I realize then that Hyt’s companion is gone; the room seems strangely quiet without him around.

“If you want to see the city, I’ll show it to you,” Hyt tells me, lifting up a tentacle in warning. “But I need you to be honest with me if you don’t feel good. Any new or worsening symptoms, I want to hear about them straightaway.”

“In that, we are in agreement,” Zero says with Rurik’s intonation. I turn and snag myself on his/her eyes, feeling a strange heat as I’m caught between the prince and the police officer. *Now all we need is the beast, and my collection is complete*. I cover my mouth to stifle an inappropriate snort. “I am concerned by my parents’ actions. They have broken *The Korol* into its smaller parts, and each one of those parts is controlled by my father.”

Hyt turns in a very disturbing way to look at Rurik/Zero.

“They dismantled *The Korol*?” he whispers, rubbing at the side of his head with a tentacle. “Fuck.”

I open my mouth to ask the meaning when Hyt’s companion comes whizzing into the room with an alarming shriek. Zero’s

eyes glow red, and her head whips over in the direction of the stairs.

“Several Falopex are descending on the house,” she says, shoving up to her feet. Rurik has clearly been pushed back. If he is still watching, he’s no longer in control of the cyborg’s body.

“My family,” Hyt groans, rubbing at his face. He looks over at me, and we both freeze.

I’m wearing the blood lace garments.

He stands up and I do the same.

“Where do I go?” I choke out, unsure if they’re going to come in via the deck and the bedroom door or if there’s an underwater entrance downstairs.

“Bathroom,” he says, bundling me up and carrying me up the steps. He gives Avril a sharp look when she tries to follow. “Eve is *not* the Imperial Princess, and you are *not* her servant.” His skin turns blue with the lie as Avril sits back down, and we head into the bedroom.

Hyt yanks the bathroom door open, sets me down beside the toilet, and then hurriedly heads back to the locker to dig around for some other clothes. He snatches my holey sweatpants and hoodie, chucks them inside, and closes the door just as I hear the sounds of splashing from outside.

“What are you doing here?” he growls out, and for a second, I’m certain that Minae is back.

“I gave you a day off to enjoy your mate, but you couldn’t possibly think I wouldn’t come see you after the heir to the imperial throne stopped by your house *personally*, now did you?” It’s Hyt’s mom. I’ve only met the woman a handful of times, but that haughty, morally self-righteous tone is impossible to mistake for anyone else. “Where is Eve?”

“I tried to stop her, Hyt.” That would be Kayla. “She wouldn’t listen. I *told* her that you and Eve deserve time alone.”

“We deserve it, and we’ll have it, don’t you think?” Hyt replies in his icy police officer voice. “Mother, go home.” Another pause, some more splashing, a sigh. “Nya. Did Farin send you here to bitch me out?”

“You ran out on the Chief in the middle of a briefing, ignored his calls, refused his summons, and so, yes, I’m here in his stead.” There’s a pause there where I can just imagine Hyt and his sister glaring at one another. “Hyt, where is Minae? Nobody’s seen her since yesterday.”

My mate sighs as I shrug off the blood lace cloak and bikini, looking around for a place to stash it. Since only Kayla and I use the toilet, and I doubt she’ll be here that long, I take a chance and carefully fold the items, gently situating them into the back of the porcelain throne. They’ll get wet, but I can always dry them later. Better to put them there than somehow end up with his family stumbling over them.

I’m sorry, Rurik, I think with a pang, looking down at the beautiful lace in the water. I carefully refit the back of the toilet tank and hurriedly dress in the sweatsuit, cracking the door to peek out.

“Why would I know where Minae is?” Hyt asks, like he’s genuinely curious. “I kicked her out yesterday for revoking Eve’s planetary privileges; she’s the *last* person I want to see right now.” He turns pink with the truth of those statements.

There’s a long stretch of silence made worse when I open the door to join the group.

Both Falopex women—and Kayla—turn to look at me. The latter grins while the former two peer at me like some sort of oddity in a museum, something best left to float in a jar of formaldehyde.

“Why would she ...?” Hyt’s mother, Anih, trails off, clearly not privy to the goings-on from yesterday.

“She wants me so badly that she’s willing to accuse *Eve* of being the Imperial Princess.” Hyt rolls his eyes, using one of his tentacles to wrap my waist and drag me over to stand next to him. “Frankly, I find it pathetic and insulting. Minae is

supposed to be my friend, but, because her wants are more important than my own, she's kicked us off of Yaoh."

"No." Hyt's mother's scales lift up like hackles. "I'll have her reverse the decision. This is ridiculous. Of course your mate isn't the princess." Anih huffs angrily, tails thrashing around. I appreciate her belief in us, and I'm surprised by her righteous indignation but ... Damn it. Wait until she finds the truth out. Because, after I'm queen, she will.

I'll tell the whole of the Noctuida about Hyt and Abraxas, and Rurik will support me.

I do not think about him getting sealed to the throne. I refuse. I'll fix this. I *know* that we can fix this.

"Doesn't matter, don't bother." Hyt waves his hand dismissively, glancing over to meet my gaze. "After the Commitment Ceremony, we're heading back to Jungryuk."

"Hyt, you just got here!" Anih puts her hands over her mouth and turns away, ever the picture of the flustered, over-invested mother-in-law. Still, better than the galactic millipede monster. I can't *wait* to meet Abraxas' mom. "Nya, go see your father. Now. Shouldn't he know about this?"

"He does know about this," Nya admits, cringing when her mother slaps her on the arm with a tentacle. "And yes, yes, I knew about it, too. Not about Minae accusing Eve of being the princess, but about the planetary privileges. What can I do? Minae and I hold equal positions. I have no authority over her. Only father can—"

"I will *wring* that male's neck," Anih growls, turning and storming out the bedroom door.

"Dead Kings' cocks," Hyt curses, yanking me along after him. We follow his mother down the stairs and into the kitchen/dining area where Zero and Avril are waiting.

The Falopex matriarch stops stone-cold, tails swaying.

"These are the princess' servants?" she inquires, addressing Hyt and not the women themselves. "Why would he leave them here?"

Hyt sighs, still holding me in his tentacles, as he moves around his mother to pause at the end of the table.

“Mother, this is Zero.” He gestures to the Cartian girl first and then to my lady-in-waiting. “And Avril. The prince left them here because I’m taking them to Jungryuk with me to search for the princess.”

“The Vestalis are swarming,” Nya adds in, descending the steps behind us. It takes me a second to realize that I don’t see Kayla, and I’m struck with a sudden fear that she might be using the toilet. *Well, it should still flush, right? Hopefully she won’t notice anything.* She comes out just after Nya, but if she did somehow discover my hidden clothes, there’s no sign on her face. “They’ve disassembled *The Korol*, and they’re everywhere. Father is afraid that they’re going to shoot first and ask questions later.”

“Sounds about right,” Hyt says, finally setting my feet down on the floor. “Which is why, as hurt as I am by Minae’s actions, I don’t care. We’re leaving anyway.” He looks at me again as if to confirm. “The morning after the ceremony.”

I nod my agreement as Anih sweeps past to study the women at the table.

“It’s good to see you both again,” Kayla says cheerily, greeting them like people instead of well, Anih’s got that *formaldehyde-filled-jar* stare going on. “Since Hyt and Eve are planning on having a couples’ day out, do you want to hang with me for the day?”

“Kayla-Kanala-Mynerah, what on Yaoh do you think you’re doing?” Anih hisses at her daughter.

“Mom, I haven’t seen another human in ten years. Now, there are two of them. You don’t think I’d take advantage of that?” Kayla lifts a brow and then grins. “A human being and a *Cartian*. They’re the smartest species to ever exist in the Noct, you know.”

Anih sighs and uses her tentacles to rub the sides of her head the way Hyt does. I see where he got that habit from. *I wonder if our future child will have tentacle tails?* Does it

make me weird that I hope he or she does? I refocus back on the moment at hand.

“Making nice with the future queen’s servants probably isn’t all that terrible an idea, you know,” Avril says, speaking up for the first time. “Besides, the prince has been known to take over Zero’s faculties every now and again. If he doesn’t like what he sees, well, you know how the Vestalis can be.”

Anih just *stares* at Avril, but, you know, my lady-in-waiting isn’t wrong. Hyt’s mother sighs and adjusts the thin belt she’s wearing, the one with a single gold chain that does absolutely nothing to hide either her ass or her lady parts up front. Tits are on full-display, too, but I guess we’re just supposed to ignore those.

Nya, at least, is wearing a metal bra and matching thong, like a character in a video game. Armor in the form of a bra and panty set. How very effective that must be at stopping attacks.

“Do what you want then,” Anih says eventually, as if twenty-three year old Kayla needs her permission to go out with friends. Hyt’s mother gives him a look. “Your grandmothers are invested in making this Commitment Ceremony as lovely as possible on such short notice. They’ll expect you to stay on Yaoh for the Homecoming Festival. Don’t tell them you’re not going to be here or why.”

“Trying to protect Minae’s honor, are we?” Hyt asks with a sigh and a shake of his head. “But no, I won’t tell them anything anyway. Now.” He turns to his mother, hands parked on his hips. “Please leave. Don’t make me turn my request into an order.”

“I’ll talk to Father and, if I can find her, Minae,” Nya offers, looking past her brother to meet my eyes. “I’m sorry about all of this. I know it doesn’t change things, but Minae truly loves Hyt. If you have it in your heart to share, she’d make a lovely companion.”

Hyt grits his teeth and points toward the stairs with a hand instead of a tentacle. I’m coming to learn that this is when he means business.

“Even if Eve was okay with an arrangement like that, I am *not*. I only wish to mate the female who holds my pearl. Last time I’m going to ask nicely.”

“You’re such a curmudgeon,” Nya grumbles, turning and pounding up the steps. Hyt’s mother heaves a dramatic sigh and gives me a look. It’s somewhat apologetic which is surprising but which also makes me feel guilty as hell. We’re lying. Minae is right that we’re lying. And yet ...

“I love your son,” I tell her, the words falling out of my mouth before I can stop them.

I mean, they’re ... they’re true. *You’ve known the guy for all of five seconds, Eve.* And while that is, indeed, a fact, you know what else is a fact? Hyt gave me his pearl. He’s gone out of his way to help me on multiple occasions with absolutely nothing to gain. That’s how Abraxas got to me in the forests of Jungryuk. Words are fluffy and sweet, but actions are meaty. I can sink my teeth into them.

As for Rurik ... I happen to glance in Zero’s direction, and my heart stops. He’s staring out of her eyes and into mine. My breath comes far too quickly, and I’m afraid the smell of my arousal might perfume the entire room. I force my attention back to Anih. *Hasn’t Rurik shown you with his actions, too? He’s willing to let you be with other men and take the throne so that you don’t suffer, so that your planet doesn’t suffer, so those other men don’t suffer.*

Dead Kings.

I’m in big trouble.

“Well,” Anih begins, swallowing hard. “You did give his pearl back.” Nya, who hasn’t quite left the room, pauses suddenly, putting a hand up on the wall. She squeezes all nine of her tentacle tails into fists, and then takes off at a brisk clip before disappearing. “I look forward to officially welcoming you as my daughter-in-law.” Anih gives her son a squeeze on the shoulder with the end of one tentacle. “I will also be speaking with your father, mark my words.” Another pregnant pause as Anih meets Hyt’s gaze. “And Minae as well. But son, please tell me she’s wrong. I just want to hear you say it.”

Oh fuck. Oh fuck fuck fuck.

Hyt isn't fazed. He smiles softly, winks, and uses a tentacle to tip his hat toward his mother.

"Eve is my mate, Mother." His skin stays pink. "I love her, and I'm going to marry her tomorrow." Still pink.

Meanwhile, Avril is *staring* at me, and I'm doing my best to remain as calm as possible.

"Hieronymus," Anih says gently, reaching her tentacle up to caress his cheek. She gazes at him with so much love and caring that I feel guilty for judging her so harshly. I mean, she *is* kind of hostile toward humans, but she also raised Kayla like a member of her own family. The world—and the Noct—aren't exactly black-and-white, are they? "You have a mate now. I know you've always shied away from the truth, but if you're going to be honest with anyone, make that person your mate."

"Yes, ma'am," he replies just as gently, bending down so that Anih can offer him a kiss on the cheek. She pulls away and then hesitates slightly before reaching out with purple tentacles to tug me close. I'm given a matching kiss on the cheek, and then Anih exits through the bedroom behind her daughter.

"Do you guys need some time to get ready?" Kayla asks, peering between Avril and Zero. She must sense that something's off with the both of them because she puts a fist to her mouth and coughs to clear her throat. "I'll just ... go check on my hoverboard."

She disappears out to the deck, leaving the four of us alone.

"You two are in love?" Avril queries, her voice strange. "What does that mean for you and Rurik?" I hear the other questions hiding behind her words. *What does that mean for me? For Connor? For Zero? Our lives depend on you, Eve.*

I open my mouth to respond, but Rurik beats me to it, rising from the table in Zero's body.

"It changes nothing," he breathes, the cyborg's red eyes fixed on the table's surface. "I will be bound to *The Korol* and

—”

“Would you stop?” I shout back at him, knowing that I should probably keep my voice down but unable to help myself. “You are *not* going to be bound to that fucking ship.”

“Eve,” Hyt says gently, tentacles wrapping my waist and ankles. I ignore him for the moment, attention fixed on the prince. He won’t look at me, and I hate that. Also, my headache’s just come roaring back with a vengeance.

“No. He’s going to stop with that fatalist shit.” I storm around the table, Hyt’s tentacles pulling taut before he releases them, and I snatch Rurik/Zero by the shoulders, spinning them to face me. “I will *not* allow you to sacrifice yourself like that. I already told you: I would rather let *The Korol* eat planet Earth than lose you.”

“It is far more complicated than that,” he replies, his voice a breathy whisper as he looks into my eyes. Both of Zero’s hands come up, like Rurik just can’t help himself, thumbs tracing across my cheeks. It’s a bit weird to have the Cartian cyborg touch me like that, but there’s no doubt that it’s Rurik who’s taking the action. “In all my life, I have never seen *The Korol* dismantled. They are desperate to find you, and if they do not, and another of my brothers brings home a mate, we will *all* be executed. Jungryuk will be lost. Earth will be lost.”

Avril makes a sound from her end of the table as Hyt moves to stand directly behind me.

“Yeah, I know all of that. I do. But—”

Rurik puts a finger to my lips.

“Soon enough, I will see you on Jungryuk. After that, Officer Hyt and I will triumphantly discover you in the Collector’s clutches. I will take the throne. I will change the laws. You will get everything you want, my princess.”

“Except for you,” I choke out, but he shakes his head at me.

“You will *always* have me. In this life as well as the next. You will sit in my lap on the throne and tell me stories. We will make love. Our child will play on the floor at my feet. It is

not a perfect existence, but it is one in which you live, and that is the only acceptable outcome for me.”

Rage fills me then. It’s white-hot, obliterating my vision, making me feel crazy. I’ve heard all of this before, but it’s like, with every day that passes, it gets more real. My impossible optimism is dimming at the edges as I realize that I know *nothing* and can do *nothing*.

“I will attend your wedding,” Rurik tells me, and I’m not sure I have *ever* heard another being on this world or any other sound as sad as he does. “I look forward to seeing you smile, and I am glad that you have found affection for the handsome young officer.”

“I hate you,” I whisper, but that’s not true. Not at all. “I love you.”

Rurik looks up and over my shoulder at Hyt.

“Tensions are as high as I have ever seen them. My parents are suspicious, and I am not sure that they believe Eve is on Jungryuk. Why else would they be searching the World Station? Yaoh? They have even left their own agents to scour Earth. They blame me for the death of Ranet and his mate, as if they have made the wrong decision, and it is my fault. If a single one of my brothers finds a female, I will lose my position as crown prince.”

Read the subtext: *I will die.*

“If they kill me,” Rurik continues, and I make a small sound as I grip the front of Zero’s dress in two fists. Tentacles slide around me from behind, comforting me with Hyt’s warmth. “Take the princess and the Aspis and *run.*” Another pause. “Perhaps to the Geometridae.”

I can feel Hyt shudder behind me.

“I understand,” he says, his voice ice-cold again.

Rurik/Zero nods before turning to Avril.

“Do not question the princess’ intent again, do you understand me?”

“Yes, your Imperial Majesty,” Avril whispers, dropping her head. But oh man, do I feel bad for her. She’s as helpless as I am. *More* helpless than I am. At least I have people out here. She doesn’t have anyone.

Rurik looks back at me, cupping the side of my face.

“Stay strong for me, Eve. We’ll be together in the flesh soon enough, and we will fix all of this.” He leans down and brushes Zero’s lips against mine, but it’s not the same. I can feel space and time, stars and cosmic dust, all of it creating a barrier between us. “I will love you into the everlasting, my mate.”

Rurik releases me and steps back, and Zero shakes her head like she’s coming out of a trance.

Don’t cry, Eve. Don’t do it.

I turn suddenly and bury myself in Hyt’s embrace. He knows exactly what to do, wrapping me up in a cocoon of tentacles and holding me close.

A throat clears from up the stairs, and Hyt turns slightly so that we can both see Kayla standing there.

She has a scrap of red lace hanging from her finger.

Oh my God.

“Hey, can I make a suggestion?,” she asks, tilting her head slightly to one side. “Your Majesty, if you’re going to hide your Vestalis garments in the house, may I suggest a spot that doesn’t cause the toilet to overflow?”



“I can’t believe Kayla found out the way she did.” I put my head in my hands, elbows resting on the surface of the table. Hyt stares bemusedly back at me, mouth quirked to one side, tails swaying.

“It’s not like my family randomly rifles through my bathroom cabinets. You could’ve hidden the clothes in there,” he says with the hint of a laugh behind his words. Glad he finds this funny. He trusts Kayla implicitly to keep our secret. She didn’t seem all that surprised or upset by the revelation.

“Yeah, you forget, I’m a human, too. When I saw the photos of the princess in full makeup, I had a strong suspicion that you two were the same person.”

“Frankly, your family *acts* like the sort of family who randomly rifles through bathroom cabinets.” I lift my head up to glare at Hyt, tugging my shell-mug close so I can finish the fresh cup of tea-ish that he just made me. Much as I wanted to lie about the headache, I didn’t. I admitted to not feeling well.

“Or maybe you only think that because *you* are the sort of person who randomly rifles through bathroom cabinets,” Hyt says with another chuckle. He comes around the side of the table and perches his firm, taut ass on the edge of it. The loincloth rides up, and there’s a hell of a lot of firm, sexy, scaled thigh in view.

I almost choke on my tea-ish.

“Fair enough,” I mumble around another mouthful. Hyt is smiling at me, but there’s enough worry in his eyes that I fear

for my chances of going out to see the city today. “Also, you know, you could do a better job of hiding your human vagina toys.”

“Oh?” he teases, arms crossed, leaning down to peer into my face. “Did I do a bad job of putting my personal items in my personal spaces while letting you and your lover use my cruiser to fuck on at risk to my own life? I am *so* sorry, your Imperial Highness.” He turns blue with the lie, and laughs as I slap at his leg. “Don’t worry about Kayla. I was going to tell her as soon as we left for Jungryuk anyway.”

“It’s not Kayla I’m worried about,” I admit, mind drifting back to Minae. Even *if* she doesn’t tell anyone her theories or even if she does, and they don’t believe her, eventually, all of Hyt’s family will know the truth. “When your parents finally find out, they’re going to hate me.”

“They’ll be mad, but as long as Rurik is king and they can’t execute us ... they’ll get over it.” Hyt looks away from me, gaze fixated on a painting that adorns the wall behind the table. Well, it’s a screen that gently flickers through different paintings every so often. Most of them involve the water, Falopex, or water with Falopex. I doubt that Hyt picked any of the paintings that are on display. “Eventually. Maybe we just won’t visit Yaoh for a dozen solar years and see if they change their tunes?”

I notice that he remains blue while he tells me all of this. So ... he doesn’t think they’ll get over it.

Wonderful.

“I’m feeling *sooo* much better,” I say with a horrid dollop of overacting. I stretch my arms above my head and stand up, trying to pretend like I don’t notice the way Hyt’s eyes find the bit of bare skin between my sweatshirt and pants. *That’s right, Officer, take a good, long look.* I saunter casually away from him and then tear my sweatshirt over my head, chucking it aside to flash him my breasts.

Hyt lifts a fin-brow at me.

“If you’re trying to convince me to take you out, you needn’t bother.” He turns pink.

“Hyt, *come on*,” I beg, squeezing my boobs and offering up what I hope is a lascivious wink. “This could be my last chance to—”

He hops off the table and launches his tentacles at me, dragging me against him so that my breasts are squashed against his strong midsection.

“If you really want to go, I’ll take you. There’s no need to flash me your breasts.” He turns blue and then pauses, like he’s just been caught in a lie that even he wasn’t aware of.

“No need, huh?” I ask dryly, and he snorts, tugging his hat low and grinning so that his canines flash prettily.

“Well, you don’t need to show your tits off to get an escort into town.” Pink. “But there *is* a need in me when it comes to your breasts.” He gives the right one a hearty squeeze with a tentacle, and I bite my lip.

“Fine. Can we go to town now?”

“Ah, but first I need to give you my pearl.” Tentacles sweep under my ass, lifting me up so that I’m face-to-face with Officer Hyt and his wicked smile. Another tentacle strokes the damp space between my legs while another pair fondles my breasts. He presses a suction cup to the back of my neck as I put my hands on his strong shoulders. “Kiss me, human,” he breathes, using a finger to tilt my chin.

Our mouths brush, waking up that inner beast inside of me, the one that’s as primal as Abraxas.

Oh, Abraxas.

I try not to think about him when I’m kissing Hyt, enjoying the male I’m with when I’m with him.

His tongue plays with my teeth, and then I hear a clack as the pearl rolls against them, slipping past and into my mouth. Hyt draws a breath away from me, eyes heavily lidded, and strokes my throat with a tentacle.

“Swallow, sweetheart,” he whispers, and I groan as I do as I’m told.

I’m *certain* that we’re going to move onto sex next, but Hyt gently sets me down on the floor, unhooks all nine of his tentacles from my body, and steps back.

I wrap my arms over my bare breasts and glare at him. I can clearly see the tented shape of his loincloth, but he just winks at me and grins, nice and sharp.

“I thought you wanted to see the city today?” One tentacle comes out and yanks my sweats down my ass while another slaps my naked cheeks hard enough to make me jump. But ... but oh. I like that. I like that a lot. “Get dressed in one of those sexy swimsuits, my love, and I’ll show you how the Falopex live.”

His companion lands on my shoulder, chirping and twittering and billowing cute little bubbles from his tiny beak. Hyt moves away from me, heading down the stairs while I gape after him.

That son of a bitch ...

I put on the black bikini with the skull-and-crossbones, but I don’t bother with shoes. If we’re swimming, I don’t need them.

I end up sitting on the rooftop deck while I wait for Hyt to do whatever it is that he’s doing. It’s so peaceful up there, nice and shaded under the umbrella, comfortable chairs, the gentle sloshing of the waves ...

The next thing I know, Hyt is sitting beside me with his elbows on his knees looking concerned.

“You passed out again,” he accuses, but I’m already sputtering as I sit up, swiping drool from my lips.

“I did not!” I hiss back at him, but ... did I? “I was ... napping.” I put a hand up to the side of my head, closing my eyes against a wave of dizziness. “Well, I’m not quite sure either way.” I cant a look over at the sun, but it doesn’t seem to have moved much closer to the horizon. If I did pass out, it wasn’t for long.

My gaze lifts up to the distant gold ribbons of the World Station. *Rurik*.

“Oh, Eve.” Hyt pulls me into his lap, wrapping me up again. I’m getting addicted to the feeling, I’ll admit. When he holds me like this, I feel safe. I feel like I’m home. I feel *loved*. I’m not sure how or why I feel all of those things so quickly, but it’s there. And it’s mixed with the anxious butterflies of fresh attraction. Talk about a heady combination.

“Going into the city won’t change how I’m feeling,” I tell him, but he already knows that.

His companion settles on the edge of his hat as Hyt studies me and then sighs.

“I was just getting this for you.” He takes one of his tentacles and presses a small gun into my hands, a silver weapon with a pink tip that looks similar to the one that Kayla was using at the range. “I want you to keep it on you, just in case.”

I give him a look.

“You think I need a gun to go into town?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“I hope not. But if someone does recognize you as the princess, they might also decide you’re a valuable enough commodity to get a hold of at all costs.” I stare down at the gun, unsure how to wield it. Hyt uses his tentacles to manipulate my hands, turning the gun over and forcing me to press my thumb into a small screen at the bottom. The weapon chirps and says something in another language before glowing pink and then fading back to silver again. My translator doesn’t seem to grasp the words. Cartian, maybe? “The way things are right now, I wouldn’t do this on any other planet. It’s only because my people are ... well, if someone recognizes you, they’re more likely to report you to the chief than try to abduct you.”

“I’m guessing we won’t be visiting the market on Jungryuk anytime soon?” I tease, and Hyt gives me a look before redirecting my attention to the gun.

“Press your thumb on the bottom pad to deactivate the safety. When the gun glows pink, it’s ready to fire.” He places my finger on the trigger, turns my body around, and tucks me against him. “Like this, Earthling.” His mouth is right next to my ear, tentacles all over my bare skin, and his cock ... well. Let’s just say: his mating tentacles *were* fickle. Not so much anymore.

“Your dick tentacles love me,” I whisper as Hyt chuckles, showing me how to hold the gun, how to aim, how to fire. He guides me to unlock it, waits for the pink glow, and then yanks on my finger to fire a test shot. A beam of hot pink light blasts into the waves, creating a massive explosion of boiling water. After a few moments, several dead fish-ish float to the surface.

Hyt’s companion zips away and, well, that tiny beak sure can open a lot bigger than I first thought.

Huh.

Hyt releases me and helps me to my feet, using his tails to slip a holster over my shoulder and carefully tuck the weapon into it.

And then he holds out a hand.

“Ready?” he asks, and I nod.

We lock hands and, together, we leap off the edge of the rooftop deck into the water.



Let’s be frank: I am not the most dexterous individual out of water. Buried in the warm current of Yaoh’s largest ocean—it’s *only* ocean; it covers the whole damn planet—I’m like a fumbling tadpole. My legs kick, my arms move, but I make very little progress.

Hyt watches me for a few seconds and then grins, wrapping me up in his tails and latching me to his chest.

“I shouldn’t have done that; you’re ill,” he whispers as my back is pressed tightly against his front, seat-belted in so that we’re touching in too many places to count. My only saving grace is that he’s so much taller, his dick is nowhere near my opening. Lucky me. Or ... unlucky me?

“Shouldn’t have done what?” I ask him, and he murmurs against my ear, tickling me with bubbles.

“Teased you. Watched you flail around. On another day, it would’ve been hilarious.” He takes off like a submarine then, a wash of white bubbles pushing us forward at a speed that steals my breath away.

Everything becomes a blur as we whip around the side of the house and head in the general direction of Hyt’s parents’ place. Thankfully, we don’t have to put ourselves through that shit today ... do we?

I can’t ask; we’re moving too quickly, and I’m too distracted.

White sand covers the ground beneath us, dotted with plants in an assortment of tropical colors: bright green, fuschia pink, obscene yellow, mauve and cyan and turquoise and vermillion. There are long strands that wave like Falopex tails in the current, similar to kelp. There are flowers. There are structures that look like sandcastles filled with brightly colored crab-ish crustaceans.

Fish—with legs, like the filets we ate together—dive and dart, scales shimmering in golden shafts of sunlight. It seems to have no trouble penetrating the depths of the sapphire water, but it’s fairly shallow here. What happens when we dive deeper? Fortunately for me, I only have astrophobia, not thalassophobia (fear of deep bodies of water).

Hyt slows down after a while, releasing me except for a single tentacle around the waist.

“Earthling, *look*,” he whispers, using that sleek, muscular body of his to spin us both so that we’re facing the ground. Down below, I see the skeleton of something long dead,

gargantuan, and covered in a blanket of undersea flowers and ... Dead Kings' dicks, are those ...

"Dude, there are like fifty-billion Shitheads down there," I blurt, and Hyt laughs. His companion undulates like a jellyfish in a circle around me, making pleased noises as it spurts bubbles and then suctions its tiny pink form to my cheek. I glance back at Hyt to see that he's gone blue again, and he winks at me. "You are going to be the most difficult man to match outfits with, you know that? What sort of color goes with both blue and pink, huh?"

I roll my eyes, but I'm only half-serious. Fine, a quarter-serious. Really, I'm not serious at all.

"Cute, right?" Hyt asks as I study the swarm of mini alien octopi. They're all about the size of Hyt's companion, like both of my fists put together. Each one has nine little tentacles with a single sucker on the end of each, a small sharp beak, and two oversized black marble eyes. "These ones are wild."

The creatures seem to have made this giant dead beastie their home. Squinting, I can make out a vague whale-like shape under the blanket of undersea florals and anemone, barnacles and ten-pointed starfish. If the dead creature ever was a whale, it also had two back legs like a frog, and a horn protruding from the center of its skeleton like a narwhal.

"Do they have a name other than 'companion'?" I ask, looking up to see that Hyt is pink again. His bright colors fit well with this environment, his braid drifting around his head as he smiles back at me. Somehow, his cowboy hat stays on underwater. He doesn't wear his boots much on Yaoh—no need, I guess, with all the water around—but he does have his loincloth in place. *Doesn't help. It's like the current wants me to see his dick.*

I pretend not to notice.

"Nope," he says, still pink. The tentacle around my waist tightens, a gentle caress that makes me exhale. Can't hide it down here. Bubbles escape my lips in a rush and Hyt smiles. "Just *companions*. Don't try to touch the wild ones though."

Kayla likes to compare their attitude to feral cats back on Earth.”

Ahh.

“Hissing? Spitting? Scratching? Biting?” I query, and Hyt raises a fin-brow.

“We’re not talking about you and me in the bedroom,” he says, and then he winks again, gathering me up in his tails and swimming in a diagonal toward the ocean floor. I see why a few minutes later when we come to the edge of an underwater cliff.

We slip past it, and I’m afforded my first glimpse of a Falopex city.

Hyt was right when he said that his house only *seemed* remote. We can’t have been swimming for more than an Earth hour and yet, here we are. My migraine has snuck back up on me, and I know I have to tell Hyt that I’m not feeling great, but ...

“Dead King’s taints,” I murmur, and he laughs, his body vibrating against mine. I’m not sure if the translator picked up my words correctly or not, but I’m too distracted to explain what a taint is. “It’s a ... it’s a *city*.”

And it is.

Not a village, not a town, but a full-blown city with skyscrapers and lights and Falopex. So many fucking Falopex. The sandy pathways between the buildings are filled with the shimmering bodies of sexy, muscular thirst traps, most of them naked, some wearing a few salacious adornments.

The buildings themselves are that same odd mix of wildness and innovation, metal and stone, coral and bright lights, glass and foliage. There are no doors on the buildings that I can see, but holes that Falopex are swimming in and out of. Some of the shops have entirely open walls, their wares visible from the street. Not just on the first floors of the buildings either, but at varying heights, some of them on the roofs of the tallest skyscrapers. Or ... water-scrapers? I don’t know. But you get the point.

Those pod-like transport ships amble through the crowd, the only vehicles of any kind that I can see. Doesn't seem like the Falopex need them with as fast as they can swim.

"Shall we?" Hyt says, his voice strangely contemplative.

"Are you worried?" I ask him, trying to turn my head so that I can see his face. Not an easy task with me strapped to his front the way I am. "About taking a human into the city with you?"

"Kayla has special diving gear; she comes down here regularly." Hyt swims downward, into darker waters that are beautifully lit with lighted posts, with shell-shaped sconces on the buildings, with strips of lights around some of the windows. *That's not an answer, Hieronymus*, I think, but I don't press the issue.

We descend toward the sandy street, joining the crowd. Other Falopex notice us right away. Whether that's because of Hyt's reputation as a liar, his relationship to the chief, or because he has a human woman latched to his body, I'm not sure. Probably all three. People avoid us like we're cursed, swimming a wide berth around us until we're blessed with our own private space bubble. Fine by me.

"Don't mind them," Hyt tells me, swimming down the street until he finds what he's looking for. "They avoided me even when I didn't have a human mate."

He takes us up the side of a tall white building with pink coral accents and way too many alien starfish stuck to its side. Hyt lands on the tiled floor of an open-air shop, one with no wall in the front to hide its contents from the street.

Immediately, I'm suspicious.

I see dresses. Actual dresses. They're made of glimmering sequins that look like scales. I don't mean to make the comparison, but *mermaid* comes to mind when assessing the shape. Uh-uh. They're all very shiny, very showgirl, very ostentatious. Like ice skating uniforms. Dance uniforms. Something from *Moulin Rouge*.

Stars help me.

“Hyt ...” My voice is a whisper as my eyes dart around the space. There are lots of dresses but no people that I can see.

“Don’t stress, darlin’,” he whispers right back, releasing me from his nest of tails and giving my shoulders a squeeze with his hands. “My family isn’t here.” He passes by me and tosses a saucy grin over his shoulder. “Just my grandmother’s dress.”

He strides up to a desk and leans over it, calling out into a back room. It takes me a minute to realize that he’s blue again. *This lying son of a bitch.*

“Hey. Flen. Are you here?” he calls, and his brother—the one with the sky blue skin—pads through an arched doorway, yawning and stretching his arms over his head. Hyt looks back at me. “Sorry, I should’ve clarified: my mother, Nya, Minae, my father, my grandparents ... none of them are here.” He jerks his head in his brother’s direction as his skin flashes pink. “Just Flen. He’s safe. He’s also a tailor.” Hyt slaps his palm on the desk and gives his brother’s heavy-lidded expression a look. “You were sleeping back there, weren’t you?”

“I—” Flen doesn’t let the lie leave his lips, sighing dramatically as he tosses his phone toward the desk. It floats briefly for a minute before settling down. “Yeah, I was asleep.” He stretches again, both arms and all nine tails. I pretend like I can’t see his dick, like he isn’t naked.

My eyes shift to the row of dresses, each one uglier and more ostentatious than the next. They all have shiny mermaid-like skirts and see-through tops made out of a gauzy, net-like material. Long sleeves. Low backs. Plunging necklines. *Wedding dresses.* I can only assume since none of the Falopex outside are wearing clothes. What else would this place be for?

I should’ve wondered about that, when Hyt’s grandmother mentioned hiring a tailor. This must be the only kind of work available for such a profession.

“Don’t fuck this up,” Hyt tells him, pointing at his brother with a single tentacle. “Grandma Layna is trusting you with her dress, and fitting it to a human’s body isn’t going to be easy. I bet she didn’t want to give you the job, did she?”

Flen bristles, scales standing on end as his gaze shifts from Hyt to me, assessing.

“I’m new at this, but I know what I’m doing,” Flen tells his brother with an airy waft of his tails. He moves around the desk to approach me, Hyt just behind him. “Hello, Eve,” he says, and I smile. He smiles back. “Thank you for mating my brother. I was sure he’d remain a virgin for the rest of his life.” Flen doesn’t change color so ... not a lie then.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” Hyt schmoozes, reaching around his brother with a pair of tentacles and pinching both of Flen’s cheeks. Flen lets him do it, sighing good-naturedly. “Not all of us can be sluts, Flen. It takes some finesse to withhold all of *this*.” Hyt releases his brother, running a hand through the water in front of his body as if to indicate his otherworldly attractiveness.

I cough into my hand, bubbles rising from my lips to hit the ceiling. I’m surprised that I’m not floating in here, that I’m just standing normally. Underwater. *Breathing* water with each inhale. And then I try to lift my foot and it takes a lot more effort than I’d expected. The floor is ... not sticky, but staticky? Like a dryer sheet stuck to a towel. I suppose that’s what’s keeping me in place.

“So we’re here to fit Grandma’s dress, are we?” I ask, my eye twitching. We went from fake fiancée to fake wedding to ... real wedding. This is a real wedding. Yes, I still need to clarify with Abraxas in person, but ... but ... A smile lights my face, and Hyt catches the expression, smiling back at me. “Grab the measuring tape then, and let’s do this.”

“The measuring ... what?” Flen asks, giving his brother a look. “She’s as weird as Kayla, isn’t she?”

“Much weirder, I assure you,” Hyt says, and he stays pink, turning his beautiful gaze to mine. “No measuring tape, Earthling.” He turns to follow Flen’s movements as his brother draws back a curtain, one that’s attached to the floor and not the ceiling. It floats like kelp against the far wall as Flen indicates a tube-like chamber behind it.

“Body scanner,” Flen says, lifting his own fin-brow. “It’ll give me your measurements, and then I’ll get to painstakingly hand-sew your garment.” He sounds freakishly excited about the task, too, like sewing is his life passion. “Our wedding dresses are made from living material; it requires finesse.”

I look back over at the wall of dresses and try not to shiver when ... did the tail of that one move?

“Plant material,” Hyt whispers in my ear, suddenly standing behind me. Not sure how he moved that quickly, but then, water is his element, isn’t it? “It’s like ... moss or something.”

“Does moss move though?” I ask, but he just laughs at me again, picks me up in his tails and places me gently into the body scanner.

It only takes a few seconds, no different than the scanner thing at airport security.

“Do I get to see the dress now?” I ask, trying to be casual and chill about it. Hyt gives me a sly look and then lets the slow simmer of a grin spread over his face.

“Oh, not just yet. On our shared birthday, the day of our wedding. Then you can see it.” Hyt turns to his brother, watching as Flen squints down at the screen of his tablet, murmuring under his breath about my—direct quote—*absolutely bizarre measurements*. Yeah, they just don’t build Falopex females like human women, do they? “Thanks, Flen.” Hyt pats his brother on the back with a tentacle. “I think we’ll hit up the bar next.”

“The bar?” Flen says, tearing his attention away from the tablet to look up at his brother. “Don’t let Mom find out you went to a bar while pregnant.”

Hyt sighs in frustration and fusses with his hat, spinning it around on his head and giving me another apologetic look.

“Just can’t escape their shit, can we?” he asks with a sigh, turning back to his brother. “Obviously I’m not going to get a drink, Flen. But I sure as fuck can take my wife there.”

“I don’t have a problem with that. You just ... you know how gossip travels on Yaoh,” Flen mumbles, and then he turns

to me, offering up a quick salute. “Have fun, and I’ll see you the day after tomorrow. And don’t worry about your dress: I know what I’m doing.” He fluffs his tails at his brother before retreating to the back room again.

“A bar, huh?” I ask, teasing Hyt with a little elbow to the side. It’s like hitting rock. Probably going to end up with a bruise there. “Also, interesting to note that both Falopex and human fetuses are affected negatively by alcohol. We’re not all that different, are we?”

My mate stops where he is, turning around to look at me like he’s surprised I came to that conclusion. Bubbles escape his tails—pheromone bubbles. Females swimming by outside actually stop to look our way. Not just one or two. Like, a *lot*.

“Sorry,” Hyt murmurs, tipping his hat forward over his eyes. “I shouldn’t be doing that in public.” He uses a tentacle to yank his hat back, so that he can look my way with another smile. “But you’re right: Falopex and humans, not all that far off, huh?”

“The Vestalis and the Aspis are way weirder,” I murmur, and then I freeze. Was that ... did I say something I shouldn’t have? Hyt takes it in stride, wrapping a tentacle around my waist before we step off the edge of the ledge. We might be underwater, but it’s still disconcerting to stand on the upper floor of a skyscraper with no walls.

“You saw the *adorgaelorac* videos, didn’t you? It gets even stranger than Vestalis or Aspis. Do you know how the Bás mate?” He shivers and then leaps off the edge, dragging me along with him. “*Penis bones*. That’s all you need to know.”

He’s right. I’m fine with ignorance when it comes to this particular subject.

“Is it really our birthday the day after tomorrow?” I ask, trying and failing to get my Earth-trained brain to realize that minutes and hours, days and nights, months and years, are all subjective to the planet or spaceship one is on when experiencing them.

When I first arrived on Yaoh, I had two weeks until my birthday. I've slept at Hyt's house—*our* house—for the past five nights. But yet our birthday is in two days? I remember vaguely that Hyt said something about a day on Yaoh being equivalent to two days on Earth. Makes sense, I suppose.

“It really is,” Hyt tells me, dragging me past shops selling decorative belts (as in, the kind that don't cover anyone's genitals), weapons, food. There are restaurants. There's a *dating agency*. With everything under the water, items are locked down with strings or clips, all of the tech seems to be waterproof, and there are companions fucking *everywhere*. Can't throw a stone without hitting one of the little shits. “I still can't believe we have the same birthday,” he mumbles, and then he's darting downwards and into a hole in the ground.

A bit of primal, mammalian fear kicks in there as we squeeze through a narrow underwater cave and then come up in a chamber with sand and fresh air. Above us, there's a towering rock ceiling covered in dripping stalactites. Just ahead, there's a purposeful arch carved into the stone and ringed with lights.

“Do you believe in fate?” I ask as I turn to Officer Hyt, dripping wet with his tentacle wrapped around my waist like a belt. His suction cup sticks to the skin of my side, sliding sweet oil over my hip bone. I flick him with my fingers and he stops, unwinding his tentacle and standing there in the strange half-light from the arch, the rest of the cave area drenched in perfect darkness. His scales are wet, shiny, blue. *Liar*. Either he's lying about the birthday thing, or he whispered something extra for dramatic effect.

Hyt lifts his hand, extending a finger for Shithead to land on. The tiny octopus curls its tentacles around it like a perch, slips, and ends up hanging upside down like a bat. My mate's attention is on the little creature and not me.

“It's interesting, isn't it? Who knows when the tradition started, but the Falopex put their afterbirth outside, and four out of five times, one of these little fuckers lays a single egg in it. We raise them with the babies, and there's a bond here that feels like fate.” He turns pink as he says this, adjusting his

gaze to mine. “Do I believe in fate? Not like the Vestalis do.” Hyt flicks his fingers, and Shithead takes off with a shriek of annoyance. He extends his hand for me instead, and I take it, curling our fingers together. The way Hyt shivers, I see firsthand that this is a particularly intimate exchange for a Falopex. “So, no. I don’t believe that there’s a controlling force over the universe. I do think that coincidences happen, and sometimes they’re very, very happy coincidences.”

“Spoken like a true off-worlder,” a voice says, and a ruby red Falopex appears from the water on my left. I can see right away that he has a cocky face, a mean smile, and a— Well, his dick is massive. I didn’t mean to look at it, but it’s right fucking there. The man struts by, flicking his tails at Hyt in what I can only assume is an aggressive manner. “Enjoy your human mate. We all know you’re wired differently than the rest of us.”

The male struts past and Hyt says nothing at all in response, but his gaze? If looks could kill, that guy would be a pile of bones covered in flowers and wild Shitheads.

“You’re not going to fight that guy?” I ask, and maybe I shouldn’t be encouraging violence, but come on. Hyt turns slowly to look at me, acting as if the dude doesn’t even exist.

“Ignore him,” he says, his voice like ice. “He’s Kayla’s ex-boyfriend, and if I acknowledge him, then I’ll have to kill him. Seeing as he’s the son of the richest and most powerful male on this planet—save my idiot father—that’s probably not a good idea.” Hyt leans in toward me, planting his other fist on his hip, his left hand still hooked with mine. “Do you like intergalactic warfare, Earthling? It’s starting to feel like you do.”

“Kayla’s ex?” I ask, turning to look in the direction of the lit arch. The male is long gone, but I can hear happy chatter and clinking glasses from down the stone passage. “I wasn’t aware she had one.”

“She has several,” Hyt says with clear annoyance, standing up straight and then tugging me along with him down the

passageway. “I don’t want her dating anymore Falopex—especially not a sack of sand like Bram.”

I’m about to ask about that—I want specifics on this Bram guy—but then we emerge out of the winding stone passage into a massive cavern that’s been converted to a bar. There’s a long counter on the left-hand side, shelves covered in bottles suspended by silver wire from the ceiling. Lounge pools dot the floor interspersed with cushioned lounges, narrow tables, and plenty of ambient light.

It’s dim, warm, and salacious. And let’s just put it this way: there is a cosmic shit-ton of canoodling going on in here. I spot that Bram guy right away—he’s the only red Falopex in the room—sitting alone at the bar. Hmm. Did he and Kayla ever come here to ... you know ... canoodle?

Nope. I don’t want to know. I am *not* getting involved in anyone else’s love life. Not now. Not ever. *I’m such a liar.* People are staring at us, but I pretend not to notice. Let them look. They have no idea what they’re missing out on.

“Pick a spot, any spot,” Hyt says, gesturing with a tentacle at the space. “I’ll order you a drink, and—”

I start to move forward, and then the world spins, and I’m somehow sitting in a warm pool with a glass of something cold and sweet pressed to my lips. I ... passed out again, didn’t I?

Hyt is holding me on his lap, encouraging me to sip from the drink.

“No alcohol in there. Drink up, Earthling,” he whispers, studying me. We’re alone in this particular pool, but there’s no way I passed out without the whole bar knowing. Pretty sure that Hyt and I are the talk of the town right now. That’s the vibe I’ve been getting since we swam into the city: everyone is watching and waiting. I have no doubt that Flen is right, that Hyt’s mother will know everything about our outing before we’ve even left.

“I’m sorry, I—”

Hyt snatches my chin in one of his tentacles and makes me look right at him.

“Do not apologize to me.” He relaxes his grip and makes himself smile, encouraging me to take the cup in my own hands, so I can drink the sweet pomegranate-ish juice at my own pace. “It’s my fault for giving in and bringing you out. You know what we’re doing tomorrow?” He leans in toward me, a look of concern on his face that I recognize from Rurik.

Yep. I’m dying again. Poisoned by own vagina.

Oops. Sorry. *Envenomated* by my own vagina.

That’s better.

“Fucking?” I ask cheerfully, sipping the drink. Hyt flicks me on the nose with his tentacle and shakes his head, leaning back to rest against the edge of the pool, one arm slung on the ground beside it.

“Resting,” he corrects, and I sigh.

“Your mother ...” I start, hoping she won’t hear about my almost passing out. Hyt is already shaking his head.

“Don’t worry about my family,” he repeats, but then he turns blue, and the *entire* crowd gasps, I swear on the Dead Kings’ hairy nuts. That’s when I know for sure. Even if they’re pretending not to look at us, everyone is. Hyt seems annoyed by his own rebellious skin. He studies me instead, waiting for me to empty the glass before he takes it in a tentacle and sets it aside.

“One proper drink?” I ask, lifting up a finger. I’m surrounded by tentacles already, but more of them slither over my shoulders, around my rib cage, curl around my wrist and give it a squeeze. Water drips down my upper body, each drop like a little caress from Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt.

The bar itself is ‘dry’ in that it’s not underwater, but it’s humid and damp enough that I’m glad I have the pearl today. Might not be able to breathe without it. It’s that intense, foggy and warm and decorated with strange formations. More stalactites on the ceiling beside thousands of soda straws,

substantial stalagmites on the floor, draperies, gypsum, limestone, cave bacon (it's a real thing, I swear).

I love it. I see immediately why Hyt brought me here. It's fun, vibrant, beautiful, unique.

My heart swells so big that it nearly chokes me.

"One drink," Hyt agrees, but he's still worried about me. "Just one."

He waves a server over with a tentacle, places an order for something I can't pronounce, and then pretends as if he doesn't notice that everyone in the room is gossiping quietly about us. A wry smile takes his lips.

"They know if they bother us, I'll come down on them like an *adorgaelorac* in a mating frenzy."

"Somehow, I actually know what that looks like, and it's terrifying." I chuckle, my gaze scanning the gathered Falopex, the lack of clothing, the abundance of exposed genitalia, and the heavy sense of judgment. I am the only human here. Correction: I am the only non-Falopex here. Well, other than the dozens of Shitheads swarming above us. "Is the wedding ... are there going to be a lot of people there?" I ask. "On Earth, if a big shot Chief of Police dude was getting married, it'd probably be a pretty big affair."

Hyt thinks on that for a moment, tentacles sliding over my body, trailing across the floor, feeling and tasting everything. I reach up and adjust his hat with my own hands, and he smiles at me like I've done something adorable and endearing.

"Doubtful. My grandmothers are planning it, and they know I don't like crowds of judgmental Falopex. And anyway, my dad might've told his friends and colleagues that he's decided to give us his blessing for the pregnancy—because generally, it's the dominant adult male in the family who makes those decisions—but he won't want to advertise it. He certainly won't want to bring everyone in to see his lying son."

"And his lying son's human wife?"

Hyt pauses as the server returns with my drink—some lavender-colored thing with heavy foam on the top—and then

waits until the male has retreated before he answers.

“Everyone knows that he raised a human daughter in his family. I don’t think you’re the real issue here, Earthling.”

Except ... Hyt turns blue when he says that.

I do my best to change the subject.

“So, care to tell me the details of the Commitment Ceremony?” I’m just waiting for something awful. You know, like moth drones, live broadcasts, and painful sex.

Hyt scratches at his cheek with his fingertips, like maybe he’s nervous about something.

“Well, it shouldn’t be anything you’re not already used to,” he tells me, and that’s when I know it’s going to be bad.

I set my drink down on the edge of the lounge pool, and he gives me a half-smile in response.

“Is there public sex involved?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

“There ... may or may not be public sex involved,” he hedges, skin remaining that brilliant sapphire color. I reach out to flick him in the arm, and he laughs, bundling me up in his tentacles, mouth against mine when he next speaks. “It’s not too late to bail: we could claim the business for the Imperial Court is keeping us away.”

I snatch his chin in my fingers and force him to look right at me. The scales on his body ruffle like goose bumps.

“I’m marrying you, Officer Hyt,” I tell him, and then I fling my arms around his neck and kiss him like I know the entire room is watching. By the time I’m done with him here, the whole damn place is going to wonder what it’s like to date a human. “Now,” I whisper, my mouth still tucked nice and close to his. “Order me another drink. Just one more. I am not about to miss out on the experience of an alien cantina.”

He gives me a studying look in response, opens his mouth to reply, and then ends up simply shaking his head. He hands me my drink back before standing up.

“Non-alcoholic,” he says finally, and then he climbs out of the pool and takes me with him, clearing a path through the crowd that’s gathered around a game at the far end of the room. Basically, it’s darts. Only, the board is a digital screen, the darts are small, soft balls, and when the players throw them, they use all nine tails to do it.

Hyt sets me down, picks up a set of balls, and gives me a cocky look. He juggles them in his tentacles while I gape at the display and surreptitiously adjust my bikini top, hoping to hide my suddenly pert nipples. *Maybe since I’m the only one who has them, nobody else will notice?*

“You ready, my little Earth wife?” Hyt asks, and then he draws his body and his tails back, takes aim, and nails all nine of the digital bull’s-eyes at once. When he does, he makes a whooping sound of excitement, sweeps me up in a nest of tentacles and kisses me until I *burn*. The crowd, cold at first, is now starting to warm up. “Little side note for ya: it’s not just me that can smell you.”

I notice right away that several male Falopex have scooted to the edge of the gaming area.

Ah.

Well.

“Their loss,” I mumble, and then I wrap my legs around Hyt’s firm body, and we never do end up getting that second drink.

Sex, though, we do have that. On the way home, at home, all throughout the night.

As excited as I am to see Abraxas and Rurik, I’m equally afraid to lose what I have with Hyt.

Despite everything, I’ve fallen in love with him.

Me. Three alien dudes. One baby.

What the actual fuck are *my* parents going to think about all of this?



Rurik

I am not functioning well, alone on *The Korol* with only my least favorite brother and his mate to comfort me. While Brot is a good advisor—surprisingly loyal, frustratedly upright, and brutally honest—he is obsessive and catty over his mate.

I could scream.

I would, if my parents were not requiring me to wear the face monitor at all times. Even now, half-naked and slumped on a plush stool in a silken robe, they are attached to my face. Watching everything. My father has broken *The Korol* down into smaller parts, swarming the galaxy, seeing the entire universe through thousands of sentient eyes.

No wonder he has not been able to maintain his sanity over time. I do remember that when I was a child, my parents were caring, loving, attentive. That did not last. It's not possible for a single person to be responsible for so much, to see so much, and not lose the heart at the core of who they are.

That will happen to me, I tell myself as I lift a macaron to my mouth with two fingers. I pause, lips parted, staring at the strange human dessert in my hand. I don't even know if I like the taste of them, but it gives me something to do with my restless fingers. Eat one alien cookie after another.

There is nothing more I wish to do right now than leave this place, take a transport to Yaoh, find Eve and never let her leave my sight ever again. *Until you take the throne, of course.*

When I sit on that chair, I will have no choice but to force her from my sight.

Becoming king will not be easy. I imagine that when I first connect to the ship, I will not be lucid for some time. It is not something that I would wish her to bear witness to.

She is sick, I remind myself for the hundredth time, and with a sigh, I toss the cookie into the pile with the others and stand up. While I wait for the lunar tide on Jungryuk to subside, I worry. I pace. I fantasize about my mate and the life I wish I could have with her.

Meanwhile, I am tormented and tortured by my brother and his mate.

“You are the most beautiful creature who has ever existed in the whole of the Noctuida,” Brot whispers to Connor, and I close my eyes in frustration. At least when the princess’ servants were around, there was a buffer between myself and this nonsense.

“No, *you’re* the most beautiful creature,” Connor retorts, and I sigh. My lids part, but only enough to be narrowed in annoyance. I turn over my shoulder to see the pair of them cuddling on the chaise in the royal bedroom. I cannot seem to pull myself away from this place. I have been sleeping in our bed. I have been ... considering the idea of entertaining myself in our bed.

Because I have a mate now, and because my mate is human, my body is constantly primed for sex. No wonder their species lacks advanced space traveling technology: they are too busy breeding and mating and fucking each other to focus on other things.

With a sigh, I reach up and tap my face monitor.

“May I excuse myself to the bathroom?” I inquire, taking advantage of my parents’ only allowable excuse for privacy. The Vestalis prefer to bathe without the company of anyone but a mate.

“*You may.*” My father’s voice is hard, cold, dangerous. He is not happy with me. The very instant one of my brothers shows

up with a mate, he will execute me and I will not see Eve again until the next life—if I am *lucky*. It is not easy to find one's soulmate in the vast extent of a cold and unforgivable universe. "*But do not take long.*"

"Yes, Your Majesty." I tap the side of the device and remove it, ignoring the low, sensual whispers of Brot and Connor on the chaise. I drop the monitor onto a side table in the foyer, collect fresh clothing from the closet filled with books and dresses that I gifted to Eve, and then head into the bathroom.

I pause briefly to stare across the space at the second doorway, the one that connects my suite to Eve's. *Our suite to Eve's former suite*, I remind myself, a rush of pleasure at the memory stirring within me.

My cock twitches inside the black silk fabric of my pants, and I grit my teeth.

If only I had a restraint strap, I think, and then I feel an odd heat hit my face. I peer into the mirror on the wall and find my pale skin colored with pink. It is true. I am blushing. I put my hands on the counter and turn to look out the window, at the blue of Yaoh and the gold ribbons of the World Station. We are passing it by in favor of Jungryuk, and my worries amplify even further.

If we approach Jungryuk, my parents will attempt to eat Jungryuk. But no matter what tactics I attempt, they will not stray to the Geometridae. I have spent countless solar days contacting the Atratan royal family, making deals that can never be carried out. All for naught.

I storm back into the bedroom to find Connor and Brot engaged in pre-mating foreplay. Connor is on Brot's lap, they are both shirtless, and Brot's black coremata are unfurled and bristling. The pheromones are so heavy in the air that I cover my mouth, trying to stifle a cough.

At the sound of it, Brot startles, accidentally dumping Connor onto the cushions as he rises to his feet and yanks a blanket over his chest. It is with great effort that I do not roll my eyes the way that Eve does.

“How dare you barge in on us,” Brot demands with a sniff, and I ignore that as well. His mate seems to find the situation amusing, but my brother is mortified that I have seen his coremata. *The whole of the Noctuida has surely seen mine by now.* I don’t allow myself to dwell on that.

“Do you know where I can get a restraint strap?” I ask him. I was not going to, but ... I cannot help myself. I need one. It will allow me to ... take care of my issues without my claspers going wild. I have been practicing to keep them furled, but if I wish to touch myself, I must unfurl them and ... inevitably they scratch and dig and claw. *Violent, unruly things.*

Brot gasps as if I have committed the most grievous error, as if I have insulted his mate. Worse: as if I have tried to *kill* his mate.

“Why would I know the answer to such a disturbing question? It appears we will soon have a fool for a king.”

“Brot.” I give him a look that promises I can only be pushed so far. “You will tell me how to procure a restraint strap.”

Such a strap could be used to comfortably hold my claspers back so that I might ... I have never before pleased myself while alone. I will do so while I wait out the fierce Jungryukian tide. My only hope is that I have delayed *The Korol* enough that it will not have the energy to dock. I will take a small craft to the planet’s surface in order to search for my mate, and I will do it *before* my parents have sent their own loyal soldiers in my stead.

In theory, that is.

It is also very likely that the king and queen will simply eat Jungryuk—whether Eve and I are on it or not may not affect their decision as much as I wish it might.

“What’s a restraint strap?” Connor asks, yanking his robe on and then digging into a plate of human food that he ordered the chefs to prepare in the kitchens. As a princeling, Connor has many rights and privileges. “Let me look it up.” He glances around for his tablet, but I have removed it. I do not wish to be spied on while asking for such a taboo item.

“Didn’t I leave it somewhere over here ...?” he trails off, and I ignore him.

Brot, on the other hand, does not. His face gentles as he gazes at Connor. I dread knowing that my own face looks much the same when I am with Eve. I reach up suddenly, fisting my hand in the fabric of my red silk robe. I turn my head to the side, spotting Yaoh out the window once again. She is there. She is *right there*, and yet I cannot be with her.

That fucking Falopex. That foolhardy police officer.

I sigh and run my hand down my face, like a human might. My feelers swing back against the sides of my head. Without that vigilante male, my wife would be dead. After taking the throne, I will not be a proper husband anyway, and she will need one. Though the Aspis sufficed just fine on his own.

I am vaguely aware of Brot explaining that a restraint strap is a ... a self-mating device.

“Are you even alive?” Connor asks, snapping his fingers in front of my face. I blink out of my stupor only to realize that Brot is putting his royal jacket on while mumbling under his breath. Connor grins at me. “Seems the mate bond works perfectly even when your mate isn’t around. That’s magical, isn’t it?” He points over his shoulder with his thumb digit, as if to indicate Brot. “We’re going to the shops to pick up your restraint strap. Sort of weird that you’d ask your brother to buy a sex toy for you, but here we are, I guess.”

“I did not ask him to purchase it in my place,” I grit out, giving Brot a look. But he is right. This was inevitable. I cannot leave these rooms or my parents will watch me, and if they see I am buying such a libidinous device, I will be severely punished.

A Vestalis male should never feel the need to mate if his female is not available. No wonder Brot is angry. This is disgraceful.

“I understand,” Brot tells me, as if he can read my mind. “We were both matched to *humans*.” He says this last word with a self-righteous sneer, but then he spots Connor taking

one last bite of his food, rolling his eyes in pleasure, and doing a little happy dance.

Brot softens immediately before storming out of the room. Connor chases after him, and then it is just me and my thoughts.

The Falopex has my child. Will the child share his DNA? If the child is female then I am a fool because I have promised my firstborn daughter to the Atrata in exchange for refueling on Pradzny.

In ten million years of written and recorded existence, the Vestalis race has never birthed a girl child. All offspring have been male, near clones of their fathers. It has never been otherwise. A smart man would take such a deal, wouldn't he?

I feel as if I have perhaps made an irreparable mistake.

Whether we eat Pradzny now or later, the deal has been made. It is ours, and we owe on the debt.

I sit back down on the plush stool that I've dragged near the window. The plate of macarons awaits, so I take one and place it on my tongue, crushing it with teeth eager to *bite*. To draw. To drink. *I want my mate's fucking blood in my mouth.*

My fingers tense on the edge of the plate, my entire hand shaking. I want to throw it against the wall and break it, watch the pretty desserts scatter. But Brot is right: someone with immense power must also have immense self-control.

I release the plate and tuck my hands in my lap, staring at my reflection in the glass.

Neither Brot nor I have changed much since finding our mates. Humans must truly find the Vestalis attractive as we are. That is something that I did not expect. Unmated Vestalis males might resemble humans, but once they are mated, they change to suit their female. If it were not for the synchronicity contacts, it would be quite an interesting sight. An entire race of red, black, and white creatures that look nothing alike, but are all exactly the same in their DNA.

I shiver and shake my head.

I am aware that my people are strange—even to me, and I am one of them.

Brot and Connor return a short while later, the former tossing a package across the room that I do not even attempt to catch.

“We will be retiring to our own chambers; if you have need of us, do call.” He takes off, dragging his human mate along behind him. I watch them go and, once again, I am alone.

It is me and a long glass wall showcasing the Stars and the majesty of engineering that the Falopex have created. At one time, Yaoh was at risk of moving closer to its central sun. It was far too hot, and the waters were evaporating. In an effort to fix that, the Falopex built a space station capable of changing the rotation pattern of their own planet.

They have moved into a much more favorable orbit.

I sigh and stand up, retrieving the package from the floor.

This is why I requested a masturbation device such as this. I am very lonely. I can do nothing outside of these rooms, nothing on the Noctuidan-Net, without my parents knowing and scrutinizing.

I can, somewhat briefly, hide from them in the bathroom.

I take the package with me, opening it up near the sink and the gold toilet I had installed for Eve. Inside, there is only a simple black strap, similar to the one I use to affix my cock to my leg. With the clasps and their riley nature—such as when they tore their way out of my pants—it is best to keep them locked down.

I run myself a bath the way Eve did, using one of the ‘bath bombs’ that Avril requested for her and that she actually seems to like. It appears to be a useless ball of sodium bicarbonate and citric acid. How strange. But it smells vaguely floral, and the water is now a vibrant red. Also, it is sparkling.

I ignore that, slinging the new strap around my waist and then carefully prying my clasps from my cock, pushing them wide and locking them into the hooks that hang from the waist belt. Once I am finished, they are trapped open at roughly the

halfway point, unable to close back around my shaft, unable to open wide and scratch, grab, pull, tug anything in sight.

With a small snarl of annoyance, I climb into the water and then turn it off so that the level remains below my dick. Lifting my palm to my mouth, I bite into the soft flesh and draw blood, using my tongue to smear the liquid across my fingers.

This is what I use for lubricant when I grip the base of my shaft in tight fingers. With my other hand, I reach up and run the length of my palm down my feeler. Sensations ripple through me from both places, settling strangely in my lower abdomen.

My own red blood smears against the pristine white of my skin, dirtying it as my pheromones release from my wings in a puff of ivory powder. It settles over the water and turns the red of it to a pale pink. I lean back, settling my legs into the hot water, letting it slosh against my hips.

It is not hard to steer my mind in my mate's direction.

Her face, tender and sweet when I am inside of her. The strange dilation of her small pupils. The obscenity of her alien channel, the slickness of it, the impossible strength in her muscles. I squeeze my shaft even more tightly, yanking roughly enough that when my fist slams into my swollen testes at the halfway point of my cock, I almost orgasm.

The pleasure is that intense.

But I cannot let this distraction end so early.

I search through my blood for my connection to the cyborg girl, finding myself peering out through her eyes at Eve. My mate is lying on the Falopex's bed on her side, blankets covering her up to her neck. The handsome young officer watches over her, turning to look at me like I've just interrupted something.

"She needs to rest," he tells me, and though I initially expect a challenge from him, he doesn't offer one. His words sound more like a plea. "Tomorrow night, Kidd will land here and we'll have bought ourselves a week. See you around, yeah?"

Hyt says and then he crawls into the bed beside my mate, taking the spot that I wish could belong to me.

I drop out of Zero's mind, returning to the bathtub with a sharp gasp. I am unkind to my body then, my hand working my cock with violent strokes, strumming the ridge on the underside, squeezing my swollen testicles.

My other hand works my feeler first, and then my clasper. Blood lace blooms on my shaft in place of the smeared red liquid, and I exchange my fingers for a faux cunt made of hot lace. It creates an all-encompassing cocoon, tight and snug around my rod. I lie to myself, pretend that it's Eve who is wrapped around me, choking the life from my dick like a tourniquet.

It is easy to control the long ribbons that I've conjured from our shared blood, easy to pleasure myself with them. I cup warm water in my hands, dribbling it over the lacy dick sleeve, making it wet. Sopping, even. Fantasizing that my mere presence has turned my wife into a puddle of dripping, thrashing need.

My palms travel up my body, nails dragging across my skin in a desperate attempt to seek comfort. *Touch. I want to be touched.* I play with the fur at the base of my throat, stroking it, yanking on it. When that doesn't work, I try to satisfy my lonely, gnawing hunger by reaching back and rubbing my coremata. Those tender male sex organs that Eve loves so much, they bloom around me. They ignite every nerve in my body with frantic, humming delight.

I play with them while I rock my hips, my reflection obscene against the glass wall on my right. *This is certainly not a dignified state, is it?* I ask myself as my claspers strain so frantically for something to hold onto that the strap pulls against me, likely leaving bright bruises on my pale hips.

Eve, underneath me in the tower on our wedding. Eve, submitting herself to being both my mate and the mother to my children. Eve, her white ass red from a hot spank. I groan, shoving my naked arm into my mouth the way I did when I was trying not to bite Eve on Yaoh. I drink my own blood in

place of hers. It doesn't nourish me, but it doesn't matter. I still have enough of her essence left in me that I cover my body in lace.

Restraints for my wrists, for my ankles, making myself prone as I use that same lace to pleasure my cock.

I did not need Brot to buy me a restraint strap; I could've made one myself in a way that an unmated Vestalis male cannot.

But something about the taboo nature of it, the fact that I am not supposed to have it, the agony of denying my poor claspers any form of pleasure, it makes me even more wild, more wanton. I tighten the noose of lace on my cock, imagining Eve in the bathtub with me, remembering the day she came in here to relieve herself just like I'm doing now.

I bind myself with my own threads, thrashing against the hold of the obscene red ties at my wrists and ankles. There's enough heat in it, enough of Eve's essence, that the lace on my shaft seems to have a mind of its own.

Eve.

My body gives into the climax, fighting my restraints in mindless pleasure, claspers aching, wings drenching the air with pheromones that call out into the night. *Where are you?* they ask, signaling to my soulmate in the endless stars that I am waiting.

Seminal fluid spurts crudely from my dusky crown, splattering my stomach and chest, dripping down my muscles into the warm water below. I stay where I am, arms and legs spread, strapped down by my own lace. With a pained groan, I release it all at once, melting the lace into blood and simultaneously absorbing it back into my skin.

My tired body sags into the water, cock twitching mercilessly. *I will have to do this many times to find any true emotional or physical relief from my heart sickness.*

Lying in the bathwater with my own seed on my belly, I finally release my claspers. They scrabble at the air as if in

anger and then wrap my flaccid shaft, spirals of red against the white, two black pointed tips closing over my crown.

The Korol has turned slightly, giving me a better view of Yaoh out of the bathroom window.

I must get good at pleasuring myself. I will be trapped on the throne with the same bodily urges and no release. This will be my new normal.

I force myself to sit up, removing the restraint strap and tossing it aside. I drain the bath, run the water, and then wash myself from the tap without filling the tub again.

No sooner have I climbed out and thrown on my robe than someone is approaching the door to the royal suites. I don't have to wait for them to ring the bell; I can see them through the blood lace pattern on the front door.

It is Brot and Connor *again*.

Only, this time, it seems as if something has truly distressed my brother.

I wave both of them through, meeting them at the halfway point in my bedroom.

“The Collector has taken off from Jungryuk,” Brot tells me in a rush, face red with distress and dotted with sweat. He dabs fiercely at it, staring at the liquid on his handkerchief like he is confused by its presence. Vestalis do not sweat unless their mate sweats. It is just the way of things.

“We must leave now and make contact before *The Korol* does,” I breathe, tearing my robe off and tossing it aside. I close the door to the closet, changing quickly into my military uniform, and then I am striding down the hall with my brother at my back.

As I walk, I slip the face monitor into place.

There are no choices: I *will* be taking my parents with me. If they find out that I have lied, if somehow they deem the Collector innocent, I will have to come up with another plan. *If I can kill him before he talks, then we can theorize that Eve is*

either still in his compound on the planet's surface or else she has escaped and been taken by slavers.

I board the queen's transport, something that my mother does not like.

"You do not even think to ask permission, my son?" she hisses through the monitor, but I do not stop walking.

"If my mate is near, I must go to her. There are no other options." I open the door to the transport. Among my daily duties aboard *The Korol*, I have been instructed to continue taking parts of the ship with my own blood lace. I have already subsumed the queen's personal dock—for those rare occasions that my mother ever leaves my father's side. *My own bride will be making frequent use of this dock.*

I don't think about that as I board, sitting down in the captain's chair and strapping myself in. My father still has control of the transport ships, so I wait for him to give me permission to captain the vessel, and then I use the manual controls and the ship's own AI to set my destination for the Collector's rapidly moving carrier.

Luckily for me, it appears that he is in fact fleeing from my parents' ship. Likely, he is concerned that with me as crown prince, that he will be charged for his trafficking crimes. He is a Vestalis noble mated to a Bás, the pair of them responsible for abducting rare species and keeping them as pets. I would have killed him anyway.

Although in a way, you were very lucky, Rurik. My brain whispers that, were it not for the Collector, I would never have met Eve. According to his communications log, he was in contact with those slaver twins from Jungryuk. The Collector specifically sent a request for Tabitha Katherine, the human female that Eve does not like. It seems that she is very famous on Earth, close to royalty.

A nice prize for a man who keeps a personal zoo.

I do not announce myself to the Collector's ship. He immediately authorizes me to board, so I do, aligning our ships so that the air locks match up. It is simply a matter of

walking inside at that point. I do so with my chin held high, adjusting my gloves as I stride across the white floors in perfectly polished black boots.

“Your Majesty,” the Collector says, bowing at the waist. His hair is short, but still white, his wings patterned with geometric red—his own blood lace design. There are not many physical differences between us that are able to be seen with the synchronicity contacts in place. Knowing the Bás as I do, I am sure there are many and that it is fortuitous that I cannot easily view them.

I stop in the central portion of the ship, an empty area with metal walls and a metal ceiling. On my right, there are stacked crates and cages filled with living creatures. This is a much more utilitarian ship than I am used to seeing the Collector in. It is a vessel meant to flee and nothing more. It is not luxe and accommodating, filled with servants and fine foods and a comfortable, private mating chamber the way his transports usually are.

He is running from Jungryuk because he fears *The Korol*.

“You dare flee royal retribution?” I ask him, biding my time. If I do not kill this male before he is granted an audience with my parents, then they will uncover my deception. Adultery is not acceptable in Vestalis society. Eve would be killed for her mate relationship to Abraxas; she would be killed for her mate relationship to Officer Hyt.

“We are fleeing nothing, Your Majesty,” the Collector’s wife says, her cloak covering her gaunt face. I see only the tip of her beak and glowing spots in the shadow of her cowl where eyes might be. They are both dressed in heavy red and gold formal wear, both polite and demure and respectful. Killing them will most certainly require an excuse. “We are simply moving back to Dome for the time being; we have no need to flee the Imperial Court.”

“Where is my mate?” I ask them, though I know she is not here. I am counting on the Collector’s ignorance in the matter. He looks to his wife and then back to me.

“I do not understand, Imperial Prince. Your mate?” He sounds distressed, and I am counting on it.

“Did you not abduct a human female recently?” I ask him, knowing this to be true. He took Tabitha Katherine from Captain Kidd’s ship. One human is much the same as the next to anyone that isn’t mated to one of the stubborn creatures. “The Imperial Princess was recently abducted; there is enough evidence to suspect that this is your doing.”

“Your Majesty—” the Collector begins, but I cut him off by lifting my hand for silence. Anything but complete obedience is punishable by death in my parents’ court. He obeys without protest.

“Did you or did you not abduct a human female recently? Yes or no will suffice.” I wait for a response, yanking off one of my gloves with my teeth. I lick my palm, drawing blood lace on the pale surface. It is more powerful than it should rightfully be. If I had not fed on Eve when I last saw her, I would have none left. I count on my parents to believe something different: that I am simply this powerful. I hid on the World Station for as long as I could before returning to *The Korol*. It is possible that I am simply well-rested and still in possession of deep reserves of power.

It’s a bluff. A dangerous bluff, but it is one I will have to make. If I can, I must convince my parents that my mate and I will be difficult to kill.

“Yes, My Imperial Prince,” the Collector answers with a bow of his head. He opens his mouth to continue the conversation, but I don’t allow for that. As easily as my father beheaded my brother, Ranet, and his mate, I do the same to the Collector and his. They are both dead before they can register either my intent or the loss of their mate.

It is a form of mercy and kindness.

Blood pools on the floor, a puddle forming beneath my boots.

I make a quick show of checking the cargo and then retreat to my own ship. I touch my fingers to the face monitor,

sending instructions to Brot rather than my parents.

“Have the live cargo collected, inspected, and then returned to where it belongs.”

“*Yes, My Prince,*” Brot replies from a communicator on his end.

There is some silence on my way back to *The Korol*.

“*Swift and vicious retribution,*” my mother breathes in my ear, but it is my father’s voice that frightens me most. Cold, dispassionate, detached.

“*You will pray to the Stars that your mate is on Jungryuk, or that will be the last of the good graces we will extend to you.*”

“Yes, My Imperial King,” I whisper, and then I return to *The Korol*, set the face monitor aside, and lock myself in the bathroom. I pick the restraint strap up from the floor of the bathtub, squeezing it in my hand before I tuck it into my jacket pocket. My parents will assume I am washing the blood spatter from my face, and the scent of wild cargo from my skin.

I do not have much time.

I head back to my desk, so that I can study the Jungryukian tidal charts. I must make the calculations by hand or else the king and queen will realize that I am trying to beat their own soldiers to the planet’s surface.

Landing on Jungryuk is never easy, particularly for a small transport. There is much work still to be done.

But just like tonight, I will need to make sure I am ahead of the Imperial Court.

A single wrong move on my part will result in us all being eaten.

This much, I guarantee.



Eve (Future Queen of the Noctuida)

There's a live fish swimming in the bowl of soup that Hyt has just handed to me. I stare down at it, and I really don't want to be rude, but ... *can I really eat this?*

"Oops, sorry, that was mine." Hyt switches the bowl on his tray for the one situated on my lap, and I'm treated to a thick, warm broth and a smell that makes even my queasy appetite rise from the depths with a vengeance. I pretend not to notice Hyt lifting the other bowl to his lips. Down the hatch the live fish goes. "Kayla says this stuff is our version of chicken noodle soup for Americans. It's a comfort stew for the ill or elderly."

"Good to know," I reply, trying to be coy but failing miserably. After we came home from the bar, Hyt and I watched a movie together in bed and then passed out. I spent the whole of yesterday cuddled up in his arms, trying to rest and reserve my strength for today. *Except it didn't work: I still feel like shit.* I make myself take a bite of the stew, and find that it's a nice mix between clam chowder and broccoli cheese soup. It's fucking delicious. I pretend not to notice the body of a soft-shelled crab thing with too many legs. It tastes good when I eat it, but if I think about the legs ... "So, what's the plan for today?"

"Lucky for us my grams took care of everything. All we have to do is show up." Hyt plays with the large pink shell that's serving as his bowl, using his tentacles to tilt it this way

and that. When he turns to look at me, he can't hide either the excitement or the trepidation in his gaze.

He wants to marry me; he's afraid we're going to die.

"At least we won't die single," I tell him, accidentally timing the quip for the exact moment that Avril approaches on the deck outside. She stops where she is, in the empty spot where a glass pane used to be. *Oh, Rurik*. I dreamt of him last night. Him and Abraxas.

"Yeah, um, thanks?" she queries, slipping through our bedroom to get to the staircase and the kitchen below.

"You know, it's particularly inconvenient to have our bedroom and the front door located in the same place." I take another bite of my soup, ignoring the roil in my stomach. Kidd is going to land tonight, right here on Yaoh. We are *this* close to ... well, buying ourselves more time. That's all we're doing, taking one step in the right direction.

"I figured that out only *after* I bought the place," Hyt says with a slight smile. He turns blue, and we both pause. He flicks his hat brim and sighs. "What I mean to say is, when I bought it, I thought I'd be alone forever, and I didn't particularly care if my family showed up here whenever." He flashes pink for me, lifting his bowl to his lips to drink the cool, clear broth inside. When he sets it back down, he continues. "I installed the toilet later for Kayla, but ..." He winks at me. "I'm glad you're using it to flood our bathroom and tell my little sister all our secrets."

"Dick," I grumble, but I like the way he teases me. I poke his muscular thigh with my foot. "Happy birthday, by the way."

Hyt wraps my foot with a tentacle, giving it a gentle squeeze as he smiles at me from under the shadow of his bright white cowboy hat.

"Happy birthday, my beautiful bride," he says, rising to his feet and collecting my empty bowl and the tray that it was served on. I'm a little disappointed to see him saunter out without another word. *Is he upset about something?* I wonder,

but that feeling proves to be entirely in vain when Shithead spirals into the room ahead of his master, singing happily to me in his chirpy voice.

My gorgeous groom is just behind him, holding a serving dish in his tentacles with a three-layer cake perched on it. The frosting is white with purple flowers piped around the base, and twenty-six candles arranged in a neat pattern on top. Not real candles though. Mechanical candles? They're skinny like birthday candles, silver, with little bulbs at the tips.

Close enough.

"You ... baked me a cake?" I ask, feeling my cheeks go hot. Hyt notices. He always notices. He can smell me, remember? "For our birthday?"

"For our birthday," he says, sweeping a gallant bow and managing to keep the cake upright in his tails. "It is an honor to share a special day with one such as you, Miss Eve."

He swings the cake around and presents it to me as Two-Face the cat wanders in the back door, yawning like my husband isn't the cutest male in the whole of the Noct. Minus ... minus the other two males who are equally as cute. *Fuck, I might be an A.S.S., but I am going to have to really work at this poly thing.*

"How ...?" I can't even finish the sentence. Instead, I tuck my hair behind my ears, close my eyes, and make the most important wish of my entire life. *Please just let us be together,* I think, imagining me and Abraxas and Rurik and Hyt and our baby all living on Jungryuk. Oh, and Jane, of course. I blow on the candles and they go out like they're real and not some weird-ass alien tech.

What the fuck is the point of a mechanical birthday candle?

"Kayla's first birthday here," Hyt begins, spinning a small plate around on the end of a tentacle. "She cried and cried and cried. I asked her what I could do to make it better, and she told me that she wanted a cake." He uses another tentacle to cut a slice, presenting it to me with a flourish. "I had to improvise since we don't have grain flour on Yaoh." A pause.

“Or sugar. Or basically anything else that goes into a cake. You can tell me if it tastes bad; I won’t mind.”

He turns blue with that statement, but we both pretend not to notice.

Looking down, I see a perfectly moist looking cake with three pale pink layers, white frosting in between each. Hyt hands over a wooden fork with another tentacle, and I give him a look.

“Also, the fork is homemade, yes. We don’t have forks here on Yaoh either.” He turns pink, still balancing the cake in a tentacle, his various other tails occupied with the knife, another plate, and a metal cake server. He’s also wearing an apron covered in seashells that’s almost too ugly for words.

I hide my grin in the bite of cake.

If it tastes half as good as it looks—

Oh.

Oh, it doesn’t. It’s not half as good. It’s ... not good at all. I start laughing and then almost choke on the bite. Hyt has enough limbs to perform the Heimlich maneuver and still not drop the cake. Impressive, right? Only, it doesn’t go quite that far. He rubs my back, hands me a glass of water, and that’s enough to clear my throat.

“Oh, Hieronymus,” I begin, and he leans down to give me a dry look.

“If you’re calling me that, you must not like it?” His lips twitch into a bemused smile, gaze sliding to the back doors. “All these years, that little brat ...” He tapers off and stands straight, crossing his arms as Kayla calls out from the deck and then comes padding in, dripping water all over our bedroom floor. She sweeps sandy hair back from her freckled face, bows at the waist, and then rises to face me.

“Imperial Highness,” she says, and then her mouth twitches, and she just laughs. “Yeah, I’m not great with authority. If I couldn’t be cowed by Mom, I won’t be cowed by either of you.” She strides forward, pointing a finger at the cake in Hyt’s tentacles. “You made the future queen a cake?”

“It tastes like ... a bowl of hospital gelatin had an illicit love affair with chalk dust,” I tell her with another chuckle. I couldn’t love that damn dessert anymore if it had tasted good. This is too funny.

“You might’ve told me all these years that you hated the cake,” Hyt chastises Kayla with a raised brow. “Thank you for letting me embarrass myself in front of my wife.”

Kayla grins and gives her brother a comforting pat on the back. I can’t help but think about that guy, Bram, but I’m smart enough not to say anything. Sort of.

“Sorry, bro. I loved watching you bake, and I always felt so special when you brought me my birthday cakes. I didn’t care how they tasted.”

I’m half-dead from the cuteness as Hyt smiles lovingly at her and then tousles her hair with a tentacle. Kayla turns to look at me, and it just comes tumbling out.

“We ran into Bram yesterday,” I say, and her eye twitches.

“Oh, Bram?” she says with a ridiculous amount of false cheer. Kayla tosses her hair back and smirks. “Yeah, he’s cool. We had a mutual breakup.” Her face radiates confidence, but Hyt gives me a sly look that tells a different story. “Should we get going? Both grandmas are already at the center. Both grandpas, too.”

Ah. I haven’t met Layna’s mate yet. I wonder if they’re like, divorced or something. Can that happen on Yaoh? It seems like Falopex have no trouble sleeping around anyway, like the mate bond doesn’t even matter. I guess it would make sense if she was estranged from the guy or something.

“I’ve only met Grandpa H,” I begin, and Hyt anticipates the question before I can even ask it.

“My other grandfather, Elian, works for the administrative side of Yaoh. He only comes home to exchange the pearl, and then he leaves again. I’m pretty sure Layna has a dozen boyfriends at this point.” I gape at Hyt, but he just smiles at me like his grandmother’s love life is common knowledge for

the family at large. “Are you ready? If you’re not, or if you’ve changed your mind—”

“Are you really giving her an out?” Kayla asks, but Hyt just shakes his head.

“I was going to say, *please don’t*. I’ll never live it down. Rejected by my human mate in front of the whole family.” He tries to make it into a joke, but we both know what he’s asking: *are you healthy enough to go today?*

Kidd is landing tonight. I will see Abraxas *tonight*. The idea gives me strength.

“As if I’d let Minae win. Over my dead body.” I ignore the look on Hyt’s face at the expression and stand up, pushing my dizziness down through sheer force of will. “You underestimate how stubborn I am,” I add, but I don’t think he does.

“Never, little Earthling,” he breathes, all six irises fixed on my face. “Never.”



The Commitment Center—I think that’s what it’s called—is located near the outskirts of the city we visited the other day, just past the monster skeleton with all the flowers and the wild mini octopi. There’s a hole in the ocean floor that leads to a passageway and then into a small chamber where Grandma Layna is waiting.

Her hair is coiffed with shells, loose tendrils floating around her face. She has a matching necklace, and a belt that almost covers her va-jay-jay. I feel like we’re really making progress here.

“Happy birthday,” Layna tells us both, giving Hyt a kiss on the cheek before she does the same to me. The way she looks at me, I wonder if she doesn’t know the truth and is just ignoring it. Or if she simply trusts her grandson and doesn’t

care. I know that my back is perfectly slathered in fresh sunblock, but ... I still feel like Layna sees something when she looks at me that tips her off. She acts like this is a normal wedding anyway, not an alien wedding. Not a supposed-to-be-fake wedding. “Flen did a lovely job on the dress,” she says, taking my hands in hers. “I’ll admit: I wasn’t particularly confident in his skills, but he did it justice.”

“Thank the Dead Kings for that,” Hyt says, reaching out to touch a garment bag that’s floating on the right side of the room. It’s anchored by a clasp on both the bottom and top, pinned in place to keep it still underwater. “If that little shit ruined a family heirloom, he’d be a disappointment in more ways than one.” There’s a gentle sadness in Hyt’s voice. Also, he’s blue again. *A lie*. He doesn’t think his brother’s a disappointment at all—but maybe his parents do.

“Tailors aren’t officers,” Layna explains gently, summing up what’s likely a very complicated family matter into a few words. She pauses as Kayla wiggles into the passageway behind us, wearing a clear mask over her mouth, a small square tank on her back, and an IV in her wrist. This is the special diving equipment that Hyt mentioned on our day out.

Apparently, the device on her wrist, the one that’s attached to a bag of fluid strapped to her bicep, provides rich oxygen to the blood. It’s enough that she technically doesn’t have to breathe, but the mask gives her an option to do so since, you know, it’s pretty much impossible to *not* breathe.

She removes the mask portion to speak with us, spewing bubbles.

Seeing her do that, imagining being trapped underwater without Hyt’s pearl ... yeah, makes me question whether I actually do have other phobias. Is there a phobia for fear of scuba diving? If so, I might have that, too. Space and deep diving. Not my favorite things in the world.

Better or worse than shitty in-laws though.

It’s a question I’m not sure that I’ll be able to answer until *after* the wedding today.

“I’m here; how can I help?” Kayla asks eagerly.

“Let’s get her in the dress,” Layna says, her tails drifting around her as she tucks her legs up against her body, arms wrapped around them, and then just floats there like this is the most normal thing in the world. “I’m eager to see how it looks when it’s on.”

“Ready, Earthling?” Hyt asks, and at my nod, he yanks the garment bag’s zipper down to reveal the dress waiting inside.

Um.

My gaze shifts to Layna, her face eager, her smile genuine. Shit. I can’t offend one of Hyt’s nice family members; I’ve already offended all of the rude ones. I may as well just roll with this.

Kayla scoots over to me, kicking her legs like she was born to live underwater. Her eyes are bright, too, like she truly enjoys this. I wonder vaguely if she doesn’t actually want a Falopex mate, someone to give her his pearl so that she can function in Yaoh like everyone else.

“Not like your grandmother’s dress back home, eh?” she whispers, and I snort.

“My maternal grandmother grew up visiting a mansion in the Hamptons for summer break; she dresses like she owns a beachside golf course.” *Shit. Wait. I think she does own a beachside golf course.* “My other grandmother is an Oregon hippie. Only wears tie-dye.”

Kayla chuckles at my terrible joke and then laughs even harder when I come to the horrifying realization that I’m not only going to have to strip my clothes in front of both her and her grandma, but also that ... I have the privilege of engaging in yet *more* public sex today.

The Noctuida is so goddamn weird.



The dress is ... unique. Let's say that. It's, um, special. In its own way. It's ... yeah, my genitals are exposed. I'm just going to say it outright. *If only Jane could see this*, I think as I study myself in the mirror on the far wall. There's actually a dressing table in here, and a chair, but I can't really use any of it without Hyt's help because I'm not a water-dwelling alien fox with tentacles for leverage. I notice that the Falopex use their tails to grab onto things, to maneuver their sleek bodies around underwater.

Poor Kayla and I are not as spry or nimble—particularly me.

Layna's dress is white, but not for the same reason that a human might wear a white dress.

“Do you like the white? Usually CC gowns are more ... outrageous,” Hyt explains, dressed in an outfit as equally strange as mine. Well, I say outfit, but what I mean is: a shiny scaled cloak with talons that gather around his throat like a choker, a decorative belt made of teeth, and nothing else.

Yeah, his cock is just *there*. It's there, and I'm trying really hard not to look at it.

“What can I say? I'm a simple woman,” Layna remarks, voice contemplative as she studies my expression with a smile. I think she likes me. Even if she suspects something is off about me, she likes me anyway. *Maybe Hyt will still have family left after our big scandal breaks?*

“Some human women wear white to ...” I trail off as I realize how absurd certain cultural practices sound out of context. “To signify that they've never fucked anyone, I guess?” *Oh my God, that's so weird.*

Hyt just stares at me, hands on the back of the chair I'm sitting in. The one I'm only sitting in because he's tied me down with his tentacles.

“I swear I've mentioned that before,” Kayla offers, seemingly unsurprised that both her grandmother and her brother are naked in the same room as her. She, on the other hand, is wearing a full-body wetsuit from neck to toes which I very much appreciate. Bubbles escape her lips as she holds the

mask away from her face and laughs. “Or maybe I haven’t, based on your expressions.”

“They wear white to show they’ve never mated?” Layna repeats, sounding perplexed. There’s a lot to unpack there, so I do what I do best and steer the subject elsewhere.

“The dress is beautiful,” I tell Layna, smiling back at her in the mirror. “Thank you for letting me wear it. I—”

She waves her tails as if the gesture means nothing. But to me, so far away from home, it means a lot. It means everything.

“I didn’t just let you wear it. I want you to keep it and, if you want to, you can give it to a future child of yours.”

Don’t cry, Eve. Don’t cry. I’m not even pregnant currently, so I can’t blame the hormones. Damn it. That’d be a convenient excuse as to why I’ve suddenly turned so soft and mushy. *Stupid Abraxas. Stupid Rurik. Stupid Hyt.*

My groom leans down next to me and nuzzles the side of my face, making my breath catch in such a way that bubbles explode from my mouth. Shithead lands on my coiffed hair, burrowing into a nest of stray floating auburn strands.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?” Hyt asks me, and I nod.

He takes my hand, but it’s a symbolic gesture. I’m only rising from the chair and not floating up to the ceiling of the small chamber because he’s holding me in place.

I catch one last glimpse of myself in the mirror, wearing a dress with a white sequin mermaid tail, see-through gauze on the bodice that trails down to a ‘V’ over my bare cunt, swoops below my ass cheeks, and covers my entire upper body from wrists to neck. The only positive of the dress is that I’ve got sparkly cups over my breasts, sparing me the embarrassment of Hyt’s family seeing my nipples.

Hah. And yet, they’ll have a front row view of everything else.

“Quick rundown on the ceremony?” I whisper to Hyt as we swim with Layna in front of us, Kayla behind. We’re heading

down a passage about as wide as a hallway, turning this way and that. Layna seems to know where she's going, so I don't stress the confined space.

With Hyt's pearl, I am definitely *not* going to end up like one of those YouTube cave-diving horror stories that my dad is obsessed with watching on his phone.

We probably should've had this discussion yesterday, but I was too busy sleeping and snuggling and ... I'm sort of addicted to Vestalin movies now. I watched three while convalescing in Hyt's bed, and they were so goddamn good. Say what you want about the parasitic world-eating moth aliens, but they understand romance in a way that many people don't.

"It'll be quick and painless," Hyt says, and he turns blue to match his weird cloak. Pretty sure it's like the skin of a creature with the claws still attached, but hey, when in the Noctuida, do as the Noctuidans do.

"I'm assuming the *quick* part was true, and the *painless* part was a lie?" I tease back, but he just nods.

"It's a simple ceremony." *Pink skin*. "We exchange the pearl in front of family and friends. That's basically it. The real celebration is the feast that follows afterward." Hyt looks a bit distressed, like he knows we won't be staying for the whole thing. We'll have to bow out early to meet with Kidd and—

Oh. Abraxas. I feel like I haven't seen you in forever; my heart is calling out for yours.

I choke the emotion back with great effort.

Then Hyt's words finally click into place, and I sputter.

"Wait. How can we exchange the pearl? I'll drown."

"We'll do the opposite of how it's traditionally done," Hyt continues as we approach a larger chamber, like a waiting area. Layna pauses to give us both quick kisses on our cheeks, and then exits through a curtain of strung pearls that covers the doorway, hooked to the ground and floating upward to obscure the room beyond. Kayla pats her brother companionably on the shoulder, gives me a look of true apology with her eyes,

and then follows after. Oh dear. My mate turns toward me, holding me still with a tentacle around the waist, and taking my hands in his. “In a standard ceremony, the male kisses the female and gives her his pearl. Sometimes, it’s the very first time he gives it to her. Doesn’t have to be though. And then ... well, they mate and she gives the pearl back. We’re just going to flip the script in the opposite direction.” He gives me a look, and reaches up to adjust the cowboy hat that he isn’t wearing. A curse escapes his lips in the form of more bubbles. “Can you hold your breath for maybe ... ten seconds while the pearl travels up from here”—he points at his crotch—“to here?” He extends his purple tongue, flicks it against the corner of his lip, and winks at me.

“I can do that,” I tell him, suddenly overcome by nerves. Somehow, this is harder than my wedding to Rurik. Definitely harder than my simple ‘wedding’ to Abraxas. All he did was give me a venomous vagina and present me to the females in the area. That was a cakewalk compared to this. “I’m terrified, Hyt.”

Fucking you in front of your family is actually worse than doing it on camera in front of the Noct and my disturbing millipede mother-in-law.

“Yeah, I’m not a huge fan of it either,” he admits, still pink. He tries to adjust his hat again and then curses so violently that he scares Shithead out of my hair. Hyt pulls me close, my body swathed in skintight gauze and sequins that aren’t really sequins at all. They’re shiny *scales*, but they’re the scales of some underwater plant that grows in shimmering fields like wildflowers or something; I looked it up on the Noct-Net yesterday. “But we’ll be in and out, that quick.” Hyt leans down and nips my lower lip, making my thighs clench and easing some of the tension in the rest of my body. “What I mean to say is: *I will be in and out quick.*”

“You make the worst jokes,” I tell him, but if I were a Falopex I’d change color. That’s a blatant lie, and he knows it.

Hyt takes my face in his hands, kisses me closed-mouth on the lips, and then turns us to face the curtained entrance.

“We aren’t nearly as uptight or ceremonial as the Vestalis. Don’t stress it, Earthling.” Hyt keeps one tentacle wrapped around my waist, his hand in mine, and then guides us past the curtain of strung pearls into a room that’s awash with an angelic glow.

The room itself is perfectly round like ... a pearl? Yep. It’s as if we’re inside of a giant pearl.

There’s a glass ceiling and floor, showing off the ocean around us, the plants below. Sea life swims past in colorful clouds, adding to the magic of the space itself. Flowers hang from the ceiling on either side of us like thick draperies. The chamber seems to be carved out of a beautiful white stone that glows with its own light. I don’t see any other source of illumination but for that.

Hyt’s family is gathered there, situated on white benches fixed to the ceiling with floral-draped metal poles, like porch swings or something. I see his mother, Anih; I see his siblings, Nya, Flen, Mino, Kayla; I see his grandparents. There’s Grandma G and Grandpa H, Layna, and a Falopex male I’ve never seen that must be her mate. Unfortunately, I see his father there as well, sitting stone-faced and silent with his wife. A smattering of other relatives fill the remaining seats, but it’s a much smaller crowd than I met on my first day here. The horde of companions sticks themselves randomly to the walls, the floor, the ceiling.

Minae is, thankfully, nowhere to be seen. Zero’s here though, but I don’t let myself wonder if Rurik is watching. I can’t think about that right now.

In the very center of the room, there’s a platform suspended in the round chamber. It, too, is anchored by metal poles covered in flowers. A thick purple moss is laid out over it like a blanket, and this is where Hyt settles the pair of us, on our knees and facing one another.

The chamber is perfectly quiet, and I can soon see why. Each move I make creates a sound that echoes around the space and amplifies until it feels impossibly loud. I get the

idea that only Hyt and I are supposed to be making noise in this sacred place.

Don't clear your throat, Eve. Don't do it. I do, and then I cringe as the sound echoes back at me in mockery. Fantastic.

"Breathe for me," Hyt says, and even those words ripple around us on repeat. "Breathe, sweet Earthling."

Somehow, his words always seem able to calm me down. I close my eyes and focus on the feel of his thumb tracing over my knuckles, soothing, soft, the small gesture rife with affection. His tentacles keep me rooted firmly in place, and I'm at least grateful that the moss underneath us is nice and soft.

I open my eyes.

No further words are spoken between us.

The lesson I learned with Abraxas comes back to me yet again: we don't *need* words to understand each other.

Hyt smiles at me, and I smile back. I hear someone in the audience shift, but when I try to turn my head, Hyt uses a tentacle to gently shift my gaze back to him. Six irises, rose quartz in color, threaded with delicate gold veins, study me like an impossible dream.

That's what I am now, somebody's dream. Their future. All I want is to be worthy of that.

Gently, carefully, Hyt lays me down in the moss, and I realize very quickly why the dress is designed the way it is. There's a slit on the side that isn't just for sex appeal; it's just literally for sex, period. My mate opens the fabric gently with his tentacles as I blush up at him, cheeks red and hot like a newlywed on her honeymoon.

And then he winks at me, and those floral curtains, they come tumbling down around us. Shithead's doing, I believe. We're surrounded by flowers the way I was surrounded by lace at my wedding to Rurik. There are enough gaps in the floral strands that we can still be seen, but it's a lot more comfortable, this illusion of privacy.

With a haloed glow peeking through and limning his fox ears, his sharp face, his beautiful smile, Hyt gently nudges my legs apart. His sleek body lifts over mine, his cloak falling around us, his hands on either side of my head.

He keeps his gaze locked on mine, all nine tails working to hold me in place under the water. His braid floats between us, and I reach up to undo the tie at the end of it, encouraging his hair to float around his head like a rose-colored cloud. When I reach my fingers through the strands, they sting me and leave a pleasant tingling sensation in their wake.

Hyt fits his hips to mine, pushing inside my eager body and locking us together in an underwater chamber shaped like a pearl. The sounds of our joining ... it's so different underwater, but so loud in that strange room. Echoes of pleasure, of tiny gasps, of sharp intakes of breath, flesh hitting flesh, suction cups popping on tender human skin. My ass digs a comfortable divot in the purple moss as my husband's mating tentacles coax and pet, stroke and tease, opening me up and stealing the pearl before I've even hit my climax.

I feel him take it back through the opening in his crown, his mating tentacles greedily pulling it from my body and pushing it into his. I'm already holding my breath, lips pressed tight, hand flying up to pinch my nose. Hyt never stops moving, stroking soft, gentle pleasure deep inside of me.

I'm not holding my breath for long—ten seconds is probably about right—but the brief lack of oxygen puts me into this ethereal, almost transcendent sort of state. Hyt looks like an underwater god with his hair framing his face, the pearlescent glow from the chamber breaking through the floral curtain like distant stars. His mouth opens, revealing the pearl clutched between his sharp teeth.

He dips his head to mine, forces my lips apart with his purple tongue, and kisses me with a mouth that tastes like promises and fresh spring water and lies. Pheromone bubbles explode around us in a cloud, and he swings a single tentacle through them, popping them and poisoning the water with lust and want and blatant invitation.

As I swallow the pearl down, I dig my fingers into his hair, loving the sharp sting of it, my hips surging up to meet his.

When Hyt pushes me over the edge and into a brilliant, shattering climax, he falls alongside me, and I forget that anything else exists in the universe but for this single, dazzling, effervescent point. I groan against his mouth, and he does the same, our mixed exclamations of pleasure the final signatures on our metaphorical Falopex marriage license.

Mate number three, locked down.

Nice one, Eve.



It's not the same, hanging out with the in-laws after the in-laws have seen and heard you orgasm.

“Why all the public sex?” I whisper to Kayla as we sit on a bench under the waxy green foliage in Hyt's parents' backyard. There are lights strung up, made of cute little conch shells, and tables full of food that I can't identify. Everyone that was at the wedding is here, and then some. The atmosphere is surprisingly cozy, calm, pleasant. Probably because Hyt's dad disappeared into the hole in the living room floor as soon as we got here and hasn't been seen since.

Good riddance.

“You know how the Falopex are,” Kayla reminds me, gesturing at the crowd of naked aliens with tentacles and decorative belts that don't cover a goddamn thing. “They're very, um, sexual.”

“Yeah, but it's not just them. It's the Vestalis. It's the Aspiss. It's ... everybody.” I pick at the sequins on my dress, and they pick back. They ruffle when I poke at them, still alive and well even as I wear them on my body. I'm going to have to correct Hyt later: this is not moss. This isn't even *close* to being moss. Moss doesn't poke you after you poke it.

“Traveling the stars and learning about black holes and portals and other dimensions, it ... I think it’s so transcendent, so beyond the scope of what we should know as living creatures that I think the Noctuidans fall back on basic, primal things like mating to help ground themselves.” She shrugs her narrow shoulders. “That’s my theory anyway. Or maybe, because we’re from Earth, we just view things out of an entirely different lens. Either way, you did good. There is no way in hell that I’d ever participate in a CC. You are braver than most.”

I glare at her.

“You are worse than Avril,” I mumble, my attention lifting to my lady-in-waiting as she eagerly absorbs every facet of Falopex life like a kid in a candy shop. She genuinely loves it out here, and I can’t say I blame her. Public sex aside, I think I like living in the scope of the Noctuida better than I ever liked living on Earth. Zero is here, too, and I can’t seem to stop myself from stealing glances at her, just to see if Rurik is staring back.

As if she can sense that we’re talking about her, Avril drifts our way and pauses beside the bench with a drink in hand. It’s night now, the gold rings of the World Station catching stray starlight in the ebony silk of the sky above.

“What are you guys talking about?” she asks, sipping loudly on her straw as I give her a wry look. Thankfully, the diving equipment that Kayla used to get herself to the wedding takes some practice, so Avril didn’t get to come and watch Hyt and I make love in public like everyone else. Small miracles and all that.

“We’re talking about how Kayla let me agree to the Commitment Ceremony without forewarning me about the whole public sex part of the deal.”

“It’s better for you and Hyt both that you had the ceremony. The Falopex might not like interspecies marriages, but at least they can see it for what it is: a pearl exchange, a loving relationship, and an official marriage. It’ll make life easier for you in the long run.” Kayla turns her head to study me, and I

can sense she wants to say more, but she doesn't. I'm guessing her thoughts have run back to the whole *next queen of the Noctuida* bit.

I sigh and pick at my plate. I'm nauseous again. Dizzy. Weak. But I'm doing my best to keep that to myself.

We are so close. So goddamn close. Just a little longer.

"If I have to pee ..." I begin, trying to sound dignified but failing. Here I am, dying because I have a glowing vagina, wearing a dress that shows off my pussy (Hyt's aunt commented on the, um, purple glow emanating from downstairs, but he told her that was normal for humans), and desperately needing to pee when there's no toilet around. Dignified ... I am certainly not.

"If you follow this path"—Kayla begins, turning over her shoulder and pointing at a stone walkway that snakes into the trees—"I've got an old toilet situated in a small structure. It's more like a pit toilet than a real toilet, but it works okay for peeing." She shrugs. I sigh, stand up, hesitate.

I consider grabbing Hyt before slipping into the trees, but I decide to leave him where he is, surrounded by his grandparents and smiling like he's actually having a good time. He sees me go, but I'm sure he also sees that Zero is trailing along behind me, ever the vigilant bodyguard.

I turn around, walking backwards down the path until I trip and Zero is forced to catch me around the wrist to keep me standing.

"Are you ...?" I start, but I don't ask the question aloud because while I might be TSTL at times, I'm not entirely nihilistic. *Are you the Vestalis or the Cartian?*

"I am Zero-One-Zero-One—" she begins, and I wave my hand to cut her off. "Raina, yes."

It's fortunate then that she stops and then forcibly turns me around, directing my attention to the lone pink Falopex sitting on a bench inside the trees. There are lights strung here, too, forcing the shadows back enough that I can easily see who it is that I'm looking at.

“Don’t worry,” Minae says without getting up, gaze fixed on the ground by her bare feet. “I won’t tell anyone that you’re out here asking your bodyguard if the prince is in residence.” She looks up to meet my gaze, but I’m speechless.

The question I just asked, wouldn’t it sound like I was inquiring as to what Zero’s name might be? My question, her answer, there is no way in hell that your average person would understand the full context from those words alone.

As I’m coming to realize, Minae is far from average. She may very well be a genius.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” I tell her, and she gives me a dark look.

“I live over there.” She points her finger in the direction of a small stone cottage that I hadn’t noticed until just now. “I have to be near the chief in case of an emergency.” She laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “Say for example, if the Vestalis found out their princess is mated to the Chief Officer’s son ...”

I ignore that last statement.

“How convenient for you,” I say with a horrible little smile. “To be disinvited to the wedding and yet, somehow you’re still here.” I pass her by in favor of Kayla’s makeshift pit toilet. I open the door to a small outhouse made of tree branches and rope, peering inside at the clean white toilet situated over a hole in the ground. Nothing fancy, but it’ll do. I pop in real quick to do my thing while Zero waits outside for me. There’s no toilet paper, but there is a handy stack of leaves.

That’ll do the trick.

When I emerge, Minae is still sitting in the same spot. There’s a weird part of me that wants to sit next to her and talk, but I push the urge aside. I am not Jane. I am not a white knight type of person who gives everyone the benefit of the doubt. Fuck this girl. *You suck, Minnie*, I think as I stride past.

She stands up suddenly, agitating Zero. I give the cyborg a look, hoping she’ll stay out of this. It’s already bad enough that she followed me here, that she’s guarding the bathroom door. How am I supposed to explain any of that?

“Hyt isn’t a toy to be played with,” Minae says for the billionth time. I roll my eyes and keep walking but, apparently, I’ve just given her the opening that she’s been waiting for. One of her tentacles snatches the back of my dress, tearing the gauze, while another slicks a suction cup down my skin.

A warm, sensual oil coats my back, and I smell ... *flowers, sweetness, a soft place to hand.* I gag.

“Did you just rub your goddamn pheromones on me?!” I shriek, swiping at my skin as a memory comes to mind. Hyt said that the sunblock might require some tentacle grease to clean off, didn’t he? That was a literal statement. And she just ... oh Dead Kings, this is not good.

“I *knew* it,” Minae breathes, eyes wild as I turn on her. She looks up at me with all six irises, scales bristling. I can’t help but take in the sensual, feminine notes of her pheromones as I try to reach back and swipe them off. They’re intoxicating, sinking into my bloodstream like an assault. “You lying bitch!”

Zero intervenes even though she shouldn’t, throwing Minae hard enough that her back hits a tree and she slumps onto her ass on the ground.

Doesn’t matter.

She got what she came for.

As I stand there on the curving stone path, under the adorable shell lights, I find myself filled with a primal fear that I can’t shake. I don’t want to kill Minae. I don’t. But it also seems like a necessity at this point.

“Now then,” I begin, walking over to stand in front of her with my arms crossed. “Why’d you have to go and do that?” Zero waits on my right side, blood lace choker glowing, eyes sparking red to match. If I want Minae dead and gone, it’s over for her. Nobody would even know. Or, if they did, there’d be nothing they could do about it. The Queen of the Noctuida has complete and absolute power.

Only, I’m not queen just yet.

I’m also not a fucking monster.

“All this time, I was right,” Minae growls out, averting her gaze from mine. There’s something in the tense set of her body that tells me she is truly afraid for her life—but also that she’s willing to die to prove a point. *This stubborn motherfucker.* She’s lucky that Hyt actually cares about her as a friend. “You taunted me, denied my accusations, went through with the Commitment Ceremony.” Minae surges to her feet, but with Zero standing between us, she doesn’t take a single step forward. Her eyes narrow, and her companion zips around us in agitation. “How can you be married to Hyt when you’re already married to a Vestalis prince? Do you have no shame?”

“Me?” I blurt out, pointing at myself in shock. “I am the one with no shame?” I march right up to her, and Zero moves out of my way without even needing to be asked. I point at Minae instead, shaking with frustration. “For someone who’s known Hyt for his entire life, you’re disturbingly clueless. He needs a friend, Minae. He wants somebody out there who can have his back, and who doesn’t ask for sex in return.”

“You mean like you?” she quips, and I grit my teeth against a frustrated scream. “*Your Majesty.*” Her attention returns to Zero, fists clenching, tails summoning water from the humid air. They drip behind her, ready for a fight. I still don’t understand how that works—looks like magic to me—but whatever. I don’t even care.

“Hyt and I are *mates*. I can’t not have sex with him, Minae. We’ll both fucking die!” If I sound hysterical, it’s because I’m *this* close to getting there. Today’s my wedding day. I’m happy, but I’m also not feeling well. In order to save my life, I have to meet with Abraxas. I *want* to meet with Abraxas. But I’m also scared for what comes after. Nervous about *The Korol*. Unsure that we can pull off this charade long enough to take the throne. “You’re acting as if I am the reason you’re not mated to Hyt. But you know what he told me? *If I wanted to give her my pearl, I would have.* I wasn’t around until recently and still, for nearly twenty-six years, he didn’t give you his pearl. Why do you think that is?”

“You took advantage of his kindness and his compassion,” Minae whispers, still looking at Zero and not at me. She

considers the cyborg girl her greatest threat and, even if she is willing to die to defend Hyt's honor, she won't go down without a fight. "You think I'm the worst for wanting him romantically and sexually?" Minae turns back to me finally. "You don't love him enough to *choose* him, and he deserves more than that. Tell me I'm wrong. Even if you could dump the prince, you wouldn't do it. Not for Hyt's sake."

"You don't care that he loves me, do you? His feelings don't matter. What he wants doesn't matter. Look." I take a step back and wave my hand, encouraging Zero to step back with me. "I'm not going to tell Hyt about this. I don't want him to know that you betrayed him yet again, that you risked everything just to prove to yourself that you were right. You're supposedly his oldest and dearest friend. *Supposedly.*"

"For someone who's supposedly *my* oldest and dearest friend, he *lied* to me. He didn't trust me. He didn't once consider how I might feel if he brought a human home that he doesn't even know. What sort of friend does *that*?" She taps at her chest with a tentacle to emphasize the point.

I hesitate to answer her. I've got a horrible case of brain fog going on right now, a sleepy, numb feeling tingling in my feet, and a rapid-fire heartbeat. I am not at the top of my debate skills tonight.

"I really *was* dying, Minae. If he hadn't given me his pearl, I'd be dead. You can be angry about that all you want, but I'm really fucking happy to be alive." I stop talking, lips pursed, and wait to see what she's going to do next. I can't let her run off and tell the chief, but I can't kill her. *Kidnap her?* That's always an option.

"Our entire planet is at risk because of you," she tells me, voice like ocean waves retreating before a tsunami. She turns away and runs her hands over her hair, pinching and yanking her cute little fox ears in frustration. "This isn't just a love affair; it's a declaration of war. We're harboring a royal fugitive against direct orders."

"Not for long," I tease, making myself smile. "You kicked us off the planet, remember? We have to leave after the feast."

Can't even stay for the Homecoming Festival."

Her scoff is one of complete and utter disbelief.

"You are ... *shameless*," she says, words thick with wary trepidation. "Your flippancy will result in the deaths of innocents. Believe me when I say this. As you can see, *Imperial Princess*, I am rather astute." Minae spins to face the woods, fluffing her tails at me in what I'm pretty sure is the Falopex version of flipping the bird.

She storms off, the pearls and bells on her pretty belt jangling. Some part of me wonders if she wore it in celebration of our wedding today. *People—and aliens—are complicated. It's not always as simple as good versus evil.*

"I am sorry that I once called you a cunt," Zero says, glancing over at me. "You are not." Her attention drifts back to the shadowy shape of Minae, slipping silently through the trees in the direction opposite her cabin. Hmm. "But her? I dislike her even more than the weepy one you brought aboard my ship."

"Ah, Tabbi Kat," I say, but my mind is adrift, and I'm forced to shake my head and rub my temples to put some sense back into my scattered brain. "Yeah, she's pretty much the worst."

"Hello beautiful wife," a voice says from behind me, and I jump, spinning to find Hyt standing about two feet from me. How he snuck up like that, I'm not sure, but ... *holy shit, that's hot*. He lifts his hands to slide them over my shoulders, giving me a quick squeeze of reassurance. "You almost ready to go? I've made our excuses." He gives a bitter laugh. "Ironically enough, Minae helped us out by kicking us off the planet. Legally, we have to be gone by the end of the night anyway."

"Where are we meeting Kidd?" I ask, and Hyt smiles lovingly down at me, the strings of lights overhead limning the small, distinct shapes of his scales. They sparkle like they're traced in gold. A single, hot thumb swipes over my mouth before he leans in to get coy with me.

"At our place. We're going to dock him at the back of the island. He should be calling me anytime—" Hyt cuts off

suddenly, and I find myself gripped by his tentacles and forcibly turned. “I knew I could smell her pheromones, but ... *she touched you?!*” He sounds like he’s going to kill his childhood friend for me, save himself the trouble. His finger traces over the line of pheromones that Minae swept across my back, and my mate marks throb for the first time in a while, a glowing red that shows through the single missing line of sunblock. Now *that* is some boss-ass alien sunscreen.

Zero jerks strangely, sparks flying and causing Hyt to spin me away from her to avoid getting burned. She seizes briefly before flicking terrified eyes up to mine.

Our gazes meet, and I find myself swept away, into a cosmic twist of fate that hinges on one thing and one thing only: *Rurik and I are meant to be together. We cannot be separated. If he dies, I too, will no longer wish to live.*

I suck in a violent gasp to clear my head.

“Listen to me,” Rurik breathes, frantic to get whatever it is out as quickly as possible. “My parents have changed course suddenly for Yaoh, and I have only just now discovered this. As we speak, they are making plans to reassemble over this planet. An ultimatum has been issued. You must leave *now* or there will be no leaving.”

“Wait, what does that mean exactly?” I ask as Hyt yanks his phone from the pocket of his cloak. He taps around with a finger, cursing in his native language in untranslatable ways. Bubbles escape his lips as he types numbers in and watches data flash across the screen. My synchronicity contacts translate the title of the app. *Jungryukian Landing Protocol.*

“It means we’re going to have to leave before they start scanning all incoming and outgoing transports.” A pause as Hyt looks up to meet Rurik’s gaze. “If Kidd can’t land here, he’ll go to Jungryuk instead—even if we can’t properly time the tidal surges, even if neither of us gets the chance to refuel.” He exhales. “We have to take the risk.”

We have to take the risk ... that we might crash. Fuck. There go all of our carefully laid plans. Isn’t it amazing what a big difference a few hours can make?

“Of mice and men and all that,” I say, waving my hand, and both males stare at me. The reference is entirely lost on them.

“The risk of staying here is greater.” Rurik’s lips are pressed into a thin line. “Go. I will send Zero to find Avril and bring her to you. If they are late, take off without them.”

“Grab my sister, Kayla, for me, too?” Hyt asks, waiting for a nod from Rurik. The prince steps in close to me, cups the side of my face, and presses a featherlight kiss to my temple.

“Do not worry. This is but a small setback.” Rurik kisses me once again with Zero’s lips, and then leaves before I can choke back my worries enough to say goodbye.

“I love you!” I call out to him, but he doesn’t stop. He doesn’t have to. I feel his emotions, as hot as embers in the wind. They catch on my heart and set fire, and I sigh. I turn back to Hyt, his expression as tender and wanting as I’ve ever seen it. I reach out to take his hand, curling my fingers around his.

“Can we really get out of here without *The Korol* spotting us?” I ask softly, and he sighs.

“We can do this, but it won’t be easy. Do you trust me?” It’s a genuine question on his part.

I nod.

“Good choice.” He grins, grabs me around the wrist, and tugs me down the stone pathway toward the party. He uses his tails to tear his cloak off his shoulders, slinging it over mine instead. Layna waves goodbye as we hurry across the courtyard, calling out her congratulations. Curious faces observe us from their spots in the lounge pools, but nobody moves to stop us.

Not until ...

Minae is waiting for us just inside the living room, arms crossed over her chest, tails swaying.

“Where on Yaoh do you think you’re going?” she growls, taking a step closer to us. “Are you afraid because the Vestalis are assembling above the planet? You should be.”

Ah. She already knows about that? News travels fast here in the Noct.

“Get the fuck out of my way,” Hyt growls right back, pulling me tightly against his side. “I won’t ask twice.”

Minae seems to consider that and, weighing the options, she stands her ground.

“I didn’t tell anyone my theories, if that’s what you’re thinking. I don’t know who did. Or, maybe, the Vestalis aren’t as stupid as they look. I have no idea. What I do know is that if you don’t surrender yourselves to them, they will threaten Yaoh. The safety of our people is my *only* priority, Hyt.”

He ignores her, using the tentacle around my wrist to drag me past his childhood friend and inside the house where his brother, Mino, is sitting at a desk playing a videogame on his tablet. He looks up as we come in, raising a fin-brow at Minae as she follows us.

“Leaving in a hurry?” Mino asks, but nobody pays attention to him.

“Hyt, *please*,” Minae begs, but he continues to ignore her, taking me into his arms and marching outside to the beach. “If you don’t give me something to work with, I’m going to have to go to the chief! I don’t want to do that.”

“I can’t control your actions, Minae, just as you can’t control mine,” Hyt says as I wriggle slightly in his grip.

It does not escape me that this is all my fault.

“Hyt!” Minae calls one, last time as we step into the water, cool waves sloshing against my calves.

Avril, Zero, and Kayla are right behind us.

The latter gives Minae a look as she passes.

“Be a hero, Minae,” she tells her, reaching out to give the Falopex female’s shoulder a squeeze. “Go make our excuses for us, tell everyone we left as quickly as we did because the prince has a strong lead and commanded us to head for Jungryuk.”

Hyt pauses to look over his shoulder with me, waiting.

Kayla and Minae stare at one another for several seconds before Minae grits her teeth and turns her head to the side.

“Of all the stupid shit you’ve done over the years, this is by far the most idiotic. I hope this girl is worth dying for.” Minae spins on her heel and takes off as Hyt exhales bemusedly, ruffling my hair with a tentacle. He sets me on the ground in front of him, and then leans down over me from behind, lips near my ear.

“You are, you know? Worth dying for.” A slight smile that I can feel even if I can’t see it. He stays pink until he utters this next bit. “Even if you are a pain in the ass.”

I open my mouth to argue with him, but he cuts me off by turning me around with his tentacles, snatching my chin in his fingers, and kissing me hard and fast with utilitarian passion. Hyt draws back to address Kayla.

“Meet you at the house,” he says, leaving the Cartian bike for Zero and Avril. “Be quick.”

Hyt’s tentacles whip around me and snatch the edges of my dress, literally tearing it from my shoulders. He takes his cloak from me, too, leaving me in my birthday suit. Fitting, considering the day.

“Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt!” I breathe before he uses his tails to lash me against his front. “Grandma Layna gave that to me, you dick.”

“Sorry, Earthling, but you’re a slow swimmer.” He chuckles before diving into the water and, even though I know this is a tense moment with too many chances for trouble, I can’t help but appreciate his body. I mean, I’m fully naked against him, he’s fully naked against me, and he’s *swimming*.

Oh, man. It’s obvious that Hyt was built for water. It’s evident in every single muscle in his body as he flexes and propels us through the shimmery blue of the ocean. Moonlight breaks through the waves, creating a pleasant, silver-stained evening. It doesn’t feel like the sort of evening where angry aliens assemble over a planet and threaten to blow it up.

We explode up and onto the deck in a rush, Hyt's wet footsteps padding quickly into the house. He doesn't put me down as he yanks open his locker, uses five of his tentacles to withdraw a bunch of weapons, and a sixth to procure a new hat and loincloth. Tentacle number seven draws a bag out from beneath the bed, and he shoves all of the guns inside. Hyt throws it over his shoulder as he takes off for the back door, slipping his feet into his boots before starting across the island.

I notice the two-headed cat trotting alongside us. Neither Hyt nor his companion seem bothered by it, so I don't pay it much attention either.

"Where are we going?" I ask, content to let him carry me around. "Also, some clothes would be nice."

"You can change when we get there," Hyt tells me, and then we both freeze as a shadow passes over us.

Hyt relaxes his tentacles just enough for both of us to look ... *up*.

"Oh fuck," I groan as I notice a large, dark shape coalescing above the gold ribbons of the World Station.

"Oh fuck is right," Hyt whispers, and then he starts to run. I hear the Cartian bike zipping through the water, followed closely by Kayla's hoverboard. Hyt doesn't wait for them, sprinting through the trees until we get to the beach on the opposite side of the island.

There's another dock here with Hyt's police cruiser parked in the water alongside it. I recognize it from that time with Abraxas on the World Station. A door on the side slides open automatically, and we enter into the foyer area where Abraxas ate a cart full of raw meat, and I chowed down on the pink dumpling that Hyt gave me.

He tosses his bag aside and strides forward, down a short hallway and into the bedroom.

It still *reeks* of Abraxas in here.

"Aspis musk doesn't come out of the draperies, eh?" I joke as Hyt tosses me onto the bed. He climbs over me, and my entire body reacts. My legs spread on instinct, and I know that

if he were to drive into me, I could take all of him in a single thrust.

“Dead Kings, Eve,” he breathes, leaning down and putting his mouth against the side of my neck. “Don’t do this to me. We really, really *can’t*.” Hyt snatches some sort of seat belt thing from the wall, yanking it over my body and essentially strapping me to his mattress.

That ... doesn’t help my sopping pussy any.

No, it makes things worse.

Hyt lets out an agonized groan as he uses his tentacles to add more straps, until I’m very firmly wedged into the mattress. He presses several kisses over my face, stroking oiled suction cups down my limbs.

“I can smell your arousal, wife. And I want you. I want you so fucking bad right now. But we *can’t*.” He makes a sound of frustration as he shoves up to his feet, tilting his hat and offering up an apologetic look. “Normally, I’d drug you for a landing as rough as this, but with your illness ... I can’t risk it.”

“A landing as rough as this?” I chirp, and then it hits me all at once and I’m so dizzy that I thank Hyt’s Dead Kings that I’m lying down. *I’m about to go into space. With the Vestalis swarming. About to land on Jungryuk, a planet that’s fucking littered with hundreds of downed ships I’ve seen with my own eyes.*

Oh my God.

Oh God.

Oh fuck.

“Can you pilot a ship?” Hyt asks Zero, voice as tense as I’ve ever heard it.

That fucking scares me.

I lift my head up to peer down the hall at the pair of them.

“This would be a hell of a lot easier with a first mate,” Hyt adds, but Zero sighs regrettably, shaking her head.

“Unfortunately those are not skills that I possess. I am a scientist, not a pilot,” she tells him, but then her head snaps up and her eyes sharpen into an entirely different expression. *Rurik*. “I will be your first mate,” my husband tells my ... husband.

Yeah. A lot to unpack later. Right now? There are my planet-obliterating in-laws to deal with.

Hyt’s phone rings, but he ignores it. Rurik turns and points down the hallway to where I’m lying on the bed, completely nude. He hesitates slightly, breath catching in Zero’s thin frame before he shakes off the surprise. Desire is naked in his gaze as he lays out a strong command.

“Avril, attend to the princess.” Rurik/Zero strides past Hyt and out of sight.

Hyt’s phone goes off again and he curses, yanking it out of the bag he tossed onto the floor and answering it as he moves around the ship.

“What the fuck is it, Kidd?” Hyt growls, holding the phone in his tentacle while he does ... whatever it is that needs doing on a ship. Both Kayla and Avril find their way down the hall to the bedroom, blocking my view of Hyt.

“You need to get off of Yaoh *now*,” Kidd yells, voice tight. “We aren’t even going to *try* to land. *The Korol* is moving into position above the World Station. We’ve only got one choice, and it’s a shitty one.”

“Yeah, well aware of all that, Kidd,” Hyt barks back as Avril smirks at my naked ass strapped to the bed, and Kayla at least attempts to be polite by averting her eyes. She smacks a hand over her grinning lips, but not before I catch the amusement in her smile. “We get the privilege of trying to land on Jungryuk during a waning day.”

Kidd pauses, and I hear him huff out a dark laugh.

“The only two bastards in the Noct crazy enough to try, and skilled enough to succeed.” Kidd laughs again, and then, after a few brief seconds of hesitation, so does Hyt.

“Damn straight.” Hyt looks down the length of the hall to meet my gaze before he lifts the phone in his hands, staring his friend down through the screen. “You listen to me, Kidd.” Hyt swallows, like he’s trying to dislodge the emotion stuck in his throat, but it doesn’t work. When he speaks again, it’s with a heavy reverence and a pleading that make my chest hurt. “Kidd, this is the most important mission we’ve ever shared. We both have to land safely or the girl I love ...” He trails off, and I hear Kidd make a sound from his end.

“I know, Hyt. I know. I ... well, there’s only one female in the whole universe that I can fuck so ...” Kidd tries to make a joke out of it, but I hear the burgeoning affection for Jane underneath his words. “I won’t fuck this up. I’ll get us all down there alive. You do the same, okay? Jane would never forgive me if her friend died and ... I think the Aspis would kill me anyway.”

Hyt laughs again, but the sound is weary and full of strain.

“See you on the surface, my friend,” he says, and Kidd returns the gentle goodbye.

“See you on the surface.”

Hyt hangs up, heads down the hall to check on Avril and Kayla, and nods in approval when he finds them both strapped into these weird jump seat things that unfold from the wall. They look a bit like the chairs that flight attendants sit in.

“This is going to be a rough landing, okay?” he says, turning to me, tails suctioning all over the walls in agitation. “But Eve?”

“Yes?” I ask, leaning my head back and closing my eyes.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

I open my eyes to see that he’s pink with the truth of that statement.

“I love you,” I tell him, even as Kayla sighs happily and Avril snorts in bemusement.

“I love you, too,” Hyt replies, forcing a smile before he turns to his sister. “Are you sure about this, kiddo?” he asks

her, and she gives him a look. “It’s not too late to bail. You know we might not live through this, right?”

“I understand the risks,” Kayla replies, crossing her arms. She flashes another grin for her brother. “But you’re a damn good pilot. We’ll make it.”

He sighs and shakes his head at her, but his smile is a little less weary, a little more real.

“Hold on tight, ladies,” he says, tipping his hat at us and joining Rurik in the cockpit.

“Don’t worry, Eve,” Kayla tells me as the ship makes a sound similar to the ending cycle of a dryer, this whirring that speeds up and then slows, dims, quiets. Everything goes still. Shudders slide down to block the windows, and the entire room plunges into darkness. “Hyt is a fucking *genius* at flying.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe in him,” I whisper back, heart racing. “I just have astrophobia.”

“Astrophobia?” Kayla asks, and I hear Avril chuckle.

“Fear of space,” Avril explains, and then—



I can't breathe.

It's worse than the star-jump.

For several minutes there—or maybe hours or possibly years—I have no idea who I am, where I am, or what I'm doing. It's like that first dip on a rollercoaster when you're moving so fast you can't breathe, can't scream, fingers clutching the safety harness and hoping like hell that it doesn't come off.

My body sinks into the mattress, and my heart flits into my throat.

I feel heavy. So goddamn heavy. I feel like my own bones might crush the rest of me, that I might end up as a puddle on the floor. I question if I'm even still *alive*.

And then I blink once more and everything shifts.

My entire *reality* shifts.

I'm gasping and struggling to breathe as I'm sat up by a half-dozen helping hands.

"She's awake!" It's my mother shouting out for a nurse.

It's my *mother*.

I stare at her as I suffocate, hands frozen at my sides as I try to lift them up to claw at my face and throat. There's a tube shoved into my mouth. Tubes in my arm. My father staring at me with wide eyes while Nate sobs beside him.

How ... what?

The tube is removed from my throat, and it feels like I'm able to draw in a breath for the first time in forever.

"I can't ... Eve, you ... oh Eve." My mother's eyes fill with tears as Jane leans in toward me, face swollen and puffy with tears of her own.

It takes a while for me to realize what's going on.

I'm *awake* for the first time in a long time.

And all the fuck I want to do is go back to sleep.



"This isn't happening," I whisper some days later. Or has it been days? Could be a week or more. Or ... it could've only been a few minutes. *How long have I been awake?* I ask myself, but I'm too disoriented to remember.

Abraxas ... isn't real? Rurik isn't real? Hyt isn't real?

I whirl on Jane, my hands shaking as I struggle to lift them off the bed. My body is stiff and atrophied from lack of use. For two months, I was in a coma. *Two months*. I haven't moved in two months. I've been dreaming for two months. I've been falling in love with aliens for two months.

"What happened to your copulatory plug?" I ask Jane in a deranged half-whisper.

"My what, sweetheart?" Jane asks, smiling sadly and sniffing as she draws my hair back from my face. "You're babbling, but that's okay. Makes sense after everything you've been through."

"Jane's been here all along," my mother inserts desperately, reaching out to squeeze my hand. I stare back at her eyes, the color a match to my own. Got my hair from her, too, that auburn wash that wafts around an equally long face, same gentle curve to our chin, same plump cheeks. I missed her, but ... I fell in love.

I was in *love*.

“She’s stayed by your side every second since the incident,” my mom tells me, glancing over at Jane. “Reading you those ridiculous alien novels she likes so much.”

“What can I say?” Jane asks with a gentle smile, her dark brown gaze never leaving mine. “I am a card-carrying A.S.S.” She pauses and then leans in to whisper. “Your mom has no idea there’s an acronym hidden in there.”

I just gape back at her, horrified.

This isn’t real, I tell myself, looking around the room. Because, again, there’s no way that I was actually in a coma, that someone spiked the water carafe at Tabbi Kat’s party, and I had a bad reaction to a hallucinogenic drug.

“This is ...” I start to panic. “This is the dumbest dumb-dumb alien romance plot that ever existed,” I whisper frantically, fingers clawing at the mattress on either side of me. No. I won’t believe it. This is bullshit. “Wake up, Eve. Wake up, Eve. *Wake the fucking fuck up, Eve!*” I scream this last part so loudly that everyone in the room startles.

The door opens, and I glance over in time to see three men in lab coats approaching the bed.

The only possible way this could get worse is if the government came to take me away and locked me in a padded cell.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” my mother says, eyeing me like I’ve lost my damn mind. “Eve seems to be experiencing issues.”

“Of course she’s experiencing *issues*,” Nate gasps, always coming to my defense against our parents. “She nearly died!”

“Your sister’s going to be just fine,” a voice says, one that I recognize right away.

It’s Hyt.

“Oh thank fuck,” I groan, trying to crawl out of bed to get to him. “Get me the hell out of here!”

Hyt ... or some human dude who *looks* like Hyt pauses near the foot of the bed. On either side of him, there are human versions of Abraxas and Rurik. Their eyes are the same colors, just ... humanized. Purple-eyed Abraxas has those infamous Elizabeth Taylor eyes that are actually gray. Rurik has a very dark red-brown stare. And Hyt is sporting the same sapphire eyes he had in the Noct just ... with two less irises in each eye.

“How are you feeling today, Ms. Wakefield?” Rurik asks dryly, glancing at a tablet clutched in his arm. He sounds bored, like he couldn’t possibly care less.

“Hello, Eve,” Abraxas says gently, voice a sultry, rich baritone with just a *hint* of a growl. “I’m quite certain that you have plenty of questions.” He’s got an accent, too, like maybe English isn’t his first language.

I just sit there and stare.

And stare and stare and stare.

“This is your medical team,” Jane whispers to me, trying not to chuckle. But she’s so happy to see me awake that she can’t seem to help herself. “Adorable, right? I nearly creamed my panties when they walked in.”

“Wait, what?” I ask, turning to look at her.

Jane *never* says ‘creamed her panties’. She thinks it’s a gross, weird way to refer to a woman getting wet. *Just think about it, the implications of cream and panties. That’s ... I’m sorry, like what? Gross.*

I turn back to look at the doctors.

“Wake the fucking fuck up,” I say, and all three doctors pause to exchange looks. “Yeah, no. I am *not* doing this. I’m waking up. Now.”

I force my aching body out of the bed and all three men rush forward to help me.

“Sedate her,” Hyt is gritting out to Rurik. The man’s already drawn a needle from his pocket and is heading toward me.

“Counciling, not drugs. That’s the answer,” Abraxas practically growls at his colleagues.

A blue tentacle slips out from underneath Hyt's white jacket, wrapping around my wrist.

"Earthling!" he shouts, and I tumble off the edge of the bed ... which actually turns out to be the ceiling of Hyt's police cruiser. The mattress I was strapped to seems to have been reoriented to a ceiling fixture, and Hyt's just undone all my straps. I fall right into a bed of soft tentacles, finding myself tucked up tight against a muscular chest and rapidly beating hearts. *Oh yeah, definitely hearts plural.* I just learned something new about the Falopex. "Oh, Eve. Oh Earthling. My love. My wife." His tentacles are all over me, stroking and petting and oiling me up.

Hyt curses under his breath as I struggle to acclimate to the sudden shift in locale.

I told myself to wake up, and I did.

That means *this* is reality and all of that garbage? *That* was a dream. This is the real world. This is actually happening. I've known that for a while, but it's nice to have the theory confirmed.

"I'm sorry about your cruiser," I mumble distantly, still not entirely recovered from passing out. I notice a massive hole in the side of the ship, sparks hissing from a tear in the hull (I use the word *hull* with great trepidation, as I'm not actually sure what a hull even is). There are tubes and wires and shit dangling from the walls, dust settling, a piece of tree impaled through the back of a cushion.

Right.

And this is why the planet of Jungryuk looks the way it does, eh?

"My cruiser?" Hyt asks, looking around, baffled. Like he didn't even notice his ship was destroyed until now. "Oh. Well. I've crashed four of these on Jungryuk already. It's part of the job. Don't even worry about that."

Hyt tucks me tightly to his chest, using the rest of his tentacles to drag Avril and Kayla from their seats. Both are breathing, but neither is awake. Hyt holds all three of us like

it's nothing, snatches a sheet to cover me up with, and then turns and strides from the cruiser and it's questionable sparking.

I bet it catches on fire here in a second.

Hyt's companion whirls around us as my husband reaches up to adjust the cowboy hat on his head. Even through all that shit, he didn't lose his goddamn hat.

"You're so unbelievably cool," I tell him, and he gives me a look.

I've said that aloud.

Yep.

Bummer.

"True. If only we weren't in the middle of a crisis. I'd have that ass buried in the damp Jungryuk dirt."

I choke on a strange sound, waking Kayla up. She blinks rapidly and then jerks her head up to look around.

"Holy fucking shit," she breathes as Hyt sets me down in front of Zero.

She's kneeling on the ground, a tear in her knee revealing strange metal parts. With a frustrated growl, she rises to her feet, her right leg bent in a strange and unnerving way.

"My princess," Rurik breathes, coming over to caress my face with Zero's hands. The double-headed cat weaves between his ankles, unscathed from the crash. Which is ... you know, *weird*. "I love you, and I am relieved you are safe. I must go if I am to leave *The Korol* without my parents' interference. If I do not see you again, I love you, and the stardust of my soul will seek yours out in the next life."

"Don't you do anything risky!" I growl back at him, snatching Zero's shoulders in tight fingers.

But the only person looking back at me now is the Cartian girl trapped inside.

"His Imperial Majesty has gone, your highness. I am at eighty-five percent capacity. I will still be of use to defend

you.”

“Thanks,” I breathe as Hyt uses a device in his hand to map our way to the house. He notices me looking at it and offers up a quick explanation.

“GPS, courtesy of the last Cartian satellites still in orbit. Doesn’t always work if there’s an Aspis around,” Hyt adds just before a roar splits the woods around us.

It’s been a while since I was on this wild, untamed planet and now that our ship is gone and we’re stranded? I’m questioning why the hell I ever thought I could live here.

It is truly fucking feral.

There’s nobody around.

It’s pitch-black under the foliage.

There are shadow monsters bobbing at the edges of the lit clearing we’re standing in. I look up to see that the hideous suns are setting, bathing the air in a thick, swampy gold, pulpy orange juice clouds blotting the sky.

They look ... *wet*.

“It’s going to rain here soon enough,” Hyt says, as if he’s reading my mind. “But real rain this time, not that acidic shit. We’ll be alright.” He looks up briefly and then down again at the device in his hand. “Better hurry back to the house though or we’ll be in trouble. Close your eyes and look away.” He taps something on the screen, and an awful white light pulses out of it, sweeping across the clearing as I turn my head. It doesn’t hit me full-on, but when it’s long over, I’m still blinking away white spots.

When I look back, the shadow things—the ones that tried to *eat* Abraxas once upon a time—are gone.

Hyt bundles me up again, dragging Kayla along by the wrist, a limp Avril still slumped over one of his tentacles. He hands her off to Zero who puts the girl on one shoulder.

“This way,” Hyt whispers, eyes flicking back and forth through the shadows. At least he knows what he’s doing here.

He's lived on Jungryuk for years. I feel like I'm in good hands. *But ... it'd be better if Abraxas was here with us.*

"What are those things?" I ask Hyt, spotting more of the shadow creatures creeping through twilight toward us.

"The Aspis call them Night Feasters," he says absently, focusing more on the woods we're crawling through than the question he's answering. "There's no need to call them anything else. Eyes closed."

Kayla and I do as we're told, and the white light pulses outward again, shoving the Night Feasters back.

Another Aspis roars, but I know it's not Abraxas immediately. I could recognize his roar across the world. Which means ... there's another Aspis roaming around here. If he or she is anything like the one that *ate* me alive, we're in big trouble.

"Can you take down an Aspis if the need arises?" I ask, but Hyt either doesn't hear my question or pretends not to hear it, so he doesn't have to answer it. "Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt," I demand, and he casts a wry look back at me.

"While trying to protect you and Kayla? At night?" Hyt keeps going, giving it some thought before he answers. "I'm not sure."

And also because you're sick, huh Hieronymus? I think, but I don't say that aloud. I wonder if his symptoms are the same as mine? Sweaty palms, racing heart, headache, nausea, disorientation. The crash did not help the envenomation issue. No, it feels like it pushed up the whole *slowly dying in agony* process by several hours.

Fantastic.

"Hey, um, can you put me down?" I ask, tapping on Hyt's tentacle. He gives me a look absolutely dripping with suspicion, as if he can sense my true motives. *If I'm this tired, then I'm sure you're tired, too. Don't spend all of your extra energy trying to carry me.* "I feel like I need to stretch my legs; I have a cramp."

It's a flimsy excuse, but what the hell does a Falopex know about human cramps?

He complies, and we continue walking until Avril wakes up, sobbing and shaking until she realizes where she is. You'd think she'd be *more* upset to discover she was trapped in an alien jungle full of pissed-off dragons and shadows that eat living flesh. But no. Like me, Avril's clearly gone insane, and sighs in deep relief.

"You're an A.S.S., aren't you?" I ask her, and she glances over at me as we continue our hike. It's full dark now, but Zero lights up apparently. It's creepy as fuck, but her white dress glows, her hair floats around her, and those red eyes and antennae of hers pulse in time with her blood lace choker. It's just enough to keep the Night Feasters back. Hyt still has the device he's carrying, but it only keeps the monsters away for so long. Zero is a better lantern.

"I can be, from time to time," Avril replies honestly, not fully understanding my question.

"You're an Alien Smut Slut," I tell her, and she gapes at me as Hyt chuckles. The sound is dry, but there's true amusement there. "Like, you *want* to be here, so you can get fucked by an alien. Or ... aliens plural."

"Isn't that why you like it here?" she asks me, like she's completely perplexed I'd even pose such a stupid question. "I assumed you wanted to stay because you were getting good dick?"

"I fell in love," I snap back at her, cheeks flushing, and Hyt nearly trips over his cowboy boots.

I say *nearly* trip because Officer Hyt is never clumsy. He turns, swaying with the motion, and then walks backward like it's nothing.

"Love?" he asks, but I pretend like I didn't hear him, turning to stare into the trees.

He smirks sharply before spinning back around, and we increase our pace until I'm panting and wishing I'd never played the hero and asked him to set me down. Hyt gives me

an assessing look, and I know that he'd much rather carry me, too.

When I hear the third roar, I strongly reconsider.

The Aspis is getting closer.

"Come on, Kidd, where are ya?" Hyt breathes, staring at his device and then looking back up. "He should've landed nearby, and he isn't answering. Fuck."

He doesn't comment again until we get to the clearing where his house is located.

I'm dumbstruck by the sight of it.

I gape up at the massive ship and the even massiver (is that a word? I don't think it is) tree that's grown around and way, way, way above it. There's a wooden staircase that curves up the front of the structure. It's got this fairy-tale look to it, all whimsical and twisted, bits of sticks and twigs woven together with small limbs and vines, a completely natural thing.

Or at least, it looks that way.

Hyt takes my hand and leads me up the steps, unlocking the front door and making sure everyone is inside before he closes it.

"Exterior lights on," he says, and outside the building, spotlights flare to life, illuminating the clearing around the house. The trees become a fence of shadows around the yard, blocking the Night Feasters from this cozy space. Inside the house, enough of that ambient light reaches us that I'm able to make out certain details. I'm still disoriented from everything that's happened today, but even my addled brain can appreciate the room we're standing in.

High ceilings, smooth and silver and curved, the inside of the ship. The walls on either side of the door are made entirely of glass, massive windows that look out on the forest. As I stare out, I see raindrops beginning to fall in the golden light. It dims gently, and then goes dark.

"We don't have the solar power to keep the lights on all night, so they pulse. I've never had a Night Feaster get in, so

don't worry." Hyt smiles at me. "They're not actually shadows. They're animals. They can't get through the walls."

"I wasn't worried about that," I tell him, thinking about Abraxas. The damn things are *scared* of him. It occurs to me then that I would've died that first night in the woods if he hadn't let me follow him back to his den and sleep outside. Did he watch over me then? I bet he did.

My lips curve into a smile before the expression falls away completely.

Hyt notices, lifting his head to look at Zero, Avril, and Kayla. He reaches out with a tentacle to pat the latter on the cheek.

"There are extra rooms around the back. Go get settled in for the night. We can't leave the house until morning." He reaches down to grab me by the waist, lifting me up and carrying me from the living room to an attached bedroom with ... Oh.

There's a toilet and a massive bathtub. Granted, both are in view of the large window on the right side of the ship but who cares? Who the fuck is out there? Nothing that wants a free peep show. Just flesh-eating shadows and murderous dragons.

A fantasy of taking a hot bath while watching the rain pour down outside fills me.

Shit.

Fuck.

I *need* that.

I look back at Hyt to find him waiting, hands on his hips, a huge bed filling the space behind him.

There's easily enough room for four on that mattress.

Even if one of the four is an Aspis.

"Where did you get the bed?" I ask, pointing past Hyt. He blinks at me again like I'm crazy, glances over his shoulder, and then looks back at me with a raised fin-brow. He lifts his cowboy hat up with a tentacle and *stares* at me.

“You really are an A.S.S., aren’t you?” he asks, but at least the joke makes me laugh. Sort of. We’re both well aware that if Captain Kidd doesn’t call soon, that means he crashed. That he’s dead. That Jane is dead. That Abraxas is dead. That soon, I’ll be dead and Hyt will follow. Rurik will starve or be executed. “The cushion came from an old Cartian ship. They used to study the Aspis, you know? Like tranquilize them and ... Anyway, they would keep them in manufactured nests during their captivity. This is one of those.”

Manufactured nests?

Gross.

I can only imagine Abraxas’ horror.

Maybe I’m not *so* upset that the Cartians got blown up?

I feel guilty immediately for the joke although I find the forced capture and study of the Aspis to be absolutely horrifying.

“Look at me, Eve,” Hyt says, and then his tentacles are all over me, and he’s holding my face between his real hands, standing close, staring down at me. I love, love, love the way he grips my face. I rise up on my tiptoes to get closer to him. “If Kidd has crashed, and Abraxas is dead, I need you to know exactly how much I fucking love you.”

I choke on those words.

“Don’t do that to me,” I whisper, heart clenching. I have no idea how this male has captured me so completely, but the thought of losing him makes me desperate. “We’re not going to die today.”

“Just in case ...” Hyt trails off and then lowers his mouth to mine, kissing me deep, lifting me off my feet to press my body against his. He wraps me up, and then I remember that I’m *naked* under the sheet I tucked around myself like a toga. It flutters to the floor, and then Hyt is turning and walking us over to the bed.

He drops us both onto the mattress, using his tentacles to slow his descent, to keep his body pillowed above me. He puts his palms down on either side of my head, grinding his hips

into me. Hyt watches my expression to gauge what feels best, slipping his length between my outer folds as he massages us both with a pair of tentacles. Pheromone oil slicks our bodies, readying us for a quick, passionate fuck.

Another tentacle slips underneath me, spreading Hyt's scent over my back and obliterating any trace of Minae from my skin.

"That's better," he murmurs, adjusting his pelvis so that it's tucked perfectly against mine. With his tails spiraled, draped, and curled around my body, he yanks me downward and impales me on his cock. "*Ah, fuck, Eve.*" Hyt groans the words out, but my own moans are caught up against his chest.

He rolls us over, situating me above him, and meets my eyes. His gaze absolutely slams into mine, cutting right through me. I meet that intensity with my own emotions, riding Hyt into the mattress and making him writhe and moan and buck up into me.

He thinks we might die. I *know* that Abraxas will show up shortly. And when he does, everything will change again.

For a time, I was an abducted wild woman living in the woods. For a time, I was a princess swathed in lingerie and eating macarons. For a time, I was the wife of Officer Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt, and we could watch movies and cuddle alone.

What's coming next? I have no goddamn idea.

I let my head fall back as Hyt does what he does best, worshipping every inch of me with oiled suction cups. Tentacles wrapping my breasts, playing with my clit, toying with my ass. Even better are the mating tentacles buried deep inside of me, coaxing my body to release the pearl. The ones at the base of Hyt's dick pet and stroke my folds, encouraging my wiggling hips to move a little faster.

I fall forward and wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him.

"I had a horrible fucking dream," I moan, burying my face in the hollow of his throat. He takes over the effort of keeping

our pelvises grinding together, using his tentacles to slam me down at the same time he raises his hips. “You were *human*.”

Hyt snorts at that, bringing my face to his for another kiss, one slick swipe of that purple tongue over my lips as he penetrates me fully from behind with another tail. I’m entirely filled by him for a minute there as he slows, releases my mouth, exhales against it.

I open my eyes to look at him, and he returns the favor, watching me as he makes me come.

My body goes taut and then slack, collapsing forward, nipples rubbing Hyt’s chest as I struggle to breathe.

“Shh, Eve. Take it easy,” he whispers, but I don’t. I dig my nails into his skin, kiss him hard on the mouth, and rock my aching, tender body until he’s squeezing me with all nine tentacles as well as his arms. Hyt’s hot cum fills me *hard*, making me whimper, making my thighs and my cunt and my stomach muscles tingle. *Oh, that feels different*. I’m not giving into Hyt’s coaxing this time: it feels like I’m trying to take from him.

I end up with tears in my eyes, draped over Hyt’s shoulder, shivering all over as he rubs my back and murmurs to me. Pretty sure he got the pearl back just then. It was way more intense than usual, that sense of intimacy that comes with the sharing of our life force.

“You know what you just did?” he whispers to me, kissing the side of my cheek. “You tried to take the embryo from me. *But you can’t have it yet.*” He nips my lower lip, and then releases me, standing up and flicking his loincloth back into place.

“I ... what?” Holy crap. So that’s what that was? There is a lot of weirdness that comes with mating a Falopex. “So, do I still have the pearl?”

Hyt adjusts his hat as I sit there, dazed by his presence.

He smiles at me.

“Keep it. Just in case you end up underwater.” Hyt goes very, very still all of a sudden. “Shit. That’s Kidd’s ringtone,”

he says, but I didn't even realize a sound was going off until he said something. Hyt strides over to a side table, picks up a tablet, and answers the call on that. "Tell me you're still alive," he teases, trying to make it seem like a joke.

It's not.

He was truly worried.

"You owe me a new fucking ship," Kidd snarls out, and Hyt sags down to the edge of the table to sit, one leg kicked up, tails swaying behind him.

"Sure. Fine." Hyt waves his hand dismissively, leaning in. "Everyone's okay?"

"Everyone's fine," Kidd breathes back, and then he pauses strangely. "But the Aspis, he already took off."

A roar cracks through the night, loud enough to penetrate the glass wall of Hyt's house.

Abraxas.

See? I told you I'd recognize him.

I shove up to my feet, wishing I had some damn clothes to wear, and then settling for grabbing the sheet again. I drag it around my body as I race up to Hyt, snatching him around the neck and crushing the tablet between us.

He's coming.

"I love you, and I'll be back soon." I kiss Hyt, release him, and then I run outside into the rain and down approximately three of the fairy-tale stairs before *he* grabs me.

A massive black tail encircles my waist, and I find myself yanked off the staircase and down to face a set of amethyst eyes.

"*Hello, female,*" he growls, and then he very slowly, very purposely uses his wing-hands to tear the sheet from my body. Scraps of the wet, white fabric remain, billowing in the wind beneath the tight coils of his tail. Abraxas loosens his grip and they float away, just before he leans down and *licks me* from

toes to lips. His tongue dives into my mouth, and I melt. “*My mate.*”

Abraxas draws back, stares me down as his horns pulse with purple spirals, and then he pushes me into the wet ground and mounts me. Right there on Hyt’s doorstep, at the base of his stairs. I tilt my head back into the mud just enough to see the vaguest hint of his silhouette watching from his bedroom window.

Shit, this is tough.

But then Abraxas tilts my face toward him, and I’m lost completely to his intensity.

He’s inside of me now, stretching me, making my breath catch in a brief worry that all this time apart has made me too tight to take him. But then he adjusts his hips, licks the side of my neck, and grinds into me. He’s so impossibly firm, his scales a completely separate texture from Hyt’s.

Abraxas grins his wild, violent Cheshire grin, and my heart stops.

This is going to hurt, I think, and then he bites down on my shoulder and locks me in place for mating. I let out a scream, but it actually doesn’t hurt. It feels *amazing*. My cunt glows bright enough to illuminate his massive sack as he fucks me hard and lets that heavy weight slam into my ass like a spank.

All of the disorientation and the dizziness and the nausea, it’s gone much faster than it came on. I feel *amazing*, and that feeling only intensifies as my male fucks me and restores our bond. It brings me so much relief knowing we’ll never be apart for more than seven days at a time. Jungryukian days, I mean.

I won’t ever have to live more than seven days without him.

That’s the important take.

My dark dragon comes so hard that his roar cracks the night sky like thunder. His wing-hand claws dig sharp points into my hips as he grips my pelvic bone, and his dick swells, locking us together for that fifteen-or-so minute time frame.

We're both panting heavily, but we'll live.

I'm not envenomated anymore, am I?

I'm cured.

"I have missed you," Abraxas breathes through the translator, huffing his hot breath against my ear. His words are faintly kissed by cinnamon and smoke, like he might very well start a fire with his next exhale. A strong pause, the sudden stillness of held breath. "Eve, where is our daughter?" he asks, and I cringe, wriggling around as that strange sensation of being connected to Abraxas hits me.

He's pumping fluids into me, just as I'm ... I think we're trading fluids.

Anyway, it's bizarre but *fantastic*.

I exhale through the sensation.

"Hyt still has the embryo," I admit, and Abraxas sighs in annoyance. He rubs against the side of my neck, and then proceeds to groom me with a savage tongue.

"Unfortunate," is all he says, cleaning me until any trace of Hyt is washed from my tender skin. I relax into his touch, savoring the sensations until Abraxas shifts and, sadly, slides out of and off of me. He curls into his gargoyle crouch to look me over, a gaze of fire and heat.

His massive mouth splits wide, and I shudder just before he licks me again.

There's an awe that I feel in his presence, like it's the first time all over again, like we just met. I know he feels it, too, with the way he's looking at me. Like something precious. Like something to be cherished and nurtured and loved. I get a little teary-eyed, but I blame it on the rain.

"Come. I will show you to the new nest, and we will mate through the night. Later, we will deal with ... *this*." He pauses and lifts his head up to growl at the ship. When I scramble to my feet and turn, I see Hyt standing on the front porch, arms crossed over the railing, tails swaying. He smiles down at me and tips his hat. Abraxas doesn't respond, snatching me up and

turning toward the woods. He takes off on all fours and drives his way through the Night Feasters. They scramble to get away from him, leaving disturbed moonlight or benign shadows in their wake.

Abraxas then leaps and launches himself nearly twice the height of our previous den into the new one.

He slumps back against the wall in a very human pose, my body tucked against his chest.

“I will not be parted from you again,” he growls, lifting his head up and spreading his wings around me to block our view of the room. I’m sure this new nest will be great, but ... is there *any* chance that it still has a toilet? Probably not, huh? “I would truly have died of a broken heart within days.”

He sounds so entirely sincere, I’m not sure what to make of it.

I put my hands on either side of his face, tracing the nearly invisible seam of his mouth.

The air is thick, swamped with pheromones as he slides his purple-teased palms down my back. Abraxas drags me against him, dirtying my chest with more of that sweet stickiness. I’m trembling as he holds me, unsure what to even say at this point.

We left off with one another planning a life alone.

And now ...

“It’s been a while,” I say, blinking at him as the sky splits and rain pours wildly down outside. My body feels heavy with the extra gravity, and the humidity is choking the life out of me, but I have the strangest sense of coming *home*. Like this is where I’m supposed to be. Earth is ... a distant memory. My hands slide up either side of Abraxas’ face, fingers taking charge of my mate’s horns. “Too long.”

“Female,” Abraxas says gently, nuzzling my face. I’m on my knees between his legs, his wings around us, his tail brushing gently up against my exposed thigh. It’s completely dark in here but for his personal glow. Oh, and the *smell*. Musky, wild, *male*. I’ve missed this so much.

I throw my arms around his neck and hug him as tightly as I can, tears spilling loose down his back. He draws me firmly but gently away, and then licks first one cheek and then the other.

“Why do you make salt, female?” he growls, nuzzling me again as I tuck my body as tightly as I can against his. He feels so perfect, so familiar, so *home*. Because it isn’t the wilds of Jungryuk that are making me feel like I’ve just come home, it’s Abraxas.

“I ... I told you I didn’t want to mate with you from the get-go,” I whisper, my voice dripping with guilt. “Because I knew I’d be the *worst* possible choice for a mate.” I look up at him, pleading, but he doesn’t seem to understand what’s so awful about any of this. He tilts his head at me. “You had to leave Jungryuk on a *spaceship*, Abraxas. I fucking hate spaceships. Don’t you? Don’t you feel confined? Don’t you worry about being sucked into the blackness of space?”

I’m panting now, but I *refuse* to acknowledge how terrifyingly awful our flight from Yaoh turned out to be. I see now why Hyt and Kidd were reluctant to try a Waning Day landing. Frankly, I’d like to *never* attempt that sort of stunt ever again.

If anything were going to be a dream, this would be it. Even though the idea makes my eyes sting with tears, I try the technique I used in the fake hospital.

“Wake up, Eve,” I whisper as Abraxas continues to stare at me in confusion, his eyes a mess of jewel-like tones and chips of gentle gold. “Wake up, wake the fucking fuck up.”

“Tiny female,” he warns me, lips ripping in a snarl. “What is wrong?”

“I had a ...” I can’t even make myself say it. “Abraxas, I’m *sorry*.”

He growls at me and then nips my shoulder, lifting me up and then carrying me down a hallway and a set of stairs. I glance over my shoulder to see that the metal steps descend into a nest, like a bird’s nest but arranged of strong, thick

limbs instead of twigs. It's woven through with vines, lined with fern fronds, and filled entirely with jet-black furs.

Abraxas sets me down in the nest, cradling my body in the soft pelts as he crouches over me. He's in his smallest form right now, but he's still much bigger than I am, dominating the space. He sniffs my hair, chuffs against it, and then works his pelvis against mine. I can feel both of his cocks, slick at the tips, probing against me.

"We will not talk of such things tonight," he tells me, and then he brings our pelvises together with a hard, wet smack. I gasp and throw my head back, nails clawing at the furs before Abraxas snatches my wrists up in his wing-hands. He slams them down on the bed above me and then uses his other hands to cup both breasts. He nips each pert nipple, biding his time while I lie there, searching for breath, as full up and fucked as I've ever been.

The rain thunders prettily against the metal roof of the long dead spaceship.

Abraxas studies my expression, adjusting his hips enough that I'm gasping, writhing, driving my pelvis up and against his.

"*Yes, sweet Eve,*" he purrs, and then he snatches up my ass in one big hand and jerks my body to his, meeting me with a wild, possessive thrust. There is no mistake in his movements or his eyes right now: he's claiming me, and he has every right to.

I give in, spreading my legs as wide as they can go, arching my back, pressing into his touch. Abraxas eventually releases my wrists, using one set of hands to grip my pelvis and the other set to touch and pet and tease my exposed skin. He licks my rain-slicked flesh, bathing me in heat, his tongue as powerful as his tail. He uses the tip of that goddamn tail to slip between us, stroking my clit and using a bit of the venom that's dripped down from his spikes as lube.

When we fuck regularly, I'm immune to it.

When we're separated, it kills me.

Die of a broken heart.

The only thing killing Abraxas when we're apart from one another is his love for me.

He sweeps his hands down my body, the purple designs on his palms glowing as he smears pheromones over my skin, marking me with his scent. It sinks into my blood, making me want him more, harder, faster when I was already certain I couldn't want him anymore if I tried.

I was just with Hyt, wasn't I? my brain supplies. I lived with Hyt and, before that, I was with Rurik. But all of that and more is obliterated from my head as the carnal impact of what Abraxas is doing to my body hits me. I'm not just climaxing then, but something else altogether. For the briefest of seconds there, my existence comes down to the points of contact between his skin and mine.

"You are so small and sweet and eager to please," he grinds out, and I slap him. He loves that. He snatches my wrist up in a wing-hand and tongues my nipple with a hot, sharp lash. "Tell me your desires, my mate."

"I want you," I tell him, falling right back into the life I was supposed to have. "I want you, Abraxas. I fucking want you so goddamn bad."

There have been moments where I've missed him so badly that I couldn't breathe, where I stood wondering if I was going to make it another second or minute or hour without seeing him. And it's been this fucking long?

I writhe like a caught thing in his grasp, but he keeps me so frustratingly still.

"You will accept this bonding fluid," he grates out between those massive teeth. "And then later, I will give you more seed. With the Falopex's help, we might have more than one child at a time. Would you like another?" He wraps his tongue around my breast and *squeezes* before releasing it to slick another angry flicker over the dancing point of my nipple. It moves up and down in rapid succession as I try to remember

how to breathe. “Your body milks me furiously, as if your greatest desire is for the contents of my sack.”

I slap a hand against his chest, but we both know that he’s at least a little bit right.

I don’t care.

I use his horns to guide his mouth to mine, and he obliges, snatching my face up in both wing-hands so he can push his tongue to the back of my throat in a punishing kiss.

I’m still coming somehow, like maybe when I thought it was happening before, I was wrong and *this*, this is the real deal. My mouth opens wider to scream, but Abraxas has full control of me, in every part of me, on every part, his massive weight crushing me into the furs beneath his hot, slick body.

My eyes roll back, and he finishes with a sound that promises murder to the next male who touches me.

I hope like hell that Hyt can’t hear it.



It's still raining when I crack my eyes the next morning. I'm so goddamn tired. My eyes are dry but somehow also sticky? I don't know. I force myself into a sitting position, a fur falling off my shoulders, and I glare at Abraxas who's waiting crouched at the base of the stairs.

"How much sleep did we get last night? Oh, that's right. Basically none."

"It was not my intention to deprive you of sleep," he says in a voice that's part rockslide, part fur pelt. Hard and soft. Definitely base. Primal. Wild. He licks the side of my face, and I see that he's a bit bigger today, like maybe he went vent dipping while I slept. "We both had such wild needs, why would I make any attempt to stop us?"

"You visited a vent?" I ask, and he moves back slightly, cocking his head at me again.

"You will still be able to take both rods," he replies, as if sex was the only reason I brought it up. I roll my eyes at him and then squeeze them shut.

"Not why I was asking," I grumble, rubbing at my forehead. *Okay, fine, that was totally why I was asking. So ... he beefed up, but he didn't beef up too much for us to have penetration. Good to know.* Abraxas and I are on the same page.

I crack an eye to find him staring right back at me.

"We both know you are a liar," he teases, nipping at the air near my face before he draws back a few, careful inches. This

is the farthest he's allowed himself to get from me with the exception of his vent visit this morning. I imagine he wouldn't have gone at all if ... he didn't think he might need the power.

Uh-oh.

I almost forgot.

This isn't just a lazy, rainy afternoon in the woods with my mate. We have problems now. Big ones. Galactic-millipede-shaped ones.

I sigh and Abraxas picks up on my mood immediately, snatching my chin in a wing-hand and peering at me with narrowed eyes.

"No. For now, we exist alone." He doesn't release me, and I worry that this is like, a cultural misunderstanding or something. Like, maybe he doesn't know that we can't do that. If the Vestalis are moving *The Korol* into position over Yaoh, it's because they very well may blow it up. And if they do that, I imagine they could come for Earth or Jungryuk next. Abraxas sighs deeply, ruffling my hair, and then releases me. "I will not allow the prince to starve to death. When he arrives, I will take you to him."

I shake my head.

"Not where my thoughts were, but ... thank you." I swallow past the thickness of tears. I'm done with this. Abraxas and I are never going to go back to the way things were before, but that doesn't mean we can't have something better now. "Rurik's parents might destroy Hyt's planet."

"I am aware," he says, sitting back on his haunches. He gives me a wry look and another sigh. "I have explained this to you before: *I am not stupid.*" Abraxas sounds mildly offended, so I scramble out of the furs to put my arms around his waist.

"I didn't think that. I just didn't ... your people don't have space travel, right?"

"My people have no *need* for space travel," he corrects me, and I see that this could actually turn into a philosophical discussion on the merits of space travel in general. Frankly,

I'm down for never getting on another spaceship for as long as I live.

Only ... that's not even a remotely realistic option for me. *Queen of the Noctuida? Holy fuck.*

"Well, unfortunately, *you* will have a use for it because ..." I trail off again and exhale, leaning back so that I can look up at Abraxas' face. I wish I could sit here all day with my arms around him, cuddle and feast and talk, relax for five seconds.

Nope.

I can't do any of those things.

I rub at my eyes with the heels of my hands.

"Bet you wish you'd mated that Aspis female, eh?" I tease, and he snags my chin again, much less nicely this time.

"I *chose* you." He sighs and uses his tail to wrap my waist so that he can pick me up and peer into my eyes. "You chose me right back. But you did not get to choose the World Eater. You did not get to choose the Sucker Tail. I am aware of that."

I grab at his wrist, both hands on his ebon scales. I tilt my head, and he opens his hand, pillowing my face against his palm.

"I love you," I breathe, and I hope he can tell how much I mean that.

"When the prince arrives, I will take you to see him and the officer both." He adjusts our bodies so that his mating rod is poised at my opening, his pleasure rod slipping along the front of my folds. I'm slick and shiny from all of the fucking. My breath hisses out as I lift my gaze from our pelvises to find him watching me. "We wait for no one. When the time comes, we will attend, but life is short. Forget the wait."

I understand what he's saying, but it takes every ounce of my trust in him to relax and accept that. He's giving me a chance to lay aside the heavy burden of my future and let him handle it. I couldn't like this male any more than I do. He's ... *everything*.

I look away, but he steals my gaze back with a claw on the side of my face. A single drop of blood wells, but Abraxas licks it off with his magic saliva, healing the minor wound. His hips rock forward, nice and slow, letting my body get used to his new size. *Shit*. I lean my head back and let him hold me with a gentle hand at the base of my neck.

“Breathe, my mate,” he tells me, and then he chuckles, like he finds me genuinely amusing. “*Fucking breathe.*” This last part crackles in my translator, overlaid with the wild snarl in his actual language. I hear both parts, the English and the raw beast.

I suck in a rapid inhale, and Abraxas drives down into me, making the wood of the nest creak with his movements. I wet my lips and take a risk, reaching up to tap my fingers beside the base of his horn, where his ear is. At least, I think this is where it is.

He pauses and cocks his head at me, but then after a minute, he grins and reaches out, doing the same to me.

The next time his lips part, I understand *nothing*.

Thank you for the trick, Rurik, I think, and then all I’m thinking about is Abraxas. The noises he makes like this, with no translator, are *better*. I might have to try to learn his language. That is, if my mouth is even capable of making any of these sounds.

“*Female,*” he finally grinds in English, reminding me that he’s just that good. I can’t even say his name, but he can say several words in my language. And with that strange mouth of his? It’s nothing short of a miracle. “*So little.*”

I groan as he winds his tail gently around my neck, like a scarf. My head is still supported by a giant hand, his fingers tucked into my hair.

How do I even respond to that?

He doesn’t give me the chance, clamping a hand over my lips as he goes utterly, eerily still. Abraxas slips out of me, using that hand on my mouth to keep me from crying out, and then he lashes me to his back with his tail.

We surge up the steps and flow into the upper chamber, shadows billowing around Abraxas and blurring the edges of the world. He stalks forward and looks down, growling, scales rippling beneath me. With a tight bunching of muscles, Abraxas launches us off the platform to land in the soft earth like a cat. Mud splatters around his hands and feet as he stands hunched on all fours, staring down Officer Hyt.

My newlywed husband has his arms crossed, an arsenal of weapons on his back, and a wry look on his face as he peers up at me.

“Don’t make a pregnant Falopex hike all the way out into the woods to find you,” he teases, but there’s a sadness in his words that digs at the edges of my heart. “I wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

Abraxas’ lips split, teeth sharp and violent as he growls out the darkest, most ear-splitting sounds I have ever heard. He’s some feral thing, isn’t he? Something truly wild. I have snagged myself a forest beast.

Hyt, however, has his translator on. He considers Abraxas’ words, and then gives me a look.

I reach up and tap frantically beneath my right ear. *One, two, three.*

“I ... understood you but not him,” I admit, and Hyt grins, sliding his purple tongue between his lips. He lifts it to flash me a bit of silver underneath before he tucks it back into his mouth. *That tongue translator is sexy as hell.*

“That turn you on, Earthling?” He grins and winks, and I find myself utterly charmed by the tilt of his hat, the way he holds his hands on his hips, the sway of his tails.

And then I look at Abraxas, and I can’t shake the sense that I have, by sheer chance, found the most incredible soul in the whole of the Noctuida. I mean, I went to cater Tabbi Kat’s stupid party to save Jane’s ass. That’s it. I didn’t want to be there. I shouldn’t have ever gone up to the roof. And yet ... here I am.

Here I fucking am.

“I told the Sucker Tail that I will take you to him when the World Eater arrives.” Abraxas glances at me over his shoulder and gives me another one of his looks. “It is as simple as that.” He doesn’t sound angry or frustrated or jealous, but he also sounds like he knows for damn sure that he’s right.

“I’ll see you soon, Hyt,” I breathe, sitting naked atop a dragon’s back.

We stare at each other, and I can see that he knows he has to go. Even though he wanted a closed marriage. Even though ... we were supposed to be fake fiancés. *God, I suck at that. I fucking suck at that.*

“That’s fine by me. I told her you wouldn’t want to see us today, but she insisted.” Hyt steps aside with a sigh just before Jane comes stumbling out of the woods, yanking her arm from the grip of Captain Kidd.

“Get your hands off of me,” Jane growls, and then she turns and sees me ... still sitting naked atop a dragon’s back.

Right.

Okay for Hyt to see but ...

“Oh my God.” Jane clamps both hands over her mouth.

It’s the first time I’ve seen her in person in over two months. The first time I’ve seen her since we were abducted by aliens. The first time I’ve seen her since I fell in love with *three* alien dudes.

“I’m an A.S.S.,” I murmur, reaching up to rub at the back of my neck.

“Yeah, I can ... see that.” Jane coughs into her hand and tries not to stare directly at me. She’s really bad at it. She’s just blatantly looking at me now. Gawping, more like.

“A picture is worth a thousand words,” I grumble, and she snorts.

“We’re well past the point of simple dignity, Eve. Come give me a hug *now* and explain to me why some guy dictates the use of your time before I get to see you?”

She has a point.

Abraxas seems to realize that, picking me up off of his back and setting me down in front of my friend. He rises to his feet and swipes the mud from his palms, using water that's pooled in the leaf of a large frond to wash.

Jane throws her arms around me, and I hug her tight right back. Out of my entire Earth family, I'd miss her the most. If I had to pick someone to be abducted with, it'd be her. I squeeze her until my arms ache, and then I look up and happen to catch sight of Hyt moving over to stand beside Abraxas. Whatever it is that they're saying to one another, I can't hear. I'm still gaping as Jane releases me and then glances over to see what I'm staring at.

"Oh. Well." She turns back to me as my gaze slips past my men to where Captain Kidd is leaning against a tree with his tricorne hat pulled over his eyes, like he's taking a nap or something. Hyt walks over and kicks him in the leg, jarring him awake. I turn to Jane again and raise a brow.

"*Oh well* what?" I repeat, but she just gives me a dark-eyed glare.

"I cannot wait to hear all the details of, well, everything." She twirls a finger around to indicate the alien men around us, and I sigh, reaching out to take her wrist. Jane loves to read smut, but she hates being teased about her own sex life. It's cute. Best if I don't say a thing.

"You'll tell me all about your copulatory plug then?" I tease, and she blanches.

"I'm wearing clothes," she says, looking me over with a tilt of her head. "You're naked."

"I'm also pregnant," I tell her, and she lifts her gaze to mine in horror. I smile tightly and then shake my head with a small laugh, pointing over at Hyt. "Well, to be literal about it, *he* is actually pregnant with my kid for a while before he puts the embryo back in me. And yeah, we're not sure but it's entirely possible the baby has three dads."

Jane just stares at me.

“Eve, I don’t ... how? I just didn’t see any of this coming.”

“My life has ... I’m not going to be a caterer anymore, Jane. Or buy a house. Or live with my parents. Or maybe ever really see Earth ever again.”

Jane just keeps staring at me, and then she nods, leaning in.

“You know how my dad always believed in aliens and everything?” she tells me, and I nod. Of course I know that. I know everything there is to know about Jane and vice versa. It disturbs me greatly to think of the stories she might’ve told Abraxas while they were traveling together. “He was right. I *have* to let him know that somehow, but ...” She exhales and looks right at me. “I don’t want to go back either.” She rushes to fill in the space. “Not because of Captain Kidd,” she assures me, completely full of shit. “The life he lives is *insane*. I’d be bored if I ever went back.” She hesitates and then bites her lip. Oh dear. What is it now? “Has anyone found Tabbi Kat?”

“Hyt has a rough idea of where she is. If he’s right, then she’s safe.” I shrug. I’d *like* to see Tabbi rescued from the Collector, but if it doesn’t happen, you know, at least Jane is here. Choosing between the two of them makes life easy. *Choosing between three guys*. At least that can’t happen.

Or ... could it. Once Rurik is bound to the ship—which I’m going to figure out, I swear—and Hyt doesn’t have to worry about his planet being obliterated anymore, Abraxas and I could live in the woods together. Rurik is even willing to give his life to get rid of the ship and remove that worry from mine. All Hyt needs is for me to stay alive so he doesn’t die, and Abraxas could certainly keep me alive. We’d only have to meet up occasionally to exchange the pearl.

I feel the blood drain from my face.

“Are you okay?” Jane asks me, and both of my mates turn to look at me. They’re both fucking *staring*.

“I ...” I whip my attention back to Jane and sweep auburn hair away from my face. “I’ll be back at Hyt’s house in a few days, and we’ll figure this all out.”

Jane looks down, like she might notice my shiny thighs, and she bites back a snort as I glare at her.

“As long as you’re safe, and we’re here together, I’m happy.” Jane gives me another tight hug and then steps aside to let Abraxas move in around me. He curves his body behind mine, dancing with shadows and pulsing with violet light.

“Sister-Human Jane is a delight,” Abraxas tells me, nuzzling the side of my face. “We spent much of our time talking about you.” He curves his head around to look me in the eyes. “I have learned *everything* there is to know, Eve.”

“Remember that she pissed herself in college!” Jane calls out, waving as Hyt pauses in the clearing to look at me. He smiles, and I smile back, he tips his hat, and then he’s gone.

I miss him already.

Then Kidd, Jane, and Hyt are swallowed up by the darkness of the trees, and I’m alone with my dragon once again.

“To be fair, I pissed myself because I was drunk and Jane locked me in our dorm room as a prank.” I turn to Abraxas, and he shakes his head.

“I comprehend little of your story and less of Jane’s. I’m to understand you urinated on yourself, and this is amusing to you both as human beings?”

“Why do you make everything sound so inane when you talk about it?” I growl at him as he stalks in a circle around me. “Like, it’s *you* who is smiling down at the rest of us less intelligent beings.”

“The two-headed cat,” he says suddenly, taking the conversation down a seemingly random segue. “Where did it come from?”

I blink at him and then turn to see the pink cat sitting at the edge of the shadows, licking one shoulder. The other head surveys the trees for either prey or predators, I’m not sure.

“From Dome, the planet where ...” I trail off as I stare at Abraxas, and he leans back to settle into a crouch. “I think he followed Hyt onto the ship when he was carrying me. I

imagine since he'd just given me his pearl, he probably wasn't thinking all that clearly."

"Mm. The cat watches everything, so I was unsure. Her intent is pure, but her eyes are sharp." He grunts as he stands up, snatching me in his tail and carting me along with him. He moves me in front of his body, putting enough distance between us that I can see his face.

"Are you hungry?" Abraxas asks with one of those demonic smiles of his, alien and cocky all at once. He glances down as my stomach rumbles, and my cheeks flush. "I will take that to be a yes."

"I'm starving," I admit, hands over my face.

"Come. We will hunt together."

He lashes me to his back again, and off we go.



Abraxas brings down a white elk-ish animal whose horns have too many points to count. It looks like it's carrying oversized candelabras on the front of its skull. He carries it to the hot springs we visited together before, makes a fire beside the beach, and cooks for us.

The meat he gives me is easily as good as anything I've eaten since I was last here.

"How did your ship fare on the way down?" I ask, sitting between his legs and studying the sapphire water with interest. As soon as I'm done eating, I'm getting in there.

"The ship?" He sounds unduly perplexed, like my question is a strange one. "I did not notice. All I knew was when it was possible to have you back. There was a shift in my understanding, and then I was running." He thrashes his tail hard enough to smash the bark off a nearby tree, leaning over me with another growl. "I have chased you across the stars only to end up here again." He lets out a huff, and then pushes

up to his feet, towering over me on all fours. “Perhaps, as my mother would say, we have been guided by our own circling feet.”

“What does that even mean?” I ask, tearing the last of the meat off the bone. I go to throw it in the fire when Abraxas snatches the item midair and swallows it whole. He stalks over to a bush and tears more of those purple flowers off, the ones that foam and suds. Abraxas chucks the bushel into the water, just like he did the first day we came here, and my throat gets tight again.

I pick at a blade of grass before one of the cricket things pokes its head out to stare at me. Oops.

“Sorry dude,” I tell him, but he wriggles from the dirt and hops steadily away from me. I think I might’ve just torn off one of his antennae by accident.

“Come. You smell of Falopex.” Abraxas snatches me up in his tail and drags me into the water, situating me in front of him so that he can wash my hair with his long, strong fingers. “He was good to you while you were in his care, *Officer Hyt*?” He growls the man’s name out like a curse, and I cringe slightly.

“He was ... he was great.” I mince my words, and then immediately regret doing it. Doesn’t Abraxas deserve the full truth of it all? When I’m with each of these men, it feels like *they* are the primary, the most important. I think that’s a good sign, isn’t it? If one of them were less important than the others, I wouldn’t feel right trying to maintain a relationship with all three. “We had fun. I met his family. He showed me around Yaoh.”

I look up at Abraxas as he carefully shields my eyes from the foamy shampoo in my hair. He uses his wing-hands to wash me and his other set to block the suds from running down my face.

“Please tell me you got to see some cool shit while you were with Captain Kidd and Jane. Distant planets? Random space stations? Other ships?”

“I had only one care, and that was to find you,” Abraxas tells me, pinching my nose with his fingers, and then using his tail to dunk me under the warm water. He brings me back to the surface as I gasp, and then chuckles as he drags me against his chest. “We docked at an abandoned space station to refuel. I was nearly eaten by something, and I am not a creature easily consumed.”

I shove back from his chest to gape up at him.

“While I was hitting the shooting range with Hyt’s relatives and going to lunch, you were almost *eaten*?” I can hardly believe what I’m hearing. “When? How? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I did not wish for you to worry. If my death means your death as well, then I will not allow myself to be killed before my time.” He snorts and grabs another handful of flowers, crushing them between his palms so that he can wash my body with them. When his hands drift across my breasts, I snap my eyes shut and try to pretend like it’s possible for us to be chaste around one another. “Oh, my mate,” he purrs, squeezing my tits and using his tail to slip between my thighs. My eyes snap open to find his. “You are making it very difficult to recall the reasons I brought you out here.”

“To bathe?” I question, looking around, but Abraxas gently shakes his head at me.

“To talk,” he tells me, and the blood leaves my head so quickly that I feel dizzy.

“About what?” I ask as Abraxas releases me to float, and then dives underneath the water. I can’t see him, but I can sure as fuck *feel* him, twisting and twining beneath the surface of the sapphire pool like a serpent. His bioluminescent marks flare to life, transforming our oasis into stained glass. The water throws ripples of blue and purple light across my face and hands as I peer at them with wide eyes and no shortage of awe and marvel.

Jungryuk truly is a beautiful place.

Abraxas slips out of the water like he's part of it, fluid and boneless and strong. He curls onto his side atop one of the floating rocks and reaches his tail over the edge.

"Come to me," he commands, and I swim close enough that he can grab me, rolling onto his back to peer up at me. I sit straddling his firm midsection, hands on the scales of his chest. I scrape my nails gently over his muscles, rubbing the glowing design that adorns the underside of his body. "You need never fear me, female. You are my mate. I should be told everything you are feeling and thinking."

I nod.

I know that.

It's just ... fucking hard to say what I need to say.

"When did you find the time to make a new den?" I ask instead, a pathetic change of subject. I love the new den and its cozy nest. It's gorgeous. Comfortable. Secure. But ... there's no toilet. I had to pee behind some bushes which, you know, didn't offer privacy of any sort because Abraxas followed me back there and pissed all over everything. He can only pee out of his pleasure rod, you know. New fact I learned today. Nice to know which of your husband's two dicks can do that sort of thing.

I scratch at the back of my head as he studies me with absolutely zero sign of his mouth, just the darkness of his feral face. And then he grins all at once, and white flashes, cutting his face in half.

"Only a truly ridiculous male would have one den," he says with a sigh, as if this is the most obvious fact to ever exist in the whole of the Noctuida. I glare at him.

"Well, *excuse* me for having a legitimate question for my own mate."

"I have dozens of dens," he tells me, turning us over so that I'm prone beneath his massive form. "*We* have dozens of dens. Before you were stolen, I had begun working on the birthing den." He slides his body over mine, his hard cocks teasing my

swollen pussy before he pushes himself over the side of the floating rock and into the water.

I turn over and crawl to the edge, pillowing my arms underneath my chin as I peer down at Abraxas. He grins at me as he swims away.

“Birthing den?” I ask, trying not to think that far ahead. I ... yeah, no. I’m not looking forward to *that*. Why can’t Hyt just do the whole shebang for me? “Where? I want to see it.”

Abraxas surges back out of the water, snatching me off the rock and taking me with him this time.

“I will show you.”



We take a different route through the woods than I’ve ever seen before, one where the trees seem to lean in, where the air is dark, where small glowing things flicker like daytime fireflies. The air gets misty and wet, a gentle fog that leaves salt on my lips.

Salt.

I realize that my hair’s now dry, that we’ve been walking long enough to have arrived at that beach I saw so long ago from the top of the mountain. *Yeah, right before Abraxas totally opened himself up to you, presented himself like a beastly gentleman ... or gentlemanly beast? Either way, he was well-spoken and well-hung, and ...* I have no idea why I didn’t just say *fuck yes* in that moment.

“If I could go back in time, I’d just fuck you on night one,” I tell him, stroking one of his horns. He sighs at me, and then laughs, the sound shaking his entire body.

“You would not have. I would not have allowed you into my den. I liked the look of you. I was attracted to you. I could certainly *smell* you, but I did not trust you.” He pauses there and then uses his tail to take me from his back, setting me on

the grass beside him. It's getting longer and thinner as the air brightens and the trees draw away from our path. "But on the second night, I would have accepted your advances."

My entire body flushes as I exhale, reaching up to ruffle my hair. It smells amazing, this floral bouquet with a myriad of unfamiliar but gentle scents. I can't seem to stop touching it. *Between Avril's galactic hair ticks and Abraxas' foamy flowers, I know which one I'd pick everytime.*

"You would've? Really?" I give him a look that he ignores, purring and slashing his tail. He pushes up to walk on two feet, sheathing the claws at his knuckles. "Somehow, I don't believe that."

"No?" he asks, pausing again to stare at me. His eyes narrow in amusement. "You defended me against the slavers. You were badly hurt in the attempt. I have never seen a female do such a thing for a male that she does not already know well."

"You came for me," I counter, because I just sort of assumed that's what happened. "You ... didn't come for me?" I correct, and he laughs, stretching and then refolding his wings. He snatches a piece of fruit from a tree and offers it down to me. It has dark green flesh, and it feels like wet velvet. Smells a bit like passion fruit. "And is this a fruit I can actually eat?"

"Eat." He tilts my hand toward my mouth, waiting for me to take a bite before he responds to my other questions. The translators we're both using now are ... impeccable. I can understand every single fucking thing he's saying to me.

I smile at that. Whether he came for me or not, he killed the Tusk Men and saved my ass. His motive isn't important. Oh, and the fruit I'm still eating? It tastes like strawberry-lemonade, and it's juicy as hell. It's a win for me.

"Of course I came for you. I left the den to hunt, and you ran away. Not once but many times."

"The last time I disappeared, that's not on me. That was fucking Rurik."

Abraxas snorts at that, prowling forward and then parting some branches.

There's the sea.

There's that strange sapphire water foaming across black sand. Vents crack the earth more frequently here, releasing steam and translucent purple gas into the atmosphere. Abraxas pulses in time with the heat as he stalks around one, and I follow.

"I will *eat* that Vestalis," he repeats as we walk together, and I think about all the things he's saying. No matter what happens—getting caught by Tusk Guys, getting caught by Tusk Guys again, getting caught by the Vestalis—Abraxas is there to follow.

"You wouldn't like the taste," I promise him, and he gives me a dark look in response.

"Mm. I will suffer through it to see him dead." Abraxas gives me a disdainful look over his shoulder. "And I do not believe the Vestalis weapon would penetrate Jungryuk's atmosphere." He pauses near one of the vents and peers in. "I believe the attack would be deflected."

I have no idea if he's just making shit up or if he really is some wise goddamn sage with all the answers.

"The den is around here?" I ask and he chuffs (his version of an alien dragon *yep*), leading me back into the woods. We pause below a single round spaceship pod stuck between the large trunks of two massive trees. It floats up there, the trunks partially grown through the metal on either side. "This?"

Abraxas picks me up and then claws his way up one of the trees, slipping into an entrance on the underside of the ship. The interior is dim with the curtains closed, and the floor is covered by a nest of plush furs. I drop to my knees in the softness and close my eyes. When I do, all I can see and smell and feel is Abraxas. *Musk. Male. Mate. Safety. Mine.*

I open my eyes to take it all in.

"This is where I will deliver our child," he tells me, inclining his noble head. "So long as you believe I have

fulfilled my duties as your mate.” There’s a bit of a cocky smirk on his mouth, a little flash of white teeth.

Arrogant dick. As if he doesn’t know how pretty this place is.

There are vines woven through the cracks in the windows, twisted and crisscrossed over the walls until all the metal is covered in a living green pattern. Massive purple flowers bloom from these vines, glowing softly and perfuming the air with the powdery, romantic scent of violets. The hole in the floor is cordoned off by a high-backed white bench that’s been infiltrated by orange flowers, and the curtains themselves are made of blossom-flecked moss.

It’s peaceful, too. When I close my eyes, I can hear the softness of the not-so-distant sea, the whisper of the wind in the leaves, and birdsong. That’s it. There’s nothing else. There’s nobody else.

“Yes,” I tell him, opening my eyes and sitting back on my haunches. There’s a fluffed corner of the room that I think is supposed to be the bed. Not that it matters since the entire den is blanketed by pelts. “This is perfect.”

I should probably ask myself if it’s reasonable for me to grant this request. Will we even live that long? Will Rurik’s parents nuke this place? Will Hyt and Rurik agree to having the baby here? But somehow, I don’t think any of those things will be a problem.

Once I’m queen, I can do whatever I want. Literal queen of the universe. I mean that’s ... that’s a dumb-dumb alien romance plot. Stupid as hell. Unrealistic. Random. Abducted by aliens. I should’ve by all rights slept in that day with how tired I was. And then none of this would’ve happened, and I wouldn’t be standing here right now.

Abraxas stalks over to the nest, turning in a circle several times and kicking his legs to re-fluff the cushions. He settles down in his dragon pose, lounging on his side and waiting patiently for me to join him.

When I do, he uses his tail to push me to my knees so that we’re face-to-face.

Our gazes meet.

The truth bubbles up between us, fizzing and popping in the silent air. Abraxas reaches back with his tail and flicks the curtains apart, allowing in a small glimmer of that painful Jungryuk sunshine. Additional details emerge, highlighting a room that's both natural and unnatural, art and coincidence.

Red silk cloth covers the ceiling, pinned in places with black thorns as big as my forearm. Colorful mushrooms grow upside-down from it, absorbing the exterior light until they glow as brightly as lanterns. Some are red, others white, a few are purple. There's no way they grew by accident. Abraxas collected and cultivated them; he planned this.

"How did you find this place?" I ask him, because while he decorated and designed the interior, there's no way that he put this ship all the way up in the trees like this.

"Exploring. Searching. Wandering." He tilts his head at me because while he knows I'm stalling for time, he also wants to share the secrets of his world with me. "I began this den long before I ever met you, and then I stopped working on it when it seemed I may not ever find a mate."

The tip of his tail strokes my cheek gently, the sunlight making his dark scales glisten like they're wet.

When I don't say anything, he continues speaking.

"After I met you, I returned here and began to add flourishes that I knew you would like. It is important for a female to give birth in a safe and beautiful space."

"But what if the baby is a Vestalis male?" My words are reverent, hushed, in honor and respect of such a handsome den. It looks like something out of a storybook, too fantastical to be real.

"I do not understand," he responds, leaning in even closer to me. He huffs, and his warm breath stirs my hair. "What if? A useless question."

I look down at my hands, fingers twisting together in an effort to expend some of my nervous energy.

“You won’t care if the baby is a Vestalis male. That’s what I’m asking, I guess. You built this den, designed this nest, and ...” I turn my face back up to his, and it all comes tumbling out. Weeks of missing Abraxas, of having my life story rewritten over and over again. So far as I can tell, it’s been twenty days since I was stolen from Abraxas by Rurik. Twenty ... days-ish. In terms of Earth days, I think that’d be about *forty* days. Since I left Earth initially, it’s been more than two months. “You would still want me to have a baby that isn’t yours in the den that you built?”

He *laughs* at me.

It’s the low, rolling notes of a nightmare, that laugh. With his massive mouth parted, all of those teeth shimmering in the light, his purple marks flaring with heat. But it’s not meant to be a mockery or a chastisement. No, Abraxas is amused by me. He uses his tail to capture my chin, so that he can peer deeply into my eyes.

“You are *my* mate. Any child you have is *my* child. I do not care what it looks like.”

I reach up to push his tail away and end up curling my hand around it instead. He doesn’t bother to flatten his spikes, and somehow they don’t hurt me anyway. They’re not sharp, and the venom that sometimes oozes out of them makes me tingle in a pleasant way, like Hyt’s jellyfish hair. I squeeze his tail even more tightly in my fingers, gearing up for a necessary but very painful conversation.

“You said you brought me to the hot springs to talk ...” My voice gets hoarse and tapers off. I release my mate’s tail and then use both palms to push my hair back from my face. “I can only assume you wanted to talk about Rurik and Hyt?”

Abraxas crosses his front legs together the way a dog might cross its paws.

“I can smell your fear and anxiety, female. It is my job as your mate to dispel those emotions.”

I touch my fingers to my lashes, realizing that I’ve got wet cheeks again. I stare down at the jiggling droplets on my

fingertips before Abraxas flicks his tongue out to clean them off.

“I love you.” This time, my words are strong. I lift my eyes to his again, and the intensity in his expression steals my breath away. I only survived being parted from him for so long because of Rurik, because of Hyt. And all the while, they were both working feverishly to make sure that we were reunited. “I love you, and I would’ve been happy living here as a couple. Just me and you. That was enough.”

“You did not ask for a World Eater to eat your blood; you did not ask for a World Eater to steal you from our den.” Abraxas leans in toward me, shadows blurring the air around him, fuzzing the harshness of his beastly outline. “I am at fault for allowing another male to steal my mate.” His scales bristle like fur, the spiky mane on his head and shoulders rising like the hackles of an angry jungle cat.

I can see that he isn’t just trying to make me feel better: he truly believes he’s at fault here.

“Rurik ... I can’t blame him for wanting to live,” I whisper, thinking back to the moment of my kidnapping. Could he have handled it better? Maybe. But knowing what I know now about his parents? He was faced with trying to separate me from an angry Aspis, faced with starvation, faced with the ruthless king and queen of the Noctuida. I don’t hold what he did against him. “Or for wanting his mate. I also can’t blame you for hating him.”

“I do not hate him: I simply want to eat him.” Abraxas’ response is very calm, at odds with the agitated swish of his tail across the furs. I notice that the claws in his knuckles have unsheathed themselves, glinting in the light. “But here we are, and there is nothing that can be changed. I told you that we will have each other, and we will have our child.” He gestures with his tail the way a person might with their hand, dismissing the complicated nature of our predicament. “And the Sucker Tail? He saved your life when I failed to do so. What more is there to remark on?”

I push up on my knees, reaching out to snatch both of Abraxas' horns in my hands.

"I don't want to let them go. Even if we didn't all need each other because, you know, semantics. I still want them. You're my mate; I want to decide everything together. What should I do? What do *you* want me to do?"

"This is why we needed to talk," he says with a tired sigh, his breath perfumed with embers and smoke. "Too many words. So many words." With a groan, he wraps me in his tail and drags me up against him, adjusting his body so that he's sitting up against the wall and *hugging* me.

I love it, wrapped in the arms of a forest beast.

"I'm sorry. I know I talk too much, but I've been trying."

"It is not that you talk too much, but that I have told you all you need to know without words." I can't see Abraxas' face, but I can feel the warmth in his body, the comforting press of my nakedness against the sticky bioluminescent marks on his chest and belly. He's holding me, cuddling me, showing me the birthing den. He isn't angry. He hasn't asked me to give up the other men in my life. He's confident and assured of his place in my heart.

He's already answered my question a million times over: *if you want those males, you can have them.*

"Thank you," I breathe out, burrowing even more deeply into his embrace. "You have no idea how many gifts you've given me."

He laughs then, and I swear, the room dims with shadows. *Oh, he just closed the curtains. Makes sense.* Still, the way the Night Feasters tremble at his approach, this man truly is an apex predator. Even the dark is afraid of him. Above our heads, the mushrooms glow. On the walls, the purple flowers glimmer.

"But," he says, frustration thick in his voice, "we *will* have a girl child. My DNA will persevere. You must shirk your fears and exist in the moment. This is a gift that I will never stop trying to bestow upon you."

I adjust myself and so does he, bringing our faces together. I kiss the invisible seam of his mouth, running my tongue along it until he splits his face in half. Dragon alien tongue down my throat, slicking across my palate, my teeth, my lips.

He puts me on my back, his huge body a blanket of shadow and heat over the top of me. I look up at the mushroom lanterns and sigh, all of the tension of the last several weeks leaving me with my next exhale.

Abraxas braces himself with his wing-hands, using his other set to spread my thighs. I expect him to go down on me, but instead, he turns his head and licks my thigh instead. It's his *horn* that he uses to pleasure my pussy with, rubbing the hard, ebony length against my slick folds. Pheromones smear all over my cunt, my ass, my inner thighs.

Definitely don't expect him to slip his horn inside of me. I startle slightly at the hard, cool length of it, reaching my hands automatically down to press against the spikes on the top of his head.

"What are you ...?" I don't finish my question. He's laughing at me again, using his head to gently slip his horn halfway into me before he pulls out again. Something strange happens when he pushes it into me, like the glowing marks inside my channel are ... I don't know, tangling around it? I can feel a tug deep inside of me, similar to what happens when we lock together after orgasm. Only, it's not quite the same. "This isn't going ... I won't get ... *stabbed*." This last word comes out as a needy exhale.

It's like being fucked with a glass dildo. I never thought I'd like something like that, but Jane wanted to try one and insisted I take one home and try it, too, and ... yeah, this is like that. Except that it's attached to an alien's head. Except that there are pheromone swirls all over this dildo. Except that ... *holy fucking fuck*.

I arch my back, digging my fingers into the furs, panting. Panting. Panting. *Screaming*. It breaks out of me, and I don't bother to hold it back. Out here, I can be as loud as I want. I

writhe and thrash, but Abraxas pins me down. His horn goes in, out, in, out, in ... Climax.

I'm coming on that hard length, my body clutching violently around it, trying to pull it even more deeply into me. When he slips it out, I'm still shuddering and gasping, not quite finished riding the wave of pleasure that my mate set me on.

I catch sight of his horn, sticky with his pheromones and my wild release. Abraxas' whiplike tongue slips out of his mouth and wraps that horn, pumping up and down on it, licking and tasting the mixture of his bioluminescence and my nectar. He draws his tongue back in, swallows with an allover shudder, and then comes down hard on top of me.

I'm bitten fiercely in the shoulder as he grinds his much larger form against mine. I am sorely disappointed when he releases me. The feel of his sharp teeth in my skin, locking me in place while he mates me. It's one of my favorite things in the whole of the Noct.

"*Stabbed?*" he murmurs, scrambling the translator in my head a bit. I see we're about to lose the ability to communicate with words. "*No. Mate marks ... protect.*" He grins big at me, a happy monster in the dark. "*For use ... when Aspis females ... no want rods.*" He rumbles with more laughter. "*Always ... you ... want rods.*"

I understand ... like fifty-percent of that.

I'm turned onto my knees, ass in the air, and I know I'm about to get the mating rod again.

Hell yes.

I wiggle to entice him, and he covers me with his body, biting my shoulder again. I groan and throw my head back, pushing my ass against his groin, so I can feel both cocks straining for me. I slick myself against his pleasure rod first, his curved body casting creepy shadows all over the walls. *Twisted spine, wild tail, spikes, horns, gaping maw latched to my skin.* I smell blood, but he licks it away and heals it as quickly as he draws it out of me.

Wing-hands keep him upright while his other set captures my breasts in long, strong fingers. He kneads the tender weights without hurting them, somehow managing this sweet, tender balance between lovemaking and breeding. *Oh Stars.* Abraxas launches his hips against me, impaling me on his mating rod. His pleasure rod strokes my rear opening, slipping between my cheeks with each hectic, manic thrust.

The sounds I make are high-pitched and keen, eager. I would never in a billion years let anyone else hear me make them. *Except for Rurik and Hyt.* I think that, and then I don't think about them again at all. Not because I love them any less, but because ... I love them all the same. When I'm with one guy, he becomes my everything.

I can only imagine what it's going to be like when I'm with all three of them at once.

My body works just as hard as Abraxas', skin slick with sweat, my pelvis rolling back to match his movements. His balls, tight and hot and full of seed, slap me with each thrust, adding more pheromone embers to the fire of an arousal that's already roaring, burning me up on the inside, catching on every insecurity or fear I have and setting them to ash.

His pleasure rod orgasms first, spurting searing purple cum onto my back, drenching me in alien fluids that drip down my ass cheeks, steamy and viscous on my rib cage. Abraxas rubs his right hand through it, sliding slippery fingers over my nipples and using his seed as lube to stroke my pink diamond points.

A snarl rips through my lover that snaps my translator in half. I know he's talking to me, but it doesn't come through. I do what he asked of me, and I try to read his body language and his intent.

"Come for me, tiny female." The words aren't spoken, but I feel them. I stop moving. I let myself go limp in his arms. I savor the rough pump and stroke of his mating rod, the full tight feeling in my belly as he subsumes all of the available space inside of me. I am liquid and heavy in his hands, and my

orgasm is much the same. It's bone-deep, like thunder rumbling through my blood.

I don't scream this time. I groan, and sigh, and shudder, eyes rolling back into my head. Abraxas throws his own head back, and I catch sight of his shadow, his spine twisted backwards like an unnatural entity. He howls like a beast, the sound ricocheting wildly inside the den, snapping the forest to life outside of it. Other things, alien things, they howl back, and then he comes, cock swelling, knotting inside of me as I'm pumped with voluminous, fertile seed.

Abraxas releases me, and my cheek plunges into the furs, resting there with his hands on my hips. I might be drooling, but only a little.

"You ... good ... tight ... hot ... fuck." He laughs at me again, waiting out our knotting period before he switches back to his pleasure rod. *"For ... safety,"* he tells me, still laughing, and then he fucks my placid, happy body into the nest. Blood vessels tie between us. Fluids are traded. Both me and the monster inside of me, we sigh happily together. United once again. As it should be.

Abraxas makes good on his promise, as he always does.

For the remainder of that night, I forget all about World Eaters, Sucker Tails, and human beings.

It is me, and it is him.

I fall asleep feeling small and loved and cared for, but also properly fucked.

Yeah, it's a good night to be Eve Wakefield.



We wake in the birthing den, and Abraxas leaves me with fruit to eat while he hunts. He brings back a couple of those birds with the curled tails, and then shows me how to process the meat. If I'm going to eat it, I should be able to prepare it.

"I did mention I used to be a caterer, right?" I tell him as I wonder how I might get around to doing some cooking out here. What about wild herbs or something? I bet there are options.

Abraxas checks the roof to ensure there's enough ventilation there to start a fire, and then squats down in front of me. With a single scaled hand, he reaches out and taps the translator under my ear. *One, two, three.* He does the same thing to himself, and then he *snarls* at me just before he mounts me again.

We leave our translators off for the rest of the day. And the one after that. And the one after *that*.

On our fifth day in the woods, Abraxas is standing beneath a hive of bee-ish things. Just ish. Because ... the creatures buzzing around are terrifying alien wasp monsters. But, awesome fact, they *do* produce a substance that tastes ever so vaguely of honey. Twice as sweet though.

"We don't need-need that stuff," I tell him, but I think he likes the challenge of it. Or maybe, really, he just wants to show off for me. I find his feats impressive, so ... you know what? If he wants to fuck around with two dozen cat-sized wasps, that's his problem.

Abraxas' grin fades as he turns his head in a different direction, cocking it to one side as his tail lashes in annoyance. He curses in his own language, and the translator fails to pick the words up. Still turned off. But that growl, it leaves goose bumps on my skin.

"He's here, isn't he?" I whisper just before I sense a shift in the world's atmosphere. Just like with Abraxas, I know that Rurik has arrived on Jungryuk.

My dragon mate doesn't bother to respond, but he does pick me up, and he hauls ass like his tail is on fire. *Just as he promised, returning me to my world eating husband even if he'd rather not.* Abraxas takes me right back to Hyt's house, like it's no big deal for him to navigate the wildness of this place the way he does.

As always, I smell Rurik before I see him.

Cardamom and honey alight on my tongue, edged with cinnamon, dashed with a hint of something spicy.

The prince strides out of the woods and into the clearing as Abraxas sets me down and I start running, leaping onto Rurik and closing my eyes as his arms tighten around me. The creak of his stiff gloves, the exhale of his whispering breath, his coremata, pulsing against my fingertips when I sneak them under his jacket. He's wearing a white one with red buttons, I think. Didn't really stop to look.

I tap beneath my ear to restart my translator.

"Princess." Rurik's hand cradles my head as he pulls back to look at me, antennae swinging forward to slide over my hair, dusting me with pheromones. I exhale in relief as our gazes meet, and I'm struck by the tenderness in his. *Finally, we are reunited. I am sorry I took so long. I am sorry about so many things.*

My hand is trembling as I raise it to his cheek, brushing fingertips down the softness of his porcelain skin.

You have nothing to be sorry for, my love, I tell him without words, and then I bury my head in the hollow of his throat and he holds me like we're alone in the universe. If only. We melt

into each other and time stops; I find myself lost in Rurik's heartbeat, in his smell, in his touch.

My coremata, mine. I pet and stroke them until he gasps, and those four unruly peacock feathers unfurl from beneath his jacket. When I move to look into my mate's eyes, he's blushing, lips parted, the endlessness of his gaze capturing me once again.

You are a naughty princess, in need of a spanking.

That's what he uses our mystical soulmate connection to tell me, that I'm a bad girl. I grin, and he smiles back, holding me up with my ass in one hand. With the other, he shoves at his coremata, trying to contain them. Too late. They're proud and fluffy around him, these red-haired tentacles that poison the air with pheromones so thick they coat my skin like a warm fog.

Wow. Fuck. No wonder Avril is jealous of me and Rurik, of

Connor and Brot, emerging from the trees and pausing as if to give us space. Doesn't stop Connor from throwing out a thumbs-up and giving me a weird wink.

"You brought them," I blurt before something more profound can come out. What I want to say is *holy shit, I fucking missed you, Rurik*. Talking to him through Zero was not the same. I haven't seen the prince in person since he broke Hyt's glass door and tore me off the officer's dick.

"I didn't want to risk their deaths," Rurik admits, and I notice then that his forehead is wet, that his pale pink mouth is nearly gray. He needs blood, doesn't he? *Damn it, Eve*. But there's nothing I could've done to get to him sooner. It just took him this long to get here.

"Are you thirsty?" I whisper, reaching up a hand to snag one of his feelers. I give it a quick rub, aware that there's so much more I need to be doing than gazing into his eyes. Can't help myself. "Hungry, whatever." I tilt my head to the side, baring my neck.

Rurik draws his lips back in a vampire's scowl, blood lace flashing in his demon eyes.

“I ... once I feed from you, I will be lost for a time. The devouring must wait.”

The devouring. Oh shit.

There's movement behind me, and it draws Rurik's frown as easily as it draws his attention. He sets me down and allows me to turn of my own accord.

Hyt.

He's waiting on the left. Abraxas is on the right. Rurik is right behind me. I have all three males within two feet of me, at the same time.

I can't breathe.

The universe expands and then shrinks.

Reality shifts.

They're here. I'm here. My friends are here. All of us on Jungryuk, just like I've always wanted. I almost cry again, but I throw my arm across my eyes to stop the tears. This is the best thing that's ever happened to me. No joke. This is peak life goals, being surrounded by so many friendly faces.

Rurik places a gentle hand on my shoulder, like he's trying to guide me to the other two males in attendance. He is so beyond selfless that sometimes I want to scream. Sometimes I want to weep. Mostly, I love him so deeply that I know our Vestalis mate bond is nothing more than an extra flourish to what we have. The reasons I like Rurik have everything to do with his actions and little to do with the magic between us. It's a nice bonus is all, that eternal soulmate stuff.

I glance over at Abraxas, sitting patiently on his haunches, his mouth invisible on his dark face. His eyes take it all in, but his gaze is just for me. I am the only thing that matters, the center of his world. He brought me here for me; he stays here because of me. He licks his shoulder with disdain, like a cat. Everything about his posture says the other men aren't a problem, that he isn't intimidated by them whatsoever.

My attention falls to Hyt next. His breath is coming in slow, shallow pants, all nine tails curled at the tips in agitation. *He*

missed me. I left him. He's wondering if I'm coming back. My own heart pounds the same nervous rhythm as his breath. Two irises meet six. Human to Falopex. Bride to groom. Newlywed to newlywed. I want desperately to give him the goddamn pearl, to take the embryo, to share everything with one another.

“Are you okay, Earthling?” Hyt asks me, genuinely concerned. His tentacles slide over me, around my ankles, my waist, my left wrist. Haven't seen him in five days either which is also weird. I miss him. I miss Abraxas. I miss Rurik. The only solution to that is ... this. All of us. Together.

Oh my.

This is a lot to unpack.

I am facing a pivotal moment in my existence, the launching point from which I'll live the rest of my life. Like a metal ball in an old-fashioned pinball machine, bouncing from one alien dude to the next.

The guys and I, we could really use some alone time. No, not use. We desperately *need* alone time. It's essential. It's immediate. There's a frantic heat in me that *craves*, that hungers, that demands that I pull them all close and keep them there. I promise myself that after today ... we won't have to spend any time apart.

The throne. The throne is looming. The fucking throne.

“We should talk,” I say, just before I notice Jane waiting at the top of the wooden stairs, Avril and Kayla and Zero behind her, Captain Kidd off to one side. Connor. Brot. There are a lot of other people here, aren't there? Shit. I scrape my teeth across my lip. It feels like everyone here is waiting for me to say something, but ... I'm naked. There are too many other people around. I'm drowning under the heavy blanket of emotional intimacy. I panic. “About our predicament,” I correct, and Hyt lifts a fin-brow at me.

“Right. Our predicament, eh?” he tsks and shakes his head as Rurik sighs deeply, putting an arm around my waist. I'm nude, so I know he can see his markings laced into my back.

Abraxas made certain to lick off every last swipe of alien sunblock. He said it tasted like carrion. Good to know.

“I believe that would be a prudent first discussion. Have you received my parents’ broadcast?” Rurik asks dryly, as if he hopes we haven’t yet, like maybe it’s the sort of news that goes down easier if someone can prepare you for it first. Yay. Can’t wait to find out what this is about.

“Not yet,” Hyt replies, flicking his hat up. His companion chirps in greeting and swirls bubbles around the four of us. *He approves of our poly family, eh?* I appreciate his support. “It wasn’t enough for them to threaten Yaoh? The whole of the Noct is going nuts over that already.”

“You will quite like the broadcast then.” Rurik’s voice is thick with sarcasm, his laugh broken and strained. What the hell happened while I was in the jungle with Abraxas? The prince holds out a hand to indicate that Hyt should walk first. “Show us the way, Officer.”

Hyt turns and sashays up the stairs in a way that just *has* to be purposeful. His ass is bare today, a short loincloth in the front to cover his dick. He sways his tails and lets him drift back to stroke over me, touching my chin or my neck or my inner thigh with oiled suckers.

“Find a black hole and shoot him in?” I ask Rurik who’s ascending the stairs beside me.

“Worse. A wormhole that makes him rethink the meaning of *four-dimensional*.” I have no idea what that means, but I decide I don’t want to. Sounds ... space-y to me. “I take it you are feeling better?”

His polite way of asking if I had fun screwing Abraxas.

“I feel fantastic, thanks,” I tell him, turning and pressing my mouth to his.

Rurik stops ascending the stairs and grabs me by the hips, sliding his wings over us so that we’re cloaked in white. The blood lace in the tip of his tongue unfurls into my own, capturing my mouth and throat, streaming into my veins.

I know you are nervous, but you needn't be. I am infinitely yours, Eve. This is simply our tragic fate.

I let him feel everything I'm feeling, and we end up pressed close together, standing still in the middle of the stairs. I can sense Abraxas just a few steps down, slithering up the stairs like ink. I can *see* Hyt staring at us from the landing.

This might be harder than I thought, having all three of these males in my life.

"Finally," Jane says loudly, slipping past Hyt to stare down at me. "You're here after *five days* of leaving me alone. I'm not particularly happy with you today, Eve Wakefield."

I just gape at her, coming up the last few stairs, so that my naked ass is facing off against her clothed one. I guess I should just get used to this with Abraxas around.

"I'd argue with you, but I really, really want some fucking clothes." I blush as I move past Jane in the direction of Hyt's bedroom. He follows me in, and the door swishes shut automatically behind him. "Please tell me you have clothes for me here," I groan, sitting down hard on the edge of his bed.

"It's your lucky day. I rescued four more humans from those fucking twins, *and* found you a brand-new stash of underwear."

I perk up at that.

I know I could have blood lace panties or something, but every now and again, can't an Earth girl just crave cotton?

"Bless you," I murmur prettily when Hyt presses the plastic package into my hands with a tentacle. I snatch the tip of it as he tries to turn away.

"Don't you want clothes?" he asks me, digging around in a duffel bag with several of his other tentacles.

"Is this preventing you from grabbing them?" I ask, slicking a thumb on the underside of his suction cup. Hyt hisses and moves closer to me, putting a knee on the mattress beside my right thigh. He hasn't stopped digging through the bag, so my

guess is *no*. “Or are you just trying to deflect me because you think you might fuck me if you don’t?”

He blinks at me and then leans down, the brim of his hat sliding over my hair.

“Can I?” he asks, and there’s a sense of melancholy and loss in those two words that I didn’t expect. “I want to, but maybe I shouldn’t ...?” Hyt trails off with a sigh, small bubbles escaping his lips. I reach up and put my hands on either side of his face.

There’s a part of me that will always mourn the loss of the things that might’ve been.

I might’ve lived on Earth and run a successful business, bought a house, married a human dude, had some human kids. Enjoyed my family, immediate and extended, all of my friends. Helped Jane ditch her job as Tabbi Kat’s slave so she might work for a real artist, someone who actually writes their own music. Been normal. Been safe. Kept it easy.

I might’ve lived with Abraxas on Jungryuk, experienced a sort of extinct and impossible sense of freedom. No rules. No bills. No social obligations. Just me, and my lover, and a beautiful, nearly untouched planet. Well-fed, well-fucked, with little else to do but raise our daughter. Presented her to the other Aspis. Met his mother. Watched him perform for me in the vents as he drew the planet’s innate power into his veins.

I might’ve lived with Rurik and seen the stars, traveled to distant planets, lounged on Dome to watch giant moths and stroke two-headed cats. He could’ve read me Vestalis romance novels in his crisp, clear voice, wined and dined and loved me all on his own. I’d have spent hours everyday just looking into his eyes, letting him hold me, feeling that impossible sense of connection across time and space. Draped myself over chaise lounges dressed in blood lace.

I might’ve lived here, with Hyt. Helped him rescue humans and send them home. Dug up old Cartian tech to play with. Traveled to Yaoh to visit his family. Went to the shooting range. Went to a cantina in an underwater cave to play alien darts. Rode a bike across the waves or through the woods.

Spent every night watching movies or alien porn before we fucked each other well into the early morning hours. Been his wife, the only one he'd ever have or want or need.

So, yes, there's a part of me that's as mournful as he is. But there's also a part of me that feels strangely hopeful. I've never been an overly optimistic person, but somehow I feel like I won't just get one of those things, but pieces of all four, and that maybe this is better than any one of those lives might've been on its own.

"Nothing has changed," I tell him, voice tight. "Well. Everything *has* changed, but not this. Not us. You and I are ... this is the thing I can't lose. Hyt, I need you as much as I did in the Cosmic Chapel." I pause and inhale sharply, drawing in the gentlest taste of his pheromones. Unlike with Abraxas or Rurik, it's a conscious act for Hyt to display himself like that. I continue to coax that single sucker, hoping for a bright luminescent bubble to escape. "No, *more* than I did in the Cosmic Chapel. More than I did when I found you in the market. More than in the brothel."

His eyes slide shut, heavy lids over triple irises. His tentacles sweep in around me, a red t-shirt bra dangling randomly off the end of one. He covers me with his tails, putting his other knee on the bed so that he's straddling my thighs. I can't help but peek at his loincloth, at the slight but growing bulge underneath.

"Tell me what you talked about with Abraxas," he says, adjusting his body, so that his naked thighs rub on my naked thighs, so that I can feel his taut little ass teasing me with the motion. Hyt crosses his arms, not his tentacles which, of course, means strict business. "What's his opinion on all this?"

"Do you care?" I ask, cocking a brow as Hyt removes his hat with a tentacle and then perches it on my head instead. It's a red one today, to match the bra he found for me, and the fresh panties inside their plastic bag. "If he told me I couldn't have you, what would you do?"

Hyt frowns at me, flattening his fox ears against his skull. His skin is still a liar's blue, but I want to see it blush pink

with some impossible truths.

“I honestly don’t give a fuck what Abraxas or Rurik want,” he says, and he flushes that rosy color all over. “I only care what you and I want. You know that I want you. All I need is to hear you say it back, and that’s that. End of discussion.”

Tears prick, but Hyt presses two slick suction cups near my tear ducts to catch them.

“Then that’s it. End of discussion. I fucking want you, Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt.” I give him a look. “You’re carrying my child. What sort of monster would leave a pregnant Falopex all alone?”

He grins at me and taps at his hat, making the brim fall across my eyes. I shove it out of my face to offer up a faux-glare back at him.

“I do fully expect you to take that deep, hard fuck you so desperately want when it’s time for me to impregnate you with our baby.” He flicks his hard lower stomach muscles and lifts a fin-brow, his jellyfish hair loose and dry around his face. “Still, I might not give a shit about Abraxas’ opinion, but I do want to know what I’m walking into when we leave this room.”

I smile at that, leaning back on the bed and gasping as Hyt comes with me, palms on either side of my head, his mostly naked body undulating cruelly against mine. I (reluctantly) drop the panties to the mattress and wrap my arms around him.

“He said I could keep you, that if all I needed to be happy was a few extra males, then he’d oblige me.” I pause as Hyt snorts in amusement. “Although he did promise that were this ever to happen again, he’s eating the next guy.”

“Good to know that I sneaked in under the radar,” Hyt says dryly, kissing my cheek and then licking my lower lip with his purple tongue. He reaches between us to push aside his loincloth. Definite bonus to being naked all the time with Abraxas: very easy access. “And with that, I’m in agreement. I’ll let you keep him. I’ll reluctantly let you keep the Vestalis prince.” Another pause as Hyt adjusts himself, positioning the

head of his cock against my opening. I can feel his mating tentacles stroking and teasing my folds, dampening and slicking my slit. “But I won’t give Abraxas a chance to eat Guy Four; I’ll just shoot him.”

“Lovely,” I murmur, and then he’s thrusting into me and kissing me at the same time.

For a small while there, we’re lost in each other.

And then it’s right back to the business of saving the entire known universe from a galactic millipede and her oversized moth man husband.

How exciting.



“It takes forty Earth minutes to slip on some sweatpants and a t-shirt?” Jane asks, giving me a wry once-over. She sighs and then points at my chest. Yes, my nipples are hard and showing through the white fabric. It’s unavoidable. I’m also aware that the image depicted on the shirt shows a silver spaceship abducting several humans and a cow off a farm.

“Hyt has a strange sense of humor,” I offer with a shrug as he chuckles and slips past me to address the others in the room.

“Can we offer anyone a drink?” he says magnanimously, thumbs tucked under his belt, red cowboy hat back in place. He’s got his see-through boots on, too, filled nearly to the knee with water to keep his gills moist. My eyes find Abraxas first, curled up on a weirdly familiar looking sofa. He’s far too large for the cream-colored modular monstrosity. He blinks slowly at me, horns pulsing with violet light. The rest of the people in the room give him a wide berth.

Except ... for Rurik. He sits on the end of the same couch, head in his gloved hand, and I feel stupid-guilty for leaving him out here when he needs to eat. I didn’t mean to get all

twisted up in Hyt. This complicated relationship of ours is going to take some getting used to.

“I’ll take a stiff drink,” Kayla offers up, lounging in a hammock that’s secured to two trees that grow straight through the back half of the living room. “Just not as many *stiff* ones as Eve has.” She chuckles, and Zero snorts in amusement, arms crossed, expression thoughtful.

“Same for me,” I tell Hyt, blinking coquettishly. “But make it a double.”

“Make mine a double-double,” Avril says, looking small and delicate in a massive armchair. Like, what the fuck creature was that chair even made for? It’d fit someone as large as Rurik’s dad. “Or is that just called a quadruple? Is that even a thing?”

I grab Jane’s hand in mine and lead her through the living room, so that I can sit on Rurik’s lap, and she can take the spot next to us. She’s traveled with Abraxas long enough that she doesn’t seem to be afraid of him. My bestie is fearless—she worked with Tabbi Kat for years, remember? That takes guts and an iron will.

“Enough alcohol to get me drunk, please.” Jane lifts up a finger as we both pause in front of the couch, equally perplexed as we turn to stare at each other. “Is this ... it can’t be, can it?” she whispers, but it might be. It could be. This couch ...

“I’ll have what she’s having,” Connor says, gesturing loosely at Avril. I notice Brot stiffen up beside him. I also notice that maybe Brot’s gotten a little more muscular since I last saw him. Is his body adjusting to be attractive to Connor? According to Rurik, that’s what happens to the Vestalis. Only ... my man looks the same as he did the first time I saw him. Make of that what you will.

“Is something the matter, my princess?” Rurik asks, peering at me as I stand in front of him with my best friend’s hand clutched in my own.

“This couch ...” I trail off as I look back at it.

“It’s a sofa,” Jane corrects, and I roll my eyes. “There’s a distinct difference between a *couch* and a *sofa*.”

“Either way,” I growl back at her, pointing at the damn thing. She gives me her best *don’t hate me I’m innocent* look, tucking dark hair behind one ear. She recently chopped her waist-length hair to above the shoulder, and I’m still getting used to it. “This is Tabbi Kat’s couch, isn’t it?”

“No,” Jane says seriously, and then she grins because she knows it infuriates me when people split hairs. “It’s Tabbi Kat’s *sofa*.”

I punch her in the arm and she grunts. I notice that Captain Kidd shifts strangely at his post, leaned casually up against the wall with his booted ankles crossed. *Gotta defend your lady, eh pirate?*

“I’ll take an entire bottle,” the captain tells Hyt as my husband sweeps past in the direction of ... the kitchen? Actually, I didn’t get a lot of time to explore this place before. I have no idea where he’s going. To get the alcohol, I presume.

“I’m confused,” Connor begins, scratching at his blue-black hair with a finger and giving me and Jane a curious look. “This is that pop star’s sofa?” He actually uses the word sofa which pleases Jane to no end, and annoys me to the point that I just know I’ll be saying couch permanently to make a point. “How is that even possible?”

“I picked it up in the market,” Hyt says, sauntering back into the room with his tentacles full of cups and bottles. He hands Kidd one of the bottles and then absently goes about pouring the drinks without skipping a beat. “The Collector—the guy who ordered the twins to abduct Tabitha Katherine in the first place—he likes authenticity in his enclosures. Trevor and Taylor not only stole all of you, but also all of Tabbi’s things.”

“Thank the Dead Kings you didn’t offer me her clothes,” I breathe with a sigh of relief, folding myself gently into Rurik’s lap. He accepts me like a gift, wrapping his arms around me, sweeping his antennae over my hair. I cling to him while Jane takes her seat, and I release him only when Hyt passes by to hand over our drinks.

“Nothing for you?” I ask Abraxas, and he grins at me.

Avril and Connor both get caught *staring* at him with equally sallow expressions on their faces, and Brot curls his lips like he’s never been more disturbed by another alien race in his life.

“I will drink your cunt nectar later. So no, female, I do not require any fermented plant water.”

I choke on my first sip, splattering Jane with a fine, smokey whiskey.

She just stares at me.

“You’re as messy and clumsy as ever.” Jane smacks me, and I smack her back. We squabble like sisters sometimes. I credit this odd aspect of our friendship to the va-jay-jay kicking she offered in greeting over lunch our last year of junior high.

Rurik stiffens slightly at Abraxas’ words—he just doesn’t stiffen in the right places—and I lean back to look at him as Jane sighs and uses her shirt to wipe whiskey droplets off her arm. Hyt takes a seat on the *couch* kitty-corner to the one we’re sitting on. I can feel his heat as well as Rurik’s, as well as Abraxas’.

For a brief moment, this is all sort of ... fun.

I point at Rurik.

“For you, I’d recommend a nice, hot Eve Wakefield. Drink her in. Don’t starve. The best of all worlds.”

Rurik offers me the briefest smile on his pouty ash-pink mouth. There’s an edge to it that makes me squirm a bit, and *then* he’s finally getting stiff in the way I want him to.

“In private,” he breathes against my ear. “I cannot guarantee I won’t get carried away and ravage you. It’s been too long. My entire body aches for you, Princess.” He leans back with a long sigh and then snaps his fingers at Hyt. “A tablet, please.”

“Oh yes, *Your Imperial Majesty*,” Hyt purrs back, as insolent as he’s always been. He uses a tentacle to pick up a tablet, passing it into Rurik’s hands and then sticking a suction cup to my shoulder. Abraxas grumbles in amusement, shaking his

massive head slightly as his tail dances along the back of the couch.

“I cannot wait to see you try to swing this little alien harem you’ve got,” Jane says with a chuckle, and I narrow my eyes on her.

“Copulatory plug,” I say loudly, and all eyes snap her direction. I grin as Jane’s face turns a brilliant, crimson red. “You know, for someone so promiscuous, you sure are prudish, too.”

“Wait.” Kayla sits up in the hammock and swings her legs over the edge, green eyes flicking to Captain Kidd before returning, with delight, to Jane. “You guys are a couple? Oh my Dead Kings, that’s so cute.”

“We’re not a couple,” Jane huffs indignantly, sweeping her hands down the front of her black breeches. She’s dressed like a pirate, too, but missing that butter-yellow hat she had on before. “What happened between us was entirely accidental.”

“One does not receive a copulatory plug from a Yaena by accident,” Zero chimes in, tapping her fingers absently against her arm as her choker throbs in time with Rurik’s heartbeat. She gives the Captain’s sputtering face a careful inspection. “You’re in love with the human then?”

“She begged for it,” Kidd growls as Hyt snorts into his drink. Kidd’s dark eyes whip over to his bestie. “Well, she did. You’ve probably noticed by now that human vaginas are like black holes. They suck and squeeze and suction. I can see why they’re so often traded as mates.”

Jane turns and throws her drink at him, the glass hitting the wall beside him and shattering to a million pieces. Uh-oh. Her face is flaming, but not with embarrassment—with *rage*.

“Oh my God, I love this,” Connor murmurs into his drink, pushing his glasses up his nose with two fingers. Only ... he doesn’t have glasses anymore because the Vestalis are geniuses. He drops his hand back down to rub Brot’s thigh. “Any drama that isn’t my drama is priceless.”

“Don’t be a creep,” Avril tells him, and Brot gives her an imperious look over his shoulder.

“How *dare* you insult a princeling. If you were not so coddled by the Imperial Prince and Princess, I would have you strung up in the punishment hall, so that your skin might be torn from your back in place of the wings you weak little creatures do not have.”

“Weak?” Connor asks, sipping his whiskey and then sitting up to look over at Brot. “You want to sit there and insult my entire species? Not cool, man.”

“What’s *really* not cool,” Jane says, rising to her feet to stare Kidd down. “Is you, talking about human women like so much chattel. Do you think it’s *funny* that human beings are traded like livestock in the Noctuida? What a sick, immature statement to make.”

Kidd grits his teeth, flashing massive canines that could take off a hand in a single snap. He has a tail, too, a big fluffy one that he holds stiff and high behind him like an angry dog.

“Are we in this mess because of me?” he retorts, trying to redirect the conversation. “I’m not the one who fucked the next queen of the Noct, remember?”

“Nice deflection there, Kidd,” Hyt says with a roll of his eyes, using his tails to pour me another drink. He offers the bottle to Jane when he’s done, and she snatches it without a second thought, chugging several mouthfuls.

“What inane dribble,” Rurik breathes, turning his head to the side, so that he can look in Abraxas’ direction. The Aspis seems amused, but not entirely unaffected by the conversation, tail twitching angrily at the tip.

“It has been many years since I have witnessed such a useless and childlike conversation,” Abraxas says, more to Rurik than to me, I think. The two of them share a look that bodes well for our happy little polyamorous future together.

“Jane only reacts with this much passion around guys that she actually likes,” I tell Kidd, as if he deserves any reassurance at all. He’s a total dickhead. But ... he did bring

Jane and Abraxas here at risk to his own life. That tells me all I need to know. Actions, not words.

Jane turns a death glare on me before perching on the edge of the *couch* cushion.

“Do you remember when Tabbi Kat made me fly to Switzerland to oversee her custom sofa order?” Jane points at the cream-colored cushion beneath her butt cheeks. “How I stayed there for *two weeks*, working on finalizing this design before she made me use her private jet to fly it back to the United States?”

“I remember,” I tell her, taking another sip of my drink. “It’s the only reason I knew such an ugly, boring couch from first glance.”

“Well, you know how pissed I was back then. I am *ten* times more pissed off right now.”

Oh. Shit. Yeah, I was right. Jane is in love with Kidd. She wants to run off together and have little space pirate babies. I stifle a grin in my drink, reaching out to offer her a companionable pat on the shoulder.

“There, there, now. I’m sure Captain Kidd is sorry.”

“I’ll bet he is,” Avril offers, finally joining in the conversation. “From what I’ve read, once a Yaena male gives his copulatory plug to a female, he can only get an erection when she’s aroused and within ten or so feet of him.” She gives the captain a look. “If I were you, I’d make more of an effort to please my female.”

“My female?” Kidd breathes, like the idea of making Jane his mate never occurred to him. But it must have. I’m sure they’ve fought over the specifics of their relationship numerous times by now. “Fuck.” He lifts the liquor bottle to his lips and chugs several mouthfuls before dropping it by his side with a tired exhale. “Can we *please* just get around to the Vestalis transmission? I’d love to know if we’re about to be blown to space dust.”

“If I may,” Rurik growls out, his skin moist when I press my fingertips to his cheeks. He needs to eat. It’s why he’s been so

quiet, so still, and I don't like that. I want to see him at full capacity, scowling and acting imperious and taking control of the room. He taps something on the tablet screen, and an image appears on the large piece of glass mounted to the wall of windows across the room. I didn't even notice it until now, since it's entirely transparent.

We find ourselves facing a video of *The Korol*, positioned menacingly above the World Station.

Oh shit.

The entire room falls still and silent.

"The Falopex have taken the Imperial Princess," the queen's voice purrs, clicking and chittering beneath the translator's English words in my ear. *"We are offering amnesty, but only if she is returned unharmed and with great expediency. His Imperial Majesty, in his infinite magnanimousness, will grant you fourteen solar days to deliver the princess before we take action."*

The screen switches to a smaller ship, bone-white and edged with red, shaped like a paper airplane and floating above a very familiar blue and green swirl. Uh-oh.

"Our first warning shot will be directed at Earth."

The image flashes again, revealing another planet, one that's green and yellow and *sapphire*. Jungryuk.

"Our second warning shot will hit Jungryuk."

Another flash, and we're staring down at the World Station and the swirling blue orb that is Hyt's home planet.

"Our last shot will be directed at the World Station and Yaoh. We will not rest until we see justice for the Imperial Court."

A timer appears then, running down seconds—or what I can only guess are seconds—and then a minute ticks by. How long is a solar day again? Was it twice an Earth day? Or half? I can't remember. Something like that.

"Well, fuck," Hyt says, and then he steals a long, lingering look at the drink in my hand. I take a sip for him.

“I have worse news,” Rurik tells us with another sigh. “The Collector attempted to flee my parents’ wrath by leaving Jungryuk; he was apprehended, and I was forced to take immediate action.” Nobody speaks, so my husband continues. “I was able to silence him before he could reveal our deception, but we must execute our backup plan immediately. We will claim slavers have raided the Collector’s compound and taken the princess. It is the only way to save Yaoh and the World Station. To save Earth.”

I notice he doesn’t mention Jungryuk, and my palms begin to sweat.

I have a bad feeling about all of this.

“And we save them by ... returning me to *The Korol*?” I posit, but Rurik simply captures my chin in his gloved fingers and looks into my eyes.

“We save them by taking the throne,” he tells me, his voice as soft as starlight.

Take the throne.

His words stab me in the heart, a physical pain that makes my chest tight. What the fuck am I going to do about that? I swore to him that I’d never let him live the life that his father’s lived, but ... I’m just one person. One human girl. I don’t even know enough about the Noct to make up theories for his rescue let alone plan something and execute it.

Fourteen solar days? However that translates to Earth time, it isn’t a lot. It isn’t *enough*.

“I have been taking control of *The Korol* piece by piece,” Rurik continues, and I feel like he’s mentioned this before, but it didn’t quite hit me the way it’s hitting me now. *My husband, my soulmate, lashed to a throne by his own blood. Trapped in a dark room all alone. Forced to rule the Noctuida just to keep me safe.* “If we can get to the throne room, I will simply *take* the throne. Whether or not my father and mother agree will be an erroneous point of contention.” He waves a gloved hand and then resettles it against my lower back. “However, we cannot respond too quickly to their threats or it will seem that

we have come running with our wings drooped in shame.” He tucks his horned antennae behind his head like a rabbit. “Our timing must be impeccable. We must also convince them that we have genuinely located the princess and have taken care of the threat, or we will not even be permitted to board *The Korol*.”

“The slavers,” Abraxas offers, surprising me by sitting up the way a lion does, his hands in front of him, claws extended, back legs languidly stretched out to one side. “I will show you where they keep their human brides, and we will make a mess of them. With your assistance, it will not be a difficult task.”

Rurik looks over at Abraxas for several long seconds before turning to Hyt and then, finally, meeting my gaze. Our connection hits like a runaway train, sweeping me under, drawing me into the red-laced eyes of a nocturnal god, promising that we have met before in life and will meet again. Always. An endless cycle of rebirth.

I yank my stare away with a small gasp, rubbing at my throat with one hand and sipping my drink with the other. *Three soulmates in one room. How does a girl get so lucky? Correction: three alien soulmates in one room. How does an A.S.S. get so lucky?*

Jane gives me a sharp look.

“Leave it to you to get embroiled in some long-standing intergalactic alien war,” she says, taking another swig from the bottle.

“The Oku deserve whatever they have coming,” Hyt agrees, using a tail to stroke the underside of my wrist until I’ve got goose bumps. He turns to Rurik, tapping his fingers on the edge of the couch arm. The one he’s sitting on is a brown and yellow paisley patterned monstrosity with a bit of a fuzzy texture to it, circa 1975. My grandmother has one just like it in her basement. “But I’m in agreement that you’ll need to take the throne immediately. Otherwise, our goodly lord and lady of *The Korol* will most definitely have a planetary feast at our expense—regardless of Eve’s return.” Hyt offers Rurik a

special sort of look. “And if Abraxas and I are on Jungryuk when that happens ...”

“I will take care of the situation before it becomes an issue,” Rurik assures him in response, and my spine tingles in warning. Something bad is coming. Even if something good comes with it, I’m not getting everything I want out of this.

I shove the thought away and try to focus on the immediate problem at hand.

“When can I take the embryo back?” I ask Hyt, trying to remember if he told me before I left him to spend five days in the jungle with Abraxas. “In fourteen solar days or less?”

Hyt cringes, suctioning several of his tails to the coffee table out of anxiety.

“Fourteen solar days. Fuck.” He leans forward and eyes Rurik and then Abraxas. He taps his fingers against the side of the couch again. *Tap, tap, tap.* And smiles wryly. “My lovely wife has a point. We can’t send her back before then, can we? Your parents are going to med-scan Eve as soon as she sets foot on *The Korol*. What if her mate marks with Abraxas aren’t enough to scramble the tech? What if, all along, it’s been the embryo that’s blocking the scans? The king and queen will know she’s not pregnant, that she’s recently mated with me, with Abraxas. It’s not a risk I want to take.”

The prince considers this.

“We will wait twelve solar days then,” Rurik agrees, not even bothering to argue. “Six Jungryukian days. That is all we can spare.”

It makes me nervous to wait that long, to push that close to the deadline, but if both Rurik and Hyt think it’s okay then ... I glance at Abraxas, unsure if he comprehends the full implications of everything that’s going on. He gives me a look.

“I do not understand why you believe me so ignorant,” he says, and I wince in embarrassment. “I defer to their expertise, but if I do not like their plan, we will not do it.”

Rurik narrows his eyes, but he doesn’t argue.

“Do you like it then?” Hyt asks, just before his companion comes whizzing into the room, spewing bubbles and spinning happily. “You’re supposed to be outside checking for Night Feasters or Oku or Aspis. Why the fuck are you in here?”

The creature lands on Abraxas’ shoulder. *On his shoulder.*

Crap.

I watch as my mate turns his head slightly to one side and *sniffs* the tiny blue octopus. Abraxas doesn’t react as he turns his bland stare and mouthless face back to the room. One corner of his lip quirks up, flashing teeth.

“He approves of my presence and my judgment.” Abraxas relaxes back into the sofa, wings raised behind him and blurred with shadows. He looks fucking wild sitting in here, like some supernatural monster never intended to leave the pages of a book. Yikes. “So does the cat.”

We all turn and spot the two-headed beast lounging on a side table, licking its butthole.

“Greetings, Two-Face.” The cat ignores me, and I sigh. But hey, at least it’s not hissing at me anymore. I set my drink on the coffee table and stand up, looking over at Abraxas first. “Do you approve of the plan then? Stay here and work on the Oku while we wait to transfer the embryo?”

“I approve,” he growls, rising to his feet and climbing off the couch on all fours. He stands up then and dominates the living room in a way that makes proportion feel wrong. He’s big and feral while the room is small and cozy. “Let us move into the den.”

He stalks away and into Hyt’s bedroom.

I just stand there and stare after him, appreciating his ass before he disappears around the corner.

“He’s intense. I love the guy, but I’m really looking forward to sleeping more than fifteen feet away from him.” Jane gives me a look. “*Lady Revenge*, Kidd’s ship, is pretty goddamn small for an Aspis.” I nod and then shrug in acknowledgement, leaning down to give her a tight hug.

“I’m so glad we found each other,” I whisper, and she reaches up, giving me a comforting swirl on the shoulder blades. “And I promise we’ll spend all day tomorrow together. Just us, if you want.”

“I want,” she replies, and then she releases me and I stand back up.

Rurik rises to his feet and Hyt joins him. The latter points at Kayla with a tail.

“Help our guests find comfortable places to sleep. If anyone’s hungry, there’s food in the icebox and in the cabinets.”

“Yes, Officer,” Kayla says with a barely restrained smile. She winks at me, but I pretend not to notice. *Cheeky little brat.*

I turn away and head into the bedroom with one male just ahead and two others behind me.

This should be ... interesting. Or erotic.

Probably both.



The bath is as fabulous as it looks, the water a gorgeous sapphire shimmer that's clearly been drawn straight from the ground. It's as hot as the springs that Abraxas takes me to, and it has that same mineral-y sort of smell.

I sit on the edge of the tub, trailing my fingers through the water and trying to pretend like this isn't the weirdest moment of my entire life.

Not the day I was kidnapped. Not the day I fucked an Aspis. Not the day I was spirited away to *The Korol*. Not the day I fucked a Vestalis. Not the day I nearly died in the Cosmic Chapel. Not the day I fucked a Falopex.

Today. Here. Now.

"Come here," I say, standing up and turning to see Rurik sitting stiffly on the edge of a chair, like he's uncomfortable being in this room, but also doesn't have the energy to stand up. Abraxas, on the other hand, is sniffing everything like it now belongs to him.

Hyt just stands off to one side with his hands on his hips, watching, waiting.

"Princess," Rurik begins tiredly, and I give him a dark look in response.

"Now." I stand up and move away from the tub. It's carved of wood, with a drain in the bottom that closes with the tap of a button on the side. I have no idea where it came from, what species invented it, or how Hyt came across it (let's be real

here: he probably stole it off a dead slaver). But it's here, and it's awesome, and we're using it. "Rurik, don't make me make Abraxas put you in there."

I point over at the dragon who grins, but doesn't respond, crawling up onto the bed and fluffing the pillows before he relaxes. Hyt watches him warily.

"You're not going to piss on all my stuff, are you?" he asks, and my dragon mate laughs, a low, deep rumbling that shakes the windows. Rain pours down in a steady silver sheet outside, bouncing off the heavy boughs of trees, thrumming melodically on the metal roof, and forming large puddles on the ground where dead cricket-ish things float like green leaves on the surface.

"I have already marked the perimeter of this space." Abraxas gives Hyt a look as the lights outside flare to life and shadows skitter into the woods. I hadn't realized there were so many or that they were so close. "This is a large area, difficult to keep clear of Night Feasters. I am impressed by your ingenuity."

I grab Rurik by the wrist and then pull his glove off, tossing it to the floor as the light outside fades away and darkness is restored.

"Live and learn," Hyt says with a shrug, giving up on his vigil and taking a seat on the edge of the bed. He glances back to notice the Aspis' dark frown as Abraxas sniffs the mattress. "This was a Cartian nest, in a ship once upon a time. Can you tell?"

"I am abhorred by its presence," Abraxas snarls, but then he fluffs the pillows again and relents to relaxation.

I run my fingers over Rurik's pale skin, finding those two sharp, red nails at the ends of his middle and pointer finger. I wonder if, should I ever suffer from insomnia (it's an inevitability), could he prick me with one of these and put me right to sleep?

"I do not wish to shed my clothing in front of others," Rurik breathes, but ... well, somebody has to break it to him.

“Yeah, that ship has sailed, hasn’t it?” I ask, taking his other hand and removing that glove as well. “You and me and Hyt and Abraxas, we’re ...”

“A family,” Hyt says with a bright smile. He sits up straight and removes his hat, tapping at his flat tummy with a hand. “I’m carrying your baby, remember?”

“We will have a daughter,” Abraxas tells us all, and at least this time, I’m not the only one offering up a skeptical look. Neither Rurik nor Hyt seems convinced by his statement. “I am curious to see how she incorporates such an odd combination of sires.”

I look back at Rurik, and he rises to his feet, shivering as I lift my hands up to stroke the red fur at the base of his throat. He stares down at me with the depthful darkness of his eyes, a shimmering red underneath, the very picture of royalty and command.

Much as I hate to accept it, Rurik is going to be a good king.

He may very well be the best thing that’s ever happened to the Noctuida. He won’t blow people up for perceived slights. He won’t slaughter people for minor infractions like adultery. He *will* send humans back to Earth. He *will* refuel in the Geometridae and spare my planet.

But ... I really don’t want to give him up.

I want to give him up so little that it occurs to me that ...

“We could run away,” I say, softly stroking his fur, from the white on his shoulders to the red at the base of his throat. He lifts a hand and curls his fingers tightly around my wrist, one long claw clacking against his thumbnail. It’s a sharp sound, like glass.

“*No*,” he sneers at me, lifting the corner of his lip. “You will *not* condemn yourself to a life of running, of living in the Geometridae, of knowing your family and your people and all of Yaoh are *dead* because I was selfish.” He releases my wrist and grabs my face, making my knees weak. I want to collapse and let him catch me. He peers into me with those goddamn eyes. Those fucking eyes. *Beautiful eyes*. At this point, I’m

convinced I'll believe whatever he's going to tell me. "I choose you first, Eve. Running is not a good idea. We're likely to die. If we don't, you're likely to be miserable for the rest of your life."

I open my mouth and he slips a thumb along my lower lip, turning my mouth into a ring of fire. I'm burning for him while Hyt and Abraxas watch. I'm helpless to stop the ride that Rurik invites me on with his face and his touch and his smell. It takes me several minutes to realize that his coremata have unfurled and are glowing a faint red, dusting the air with pheromones.

He's hitting me with absolutely everything he has on *purpose*. To make me agree with him. To take away an impossible and horrible choice.

I can have Rurik or I can have the universe, but I can't have both.

Jane and Kidd might be killed. Avril, Zero, Kayla, Connor, Brot, Hyt's entire family on Yaoh, my entire family on Earth, Abraxas' entire family on Jungryuk.

I start to suffocate on the reality of what's going to happen.

Rurik is going to live the rest of his life in one room. One room. He won't even be able to stand up. His mind will be split between hundreds of ships and millions of people. He'll be a king. I will rarely see him, and when I do, he'll be suffering.

My knees collapse, and he hits the floor with me. What he also does is slide his wings forward so that when my knees come down, they hit the softness of him instead of the ground. That must *hurt*. But if it does, he doesn't reveal it. He's still staring me down and drowning me in pheromones.

"That's not fair," I murmur, feeling my cheeks heat. But it's working. And I hate myself for that. I *know* that he's seducing me in order to keep me from crying, from hurting. "You're a terrible husband," I choke out, which is a complete and total lie, and he knows it.

"I'm a much better prince," he assures me, and then he drops his mouth down and kisses me.

If I'd had *any* chance of escaping him before, it's gone now, and I'm lost. I am completely and utterly lost. I surrender to whatever it is that he wants. *Even if that means losing him. He says he'd never let his child sit on the throne? At some point, he'll launch himself into a sun. What a noble, stupid bastard.*

I'd say it aloud if he wasn't kissing me with the heat of the devil on his lips. He absolutely condemns me to carnal hell when he spreads his thighs around one of mine, pushing his clothed erection into me. Rurik cradles my head, and then dives into me with the blood lace.

You are so well loved, Eve. You are loved dearly.

I don't even respond to his thoughts, his reassurances. Instead, I shove deeper into *him*, search for the truth he's trying so carefully to hide.

I do not want the throne. I want to stay with you. I want to see the stars. I do not care about the other men. If it means being with you, I will not fight it.

My fingers unconsciously fumble for the clasps on the backside of his jacket. I've learned by now that trying to take a winged man's jacket off like he's human doesn't work as well. The Vestalis have clever hooks above and below their wings in the back of the garment, allowing it to slide forward and hit the floor in a crumpled white heap on our feet.

My hands find his chest as we kiss, as his hands roam, and his blood lace pores through my soul, shoving aside blood and guts and bullshit to find the truth underneath.

Then I'm gasping as hot water hits my naked skin and somehow I'm on Rurik's lap inside the massive wooden tub. We're both naked and I'm facing him, staring at his dark eyes, his wings, his coremata, his horns. Ugh. He's so tragically beautiful, fae-like, and certainly nothing even remotely human.

His claspers have just snagged me possessively around the hips. I don't think they'd let me go even if he wanted them to.

"Fuck me," I tell him, licking my lips. "And eat me. Fuck me *while* you eat me."

“Yes, my princess,” he says, eyes half-lidded, and then he’s sweeping my auburn hair aside, cupping the side of my neck with his left hand and ... *ah*. Hot, sharp pain lances my throat, but in reward for the pain, I’m blessed with a rush of pleasure that has my cunt clenching frustratingly around *nothing*. Rurik presses his mouth to my neck, entering my bloodstream with his lace. At the same time, he uses his right hand to drag me down hard over his cock.

With the huge tub only half-full, we’ve got plenty of lube, water sloshing around us. Rurik’s pheromones are drifting like red pollen, poisoning our bath and turning it the color of blood. I close my eyes tight and bite my lips, letting him be the one to rock our hips together.

I can’t even move right now.

I can’t move, and I’ve literally forgotten where I am for several minutes there. My eyes shift to the right to find both Hyt and Abraxas watching. Silent, still. They’re both coiled. They’re both *intense*. I exhale and squeeze my eyes shut, unable to handle that they’re witnessing all of ... *this*.

There are a lot of deep, weird personal vibes and frankly, if I’d been watching, I would’ve bolted from the room in jealousy. They’re handling this shit surprisingly well.

Rurik drops his left hand from my neck, coremata sweeping forward and brushing across my skin. When his hand comes to rest, it’s with his fingers curled around my ass. They squeeze my cheeks nice and tight, digging those red nails into my pale skin. He does the same with the thorn-like claws at the end of each clasper, squeezing my hips mercilessly and pricking my lower back.

I gasp a little when he presses hard enough to draw blood, six fine dots from claws and claspers that quickly morph into points of pleasant heat. Those Vestalis pheromones are *insane*. I can’t imagine how hard it was for Rurik to hold this all back from me for as long as he did. If he’d wanted to essentially mind roll me in the beginning, he could have anytime he wanted.

He let me come to my own terms about choosing him.

But this?

When it comes to choosing me?

I accept our fate as I grab onto his hair and yank his bloodied ruby mouth from my neck. He meets my lips with equal force, coming at me like this is a fight we're both determined to win. He fucks me like he has nowhere else to go, nothing else to do. This is the culmination of everything, and he's going to enjoy it.

I fuck like I *refuse* to say goodbye.

Rurik drags me out of the tub and then lays me on the polished wood floor beside it. He sits up and takes my legs, putting them over his shoulders as his claspers scramble to regain purchase on my skin. I'm completely and utterly exposed physically, but that doesn't seem to matter as much as the way he's tearing me apart with his stare.

"Harder, your majesty," I grumble, and he smiles with pretty vampire teeth, courtly and royal and alien and beautiful.

"Yes, my princess." He drives into me with balls-deep depth, pounding my ass into the floor, the sound of our bodies slicking together as loud as the drive of the rain outside. His testes are buried deep inside of me, their firmness tucked halfway along the length of his shaft. I can feel them pulse and twitch with the need to come, to fill me with hot red seed.

Even if he's strapped to the throne, we're going to have a lot of children anyway. Even if I have to go to him to fuck, and I have to do it in that stupid throne room, I won't be able to resist.

"You're such an angry fuck but also such a personal fuck. How is that possible?" I whisper when he spreads my legs around him and leans over me again, kissing the wound on my neck and shuddering when I stroke his coremata.

"Because I am making love to you while in a red-zone rage, my princess." He sounds almost apologetic about it, too. "I despise the universe for her cruelty." He sweeps his fingers down my cheek on one side, putting his face right up against me on the other. Our skin brushes together with a heated

shimmer, pheromone dust making us glow when the lights outside pulse again.

The world is painted white as Rurik grinds my pelvis into the floor, as his claspers tighten around me so fiercely that our skin is melded in the center.

“Shit,” I breathe, panting through the rush of it. “Rurik, I ...”

All of that tension and anticipation breaks *hard*, shattering like a firework, a thousand flickerings in the air around me. Gold sparks. White streaks. Hot red. That last color, like blood, bathes my skin in imaginary light. It’s all around me. In his coremata, in his fur, in the blood smeared around his mouth, in the markings on his wings.

I collapse beneath him as he clutches my body to his and works my pulsing cunt until he’s stiffening up above me, teeth scraping my neck, clawed fingers digging grooves out of the floor.

Rurik relaxes suddenly, dropping his head as he breathes heavily above me. When he lifts his gaze and snags mine, I realize once again that we’re not alone in the room. He sits up, and I scoot a few careful feet away lest we start fucking again.

“The whole room smells like *honey*,” Hyt says, sounding baffled as I glance his way. He’s frowning, hands clasped together in front of him, elbows on his knees. His tentacles slide nervously over the bed, into the pillows, suctioning to the floor near his feet. Hyt looks up and catches my gaze, mouth lifting up at the edge in an almost-smile. He rises to his feet and saunters over to me, using his tentacles to pull a towel from a cabinet before he approaches me.

Hyt tosses the white fabric over me and it instantaneously sucks up every droplet of water from my skin and hair. I drag the sopping thing away from me and gape at it. Right. This is an alien planet. They have alien things. I remember now.

He hefts me to my feet as Rurik turns and crawls in the direction of the bath, hauling himself over the edge with a groan. He splashes into it and then sits up suddenly, pushing

wet hair away from his face. Well, it's fur, I guess, but it looks like hair. He puts soap in his hands and then reaches up to yank on his antennae.

I look away, back toward Hyt who's leading me in the direction of the bed.

"I might want to shower this off," I explain, gesturing loosely at myself. Hyt gives me a look and tucks his hat back onto his head at the same time.

"I thought maybe you'd shower after I fucked you again." He grabs me and tosses me onto the bed. I let out a small sound, finding myself lying less than three feet away from Abraxas.

Um.

He lets out a growl that ricochets off the metal walls in the room. Hyt tenses up slightly, but he doesn't move. He knows that, even if Abraxas were inclined to hurt him, he can't. If he kills Hyt, I'll die, too. All of these unavoidable facts are coming in handy, preventing any sort of infighting.

They might actually get along okay after all.

Hyt climbs over me, straddling my thighs, and then brushes some weirdly dry hair off of my forehead. His loincloth is hanging down in just such a way that he's fully exposed, but also that I can't see his dick. Abraxas must be getting a good look from the side though. I hear the bed shift as my Aspis mate moves, leaning in closer to us.

"Are you okay with this?" Hyt asks before he goes any further. "Having us right next to each other? Or right after each other?" He waits as Rurik goes still in the tub and Abraxas' tail slips across the bed to nudge at my hip.

Waiting.

They're all waiting for my answer.

I laugh.

"For agreeing to this relationship, don't you at least think you guys deserve unlimited sex? It's the least I can do."

Hyt scoots off of me and turns away with a level of sass that both ignites my desire and infuriates me. I snatch at one of his tails and give it a yank.

“What are you doing?” I ask, perplexed.

“Waiting for you to stop lying to me,” Hyt offers up with a raised fin-brow as he glances over his shoulder, situated on his knees beside me. With his ass pointed right at me, taut and hard and sexy, with those goddamn juicy thighs of his, how am I supposed to do anything but confess?

“Fine. I meant what I said, but that’s not why I’m okay with this. I *want* to do this.” I swallow hard. “I *want* to fuck you guys.”

“Ah, okay, good to know. Because I want you to want to fuck me. It can’t be out of a sense of obligation.” He turns back to me with a sly smile, covering my body with his. Tentacles slide under my back, slicking hot and oiled against my spine. Hyt releases a wave of bubbles from his tails, sending them to drift like golden balloons in the next flash of light from outside. I watch those bubbles turn white, blind me, and then leave me with nothing but their scent when they pop and the Night Feaster light shuts off again.

Hyt uses the tentacles positioned along my spine, the ones gripping my ass, the ones on my thighs, and he drags my pelvis toward him. We *just* fucked, right before walking into that living room. Does that matter? No. I’m slick and swollen when Officer Hyt drags his hips forward and slicks his cock against the outside of me. I feel tentacles teasing my folds, my ass, probing my opening.

But he doesn’t put it in.

He makes my whole body slippery, rubbing oil into my tight muscles with his tentacles. His pheromones seep into my blood, pushing Rurik’s scent to the edge of my vision. On my other side, I can most definitely smell Abraxas. He’s close, fisting a cock. Just one. He strokes it when he notices me looking.

Yep. This is officially insane. Wake up, Eve. Wake up.

I repeat that last part about a hundred times as Hyt drives against me, coiling my body tight at his refusal to give me what I want.

“Don’t make me beg,” I whisper, and he offers a charming half-smile.

“Even if you did, I wouldn’t give it to you just yet.” He winks at me and tugs down the brim of his hat with a tentacle, purple tongue poised at the corner of his lip. “Save your dignity and relax.”

“You son of a bitch,” I murmur, and then he’s pressing the tip of a tentacle against my lips and I’m opening. I suck him in as he drops my pelvis lower, adjusting his body, so that he’s above me on all fours. He slowly, teasingly draws my hips up so that we’re lined together and ready to fuck.

Still, he doesn’t put it in.

“Hyt,” I groan around a mouthful of tentacle. Another slips between my cheeks, oiling up my ass before it pushes inside of me. A pair of tails wrap my breasts, squeezing gently, teasing my nipples with suction. I grind my hips at him in silent demand, and he draws back a bit, chuckling at me. You wouldn’t know he had an angry Aspis on his left side.

“He’s not going to eat me, is he?” Hyt asks, quirking a brow. He dips me toward the bed, manipulating my body with his tails like I’m boneless, weightless. I truly don’t have to move. He has the situation entirely under control. Bubbles explode around us and pop, forcing me to writhe against my will anyway.

“I would’ve liked to,” Abraxas growls at Hyt, dropping his head to look at me. I catch my Aspis mate staring from the corner of my eye, and then we’re looking at each other while my entire body is consumed by somebody else.

That is the moment when Hyt drives his hips into me, slamming his pelvis up against mine. Our skin smacks together with a loud crack and then he’s gripping my ass and undulating his entire rock-hard body against mine.

I struggle to draw my gaze away from Abraxas, but as soon as I do, Hyt steals my attention completely. He's so ... *pornographic*. I don't know how to explain it, but the Falopex are just built to entice. *No wonder Minae was so damn jealous. He's godlike.*

Hyt slows his rolling hips and then sits up, bringing me with him using the strength of his tails, and then crooks a finger beneath my chin. He leans in and then licks the edge of my lip, even as my mouth is still stuffed full with a tentacle, suction cup pressed into my tongue.

"What sort of insane things are you whispering about me inside that head of yours?" he asks, and he looks right at me. "I can smell a lie, you know; that's part of the Falopex deal."

He turns blue, and I grin. But then he moves his tail against and into my ass again, and I'm arching my back like I'm possessed. Hyt lets me go through it, lowering me to the mattress in time for me to witness that Rurik has come to sit with us.

He's on the floor, his back against the side of the bed, wings obscuring most of his skin from view.

But then I look up and catch sight of him in the reflection of the glass walls. *Naked, beautiful, haunted. A gaze that spans the stars.*

It only lasts for a minute because the outside lights flare on, and I'm blinded again.

The mattress dips on my left, and even though I can't see Rurik, I can feel him. Hear him. Smell him.

"I am here, Princess," he tells me, and then Hyt is riding me nice and hard and fast.

There's no part of me he doesn't demand. My clit and nipples are being laved with warm, sweet oil, and he's filling me up in both channels. He removes the tail I'm sucking on, and his mouth claims mine. I'm blanketed by his tentacles, wrapped from head to toe. Both legs, both arms, my waist, my neck, warm and heavy across my forehead. His mating

tentacles coax and stroke the deepest parts of me, asking for something or offering it up, I can't tell.

Pearl. Embryo. Trust. Love.

We share it all.

Ugh.

I'm coming with my head thrown back, my body clenching tightly and possessively around Hyt's. I can't help myself, I snatch up the closest hand to wrap my fingers around, and I know it isn't Hyt immediately. *It's Rurik.*

The white lights have dimmed completely again, but the room is now awash in a violet glow. It competes with red as Rurik's wings pulse like his blood lace. Hyt doesn't glow, but he catches the reflections from either side. Purple on one half, red on the other. I'm still panting from my climax when I look up at him and watch as he sits up and pulls off his cowboy hat. He tosses it onto the floor and then runs those long fingers of his over his hair. As he does, he draws water from the air and lets it drip down either side of him. When it hits the mattress, it's nice and cool, a sweet balm for my overheated skin.

Without a word, he slides out of me, sitting back on his calves with his hands on his naked thighs.

Hyt's eyes track me as I'm grabbed around the waist by Abraxas' thick tail. His grip is impossibly strong, even more so than one of Hyt's tentacles. He pulls me over to him and stares down at me, horns and eyes glowing.

He has no mouth.

I reach up and try to find the seam, smiling when he lets me find it, licking my fingers with that hot, wild demon tongue before he splits open in a full Cheshire grin. He looks like something you'd describe to scare your children away from the woods, like some old nightmare monster illustrated to educate the world against sin.

When he talks, he's a wise sage.

"You're not upset?" I whisper, voice shaky as the reality of what's happening in here hits me.

The three males I've fallen in love with are in a single room together. Nobody is fighting. Everything feels ... normal. I'm with Rurik in the bathtub. I'm with Hyt covered in tentacles. I'm underneath a grinning Abraxas.

His grin fades quickly, leaving the faultless seam of his lower face in total darkness. He quirks the edge in a slight growl.

"Finding oneself consumed by something that cannot change is pointless." Abraxas uses his wing-hands to snatch my hips, flipping me over onto my knees. His tail lifts my pelvis and he mounts me hard and wild from behind.

Abraxas' large, dark hands dig into the mattress on either side of me, claws extended slightly from his knuckles. My breasts sway back and forth with each violent thrust. We've spent the last five days mating and still, I missed him so much that it feels like we just found each other again.

I refuse to let my mind register that we only have six days left to enjoy this.

Six of them.

Abraxas reaches down with his wing-hands and takes my full breasts in his clawed fingers, kneading the flesh as he pleasures my cunt with fast, needy friction. There's intent there, in the rapid-fire pistons of his body. He comes inside of me in a show of raw dominance. His cock swells as all of those little blood vessels bind us together. *My goddamn glowing vagina.*

He finishes quickly and then sits back in smug satisfaction, using his palms to lovingly stroke my skin as we remain bound to one another. Me, I'm panting heavily, shaking, impossibly wishing for more while he chuckles in contentment. There's no doubt Abraxas knows what he's doing, staking a claim. He can't help himself.

"When an Aspis male climaxes," he growls out, like he's educating the other two males. "His cock swells and his blood connects to his female's blood. We exchange fluids and cannot be parted until our bodies naturally release." He slaps my ass,

and I gasp, turning my head to find Hyt lying nude on his side, head propped by a hand, watching. Rurik is sitting up behind him, his wings casting red onto the mound of pillows, his antennae tucked tightly against the sides of his head, black eyes narrowed. “This is the process that prevents heartbreak.”

Hyt says nothing about the venom theory because I asked him not to, but it seems like I needn't have bothered. Abraxas continues the conversation on his own.

“I did not get physically ill when I was separated from my female, though my heart was indeed broken.” He caresses my hips, nails pricking the skin where Rurik marked me with his claspers. I gasp as the sore points are teased until Rurik's pheromones are activating and turning that small pain into hot pleasure. I writhe against Abraxas, but he doesn't take the bait. He snatches me and holds me very still. “She is envenomated by my marks, but only alleviated by the antivenom stirred by our mating. She gave me no venom-laced marks in return though a female of my own species would have ...” He trails off with a deep growl, dropping his body over mine and rubbing the side of his face against my cheek. “I am sorry, little female, that you suffer when we are separated, but I do not regret that you accepted my advances.”

I was worried that he'd beat himself up over this, but I guess he's wiser than that.

Our bodies disconnect and Abraxas slides out of me. He puts a small amount of space between us, coaxes his mating rod out and then puts both of his cocks inside of me at the same time. Hyt left so much of his slick pheromone oil on and in my ass that Abraxas can take me from behind as hard as he wants.

With both of his shafts buried in me, I'm completely full. There is no room left inside my body. He's stolen all of the available space. He curls his massive form over me, using his wing-hands to hold himself up and his other set to touch me. Fingers smooth down to my navel and then past the soft curls to my clit. His other hand finds one of my breasts, kneading with strong undulations of his fingers.

“So strange, this soft breedable body,” he purrs, and then he latches onto my shoulder with his teeth. I’m completely prone and primal beneath him, moaning at the carnal curiosity in his voice. “So *little*.”

He wraps my hips in the slithering coil of his tail, pounding hard until he forces me into a messy climax. I shake all over as he continues to mate me, and then I collapse. Doesn’t matter. My head is pillowed on the mattress and his tail keeps the rest of me upright and in a perfectly fuckable position.

“Such a good female,” he murmurs with another nuzzle, and then he works himself into me ruthlessly until he’s finished and pumping me full of molten cum. His mess only adds to the ones Hyt and Rurik left. Our bodies knot and we end up locked together at the pelvis again. “The mating rod strives to keep as much good seed inside as possible.” Abraxas folds his wings behind himself and then gives my ass another loving caress before he slaps it again, and I gasp. “It is a good adaptation for a male to have; the two of you may find benefit from it as well.”

All three of them, their seminal fluid is now trapped inside of me.

The thought is almost as erotic as the acts that preceded it.

“Much appreciated, I’m sure,” Hyt drawls, and he stays blue.

Rurik says nothing, but when he turns his head to look at me, our gazes lock. With Abraxas knotted inside of me, I’m swept away on another star-destined swirl of fate. *My love for you is absolute. My affection is total and complete. I am yours even if you are his.*

I’m yours, too, my eyes tell him. Maybe we were all meant to end up here together?

Abraxas grunts and adjusts himself, the bulging flesh inside of my cunt loosening slightly.

I’m sticky and well-loved when he slips out of me and curls up on my left side. I remain on my stomach, panting hard, lids heavy, lips parted. I should probably shower.

The lights outside flash on again, blinding me.

“Let me take care of that,” Hyt murmurs, climbing off the end of the bed to avoid Rurik and Abraxas on either side of him. He grabs a long stick at the edge of the room and manually drags a sea of heavy curtains over the windows. No automated curtains or shutters here, like he has back on Yaoh.

Shadows consume the edges of the room, but our bed is still very much lit with purple and red.

Rurik moves closer to me in Hyt’s absence, looking up and over me at Abraxas who still has a hand on my hip, his tail wrapped around my ankle.

“I sympathize with the sacrifice that you will have to make,” Abraxas tells him, and then he removes his grip on me, so that Rurik can pull me into his arms. The prince tucks me gently beneath his chin as I cling to him and try so very hard not to think about it.

Rurik mists pheromones over me, smoothing a hand down my back. His ruby mouth touches the edge of my ear.

“Sleep,” he commands, and then he pricks my ass cheek with one of his claws.

I lose consciousness almost instantly.



The room is pitch-black when I come to, and I'm so disoriented that I can't remember where I am for several seconds. *In my bedroom on Earth? In the den with Abraxas? On The Korol with Rurik? In the Yaoh beach house with Hyt?*

I rub at my eyes and sit up, recognizing a warm body on either side of me.

Abraxas appears to be gone, but when I reach out with two hands, I find Rurik on my right and Hyt on my left.

The former is awake. I'm not sure that the latter is. Hyt's usually up before me, and I can't help but wonder if he got little sleep while I was gone, if it was hard for him to lay in the dark and miss me the way I was missing him.

I smile.

"Your expression is a blessing, my princess," Rurik murmurs, reminding me that he can see in the dark. He rolls over and pillows his cheek on my thigh, one feeler swept back behind his head, the other in my hand. I grip the heavy bone and give it a gentle jerk with a closed fist, like I'm playing with his cock. He breathes out nice and deep, a hiss escaping his lips that needs no translation.

Rurik had dreams of traveling with his mate.

I could make that dream come true.

"Let's go somewhere interesting tomorrow," I suggest, wondering what that would feel like, traveling around with all three men, exploring forests and oceans and cities and space

stations. “There are so many beautiful spots on Jungryuk.” I lift up a hand and put my palm on the upturned half of his face. “Did you get to explore it much before you found me in the market?”

I smile wryly at that, and he shakes his head.

“I was here only a day before I crossed your scent.” He sighs gently and then pushes up to his knees. The marks on his wings aren’t glowing currently, but I can tell that he must’ve put on some pants during the night. His leg when I reach out to touch it is covered in fabric.

Hyt, however, has put on no clothes.

His bare cock brushes against me when he rolls onto his side to slip an arm and several tentacles around my body. He presses a kiss to my shoulder.

“Good morning, Earthling.” Hyt grabs his hat off the floor with another tentacle, yawns with a rush of bubbles, and then drops the hat to his head while sitting up into a slouch. “We should visit the hot springs,” he says, redirecting the conversation back to my previous statement. My lips part in surprise.

“You know where it is?” I ask, and he snorts, standing up to pad over to the curtains. Using the same long metal pole from last night, he opens them and floods the room with warm but diffused light as it filters through the surrounding canopy. The suns here are no joke, and I’m glad they’re not shining directly through the windows.

“Abraxas gave away its location when he let me track him in the woods. I just assumed he wanted me to have it.” Hyt winks and then moves up to the side of the bed, offering out a tentacle to help me stand. I take it, and he tugs me against his body, reminding me again that we’re both naked.

Through sheer force of will, I peel myself off of him and snatch a robe off the back of a chair; it’s a blood lace robe. Either Rurik brought it in here for me last night or someone else came in here to deliver it. *Avril, you little shit.*

There's a set of lingerie waiting with the robe, like Avril must've forgotten how many guests we have staying here with us. I sigh, but I put it all on anyway. When I bend over to slip the panties on, I feel a frantic throb of pheromones from behind me. Both Hyt and Rurik are reacting to the sight.

I hurriedly yank on the panties and the balconette bra, and then I slip into the robe, belting it at the waist. When I turn around, they're both still staring at me.

"Who knew our meeting in the market would come to this?" Hyt says with a shake of his head, opening a metal locker and withdrawing a pale blue robe for today. He pauses before he puts it on, mumbles a lie under his breath, and turns blue. Only then does he slip it over his shoulders.

I pick up Rurik's jacket as he rises to his feet and offer it up for him to slip his arms into. He hesitates slightly, but then takes me up on the offer, turning, so that I can attach the clasps on the back. I take care of half of them, but then I throw my arms around his waist and hug him as tightly as I can.

"How long do Vestalis mates carry their children for?" I ask absently as he caresses my hands. He presses them hard against his lower belly, sweeping his antennae all the way back so that they brush across my hair.

"As long as they would carry a child of their own species," he says, and I exhale with a bit of relief.

Okay, one down.

I release Rurik and turn around to find Hyt standing surprisingly close behind me, one hand on his hip, hat firmly tucked in place, robe doing little to cover his erotic form.

"In Earth months? I'm not sure," he tells me before I even ask. Hyt pats me on the head and slips past, heading over to his tablet on the table and turning it on. He taps in some numbers and then looks back over at me. "Eleven Earth months is a typical Falopex pregnancy."

I'll have to ask Abraxas the same when I see him again.

I turn to glance at Rurik only to find him unbuttoning the front of his jacket. Now that the back is secured, he undoes the

top half of his buttons so that his flat chest is exposed. I flush a bit at the sight and he gives me a roguish smile in return.

“I wish to wear clothing, but I also wish to be comfortable.”

“You won’t hear me complaining,” Hyt says, slipping his feet into his boots. He turns the faucet on and fills them. I wonder how his water-summoning power works. Does he draw it from the air? Does he draw it from himself? I have no idea. “Make yourself at home, Majesty.”

Hyt winks as he slips past and out the door.

I follow with Rurik trailing just behind me.

We emerge into the living room to find Avril serving ... coffee?

I forget what I was going to chastise her about and sigh, sitting down on one of the couches and picking up the mug.

“What the fuck is this?” I whisper, eyes shut tight as I breathe in the heavenly smell.

“The best arabica beans on Earth—literally. This is my favorite brand, and your honey here happens to have a pretty well-stocked pantry.” Avril leans in conspiratorially toward me, red hair falling forward around her face. “He has canned raviolis, Eve. Canned ones.”

I take a sip of my coffee and then gently, reverently set it aside, padding into the kitchen and turning to find a tall floor-to-ceiling cabinet with green doors. I think it used to be part of the original ship, but Hyt has arranged his furniture in such a way that it looks almost like a weirdly tall kitchen cabinet.

I open it and my jaw drops.

He has ... the most random assortment of junk food shit I’ve ever seen in my life. Candy bars, sodas, canned goods, boxed goods, mac ‘n’ cheese. He has fucking mac ‘n’ cheese in his cabinet. Just the one box, but it’s there.

“I see Kayla’s eaten half my stash already,” Hyt says with a sigh, pausing behind me in that robe of his. It flares open over his tails and leaves his whole ass exposed. How very Falopex of him. He stares at his sister as she comes out of a bedroom

tucked into the corner behind the kitchen. The exterior wall of that room consists entirely of wood-like vine growth, but with enough of an old doorway from the ship for an entrance. Fascinating. “Where are those truffles?” he asks her, gesturing with a tentacle. “You fucking ate ‘em I’ll bet.”

“What?” she asks innocently, smiling like she’s twelve instead of twenty-three. “How cruel are you, asking a girl who hasn’t seen food like this in ten years to keep her curiosity to herself?”

“I send you snacks all the time,” he retorts with a wave of his tail, and then he gives me a look. “I feel like we’re cursed to be in my family’s company. Why won’t they go away?”

“Because they love you far too much to let you go?” I suggest with an innocent blink, grinning when Kayla puts an arm around him and offers up a comforting pat.

“You’ve been good to me, Hyt, but I *do* have to grow up at some point. I’m not all that much younger than you. When I do go, you’ll be sorry you didn’t cherish every moment.”

“Just so long as you don’t marry a Falopex, I’ll be happy,” he says, and Kayla frowns like he’s just reminded her of something truly god-awful.

Probably a person.

Either an ex or ... the future love of her life. One of the two. Whoever she’s thinking about, she either loves or hates. Only time will tell.

“What’s his name?” I whisper, and she gives me a look. *I bet it’s Bram. Oh my God, it’s totally Bram.*

“I have an ex,” she tells me cryptically, and when she says that ... I decide that he’s both an ex *and* the future love of her life. That explains it. I hide a private smile that she pretends not to notice. “It’s not Bram though. A different ex.”

Mm-hmm.

Two liars in that family, I see.

I realize that Rurik isn’t planning on following me in here and pop back around the corner to see him sitting across from

Avril and Zero.

“You appreciated the pants and the robe though?” Avril asks innocently. “Look, I’m just trying to do my best to thank you both for letting me leave a lifelong servitude for a dating app.” She looks up and grins at me. “I’m being told to never enter your bedchamber without knocking again or he’ll drop me on a planet that’s entirely covered in liquid mercury.”

“Don’t come in again,” I repeat, and then I slump down on the paisley couch next to Rurik. The first thing I do is look around for Jane. She must be sleeping still. I pick up my coffee in my left hand and glance over at Avril. “Did you happen to see where Jane went last night after I left?”

“She slipped outside with Captain Kidd,” Avril tells me with a daring smile. “They haven’t been back since.”

“This should be fun,” I say, sipping my coffee again. It’s black which isn’t usually my thing, but what is there to put it in? Maybe some marshmallows. Some Lucky Charms cereal. Hyt’s selection is just that random.

“Hey, can you steal some non-dairy creamer next time you’re at work?” I ask Hyt sweetly, tapping my fingers against the edges of the mug. It says *Go Away, I’m Reading!* on it, and it takes me a few minutes to realize this is Jane’s lucky mug.

I narrow my eyes.

Those stupid Chad-like twins in the market better not have taken any of my stuff. Not because I want it back or that I care, but because I don’t want my family to have been any more traumatized by my disappearance than necessary.

Rurik’s arms are crossed, so are his legs. He looks to be in thought but also like he’s staring at me. He drags his gloves from his jacket pocket, stares at them, and then intentionally puts them back. When he reaches out to take my hand, it’s just his skin against mine.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Jane says, reaching up to pull a leaf from her hair. She’s dressed in boots, brown breeches, and a frilly white shirt, but she’s also got mud on her right cheek and matted hair with a twig in it. Captain Kidd waltzes past her,

yanking on the twig as he goes. The move pulls Jane's hair and she clamps her hands over it, throwing a glower his way. "I was working. I've been hired onto Kidd's ship, but I *do* have to behave like he's my boss sometimes."

"Uh-uh," I stare at her overcompensating ass as she narrows her eyes at me and points.

"Hey, is that my cup?"

"Alright, Kidd," Hyt announces, slipping a six-shooter pistol from the pocket of his robe with a tail. He points it at his friend's crotch. "I told you that if you mated the human girl, I was going to shoot your balls off. I always follow-through with the promises I make." Hyt nods his chin toward the door. "Outside, pants down."

"*Technically*, his balls belong to me now," Jane says, holding up both hands. "Not because I care or want them, but because he's currently the only man I can have sex with. So ... please wait until I figure out how to cure this situation?"

Hyt gives Kidd a look before flicking the gun and showing him that it was unloaded. He slaps the weapon against Kidd's chest as he walks by.

I'm more than ready to tease Jane mercilessly, and she knows it. She narrows her eyes on me, and I grin back at her.

"You really like this guy, don't you?" I ask with a chuckle, and she slaps me in the arm as she takes a seat. Her gaze slips past me to Rurik and the two stare at each other for a moment.

"You are *really* pretty, aren't you?" she asks, giving me a look. "I heard the Vestalis like, morph into looking sexy for their mate. This is basically your perfect guy, huh? With feelers and everything? He's a moth."

I reach out and pinch her arm as she grins, rubbing at the spot but refusing to flinch.

Abraxas swoops into the yard outside. It's easy to see him since the front walls are mostly glass. He dives down and dumps a bloody corpse into a pile of two others. Dead ... antelope-ish things? Just ish. I don't know what the fuck they are. Six legs is not a good look on an antelope. I shiver.

“I have supplied the meat. The other males will break it down and serve it.” Abraxas appears in the still-open doorway before he stalks inside and stands up. Avril lets out a small sound of surprise as Zero leans in close to her.

“You know that he will get three times this size after a roll in the vents?” she says, pretending to pitch her voice low but saying her words in such a way that she knows we all hear them. Both Zero and Avril give me looks. Jane, too.

“How do you even—” Jane whispers, but I shush her by grabbing her hand and squeezing it *hard*.

“We haven’t tried it yet,” I whisper back, but what’s there to try? Abraxas in his full size? I can’t take those dicks. I don’t even know what I’d do if he asked me to touch them. *Yes, you do. Liar.*

“I can break the kills down or cook them,” Hyt says, turning to look at Rurik. He raises a fin-brow, hands on his hips, robe mostly undone so that his entire body is visible but for his dick. Once a Falopex, always a Falopex I guess. Not ... that I even know that much about Falopex in the first place.

I’ve been here, what, two-plus months? Doesn’t make me an expert.

“Kidd can help, too,” Jane says with a scoffing laugh, giving her boyfriend/soulmate (my opinions are solely my own) a dark glare. “Honey, offer to do something male-ish.”

Kidd barks—literally—a laugh, crossing his arms, and staring my best friend down. His eyes are the most disturbing shade of amber, no whites, the eyes of a predator. If I hadn’t met Abraxas, I might be impressed. Might is ... not a strong word, just *the* word. I wouldn’t. I was trying to be nice.

“In *my* culture, females hunt.” Kidd stalks over to stand in front of Jane, and she stands up. They look like they’re about to kiss. Nobody here is fooled. This is hatred for the sake of having hate sex and make-up sex. “Females are larger, pumped with testosterone and *mean*. You are none of those things! You are *not* very ladylike. Too small, too weak, too much like *prey*.”

Jane gut punches him, but it doesn't land because Kidd grabs her wrist in his hand.

"I will break the hunt down," Rurik offers, rising to his feet like the move requires zero effort whatsoever. He's so elegant that he flows. What I mistook for arrogance in the beginning is just ... confidence.

"You can do that?" I ask, surprised, and he gives me a dark look, offering out a hand, like he knew I was planning on following. I take it and Rurik yanks me up and into his arms, wrapping one around my waist. Our eyes meet. *There will never be a moment that it doesn't feel good to fall for you.* I blink away the cobwebs and try to remember that we're in front of a crowd.

"I have traveled extensively; there were not always chefs around to feed me." Rurik's mouth quirks slightly as he releases me, taking my wrist and moving past Jane who's just sat back down on the couch. Kidd's retreated to the other side of the room, panting. Bulge in his breeches. You know.

My eyes meet Jane's, and I know she's giving me a *you promised today would just be us* look.

I return it with: *you were literally just prepping for a hate-fuck.*

And then we move on.

We need to talk. And we will. Just not right this second.

Rurik takes me down the stairs and over to the pile of dead antelope-ish things. There's a second pile of dead birds on the ground beside them.

'Birds', with air quotes around the word. Definitely not birds. They have multi-prong antlers and fluffy tails. Rurik studies them, strips his jacket off, and tosses it onto the alien cricket-grass. *Shirtless. Delicious.* He fucking glows when he steps into a shaft of scattered sunlight, like he was born to be a planet-dweller.

"Do you even *like* space?" I ask, and he pauses briefly before turning back to me.

“Does that matter?” he replies easily, sweeping his wings toward me. And then he opens them up all the way. It’s rare that I get to see him do this. I’m mesmerized by both the sight and the smell, a sweet spring afternoon when the whole world is in bloom and the air tastes like possibilities.

Shit.

“You’re rolling me again,” I murmur, rubbing at my forehead with the heel of my hand. I can’t seem to want to fight him when he makes me feel like this. I just give in. He’s never used this power on me except for now. All this time, he was *holding back*. I stop and drop my arm to my side, giving him a look. “You know that I like you for *you*,” I tell him in no uncertain terms. “Your actions. Your personality. Not this stupid mate bond that was forced on us. The mate bond was just our meet-cute.” I exhale and tuck my hair behind my ears as a beautiful smile breaks out on Rurik’s face.

“I know,” he breathes, fanning me again with pheromones and making me sigh happily. “For six days, I will give you the life you want.” He steps toward me, and I sigh, reaching my arms up to put them around his neck. “And while I am doing that, I will get to know these other males, to ensure they are worthy of your presence and capable of maintaining your safety.”

I snort and give him a raised brow, my back bumping into the trunk of a tree. I like the feel of the rough bark against my palms. I like the sight of Rurik, with enough space to open his wings, limned in sunshine and smiling. The life that I want? This *is* the life that I want. Jane and Avril and Zero, Connor and Brot, Kayla, Hyt’s friend Kidd. Hyt. Abraxas. Rurik. And if I can visit my family once a year, well, it’ll be bittersweet, but that’s what makes chocolate good.

Rurik cups my face in his hand, tilting me up for inspection, eyes drifting to my lips and staying there.

“You don’t think Abraxas is capable of protecting me?” I ask with a chuckle. Rurik swings his antennae forward to brush over me, smelling me and dusting pheromones at the same time. “Have you seen him in action?”

“He makes for a lovely bodyguard, but he cannot navigate the stars.” Rurik lifts his attention to my eyes, and I suck in a sharp breath that’s reflected in the contraction of his own chest.

“That’s what Hyt is for,” I breathe out, eyes fluttering shut when Rurik runs one of his red claws along the seam of my mouth. He pushes against me, and I open my lips. He replaces his fingers with his mouth, his tongue hot and frantic against my own. Blood lace kicks copper sparks against my taste buds, and I let myself unravel. Rurik keeps me upright with an arm around my waist, the other cupped against the back of my neck. He strokes my pulse with a claw as he kisses me and breaks my spirit in half.

You are so lovely out here in the woods, like a little wild thing. That’s his thought, spiraling through me like a smile.

Just a primitive little human, I respond, and Rurik actually laughs against my lips.

“You are impertinent is what you are.” He kisses me again, smearing ruby blood between our mouths. My fingers slide greedily around his waist, brushing his coremata and feeling them unravel. I open my eyes to watch as those strange appendages curl around him, like red tail feathers. My fingers touch the closest one, and we both moan as the pheromones come down like rain.

“Maybe you just want to spank me again?” I ask, and we both go still, remembering that moment in the embassy when he tossed me over his shoulder and gave me a few little love-taps. We haven’t had the chance to recreate that. “Would you like that, huh? To be a naughty alien?”

Rurik snorts at me, but he grabs me up anyway and swings me around to the other side of the tree, just inside the shadows of the canopy. I can see the small ring of space around Hyt’s house, but I don’t think anyone looking out the window could see us now.

Err. A *human* couldn’t see us. For all I know, Abraxas has the eyes of an eagle.

“Naughty,” Rurik breathes, dropping his forehead to the curve of my neck. When he exhales, I feel his emotions along with his breath. All of a sudden, it’s like we’re on Dome, and I’m waking up in bed to eat some floating doughnuts. In some slice of the multiverse, I didn’t get sick, did I? And in that one, I stayed with Rurik and we spent our last few days of freedom alone together.

“I’m sorry that I left you,” I tell him, even though I’ve told him this several times already. “You could’ve died, and—”

Rurik interrupts me by leaning back and placing a finger on my lips. He traces across them, and my eyelids flutter. He trails those two long nails of his down the side of my neck and then takes a hold of me with a firm but gentle grip. A gasp escapes me that he catches with a flick of his own tongue.

“If my choice was your death or Officer Hyt as a partner, there was no true choice. Your life means more than anything else in the entire Noctuida.” Rurik hesitates, his gaze drifting to one side. I can’t even say how I know his gaze is drifting since his eyes are all black, but there’s something in the demonic shine of those hellish pits. Ebon black and snaked with blood lace. *I want his fucking teeth in my neck.* I wriggle a bit and Rurik makes a sound, but he doesn’t indulge me. He looks back at me and adds, “if the choice were between saving your entourage or having Hyt as a partner, then your entourage would need to go.”

I snort with laughter, but then he’s covering my mouth and yanking on the tie of my red robe. It comes undone and spills over my smooth shoulders and his milky hands as he digs his fingertips into my arms. Blood lace slams into my tongue, twisting like a corkscrew into the center of my heart.

I will show you what I would have given you, if I had the choice.

And he does. He pushes joy and unity and happiness in my mind. Teases me with ideas of travel and good company and children. Makes me smile when he encourages a visit with my family on fucking *Earth*. All of the things we should be able to have, but that we won’t get.

I jerk back from him, smearing our mouths with blood.

I stare at him, brows pinched, and then he douses me again. He dusts me with shimmery pheromone powder that clings to the stickiness of my lips. When I lick it off, it breaks my brain and his simultaneously. The pheromones flood my tongue and consume my thoughts while Rurik kisses me like a man and not a goddamn Vestalis.

They're the weirdest species in the whole of the Noct.

I leap into the prince's arms—the future *king's* arms—and I try to pretend this is all a good thing. Yay, he's ascending to the throne. Yay, we won't be killed by his parents. Yay, I won't be separated from Abraxas or Hyt.

We're all here together; it's the best possible day.

Rurik drops to his knees and takes me with him, making sounds that defy translation when my fingers brush over the fur at his throat and shoulders.

“That's *sinful*,” he whispers, hissing the word. I can only imagine where and how he learned to say something like that.

“Oh, is it?” I ask, and then I grab two fistfuls of fur, and he gives me a much less coherent noise in response. I'm laid in the grass beneath him, still clinging to that noble red mane of his, looking up into alien eyes. My lace panties are melted by his will, leaving my ass in a puddle of hot blood. “*My king.*”

The words come out of their own accord, my final plea to find some sense of joy in our future as the rulers of the Imperial Court.

“My queen.” Rurik parts my thighs, sliding down my body to lie on the forest floor between them. His grip is ironclad when he cups my ass, his royal hands a decree. *Stay still and let me eat you.* Rurik's thoughts spiral into me as he dips his mouth to my nectared cunt, his tongue slipping between my folds.

Blood lace follows, a searing slash of red lace shaped like a cock. My prince-cum-king uses it to fill me up and then again to torture me when he slides it out, using only his blood to maintain rhythm and control. His curled moth tongue darts

over my clitoris, tasting me, savoring me. His horn-like antennae swing forward into easy reach, and I grab onto them for support, yanking his head forcefully against my tingling pussy.

My hips rock in time with the blood lace dick, up when he thrusts in, down when he pulls out. His tongue dances a sultry tango over me, up to my sweet, soft curls, my navel, and then back down again.

I don't expect him to bite me, but I should have.

Come here and get some, my blood tells him as it sings a song only he can hear, pumping feverish and fresh around the six sharp punctures in my pale skin. Rurik is like a ghost against me, devoid of color, a white so alien that it must contain all the colors in the color spectrum and then some. Extraterrestrial colors, ones that I can't perceive, that I can't even fathom. *Drink of me. Consume me. Have all of me.*

Oh, believe me, my queen, when I say that I will feast and fuck to my heart's content. These coming days, you will have little reprieve from my ministrations.

A moan drifts across my lips like fog, something insubstantial but very real. It joins the primal calls of the forest around us, just another creature in the throes of a rut. Sex is as wild and natural as anything, the most universal experience in the whole of the Noctuida. We're out here, sharing that experience with the rainbow bats in the trees, with the anxious kiyo skirting past the house, with the birds calling to each other from their perches on the roof of Hyt's house.

Hyt's house. My house. Our house.

I ride that blood lace cock as Rurik eats me, swallowing mouthful after mouthful of my essence until I forget that he's Vestalis and that I'm human. It never matters when we're engrossed in one another like this. Rurik is just my other half. In some lives, maybe we were the same species. Maybe we will be again one day.

For now, he's a parasitic, world-eating moth, and I'm the crazy human woman that's in love with him.

“Come ... come to me.” My voice is strong, almost a command. When I hear myself speak like that, I can almost imagine being queen. Forcing my will on the universe and hoping that I’m doing right by as many people as I can.

Rurik kisses my trembling thigh, leaving a blood lace garter to cover the wounds left by his teeth. The blood lace shaft inside of me doesn’t stop moving, not even when he sits up and rises above me. His pristine hands slam into the dirt on either side of my head, fingertips digging at the earth until they’re soiled like his claspers. They must’ve come unfurled while he was eating me, ruining his pants and clawing at the ground, frantic, mindless, male alien fuck toys.

My king kisses me with the taste of blood and honey on his lips, melting my balconette bra until crimson liquid drops down my heaving tits. The robe goes with it, soaking the ground beneath us both. He doesn’t absorb it into his skin, not yet. He leaves me to splash around in it as he teases me with a thrust of his cock against my folds. The ridged underside catches, igniting my nerves with ardent flame.

The claspers take possession of me as Rurik settles in, their hold so frantic and tight that I wonder briefly if maybe he does have *some* semblance of control over them. *I will never let you go*, he tells me, but we both know that he will. He’s that selfless, even if I wish in that moment that he were the most self-serving asshole in the Noct.

The burnished red tip of Rurik’s shaft probes me as his coremata blush brightly in the morning light, framing his regal form like a lascivious peep show. There’s just something so ... wanton about them. They’re obscene. They’re ribald and vulgar and unbelievably attractive. He flicks them and they dust the air with a blatant request for female companionship.

I smile up at him, accepting the invitation.

White wings spread to blot out the sun, a vague red glow limning his white hair and his feelers. The mate marks on his back call out to mine, and I feel my back throb in response.

Rurik locks his gaze with mine and draws me into the undertow of his thoughts.

His hips buck forward, slipping into the center of the blood lace shaft inside of me so that he's wearing it like a condom. He keeps it there while he undulates against me, staring down at my face, mixing my thoughts with his. We're in such a jumble that I actually get off on how good *I* feel, how tight my channel is, how sleek. Each contraction of my body gives double the pleasure, double the sensation. I get off on Rurik's cock, but I also get off on the tightness of my inner muscles.

Something untangles inside of me, a dart thrown from the tip of Rurik's penis. It's the same feeling I had the night of our wedding, when he stole all of my eggs and marked them as his. An anchor between him and me, snatching at my ovaries, claiming them.

Still mine, he reassures himself or me or maybe both of us. I still can't sense the line that demarcates him from me. It's just us. Us, us, us.

That pressure eases, and then we get a little sloppy. Biology kicks in, sending his pelvis to strike mine, encouraging my hips to collide with his. Blood lace slithers up from the puddle underneath us, twining around our bodies like ribbons and binding us together. We're tied up as one, shackles of heat around his hands and mine. A collar on my neck to match his, a single leash between us. Ankle to ankle. Pelvis to pelvis. Rough lace slithering over my nipples.

A cocoon forms around us, turning the sun into diffused shadows that throw lace-like patterns on my skin and his. It's just enough light for me to see the blush that stains his cheeks before he dips his head to mine and kisses me again.

While everything around us is alien, that kiss is not.

It's home. It's comfort. It's safety.

I don't climax: *we* climax.

I feel what he feels and vice versa.

My sack—his sack—it feels tight, almost painful. Her body—my body—is squeezing it, gripping it in fierce possession and sending me—us—into oblivion. Rurik fucks frantically to find that end point, to kill the tension, to unleash peace within

his body. When he breaks apart, so do I. Voluminous seed spurting. Female liquid dripping. Mindless, writhing flesh.

Rurik rolls off of me, claspers scraping my skin, his body smashing open the lace cocoon. It all comes apart, unraveling into a spatter of hot liquid that he absorbs like a sponge. One minute, we're lying in a literal bloodbath, obscene red stains on his skin and mine, and then it's just our panting bodies, hands clasped together between us, and a cool breeze.

My lids get heavy, but not before I hear him speak.

"You are my goddess, Eve. I have need only to worship you. Your love is my very reason for existence."

"Ditto," I mumble, and then I'm rolling over to pillow my head on his chest, reveling in freedom, connection, and sleep.

A perfect start to a perfect day.



"Hello there," Hyt says, squatting down beside me in a brown cowboy hat and matching loincloth, his see-through boots in place. "Figured you two might need a minute, so I'm going to break the kills down." He jerks a thumb and all nine tentacles over his shoulder, indicating the pile of game that Abraxas left.

Oops.

"My apologies," Rurik says strangely, and I roll onto my back, so that I can see him better. He has one knee up, one leg stretched out. His arm is thrown casually over his knee, and he's staring mildly at Officer Hyt like maybe, just maybe, today is the day he simply decides not to hate him. "I will prepare the food to make up for it."

Hyt contemplates that with a small frown.

"You can cook?" he asks skeptically, peering past me at Rurik. "Somehow I find that *extremely* difficult to believe, Your Imperial Princeling, Grand Master of the Universe."

Rurik's bloodied mouth twitches as he reaches up to drag an arm across it. His skin glows in the fucking sunlight, giving him that ethereal fae-like look I recognized on him before.

"I will prepare it," he repeats and Hyt shrugs, rising to his feet and then holding out a tentacle for me to take. I do, and he draws me up alongside him.

"You've gone mute?" Hyt queries, giving me a look, his tentacle tails sliding all over my body, just nine continuously moving caresses, like he's checking me for injury or something. I blush when he brushes his tail over the space between my legs, accidentally collecting Rurik's cum on his suction cup. He frowns harder as he brings it up for examination, and I try to shove his tail back down.

"Hyt, *come on*," I moan as he gives me a look. Even using both hands, I can't push his tentacle down. It remains where it is, curled in the air like a statue. And then he shakes it out and snakes that same tentacle through one of the giant leaves nearby. There's a whole pool of rainwater cupped inside of it.

"I'm examining the cum that came from the father of *my* baby," Hyt teases as Rurik stalks up to stand beside me. The prince looks mildly amused, so at least there's that. "What's wrong with that? It got stuck on my tail. I can fucking smell it. Don't I deserve some sympathy?" He winks to soften the verbal blow, and I sigh.

He's got a point.

"I imagine we'll be getting quite used to one another—and very quickly, too." Rurik pauses as Abraxas slithers out of the shadows to join us, completely and utterly silent until the exact moment in which he chooses to reveal himself.

Holy shit.

"This is ridiculous," he grumbles, curling around me like something that just crawled out of a closet. I feel like my nightmares are giving me a hug right now, and I am *all* here for it. "I would have had these carcasses broken down and cooking for the female's sensitive digestive tract." He lashes out with a tail, snags the antelope thing around the antlers and

drags it his way. “*And* I would have mated her. In that same time frame.”

“Being quick during a mate isn’t a good quality, you know,” Hyt tells him gently, and Abraxas makes a low snarling sound that I’m all too familiar with now. He slithers forward and around the pretty police officer, like he’s going to crush him with sheer bulk. Although ... since Abraxas is at his smallest size, he’s not *that* much bigger than Hyt.

They look at each other, face-to-face.

“I have explained to our female *numerous* times that I am not stupid. I am not primitive. I will not force the idea down your throat, but you *must* be aware. You must consent to a simple fact: I am *always* right.” He draws back, blurring the edges of reality with shadows. Abraxas takes a seat and begins gutting his kill with his fingernails in place of knives, like he always does. “What I *meant*, of course, was that I would have spent less time standing around and talking and more time *doing*.”

“He doesn’t like to talk,” I explain to the other two, feeling all proud and shit to show Abraxas off as my mate. Weirdest part of it all though? I’m proud to show Rurik off to the others. I’m proud to show off Hyt. The feeling in my chest is a good one, a promising one. I imagine this must be what it feels like to win the lottery. I don’t even mean that in a derivative, cliched sort of way.

What I mean is this: there are beautiful things in the universe, and when the time comes that one is gently—or forcibly—placed in our lap, there’s a sense of awe. Of miracles. Of two realities splitting. I tell myself there’s an Eve out there in the multiverse who never got kidnapped from Tabbi Kat’s fundraiser. She gave her statement to the police when they show up, she helps Jane dig herself out from under a pile of social media shit, she takes a day off to play golf with dad.

I feel sad for that version of me, but there’s nothing I can do for her.

Reality is the space that we can't run from, can't hide from, can't avoid.

This is reality for me.

“Neither do you apparently,” Hyt says with a chuckle, poking me in the forehead with a tentacle. “Did she *ever* stop talking when she was with you guys?”

“She is loquacious,” Rurik admits gently, standing shirtless with his back to a tree. It's the most casual I have *ever* seen him. Where is the uptight prince with the attitude. I watch as he flattens his feelers against either side of his skull. “But I appreciated the companionship.”

There's a long space of silence where the air feels heavy with emotions.

“If you guys want to talk about—” I begin, but Hyt cuts me off with a snort.

“I was happy not being alone,” he admits, lifting up one of the giant bird bodies and hanging it from a hook. “So, yeah, I welcome Eve and the crazy thoughts that fall freely from her pretty mouth.”

Rurik smiles and pushes up off the tree to make his way up next to Hyt.

“We arrived at the wrong conclusion,” Abraxas begins with a little growl. “Which is my fault since I am the leader of the tribe and the alpha male. I hunted alone when I should have taken you all with me. Forgive me, it has been a long time since I lived in a tribe.”

My head is spinning with everything he's just said, but I fixate on one weird thing.

“Wait, your people aren't always solo? Like, you're the weird loner among the Aspis?”

He gives me an odd look.

“Unmated females live in tribes—which you have seen—as do juvenile males. Unmated males leave to find their female elsewhere. I am perfectly normal.” He stands up and snaps his teeth at me, his face split in half like a villain from a Marvel

comic. “What I am trying to say is this: we should not be splitting duties, but taking care of them together.”

Rurik uses a knife as well as Hyt does, removing the offal from the kills and tossing it into a bucket. I don't look when Abraxas eats it. Instead, I focus on the other two, waiting for a response of some kind.

“If you guys want to talk about—” I begin again, but I'm cut off for a second time.

Well. Guess they *don't* want to talk about it anymore.

“He's right about some things,” Hyt continues, not looking at me but focusing on his gruesome work. But that's just the way it is around here. There are no grocery stores. There is no lab-grown meat. It's truly a survival situation on Jungryuk. But ... we have at least one apex predator with us. I eye the other two men. “We'll have to get used to working together from now on, eh?” Hyt hooks a sad smile, eyes distant even as they're fixed on the task at hand. “Personally, I'd like to live on Jungryuk together. Does that idea suit you both? I want to raise our kid here.”

There's only a brief hesitation before Rurik answers him.

“We will stay here as much as we can, but you must be ready to travel on *The Korol* at times. I have promised many things to my princess that are only possible if we assume the throne.”

“World eaters will eat,” Abraxas adds, like that's all that need be said. As in, if Rurik and I don't take the throne, we are all fucked. “We will travel the stars only when necessary,” Abraxas continues, finishing with the antelope and leaving several cuts of beautiful meat lying in the grass. The rest of the skeleton and the flesh still attached to it? He eats that, too. “And we will give birth *here*.”

There's a long pause as both Hyt and Rurik think that over.

“Here,” I whisper, staring at the grass. In an ideal world, that's what I'd want, too. If Abraxas thinks he can keep me safe during childbirth, I believe him. I look up and meet the gemlike scintillation of his gaze. He blinks slowly at me and

then makes his way over, snatching a bird up as he passes. He stands on two feet, sheathes his claws, and uses his hand to hold it out to me.

“Yes, here. We will deliver the girl child in the birthing den unless you do not like it. In which case, I will make another. For now, you will learn to procure food for your family.”

“It’s hard to get shipments of food down here—especially fresh stuff,” Hyt explains, and I notice that he doesn’t argue about delivering the baby in a wild forest den. “So, please, my love, pay attention.” My cheeks heat as he grins and continues on. “We can have the baby here, but we’ll all have to travel to Yaoh at some point to show her off to my family.”

“I imagine my parents will flee,” Rurik muses, and both he and Hyt finish their carcasses around the same time. They begin skinning the final two kills of the day. It looks like a lot of meat, but I honestly think it’s not much more than a day or two for Abraxas by himself. Feeding the rest of us? I’m glad he’s here to help though I bet Hyt could use guns to shoot something—or tentacles—and Rurik could use blood lace.

I feel well-taken care of.

“You think so?” Hyt remarks as Abraxas sits behind me, placing a sharp, black claw into my hand.

“I found this today,” he breathes against the side of my head, making me shiver and squirm in his lap. Not a good idea considering the task ahead of me. “You will need the assistance of this tool; your soft, blunt-tipped fingers are quite helpless.” Abraxas guides my hands, showing me what to do. I try not to get squeamish about it.

“I think so,” Rurik tells Hyt, belatedly answering the question about his parents. “They have done me and my mate many wrongs, and they must know that once I take the throne, I will punish them for it. I believe they hope I will be disoriented at first—and perhaps I will—but they will not make it from the throne room alive.”

Ouch.

His ice-cold voice stops Hyt and Abraxas both. I nearly drop my knife at his words.

“You’re going to kill your own parents?” I ask, even as I know instinctively it’s for the best. We can’t trust them. They’re threatening to blow up three planets if they don’t get what they want. Not exactly the kindest folks in the whole of the Noct.

“There is little choice.” Rurik finishes his kill and then turns fully around to look at me, blood spattered on his naked white face and chest. As I watch, it’s absorbed into his skin and disappears. Abraxas growls and Hyt whistles. The prince forces himself to smile. “Everything you wish for will come true.”

There’s no chance for me to shoot off a smart reply to that. *Everything? Without you, it feels like nothing.* Jane appears, interrupting us like she did the other day, when she caught me naked on Abraxas’ back. My eyebrow twitches.

“Hey.” She kicks a rock, and I stand up, swiping blood off on my— Shit.

I’m wearing ... literally nothing. Again. Caught in the buff by my bestie. Jane notices and snickers as I flick a quick look in Rurik’s direction.

“Clothing, my prince?” I ask, and he lets a slow, easy smile slide over his lips. You’d never know the guy was breaking apart on the inside.

“Yes, my princess,” he tells me, moving over to stand in front of me.

I gasp when he falls to his knees in the dirt.

“Yeah, so, I’ll be over there ...” Jane trails off and turns to leave, quickly picking her way back in the direction of the fairy-tale staircase. Oh, and maybe also in the direction of the space pirate who’s standing there.

“*You’re an idiot,*” Kidd mouths, pointing a gloved finger over at Hyt.

“*Piss off,*” is what Hyt returns, nearly silent as he cups two tentacles around his own mouth. With a laugh, he turns and puts himself between me and Kidd. Not that the latter was looking; he was far too busy staring at Jane. “If we could *not* do anything sexual with either Jane or Kidd around, that’d be ideal,” Hyt drawls just before Rurik runs his tongue up my lower belly, from the top of my curls to my belly button. Blood laces smears across my skin as he sits back on his calves, redirecting the lace to sit where he wants it to. He decorates my entire torso, creating a new outfit from nothing.

I’m given a fairly opaque bodysuit. When I run my hand down one of the front panels, it feels like silk. A fresh lace robe forms over my shoulders and pools on the ground around me.

Holy shit.

“You’re getting *good* at this,” I whisper as Rurik rises to his feet in front of me.

“Well, I have been practicing,” he tells me, but there’s something about that phrasing I don’t like.

“Is it safe now?” Jane calls, and Hyt snorts, glancing over to see her staring right at us.

“Sorry, she’s like that,” I tell the others as Abraxas rumbles with low, sinuous laughter behind us.

“Eve’s sister-human is a strange beast indeed; I am pleased to no longer be trapped in a small space with her. There would eventually have come a time when I would’ve needed to eat her.”

“Oh, stop that.” I slap his chest as I walk around Hyt and then stop. He kicks off his clear boots with the water inside, dumps them, and gestures for me to step inside.

“Go on. Take ‘em. Take a walk if you want.” There’s a pause there, and Hyt holds up a few tentacles. “Avoid the thermal vents, avoid deep shadows, and don’t touch any plant that— Well, just don’t touch any plants.”

“Anything else we should be worried about?” I ask dryly, stepping into the boots. I’d always wondered how they

worked. As I press my feet into them, I realize that I'm stepping into clear gel of some kind. It grips to my feet, slips between my toes, gives me goose bumps all over. *Eww*. But also, these are the comfiest shoes I've ever worn in my life. I lift one foot up and glance over my shoulder to study it. I see my bare foot inside the clear shoe, and I can very clearly see the shape of the shoe itself, but it looks like there's no sole at all. Crazy. I put it back down and give Hyt a real smile. "Thank you."

He acts like the words have no effect on him, but the scales on his tails ruffle and he releases several pheromone bubbles.

"No snakes, no bugs, and if you see another Aspiss—she'll probably leave you alive, but eat your friend."

"I can correct this," Abraxas says, and then he moves far too close to Jane, and I wonder if he isn't going to, you know, mark her. I give him a look and he growls at me. "Such simple solutions to complex problems, and yet you balk out of some strange sense of Earthen propriety."

I just gape at him.

"But, but ..." I have nothing to say and so I try to keep Jane distracted while Abraxas pees and sort of, kind of, just a little bit on the edge of her shoe ... It's to keep us safe, okay? I know it's weird. But here's the thing? You want a magic alien dragon soulmate bat-winged thing to love you? Sometimes you deal with pee. I will deal with pee for Abraxas. I am *happy* to deal with pee for him.

Just like I always have to deal with blood when it comes to Rurik.

What was that wise sage phrase that Abraxas gave to me? *Nothing in this life is free or easy. To get something worthwhile, one must give something up in return.* Yeah, that.

"What is that smell—" Jane starts, but I snatch her by the shoulders, leaning in.

"I have wanted to talk to you alone for *two months*," I tell her, and she sighs, and then she smiles, and then her mouth twitches and I know that she knows.

“He pissed on my shoe, didn’t he?” Jane asks, and I shrug.

“If the shoe fits ...” I trail off and then chuckle. “If the shoe fits, it’s probably some Falopex-made boot.”

“Atrata-tech, actually,” Hyt inserts for me, and I look over to see him shrugging. “Stole it, killed the dealer, the usual.” He waves us off. “Take your walk. If you get too far away, I’m sure the Aspis will let you know.”

“Indeed,” Abraxas growls, nodding his chin at me as Hyt sets up a firepit in the middle of the yard. Rurik trails behind him, but his eyes are on me.

I do not want to waste a single second, my love, he tells me without having to say a word at all.

Neither do I. We won’t be separated again after this moment, okay?

Jane and I head off together, meandering toward the dark line of the trees, twisted up in our own thoughts for the moment. When I look her way, I find that she’s staring right at me.

“This is so weird,” she says, brown eyes wide, “seeing you in love. I’ve known you for a long time, and I’ve never seen you look like that.” A pause. Jane tucks some short brown hair behind her ear. The bob looks good on her, but I do miss the long hair she had before. “You’ve changed, Eve,” she tells me, and I open my mouth to argue. Jane reaches a hand up, palm out, asking me to stop. I snap my lips closed. “In a good way. You’ve grown-up. You seem more confident, more relaxed, and *happier* than I’ve seen you ... maybe ever.”

I stop walking, standing at the edge of the property with that weirdly hot Jungryukian sunshine behind me, a dark and deadly wood in front.

“You think?” I ask, completely baffled by her statement.

I’ve never been more stressed.

I’m at risk of losing Rurik and yet, Jane thinks I’m the happiest I’ve ever been?

She’s right.

I am.

I don't argue when Jane nods. I just tuck my hands together behind my back and off we go. We meander into the trees, me in red lingerie and see-through alien cowboy boots. Her, wearing black *breeches* and a tricorne hat like some kind of eighteenth-century pirate.

"Ahoy, mates," I growl in a really terrible pirate accent.

Jane throws her head back and clamps both hands over her mouth before abruptly lowering them to her sides. She drops her chin and glances my way.

"Make fun of the pirate thing all you want," she tells me, leaning in. "Your boyfriend saved our asses from a bunch of alien dogs. Even took an extra minute to rescue Madonna, the possum, for me." Jane lowers her voice, even though there's nobody here.

Well.

It's not like we're alone, but Abraxas keeps to the shadows, so that he's essentially silent and invisible. The only reason I know he's there is because of the *smell*.

"Abraxas is pretty awesome," I admit, and then I clear my throat, giving Jane a look. "What about the other two guys?"

"Oh, Officer Hyt is a peach," Jane says, flicking her fingers at me. "You do know why both he and Kidd dress up like cowboys and pirates, right?" she asks, but I've only heard half the story, apparently.

"Hyt told me he dressed as a cowboy because of Kayla."

Jane nods, voice catching in her throat.

"And Kidd dresses as a pirate because of *her* little sister, the one who died."

We both go quiet for a few minutes, pausing near a small pond with rocks floating above it, like a miniature version of the hot springs. Jane reaches out a finger to poke one, and the rock bobs through the air like it's on a planet with zero gravity, not one with unusually heavy gravity. *I might get wrinkles*

faster here, I think, and then, but I bet there's alien tech for that.

“They cured my cat allergy with a single shot,” I tell Jane and she gives a fist pump.

“Yes! You see that? If these fucking aliens can accomplish that, why can't they get rid of my copulatory plug?”

I give her a look, squatting down by the pond and reaching out a hand. When Abraxas doesn't stop me, I poke the edge of a waxy purple flower that's floating on the water's surface. The interior of it glows, and there are winged insects without legs, like fat rainbow bumblebees, fluttering inside to collect the shimmery pollen.

“Jane, you don't want to get rid of your plug. You're in love with the handsome captain.” I rise to my feet as she sighs, scrubbing at her face. “Just stop bringing it up, and it'll be less embarrassing for you.”

“What about you?” she asks, putting her hands on her hips. “The Vestalis prince? Do you *really* love him or is it just his weird adaptable biology? I'm not trying to hurt you; I just want to make sure you're okay with Rurik.”

“I love Rurik.” The words whisper out and catch on a breeze. A thermal vent opens up randomly a few feet away from us. It's just a small crack, but it's disturbing to see how quickly it happens. Dozens of the grassy crickets die under the force of the heat. The smoke is both purple and red, like Aspis males and females. “It's not just biology. Maybe that's the catalyst for how it happens, his body and mine aligning perfectly. But there's something else. Something deeper, older.” I scrape my lip with my teeth and Jane slaps me hard on the back of the hand. She hates that habit.

“Alright then. If you're good with it, I'm good with it. He seems nice.” She pauses again, and I raise a brow as we continue walking. “Also, he's very, *very* pretty.”

“Isn't he?” I ask, and I can feel myself lighting up. This is what I needed, to talk to Jane. To see somebody from back home. My sounding board. My best friend. I'd pick her even

over my own mother; Jane is the person that I trust the most. *Person* I trust the most. There might be other competitors for top spot overall. “Like a faerie/vampire prince.”

“I was thinking demon,” Jane says, tapping a finger to her lips. “Hyt is ... well. I mean, the Falopex in general are *gorgeous*. And ...” She glances over her shoulder, shivering slightly, as if she can sense she’s being watched by Abraxas. “You’re kinkier than I am; let’s just say that.”

“You fucked an alien space pirate hyena. Don’t even get started with that shit.”

“How many days did it take you to fuck him, hmm?” Jane asks, bumping me with her shoulder.

“Nine,” I state proudly, refusing to admit that any of the other stuff—like the tongue lashing about two seconds in—counts. Jane narrows her eyes at me.

“Shit. Five.” She puts her face in her hands, and I laugh.

“I’m only surprised it took that long,” I tell her, and she gives me a raw look.

We both fall silent again.

“Your family,” she starts, and I nearly buckle to the ground. Jane grabs onto my arm, and then I turn and we’re throwing our arms around each other. All of the shit we’ve been through since that night on the roof of Tabbi’s apartment, it hits us both all at once.

“All I’ve been doing since moment one is trying to get back to you,” Jane tells me, and her words are an echo of my own actions and desires.

“I wanted to find you so bad,” I tell her as we pull apart and stare at each other again. “When I heard you calling for me in the market that day, I tried to get to you but ... things turned out a little differently.”

Jane smiles.

“You mean the Aspis alarms? Yeah, I heard those. Had no idea you were fucking one until he barrelled into our camp and

tried to kill Captain Kidd.” Jane hesitates slightly. “I threw rocks at him.”

“That’s my girl.” I pat her arm and then stand up straight, crossing my arms over my lingerie-clad bosom. It’s heaving, I’ll admit. It’s heaving like a bitch on the cover of an eighties romance novel. All we need now is a broad-chested, long-haired caveman and we are good to go. “Isn’t it interesting how times have changed?” I remark absently, and Jane lifts a brow.

“Meaning what?” She turns to walk, but I don’t follow her. I’m just shaking my head.

“In the eighties, women wanted to fuck like cavemen and cowboys and shit. Now, they want to fuck demons and dragons and ... aliens.” The edge of my lip quirks up as Jane snorts at me. “I’m going to blame you for turning me into an official A.S.S. I want to make us shirts that say *alien smut slut* in English and wear them to official Vestalin court functions.”

“Yeah, about that.” Jane looks me up and down, a slow roll of the eyes that ends with a disbelieving shake of the head. “You’re going to be a *queen*. Someone with real power. *You* will be the one in the sky threatening to eat planets.” Jane stops suddenly and spins to look at me, true alarm in her face. “You do know what that means, right?” she queries, peering closely at me. “The eating thing?”

I shrug and tuck my hands into the lace pockets of my robe.

“I assumed it was figurative language?” I respond, and wait, but Jane just keeps staring at me. “It ... isn’t figurative, is it? This is the Noctuida.” I feel the blood drain from my face.

“A giant mouth opens up on the bottom of the ship and a massive fucking *tongue* comes out,” Jane whispers to me, leaning close. “They smash that blood lace shit into the planet, heat it up like a microwavable bowl of soup, and then *slurp* it up.” She smacks her lips for emphasis as I gape back at her. She’s far too serious to be fucking with me. She looks *terrified*. “That’s what they want to do to my Dad. To your parents. To your sisters. To Nate. To all our friends.”

“I know, Jane. I know.” I rub my temples in circles. “I *know*.”

“I know you know, I’m just ... scared,” she tells me, and I nod, reaching out a hand to squeeze one of hers. In the distance, something screams, and we both flinch. With Abraxas’ piss on our shoes, and him on our asses, I’m sure we’re fine but I can’t stop the goose bumps.

I take a moment to really look around, at the towering trees, at the depth of the shadows around us, at the bioluminescent foliage, and it’s like my body somehow knows we don’t belong here. *This is alien*, it tells me. *This is foreign*. It’s a feeling I can’t explain. It’s like a sixth sense, something that can only be experienced once it’s experienced.

But at least my feet are standing on dirt.

“What’s the best experience you’ve had since our abduction?” Jane blurts, clapping her hands together. I smile as she tries to lighten the mood. This is what I’ve missed about her. In my darkest moments, this is what I needed.

“Thinking about you whenever something went wrong. Wondering to myself *what would Jane do, what would Jane say, where the fucking fuck is Jane?* I feel like I’ve beaten a level in a really hard video game. I’m sort of proud of myself. For finding you, that is. That’s my best experience.”

“For real, Eve. Don’t be yourself for two seconds. Be serious and tell me—besides the fucking—what’s the best alien experience you’ve had?” She waits, her own gaze tracking the RV-sized ferns, the flowers that move, the vines that slither, the shadows that dance just outside the edges of our vision. On the tree across from me, wispy spirit things scuttle across the bark, a whole row of them like ants. Only, they look more like ghost lizards. When Jane glances back to look at them, they disappear. She turns to me again.

“Come with me, and I’ll show you,” I tell her, and then I whistle for Abraxas.



After a lunch of roast meat and the most random fucking assortment of human snacks, we pack up and head for the hot springs. The ‘we’ in all this consists of Jane, me, Zero, and ... three pheromone-filled males that neither my body nor my heart can ignore. Kidd would’ve tagged along, too, if it weren’t for the epic pre-hate-sex fight that he and Jane got in before we left.

Le sigh.

My dudes and me? We’re not fighting *at all*. I expected some man-trums, but it seems my men aren’t just otherworldly attractive. They’re exceedingly mature and rational, too. Even the dragon.

“You’re fidgeting a lot,” Jane tells me, glancing over to look at Hyt. He’s whistling as he walks, adding his song to the twittering of the alien birds. When he notices us staring at him, he tips his hat and winks at us. “Do you want me to go back to the ... alien spaceship house thing, so you can be alone with these guys?”

“We wouldn’t be alone anyway; Zero would be here,” I explain, as if I actually believe a response that lame is going to get me out of answering Jane’s question truthfully. Do I want her to go back so we can have more alone time? Maybe? But also, I’ve barely seen her. And ... and some other reason ...

I want Rurik and Jane to get to know each other while they have the chance. It’s that important to me that she understands him before he ends up a prisoner on his own ship.

Jane follows my gaze as it slips to my right, to Rurik and his *robe*. Yes, he's strolling through the woods in a robe and untied breeches. The top of his pants gapes open and reveals way too much of that white jade skin for me to remain sane. As I stare at him, he scowls viciously at something Abraxas has just said, flashing teeth as he clutches the gaping sides of the robe together.

"You're certain there are that many?" Rurik asks, a simmering rage in his words. I realize that as Jane and I have been whispering, Rurik and Abraxas have been talking. By themselves. I'm so excited that they're getting along that I bounce on my toes a bit as I walk. Jane quirks a brow, but I quickly stymie the excitement and bite at my lip.

When Jane reaches out to slap at me—she hates this habit, too—Rurik catches her wrist.

"I am sorry, Jane Baker, but I will be enjoying that." He leans over and flicks his tongue across my lips, stealing away the faint blush of blood from my worrying teeth.

"As will I." One of Abraxas' large hands comes around my waist, stopping me in my tracks. Another large hand snatches my chin, tilting my head back. My mate curls his sinuous spine and leans over me, using his long, hot tongue liberally on mine, on my lips, dipping it down to curl around my *neck*. The little divots I'd chewed into my lip heal over as Abraxas cranes his back even further.

"Here we go again," Jane grunts, taking off with Zero for protection and leaving me with Rurik, Hyt, and ... this. Whatever the fuck this is.

Abraxas withdraws his tongue and slides around me, shadow and sinew and heat. He crouches down in front of me, spreads my thighs and slips that nubile tongue into me. I'd have fallen over if my hand didn't end up gripping one of Hyt's tentacles. He steps closer and wraps them around me, holding me up.

Um.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I whisper to Abraxas, wondering if he maybe just doesn’t get human propriety and— No. No. I need to stop doing that. He isn’t a stupid beast: he knows *exactly* what he’s doing.

“You are sore from being fucked this morning and last night,” Abraxas explains calmly, standing up and leaving me there trembling in the stretch and slither of his imposing shadow. “Your gait was off because of it, and you were chafing between the thighs; you were in pain. I have taken care of all of it.” He drops into a squat and then turns to look at Rurik, horns pulsing.

Hyt moves even closer, cuddling me more tightly in his tails and putting his front to my back.

“You ask if I am certain, Vestalis prince? I am more than certain. If there were less, I would have killed them all by myself.” Abraxas watches Rurik to gauge his reaction. “But together, I do believe we will be taking only a small risk.”

“You’re talking about killing the Tusk Guys?” I ask, and then the correct terms pops into my brain. “The Oku, right?” I glance over my shoulder as Hyt leans down, putting his face up alongside mine. He rubs his cheek against me, and I wiggle a little in his arms.

“We’re going to free the humans and burn down the tribe’s largest settlement. It’s an early victory for your Imperial Court, Princess.”

“When do we leave?” I ask, and all three men have the audacity to look at me like we didn’t *just* have a discussion this morning about doing things together. “You said that when you went hunting, you should’ve taken me. All of us.” I look specifically at Abraxas. “That if I wasn’t alone in the den when Rurik showed up—”

“Yes, I know,” he growls back at me, lips rolling back from too-white teeth. “But this is a combat situation, little human female. You soft-skinned creatures are so eager to leap into a fight where it is simple for us and very, very difficult for you.” He grumbles a laugh, unsheathes his claws, and pushes onto all fours, a lithe sway of muscle and rage as he pads over to

me. Hyt doesn't move, but he doesn't have to. Abraxas puts his face right up against my cheek on the other side and rubs on it. "But if you wish to come, I will make the effort."

"Absolutely nothing the Cartians published about the Aspis is true, is it?" Hyt asks as Abraxas circles around us and then continues on. Jane and Zero have stopped walking; neither of them knows where to go. I'm surprised the cyborg girl can't sense it, but then I wonder if that isn't because of Abraxas scrambling all the tech-y shit attached to her brain. She's had a runny nose and slightly reddened eyes ever since meeting him. Also, I saw a few sparks jump between the points of her red rabbit ear antennae.

"Very little," Abraxas growls back, glancing over his shoulder. He waits for Hyt to release me—which he does, reluctantly—and we continue on. When I turn to Rurik, I see him with his hands clasped behind his back, the slits in his robe open around his wings, the fabric billowing when he moves past a small thermal vent.

When he turns his head briefly to look back at me, I can see that he's troubled by something.

"There are more Oku living here than I first understood," he says, a bit mystified.

"How many?" I ask, curious. I don't have a clue.

"Ten-thousand," Rurik replies, and Hyt nods as if in confirmation.

I trip on ... nothing.

On my surprise, maybe.

Anyway, I trip, and both Rurik and Hyt catch me, one on either side.

"If there are that many of them, then how many humans are there?" Jungryuk feels like the most isolated place in the whole of the Noct to me. The idea of other humans being here is ... weird. I tack on another random question. "How many Aspis?"

“Twenty humans, less Aspis than Tusk Men,” Abraxas replies as we catch up to him. Okay. Good enough.

“*Twenty* humans?” I breathe. “No wonder those guys were so excited at the prospect of buying me.”

“Oh, they buy plenty more than that. It’s just ... not all of them survive.” Hyt tucks his hat brim down over his eyes and glances away from me, the triple irises in each eye tracking the stream through the trees. He knows where we are as well as Abraxas does.

“You guys can take down *ten-thousand* Oku?” I ask incredulously, and Hyt gives me a look.

“The Oku settlements are spread out all over the place. They’re tribal, aggressive. They’re split up over a hundred villages, easy. The closest one to us is the largest, maybe a hundred Oku and the twenty humans that Abraxas mentioned. There are more humans than that on Jungryuk for sure, but I don’t know how many.” Hyt sounds disgusted with himself, as if one man can deal with the Noct’s entire human population by himself.

“We will take care of the problem,” Rurik reassures us both, voice thoughtful. “It will be useful to see the issue firsthand.” He curls the edge of his lip again in a partial scowl. “And we will find a slaver to blame, someone we can present to my parents.”

Hyt snaps all nine of his tails and points at Rurik like he’s impressed.

“Yeah, that’s the ticket right there,” he says with a brilliant grin. “We need a villain and I know just the guy.” A pause, a gentle frown. “Well, the guys—plural.”

My eyes widen as I resist the urge to hop up and down.

“Those horrible twins,” I breathe as we take the last curve in the path, coming up on the beauty of the hot springs.

“Oh.” Both Jane and Zero are standing in place, eyes wide, lips parted. They look like a pair of ardent worshippers, discovering a holy place for the first time. I wonder if that’s how it happened on Earth, you know? The idea of magic or

spirituality. Something beautiful like this, something natural, something real.

“I never thought I was going to see this place again,” I admit, and Rurik cringes, pulling the tie of his robe more tightly around himself. He looks away and takes several deep breaths before he’s able to return his stare to mine again. *I forgive you. You know that. If I’d had a choice to trade this for you, I’d pick you everytime.* My thoughts tangle in the space between us.

“This is ... some form of paradise, that’s for sure.” Jane lays her drying cloth—it’s another one of those insta-dry towels from Hyt’s—on the shore and then carefully edges toward the water. But only for a second. Her lips twist to the side and she rushes headfirst into it before letting Abraxas check the temperature. That’s Jane for ya. Doesn’t even question it.

She disappears into the water, parting it in a perfect dive (she’s much more athletic than I am) while I stand there with my arms crossed and watch.

“You are perfectly compatible with heated water,” Rurik informs Zero in just such a way that it doesn’t quite sound like a warm encouragement. Couldn’t catch the prince being nice to his underlings. Oh no. He’s a stone-cold dick.

I quirk a brow as I stare at him.

“I heard you defended my crew from your parents,” I say, and Rurik gives a loose shrug of his shoulders that he must’ve picked up from watching me.

“I did only what I knew you would want me to do,” he explains, as if that negates the kindness in the act.

“Were you hurt?” I ask, sidling a little closer to him. Zero walks into the water until it hits her at the knees, tilting her head back and closing her eyes. There’s an adorable smile on her face that I never expected to see. For the first time since I saw that hot pink text on the screen in Abraxas’ den, I think the Cartian girl might actually be happy. My breath catches, and my eyes water as I stare at Rurik.

“I suffered very little, my princess,” he tells me, but there’s a hitch in his voice that reveals the lie for what it is. “I broke my arm and lost a single antenna.”

“The Imperial King bit it off at the skull,” Zero explains, glancing over her shoulder and opening her eyes. That smile of hers grows even wider. “The prince was spurting blood, stumbling, and showing quite a lot of mangled bone.” She gestures at her arm and then grins.

What was I saying about her? That ... she was adorable? Never mind.

“You can grow antennae back?” I ask in disbelief, still staring at Rurik. Abraxas is gathering the sudsing flowers and tossing them into the water while Hyt ... removes his belt. Um. Jane is gaping. Crap.

“I can grow back any body part so long as the injury I have sustained is not life-threatening,” Rurik explains gently, and I swear to the Stars: the Vestalis are fucking *weird*.

“Huh.” I move over to Hyt next and tap him on his naked shoulder. He’s still got his cowboy hat on when he glances back at me. “My friend is staring at your dick.” When I look over, I see that Zero is gaping, too. “I thought you were modest?”

“I’m still modest, but ... we’re going swimming.” He shrugs and then turns, so he can lean in toward me. “Tell your perverted friends not to look.” And then he moves away and dives into the water, disappearing so far beneath it that I have no idea where he is for quite some time.

“Shall we, female?” Abraxas asks, grabbing me around the waist with his tail and taking me with him into the water. I exhale in bliss as the heat of the sapphire liquid pools around my waist. Even better: I don’t have to swim because Abraxas is doing it for us, holding me up with his tail.

“You’re so lucky,” Jane says from above me, and I glance up to see that she’s situated on the edge of one of the floating rocks. Evidently she got up there all by herself. Definitely not a feat that I’m capable of. My mate sets me there beside her,

giving me a view of the shore. And of Rurik, standing awkwardly near the edge of the water. “What is he doing?” she asks me, but I don’t know.

That is, I don’t until he looks up and our gazes lock.

He drops the robe to the ground, leaving on the pants. Apparently, he’s going to swim in them.

Rurik walks into the water like some noble king committing suicide by sea, taking step after careful step until it’s up to his head. He dunks under, and then breaks the surface, moving a few steps back so that he can spread his wings. The bottom set remains underwater, while the top set opens fully. When the prince leans his head back, and the sun hits him just right, he starts glowing again.

“Yeah, I ... wow.” Jane turns to me, and I do the same, glancing at her. “I’ve seen this tenacious streak in you for half my life, and I’m still in awe of it.

“Tenacious streak?” I ask as she leans in and hits me with her shoulder, fingers dug into the rocky soil for purchase. When she glances behind us, I follow the direction of her gaze to see glowing critters in the shallow pool at the center of the floating rock. “What do you mean?”

“You got abducted by aliens and became their queen; I’d expect nothing less out of you.” Jane reaches out to pluck one of the alien creatures from the water when Abraxas’ tail snaps up, curling around her wrist.

“Do not touch the pink crawler,” he warns Jane, releasing her as I hold back a chuckle. Jane’s face has gone ash-white.

“He’s a little scary,” she whispers, and I shrug, picking at a bit of alien grass before I remember what the green strands around us really are. One of the crickets comes loose, and I drop it with a small shriek. Jane snorts at that. “I would pay money to see what you were like when you first got here.”

“I handled it like a boss,” I tell her, and she nods, like that’s what she meant.

“How did you end up with the dragon? He refuses to tell me.”

“Oh? Well, he attacked the wagon I was in, ate the guy who bought me, and then woke me up by giving me cunnilingus.”

“Seriously?!” Jane chokes on the word, and then shakes her head. “Yep. I am officially jealous. That’s not how my journey began.” She narrows her eyes, and I know she’s thinking about Captain Kidd.

“If you wanted him to come, why not just invite him?” I ask, but she’s already shaking her head again.

Here we go with another lie. Watch her try to Jane-splain away the fight from earlier.

“He has to take care of his ship. Business for him doesn’t stop just because we’re here for other reasons. He has a crew to maintain, you know?” Jane stops talking as I watch Rurik take a seat in the shallow water, clearly enjoying the warmth but unwilling to actually swim.

Abraxas is just below us, washing himself. I still don’t see Hyt.

Blue tentacles creep over the edge of the island, and I actually let out a small scream as they unfurl beside me, suction cups sticking to the rocks before the appendages go tense with strain. Hyt rises into view, putting his palms on the island and hopping up beside me. He turns and sits on my right, covering his genitals with his hands.

Jane is already trying to look.

I elbow her in the side, and she grunts.

“What? I’m just curious. I watched some Falopex porn with Kidd—” She cuts off abruptly, and then struggles to clear her throat. “I watched some Falopex porn, and it was ... there’s a lot of dynamic parts to those dicks.”

“Thanks?” Hyt says. It’s a question. He moves the wet, shiny girth of his thigh up against mine. His skin is hot and hard, and my fingers can’t seem to resist reaching out to touch it. I end up putting my palm against his bare leg, and he shivers.

“Man, my dad would love to know about all of this.” Jane swirls her finger in a circle, indicating the Noctuida. “If he’d been abducted, it would’ve been the best day of his life.” Her mouth twitches. “Second best day, after my birthday.” Her expression crashes hard, and she turns to me suddenly, frantically. “When you’re queen, Kidd says we can visit Earth. That’s true, isn’t it? I don’t want to go back, but ... I just want to be able to see my dad and tell him in person that I love him.” A hard swallow. “And that he was right about aliens.”

“You should never tell him that he was right,” Hyt says gently, looking past me at my friend. “Trust me: humans are better off left alone and ignorant. You guys don’t belong out here.” He stays blue, even after saying *trust me*. Hyt frowns, like he’s surprised those statements registered as lies.

“And yet ...” Jane gestures our way, and Hyt exhales like he has no idea how to respond. He reaches up with a single finger and tugs on the brim of his hat, draining off the excess water. “How are you feeling over there, Officer?”

“Do not tease him about the pregnancy,” I warn her, and she grins mischievously at me.

“I still can’t believe you got a guy pregnant,” she says, and then the laughter spills out like I knew it would. “I’m going to be an auntie! Really, Eve, I’m excited about this for you.”

“Thanks.” I pick at the rocks with my fingers. “My parents ... how am I going to explain all of this? They’ve probably had a funeral for me by now, and then I’m going to come with a baby?” I look over at Hyt, as if to confirm. “I can bring the baby home to see them, can’t I?” I ask, and he shrugs.

“We can get a hologram for her when she’s old enough to use it.” He pauses, the edge of his mouth curving into a smirk. “You see that? He’s even got me thinking it’s going to be a girl.”

“It will be a girl child,” Abraxas agrees, listening in from underneath us.

“If it is, can we name her Kya?” Hyt asks randomly, and Jane makes a sound of recognition. I look her way, and she

raises her brows, pointing to her head as if that gesture is supposed to make me understand. “After Kayla’s human sister, the one I couldn’t save.” Hyt’s voice breaks roughly before he gets himself under control again. “The one who liked pirates.”

He pushes off the rock and into the water, disappearing briefly from view.

That’s when I know: if the baby is a girl—and Kayla is okay with it—we’re naming her Kya.

“I approve of the name,” Abraxas growls, reaching up to snatch me off the rock. He brings me down to face him as Hyt pops up out of the water, just a few inches to my left. He floats there as Abraxas scrubs me down from head to toe with foamy floral soap.

I don’t expect Rurik to join us, but he does, parting the water with elegant strokes until he reaches one of the lower rocks. He hefts himself up and onto it, turning so that he can see me.

Jane jumps back into the water and then, as discreetly as she can, finds Zero and hitches an escort back to the house.

Then it’s just me and the guys, alone.

I exhale as Abraxas keeps me held in place with his tail. Hyt treads water just beside me while Rurik looks down from above.

“Perhaps tomorrow we could see the birthing den?” he asks, and I try hard not to let the pang of that question break my heart in half. *Let me see it because I won’t be there when—*

“Oh, you’ll like that,” I tell him, playing a part the way I did when I was Hyt’s ‘fake fiancée’. “It’s by the beach.”

“Have you seen the tides here?” Hyt asks, directing the question to both me and Rurik. Hyt looks up at the prince, arms breaking the surface of the water on either side of him. His hair is threatening to come undone from his braid. It drifts toward me, so I reach out and touch it, dragging my fingertips along it until it stings me.

“The tides?” I ask, thinking of the strange black beach. “No. What’s up with the tides—I mean, besides the whole spaceship crashing gravity shifts ...” My voice trails off as I squint up at a bright light through the trees. There’s a flash that streaks down through the foliage, the sound of cracking branches, and then a distant *boom*. I swear that I can smell smoke. “Did we just ... did a ship just crash?”

Neither Hyt nor Abraxas appears fazed.

Hmm.

This is the planet we’ve chosen to settle on? Would we be better off on Dome? I didn’t mind Yaoh either—if you take away the judgy Falopex.

Do not think about running. Do not think about Minae. Do not think about how much you want Abraxas to eat Minae.

“Yes, female. Every now and again, you will see one. Do not despair.” Abraxas lifts me up to face him. “The tides here are fierce, but well-observed by the Aspis; I will show you their secrets tomorrow.” He gives me a look, reaches down with a wing-hand and strokes his fingers through my hair. “Too much soap,” he says.

I’m wondering what he means when Rurik adds, “this was a wonderful idea, to come here.”

And then Abraxas is dunking me and rinsing the last bit of suds from my scalp.



Connor and Brot are cuddling on the couch when we get back to the house. Actually, when I move across the room and squint through the shadows at them, I see that they’re asleep. Outside, the bright lights flash on, searing the room with white.

It fades away, murdering my night vision in the process.

“Come,” Rurik whispers, taking my hand and leading me into the bedroom. I hear the sound of a switch being flicked, and the room warms with a dim glow.

“Hope y’all are okay with nudity,” Hyt says, stripping his belt off and tossing it aside. After we finished at the hot springs, we met back up with Zero and Jane and walked through the woods until we found the other half of Zero’s old ship: there was absolutely no antivenom in the wreckage.

“The ship fragment—your old den—is still on The Korol,” Rurik said with a sly smile. *“I will drop it off for you in the same place that I found it.”* But there was no antivenom there either. If I hadn’t mated Abraxas, he would’ve died that night.

Ouch.

“Covering one’s body with useless cloth is a strange habit,” is how Abraxas responds, climbing right onto Hyt’s bed like he owns it. Since he’s pissed everywhere, I’d say he does. Fair and square.

Rurik stands beside me, near the door like he hasn’t yet decided what he’s going to do.

“Not all of us have a slit to hide our genitals in,” Hyt tells Abraxas, swinging his hat off his head and flipping it onto a hook embedded in the wall. He’s so casual here, even more than he was in his home on Yaoh. The more of himself he lets me see, the more I like the guy.

“As if your useless cloth strip provides any protection whatsoever,” Abraxas retorts with a grumbling laugh. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they might actually ... get along? I’m shocked.

Rurik takes my hand and leads me to the bed, encouraging me to sit down on the edge.

“Shall I make some tea?” he asks, and I nod. Vestalis tea is good, and I know he packed some in the luggage he brought with him. I have a few favorites saved up from the *Day of Tasseography*. “Maybe that purple floral tea?”

He nods and makes his way over to a side table against the far wall. The curtains are already closed behind it, blocking

out the flashing strobe from outside. As he walks, he shrugs out of his jacket and dons the silk robe he wore this morning; he changed out of it after the hot springs.

There's a bright ding from the bag closest to Rurik's elbow. He pauses in his tea preparations to check whatever notification on his tablet, and frowns. His antennae swivel out to either side in agitation.

"What is it?" I ask, my skin prickling with goose bumps. I don't like the way his expression is making me feel.

Hyt watches me, yanking on a chain and starting the shower. It comes down a long pipe that descends from the ceiling, the end of it fashioned out of a spaceship fragment. I can still see the partial logo. It has holes drilled into it, basically a homemade showerhead.

"There are sixty-two violations of a serious ordinance—" Rurik stops talking, and then turns to look back at me, sitting on the bed with Abraxas. He brings his tablet over, and I flinch, wondering if *The Korol* might be able to come through the cameras of any device connected to the Noct-Net. Throw in a little facial recognition technology, and we're done for. "The camera and mic have been physically removed. Here."

He hands it out to me, and I check the application he has pulled up.

The words are written in the Vestalin language, so I squint and wait for my synchronicity contacts to kick in. There's a bunch of legal gobbledygook. I tap the next button and find an image of ... Abraxas sucking his own dick.

I let out a yelp and the tablet goes flying. Rurik catches it easily, lifting it up to examine the image on the screen. Hyt turns off the shower and pads close behind him, dripping water everywhere.

"Oh, well would you look at that?" Hyt whistles as he sweeps around Rurik and sits down on the edge of the bed, still soaking wet. He pauses and then curses, glancing over at me to see if I disapprove. I bet he's used to crawling into bed while wet. I'm not a huge fan, but I'm more than happy to

make compromises. It's *our* bed now. Our sleeping arrangements.

"You viewed the forbidden footage of the princess' orgasm face," Rurik says, referencing the night of our wedding. "Sixty-two times."

"My body is primed to having a female, and needs to be emptied regularly," Abraxas explains calmly, as if this should be obvious. I look back just in time to see his wicked face split into a grin. "Besides," he growls out, using his *tongue* to wrap my waist and drag me into his lap. "I knew the princess would forgive me."

He bites me, and I gasp, arching my back and automatically pressing my shoulder into his teeth. The deeper they sink, the better they feel.

"I shall pardon your crimes, but we must hope that my parents do not find out that I have done so." He tosses the tablet onto the end of the bed.

"You ..." I pant, trying to get Abraxas to look at me. "Jerked-off to me ... *Sixty-two* times? Over three weeks? That's ... that's three times a day."

He releases my shoulder, and my body screams in protest, wanting more. I love when he grabs me, picks me up, surrounds me with his big form. *I'm excited to see him hit the vents again.* I want him as large as possible. First off, because I want to be picked up, petted, and kissed by a monster. Second, because I want to play with his giant cocks. I have a plan. It won't involve penetration, but I bet I can make him climax out of both rods.

"Sometimes more or less," Abraxas answers belatedly, giving me enough space to pick up the tablet.

"Can I use this?" I ask Rurik, but it's Hyt who answers.

"Just don't expect a good signal—and don't search for any contraband," he tells me seriously, relaxing back into the pillows, naked from head to toe. Even with Abraxas in the room. With Rurik.

“If *The Korol* actually started blowing up planets ... what would happen?” I ask as Hyt turns his head to look at me.

“Eating planets,” he corrects, and I sigh. I start to type a search into the Noct-Net’s browser when one of my mate’s tentacles wraps around my wrist.

“*Contraband*, Earthling. Don’t do that,” he warns me, using his other tails to push his body into a sitting position. Personally, I’m finding it a bit difficult to not stare at his dick. He notices, and cocks a grin. Abraxas growls from behind me. “The Vestalis monitor internet searches. They might wonder why the prince is looking something like that up when he well knows what happens when *The Korol* moves into position.”

Across the room from us, Rurik cringes and pinches his feelers against the sides of his head.

“How ... totalitarian government of them,” I say with a snort. Hyt releases me and stands up, padding over to some lockers on the wall. He removes a tablet of his own as I try and fail not to stare at the sculpted muscles of his ass.

“Don’t like it?” he asks, casting a look over his shoulder. “Wear that Imperial crown with pride and *change it*.” He comes back over to the bed and hands his tablet out to me, a video prepped and waiting on the screen.

“What is this?” I ask, blinking down at it. *I’d rather watch Abraxas suck his own dick, but ...* Ahem. I briefly set Rurik’s tablet aside as my dragon mate peers over my shoulder, spine curved like a demon.

“As a Falopex, I have access to what the Vestalis might call ‘illegal footage’.” Hyt makes quotes with two tentacles, and I hide a smile that’s definitely not appropriate considering the subject matter. Can’t help it. When he mimics human body language, it’s too cute for words. “That’s ... well, that’s footage of the Cartian’s planet being eaten.”

I gape at him before letting my attention swing back to Rurik. He’s turned toward me, a pair of mugs in hand. He carries them over to the bed and offers one out to me. I take it,

our fingers scraping together with the flinty spark of raw emotion.

“Watch it,” Rurik tells me with a nod. “As queen, you will have the ability to direct the ship through me. I would rather you entered into this knowing what we will be capable of.”

I’m so disoriented by the idea that I hesitate, and it’s Abraxas who reaches past me to tap the play button.

“I didn’t even know you could use a tablet,” I mumble, and he growls at me, snapping his teeth next to my ear. The screen flickers and blurs, shutting off briefly before flaring back to life.

“How else was I to get release in your absence? I learned what I needed to learn, no more and no less.” Abraxas sniffs and then lets a low, rolling laugh slither past his terrifying mouth. “I am a modern male, my female.”

“I see.” I peer down at the screen as the video restarts, trying to wrap my mind around the image in front of me.

The Korol is ... absolutely fucking terrifying.

Avril claimed it was about the size of the United States. Looking at it now, I can believe it. Whoever filmed this, they’re not down on the yellow and blue planet below, but on another ship just off to one side. I can see the white underbelly of the mammoth vessel. A pair of doors slides open, and I brace myself for what I’m about to see. Jane told me about the mouth, about the eating. She did. I guess I just didn’t—

“Oh, shit.”

There’s a *massive* fucking maw on the underside of *The Korol*, a circle of sharp teeth with a tongue in the center. *No, more than one circle of sharp teeth.* There are three rings of teeth, as vicious and pointed as the vampire fangs in Rurik’s mouth. I’m not great with spatial awareness, but each one of those teeth is probably as big as the Empire State building.

The tongue unfurls, a stretch of dripping pink in the middle of space. Saliva globules float around, like bubbles amongst the flickering of distant stars. Dizziness sweeps me, but I fight

it back. I need to see this. *Oh, Zero, I'm so sorry*, I think, and then it gets worse.

The Korol's tongue flicks up against its own teeth, drawing blood, and then lashes downward, sending a glowing red beam of blood lace straight to the planet below. The view switches to a different camera run by, presumably, another ship. I get a firsthand view of the blood lace smashing into the orb and heating it up until the entire thing appears molten and unstable. Like a cookie dipped for too long in a glass of milk, bits of the Cartian planet begin to drift apart.

The world-eating ship descends toward the Cartians' ruined homeland, its tongue stretching down to slurp up glowing shards. The liquefied planet is dragged into the circle of teeth, and then *The Korol* gives a violent shudder, as if swallowing.

"What ... how ..." I don't even know what to say. I just sit there as the footage continues, documenting the annihilation of an entire planet and the curious pink-loving scientists who inhabited it.

"Why do you think we call them Word Eaters?" Hyt asks with a shrug of both shoulders and all nine tentacles. "Because they *eat*."

"What a gluttonous waste of resources," Abraxas snarls, pushing the tablet away. I hand it back to Hyt as my gaze drifts to Rurik, ever the tortured princeling. His endless eyes are fixed on the mug in his own hand just before he lifts it to his lips to take a sip. I notice he didn't offer Hyt or Abraxas any tea, but I bet that has less to do with bad manners and more to do with the reality that neither of them drinks tea. Well, Hyt drinks tea-ish, but I definitely can't see Abraxas enjoying boiled plant water.

"Hey come on, you can't help who you're related to," Hyt says, surprising me by showing sympathy for the prince. Rurik looks over at him, equally surprised. "I've seen the Geometridae and how the Atrata run it. Even with all of this, we're better off here."

"Better off, perhaps, but it is not ideal." Rurik takes another sip of his tea, and I do the same. It's very sweet, flavored with

a honeyed nectar and so very moth-like. I don't say that aloud though. Let the man think himself a great imperial prince and not a moth man. It's the right thing to do.

"Whatever did you offer the Atrata to get permission to refuel on Pradzny?" Hyt asks, almost absently, like it's something that's just now come to mind. We all turn to Rurik, but I see right away that the question has made him so absurdly uncomfortable that he isn't going to answer it.

"It doesn't matter." He waves a hand dismissively. "I will handle it."

"Only lizards and liars give such evasive answers," Abraxas says with a scowl of his own. I have no idea what that phrase means, but hey, when in Jungryuk, talk like a Jungryukian dragon alien monster. "We are about to receive a visitor."

The chime at the bedroom door goes off, and Rurik sighs dramatically, moving back over to the table to collect his robe from the chair. Hyt just climbs into the blankets and tugs them over his junk. Abraxas, well, he's always technically naked anyway.

The prince opens the door to reveal Zero waiting on the other side.

"I have completed a perimeter check, Your Imperial Highness," she tells him. Likely that would've been the end of her visit, but your girl isn't very elegant. I bump the screen on Hyt's tablet, starting the Cartian planet's annihilation footage all over again.

"Female," Abraxas warns, but it's too late.

In my haste to turn it off, what I actually do is crank the volume. Apparently, there's some commentary overlaid on the video that I wasn't aware of. Crap.

"Planet Seven-Six-One-Four-Nine-Eight-Two. Cartia. Home to four billion Cartian citizens. Struck from the Noctuidan record."

"I want to see it," Zero breathes suddenly, taking a step toward the prince that causes him to take one back. Sure, he can control her every move, but that look in her eye ... I don't

blame him. The blood-powered cyborg girl looks downright manic. “I want to see it,” she repeats, her voice caught in the choke point of her throat. The words come out in a rough strangle as she slowly gets to her knees in front of Rurik. “Your Imperial Majesty, *please*.”

“Absolutely not,” Rurik sniffs, tucking the edges of his robe together. He’s playing the part of the haughty prince, but what he’s really doing is trying to save his friend from seeing something that nobody should ever see: the complete and total annihilation of everyone and everything she ever knew and loved.

“I beg of you,” Zero whispers, putting her forehead to the floor at Rurik’s feet. “I beg you, Majesty.” When she lifts her face again, tears of blood streak her cheeks. Her blood lace choker pulses with light as she clasps her hands together in desperate pleading.

“It will do you no good,” Rurik explains, voice a touch softer this time. He holds his tea mug like a shield between them, like the warmth of the cup might keep all the hard and horrible truths at bay. “There is nothing for you to gain from this, Raina.”

Even the use of her real name isn’t enough to break the spell.

“If she wants to see it, let her see it,” I tell him from my position on the bed, tucked up against Abraxas’ hot body, the paused tablet resting in my lap. “If ... if it were Earth, I’d want to see.”

“It will not be Earth,” Rurik says, his words almost harried. “I certainly will not allow Yaoh and the World Station to fall. I will do my best to save Jungryuk. You must trust me.”

“I do,” Zero tells him before I can respond. “Your Majesty, you are the most brilliant star that has ever shown in the whole of the Noctuida. I will see you to the throne; I will see your parents displaced.” A deep breath as she reaches up to swipe the bloody tears from her face, leaving streaks of red on her pale cheeks. “Even if it kills me, I will give everything I have to find that end. But I want to see. I am without a home,

without a family, without a body of my own. In this, let me have free will.”

Rurik hesitates, but only briefly. He turns away and waves his hand again, offering silent permission.

When Zero approaches the bed, Abraxas growls, but I ignore him, crawling across the blankets to hand the tablet out to my bodyguard. She takes it gingerly, turns up the volume, and restarts the video.

“As the Chief Officer of Yaoh, I record this footage for posterity’s sake. Let the cruelty of the Vestalis remain known, so that it cannot be erased from existence at their merest whim.”

“My great-grandfather’s voice,” Hyt says softly, staring up at the ceiling. His tentacles peep up around the edges of the blankets, seeking my skin and curling around my extremities. He squeezes me gently as Zero watches the horror unfold on the screen.

She watches it not just once or twice but six times before handing the tablet back.

Our eyes meet, red boring into green.

“I will do everything in my power to make certain this does not happen to Earth,” she tells me, and then she turns on her heel and strides, barefoot and bloodied, out the bedroom door. It swishes shut behind her.

The room falls into strange silence.

“I am sorry that you are the most palatable Vestalis of them all,” Abraxas says softly, “but to get something good, one must often give up something in return.”

“I am aware,” Rurik breathes out, finishing his tea and then slamming the mug down like it’s a shot glass.

“If *The Korol* fires on Yaoh and the World Station,” Hyt muses gently, “our shields will kick in. We can take maybe ... five or six hits before they fail? If we need to, maybe we could bait your parents into eating my planet instead of this one?”

“They will eat nothing,” Rurik snaps out, tossing his robe aside. His pants follow after, and then he’s climbing naked into the bed with the rest of us. “I will make certain of it.”

My husband takes me in gentle hands as my other husband snaps his fingers to shut off the lights. My jungle husband curls his body at the edge of the bed to watch.

Rurik and I make love, and then we seek sleep in one another’s arms. The other men don’t pressure me for anything more than that, and I know, without a doubt, that I, against all odds, have found the one place in the universe where I belong.



“Morning, bitch,” Jane says, offering a little fist bump when I meet her in the living room the next morning. I’m yawning profusely, but only because I just woke up. Actually, I slept like a fucking baby. I’m as well-rested as I’ve ever been in my life. “Finally getting that time off that’s so well-deserved?” she asks as I study her black breeches, knee-high boots, and gold military jacket. It’s unbuttoned over a black crop that shows off her perfectly toned abs.

Huh.

Jane’s always been an early riser—her wake-up time is often the same as my bedtime—but this is a whole new look, the pirate thing. She has another tricorne hat on her head of dark hair, a black one with a gold feather stuck in it.

“Good morning,” I say on the tail-end of another yawn. Abraxas stalks out of the room behind me, stretching like a dog with his front feet on the ground and his ass in the air. Jane studies him before turning to me again.

“I was hoping you were going to come out soon,” she says slyly, and I give her a look.

“Sorry, yeah, I was busy. Had to give three different hand jobs.” It’s supposed to be a joke, but this is Jane we’re talking about. She doesn’t take it that way.

“Three different masterclasses in hand jobbing,” she says with a chuckle. “You and all your *vast* experience. So, virgin bestie, how was it?”

“Do you mock my female?” Abraxas asks as he saunters past like a hungry housecat. “She is quite proficient at what she does.”

“Oh, I’ll *bet* that she is,” Jane says with a snort, and I narrow my eyes on her. She’s had five times as many partners as I have, easy. “What? You expect me to take it easy on you after you defiled a copy of *Twilight* to write me such a stupid message?”

Oh. I’d almost forgotten about that.

“Eww, a Twi-hard,” I say with a gag, dodging the faux punch she tries to land on my shoulder. “But hey, if you want to know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, I’ll tell you: each guy was completely different.” I start ticking fingers off as Hyt strides past, ruffling up my hair, and Rurik follows. They’re both wearing robes, and they both look ridiculously sexy in the morning light streaming through the thick canopy around the ship. “Two hands for Abraxas, Rurik’s claspers try to reel me in, and with Hyt, I can’t tell if I’m doing him or he’s doing me.” I look up at Jane and raise a brow. “Tentacles. So many tentacles.”

“Yeah, I noticed that when Kidd and I— When I watched Falopex porn by myself.”

I just stare at her.

“Right.”

My bestie clears her throat.

“I have to go help Kidd with something on the ship today, but if you’re not okay with that, I’ll stay.”

I wave my hand dismissively in her direction as Rurik rouses Connor and Brot from their entwined slumber on the sofa.

“No, no, you go. I was actually going to tell you that we’re going to see the birthing den—”

Jane cuts me off by snorting a totally inappropriate laugh, and I narrow my eyes at her.

“I’m sorry.” She makes quotes with her fingers. “*The birthing den*. Have fun with that. If I *ever* give birth, it’ll be in a hospital with epidurals or the alien equivalent of such a thing. But you do you. Have a jungle birth if you want.”

“Your censure is ridiculous considering that you are also pregnant,” Abraxas remarks, opening the front door, so that he can sit on the porch and stare into the woods with those beautiful purple eyes of his.

“I’m sorry, what?” Jane asks, turning to look at him, but he doesn’t break his stare or bother to respond. “What did he just say?” she asks me, but I shrug. If Abraxas thinks that Jane is pregnant, well ... maybe she is? I don’t know. I’m still not convinced that Hyt is pregnant with a girl child.

“Morning,” Kayla says, scratching at her mussed hair and flopping onto the couch behind Jane. I give her a little wave as Avril enters with two cups of coffee in hand. When she passes one to me, I thank her profusely.

“So not fair that the only coffee in the Noctuida is in that cup,” Jane mutters, shaking her head. Avril gives her a look and then shrugs one shoulder.

“Sorry, but Eve is the Imperial Princess—difficult as that is to believe. All your coffee are belong to her.” Avril chuckles, but Jane and I both just *stare*. “Sorry. My dad was a huge fan of that video game, *Zero Wing*, in the early nineties.” A pause. “It’s a meme?”

Yeah ... nope. Still don’t understand the reference. *How old is this chick anyway?* I squint at her, but she appears ageless.

“I don’t understand the meme, but I agree that Eve is ...” Jane surveys me and then shakes her head. “I know she doesn’t *look* like a queen, but she’s got a good head on her shoulders. Better her than me.”

“Alien politics are still politics,” Avril agrees with a snorting laugh. “Vestalis versus Falopex? Ouch. She’ll need all the help she can get. Thus, the coffee treats.”

“Yes, thank you both.” I gesture with the coffee mug, taking a sip and groaning like I’m halfway to climax. The spines on

Abraxas' back rise, and his scales ruffle in horny distress. Poor thing.

"When we finish those beans, we can try the Columbia reserve that was hidden in another drawer," Avril whispers, like this is a state secret. "With your Falopex honeybuns around, we may never have to drink decaf *Dunkin'* again; he has a talent for scouring the black market."

"Alright. Well. I'm on my way out." Jane points at the door with a single finger. "It's not easy being a space pirate, you know. It's a life of living on the edge, a life of vigilance. We almost got eaten on an abandoned space station."

"Yeah, you ham, you mentioned that," I tell her as both Avril and I sip our coffee with matching orgasmic sighs. Jane glares at me, so I roll my eyes and hand out the coffee so she can partake of the liquid gold. She takes a *very* generous sip and then hands the mug back, offering an apologetic look along with it.

"Are you sure you're okay with this? With me jetting out the door so early in the morning?"

"Don't be sad," I tell her, reaching out to take one of her hands. I cannot even begin to tell you how happy I am to have my best friend here with me. If I'd been given a choice back on Earth as to who I wanted to bring with me on this adventure, I'd have picked Jane Baker. "This isn't our last week together; this is the *beginning* of our life. This is our new reality." I give her a strong look. I need her to understand that I'm telling the truth. "You know you can live here with us if you want?" I suggest, and she nods. "Or on *The Korol* or ... wherever. As queen, I'll make sure you're happy, healthy, and well taken care of no matter where you go." I take a deep breath. I'm not good with sappy stuff, but this needs to be said.

"I know," Jane confirms, straightening her hat again. "And you know that you're always welcome on Kidd's ship?" She says it like it's a question, and I nod. "With a free ride to Earth any time."

"Same." I offer a bright grin and we bump fists again.

“Alright, I’m out then. Have fun with your multi-alien orgies,” she tells me, and then she’s fleeing the house before I can explain my theory that four people does not an orgy make. It has to be at least five, right? That’s what I tell myself anyway. *Damn, I should’ve made fun of her ugly pants before she left.*

Oh Jane.

“Hey, Kayla, are you into coffee?” I ask, lifting the mug in her direction as she cuddles a pillow to her chest and sizes up the Connor/Brot cuddle-fest on the seat kitty-corner to her own. Brot is brushing his feelers across Connor’s blue-black hair and tainting the air with this cloying, powdery scent, like sugar water and baby powder. Gag. *Ah, right. A Vestalis’ pheromones only smell good to their own mate.* Point taken.

“Nah. I was abducted before I got into it, and it’s worth *big* money out here in the Noct. You drink it.” Kayla settles in with a silver package in her hands, eyes glittering as she stares at the item like *it* is worth big money in her mind.

I think it’s a Capri Sun. You know, one of those juice pouches with the tiny straws you have to stab into the top, the drink that masquerades as something healthy-ish, but is just sugar water? My eldest sister and I have a huge age gap; she grew up in the nineties when those things were handed out like water bottles.

“Ah, so you found my secret stash,” Hyt says, returning to the living room with a mug in his own hand. I wonder what he’s drinking? The Falopex tea-ish stuff? Rurik has one, too, and I assume that he’s made more Vestalin tea. “Is there anyplace you humans don’t think you should snoop? Hmm?” Hyt asks it like a serious question, but his voice is warm with love and affection.

“I don’t snoop in your private spaces,” Kayla sniffs, and then she levels me with a dark look. “I once opened the drawer beside his bed and vowed to never, ever do that again. I think I was like, sixteen at the time.” She stabs the yellow straw into her drink, takes a sip, and then sighs like she’s having a full body reaction to the black market human sugar water.

“I’ve snooped just about everywhere that I can snoop,” Avril admits, shrugging her shoulders. “I’m sorry, but like, I was abducted by aliens, and I want to know everything.”

“Sorry, not sorry?” I ask, and she shrugs again, sipping her coffee.

“It is a good morning to hunt,” Abraxas says, coming back into the room on all fours before he sheathes his claws and rises to two feet. “But we will collect food on the way to the birthing den. Will these helpless creatures be able to hunt for themselves?”

“Eh, I have plenty of food in the kitchen,” Hyt responds with a dismissive wave of his tails. He takes a sip from his mug, all six irises in both eyes locked on me. “I’ve been hoarding food for years. I put toilets in this house for human guests that I never truly believed I’d have.” He grins, flashing sharp teeth. “I’m thrilled to have a chance to put it all to use.” He pauses, whispers something under his breath, and then flashes from pink to blue.

“Speaking of human guests,” Connor says, untangling himself from his Vestalis mate. Brot makes a hissing sound—a moth-like one—and curls his lip in a way that reminds me of Rurik. “Is there more coffee on hand? If you’ll recall, I too, am a prince.”

“A *princeling*,” Avril says, giving her ex-boyfriend a look. God, that’s weird, thinking about the two of them— Nope. I won’t go there. “Not a prince. Completely different. Besides, I’m Eve’s lady-in-waiting, not yours. You can only have coffee if she says you can and, even then, make it yourself.” She takes a seat on the third couch and drinks from the mug with her eyes closed.

I’m fascinated with the group dynamics here, but I can’t seem to pull my eyes away from the line of men standing against the window. Outside, the wildness of Jungryuk waits in dark greens and browns and the impossible black of forest shadows. Sunlight streaks through it in bright golden beams, the planet’s manic suns finding their way to the ground

through impossible odds. And, silhouetted against all of that magic, are the three males that I can now safely call my own.

Abraxas then Rurik then Hyt. Naked, wearing a robe and pants, wearing a robe and nothing else with ass cheeks hanging out. Watching me, watching me, watching me. Drinking nothing, clenching his mug tight, sipping his drink and then flicking his purple tongue against the edge of his mouth. Mine, mine, mine.

I grin into my drink as I take a seat beside Avril.

“Damn, okay. When did you get so savage?” Connor grumbles as Brot clenches his teeth and tucks his feelers back.

“I’ve always been savage, dickhead,” Avril replies easily, opening her eyes. “It’s why we broke up.”

Kayla chuckles and squeezes her drink pouch tightly in her fist, emptying the last of the liquid.

“I’d forgotten how amazing it was to hang out with other humans—Americans in particular. I’m from Wilsonville, Oregon, by the way. How about you guys?” Kayla points a finger around the room.

“Portland,” Avril, Connor, and I all reply in unison, and Kayla nods slowly, as if there’s something about our hometown that tells her everything she needs to know. I have a love/hate vibe with the city I grew up in, can’t lie. There’s a lot I’m *not* going to miss, but there’s also the Grotto, the Freakybuttrue Peculiarium, and Powell’s Books so ... Yeah, there are some parts I’ll miss.

“Portland ...” Hyt trails off and then comes to sit provocatively on the edge of the coffee table, his robe falling open to reveal a long length of beautiful blue thigh. The top is already mostly undone, showing off his perfect chest and eight of his ten abs. Avril chokes on her drink and forces her attention to the side, squeezing her eyes shut. I snort a laugh into my coffee. “That’s north of Wilsonville?” he asks, like he’s actually familiar with the terrain.

“South,” I correct as Rurik finally breaks through whatever it is in his brain that’s holding him back. He takes a seat beside

me, our bodies pressed close together. Abraxas ... err, crawls onto the back of the couch and curls around us both like a jungle cat protecting his kittens. I have no doubt that he'll now protect Hyt and Rurik with his life. First off, because Hyt is pregnant with our baby. Second, because he knows I love these men.

And I love him to bursting. I've never felt so fulfilled—or so full, pun intended—in all my life.

Hyt's companion floats down in a sea of gentle bubbles, sticking himself to the side of my neck. I grin and reach up to give him a little stroke. I wish I could see myself right now, with a mini alien octopus glued to my skin.

“You're so rude, Shithead,” Hyt tells him, reaching out to poke the small creature with a single finger. But he stays blue, so he obviously doesn't mean that.

“He is intuitive and intelligent,” Abraxas says, voice dripping with wisdom. I am truly shocked at the capabilities of the translator that Rurik forced on me while I was sleeping. *Yeah, don't you feel like an idiot for treating Abraxas like a wild jungle beast all this time?* I do. I should just accept that our child is, in fact, going to be a girl. And also that Jane is pregnant. I hide my sly smile in another sip of coffee. “He loves Eve for her courage, sociability, and gentle heart—as I'm sure we all do.”

I flush a little. I am not good at taking compliments.

“Hey,” I say, trying to push the conversation toward a new, less embarrassing subject. “Has anyone seen Two-Face?” All I get are blank stares in response. “The two-headed cat?”

“Oh,” Connor says, standing up to make his way to the kitchen. Brot follows him, their hands entwined. *I smell codependency.* I tell myself that I am nowhere near that level with my own lovers. Only ... I am. I truly fucking am. “The cat pissed on your kitchen counter and then jumped out a window. Think he'll get eaten out there?”

“I think that cat knows exactly what it is doing,” Abraxas responds easily.

“I think it’s merely a mindless beast,” Brot sniffs, and Rurik gives his older brother a look.

“You are speaking to the prince consort; watch your tongue, Brot.”

Brot pales—which is a difficult trick for a Vestalis to pull off—and then he disappears as Connor yanks him through the kitchen doorway and out of sight.

“The prince consort?” Abraxas repeats, and I wonder how his translator is handling that one. I can only assume he has the same implant that I do. “Ah ... the mate of a queen. Yes, I accept that title.”

Rurik smiles wryly, taking an imperious sip of his tea.

“It is a title that has never before existed in the Imperial Court, but I will introduce the subject to my people. There will be resistance; we will crush it swiftly and move on.” He casts a look in my direction, the expression dripping with authority, the promise of violence, and ... endless love and affection.

You and your mates will be well taken care of. You will want for nothing. I will love you in perpetuity and throughout endless lives. But next time, I do not want to take the throne.

I hastily shove my coffee mug in Hyt’s direction and he snatches it up with a tentacle, leaving me space to throw my arms around Rurik’s waist so that I can squeeze him—hard. He reaches down with his naked fingers, stroking them through my hair. It’s a bit tangled, but he uses his two long nails to work the knots loose.

“Human hugs—my favorite of all human things,” Abraxas says with a gentle growl threaded into his words. His tail slips around my waist, hugging me even as I’m hugging the prince. It’s a near perfect moment with one exception ... and then Hyt hooks several tentacles around my ankles and calves, rubbing sweet oil pheromones into my skin.

Zero appears at the front door, picking leaves out of her bone-white hair.

“I wish to sign up for Affiance,” she announces, and I sit up in time to catch Rurik’s slight cringe, his eyes squeezing shut.

His feelers have left a gentle pheromone powder in my hair. I run my fingers through it and then try to surreptitiously reach back to brush the purple markings on Abraxas' lower belly. He growls approvingly at me which, you know, makes the move a lot less surreptitious.

"Affiance, the dating app?" I ask, remembering suddenly that Avril also wanted to sign up for that.

"Can you entertain a mate and perform your duties as well?" Rurik asks, opening his eyes and then glancing in Zero's direction.

"You know," Hyt remarks, leaning forward and putting an elbow on his naked knee, both my mug and his dangling from a few spare tentacles. "With me and Abraxas around, Eve won't really need a bodyguard after you become king, right?"

Rurik's gorgeous porn star mouth purses slightly and he glances my way again. Our eyes meet in a rush of feeling. *Whatever you want, my queen*, he tells me, and bittersweet emotion floods me. I give a brief nod.

"I suppose that is true," Rurik hedges aloud, and I grin, clapping my hands together and then shivering as a rush of need mushrooms like an explosion inside my chest. *Shit, fuck*. I have Abraxas' sticky pheromones smeared across my palms.

"It's a deal then," I say with a grin. "After we take the throne, both you and Avril are free to find your own soulmate or soulmates, in the plural."

"And me?" Kayla asks, drawing Hyt's attention back to her again. "You'll be a prince consort, too, right? So ... can I sign up for Affiance?"

"Is the app that big of a deal?" I query as Hyt sits up a little straighter, and gives Kayla a knowing look.

"As long as you don't date a Falopex," he repeats, and I hear something unspoken in that sentence. *As long as you don't date that Falopex*. I seriously need to know if this is about that Bram guy. My curiosity is raging.

"I do not know what *Affiance* is, but I suggest you search for a mate until you find one that complements your ragged edges,

and fills the empty holes in your heart. More than anything, I suggest you find a mate who treats you with kindness and compassion.” Abraxas sits up and puts his legs on either side of me, sliding down the back of the couch at the same time that he uses his tail to lift me into his lap. His strong, ebony arms slide around me, his scales hot to the touch, his pheromones sinking into my blood in every place where his markings rub against my bare skin. “Now, my sweet little female, we shall go to the birthing den.”

“Of course,” I manage to whisper, wondering how I’m going to make it all the way there when what I really want to do is tear my clothes off and get into bed with these three males. Even better if they choke the air with pheromones until every breath becomes exquisite torture.

“Can we go to the market today?” Kayla asks as Abraxas rises to his feet with me in his arms.

“Only if you take Zero with you,” Hyt says after exchanging a look with Rurik. The prince nods.

“You will make certain these humans—and my brother—remain hale and whole while we are out today. If you go to the market, you go under the guise of searching for the princess. My parents have eyes everywhere.”

“Yes, My Imperial Prince.” Zero takes a bow as Abraxas heads for the door with me in his arms, strides onto the porch, and leaps right over the balcony and onto the ground below. Doesn’t even break a sweat. Hell, I’m not even *jostled* by the move.

“We’ll get dressed and be right down!” Hyt calls out, and I grin as my dragon mate turns us and pushes me against the exterior wall of our new ship-house.

“You’re doing better than I thought with the whole sharing thing,” I whisper as Abraxas lowers his face to my neck and inhales. When he exhales, he lets out an affectionate chuff and ruffles my hair with his warm breath.

“I like this new den, and I am pleased by the ingenuity and intelligence of both the Sucker Tail and the World Eater.”

There's a long pause there where Abraxas drags his tongue over my neck, and I lose all rational faculties. My cunt pulses, and I'm tempted to beg for his mating rod. I want it so goddamn bad. *I want another baby*, my body tells me, but my brain reminds me that's a terrible idea. *How would that work anyway, if I had another one? How long can Hyt hold onto an embryo for me?* "I do not like to admit this as it implies a weakness on my part, but it is reassuring to know that if I am injured or otherwise engaged, that there are those I can trust to watch over you." Abraxas huffs a laugh as he takes a step back, dropping down to all fours and digging his claws into the soft earth beneath us. "I did not ever believe there would be a soul in existence with whom I would trust my mate."

I can't keep the smile off my face.

I throw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his strong neck, and I thank him with my whole heart and soul for all the wonderful and selfless gifts that he's given me.

"Thank you," I tell him, my voice edged with tears. "Thank you, Big D."

He chuckles, and then wraps his tail around me.

"No, female, thank *you* for quenching the hungry depths of my lonely heart."



We stop at the beach before heading up to the birthing den, standing together on the black sand and watching as the waves crash, sapphire and white foam on rocks. The suns reflect off the water, enhancing the azure color with an injection of liquid gold.

Abraxas keeps us all shaded with a single wing, waiting patiently for something to emerge from the surf.

"What are we looking for exactly?" I ask, fidgeting impatiently. I'm still wearing my robe and lingerie from this

morning because, you know, my dragon mate didn't give me any time to change. But that's okay. I feel exotic and commanding on this alien soil, my bare toes digging into the soft black sand.

"Patience, my mate," Abraxas rumbles with the laugh of a beast. "Time moves quickly in those star-traveling vessels, but when we are connected with the softness of the natural world, patience is necessary in order to witness miracles."

Hyt whistles and adjusts his black hat with a tentacle.

"Well said, my friend," he tells him as my hand clasps tight to Rurik's, squeezing hard. Hyt and Abraxas might know what's going on here, but neither the prince nor I have any idea.

"This should satisfy your wanderlust a bit, eh?" I tease, giving Rurik a gentle elbow to the side. He's dressed in black today with silver buckles on his jacket and boots, but at least the jacket is undone so that I can see the marble-esque perfection of his chest and abs.

"You satisfy my wanderlust, princess," Rurik tells me, and when I glance his way, he's smiling.

"Oh, and you blink and miss it," Hyt teases, and I whip my gaze back around just in time to catch a glimpse of a fat white seal *thing*. It's as big as an orca whale, but fuzzy, with two spiral horns on its head. The tide draws back, and I see that it's not just one animal, but dozens. Babies, too. Their eyes are even bigger than the adults, huge black circles framed with long lashes.

"Beautiful," Rurik breathes, but he isn't looking at the animals. No, he's looking at me, studying the expression on my face like it's the most valuable commodity in the whole of the Noctuida. He reaches out with a hand to touch my chin, and I shiver. *Your awe, your joy, I could drink it in place of your blood.*

I exhale, and then jump in surprise as a bright song explodes from the first of the large creatures. And then they're

spreading wings I didn't know they had and taking off into the sky, trailing water as they go.

"Holy fuck," I breathe as Hyt chuckles, and Abraxas snorts.

"There is more," he reassures me with the purr of an Aspis male in rut. Well, I mean, I think he's always 'in rut' so to speak, but you get what I'm trying to say. Sex on a dragon stick, that's Abraxas for you. "Patience is *essential*."

"It's also a virtue, but I'm not a particularly virtuous human, now am I?" I retort, still clinging to Rurik's hand as I stare out at the sea. I don't see anything other than shells and bones (way too many bones) buried in the sand, a few scuttling crab-ish things. Just ish though. I'm not sure what it is about the Noctuida, but most creatures have too many legs for my liking. These are not the exception.

"Virtuous?" Rurik repeats, likely puzzling out the multiple meanings in his translator. "Perhaps not in chastity, but in commendable qualities or beneficial traits, yes. You are very virtuous indeed, my princess."

"You hear that?" Hyt teases, his tentacles smoothing over the skin of my legs and arms. "His Imperial Majesty just called you a minx." He stays blue, so he's clearly joking but ... but is he though?

Abraxas rears back as if he's offended on my behalf.

"Perhaps the meaning is lost in translation, but this sweet little female is anything but an easy conquest. I had to court her with vicious intent. It was a true *vener*." Abraxas snarls this last word out with so much heat that I have a physical reaction to it. My pussy clamps down like she's trying to milk his mating rod, and I nearly stumble. Abraxas steadies me with a wing-hand on the top of my head.

My translator burbles that last word a bit.

"*The world 'grawl' may refer to one or more of the following meanings,*" it begins in that strange, perfunctory voice that I remember from when Zero updated my software to include the Aspis language. *Grawl* is just my best interpretation of the ripping snarl that punches into my

eardrum. *“Definition one, noun: the art of hunting. Definition two, noun: prey or game. Definition three, noun: the pursuit of sex. Definition four, noun: sex.”*

Oh dear.

I shift on my feet and reach up a single finger, running it along the edge of the lace and silk teddy that I’m wearing, my fingertip gliding over the moist mounds of my breasts. It’s hot as fucking hades out here, and I’m surrounded by three males who absolutely do it for me. *I can’t breathe; I don’t care what else is in the water.*

Would it be inappropriate if I invited them all back to the birthing den for another group session?

“I agree with the Aspis,” Rurik murmurs belatedly, his demon eyes fixed on my finger as it traces over my décolletage. I very quickly drop my hand by my side. “You are the most difficult mate bond in the history of the Vestalin race.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you shouldn’t have kidnapped a naked chick inside her own den? Hmm?” I pretend like I don’t feel Hyt staring at me. He doesn’t allow for that luxury, leaning in to tease me.

“Were you hard to court? All I remember is that you were supposed to be a fake fiancée, but behaved like a real one from about ... oh, right about the moment you impregnated me.”

“Seriously? You’re all going to team up to tease me in tandem? I didn’t sign up for this shit.”

“No,” Rurik agrees readily, reaching out with a long, red nail to turn my face back to the ocean. “This is our Star-destined fate.”

I release his hand, so that I can clamp both of my own against my mouth.

There’s a *castle* under the water. As the tide draws further from the shore, I can see black spirals twisting up like Abraxas’ horns, punctuated with purple veins of bioluminescence that shimmer and flare with light before

growing dark again. I see windows, some with cracked glass, others intact, all of it covered in unidentifiable sea creatures.

“What ...?” I don’t even have the time to finish the question before the sea steals it away, and the tide begins to come in again. Um. That’s *definitely* not how the tide works on Earth. “What was that?” I ask, releasing Rurik’s hand to take a few unconscious steps toward the water. My feet sink into the wet sand as sunlight falls across my face and I’m forced to lift a hand to shield my eyes.

“An Atrata space station?” Rurik says it like a question, moving up to stand beside me.

“I do not know what it is, but it has been here for as long as I have been alive.” Abraxas stalks into the water, watches the waves with eyes mosaiced from sapphire and amethyst, and then lashes out with his tail, snatching a creature that looks a bit like a swordfish. If, you know, swordfish had legs. And were black with purple gills. And also winged. He flicks his tail and snaps the creature’s neck, leaving the body to hang limp in his grip.

“Which is how long again?” I scratch absently at my ear with a pinky finger. I would *love* to know the age of my dragon mate. Hyt and I are literally the exact same age, which is cool. Rurik is a little older, which is hot. But ... Abraxas? I have no fucking clue.

“I am a mature adult male, well past sexual maturity,” he repeats, as if I were unaware of any of that—especially that last part. It is abundantly clear that my mate is a whole ass man. When Abraxas notices the expression on my face, he huffs, throwing a wing-hand into the water and snagging another one of the alien swordfish. He breaks that one’s neck in much the same way as the first, and then tosses it into his massive mouth, swallowing it whole. “There are infants, babies, children, adolescents, adults, and elders. That is it. What more is needed, human female?”

“How many turns around the central sun have you been around for?” Hyt asks delicately, coming up to stand on Rurik’s right. The prince is gazing out at the sea, committing it

to memory. *He may never see it again*, the shadows in my mind whisper, but I banish them by dropping my hand from my face and letting the sunlight blind me for a brief moment.

Abraxas turns his head *sloooowly* to look at Hyt, and it's fucking terrifying. His lips pull back from his teeth, revealing the sneer of something wild and untamed. The handsome Falopex officer doesn't even flinch, looking back at him and quirking a fin-brow. Abraxas growls low and deep, but it's not a threat or a warning, just a sound of bemused contemplation. I'm not sure how I know that; I just do.

Scrambles the translators though. The rest of us cringe and clamp hands or tentacles over our ears. Ouch.

"My apologies, precious female," Abraxas purrs, giving me an adorable headbutt and rubbing his horns over my hair. "I did not intend to break the poorly designed alien tech; I have never once taken the time to observe or record such things. If I knew my age in numeric terms, I would tell you."

"It's okay." I'm surprised to find that I'm enjoying the fact that he doesn't know. The unknown only adds to the appeal of his enigmatic nature. "You've got some seriously primal rizz, you know that, Abraxas?"

"Rizz?" Hyt queries absently, playing with the brim of his hat. "My translator isn't picking that one up." He switches from blue to pink. Ah, the joys of ever-evolving human slang. Seeing as I won't be living on Earth anymore, I'll probably start to sound outdated in about ... yesterday. Yep. Already outdated.

"Don't even worry about it," I mumble as Hyt taps me on the nose with a tentacle and then turns to Rurik.

"To answer your question: yeah, that's an old Atrata space station. Before the Vestalis whipped their asses into the Geometridae, it was locked in rotation around Jungryuk."

"Ah," Rurik replies, closing his eyes briefly and shifting his wings. I smell his pheromones right away, and then I'm the one shifting to relieve the discomfort between my thighs. "That would be about the time my great-many-times

grandfather blew up the Vestalin planet during a dispute with his brother.” He reaches up to rub the black V-shaped mark on his forehead. “How exhausting.”

“Wait ... your people blew up their *own* planet?” I ask, and Rurik offers a small nod of confirmation. “Holy shit.”

“We will be unlike any Vestalin rulers that have ever come before,” he tells me, and I’m at least happy to hear that there’s a note of pride in his words.

“A person is a person,” Abraxas says mildly, sitting back on his haunches. He launches another wing-hand into the water, snatches a fish, and snaps its neck. It disappears down his throat in a single swallow. “You are not the sum of the collective actions of others, either past or present, but an individual. You can and will succeed where others have failed.”

Rurik hesitates slightly, and then nods, giving Abraxas an appreciative look.

“He can be disturbingly wise at times,” I whisper, and the prince smiles, a bittersweet stretch across his gorgeous mouth.

“There it is again,” Hyt calls out, using a tentacle to point at the space station as the tide once again begins to recede. I look over to see the Gothic spirals of the Atrata station come into view again. “We’ll have to swim down sometime and check it out.” He fluffs his tails in my face and then turns away, sashaying into the canopy behind us in his see-through alien cowboy boots, hat, and loincloth. I jog to catch up, Abraxas stalking alongside me and Rurik trailing imperiously behind.

“The chemicals and oil and whatever from the station don’t contaminate the environment?” I ask aloud, wondering if the water is even safe to swim in. Hyt tucks his thumbs under his belt while he thinks on the answer to that question.

“Nobody but me has ever bothered to test the water, but I didn’t get any unusual readings. Jungryuk has a way of neutralizing tech,” he says with a knowing, almost prideful smile. He loves this place as much as Abraxas and I do. Now

all we need to do is get Rurik onboard and then ... *and then we can live happily ever after here?*

I want to believe that; I want it so fiercely that it becomes a burning ache in my chest.

I'll have to make sure that my desire doesn't flame so hot that all my hopes and dreams crumble into ash.



When we arrive at the birthing den, Abraxas pauses to make a fire so that we can cook the fish before climbing or jumping or ... I'm not sure how the other guys are going to get into the den.

I point up.

“How is this going to work?” I'm genuinely curious. I saw Rurik climb the wall into our previous den. He took his gloves off, stabbed his nails into the side, and just sort of hauled ass. I haven't seen anything like it since. And Hyt ... I remember how he pulled himself up onto the floating rock.

I have a feeling I'm about to witness whole new sides to these guys that I've never seen before. Sort of like Abraxas and the tablet last night. We've all changed; we've all been in unfamiliar environments. I'm curious to see how they solve this problem.

“I could get up there, my princess,” Rurik tells me, tilting his head back. “With the blood lace.”

“Your wings don't work?” I tease, and he drops his head to give me a contemplative look in response.

“The Vestalis are flightless,” he says simply, and for some reason, that's one of the saddest things I have ever heard him say.

“You're ... flightless?” I repeat, and I guess it just never occurred to me that he hadn't used his wings in front of me. We haven't really had the chance. A lot of our time together

has been spent indoors, and on spaceships with ... very little room to fly. It suddenly all makes a whole lot of strange sense, generation after generation of Vestalis who didn't have the space or opportunity to fly and now they just ... don't. "With all the traveling around you've done? Did you ever try?"

"The Vestalis haven't been able to fly since they ate their own planet," Hyt says, and then he snatches me up in his tentacles, and I let out a small sound. He doesn't answer my question on how he's going to get up to the birthing den. Instead, he shows me. He uses his tentacles to *climb* the tree, one limb after another until he's swinging us over and up, into the entrance on the underside of the crashed vessel.

Oh, it's beautiful. I'm reminded all over again how much I like this place, how at peace I feel here.

Hyt carries me away from the entrance and over the flower-flecked white bench that blockades it, setting me down on the floor as gentle dust motes float in a ray of diffused sunshine.

"You could've just ridden in on Abraxas' back, you know," I tell him, rolling my eyes. The Aspis comes clawing his way into the entrance a split-second later, wing-hands slipping through first, deadly claws on the edges of the white metal. He hauls his black and purple body through, swinging Rurik down with his tail and setting the prince on the floor beside me.

"You can get in with the blood lace, huh?" I tease, and he lifts an imperial brow.

"I chose the most economical route." Rurik adjusts his wings and, intentional or not, floods the relatively small space with pheromones. Not one to be outdone, Abraxas rakes his body against the side of mine, smearing my skin with sensual stickiness. With a snort, Hyt flicks his tails, releasing dozens of pheromone bubbles that are only innocuous until they hit the ceiling and pop.

Um.

My pupils must be blown wide because the shadows of the birthing den don't seem as deep as they did a moment ago. My

skin is hot and tight, and I can already feel that the lace teddy is soaked between my thighs.

Abraxas chuckles.

“And then the female releases her own pheromones and we are slain.” He stalks over to the bed and begins to fluff the nest, rearranging furs just so. Rurik and Hyt are smart enough not to interfere with the nesting process.

“He isn’t wrong though, is he?” Hyt glances over his shoulder and notices a pile of debris in the corner. He turns and points with a tentacle, a strange note of excitement pierced through his next question. “What is all of this?”

I turn to see what he’s looking at, studying the waist-high stack of crap at the edge of the room.

“Yeah, I should probably mention that Abraxas is a bit of a hoarder.” I rub at the back of my head and then shrug.

“Sometimes old alien tech comes in handy, doesn’t it, my tiny, tender mate.” Abraxas finds a lizard in the nest and curls his lips back in a snarl. I look back just in time to see him eat the intruder. Well then. “Without it, we would have had no means with which to communicate; I will sort the items and move the extras to another den before the child is born.”

Hyt wets his lips, letting his strange eyes shift over to me.

“There’s a lot of good stuff here. May I?”

It’s Abraxas who answers for me.

“What is mine is my female’s, and what is yours is your female’s, and so what is mine is yours and what is yours is mine.”

Ah. A complicated explanation for *mi casa es su casa*, am I right?

“I will gift the whole of the Noctuida to you and your mates,” Rurik tells me, cupping the side of my face. I slap his hand away and curl my lip like I’m Abraxas or something. The prince looks so absurdly offended, his feelers swinging out to either side of his head like black-fringed horns of bone. “What I am trying to say is that I agree.”

“Stop trying to be a hero,” I grumble, but then I’m hugging him again and he’s watching with undisguised curiosity as Hyt squats down—flashing a whole lot of sexy blue butt cheek. He pulls items aside and mumbles under his breath, his skin turning pink for a few brief blinks before he’s blue again, and then the cycle starts all over. Pink. Blue. Pink, blue, pink, blue.

“Aha!” He hauls something out of the pile and then stands up, clutching it with the end of one tentacle and using both hands to cover his mouth in a gesture he probably learned from me. Hyt drops his hands to his sides and turns to face us, lifting up a ... a pearl earring? At least it’s not a pearl necklace, eh? “Look what I found. I thought I smelled a Falopex pearl in this ship.”

“This is a Falopex pearl?” Rurik inquires, and at least he sounds as confused as I am. “I do not understand.”

“Well.” Hyt tosses the earring up and then catches it in his hand. That’s when I know it’s truly valuable, when he touches it with his actual hand. “It’s rare for this to happen but sometimes ... a Falopex misplaces their pearl or it gets stolen.”

“Like your sister and her mate?” I ask, but he shakes his head once, a grim smile lighting his lips.

“As in, the pearl isn’t exchanged with a potential mate but actually lost or physically stolen.” He takes a step toward me and lifts it up, letting the delicate piece of jewelry dangle in the muzzy shadows between us. “Same rules apply: if they don’t find it in time, they die. Whoever this belonged to is long-dead.”

Abraxas slithers up beside Hyt, a current of shadow and sin, curling his body around the Falopex and causing the man’s pink scales to ruffle with concern. Big D leans in, sniffing the pearl vigorously and then flicking his tongue against it.

“The scent is quite subtle; I did not initially detect it.” Abraxas sounds salty as fuck about that, too.

“Falopex are attuned to the scents of other Falopex,” Hyt admits as I tuck my hair behind my ear and turn my head so

that he can slip the earring through my lobe. He tries anyway, but there's a bit of skin that seems to have grown back. Guess it's been a while since I wore any earrings?

"Pierce it," I confirm, and Hyt pushes the end of the earring through, a tiny spark of pain and a bit of blood follows. Rurik's nostrils flare and he leans down, flicking his tongue against the blood to clean it off. The pain turns to pleasure, a strange erotic tingling in my ear. When the prince draws back, there's a bit of lace on his lips that he rubs off with the back of his hand.

"Keep that on you at all times," Hyt tells me, pointing with a tentacle. "The life force of that Falopex will protect whoever is closest to it." He goes back to digging through the pile as I reach up and touch my fingers to the smoothness of the pearl. *Hyt and I are sharing one of these*, I think with the quirk of a smile on my lips. *I hope that whoever lost this pearl was an asshole like Minae.* "I'll gift the rest of this stuff to Kidd; there's a small fortune to be had here." There's a pause as Hyt draws a strange looking weapon out of the hoard and examines it, tentacles sliding all over the device in a way that makes me jealous. He's giving it a very thorough alien probe, that's for damn sure. "Except for this one. I'm keepin' this."

I turn to Rurik, reaching a hand into the pocket of his jacket and withdrawing the book he brought with him. I dangle it in front of his face, and he lets a slow, sensual twist shape his perfect mouth.

"Brought some alien porn with you?" I tease, and he inclines his head.

"It is a Vestalin romance," he corrects, and I glance over to see both Hyt and Abraxas watching us curiously.

"He read me one of these during our—" I hesitate, but only for a few seconds. "During our honeymoon. Sure, there's *some* plot, but it's oh so very racy."

I flip open the cover, and stare down at the words, letting my synchronicity contacts do their thing.

"*Opposing Minds*," I read. "*A Vestalis/Falopex romance.*"

I look up, my gaze shifting from Rurik to Hyt and then back again. *Oh, that'd be kind of hot, eh? What if Hyt used his tentacles on the prince? What if the prince tied Hyt up with bondage blood lace?*

Hyt flicks me in the forehead with a tentacle.

“Don’t get weird ideas, Earthling,” he says with a sly little smile, sitting cross-legged on the floor to sort through the junk pile. “I’m sure he picked the title for *you* and not for me.”

Abraxas laughs, the sound like a knife in the back, beautiful but deadly. I know my back is safe, but the rest of the Noctuida better watch out.

“Literature,” he says with a snort. “My people tell stories with their *mouths*.”

“It’s no different than sitting around a fire and sharing wisdom,” I retort automatically. If Jane were here, she’d divorce Abraxas for that statement. “Whether you like it or not, books are a part of your life now.”

“There are no recorded instances of Vestalis mate bonding with Aspis,” Rurik explains simply, sliding the book from my hand, his fingers leaving trails of need in their wake. “I would have preferred that to a tale about the Falopex.”

Hyt chuckles, but doesn’t respond, picking out the weapons from the pile and using a stray hide to wrap them up like a package.

“I have seen an Aspis mated to a World Eater,” Abraxas says easily, turning away and snatching me up with his tail. He carries me into the nest and sits me in his lap, using a wing-hand to pick up a cooked piece of the swordfish. He wrapped the filets in leaves and tied them with vines, something that I have *never* seen him do before. I’m guessing he learned to do that in the time we were apart.

When I unwrap it, there’s a spicy fragrance that makes my mouth water, and I see that the meat is still steaming hot. *Stacked and a provider is right*. My mouth twitches as I use my fingers to tear a piece of flaky black meat off. It’s a bit

odd, eating meat that's the color of Abraxas' scales, but I am way used to weird by now.

Rurik doesn't hesitate to kick off his boots, shrug his jacket from his shoulders, and join us in the nest.

Abraxas goes strangely still for a moment, the idea of another male in his nest an odd and unnatural phenomenon amongst the Aspis. I wait for him to say something in protest, but he doesn't. Instead, he picks up another of the leaf-wrapped filets with a wing-hand and passes it over to the prince.

"We can only survive together as a unified tribe," Abraxas says, meeting the prince's gaze over my shoulder. "Our fates are as tangled as chokehold vines on a blossom fruit tree."

I have no idea what chokehold vines or blossom fruit trees are, but I understand the reference.

"I agree with that," Rurik says, unwrapping his own food. He hesitates, but only for a moment. He doesn't need anything other than my blood to survive, but I think he likes that humans don't just eat for sustenance. It can be fun, too. I watch his expression as he takes a bite, blinking dark eyes down at the food as the taste settles on his tongue. "Exquisite," he admits with a surprised smile.

That expression fucking does everything for me. My heart slams hard against my ribs, and my eyes get a little teary. I pretend that I'm not having a super emotional reaction to watching my mate eat food prepared by my other mate. That's a blatant lie. I am a fucking liar—mostly when it comes to myself.

Hyt finishes tying up the weapons bundle and then joins us, the gun he salvaged for himself trapped in one of his tails.

"What is that?" I ask as he takes a seat beside me, selecting one of the wrapped filets for himself. His tentacles automatically find their way around my ankles.

"Atrata tech," Hyt says with a salacious little grin. "It's fully loaded, too, which is rare." He points to a clear chamber on the underside of the gun, and I see a viscous white fluid swirl

around inside. *Please don't let that be semen.* Would not surprise me, out here in the Noct. “The Atrata make silk the way the Vestalis make blood lace; the liquefied silk is what’s stored here as ammunition. With a single pull on this trigger, I can replicate the abilities of an Atratan *king*.” Hyt lifts his eyes up to meet Rurik’s. “This particular gun is completely and utterly illegal according to the dictates of the Imperial Court. But—and forgive me if I’m being presumptuous, Your Greatness—I’m assuming I get a free pass to break the law.” Hyt winks theatrically, and leans in, bumping Rurik’s shoulder with his own.

The prince blinks strangely at him, swinging his feelers back like rabbit ears. Rurik narrows his eyes and lifts the corner of his lip up in an angry aristocratic pout. I’ve come to realize that all of the blustering and the scowling and the haughtiness, they’re all just shields to protect the fragile heart underneath. Hyt is similarly unfazed, and I realize that he never was intimidated by the prince. Abraxas either.

“The queen will be in charge of disciplining you,” Rurik drawls, leaning back into the furs like he was born to lounge in luxury. And make no mistake: we might be in a crashed spaceship that’s wedged between two trees, but the pile of soft and beautiful furs beneath us are the very definition of *luxe*. “I do not think it would be good for our relationship if I were to make an attempt at it.”

Hyt unwraps one of the filets and eats with his tentacles instead of his fingers. Abraxas doesn’t bother with any of the delicately cooked dishes. He ate his fill of raw shit outside, and then gorged on some sweet smelling plum things directly from the limbs of a squat tree with red leaves. His breath is pleasantly perfumed when he leans down and licks me, from chin to scalp.

I’m being groomed.

“Stop that,” I grumble, slapping uselessly at him. He snags my wrist with his tail to stop me, locks my head between both wing-hands and wraps his arms around my waist.

“*Hold ... still.*” He growls that out, scrambling my translator again. And then he proceeds to lick and nibble, to groom and pet. I sigh and relax into it. I might protest, but I actually do like it. Abraxas releases my wrist, so that I can eat with two hands.

“How are we going to discipline our kid?” Hyt asks, stretching both feet out in front of him. He’s already taken his boots off and tossed them aside, showing off his webbed toes. He takes a bite of his food and chews in contemplation, using one of his hands to touch his perfectly flat belly. “I’ve heard all sorts of stories from the humans I’ve rescued, but the only thing they had in common was their parenting styles were never the same. My dad was—is—a Star-fucking asshole, so I’m probably inclined to go soft on the little shit.” He lifts his hat to release his companion, and I grin as the tiny creature pauses to kiss my cheek with its beak before sticking its suckers to the metal wall. It hangs sideways, watching with button-like eyes.

“My parents were quite loving when I was young, but as the whole of the Noctuida has witnessed, that love has never prevented them from exacting harsh punishment.” Rurik sets the leaf aside and then collects one of the plums that Abraxas brought up with us. He takes a bite, flashing all six of his vampire fangs. My neck throbs, and my blood pushes angrily at my skin, seeking his hot mouth.

He looks right at me, and knocks me down the fated mates’ hole with him.

Our souls can only exist in tandem with one another. There is no me without you. We are the very definition of destiny.

I gasp in a sharp breath, and then choke on a bite of food, looking around for water and finding none. Hyt leans in quickly, puts his hand on the back of my neck and presses his mouth to mine. Cool water floods my tongue as he kisses me and then draws back, offering me the opportunity to swallow and clear my throat.

“Thanks,” I mumble, as Abraxas resumes his careful grooming of my body. The blood lace robe is pushed from my

shoulders, exposing my heated skin to the intimate space. Three sets of eyes are on me, and I can feel both the pressure and the excitement of their combined interest, their combined affection. *Their combined love.*

“My parents are wise, patient, and true. They did not withhold love or discipline. I will look to them as examples when it comes to raising my own young.”

“Your mom can help with the birth?” I reconfirm, and even the word *birth* gives me the heebie-jeebies. It’s so easy not to think about when I’m not the one carrying the embryo. But once Hyt gives it back? I imagine that’s when the reality of the situation will hit me. We don’t even know what *species* this kid is going to be. Part Aspis? Part Falopex? Part Human? Or all Vestalis, the way Rurik believes?

“She will be of great comfort to you,” Abraxas says, combing through my hair with his fingers as Hyt toys with his own braid. I wonder if he can cut his hair? It’s more like jellyfish tentacles than any type of human hair, but his brothers have short hair. His dad, too. Not that I want him to cut it. When he’s underwater and it fans out around him, he becomes a depthful god.

We all fall silent for a moment, listening to the forest sounds that penetrate into our private little space. The frogs, birds, and insects here on Jungryuk give the impression that the wildest places on Earth are tame in comparison. There’s a cacophony of distant animal voices, the roar of a faraway Aspis, and our combined breaths.

I’ll be giving birth in this nest, I realize, looking up to meet Rurik’s eyes again. No. No, if he’s trapped in that throne room then *that* is where I will have our baby. I’ll do whatever it takes to make his life worth living—even at the expense of living my own.

I just won’t tell him that or he’ll hypnotize me again.

“My parents were too nice growing up,” I say, my voice soft, almost a whisper. There’s a reverence in this place that I instinctively shy away from breaking. “They can be critical now but—” *Who cares about that when they might have*

already had a funeral for me? For Jane? Oh. I rub my face, overcome with emotion suddenly.

“Shall we read?” Rurik asks gently, holding the book up. Abraxas finishes with his grooming session, using his tail to push me into the prince’s lap. I end up curling onto my side in the center of the nest, my head on Rurik’s thigh. Abraxas curls around the pair of us while Hyt relaxes on his back beside me, tentacles gently stroking my bare legs.

We spend the night there together, reading the book straight through.

When the last page is turned, Rurik pulls me into his arms and gently sinks his teeth into my neck. As he drinks from me, he strokes a hand down my back, melting the lingerie from my body. The blood doesn’t even touch the furs, sinking into his skin and disappearing.

He lays me down in the softness of the nest and makes love to me, and it’s as if we’re all alone in our bedroom aboard *The Korol*, a closet full of books and clothes just out-of-sight and around the corner. We finish together, and I invite Hyt in next, taking him into me and giving up the pearl almost immediately. I stroke my fingers down the length of his jaw and kiss him so deeply that he gives the pearl right back to me. I swallow it down easily, the essence of our combined life force lingering on my tongue. Abraxas is last, but I know he likes that, to knot me with his mating rod, or connect with me through the vessels on his pleasure rod.

“We must savor this,” he growls into my ear, fitting both of his shafts into me at the same time. “Tomorrow, I will seek the vents, and you will not be able to have me this way for some days.”

“Oh, how will I ever survive?” I tease, but then he starts to fuck, and one does not interrupt an Aspis in mid-rut.

Afterward, I curl up on my side in the fetal position at the center of the nest, and the men arrange themselves in a circle around me. It begins to rain, and the gentle patter of water on the exterior of the ship, the mingled breathing, it puts me right to sleep without a single shred of worry or fear left in me.

Optimism is a beautiful cloud, but when the storm comes, it doesn't just arrive with a downpour. Lightning, thunder, baleful winds. Somewhere inside of me, I know that I'm setting myself up for a cataclysmic event, but I have yet to come to terms with any of it.

Rurik is going to be king.

One way or another, we'll see our way through the storm to the bittersweet sunshine waiting on the other side.



The best part about living on Jungryuk is the lack of expectations. There are no alarm clocks or appointments. No rules to follow. No property taxes to pay. No jury duty to attend. No errands to run.

It's Abraxas who wakes me up for a quick fuck, knotting with me and delivering yet more seed that I don't have a use for (but desperately want anyway) before he slips out to hunt. I take some time with Hyt, with Rurik, riding one and then the other before I collapse.

Breakfast is brought to us, freshly killed, professionally cooked.

"Who taught you to do this?" I ask, lying on my side, naked, alien cum between my thighs. It's slick and viscous when I wiggle, dripping out of me in obscene and unspeakable ways. It coats the crack of my ass, soaks into the furs beneath me. I'm heady and wild with the feel of it, but ... I'm also finding that I have a stupidly selfish streak.

I like taking the guys one after another. It's hot as fuck. But ... I want to try some group stuff. I just have to figure out how to put an Aspis, a Falopex, and a Vestalis into the body of one little soft-skinned human female. Hmm. *Why did God or Nature or whatever make me so delicate but so horny at the same time? It isn't fair. And on top of all that, I have an A.S.S. card in my proverbial wallet.*

"You," Abraxas replies, tilting his head at me, like I've lost my mind or something.

“Not the fire part or whatever, but the wrapping of the leaves, the tying with the bits of vine. You’re not just cooking the meat over the fire anymore; you’re making recipes.” I push myself into a sitting position and try to use mental gymnastics to get over the idea that the meat on my leaf plate used to be a monkey. It’s an alien monkey, right? It isn’t *that* closely related to *Homo sapiens* ... is ... is it?

“That would be me.” Hyt raises a tentacle, also naked, sitting with his back against the wall, his companion perched on his knee. “We had our talks on the cruiser and all that; I showed him how the human women in the Oku village prepare their food.”

Oooh. There are few things I love more than a blossoming bromance—especially when that bromance is between two men that I care so much about. Two men that I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.

“When it comes to the Oku settlement,” Rurik offers, rubbing a hand along the length of one feeler in a stress-induced move. I scoot closer to him and wrap my arms around his waist, teasing his coremata so that we’ll both feel better. He curses at me in moth (as in, the translator doesn’t pick up the words), but he doesn’t stop me. “What I am trying to say is: allow me to handle the opposition on my own. I do not require assistance.”

“Are you nuts? There are a hundred males in that tribe—most of them warriors. You think you can take on a hundred Oku by yourself?” Hyt lifts up the Atrata gun with his tail. It’s not the same one we used at the range—the one with the bat wings—but it has that same Gothic cast to its appearance that the sunken space station does. Baroque, black, predatory. I wonder if I’ll ever get the chance to meet an Atratan in person?

“I know that I can,” Rurik replies calmly, shuddering as his coremata unfurl, two red hairy tentacles on either side of him. I stroke one, collecting pheromones on my skin like candy. He snatches my chin in his fingers and peers into my eyes, narrowing them on me. “All I need is my mate, and my mouth on her bloodied neck.”

Erm.

I release the corema in my hand and sit back, finding myself in the hot coil of Abraxas' body. He laughs, the sound sending static through my translator and into my brain.

“Show me what you can do, World Eater.” He laughs again, and when I look back, I see that his mouth is stretched wide, the grin of a monster that splits the delicious shadows of his face in half. “I endeavor to see all of your tricks.”

Rurik nods, as if he isn't being baited, but being trusted, being praised. I think ... that maybe he is? I give Abraxas' tail a stroke, collecting sweet venom from his tail spikes and rubbing it between my fingertips absently.

“We will bring Zero with us; she will protect our mate,” Rurik continues, looking over at Hyt. They stare at one another, and I sense a bit of a challenge in the air. But what was it that Hyt told me? That he likes a challenge. Oh yeah. “You can collect our hostages.”

“Hostage, singular,” Hyt replies with a bit of a laugh. “I'll turn one twin's head into mist—Taylor, Trevor, who gives a Dead King's dick—and we'll take the other with us. Do we need any Oku hostages?”

“Perhaps one or two,” Rurik replies thoughtfully, inhaling deeply and closing his eyes. He looks like a divine manifestation, nude but for the black thigh strap that he uses to keep his cock and claspers in place. Skin pearlescent and glowing from the diffused sunlight. Wings spread across the floor and casting a red glow into the den's shadows. Coremata framing him like a bloodred halo. Ugh. “The women, I do not know what to do with. But if they are to be kept alive, they cannot board *The Korol*.”

“Kidd and I will take care of the women,” Hyt agrees. “Well, after we rescue them. While we're there, maybe we put Abraxas in charge of that? Some of the Oku might get it in their heads to take their own wives as hostages.”

“I do not trust the mechanical female to take care of my mate. Send her to collect the human women, and I will protect

Eve.” He growls my name out, the word pricking my skin with happy goose bumps.

Rurik thinks that over briefly and then nods. He doesn’t argue that Zero is connected directly to him, that she’s trustworthy and capable. He considers and then accepts the Aspis’ suggestion.

“Do we really have to do this today?” I breathe, even though I know that we do.

Yeah ... I know I said living on Jungryuk is chill, and it is, but I can’t ever forget that we have *The Korol* waiting to slurp us up like an overheated bowl of chicken noodle soup. Fuck. I honestly just love living here with these guys, with Jane and the others. I don’t want it to end.

I rub my face with my hands, but it’s Rurik who takes my wrists in gentle fingers and pulls them down to my lap. He stares into my eyes, but I don’t look directly at him or else I’ll just start writing sappy romantic poetry in my brain. I stare at the black ‘V’ between his eyes instead.

“It is best that we do it now in case there are complications. We will wait as long as we can for the embryo to kindle, but we cannot risk something going wrong with this plan. I have already failed once. The Collector was much too easy to apprehend. I am only lucky that I was able to kill him before he said the wrong thing.”

“Won’t be too much longer,” Hyt says, exhaling and resting his head against the wall. His cowboy hat is sitting on the floor beside him, and I find it adorable that he looks more like himself with it on than he does with it off. “I can feel it in my ... well.” He gestures at his crotch, and I raise a brow. He drops his chin back down and sees me staring skeptically at him. When he crosses his legs and leans forward, his companion takes off and then lands—of all places—on *Rurik*.

Both the prince and the police officer look like they’ve been hit by lightning.

Abraxas only laughs again.

“What a complex and intelligent being, this—*snarl*—is.” I can’t repeat what Abraxas says for that missing word. Not because it’s obscene or anything, but because there are sounds there that I can’t make with my human mouth.

Now we’ve all been struck, fried to a crisp by the dragon alien’s idiosyncrasies.

“Is that ... is that his name?” Hyt asks, tilting his head to the side and flattening his fox ears back against his blue hair. It was pink before, but he must’ve cursed a lie under his breath since I last looked at him. “I can understand a little of what he’s saying, but ... not that.”

“It is his name, yes,” Abraxas agrees, inclining his head. “But he says that he does not mind when you call him *Shithead*.”

“Well, fuck me,” Hyt breathes, and Abraxas snaps his teeth in the Falopex’s direction.

“I will decline the invitation,” Abraxas replies haughtily, and I laugh so hard that my eyes tear up.

“Seriously?” I give my mate another look over my shoulder, but he seems perfectly serious, like that wasn’t even meant to be a joke. Okay then. I turn back to Hyt. “And you. Were you trying to imply that the embryo is ... like, in your balls or something?”

“For the Earth month that I hold it, it’s stored in the brood pouch. Here.” He points to his lower belly with a finger and turns pink at the same time. “The embryo is fed oxygen and nutrients through special capillaries, and when it’s developed enough, it moves down to ...” He gestures at his crotch again. “Into my testicles, yes.” I just stare at him, but he only smiles back at me. “You know the hole at the end of my cock where my mating tentacles come out of, yes?” *The one you fucked with your finger about two seconds after telling me we were mates for life? Yes, I do remember that.* “That’s where it comes out, and my mating tentacles will ensure it gets seated properly in your uterus.”

“Assuming it all works as it should considering the circumstances,” Rurik says gently. I know he’s trying to prepare me for the idea that this won’t work out, that there won’t be any baby at all. Abraxas doesn’t seem worried, licking his own shoulder and fastidiously grooming his scales.

“There will be a healthy girl child; I do not know what species it will be, and I do not care.”

“That settles that.” I clap my hands together and clear my throat. “So, we’re close?”

“We’re close,” Hyt confirms, and I’m both happy and sad about that. One, because it’s been nice having whiskey as a nightcap. Two, because as soon as he gives the embryo back to me, it’s game on. Back to *The Korol*, to that horrible throne room, to the rest of our lives.

“Then it is even more important that we move forward with this today.” Rurik rises to his feet, and I groan in disappointment as his coremata furl back into place. He doesn’t seem bothered by the little octopus stuck to his shoulder. When he thinks Hyt isn’t looking, he even gives it a little pat on the head.

“Cool, so ... let’s kick some Oku ass and rescue some humans.” I hold up a hand for Hyt, and he gives me a nice, hard high-five in response, snatching my wrist afterward and yanking me into his naked lap.

“Did Kayla teach you that?” I whisper, blushing all over but trying to act like a sophisticated almost-thirty-year old. Alright, fine. Twenty-six.

“Um. Dead Kings, no. I don’t get sex tips from my sister.”

“I meant the high-five,” I grit out as Hyt leans in and kisses me, clacking that silver tongue translator enticingly against my teeth. He presses another kiss to my cheek and then uses his tentacles to get us both to our feet.

“Do you need to get some guns or something? Or will your new one suffice?” I ask him.

“This?” He hefts the Atrata gun up with an extra tail. “Absolutely not. This would be ridiculous overkill for the

Oku; I'd end up killing the human women along with everyone else." Hyt pauses to give Abraxas a look as he stretches like a cat, claws unsheathed, shredding metal ribbons from the floor. "Where did you get all of this stuff anyway?"

Abraxas sheathes his claws and rises to two feet, offering a smug smirk along with his response. His markings flare with violet light and then dim.

"I eat slavers; I steal their items. I do not even care what they have. I take it all." He reaches out and runs a finger down the side of my face. "Now, we must find a large thermal vent for me to *enjoy*."

Ah. Today is the day. It's time for Big D to make his monster appearance like he did that day at the brothel, when the black market Aspis alarms went off.

"Once we have our hostages in hand, where shall we keep them? I can make a cage of blood lace," Rurik offers, and Hyt shrugs one shoulder.

"I have a cell underneath the house. It's real nice, got a big lamp in the center but leaves plenty of room for Night Feasters to crowd around the edges at night. Keeps the perps in place. Never had anyone escape alive. If you want to reinforce it with blood lace, I won't complain."

"Hey guys," I say, waving a hand to get their attention. "Thermal vent, yes. House, a must. I need a shower and some clothes, please. Also, I'd really like to use the toilet."

Last night, I had to ask Abraxas to take me down to pee. Not my favorite thing in the world, waiting for *him* to piss in a circle so that the Night Feasters wouldn't eat *me* while I was squatting. Not that they could, with Abraxas there, but still. I would like a toilet, thanks.

"I fucking knew that would come in handy one day." Hyt slaps his black cowboy hat on his head with a tentacle and buckles the belt around his waist the same way. He uses his hands to tie a black bandanna around his neck, and then offers me a sexy little wink. "Let's do this, Earthling. I've been waiting *years* for the opportunity."

“Community service in the form of ass-kicking.” I look around for a spare fur that I could use to cover my naked body, but Abraxas is already snatching me up in his tail.

“You take the prince today,” he grumbles at Hyt, and then he leaps over the white bench and into the opening in the den’s floor.



I crouch beside the thermal vent, naked and uncomfortable with all of that alien jizz between my legs. But I guess I can play *Jana of the Jungle* again if it means getting another chance to watch the show that I didn’t properly enjoy the first time.

Abraxas rolls in the vent and coats his magnificent body in flaming pitch, rising to two feet and letting his head hang back, liquid dripping from his horns and wings and tail. Only difference between this show and the last one is that he didn’t get his junk out for me. I was sort of looking forward to that.

“Dead Kings, that’s impressive,” Hyt says with a whistle, watching as Abraxas drops back down and goes for another round. The markings on his body glow so brightly that I have to lift a hand so that I can shield my eyes.

“You should’ve seen him do it when he was trying to get me into bed,” I tell Hyt and Rurik with a chuckle, standing up and acting like I don’t notice when they both check me out. I have never felt sexier in my entire life, happily fucked, happily fed, and dreading the look on Jane’s face when I walk in the door with three different colors of alien cum sliding down my legs.

The *copulatory plug* defense isn’t going to work today.

“He is truly magnificent,” Rurik says, and I glance over to see if he’s teasing me. He’s not. He’s staring at Abraxas the way a human might look at a lion with a full mane and sleek muscles beneath his tawny fur. I remember that he told me that

he'd come to Jungryuk in the first place to catch sight of an Aspis. "Beautiful."

"I've always liked the Aspis." Hyt flicks the brim of his hat away from his eyes. "Never thought I'd be carrying one's baby."

"Do you practice these jokes in the mirror?" I ask as Hyt's eyes rake down my naked skin. I wish fervently that I were wearing clothes. Or fucking. Yeah, more like fucking. But since I can't do that, clothes would help.

"Sometimes." Hyt crosses two tentacles over his chest like arms, thumbs in his belt. "My aim is to please, Your Majesty."

"See, and now I can't tell if you mean him or me." I offer Hyt a vicious smile, one of his suction cups sliding oil up my inner thigh. *Shit*. I slap him away and he chuckles.

"Well, I'm carrying his baby, too, so ..."

"All Vestalis children are carried by aliens," Rurik replies with the smile of a scheming aristocrat. It shouldn't look so hot, the expression of haughty disinterest, but oh ... Wow. I'm struck by that look, and it has nothing to do with his pheromones or his sweet-poison stare: it's just him, being him. "Do not act like it is uncommon; it is simply the way of things."

Rurik hooks his smile just slightly more to one side, and my knees are weak. Okay, fine. Maybe it has a *little* to do with his ... uh ... mimicking ... bio signatures. Or something. I frankly don't fucking care. I *like* it. If you had a fated mate, you might like it, too. It's *amazing*.

"True. And the babies are always Vestalis males. Always. Only ..." Hyt rubs at his chin with his actual hand, indicating some serious thought on his part. "Not after an Aspis has fertilized the egg *first*."

"You are saying the child will be a *female* Aspis?" Rurik sounds panicked, but it's not the *Aspis* part that he sounds panicked about ... it's the female part. "You cannot truly believe such fantastical nonsense."

“You don’t want a little girl?” I ask him, hurt and confused for a brief moment. Rurik shakes his head, feelers tucked back.

“I ... promised the Atrata that we would marry our daughter to their prince.”

No words. I cross one arm over my breasts and cover my naked pussy with my other hand.

“Rurik, what the *fuck*?” I growl at him, but he just looks at me with an expression of deep apology. I’m not as mad as I should be. I didn’t believe Abraxas either when he said the baby would be a girl. I still don’t, if I’m being honest. And yet ... this feels like a problem I’m going to have to deal with much, much later.

“When she is twenty-one, I ... a Vestalis has *never* in all of our history had a female child.” He narrows his eyes slightly and turns away from me. “Ten *million* years, princess, and no females. How could I ... but an Aspis ...”

All this time, I haven’t heard Hyt move. He does now, coming over to stand between us. I expect him to be angry at first, but ... he’s not.

“Listen. You did what you had to do. We *cannot* let that ship eat Earth, Jungryuk, or Yaoh. It can’t happen.”

“I would let it, in order to protect my daughter,” Rurik replies easily, and I release a sharp breath. “But you are right. When the time comes, we will deal with it. I will fire on the Atrata’s ship with *The Korol*—even if it kills me.”

“I love you guys,” I whisper, turning just as a shadow falls over the three of us and we all look up to see Abraxas looming over us. He’s as big as a house, but even with black pitch dripping from his massive form, I can see that he knows. He heard us. “I love you guys,” I repeat, just to make sure that they’ve all heard me. “But ... just curious ... you’re saying they want to make *our* daughter the princess of both the Noctuida *and* the Geometridae?”

“If there is a daughter, yes,” Rurik replies, and Abraxas grins as Hyt whistles in surprise.

“There *will* be a daughter.”

At this point, I am going to be so fucking pissed if Abraxas is wrong.



“Where were you last night?” Jane teases, following me into the bedroom and turning her back so that I can shower. The guys aren’t particularly pleased, but they’re going to have to get used to this. I won’t be able to hang out with Jane much after I’m queen, and she’s a space pirate’s wife, and ...

“You’re definitely pregnant,” I tell her, stepping up to the wall where the shower is located and yanking on the chain to start the flow. I step out of the way just in time to avoid a rush of ice-cold water from the ceiling. *How do I make this hot?* I wonder, playing around with it.

Jane is dead silent behind me.

I’m proud of myself. I didn’t use the *copulatory plug* defense; I used the *you’re pregnant* defense. Sorry, my friend. You and me, we suffer together.

“That’s not ...” Jane doesn’t finish the sentence because she knows that it *is* possible. “How?”

“Rurik claims that all life in the Noctuida started from one stray comet, that all species are related. Then again, his people worship a miniature star in a chapel with no ceiling, so do you really trust their judgment?” I’m only teasing. I don’t know anything about the Vestalis religion—or lack thereof? I have no idea.

Rurik and I need to spend way more fucking time together, don’t we?

I swallow the pain and scrub myself down before Jane remembers that I walked up the staircase with purple, red, and clear cum between my thighs.

“Guess we’ll be doing this together then?” Jane says and the relief in her voice is the same relief I felt when I realized she’d

fucked a space hyena. We're going to be together, and if we're going to be together, I can definitely do this. Be mated to more than one guy. Have a child. Live on an alien planet. Or in a spaceship. I'd prefer not to because, eww, space, but I'll do it. "When you go back to Earth, can you take a letter to my dad?"

"Wait, you're not going?" I ask, spinning away from the wall to stare at the back of her head. "But your dad ..."

"I'll go eventually, but not yet." Jane plays with the armrest of her chair and then looks over her shoulder at me, holding one hand partially over her eye, so she can peer at me and feign modesty at the same time. "Can you do that for me? Tell him that I'm safe."

"Of course I can do that," I reply gently. I don't know why she's so against going back to Earth, but if she doesn't want to go, I won't make her. Never. I can be queen to everyone in the universe except for my husbands and Jane.

I wash myself down, but it's really only my, um, lady parts that I needed to wash. Abraxas' grooming from last night has left my hair shiny and full and detangled, my skin glowing (his tongue heals *everything*), and a scent lingering around me that's part plums and part dragon musk.

"I'm still not going to forget that you walked naked into the house this morning," Jane warns me, rising to her feet and heading into the living room to wait for me. "And also that you brought your triple alien creampie with you!" she shouts just before the door closes behind her.

I cringe. Damn it. There is no defense in the world to protect me against that jibe.

Avril joins me shortly thereafter, offering out an outfit that I never expected to see again.

"Hyt told me to give this to you," she says, handing over a bright pink space suit. The boots and gloves are different—still white but a little sturdier in quality—but the suit itself is disturbingly similar to the one I found on Zero's ship. Avril leaves me to it which I appreciate. I don't need any help with

this particular garment. The crazy Vestalis clothes are a different story.

I dress quickly and join her, only to discover that we have a full house today.

“I’ve decided being a princeling is superior to being an actual princess.” Connor lifts up a glass of amber colored liquid in my direction.

“Did you raid my alcohol stash?” Hyt asks, sitting on a window seat and simultaneously polishing five guns at once. He makes up for only having nine of the required ten tentacles by using one of his hands. The other is used to dramatically flick up his hat brim. “Better not touch that locked cabinet in the back, you hear me?”

“Of course, prince consort,” Connor says with a mocking smile that says he’ll be picking that lock before the night is out. “I *did* save the princess from an arterial bleed once, did she mention that?”

“Mostly because of me,” Avril corrects as she studies me in the space suit.

Hyt looks up and then stops polishing his guns. He nearly drops the one in his hand.

“Ah, Dead King’s testes. I am *never* going to get good work done around that. Eve, my beautiful wife, are you tryin’ to kill me?” He smiles prettily at me. “You look *terrible*.” His pink skin turns blue, and I grin.

“How many of these fucking suits did you scavenge from the Jungryukian jungle?”

“Oh, only about ... sixteen.” Hyt stands up suddenly and tucks all of his guns into a strap on his back. I see his assault rifle on the cushion beside him. The rest of the slots on his holster are filled with yet more guns. Nine in total, I think. He’s even hotter wielding weapons. Imagine that. “You wouldn’t *believe* the places I’ve found these things.”

“There were over two hundred female members of my crew,” Zero says when she walks into the living room from

outside. “I am not surprised you stumbled upon a very small handful.” She pauses to stand in front of Rurik.

He’s just appeared in the kitchen doorway, his jacket buttoned up to his throat, hair smoothed back. The face monitor is in hand, and he tosses it back and forth as if deciding whether or not to put it on. I’m sure he’s wondering if recording our encounter with the Oku would be helpful for our cause ... or if it would cripple us.

It seems like a small decision right now, but I go cold on the inside.

This is just one decision among many that we’re going to have to make in the next few days to determine whether we live or die.

“Don’t wear it,” I tell him, breathing hard. He’s looking right over and past Zero’s shoulder to stare at me in the pink suit, absorbing my curves with dark eyes, a muscle sliding in his jaw. “You haven’t filmed anything up until now. If you turn it on just before the fight, it’ll seem like we’re trying too hard.”

“My parents believe *nothing* if they can’t see it with their own eyes; they are always second-guessing and questioning everything. If we don’t give them something to feast on soon, they will start eating planets regardless of the deadline they have given. That is what I am worried about.”

“Too many moving parts in my opinion,” Hyt offers. “But you’re the expert on your parents. Whatever you think is best in this case.”

Rurik looks down at the device and then tucks it into a pocket on his jacket.

“Zero, report,” he says, taking our opinions in stride, making a quick decision, and moving on to future business. He turns his attention to the cyborg girl.

This is what a leader looks like.

I feel so immensely proud of him all of a sudden.

“Taylor and Trevor are at the settlement making a sale,” she confirms as Abraxas lands in the yard and then moves close to the front steps. On two feet, he can look right over the balcony and into the room. I didn’t realize we were so close to the Oku village. Zero and Abraxas were gone and back in less than an *hour*.

Or ... maybe we’re *not* close, but they move fast?

“As I knew they would be. Every week about this time. They’ve got a pattern.” Hyt picks up his assault rifle and then turns to look at Abraxas, seemingly unfazed by his mammoth change in size. “The Oku are all there, aren’t they? To look at the new bride candidates.”

“*All ... but ... three.*” Abraxas’ presence, all pumped up with bioluminescent Jungryuk juice, scrambles the translators when he speaks, and his words are as broken and halting as they ever were. He doesn’t have to tell anyone that he ate the three straggling Tusk Men, probably dudes out on the road with wagons. We all know that’s what happened. He reaches a huge hand in through the front door, snatches me around the waist and draws me out, transferring me to a wing-hand before bringing me close to his face. He licks me with a tongue as big as I am, a monster’s romantic kiss. “*Come, female. We now ... do ... ventry.*”

My translator stutters again, describing the word and giving me all four definitions. Since the fourth is just *sex*, my mind gets a little stuck on the idea, and I can’t help but wonder if that’s what he’s referring to. But no, no. He means the hunt we’re about to take part in ... doesn’t he?

Connor yells out the window at us.

“Yep, way happier to be a princeling with no responsibilities, plenty of alcohol, and a guy with a dick that’s not taller than I am. Oh happy days.”

“Eat him,” I tell Abraxas, but he’s smart enough to play word games with me in two languages, so I don’t bother to explain that I’m joking. He knows. Or ... the way he looks at Connor, I end up flicking him in the cheek.

“Disgusting human meat ... even not ... picky starving,” Abraxas grumbles, and my eyes go wide.

“Wait, please tell me that you haven’t eaten—” I start, but I don’t get very far. He hauls me up and onto his back, lashing me in place for the ride with his tail.

Hyt comes down the stairs and over to the Cartian bike—Zero’s bike, that is—and mounts it, starting the touchscreen with the brush of a tentacle. Rurik is just behind him with Zero on his heels, and he takes it all in stride, swinging a booted foot over the bike and grabbing a seat behind his new best friend. Rurik and Hyt, another cute combo.

“I live for this shit,” Hyt breathes, and then he hits the option on the screen, swings his tentacles around Rurik’s waist to hold him in place, and takes off into the trees.

Abraxas yawns, stretches, and then launches himself into the air.



It never gets any less thrilling to ride on a dragon alien monster’s back. I’m sorry, but it doesn’t. Especially not when he has two cocks and glowing purple balls. There is literally *zero* reason not to have a good time in this scenario.

I’m telling you this: if that dream of the doctors and the hospital had been real, and this had been the fake stuff? Yeah, I would not have been okay with that. There’s no telling how far off the deep end I would have jumped.

We pass over a thick green canopy, black mountains with flaming peaks in the distance, the ocean on our left, and then we swing down into a clearing and circle a village with metal walls and dozens of small, ruined spaceships. The debris has been dragged into neat rows and columns with wide paths between them, like cottages on a dirt road or something.

Abraxas flies above the village, setting off the Aspis alarms. Same sound as back in the market. He continues circling like a vulture, casting a huge shadow over the crowd of people down below. I can't make out much from here, can barely tell the difference between the Tusk Dudes and the human women. Gunners rush to man the weapons on the walls, and I recognize more of the cannons and net guns that I helped Abraxas take down way back when.

He laughs and, at this size, it's like a roll of thunder across the jungle. Alien critters take off for the sky in droves, heading away from us in all directions.

"*Now.*" Abraxas tucks his wings and dives down, sending my hair flying back from my face. When he lands, there's not much impact on me, but the ground certainly takes a hit. Clumps of dirt and cricket-grass go flying as his claws dig into the earth. I see nearby boulders *bounce* from the impact, and that's when I know: I am married to a fucking *earthquake*.

He spins, a centrifuge of black and purple fluid, oozing like ink across the landscape. The gates to the settlement are open, these two massive pieces of metal with faded logos on the front. More spaceship parts. Hey, crashed alien tech is a vital resource here on Jungryuk.

The doors are in the process of being shut, leaving a bevy of wagons out front.

I can hear a girl screaming from here, and my blood chills.

"Get the wagons," I whisper, leaning down, and Abraxas complies. He slithers forward, removing his tail from around my waist so that he can use it like a whip, lifting flaps and checking for human cargo. The wagons that don't have people inside, he picks up with a wing-hand and chucks against the walls of the settlement or into the trunks of the biggest trunks. They shatter with a sound like cracking bone. Even though I know it's only wood, the noise leaves me unsettled.

Only one of the wagons has a person inside, a girl with short, brown hair and a face streaked with tears. I can barely see her through the bars of the cage, but as soon as she spots Abraxas, she starts to shriek like a heroine in a low-budget

horror movie. The sound reminds me of Tabbi Kat, but surely ... it can't be.

Abraxas snags the enclosure with a wing-hand and pulls it from the wreckage, dangling it like a bird cage from a single finger. The poor girl urinates on herself and then collapses into a heap on the floor. That ... that isn't how I reacted when I woke up to Abraxas tonguing my thigh. I'm coming to the realization that I didn't *become* an A.S.S., but that I've always been one in my heart of hearts.

Yep. I don't think the brunette chick in the cage is going to elect to stay in the Noctuida. She can go back to Earth and sell dick-shaped candles on Etsy like my sister, Kari.

"The gates are closing!" I shout, snatching Abraxas' spiky mane, fingers clutching at individual spines and ending up with my hands coated in venom. Might as well. His venom is a part of me now, too. *My poisonous glowing pussy.*

"*Not ... our ... problem,*" Abraxas grumbles, peering at the female in the cage before hanging said cage from the limb of a nearby tree to deal with after the fight is over. "*World Eater's problem.*"

Rurik did say to leave it all to him, so ...

He walks up beside us, picking at the finger of his glove.

"Come, princess," he says, holding out a hand for me. Abraxas lowers himself to the ground, so it's easier for me to slide off. I slip down his ebony scales and land in front of the prince, allowing myself to be tucked tightly against his chest. "May I?" he whispers, leaning down and putting his ash-pink mouth near my ear. *Cardamom and honey and the sweetness of alien plums.*

I nod, and he bites down hard, sinking his teeth into my skin, perfuming the air with iron and heat. I can't see anything but for the white jacket he chose out of the copious luggage he dragged with him. My fingers dig into the fabric as heat punches me hard in the stomach, and my legs tremble with the strain of staying upright while I'm essentially fucked in the *neck.*

There are human traffickers with guns just behind me and here I am wondering if I'm going to come while a moth prince slips his tongue into the wound on my throat, draining my blood like the parasitic world-eating monster that everyone thinks he is.

And I love it.

I relax into his touch even as I hear the sound of gunfire from my left. *And that would be Hyt, watching our six while we refuel the deadly blood lace spools in Rurik's tongue.* Abraxas remains on my right, a hot shadow falling across the prince and princess of the Noctuida.

"It's a blood-bag!" someone shouts, and I hear the renewed surge of gunfire. *That'd be Zero, right?*

Rurik spares a bit of my dignity by withholding the blood lace. If he were to thrust that into my veins, I'd probably orgasm in the strong circle of his arms.

"You are a very good girl, aren't you, my princess?" he asks when he draws back, lace stuck to my neck, to his mouth. It's wet and dripping, and when he reaches up to brush it off, crimson smears across the white sleeve of this jacket and the fairy-tale pretty of his rubied lips. Rurik strokes a gloved hand over my hair and presses a bloody kiss to my forehead. "Do not get yourself into trouble, and I will reward you for that later." He steps past me and then *slaps my ass* as he goes.

Who does that?! In the middle of combat, no less.

I whirl around to watch him, reaching up a hand and groaning as my fingers brush across the bite.

The prince strides into the center of the clearing, heading straight for the settlement doors which are now shut tight and probably locked ten times over. Hyt is standing dead center in the ruined grass, assault rifle pointed at the Oku who are brave enough—dumb enough?—to climb the walls and take shots at us.

He nails one in the center of the head, and the male's body tumbles over the wall and hits the ground with a sickening crack. Hyt has nine other guns held in his tentacles, but he

isn't taking shots with those just yet. I don't see Zero anywhere, but she could probably climb the walls of this place without much effort.

I wish I could do more, but ... I'm a caterer, remember? I can make a mean chocolate souffle, but when it comes to firefights, alien politics, and rescue missions, there's only so much I can do. Blood donation, for one. Praise, too. I want to help, and I will if I can but I'm also aware that when it came to the battle with the female Aspis, I made things worse, not better.

If I see a good, safe opportunity to intervene, I will.

For now, I'm content to watch.

"Ah, that means a lot comin' from you, wife." Hyt glances over and winks at me before turning his attention back to the walls, searching for targets. None appear.

Rurik walks right up to the front doors of the village, puts his hands against the metal, and then leans in like he's about to kiss the love of his life (aka me). His tongue slides up the wall, spilling blood lace that multiplies and swells, sweeping the compound doors and wrapping them in delicate lace shrouds.

The prince takes a step back, lace connecting his tongue to the doors, and then reaches up and snaps the threads, leaving blood to drip down his chin to the white fabric of his jacket. With a sweep of his hand, the blood lace pulls and yanks on the doors, the sound of shrieking metal making me wince.

And then the doors come off in an explosion of dust and splintered wood, bits of metal, blood spatters from the broken and shredded lace. Rurik strides through the dust and straight into the compound like he isn't at all worried about getting shot or stabbed.

"Haughty ass fuckin' Vestalin motherfucker," Hyt grumbles, jogging to catch up with all ten guns in hand (and tentacle). I look over at Abraxas and he inclines his head, leaning down and using one massive finger to stroke the side of my face. Sticky pheromones cling to my skin and pump straight into my blood.

“Go ... I ... protect.”

That’s all the confirmation I need.

I follow the other men into the settlement and find myself at the wrong end of about a hundred weapons. Nobody has fired on us which is a miracle, but how long is that going to last? I notice that a good half of the Tusk Men are gaping at the prince like they’ve never seen a Vestalis in the flesh before now.

“It’s a prince,” one of them murmurs, and I hear gossip spread like wildfire through the camp. Surely they’ve heard *The Korol’s* warning. Is that how they know who Rurik is? It seems like maybe, just maybe, they’re afraid to shoot him and face the consequences for that. I know I would be.

Rurik’s dark eyes scan the crowd of gray-skinned faces, punctuated here and there with peach and white and brown. Human women. Some of them are terrified, others seem hopeful, a few look like they’re considering taking up weapons and fighting on our side.

There’s a gasp as Abraxas pads up to sit behind me, throwing a shadow across Hyt, Rurik, and myself. He casts a purple glow on the walls, the color competing with the red throb of Rurik’s wing design.

Zero hops down from the wall and lands in a crouch, her white hair and red dress billowing around her, and then she takes off, sprinting directly into the crowd and skidding to a stop in front of a quaint little doorway. There are flowers out front, bordering either side of the old ship’s door which is now made of wood and bolted into the metal with crude looking screws.

She reaches out and takes hold of the door as the rest of the settlement remains still and silent. Feels like a pin could drop and the violence would mushroom like a toxic cloud.

“What do you want, World Eater?” one of the Tusk Men asks, stepping forward to act as the spokesman for this settlement. He keeps his gun leveled on Rurik, but his gaze slides over to Hyt. I see my husband offer up a deadly little

wink in silent reply. “If you brought Officer Hieronymus, then I can only assume you’re here for our wives?”

“Are they wives though if they didn’t agree to get married in the first place?” Hyt wonders aloud, swinging all nine of the pistols in his tentacles toward the Tusk Man. This guy has more gold markings than the others, bigger horns, longer tusks. Same gold eyes with the square goat pupils that I remember from before. *And a dick with slimy worm tentacles and teeth. A dick with fucking teeth!* I shudder at the memory. “But yeah, you got it half right.”

“Human women, if you would like to remain with your husband—if you fear for his life—step in front of him,” Rurik says, voice even and cold, crafted of authority and absolute power. He knows who he is and what he can do, and he isn’t afraid. I was sort of assuming we’d be coming here at risk to our own lives, fighting the good fight and all that.

But I don’t think there’s any contest here, not even if all hundred Tusk Dudes have weapons.

None of the women move as Zero ducks into the building, and a fight ensues. One of the green-skinned twins that I first met on the rooftop of Tabbi Kat’s apartment comes sprinting out, taking off for the wall and climbing it like he’s fucking Spiderman or something. He scales it like it’s not a challenge at all.

“There you are, you son of a bitch,” Hyt growls, aiming his weapon and then firing a single shot that turns the alien’s head into mist. The body falls backward off the wall and hits the ground with a loud *whump* and a cloud of dust.

“You’re here for the twins, too?” the leader asks, but he looks nervous. If he thought he could kill us all and win this fight, I’m sure he would’ve already pulled the trigger. He doesn’t think he can win. That, and I’ll bet he’s stalling for time ...

I look around to see that several of the Oku have climbed the far wall and are turning a huge cannon in our direction.

“Wow,” says Hyt as one human steps boldly in front of her husband. Nobody else moves. “Now you’re two-thirds right.”

“Huh?” the leader asks as a woman comes stumbling out of the building on Zero’s arm. She’s holding a blanket around her naked body, eyes glazed and empty as she keeps her focus on the ground. Fuck.

“Want to take a guess at our final objective?” Hyt teases, and then Rurik is grabbing me and dragging me close to him, my back to his front. He bites me again, arms tight around me, fingers tense and gripping the hot pink material of my Cartian space suit. Blood lace flows out of my neck and into the dirt.

Three ... two ... one.

I can hear the countdown in Rurik’s head, his thoughts transferring into me through the bite. Blood lace explodes from the ground at the feet of every Oku in the village, wrapping them in cocoons of arteries and veins. Guns go off, but Abraxas throws his wings around us, taking the hits like a human might grudgingly accept rocks being sent their way with a slingshot. It hurts, but it’s not deadly.

Muffled male screams and female shrieks, more gunshots, wet splatters.

I sag slightly in the prince’s arms, my head spinning a bit from the loss of blood. I’ll need to eat after this to replenish my strength.

“I have you, my princess,” Rurik murmurs, swinging me up and into his arms.

When Abraxas draws his wings back, I’m faced with the reality of what my husband has just done.

Murdered an entire village of Oku.

Were they all bad? I don’t know. Did they all deserve what just happened to them? I have no clue. I don’t let myself think about it. If we don’t pull this off, this entire planet dies. We can’t leave any witnesses to refute our claims. Even leaving the human women alive is a stretch, but that’s a line that I refuse to cross.

“Now where the fuck is that other twin?” Hyt grumbles, lowering his weapons as silence once again overtakes the settlement. The Oku males are dead save for three of them. Two to take back to *The Korol* and one whose wife has her arms wrapped protectively around his midsection. He’s holding her in the same way, like he’d die to keep her safe.

There’s a story there, but it’s not my story. I don’t pay much attention to it.

Women begin to cry. Some collapse to the ground. One rushes forward and drops to a knee in front of the prince, like she actually knows who he is.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” she whispers, voice rough with gratitude. When she lifts her face to peer up at us, I can tell that she knows not only who he is, but also who I am. “Princess.” There’s an awe and a reverence in her voice that I don’t deserve. “Girls, come.” She gestures wildly with a hand, encouraging the other women to come and pay obeisance.

“That is not necessary,” Rurik tells her, voice smooth and inflectionless, the tone of someone in charge. “Gather whatever belongings you wish to keep; you will be coming with us.” He raises his voice so that it echoes out across the village. “Those who want to return to Earth will be sent home. The rest will be given money and transport to the World Station.”

The women begin to talk wildly amongst themselves as Abraxas rises to his feet and looks over his shoulder. He curls his lip and then takes off, bounding into the woods and disappearing into the shadows.

“Alright, girls,” Hyt calls out, slinging his assault rifle over his shoulder and using a tentacle to gesture at the women. “Line up here when you’re ready to leave. And don’t bother trying to hide in the houses. We’ll be checking them all.”

“There are girls tied up and chained,” one of them says, and Hyt curses, giving me and Rurik a look.

“I’ll take care of that,” he says as Zero appears with the remaining Oku males in her possession. She has them both by

the throats, shoving them to their knees in front of the prince. The third follows willingly, his wife tucked against his side.

She jerks away from him, forcing herself between Zero and the prince. But rather than look at Rurik, she stares at me instead.

“If you kill him, you may as well kill me, too.”

“We’re not going to hurt him,” I assure her as Rurik sets me on my feet, keeping an arm around my waist, so that I don’t stumble from the loss of blood. My vision is a little patchy, my skin a bit sweaty beneath the suit. I could really use an orange juice or a doughnut or something right now. *Oh, didn’t Hyt have some powdered doughnuts in his cabinet of miracles?* Unless, you know, Kayla or Connor or Avril got to them first.

“He’s different than the others,” the Oku wife says, face twisted in anger as she glares at me. I get it. She’s trying to protect her mate. I don’t argue, just cross my arms over my chest and wait. “He never once used the breeding rooms. Not once.”

Um. I don’t want to know what a breeding room is. I really don’t.

“I believe you, okay?” I tell her, quirking a brow and then looking over at Rurik. “Now what? If we don’t have Taylor or Trevor or whatever the fuck his name is, then—”

The sound of branches cracking draws my attention around, and I see Abraxas trotting out of the woods with the other twin clutched in his tail. He pads into the village and the women shrink back in fear. One of them murmurs something in Spanish and touches the rosary around her neck. I don’t blame her. He looks like a demon risen straight from the depths of hell.

In truth: he’s a cinnamon roll in alien dragon monster wrapping paper.

“*Found ... twin,*” he says with a howl of laughter, thrusting the squirming man down for our inspection. Trevor/Taylor is writhing, wrapped in the coils of an Aspis tail like a boa constrictor’s prey. As I watch, his face blurs strangely, and I

rub at my eyes, wondering if my synchronicity contacts are malfunctioning again.

“Oh no you don’t, you stupid fuck.” Hyt saunters up beside me and then swings his braid over his shoulder.

“Officer Hieronymus,” the twin chokes out, face shifting and blurring. Is he trying to make another clone of himself? Isn’t that what Hyt said that he could do? Dude, the Noctuida is weird as fuck. “Let’s work out a deal.” Another squeak as Abraxas curls his tail even more tightly around the man’s body.

“How about ... suck a Dead King’s dick?” Hyt asks wryly, picking up his braid and then using it to thwap the man in the face. Trevor/Taylor screams as he’s stung with jellyfish tentacle hair, and then he slumps forward with his tongue swelling dangerously in his mouth. Hopefully he doesn’t choke on it. We sort of need the asshole alive. Hyt tosses his braid out of his way and turns to face us. “There are more women here than I thought. We’ll need to sweep the houses and then get them out of here. I’ve got Kidd on the way, but they’ll need an escort. There’s no way he can keep thirty-or-so females safe in the Jungryukian jungle by himself.”

“Zero,” Rurik says, and she nods her head in acquiescence. “Take the prisoners to the house, lock them up, and then escort the women to Kidd’s camp.”

“Yes, My Prince.” Zero drags the Oku males with her out the ruined front gate, and I turn to see that all of the women are staring at *me*. Not the giant dragon monster with the purple and black horns. Not the guy with ten guns, nine tentacles, and sculpted thighs. Not even the prince who just slaughtered a hundred fucking men with guns without breaking a sweat.

Me.

Now what?

Here I am, faced with dozens of women who were abducted, just like I was. Who were purchased, just like I was. Who didn’t have an apex predator to save them. Who weren’t mated

to a kindhearted prince. Who weren't gifted the only pearl from an alien thirst trap.

I owe them whatever help or reassurance that I can give. I turn to Hyt, his face etched with love and sympathy and understanding. It takes me three tries to get the words out.

"Let's start checking the houses," I tell him, and he nods.

"Of course, Earthling," he says, but then he reaches into a pouch on his belt and pulls out a few of the plums from last night. "But not until you eat a few of these." Hyt steps toward me, cups the side of my neck and bends down to kiss me, spilling cool water into my mouth. He kisses me until I'm thoroughly sated, and my vision is a little less patchy than before. "Let's round up some humans together."

Hyt lifts his hat to release his companion, takes my hand in his, and shows me the world he's been living in since he was sixteen years old.



“They’re here!” Kayla shouts from across the clearing. She’s waiting on our balcony, the first person to see us heading for the house. She races down the steps to meet me, eyes wide at the sight of so many human beings in one place. “I never ... thought ...” She doesn’t finish her sentence, but I get it. It’s been a decade since she was abducted.

“I thought you might want to go with ‘em,” Hyt says, tipping his hat at his sister. She whips that green-eyed gaze to her brother. He reaches out with a finger and flicks her in the forehead with unabashed affection in his eyes. “That’s why you wanted to come here, isn’t it? To help the other humans?”

Kayla reaches up and rubs her arm across her eyes, like something about Hyt’s question has reversed the clock on her age. But then she drops it by her side and nods, expression hardening.

“I do. I want to get them through this, get the ones home who want to go home, and the rest ...” Her mouth twitches strangely, eyes shifting to the side. “I’ll teach those ones to love the Noctuida the way that I do.”

Rurik pauses beside us, hands behind his back but in front of his wings. He shifts them as he adjusts his stance.

“I will send them to the World Station when I can. If there are any that wish to stay on Jungryuk, that is acceptable as well.” He continues on, meeting up with Avril and Zero. I don’t see any signs of the prisoners the cyborg girl took earlier, and I don’t particularly care to. Not after speaking briefly with

the women—and a few men—who lived in that village. I can only imagine how Tabbi Kat escaped that place. Some of these people have been there for *years*.

As for children, there were none. They've all been taken away to be raised by another settlement. That's how it's done with the Oku. They keep wives in some villages, and raise children in others. Those two things never mix. The human women behind me who have children haven't seen them since a few weeks after their births.

"I'm going to change the law," I remind Kayla, and she nods, sweeping sandy hair back from her sun-kissed face. She's used to spending all day on a surfboard back on Yaoh. I wonder what this is going to be like for her, living in the middle of nowhere.

"I know, but sometimes people have other reasons not to go back, you know?" She looks up at me and I wonder if, like Jane, Kayla doesn't feel comfortable going back to Earth either. Whether that's something that'll change for either of them, I don't know. What I am sure of is this: I could be happy here no matter what.

But—and there's definitely a but there—I will be *much* happier if I can see my family. There's no reason to deny that.

I glance over my shoulder at the women behind me, all of them dressed in these austere sack dresses and simple sandals. Some have nice belts around their waists, others have bones and gems threaded into plaits or ponytails. They've brought a strange assortment of items with them: large clay pots, duffel bags, swords, guns, rifles. One girl has a case filled with vials while another has a cart full of medical supplies.

Abraxas stands behind them, watching the rear of the group. The sun is going down, and I can see Night Feasters at the very edges of my vision. I feel like I've never seen them this early or this frequently before. I haven't asked, but I'm wondering if the scent of death is in the air or something.

I feel tense, like there are eyes on my back. Only, when I look, it's just Abraxas. I'm nervous anyway, a little jumpy. I didn't feel like this earlier, when the battle was imminent. But

now that it's over, it feels like there's even *more* to lose. These people are under our protection. Whether they live or die, that's up to us, and it feels like a huge fucking responsibility.

"Eve!" Jane jogs out of the woods, Captain Kidd and a half-dozen other pirates on her heels. My bestie has a sword on her hip. A *sword*. She's a talent acquisition and retention specialist aka a pop star's manager. How the fuck does she have a sword? Not like a Lightsaber or something, but a curved cutlass with a leather hilt. Huh. "Holy shit," she breathes as she examines the women behind me. Oh, and the one Oku husband whose wife wanted him kept alive. At some point, we'll separate them and make sure she's serious.

For now, I guess he gets to stay with the humans? I don't know how that works, not if Rurik is trying to keep things quiet, to prevent witnesses from stepping forward and telling the king and queen that we're completely full of shit. There's *always* a possibility that we were recorded. Cameras, drones. It's a weird clash of untamed and intergalactic.

But then, I know why Rurik is letting that Oku husband leave.

Because the prince is in possession of a beautiful fucking soul.

I rub my face with my hands, Hyt and Kayla off to one side, Rurik just ahead, Abraxas behind. It's me and Jane alone for a minute. Sort of. There are also *thirty* strangers standing behind us, some of whom have lived here on Jungryuk for half their lives. It's possible that some of them might no longer see this as a rescue mission. Ugh.

I'm starting to realize that I need to expand my way of thinking.

"Nothing in this life is free or easy. To get something worthwhile, one must give something up in return."

In order to save Jungryuk, to save Earth, to save Yaoh, sacrifices are being made.

Sacrifices.

My chest constricts, and I dig the fingers of my hand into the front of the space suit.

Rurik is going to sit the throne. Rurik is never going to leave the throne room. That is my reality. That is my sacrifice.

“Jane, being queen is *hard*,” I whisper roughly, and she nods, reaching out to take me into her arms. She hugs me nice and tight, stroking my hair back.

“You’re doing the absolute best that you can given the situation. Eve, don’t be so hard on yourself. I wouldn’t want your job. A lot of people would run from that level of responsibility. You’re willing to take it on and do it right. Don’t *ever* forget that.” Jane draws back and puts her hands on either side of my face, smiling confidently back at me. “Look, Kidd and I will take care of the humans so you don’t have to worry about them. In exchange, you keep that nasty ass space tongue inside that stupid ship. Okay?”

I laugh at that. Where the fuck would I be if I didn’t? *The Korol* is going to kill us all if we mess this up. Not a drill. There’s a spaceship floating above Yaoh right now with the capability of liquefying the entire planet. Killing Grandma Layna. Grandma G. Grandpa H. Mino. Flen. The entire Falopex race.

There’s no time to dwell on anything now.

We have precious few days left here until we flip a coin between living and dying.

“I’ve got this,” I tell Jane, and she gives me a little fist bump. “Thank you for having my back, as always.”

“Just consider this my chance to pay you back for catering Tabbi’s fundraiser that night. Really, the mushroom sliders were *delicious*.”

I grin as Kidd comes up to stand beside her and Hyt rejoins us.

“You got this, my friend?” he asks, and Kidd gives him a sharp look, glaring at my mate with amber eyes as he reaches up to touch the edge of his tricorne hat.

“Don’t I always back you up when it comes to saving humans?” Kidd and Hyt both look at each other, their gazes switching to Kayla when she steps in between them, putting her arms around them both. I see Jane’s attention flick to that arm before she shakes her head and rids herself of any unwanted jealousy.

Cowboys for Hyt, pirates for Kidd. One for Kayla, one for Kya.

“I’ll be here to act as an ambassador; there’s nothing to worry about,” Kayla offers as Hyt’s companion zips around us and Abraxas paces the edge of the clearing, refreshing the ... perimeter. As in: he’s pissing everywhere.

Rurik returns with Avril and Zero just behind him.

“They will accompany you as well; if you need to speak to me, speak directly to Raina and do not communicate with us in any other way. Do not come back here. Do not attempt to take off unless I give you the okay.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Kidd drawls, waving his hand dismissively and then turning to examine the crowd. “I’ve been friends with Hyt for years; I know what I’m doing.”

“You’re about to be a dad. Don’t fuck this up,” Hyt says, a lighthearted joke to make the situation a little less tense.

Doesn’t work.

Kidd’s eyes go wide before he drops his attention to Jane. She looks like she’s about to throw up.

Oops.

“What ... what the fuck?” Kidd whispers, lifting his nose to scent the air. He shakes his head after a moment, running a hand down his Mohawk, his gold and black skin catching the fading beams of sunlight. “You ...”

“There’s no time for that,” Jane says with a falsetto laugh, and I roll my eyes. Here we go with this nonsense. I’m done with all this. I can’t *wait* for her love/hate arc to be over, so that she’ll just be in love with the fucking guy, and I won’t have to watch this crap anymore.

“Jane ...” Kidd tries to take her elbow, and she yanks away from him before stalking off.

The captain bares his teeth at his friend.

“You are a dumbass motherfucker, Hieronymus. Thank you for that. Really, I appreciate it.” Kidd takes off as Hyt sighs, pulling his hat down over his face.

“That was pretty dumb, you know that?” Kayla says, but she’s grinning. She holds her arms out, offering me up a goodbye hug. “I’ll see you soon. And ... just in case I don’t, I want you guys to know that I thought your wedding was beautiful, and it’d be a dream of mine to have a relationship like yours.”

“No Falopex,” Hyt repeats, taking his hat off, but he’s only half-serious. He’s a sucker for humans—especially me and his sister. If she fell in love with a Falopex, he’d find a way to get past that.

“Alright, friends,” Kayla says, moving around me without bothering to reply to Hyt. “We’re going to be walking quite a long way tonight. If anyone needs anything, I’m the one to ask.”

I turn back to Hyt and Rurik as Zero and Avril both offer me deep bows.

“I will be your eyes and ears, My Princess. If you would like to speak with your friends, please let the prince know, and I will do my best to relay any messages.”

“Thank you, Zero,” I tell her, giving her a hug and wondering why this all feels like saying goodbye. We’ll see each other again soon enough. The very moment we’ve transferred the embryo, we’ll go to *The Korol*, sort this out, and take the throne. After that, I’ll be able to come back to Jungryuk and visit whenever I want.

And yet ...

I squeeze the cyborg as tightly as I can, surprising her but making Abraxas chuckle as he settles down beside us. He’s a *little* bit smaller than he was earlier, but not a lot. At this rate,

it'll take longer than the remaining days we have left on our countdown timer for him to return to his smallest form.

"More ... hugs," he grumbles, watching as I move from Zero to Avril, not at all surprised by the fierceness or the warmth of her hug. She and I have been a little prickly at times, but we both know that the other has our back. She saved my life when she didn't even know who I was. She stood up to Rurik while I crawled into a corner. That means a lot.

"Trust the prince," she whispers in my ear. "If you two stick together ..." She trails off as she looks at Abraxas first and Hyt next. Her sapphire gaze falls to mine. "If you stick together, you'll be okay."

I have never been a part of something this big.

I don't even know how to process it. My life has been relatively charmed. Not just on Earth, but up until now. I draw back from Avril, and I look right at Rurik.

"Take care," Avril says when she realizes that I've gotten stuck in the viscosity of our mate bond. It feels like I can't move, that I don't dare to. My lady-in-waiting gives me one last pat on the back and moves away, skirts trailing over the ground behind her.

With the unsubtle crushing of foliage, the group moves into the trees and away from us. We'll be able to hear them for some time, I'll bet. If the case arose that they needed to hide for whatever reason, they're fucked.

"This is a huge risk, isn't it?" I ask, still staring at Rurik. "Saving the humans instead of ..."

"There are many witnesses to the truth," Rurik agrees as he inclines his head. "But without the conflict, we don't have a solution. We must stir and change something significant here on Jungryuk. My parents will summon witnesses from all over the planet; they will send nobility here to investigate."

"I understand."

We're all alone now, the four of us in the middle of a quiet forest clearing. Birds sing, and odd insects whip past me. There's one that looks like a flying dick, swear on the future of

planet Earth that's true. I swat a penis with butterfly wings away from my face.

"Whatever we do," Rurik begins before either Hyt or Abraxas can speak up. "I want to be outside."

"*I ... would ... same,*" Abraxas growls wisely, and I see how dense I was in the beginning for failing to recognize that he's like, a prophet or something.

Hyt plays with the fabric of his loincloth, flicking it on *purpose* to make me look. He must be, right? Who would do that by accident? I swat at another butterfly peen, and Hyt lifts his head to stare first at me and then Rurik.

"We could drag the mattress outside and sleep here?" Hyt points at the ground with several tentacles.

"I would like that," Rurik says with an adorable smile. "I would like that very much."

"Eve!" Another voice is calling my name, and I cringe on the inside. Shit. Fuck. I thought we were alone. Rurik, too, because he turns a vicious scowl over to Connor and Brot as they make their way across the grass toward us. It's Connor that's yelling, obviously. "We just got back from the hot springs. Did we miss anything?"

I just stare at him as Rurik closes his eyes and rubs at his forehead.

"It's not just my family, eh?" Hyt teases, but we both know that's a ridiculous joke because his family was simply annoying and judgmental. Rurik's family wants to fucking kill us. Abraxas, of course, is going to have the most adorable little family, I bet you that right now. A wise, sweet father and a strong midwife mother. I'd put money on it.

"Go in the house and do not come back out for the rest of the night," Rurik snaps at his brother, and Brot scowls back at him, reverting back to that same ol' Brot we all know and love. What was it that he said to me? That I was an ugly, useless mate? That the only thing that was right was the timing? This is that guy.

“If you wish for privacy, all you need do is say it. I, for one, would never barge in on such a delicate and primitive situation.” Brot reaches up to run a hand down the red fur at the base of his throat and Connor—dressed in shorts and a loose tee with a fuzzy kitten on the front—grins, hooking his arm with his mate’s.

“He’s still angry that Rurik peeped on us when we were aboard *The Korol*.”

“I did not *peep* on you,” Rurik snaps back. “If you choose to mate in inappropriate places, there will be consequences. In the house. *Now*.”

Connor ignores him, turning to me and allowing the humor to drain from his face.

“They already left, huh?” he asks, and I get the idea that maybe he didn’t want to say goodbye anyway. Having Brot is helpful, but Connor is a human trapped in a new world, too. Where he lives and what happens to him and his mate depend entirely on us as well.

“I could really use a drink,” I mumble under my breath before forcing another smile. “They did. Avril told me to tell you that you have a small dick.”

Doesn’t even faze him. Connor nods like he expected her to say something like that. The fact that he doesn’t immediately move to defend himself makes me wonder if he doesn’t have any need to feel ashamed. Huh. The Big Dick Energy is strong in this one. Poor Brot.

I look over at Abraxas and ... *do not think about his Big Dick Energy. Not yet, Eve. Not until Connor leaves.*

“We’re just going to grab the mattress, some snacks, and a shitload of liquor and we’ll be out of your way for the rest of the night,” I tell him.

“Can we use your bathtub?” Connor asks, and I nod. It is a pretty sweet bathtub. Can’t lie about that.

“Knock yourself out.”

The pair of them leave, but not without a parting quip from Brot.

“You may need to behave like mother and father at times. There’s no way around that. You can’t beat ruthlessness without adopting it yourself, but what you *can* do is treat those you care about with respect.” Brot turns away and heads up the steps ahead of Connor.

Rurik sighs as Hyt gives his shoulder a companionable clap.

“You must’ve seen something interesting, for him to be that mad.”

“I walked in on them kissing without shirts. It was hardly a scandal.” Rurik waves his hand dismissively. “But many Vestalis are wedded to species who rarely breed and mate only for the wedding itself and for children beyond that. They do not do it for fun, or engage in such ... odd acts as human beings do. For both Brot and myself, it could be seen as a source of embarrassment in our society.”

Abraxas rumbles with laughter, crouching down on all fours so that he can stare at us with his massive head. If he wanted to spear both Hyt and Rurik with his horns, it wouldn’t be all that hard. The restraint he shows for his own aggression manifests as undisguised sexual need.

“*All ... of ... universe ... fucks.*” I’m picked up in his tail and brought to his face, so that he can stare at me with one massive purple eye. If he wanted to eat me right now, it’d be that day with the female Aspis all over again. Knowing that he won’t gives a heady rush of power to me that I can’t even explain, like I’m in control of a great beast. “*They ... decorate. We hunt.*”

He spreads his massive wings and then takes off, carrying me along with him.



The mattress is waiting under the stars when we get back. It's full dark now, a blanket of black and purple cosmos above our heads. As Abraxas circles the clearing, preparing to land, I happen to glance over my shoulder to see one of the two full moons of the night.

Like an inkblot on a Rorschach test, I catch the hint of a shadow interposed between us and the silver disc. It looks vaguely like a paper airplane at this distance, but there is no mistaking what that silhouette belongs to.

The Korol.

I clamp a hand over my mouth to hold back a gasp, the other snatching at Abraxas' spines to keep from falling off his back. Not that he'd let me, but I need something to hold onto right now.

As soon as we land, a crush of untamed brute against the naked earth, I'm slipping down the shimmer of black scales on Abraxas' side and stumbling over to the bed. Hyt seems to be asleep, hat over his face, blankets loose across his hips. Rurik lies on his back on the opposite side of the mattress, looking up at the sky.

There's no way he can't see it, that he doesn't know what's happening here. I knew there was *a* ship above Jungryuk somewhere, ready to destroy the planet as a secondary warning after Earth. A ship. Not *the* ship. I recognize the shape of it even from all the way down here: that is most definitely *The Korol* moving in toward us.

"What is that doing up there?" I demand, pointing my finger randomly in the direction of the moon. I don't look back at it, keeping my attention fixed on Rurik. He's staring skyward, and I wonder if he isn't imagining what it's going to be like living the rest of his life on *The Korol*. Because the only way that ship doesn't take our kid's life next is if he destroys it—with himself on it. Hopefully not for a long, long time, but ... eventually. One day.

How the fuck is that a happily ever after? I ask myself. If this were one of Jane's dumb-dumb alien romance novels, I'd burn it in a fireplace and spit on the ashes. But that's not real

life, is it? If we get everything we want, every time we want it, would things be too sweet? Do we really need that bitter to go along with our chocolate?

My skin crawls, but I swallow back the fear. It's imperative that I keep myself calm. If Abraxas isn't panicking, if Hyt isn't freaking out, if Rurik is lying here like this ... then maybe they already know what's happening? They don't seem worried.

"My parents have heard news of your rescue; they are coming here to meet us." A pause. Rurik doesn't look at me, but his beautiful mouth slips into a frown. "Hopefully, we can transfer the embryo before they demand an audience." A pause. "And hopefully, meeting with us is all they are coming here to do."

Hopefully.

The word of the day.

The strobe light goes off, flooding the area with a white glow before I get a chance to squeeze my eyes shut. Once again, I'm blinded by the damn thing.

"Can we turn that off somehow?" I ask, but then I remember that the Night Feasters were extra bold after the bloodshed in the jungle. Maybe all of that death attracted them here, and that's why there are so many. I don't know. Maybe they sense the impending doom of a world-eating spaceship?

"*Do it. I keep ... we safe.*" Abraxas tosses his kill onto the ground at the foot of the mattress and then uses his tail to gently place me in the clump of pillows at its center. He stalks to the edge of the clearing as I blink my night vision back into place. I see him lift his leg on a tree as Hyt grumbles under his breath and stands up, disabling the strobe light before returning to the bed.

"You okay?" Hyt asks me, like he's as worried about me as I am about Rurik. He squats down and pulls something out of a duffel bag, offering the package of powdered doughnuts over to me without even knowing that this is exactly what I wanted. I tear them open and pop an entire mini ring into my mouth.

Oh Dead Kings, that's good. Not as good as my homemade ones, but still, amazing. Fat. Sugar. Carbs. Heaven.

I groan so deep and low in my throat that Rurik startles, turning toward me and swinging his feelers forward to brush over my body. I slap one away, and he narrows his red-laced obsidian eyes at me.

"I'm okay," I tell Hyt, but I'm looking at Rurik. Whatever he wants, these next few days, I'm going to give it to him. I look back toward the trees, spots of bioluminescence shimmering in the shadows. Things move. Branches crack. Some distant animal cries out and then falls silent in an instant.

"Good. Because we're betting a lot on some Aspis piss," Hyt says, sitting on the edge of the bed with his knees spread, elbows resting on his thighs as he watches Abraxas. "They're wild tonight, the Night Feasters."

"Any particular reason why?" I wonder aloud. I've been thinking about this all day.

"*Afraid of ... ship,*" Abraxas says, looking up and staring in the general direction of the full moon. Another is directly behind our heads. Two more rest side by side on my right, one a half and the other a crescent. "*Fleeing its shadow.*"

Whoa. My theory was right then, huh? Something about that gives me the chills, and I wrap my arms around myself.

Abraxas squats at the end of the bed, clearly intending on breaking down the prey he just killed. Instead, he looks up and sees me staring at him. Namely, my gaze has slipped between his legs to his groin, curiosity getting the better of me.

He notices right away, his markings flaring bright enough to illuminate the entire courtyard.

Abraxas definitely looks like he belongs here in a way that Hyt, Rurik, and I do not. He's blurring the edges of his body into shadow, melding with the background even as he uses his wing-hand to drag our dinner to one side and toss it a safe distance away. He reaches his tail between his legs and pushes the tip into his groin slit.

“Uh.” I sit up a little straighter, my attention absolutely fixed to the scene. Hyt turns his head to look as Rurik pushes up to his elbows and peers down the length of his own body at the Aspis male. I’m not the only one who’s about to get a show. Not sure that either of my other mates *wants* to see the show, but they accept being part of the audience with grace.

That tail of his pushes in a little deeper and Abraxas groans, putting one large fist on the ground. When he lifts his head to look up, I’m the only person in his gaze. He doesn’t even *see* the other males with us. I gasp as he yanks his pleasure rod out of his pouch with a snarl and a spatter of fluid. He’s getting slick for me, and I can’t resist. The air reeks of pheromones, and the sky is lit with stars.

I truly hope *The Korol* can’t see what we’re doing from way up there because if adultery is going to get us all executed, we are *dead*. I’m going to fuck all three of these guys before the night is over. I crawl across the bed on all fours, pausing at the end of it to watch as Abraxas drags his mating rod out, his heavy sack falling out along with it.

I’m faced with two massive dicks, half as big as I am. It’s ... it’s an A.S.S. moment if there ever was one. Because I’m into it. I’m into the glowing balls, and the knowledge that my own pussy is glowing with the same light.

“*Come, female,*” Abraxas growls at me, and I do, slipping off the end of the bed to stand in front of him. I kick off my boots and then reach for the zipper on the space suit, my gaze glued to the absurd stretch of his pleased smile. He doesn’t show his teeth at first, the shadows in the center of his face blurring as he twists his mouth to one side.

I drag the zipper down, my breasts popping out of the tight fabric. It takes effort to slip my arms free, to peel the skintight garment down my curvy body. I pull one leg out and then the next, tossing the Cartian suit into a hot pink puddle on the bare earth beneath my feet. The cricket aliens have long since scrambled out of their beds for the night.

I squat down and then crawl underneath Abraxas’ massive form, finding myself face-to-face with the biggest dicks I have

ever seen in my entire life. Hah. No wonder he told me no that first day, that I was too little. It isn't even a remote possibility that he would fit inside of me. I'm glad we have a way to make penetration work, but ... I would've fallen in love with him anyway.

As an accomplished A.S.S., I have ideas.

I start with his heavy sack, rubbing my palms over it and enjoying the way he shudders above me, scales ruffling, tail sneaking around my waist to give me a squeeze. *I'm going to turn this massive beast into putty in my hands*, I think with a grin, leaning in and tracing the glowing purple designs with my tongue. Up close, they look like jagged bolts of bioluminescent lightning.

Sticky pheromones collect on my tongue, a dose of sweet venom to jump-start my already racing heart. My hands caress and stroke as I lift up onto my knees and press my breasts into him, rubbing my full chest over his balls. They pulse under my touch, like he's already close to spilling his seed. I can only imagine how much of it there's going to be. *Like I'm in a hentai or something*.

A low chuckle escapes me, my breath feathering over Abraxas' skin. He bucks involuntarily as a snarl rips from his throat, and I glance back to see that he's curved his spine to look down the length of his own body at me.

"*So soft ... so sweet,*" he growls out, giving me a gentle squeeze with his tail. I writhe under his touch, rubbing my hard nipples through the viscous heat of his pheromones. The more of it that gets on me, the more I swipe off my tongue, the headier I feel, the wilder I become. Brazen. Shameless.

I take my breasts between my palms, rubbing them all over Abraxas' balls, tilting my head back so that I can flick my tongue to the underside of his mating rod. He snaps his teeth together in needy anticipation, shifting above me as I lick and suck on his tender skin, brushing my cheek over the head of him. Pre-cum (or whatever the alien equivalent is) taints my lips as I press a kiss to the most sensitive part of his body. My

tongue flicks into the slit of his crown, and he loses it, using his tail to lift me from the ground.

My body is slid between his two shafts, my back to his pleasure rod, my breasts and pussy against his mating rod. Um. Abraxas takes over the encounter, using his tail to rub my nakedness up and down his shafts, the slick mating fluid on his skin lubricating us both so that we slide together, nice and slippery.

I'm not about to make it this easy for him, wrapping my arms around his dick and squeezing hard. I even *bite* him, and he lets out a snarl that's equal parts frustration and pleasure. That's when he starts to fuck, thrusting his hips like he's driving into me.

The wild friction does it for us both, grinding my clit into his hot body, stimulating my nipples, making me moan as I suck and lick at the head of him. When his mating road climaxes, it's with a roar that shatters the quiet of the jungle, hot seed spurting freely from the tip of him. I knew that there'd be a lot of volume, but there's even more than I expected, lavender liquid pooling heavily on the ground between us and the bed. Without my cunt wrapped around him, I'm able to see what happens when he knots.

The tissue at the base of his shaft swells, hard and hot and stiff between my thighs, bulging like a second set of testicles. Not just there either, but around the head of him, too, plumping up his crown into a swollen knob.

I'm losing it now, caught up in the smells and the sounds and the wild warmth all around me. I scramble out from between the pair of massive cocks—truly, Big D was the perfect nickname for my mate—and tap at his hard thigh muscle to grab his attention. Looking up, I can see the gorgeous design that decorates the underside of Abraxas' body. It isn't just 'swirls' as I've been referring to it in my head, but a complex art piece akin to the lacy moth wings on my back.

Abraxas sucks in a deep, shuddering breath, and I've got a front row seat to that, too. The way his abdominal muscles

clench, the shift in his powerful leg muscles. He's looking at me again, spine curved over, his head upside down, his tongue lolling out to flick down my naked skin.

I swat at him playfully, my nipples painfully erect, my inner thighs dripping with my own need. My whole body is coated in the slickness from his shafts, and I can't resist rubbing my palms over it, smearing it into my skin.

"Sit up a little bit for me?" I ask, quirking a brow as he rises above me, sheathing his claws and relaxing onto his haunches. He's still panting heavily, but he looks at me like all he had was a taste. He's ready to *feast*. I use his leg to climb up, so that I can swing my own leg over his pleasure rod, to ride it like a fucking bicycle. I wrap my hands around the tip of him, letting my lubricated body slide down so that my back is pressed to his front.

My mate curls one big hand around the front of my neck, fingers loose, tip of his thumb covering my mouth completely. He strokes my lips for a moment before pressing tightly against them, encouraging me to open.

I do, and it's like taking his smallest sized cock into my mouth. That's how large his *thumb* is. I make a wild sound in my throat, leaving one hand on his dick while I put the other up to his wrist. My body undulates against him in full view of Rurik and Hyt. If this doesn't send them running to the farthest corner of the Noctuida, I don't think anything will.

I'm moaning as Abraxas peers down at me with glowing eyes, his horns silhouetted against a distant, silver moon. He opens his fanged lips and snarls out an entire story in a language that isn't just foreign, but impossible. Yes, he's intelligent. Of course he's sentient. But he is the one out of these three who is the most alien to me—and I *love* that.

Each slip and slide of my rapidly gyrating hips works my clit with a firm, unyielding pressure and a consistent speed. Slickness is everywhere, between my legs, on my breasts, making my damp skin steam slightly in the frigid air. It is weirdly cold tonight, but my body is hot as fuck.

“Come for me,” Abraxas commands in unmistakable English, and my eyes go wide as I feel something move beneath the skin of his shaft. I look down to see that one of his veins is drawing away from his body, disappearing underneath me ... and then ... a pressure at my opening.

With a growl, he drops lower, using his wing-hands to hold us up. He’s coming again, mating fluid oozing from the tip of him. And those blood vessels that join us after mating? My glowing pussy is opened by a thickness as big around as his thumb. As his dicks when he’s at his smallest. Our bodies find a way to connect even with the size difference, and I go limp as the rush of fluid between us makes me almost euphoric.

Yep. Probably ... Rurik and Hyt are going to leave after this.

I wouldn’t blame them.

Abraxas draws his thumb from my mouth as I orgasm, letting my moans echo into the woods, just some wild thing in the middle of a mate. Fucking the apex predator. Fucking the *don’t you ever fuck with me* dragon alpha. I’m into it. I am so into it.

“Yes, sir,” I mumble as Abraxas laughs, adjusting himself comfortably onto his side with me still stuck to his dick. My cunt pulses around his blood vessels, and he licks my ear in response. It takes as long for my mind to recover as it does my body, so it’s only when he’s finally setting me aside with his tail that I register the perfect silence on the bed.

“Shit.” I shift awkwardly on my feet.

I look up and find Hyt’s expression first. He appears ... unsure. But not like he’s going to leave, like he’s worrying about whether or not he’ll be able to make me feel that good. Our eyes meet, and his frown very quickly turns into a feral smile. Oh. Wait. That thought never crossed his mind: he *knows* that he can do just as good or better.

“That may be the weirdest thing I have ever seen,” he tells me aloud, but his skin stays blue, and I smile back at him.

“What a liar,” I breathe, narrowing my eyes. “Why don’t you get your wife a drink?” I tease, and his eyes go wide in response. I’m not sure why, but he darts up from the bed with a stricken expression and a hand pressed tight to his flat lower belly.

“A drink?” he asks in a strange voice. “Why not?” Hyt looks over at me and winks, tipping his hat at me. “It’s almost time, Earthling.”

“Time for what?” I ask, but Hyt just chuckles.

“I’ll go make you a drink: it’ll be your last one for a while.” He turns pink. “*Almost time* was not a good choice of words. It *is* time. Now. Have a drink and then we need to fuck.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, still reeling from what just happened with the dragon. Now the tentacle fox is going to mess with me, too? “I want to fuck you, yes, but when you say that it’s time ...”

“The child,” Rurik whispers, and I swing my gaze to him to find his eyes closed, head tilted back to the sky. The breeze picks up the white perfection of his hair. It doesn’t blow like normal hair though, more like a mane, like fur. He drops his chin to look at me as Hyt makes his way around the bed, heading for the crate of liquor bottles we brought out with us. He squats down next to it and withdraws a shaker, several bottles, a piece of fruit, and a knife. He starts to chop the fruit with his tentacle tails before he’s even done digging through the crate with his hands.

Wow.

“The child.” I move toward the bed as Abraxas adjusts himself, curling his body tightly around the end of the circular mattress, sort of like he’s spooning it or something. I notice as I prepare myself to climb on the bed that there’s some ... spatter. *Damn, he makes a lot of cum.* “Err. It’s time?” I look back up at the sky and trees that are now blocking my view of *The Korol*. “But we’re days away from our deadline ...”

“Instead of letting our deadline sneak up on us, we will turn and face it.” Rurik holds up a bare hand as I drop my gaze to

his unbuttoned jacket and the smooth expanse of chest beneath. I go to him, happy to tears that he and Hyt are not only still here, but also seem not to care that I just fucked a giant black and purple alien with two dicks.

That's ... that's true love, isn't it? When your guys can get cucked by a double-dicked dragon.

"My female's pheromones ... want to fuck and fuck and fuck." I can't tell if Abraxas means that my pheromones make him want to fuck and fuck and fuck or if he means that my pheromones make me do that. Either way, he's right so I don't argue. He's just trying to pay me a compliment.

I take Rurik's hand and he guides me into his lap, his own body still reclined onto a single elbow, wings trapped beneath him. I'm getting his slacks all dirty, but ... there's already a bit of a puddle at the bottom of the bed. The prince turns my chin back to him with a single finger, so that when he opens his eyes finally, I'm staring directly into them.

"I did not want to accidentally snare your gaze," he tells me honestly, and my heart throbs painfully as I'm reminded all over again of his fate. Tears come to my eyes, but then Rurik is sitting up suddenly and wafting his wings, spilling pheromones into my hair, dusting my skin with them. His hand holds my chin in a tight grip, red claws tracing the pulse of my carotid artery.

It wouldn't have been pleasant for you to witness the inside of my mind just then, huh? I ask through our stare, emotions transferring from me to him and vice versa. I don't even know how to explain it but to say that Rurik and I are an endless circle, a snake eating its own tail. Forever. That sort of mystical shit.

I know that what I'm experiencing is akin to getting off on cannabis, like getting drunk. The pleasure signals in my brain are on overload just from the smell of him, from his stare.

On the contrary, it would've been far too pleasant. You looked very happy, and I would've reveled in witnessing that, would probably have enjoyed it. But I am already struggling

with what I must do. I couldn't bear to know all that I was missing out on.

I reach up and snatch his feelers, one in each hand, and then I lean down and take his mouth. He lets me, moving his hand from my neck, so that he can grab onto my upper arm. Rurik's fingertips dig into my moist skin as he kisses me with zero inhibition, as if he doesn't care where I've just come from or who else I was with.

"Here," Hyt says, gently enough. He uses one of his tentacles to grab my wrist, uncurling my fingers with a second one, and putting my drink into my hand with a third. "Drink up. Next time, it'll be your pregnant ass making *me* a drink." He turns blue. Fucking liar. Hyt cringes and reaches down, grabbing his junk through his loincloth. "Dead Kings, it's common knowledge that it's supposed to ache when it's time, but males can hold their embryos for up to two years. This ... isn't that. I have to get this baby in you *now*."

"But—"

Rurik takes the drink from me before it ends up getting spilled. Hyt hefts me up off of the prince's lap and, even though he tries to hide it, I see a little smirk on his lips. Maybe a little retribution for Rurik ripping me off his dick last time?

Hyt drags us both down into the blankets before he realizes that there was ... an error in Abraxas' judgment.

"We accidentally got some on the bed ..." I hedge, but my mate is quick to correct me.

"*No, female. Not accidental.*" Abraxas howls with laughter, startling brightly colored bats from the trees.

Okay then. I correct my mistake.

"Abraxas *intentionally* got some on the bed."

"Don't even fuckin' care," Hyt tells me, undoing his belt and chucking it onto the ground. He spreads my legs and gets to his knees between them. I watch as his hand drops to his cock, the secondary shaft already protruding from the thicker lower portion. His base tentacles and mating tentacles both are reaching for me, and his balls look swollen as *fuck*.

“That’s where it hurts, eh?” I tease, but he just uses his tentacles to yank me even closer to him and I let out a groan as our genitals brush together with wetness and heat.

“Not at all,” Hyt lies, turning blue, adjusting the tip of his shaft, so that his mating tentacles are able to press into my opening. The purple glow from my pussy is blatantly obvious for a few seconds there. But Hyt doesn’t start slow. He drives deep, using his tentacles to hold me in place while he gets wild, almost vicious with his thrusts.

It’s exactly what my own body wants, and I reach up, trying to get him to come to me. He does, sliding his gorgeous body against mine as he fucks. Tentacles are everywhere, touching all of me, squeezing my breasts and pinching my nipples, caressing my ass, smearing my hot skin with oil. My hips pump up to meet his as I lock my hands together behind Hyt’s neck, his braid falling between us and leaving my skin with an all-over tingling that amplifies the sensation of touch.

“This is *insane*,” Hyt groans out as Rurik crawls over to us on all fours, stalking across the bed like he has an idea in mind. “My entire body is going to split in half if I don’t put this baby in you *now*.”

“My biology,” Rurik whispers reverently, “Abraxas’ biology. Something is different, perhaps.”

Hyt groans and presses his hands into the mattress on either side of my head, staring down at me with his strange eyes. Three blue irises because even if it was hyperbole, it’s still a lie. His body isn’t going to split in half: it just feels like it is. His mouth closes over mine at the same time I offer up the pearl. I give it to him right away, and then I take it back through our kiss. There’s a shimmer on the inside as it passes through my system, and then I give it again through my cunt.

My husband does the same: accepts it while he’s kissing me, and then pushes it back out of his mouth. His life force. My life force. *Our* life force. *Holy Stars, this is crazy*. The dang thing makes a quick half-dozen rounds before Hyt groans and forces himself to relinquish my lips. He sits up a little more so

that he can stare at Rurik, holding me against him with a nest of tentacles.

“The embryo feels ...” He turns to glance at Abraxas, the dragon’s massive head lying on the end of the bed, staring at us with slowly blinking eyes. “Like it’s bigger than it should be.” Hyt turns back to study Rurik, and then shakes his head. “This might hurt us both a little,” he tells me in an apologetic but very tense tone of voice. I nod at him, and he nods right back, adjusting my body so that he’s sitting up, and my ass is lifted slightly off the bed.

Rurik reaches a hand down and flicks the button on his slacks, sitting up so that he can shrug out of his jacket first, his pants next. I catch sight of the design on his wings, glowing red under the blanket of stars above us. Insects call out gentle songs as something owl-like coos and then chitters, and then Rurik is crawling to me and swinging a leg over my head.

He straddles my face, reaching down to free his straining cock from its thigh strap. It springs forward, claspers unfurling all at once. That beautiful white cock slips into my mouth as Rurik mounts my face, claspers diving into the mattress on either side of me and effectively pinning me there.

But we can communicate, me and my prince, so he knows exactly how to position himself, exactly how deep he can go, how best to please himself without hurting me. I tilt my head back as far as I can so I can take more of him into my mouth, and then I let myself relax completely.

The smell of allspice and ginger, nutmeg and cinnamon, it hits me at the same time that I taste honeyed sweetness on my tongue. The prince gently rolls his hips, slow, even strokes that get him nice and hot and wet with my saliva. I suck greedily at him when he draws back, and then I relax again when he pushes forward.

Why is this mouth as exquisite as the pussy that adorns the other end of you? Why does my princess make me feel so shameless? Rurik wonders all of that even as we both know the answer to that.

He *should* have changed to suit my needs. That's what the Vestalis do. That's how they're made. But he didn't. This is something he always wished for in a mate—raw, unfiltered *sex*—and he's getting it. Also, he likes to be the boss and we both know that has nothing to do with me regardless of how much I like it.

With a snarl, Rurik reaches down and grips a handful of my hair, bracing himself on his other hand as he rides my mouth toward orgasm. His testes bump against my lips with each thrust, tucked nicely against the midway point of his shaft. Those claspers though? They're never satisfied with staying put and instead, they cling to me, claw at the blankets, shred the fabric with their sharp black tips.

I feel something brush my ankle, something thicker and hotter than one of Hyt's tentacles. It's Abraxas' tail, squeezing my leg and pulling me open wider for his comrade.

Hyt takes care of the rest, gripping my hips as he slams into me at a rhythm designed by nature to get what it wants out of us.

That *coaxing* sensation, it happens at the end of me, like Hyt is playing my insides like an instrument, like he knows exactly what notes he needs to strike in order for me to open. It's like the pearl, but worse. It's the same frantic intensity that I felt the other night when he refused to give the embryo back. But now? He's literally pushing it into me, returning the egg through the tip of his cock, out the little hole at the center of his mating tentacles.

He's right: it is large, the size of a golf ball maybe. I figure it's probably surrounded by fluid or a sac of some kind, but ... maybe it's just this huge because of Abraxas? *Please don't let this kill me*, I think, but then it's too late because I suddenly don't care about anything but this.

The orgasm strikes me first, but I realize in the back of my mind that it's really only a small part of what's happening to me right now. The fertilized egg slips out of Hyt and into me, taking root in my body so suddenly that I gasp. I'm coming,

but I'm also feeling something akin to a hard punch to the lower belly.

"*Seeded ... again,*" Abraxas grumbles as Rurik spills honey spice cum into my mouth. *Another packet of vitamins,* I realize as Hyt slams deep for the final time, hands gripping my hips, tentacles slathering my body with pheromone oil as he releases an entire cloud of bubbles into the sky. Hundreds of them, at least. The mattress gets a little wet around me, like moisture is beading on Hyt's beautiful lie-blue skin, clinging to his scales.

"You're pregnant," he whispers huskily, turning pink. Hyt slips out of me, but he doesn't go far, moving to the left and using his tentacles to pull my leg open for Rurik. With Abraxas holding one half of me, and Hyt holding the other half, I'm completely open for the prince.

With a hissing moth curse thrown at his claspers, he forcibly pulls them back and then rolls off of me. I suck in a deep breath as he readjusts himself to settle between my thighs. I lift my head up just in time to meet his gaze, hurting a little bit, panting a lot, struggling to blink through the dizzy rush of pleasure.

"Princess," Rurik says, and then that's it. He curves his hands around my pelvis and mounts me while the other two keep me spread nice and wide for him. Our eyes meet, and I'm twisted up in that stare all over again. "Princess." Another hard thrust. "*Princess.*"

The prince drives our bodies together, and I realize as I watch him silhouetted in white marble against a very milky solar system, that he is no longer teetering on the cusp of being king. Tonight, he's wearing the crown.

One of Hyt's tentacles flicks against Rurik's lower back for me, activating the coremata so that they unfurl in bright red lines of eversible alien *sex*. My moth man lover wafts his wings, sprinkling pheromone dust like glitter. More bubbles from Hyt. Abraxas' still warm cum puddled around me, his tail dripping hot venom on my bare skin.

I climax again, my body clutching greedily at Rurik's, and then I open my shuttered eyes to a double set of stars—real

ones, others little more than misty pleasure. Hyt collapses to his side on my right and Rurik, once he's come inside of me, he collapses on my left. Abraxas stretches a wing over the bed, shielding us from the worst of the cold air.

"Much appreciated," Hyt murmurs, naked and splayed on his stomach with his cowboy hat knocked askew. His companion chitters happily before settling down near the pillows, well away from our messy pile and all of the, um, fluid around us. It's fun now, but in a few hours ... we might have to take the blankets off the mattress and leave them elsewhere.

"Get under my wing or get out of my way," Abraxas purrs with another dark laugh, and I shiver.

I scoot as close as I can get to Rurik, curling up in his arms with Hyt pressed tight against my back. Hopefully Abraxas will be back to his small size in a few days, and he can sleep in the bed with us.

Except ... you were waiting for the embryo and now you've got it.

There isn't going to be another night like this on Jungryuk, is there?

I do my best to enjoy the time left in the one we have.



Sleeping outside is a more romantic proposition than it is a reality. Sometime in the middle of the night, Hyt gets up to make a roaring fire and Abraxas forces his massive form onto the bed, effectively cuddling all three of us in the abject lack of space.

When I first crack my eyes to horrible morning sunshine (yeah, still not a morning person), I'm bundled up with naked Hyt and mostly naked Rurik in the circle of the dragon's sinuous black body.

"Good morning, sweet female," he purrs at me, grooming my hair with his tongue. I'm too tired to fight him off—even for play pretend—so I just stay where I am, completely and totally relaxed.

"What's the plan for today?" I whisper the words because I don't dare speak them any louder. If I do, I might burst this perfect bubble around us. I can see *The Korol* against the morning clouds; it's even closer now. The air has a stale, unnatural quality to it. And the cold? It hasn't gotten much better since the sun came up. The ship is blocking one of Jungryuk's suns like an eclipse.

"We will eat," Rurik says slowly, his body leaned back against Abraxas' in much the same way that mine is. "We will bathe. Dress ourselves. Call for a transport."

I shiver all over, wrapping my arms around my body as Hyt's tentacles squeeze me gently in a good morning hug.

“We’ll get through this, Earthling,” he reassures me, rising to his feet and stretching his arms to the sky. Hyt snatches up his cowboy hat and flicks it onto his head. “I’ll check on the prisoners. You want to cook?” He points at Abraxas with a tentacle, and the Aspis yawns, stretching like a cat before hopping off the bed.

“*I will cook,*” he breathes, my translator crackling as he swipes his tail against my face, feigning an accidental brush. I glare good-naturedly at him. He’s smaller today than he was yesterday, but by no means is he as small as Hyt or Rurik (let alone me). “*But first ... hunt.*”

He takes off into the air without asking me to follow, and I thank him silently in my mind for leaving me with a chance to spend one last minute alone with Rurik. I’m sure we’ll be alone in the throne room, too, but it won’t be the same.

Hyt saunters off with a purposeful whistle, letting us know his location so that we can lay naked on our sides to face each other.

“Your nose is fascinating,” Rurik tells me, reaching out a finger and running it down the line of my bridge. I scoot a little closer to him and he takes me in his strong arms, holding me against a human-like chest without hair or nipples. It’s close, but there’s something about that ethereal perfection that seems fabled. My turn to trace a finger down his body.

I start in the center of his chest and find my way to his clasper-swirled cock.

“Your dick is fascinating,” I respond easily, and Rurik chuckles, leaning in and putting his pretty mouth against the side of my neck.

“Weren’t you listening to the plan, princess? First, we *eat.*” He snatches my chin in one hand, forcing me to arch my neck so that he can easily sink his teeth into my throat. Right in the front, too, like a wild animal biting into its prey. I hold very still, but Rurik chuckles gently against my skin and then nuzzles it, slipping his tongue into one of the wounds to drink.

He needs as much as he can get for today: I understand that.

I close my eyes as he adjusts himself between my thighs, settling in to enter me. His claspers spring wide and snatch my hips, drawing us together as his wings fall to either side like a heavy winter cloak. I snatch at his red fur with one hand, snagging a horn with the other.

Blood lace spills down the side of my neck and slithers across my body in ribbons, twisting around me and blanketing me in pulsating heat. It chases away the cool of the morning air as Rurik works his body slowly and patiently against mine, withdrawing his lips from my neck so that he can kiss my mouth with the tangy taste of copper on his tongue.

I press my hands to either side of his face, kissing him back and allowing my eyes to close. Our magnetic stare is great, but I don't need it right now. We're making love, so the connection is there anyway.

I am happy that our baby is with you again, he tells me, and I grip his horns, giving them a playful yank.

We spend a lazy morning moving slowly, not chasing orgasm but letting it come in its own time. He's first, but he doesn't move when he's done, waiting only a few minutes before continuing. My climax is slow and achy, and it both feels good and emphasizes the hurt left from the cramps last night.

"This baby isn't going to grow bigger than I am while still inside of me, is it?" I ask when Abraxas returns, carrying one of those giant purple toads in his wing-hand. He chucks it onto the ground and tilts his head at me, like I've managed to confuse him.

"Makes no sense," he tells me confidently, righting his head. *"Mother ... death."*

"Yeah, I know, that's why I'm asking," I complain, sitting up with lace ribbons draped all over me. A more creative individual could twist them into a dress or something, but that isn't me. I'm a caterer and a chef and a baker. I work in pastry cream and piping bags. Sometimes. Others, it feels like all I excel in are giving orders and paying taxes. At least one of those things should come in handy while acting as the Imperial

Queen. “There’s a movie called *Alien* where the baby aliens, like, burst out of human chests.” I use my hand for emphasis as Rurik just stares at me from my left side.

“It comforts me to see you question his offspring as you did mine,” Rurik tells me. Nobody acknowledges the dumb shit that I said about the movie. Maybe they can sense how weak I feel from the blood loss? Might have to sneak some extra fruit into my dress pockets to carry aboard *The Korol*.

“You didn’t ask if mine were tadpoles, did you?” Hyt asks it like a question so that he’ll stay blue, eating something that looks a bit like an orange creamsicle. He’s holding it one of his tentacles and giving it a nice, long lick. When he sees me looking, he raises a fin-brow and holds it out. “You want some?”

I stumble over and take it as he leans down to peer at me.

“Are they then?” I ask, and he blinks like he isn’t sure if I’m joking or not. “Tadpoles, I mean. Why would you even bring that up? Now, I’m nervous as hell.”

“Eat your ice cream,” Hyt tells me, sidestepping the question entirely. I see that he’s got a pair of robes hanging from his tentacles. Aww. One for me and one for the prince? *What a cutie*.

“Bastard,” I grumble aloud, giving him a dirty side-eye. “I can’t believe I let you give the embryo back last night. I should’ve made you keep it for another night. I didn’t even get to enjoy my drink.”

“No? Well, I certainly enjoyed it,” Hyt teases as he spins his hat and winks at me. “And anyway, you didn’t have much of a choice. You’ve felt the mating tentacles, right? A male has to be skilled to get a female to give up her egg, and even more skilled to convince her to take it back. Remember: it’s the only part of a female Falopex’s channel that gets stimulated. If it wasn’t convincing, we’d be in trouble as a species.”

“Female Falopex,” I grumble as Abraxas blows on a pile of logs and starts a massive blaze with little effort and no tinder. *Fucking Minnie*. I don’t let myself think about Minnie (fine, I

know it's Minae) and turn back to Rurik. Hyt is about to make a joke, I think, but he doesn't quite get there, pausing to answer his phone.

I open my mouth to say ... something. Doesn't come out.

One minute, everything is peaceful. The next, it's complete and utter chaos.

Rurik's eyes shimmer with a flood of red lace, glazing over like he's no longer present in his body. *Zero*. It just has to be Zero, right? I stand there with a dripping ice cream clutched in my hand, waiting with a thumping heart and absolutely no idea as to what's going on. *The Korol* knows we're here, so what could this possibly be about?

"*We are so fucked!*" Captain Kidd shouts as Hyt answers the call; I hear panting, the sound of foliage crushing underfoot. Shouts. Screams. My heart stops and then restarts at a frantic gallop. "*They're here to arrest us all!*"

They? I wonder, my attention still fixed on Rurik. Whatever is going on with Captain Kidd and the others, Rurik can see and experience through Zero. I only wish I had that ability, too, so I could check on Jane and Kayla, make sure Avril and the human women are okay.

Abraxas prowls over to sit beside me, curling his tail in a protective coil around my naked body, as if he can sense my extreme distress. I wait for the other two men to explain what's going on.

"*Today ... it ends,*" Abraxas says, but not like he's worried. I resist the urge to turn my attention up to the sky, to *The Korol*. Did the king and queen send soldiers down to the surface? Did one of Rurik's brothers show up with a mate? Are we about to be slaughtered? Are we about to ... I give in and shift my eyes up to the eclipsing shadow of the ship, and then force myself to bite the ice cream in half. I need the sugar to replenish my strength, and ... if the ship is going to consume us all, my only chance at keeping us safe is to supply Rurik with plenty of blood.

The prince shakes his head violently, clearing his vision and shoving up to his feet. He snatches both robes from Hyt's tentacles, passing one to me and slipping the other over his own shoulders.

"Arrest ..." Hyt doesn't even ask a question, looking up to meet Rurik's gaze. Abraxas lifts his head up and scents the air.

"*Falopex ... too many,*" he growls before either of the other males can say anything.

"*The Chief is heading your way now, my friend. Good luck, and I love ya,*" Kidd says abruptly, like he doesn't have the time to continue this conversation. How could he? If there are Falopex ... if the Chief is here ...

"I love you, too," Hyt says grimly, and I really hate that the friends aren't giving each other shit. If they're saying their *I love you's*, then how bad is this really? "If my father is here, then he's brought his best people with him," Hyt tells Rurik, slipping his phone back into the pouch on his belt. "I don't know why he's on Jungryuk, but if he felt the need to come here then it's not looking good for us." I watch him adjust his stance, slip his thumbs under his belt, drop his head in thought. He's wearing a purple hat today with a matching bandanna around the neck, a belt and loincloth to go with it.

Hyt reaches his fingers up and rubs at the burn mark on his chest—his sheriff's badge or whatever it is. It's in the shape of the World Station armillary sphere with Yaoh attached. I wonder if he's thinking about his people and how much of this situation is really due to our actions. I wonder if he's thinking about fucking Minae, and the likely possibility that she may have told the Chief who I really am.

The Vestalis were settling their ship over Yaoh, but now they're here. Captain Kidd is evading arrest as we speak—who knows what's going on with all the women we saved—and now there are Falopex heading through the trees toward us?

"Get inside and get washed up," Rurik snaps, turning to Abraxas and slinging orders like he expects the other men to obey. "Burn the evidence from this courtyard. Anything a

Falopex could use to scent that there were unauthorized matings here.”

Abraxas considers that for a minute, weighing the validity of the action. He makes a decision and then inclines his head.

“*Yes, Imperial Majesty,*” he says without a hint of derision or hostility. Okay, fine, with just a *little* bit of sarcasm and disdain. He turns and drops his head, billowing flames from his toothy mouth and setting the bed from last night on fire.

“Come on, Princess,” Hyt says, looking stricken. Because he knows that if there are Falopex here, it’s because Rurik’s parents know they’re here. They wouldn’t have been allowed to land otherwise.

Rurik sweeps past us and up the stairs in his silk robe while Hyt and I follow behind.

“Oh, you guys are up?” Connor asks, eating cereal in the doorway to the kitchen. He looks a bit like a frat boy now, with his glasses gone, shirtless and wearing yellow and green sweatpants with the University of Oregon Ducks logo on either side.

“Intergalactic war,” Hyt says, and he stays pink. Uh-oh. He wraps me in a nest of tentacles to hide my nakedness from Connor (my robe was gaping wide open at the front), and I think the move is entirely unconscious on his part. If he was thinking clearly, he’d remember that Connor has a Vestalin mate and would never even *dare* to look at another living being with sex or romance in his eyes.

“Get dressed and prepare to board *The Korol,*” Rurik growls over his shoulder as Brot struggles to sit up on the sofa. Couch. Whatever the fuck it is. The door to the bedroom swishes open, and Rurik makes his way straight to his bag. He withdraws the face monitor and gives the pair of us a pointed look. “Stay away from me while I am wearing this.”

He heads back into the living room and closes the door behind him. I peel away from Hyt as he gets the shower started and digs through one of the trunks that Avril left in search of

clothes for me. He's Falopex royalty; he'll know what an Imperial Princess needs to wear.

I turn my head and close my eyes, listening into Rurik not through his words but through the blood lace. I don't know how it works; it's just intuitive. I can hear what he's saying even with a thick door and metal walls between us. If I focus really, really hard, I can even *see* what he's doing.

"I am seeking transport to board The Korol," he says, voice crisp and authoritative. A long pause follows there, and then Rurik is tearing the device away from his face, his father's meaty tendrils snapping, blood running down his elfin ear. He turns to look at me somehow, through the door, through my closed lids.

I snap my eyes open and hit the button to force the door open, so we can actually look at each other.

Rurik is standing just as I imagined him, dripping red blood onto the white shoulder of his silk robe.

"Get dressed, my Princess. But there is no need to rush. When we meet with the Falopex unit, we will meet them as royalty, not as criminals."

"Your dad is going to hate me," I whisper to Hyt when I move to join him in the shower.

"Good. Then we'll belong to the same club." Hyt dumps a bunch of soap on my head, but as he moves to wash me with his tentacles, he seems to realize that we aren't supposed to be touching and takes a step back. Rurik joins us, but, with no such complications to consider, he collects more soap into his hands and gets to work cleaning the evidence of seminal fluid and pheromones from my body.



This might be the most beautiful dress that I have ever worn, save for my wedding dress. It'd be difficult to beat something

that Rurik made with my own blood, crafted with his tongue and fingers. This gown though, with its bone-white skirt, the red fur neckline, the heavy cloak, is in a league of its own.

I feel like a fairy-tale creature with my auburn hair piled high on my head and dressed with jewels, strings of pearls, hair clips made of mechanical butterflies whose wings gently flutter. My mouth has been painted an obscene red, my eyes darkened with black shadow, and my pale hands covered in red gloves.

I have the Cartian gun that Hyt gifted me stuffed into one pocket; the other is packed with food to assist in all the bloodletting I'll need to do today.

Rurik and I stand side by side while Hyt takes the frontmost position, a row of guns down his back, the Atrata weapon he found in the birthing den clutched in his hands. Not his tentacles but his *hands*. Serious business. Brot and Connor, both in full Vestalin regalia, stand just behind and to the right of me. And in the very back, our resident alien dragon looms above the clearing.

While the rest of us are dressed up, Abraxas remains naked but coated in fresh pitch from a thermal vent. He's returned to his full-size again, sitting on his haunches with his wings spread, a purple glow infecting the stale, gray morning air.

I haven't seen Hyt's companion for a while, but I imagine that when he comes screaming into the clearing that we'll have our last warning. Hyt sent him ahead sometime ago to track the progress of the chief and his entourage of high-ranking Falopex.

Breathe, Eve. You don't know why they're here. Only, I can take a wild guess. Hyt seems to think the same thing, and with Rurik's parents refusing to say anything over the face monitor, all we can do is wait and see.

"I do not know why the Falopex are here, but I do know that my parents are angry—angrier even than they were before. Something has changed since my last communication with them, but I cannot say what that is." That's what Rurik told

me as we were getting dressed, but in his face, I could see it all.

We either take the throne today, now, or we all die.

The two-headed cat trots into the space just in front of us, paws padding over cricket-grass. Some of the poor critters got incinerated early, but that's the price of being a lawn ornament, now isn't it? The cat sits down and then lifts a leg, licking its back paw with one head while the other—the mean head—*stares* at me.

“Two-Face, *get out of here,*” I grind out through my teeth, waving my hands at the cat. I have to resist the urge to shout *psst* and see if I can chase it off by waving my arms. That's the hysterics talking. This is *the* most anxious I have ever been in my entire life. I'm desperately worried about Jane and the others, about the women we rescued, about *us*.

The cat pauses and drops its leg, turning so that both heads can glare at me with green eyes.

“When the crucial moment is upon us, you expect me to flee?” the cat asks, both mouths speaking in unison.

Erm.

I scratch at my ear with a finger and then squat down, my skirts rustling.

“Please tell me I'm not going insane. You guys heard the double-headed cat talk, right?”

“I heard it,” Hyt says, sounding as perplexed as I feel. His tails waft behind him as he adjusts his white hat and keeps his attention on the weird-ass pink alien cat. I miss his purple outfit already, but ... there was a *smell*. The air around these guys gets heavy when they're aroused, a mist of pheromones rolling in like a hot and humid storm. His prior outfit had to be burned. “But I wish I hadn't.” He turns blue.

“The Dehvas ... are not known to speak,” Rurik adds, his voice puzzled but tense. He's curious about the cat, but there are much, much bigger concerns at play here. When I look back at him, I see that his dark gaze isn't on the cat but on the shadows of the woods around us.

“*Already ... I said,*” Abraxas growls, and the translator goes completely haywire in my head, blurring the unintelligible words spilling from his horror movie mouth. “*I ... you ... told,*” he repeats, and he did. He told me the cat was ... sharp but pure in intent? Something like that.

“A crucial moment?” I ask as we all stare at the cat, and the cat(s?) stare back. There must be two distinct individuals in there, right?

“We are kingmakers,” the cat heads say in unison, and once again I question whether there are two cats or, like with Taylor/Trevor, there’s only one soul between them. “We read the stars,” it continues, standing up and pacing over to me. I prepare myself to be bitten again, but this time, even the mean head is rubbing against me with an interstellar purr. “We domesticated ourselves to serve the Vestalis; it was the best possible course for the evolution of our species.”

Huh. Like cats on Earth? They domesticated themselves. If you’ve ever spent any significant time around cats, you know it’s true. A cat only does what the fuck a cat wants to do.

“What in Stars is this blasphemy?” Brot breathes out from behind us, and I hear Connor doing his best to soothe his mate’s ruffled propriety. “The Dehvas can *talk*? But ... they are mindless animals.” He sounds panicked now, and I wonder if, like me and Rurik, he was sharing his marital bedroom with super intelligent alien felines.

The cat whips both heads in Brot’s direction.

“Your lovemaking is not as scandalous as you make it out to be. Calm yourself, uptight alien princeling.” The cat offers a hiss and a swipe at the air with its claws extended. Brot rears back like he’s been slapped, but what’s new? Poor Connor has his hands full with that one.

“Kingmakers?” Rurik repeats, and now he can’t resist. He takes a step closer to the cat, dressed in a red jacket with black and gold piping, black pants, and boots with huge gold buckles. He very much looks like a king in that outfit. Pride swells in my chest, but I push it down. We are not out of the woods yet—not even close. “I do not understand. Clarify, cat.”

The alien feline sits down and looks past me toward Abraxas. The pair of them study one another, and I get the idea that maybe they're communicating through body language.

"There's always something new to discover in the Noctuida, eh?" Hyt asks, remaining blue. "So, cat, if you're a kingmaker, and you're here, you must like Rurik then?"

The cat draws its four eyes away from Abraxas to look at me instead.

"The most beneficial action the Dehvas could take when the Vestalis arrived on our home planet was to allow them to have control of it. They love and cherish our homeland as much as we do, and they can protect us from star-sent invaders." The cat turns to Rurik next. "According to our oral history, we have encountered the Atrata and suffered for it. So, we allow the Vestalis to come, and we evaluate their royal candidates. The former king and queen were foretold as a necessary evil, but their son ..."

"You chose Rurik to be king?" I ask, because I see that this is where we're going. Not sure if I believe it, but ... I remember Two-Face appearing as soon as we landed on Dome, following us around, sneaking into Hyt's police cruiser after the incident at the Cosmic Chapel. "Then why were you always hissing at me?"

"The queen is as important as the king—if not more so. We had to evaluate you, but we were unsure. However, you have proven yourself, and we, the Dehvas, extend our blessing for a long and fruitful rule."

Silence falls in the clearing, but the woods are as alive as ever.

They're almost here.

"I will do your people justice," Rurik breathes, looking up as a twig snaps somewhere close by. Hyt turns his head to follow the sound as his companion twirls out of the shadows and screams a wild warning, bubbles billowing in a steady stream from its beak. Abraxas snarls, tensing his muscles and readying himself for violence.

If a fight happens here today, Falopex are going to die.

“We truly believe that you will,” the cats say in unison, both heads dipping. I hesitate slightly, but ... it *is* a cat even if it’s a kingmaking sentient alien cat with hot pink fur.

“Can I pick you up?” I ask, and Two-Face rises to its feet, stretching and yawning before headbutting me in clear acquiescence. I scoop the fuzzy creature into my arms, grateful for the allergy shot I received from the Vestalis, and missing my Earth cat, Annabelle, with an ache that transcends the tense nature of the moment.

I stand up as Hyt’s companion races forward to intercept ...
oh no.

Oh shit no.

I recognize the mini purple octopus spinning into the clearing.

It’s Minnie’s companion. I mean, it’s Minae’s companion.

“Aw, fuck,” I groan as Hyt flicks a sympathetic look over his shoulder at me. Our eyes meet.

“I am so sorry, my beautiful bride,” he whispers, and then he turns back in time to see his childhood friend emerging from the trees. She’s not alone: Hyt’s father is right there with her. Nya, Hyt’s eldest sister, stands on the opposite side from Minae. Behind them, a good three-dozen Falopex in varying colors, all of them bristling with guns.

Oh, and the weirdest part? They’re all clothed from head to toe in the same starry fabric that I first saw Rurik dressed in, like Kevlar or something. Pants, jackets, boots, peaked caps. Weapons. Lots and lots and lots of weapons. Plenty of companions, too, drifting in the air like tiny helicopters.

More Falopex soldiers emerge until we’re entirely surrounded, a ring of tentacle-tailed police officers staring at us with guns held in their hands, clutched in their tails, frowns on their beautiful faces. *Clothed* Falopex. No plump slits, no taut breasts, no flaccid dicks or dangling balls or buttoles to be seen. It’s weird as hell. It adds an extra layer of eeriness to the situation (seriously).

“Hello, Son,” the chief says, his voice dark but pierced with shards of bright red rage.

“Hello, Chief,” Hyt replies, holding the Atrata gun on his own dad. He doesn’t threaten him, doesn’t even move, but he certainly doesn’t relax his stance. “What brings you all the way out here? Never bothered to visit my house when I invited you before, but I suppose that this is *far* more important to you?” All questions, leaving his skin stained with the blue of lies.

Oddly enough, Officer Hyt is one of the most honest individuals I have ever met, right up there with Abraxas and Rurik. Also, he made me a homemade alien cake for my birthday so I ... I guess I’m partial to the man.

The chief’s gaze shifts over to me, my hair and makeup done, my clothing befitting the Imperial Princess.

“Damn you,” Minae grinds out, turning her head to one side like she can’t bear to look at me. “Because of you, Hyt is ... Hyt ...” She trails off before whipping her gaze back to mine, eyes burning with loathing, ire, and contempt. “This is all your fault. He’s going to fucking *die* because of you!”

“Stand down, officer,” Hyt’s father says calmly, but he’s looking at me, too.

“My fault?” I blurt out, taking a step forward and ending up with all of those guns pointed directly at my person. Abraxas lets out a warning growl and stalks forward, standing above me like the bodyguard I’m currently missing and hoping is okay. *Come on, Zero.* If anyone can get my friends—and the rescued humans—out of this mess, it’ll be her. Her and Kidd and Jane, Avril and Kayla. I trust them implicitly. “If you hadn’t run your fucking mouth, we wouldn’t be standing here, now would we?”

It hits me then that the prisoners we took from the Oku settlement aren’t going to fix our problems. Taylor/Trevor is still locked up beneath the house with his two sex trafficking companions. It should’ve occurred to me sooner when the guys didn’t truss them up and march them into the clearing with us.

If the Falopex are here, if Minae is screaming at me about being right, then the king and queen definitely know by now that Hyt and I are mates. And if they know that, are we truly and utterly fucked? Is there no way to pretend otherwise, to ... I don't know, claim that Hyt and I were truly just fake fiancés?

Rurik places a hand on my arm, and when I look over, I see that he's entirely calm, stoic, commanding. Behind him, I notice Connor fidgeting with his jacket, and Brot standing with his chin held high. The only tell that Brot is not entirely comfortable with this situation is the way his fingers grip his mate's.

"Lower your weapons," Rurik orders, the words echoing out across the clearing. None of the Falopex move to obey. "We will board *The Korol*; I have already ordered a transport."

"We'll be escorting you to the ship," Hyt's father corrects, completely businesslike in his demeanor. If he, like Minae, truly believes that his son is going to die, he doesn't seem to care that much. Nya looks pained, her attention moving from the prince to me, to Abraxas and then to Hyt. It's the latter that holds her attention. She wets her lips but says nothing, deferring to her father as Minae and I engage in our own personal standoff.

I get the idea that she's usually a good soldier, follows orders, gets A-plus-plus grades in class. Not today. Her jealousy has broken her wide open.

"You stole him, and then you dragged him straight to the executioner's block," she breathes again, like she just can't help herself.

"If you'd let us handle it, we wouldn't be in this mess," I growl at her, and the cat hisses with both heads, drawing the attention of Chief Officer Farin. Hyt's dad does *not* look happy to see a Dehvas cuddled up in my arms.

"Let you handle it?" Minae snaps, her voice thick with distress. It's in that moment that I realize she truly does love my husband. She's stricken by what's happening, tears running down her rose-pink face. "I *did* let you handle it! I didn't tell anyone anything. It was so damned obvious that the chief

figured it out on his own.” She stays pink, so I can’t deny that she’s telling the truth. Crap. I so wanted her to be the one that outed us. Then I could justify the intense jealousy and dislike that I feel toward her. “Did you really think this was all going to end in *happily ever after*?” Minae asks, redirecting her attention to Hyt.

Farin’s eyes flick to his subordinate, and he adjusts his grip on his weapon.

“Last warning, officer. *Stand down.*”

Shit. Either the chief was already aware that Minae knew about me and said nothing, or he just now found that information out. I can’t imagine she won’t be punished for this. I almost ... almost ... a little bit ... feel some ... sympathy for her. Gross.

Minae relents—temporarily—and has the decency to look ashamed. Hyt has no such compunctions.

“If you’d allowed us to take care of the situation, everything would’ve been fine,” Hyt growls, water dripping from his tentacles, as if he’s drawing it to himself without even meaning to. I notice that several of the officers have taken special note of the weapon in his hands. “But instead, my father chose to implicate his own son—knowing that I’d be killed as a result. *The Korol* was already moving away from Yaoh; there was absolutely no reason to get involved in this in an official capacity.” He flashes pink, and the crowd of soldiers gasps. “Maybe you’re doing the right thing by Falopex standards, Farin, but I’m your *son*. How could you distrust me so completely, when you know where my heart is at?” Hyt exhales and then flashes a sharp grin that doesn’t go any further than his mouth. His eyes are desperately sad. “You do fantastic work, Chief.” Blue again.

“The king and queen are going to execute you all, but I can at least protect the innocent citizens of the Noctuida,” Hyt’s father says, trying to assert his ironclad control over the situation. “Should I have kept your secret and waited for the truth to come out later? You have put our entire planet at risk, Hyt. The World Station. Jungryuk. Even Earth. And now,

perhaps Dome as well. You thought to smuggle more than one endangered, protective species across the stars?” Farin looks at me with the cat snuggled against the fine fabric of my dress, his triple-iris eyes hard and dark.

“You can’t undo what you’ve done—I assume you told the Imperial Court that I was fuckin’ the princess, eh?—but what you can do is back down now.” Hyt is enraged, his skin blooming pink with the harsh reality of his father’s actions. “Let us handle the situation from here, and by the end of it, you’ll be bending a knee to the next king. If I were you, I’d watch my mouth and most especially, my actions.”

“If I had refused to give you up, *The Korol* would already be engaged in war with the World Station. If we have to, we will fire on them. But are you worth that, son? Your impetuous nature and your lies, that is what brought you to this point. You are a fool, and there is nothing more that I will do to help you.”

Wow.

“Hyt, please,” Minae begs, disobeying her orders once again. *Damn, she’s got it bad.* But I can’t even blame her. If I were in her shoes, I’d do the same. “Do what you’re told and maybe ...” But she doesn’t finish speaking because she knows. There is no getting out of this, not now that the Chief Officer has ratted us out.

“Come with us and board our transport; we’ll take you to *The Korol*,” Farin repeats, gaze slipping past his son to the Aspis lording over us. The chief looks at me again, and I can see the truth of it in his eyes. It’s no secret that I was mated to an Aspis before my wedding to Rurik. And now, here, there’s an Aspis guarding us with his life. Shit. “If you resist, we have been granted permission to use deadly force.”

Hyt’s expression hardens, but not before I catch sight of his heartbreak.

Rurik would rather take down his entire court and the ship that sustains them than let his child be trapped on the throne. But Hyt’s father? He’s selling his kid out to save his own skin. Even while disapproving of his son, he uses him for political

gain. *The Korol* was already leaving Yaoh to come here. Rurik *called* them here. There was no reason for the chief to do what he did. He could simply have kept the secret to himself.

I look back to see that Rurik is no longer watching the Falopex, but is instead staring up at the sky. Two things immediately stand out to me. One, there's a small ship coming our way, white and red with a giant *eyeball* on the front. Two, *The Korol* is stretching its jaws. It's hard to see any details from here, but there's a red and pink and white swirl moving on the underside of the ship. *Its mouth. That's its fucking mouth.*

I drop my chin, blood draining from my face. I squeeze the cat a little tighter as it leans up and whispers in my ear, its breath making the single pearl earring swing.

“Good luck. You will be the ones to strangle the life out of The Korol. Of this, I am certain.” Two-Face leaps from my arms, startling the soldiers, and then vanishes. A smear of hot pink paint in the air and then *nothing*. Unsettled murmurs ripple in the group as I stare down at the space where the cat disappeared, my mouth hanging open.

I'm not the only one: nobody expected that.

Except ... for maybe Abraxas and Rurik.

Both are calm. Both are violence waiting to happen.

The former spreads his wings wide in a clear threat while the latter steps forward, leveling a look that is nothing short of pure majesty and dominion onto the group of Falopex. My body tenses at the sight, pheromones sweeping over my skin. *I am in charge here*, they say, and my legs tremble with the urge to obey.

I'm not the only one. When the prince wafts his wings, Falopex *fall*. They hit the ground on their knees and drop their weapons. Um. I wasn't aware that the prince could do this with his pheromones, and I'm sort of wondering if he isn't OP as fuck. There must be something to that Imperial Prince title that's more than pomp and circumstance. He's *strong*, much stronger than he was when I first met him.

“We will take our own transport,” he repeats, staring Hyt’s father down. “Is that understood, Chief Officer? You are facing your future king. I can and will make good on my parents’ threats in regard to Yaoh.”

Ouch. Threatening to eat Yaoh already, is he? Definitely OP (overpowered) and willing to use it. Or at least pretend like he’s going to use it. There’s a long stretch of silence that follows where I (and probably everyone else) wonder how serious he really is about that. It’s hard to say.

Rurik is kind, but he isn’t foolish. He will do what needs to be done. He saved the human women, but he slaughtered the rest of the Oku village. There might’ve been innocent men there. Didn’t matter. He won’t allow his kindness to be used against him.

I take another peek at Minae only to find that she’s still crying, but also that she is *not* on her knees. Neither is Nya. Definitely not the chief. It’s easy to see who has the power in this group. Every single other soldier is kneeling—either against their will because of the pheromones, or because they believe what Rurik is saying.

“If you refuse to board our ship, then we will at least escort you,” Farin declares, a clear threat. “If you deviate from *The Korol*, we will give chase and open fire.”

Rurik considers this and then laughs, his voice a low, sensual promise on the wind.

“You do so at your risk,” he warns, turning and taking my arm. He doesn’t wait to see what anyone else will do, guiding me to the white ship that’s hovering above the clearing. It’s big, but nowhere near the size of *The Korol*.

I freeze where I am, my head spinning dangerously as I look up at it.

We’re going back into space. I’ll be swimming through dark matter. I don’t even know what dark matter is.

“Hey.” Hyt snaps his tentacle in front of my face, trying to redirect my attention. I blink several times and his gentle expression swims into view. Rurik is still holding my left arm,

and Abraxas stalks alongside us, his gaze over his shoulder on the chief. The edge of his massive mouth curls in warning, and a growl shakes the earth beneath our feet. “You’ll be okay, Earthling; we aren’t going to let them shoot us down.”

“I’m okay,” I promise. I’m weirdly calm about all of this. It’s just ... the astrophobia isn’t rational. It’s like Jane’s absurd reaction to spiders. Her arachnophobia is off the charts. “I’m more worried about the others. If we board *The Korol*, but its mouth is already open, then what? How long will your parents need to eat this place?”

With Jane on it. With my friends on it. The entire Aspis species wiped out in a single swallow.

“Trust me, Princess,” Rurik repeats for what is surely the hundredth time. The problem is that I *do* trust him. I just don’t *want* to. He’s going to take the ship *right fucking now*, isn’t he? We’re going to take over *The Korol* today. And I hate that. “I will do everything that I can to save Jungryuk.”

Everything I can. He’s phrasing it that way because he doesn’t want to lie to me, because he isn’t sure if he *can* save Jungryuk. If only the chief hadn’t gotten involved then ... But he did. He did, and this is where we’re at now.

“He flaunts an illegal Atratan weapon?” the chief is saying to Minae. I look back and catch sight of them for a final time. They’re about to board their own transport, a blue and white ship that reminds me of the one that Hyt crashed here. I didn’t even see it land. Definitely not a Waning Day then. “He’ll be dead before he leaves the transport.”

Farin walks calmly up a ramp attached to the side of the ship, Nya worriedly following behind him. When Hyt’s sister looks up and meets my eyes, I know what she’s telling me: that her brother is a dead man. Either way—leaving him on Jungryuk to be eaten or taking him on *The Korol* to be shot—he’s done for.

A sound catches in my throat as Minae and I lock gazes.

“You killed him with your selfishness,” she tells me, pursing her mouth and turning away. “Remember that.” The door to

the transport closes with a hiss of hydraulics.

“Shit,” I murmur but at least my astrophobia isn’t kicking in anymore. Oh no. I’m in the midst of an existential crisis instead. *Come on, Eve. It’ll be okay. Just keep moving forward.* “We need to get Jane and the others, bring them with us, just in case. We *can’t* leave yet.”

I’ve already accepted that Jungryuk is done for.

It’s happening.

I can’t stop it.

I want to throw up.

“We must go *now*,” Rurik warns me, leaning down to look into my eyes. “If we do not, my parents will eat this planet with us *on it*. They would rather kill us than see us run. If we go willingly, they will attempt to lock us up, hold us until one of my brothers finds his mate. This is our only chance.”

They’ll hold us because even with adultery on the table, they want to escape the throne so badly that they’ll still consider giving it to us. But does any of that change the fate of this planet? *The Korol* needs to refuel, and they’re not next to Earth. They’re not on their way to Pradzny. They’re ... here. Above us. Opening their mouth and widening their jaws.

“But Jane!” I yell back at him, and then Hyt is swinging me up and into his arms. “What about Kayla? Avril? Zero?”

Nobody responds to me. My men *always* respond to me. They don’t want to tell me the truth: we might lose my best friend, my new friends, and all of those abducted human women.

Rurik slips his face monitor back on, glancing over at Brot. The pair of them exchange a look.

“You could die by staying here, or you could die by joining us. Take your pick, my most favorite of all my brothers.” Rurik’s voice softens in a way that’s generally reserved for me. We’re at the finish line now, and there’s no time left for games.

“I am with you, My King. Until the end.” Brot inclines his head, his arm around Connor’s waist. The human medic looks

back at me, but there's a sadness in his eyes that says he isn't convinced we're going to get out of this alive.

"I'm still glad I saved you from that arterial bleed," he mumbles, leaning into Brot for comfort. Connor forces a smile. "No matter what happens: it still beats getting swallowed alive by a giant alien slug."

He has a point, but ...

"Bring us up," Rurik says, touching two gloved fingers to the face monitor the way he did when he first found me in the woods. The time for protests ends, and that's it. The decision has been made for me.

"I'm sorry, Abraxas." My words are stronger than I expected, my gaze locked with my mate's. This is my fault. His people ... his planet ... his entire life, *ruined*.

"*Not I,*" he growls out, dropping his head to stare me down. His tail tip caresses my chin lovingly, and I worry briefly about getting his scent on me. Then again, what does it matter now? The king and queen are either going to lock us up or kill us. Or lock us up and then kill us. Or lock us up and then force the throne on us later. Regardless, we will still lose Jungryuk. "*You ... worth the world. But this place ... perseverance.*"

I'm not sure what he's trying to say. My translator is trashed by his presence. That, and I'm about to be abducted by an alien spaceship. Again.

I blink as a white light envelops us, and then we're rising into the air together. At first I think we're being literally beamed up, but then I realize that we were standing on a platform that was lowered to the ground. We're being pulled up instead. Much less exciting.

The platform docks in the floor of a large ship, plenty big enough for Abraxas to stand on all fours. Not big enough for him to stand on two feet. I'm carried to the front of the vessel, a bright red glow cast across my skin from the king's bloody, meaty growths on the walls. It oozes, I swear. It's sticky and it fucking drips, pulsing like a living heart torn from a body. The sight of it makes me sick.

I'm set on a padded seat, like an oversized car seat for adults. *This is going to suck, isn't it?* I think as Hyt straps me in. He leans down to look at me, his hands on either side of the chair, tails swaying behind him.

"We have to trust that Kidd will get them out of here. If *The Korol* is preparing to eat, it'll have less energy to direct elsewhere. They can take off if they have to."

"What if—"

It's too late. I don't get a chance to finish my sentence. Hyt is strapping me in as Rurik gives orders to the ship by ... kissing it? He leans forward and puts his hands to the wall, tongue unfurling and sliding up the white metal at the front of the vessel, where the eyeball is on the outside. From in here, it just looks like a huge, round piece of glass. I can see the shadows of the forest just outside.

The alien craft shivers strangely, and I watch in abject fascination as the blood lace on the ceiling shifts from thick, meaty hanks to delicate red lace. Oh. The vibe changes very quickly, from sci-fi horror movie to Gothic boudoir. How else can I possibly explain Rurik's style? He has class.

Rurik steps back and turns, making his way over to the seat in front of mine while Connor and Brot settle into the seats behind me. I glance over my shoulder to see that Abraxas has allowed himself to be belted in with Rurik's blood lace. His eyes are closed like he's meditating on something, and a sneaking suspicion comes up on me.

"You're afraid of space, too, aren't you?" I call over my shoulder, and the dragon grumbles but refuses to answer. Because I'm right. I am so right. "Scaredy-cat."

"*Not ... fearful as you ... female,*" he purrs back at me, and then Rurik is lifting his hand and up we go.

It happens so fast that I forget to remind myself that I'm about to die.



Two seconds into this voyage, and I'm already questioning my very existence.

Like our takeoff from Yaoh, my body melds with the seat underneath me until I forget where I am and what's going on around me. Are we about to watch as Jungryuk is swallowed by *The Korol*? Yes. Are we about to face off against the king and queen in a battle for our lives? Uh-huh. Is Rurik about to wind up a slave to a sentient ship? Maybe. Our shiny alternative? Death. For everyone. *Everyone*.

Don't go there, Eve. Not while you're in this state. Not when you're questioning what it even means to have sentience or to love.

I hate spaceships.

If I do go down the gloom and doom route, I'll end up in another way-too-realistic dream where all the people I love are dead, Rurik is a prisoner, and Hyt, Abraxas, and I are forced to wander the stars looking for a new home. I had enough trouble with the fake hospital scene. This one could actually be *worse*.

I force my mind away from that possibility, relaxing into the experience instead of fighting against it.

I focus instead on last night, reliving every perfect moment, so that when the ship finally docks, and I'm blinking myself into reality again, I'm both aroused *and* on the verge of a battle to the death. Maybe not the best use of my time.

Hyt is already up, but it's Rurik who undoes my straps for me and hauls me to my feet. He takes his hands and brushes my hair back, pressing his lips to my forehead.

You did very well, he says without saying anything at all. Rurik draws back from me and turns to watch Abraxas shake off his blood lace restraints. He glances at Hyt next, standing just behind me with his Atrata gun in hand. Last but not least, he checks in with his brother and poor, unconscious Connor. He's been tossed over Brot's shoulder for the time being.

While I'm still not thrilled with how aroused I am, I'm proud of myself for directing that horrible experience in a positive direction. *Fuck, I really hate space travel.*

"Brot, remain here on the ship. If I am killed, leave," Rurik explains, voice too cool and calm for my liking.

Brot sniffs angrily, his delicate sensibilities offended yet again.

"What part of *'I am with you, My King, until the end'* did you not understand?" he retorts, but a dark look from his brother stymies any further objection and Brot sighs, cheeks flushing with pink. "Yes, of course, Your Majesty."

Seems like poor Brot never got the memo that sometimes, people say really epic things like *Stars, mate, is it time* before finding out ... that it's not actually time at all. Rurik learned to accept humility and blush; Brot can handle the same.

Rurik faces Hyt and Abraxas again, dismissing Brot (and Connor) from the conversation.

"Follow my lead," he says as my heart leaps into my throat and ends up stuck there, choking me. He guides me away from the rows of chairs and over to a door that's slowly opening into a hatch of some sort. *His parents might rip the walls open and let the endless night take us.* That's not even a paranoid thought, is it? No, it's a possible reality.

My knees are weak, but I don't let my fear show. That's the least I can do right now, isn't it? I'm a caterer, but I'm also a queen. I keep my chin held high, back straight, as we make our way off the transport ship and onto *The Korol*.

Rurik's boots are loud; mine are even louder. The sound of Hyt's footsteps join us in the quiet space, but it's Abraxas that makes absolutely no noise at all, spilling like ink from inside the transport and causing the large screen in the corner of the room to fizzle with gray static.

There's no sound. No smells. No soldiers. Just us standing in an empty room with blood lace throbbing on the walls, glass all around us in a design similar to the Vestalin Embassy. The floor is glass, the walls are glass, the ceiling is glass. There's nothing to see but an endless stretch of space and stars.

My head spins, but I don't collapse. I don't tremble. I stand firmly beside Rurik and look down at the blue, green, and yellow orb of Jungryuk so far below us.

And then I see the tongue.

"Rurik!" I shout, but it's too late. That massive pink tongue flicks downward with a spatter of blood, house-sized droplets drifting in the vacuum of space. The tongue itself heats up, liquefying the king's blood lace and then sending it downwards in a sharp red beam.

I scream, but the sound chokes off as I watch the red light hit the planet and then ... *disperse*. It flows into the ground, and one of Jungruk's massive volcanoes explodes in a rush of purple magma, spilling and tumbling down the side of a flame-capped peak.

Please don't let that volcano be anywhere near Jane and the others. That is, if they're even still on the planet's surface. Regardless, a volcanic eruption is a lot easier to deal with than total annihilation. I'm breathing so hard that I feel dizzy again, clinging to my king's arm, unshed tears stinging my eyes.

"What ... what the actual fucking fuck?" I whisper, because I might be the future queen, but I'm still Eve Wakefield, nearly-thirty, ex-caterer, dirty mouth.

"I do not know," Rurik replies, his own breathing erratic and labored, feelers sticking straight out to either side in distress. Only Abraxas seems chill.

“Jungryuk ...” Hyt trails off and looks up from the floor to stare at Abraxas. “There are no shields there as far as I know?” He asks it like a question, but we both know it wasn’t some sort of advanced alien technology that protected the Aspis’ home planet.

The planet protected *itself*.

“*No shields,*” Abraxas agrees, but he doesn’t elaborate. If we survive this, I’m sure he’ll gloat about being right. He did say that he expected Jungryuk could resist the Vestalis threat, didn’t he? Just like the Aspis scramble tech, so does their planet.

Abraxas cocks his head to one side and then looks up, at a sudden crack in the glass wall. A crack. There’s a crack. *We’re going to be flung into space, just like I’ve feared all along. The oxygen in my lungs will expand, my saliva will boil, I’ll be pulled apart—*

Rurik snatches me in his arms and tears into my neck, blood splattering on the glass and turning to lace. It seals the expanding crack and covers the walls and ceiling, the floors. He drinks so deeply from me that this time, when I get woozy, it’s not because of the astrophobia or my fear for Jungryuk; it’s my love for Rurik coupled with blood loss.

The prince catches me before I fall, hauling me up and into his arms.

“My parents are loath to kill us,” Rurik explains, his voice a soothing balm in a high stress situation. “They are testing us now, and they will try to imprison us later. Remember: they ultimately do not want the throne either.”

I nod and reach into a pocket on my dress, withdrawing a candy bar that I snatched from Hyt’s place. I might not be a superhero, but I’ll help where I can. If eating and giving blood to Rurik is the thing that will save our lives, then that’s what I’ll do.

I lift a shaky hand up to try and tear the wrapper open, but my trembling fingers won’t obey.

Hyt snags it in a tentacle and unwraps it, holding it to my mouth, so that I can take a massive bite. The sugar rush is beyond welcome, but I'm going to need some— Hyt waits for me to swallow and then leans in, kissing me and banishing the well of thirst in my lower belly.

“You can take more blood because of our connection,” Hyt tells Rurik softly as Abraxas reaches out experimentally for the air lock, trying to wedge it open with his strong arms. The screen in the corner shatters, bits of glass tumbling to the floor. Still, the door doesn't open. “But if I pass out, too, one of you will need to grab me.”

“Of course.” Rurik strides to the door and sets me down, pushing me against the wall as he drops his head and laps at the side of my neck again. I try to focus on that, on the sensation of his tongue, on the melting candy clutched in my left hand. On the fact that the *only* thing holding this portion of the ship together is Rurik.

We are truly *this* close to finding ourselves sucked into outer space.

Somehow, beyond all logic and reason, I manage to keep myself calm. Maybe it's because the men are here with me? Maybe it's because in a crisis, we have two choices as human beings: let our panic overtake us or allow our logic to overtake our panic. I manage the latter, lifting the candy to my mouth and taking another exquisite bite as Rurik draws more blood from my throat.

As he does, I can feel the dizziness creeping in at the edges of my vision, threatening to drown me in oblivion. But then I feel it, a warmth that drifts like cobwebs on the wind, a gauzy insubstantial shift between me and Hyt. *Our shared life force.* I'm regenerating blood at a much faster rate because of him, just like I was able to survive the venom longer because of him.

Holy hell. My multiple mate situation might just get us out of here alive.

Rurik presses me even more tightly against the door, his pelvis hard against my stomach, his arousal obvious even in

such a tense situation. Hey, it's not like we can tell our bodies that now isn't the time to fuck. The exchange of blood between us is an inherently sexual desire, and it's stirring both of us up in inappropriate ways.

"First, we conquer the universe *then* I fuck you," he breathes, and then he thrusts roughly against me, and I groan, my own pelvis undulating back in his direction. Blood lace pours out of my neck and sweeps up the wall, wrenching the doors open behind me by force. Rurik's tight grip keeps me on my feet, but as soon as I'm stable enough to stand, I spin around to see what's happening.

His delicate blood lace flows down the hallway in a red wave, smashing into the next set of doors and forcing those open, too. Then past that until it hits the next set of doors and beyond. *Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh.* One after another, all the doors along the length of the hallway slam open to reveal a distant staircase at the far end. I recognize it as the curved staircase that comes down from our floor, the one that leads directly to the door outside the throne room's foyer.

Abraxas stalks forward, and as he goes, screens break and cameras malfunction. The doors just ahead of us that were attempting to close stall and shudder, as if the presence of an adult male Aspis is just too much. He leads the way for us, scrambling tech and making my translator buzz inside my brain.

The next time that Rurik speaks, I can't understand a word that he's saying. Hyt looks his way and I can see that he, too, isn't picking up on any of it. When he tries to voice a response, his tongue translator fails and all we get are bubbles.

Okay, so, no more talking then.

We continue down the hall, a wall of windows on our left, doors at even intervals on our right. All of them are covered by Rurik's beautiful blood lace, sealing them shut with floral patterns and scalloped edges, diamonds and crowns and chandelier shapes. *Gorgeous.* Rurik blankets the ceiling and walls with it, too, peeling up his father's lace and leaving it slimy and bloody on the floors around us.

The Korol shudders and goes dark, the lights turning off, the ever present hum of air vents and distant machinery silencing in an instant. Dim starlight filters in from the windows, but it's Abraxas' purple glow and Rurik's red glow that guide us as we walk.

Hyt keeps his Atrata gun out, eyes sweeping the hall before he turns and then walks backward, his tentacle tails sweeping the ground behind him to avoid tripping on anything.

There are no soldiers, no alarms, nothing to indicate that a hostile force is heading straight for the throne room. I remember what Rurik first told me when I arrived on *The Korol*, how the soldiers were mostly for show, that there has never in all of Vestalis history been a successful coup. How could there be, when the king controls the entire ship? There was no need for Rurik's parents to fear bringing us here; we posed no threat.

Only ... they must've underestimated their son. When he said that he'd spent time taking over parts of *The Korol*, I guess I didn't understand what that truly meant. He's worked himself into the fabric of the ship, as much a part of it as his father.

Since Falopex don't mate with Vestalis often—only three mixed-Falopex couples in history, remember?—the king and queen might not have known that my shared life force with Hyt would easily double or triple the amount of blood available for donation.

And Abraxas? Yeah, no way in fuck they saw a tech-scrambling Aspis coming their way.

I take strength in that, in the idea that my connection to these males is our key to victory.

Doesn't make the dead, silent ship any more pleasant.

It's so eerie, so hushed, so still. Abraxas makes no sound when he walks, even as big as he is, blurring into the shadows like they're a part of him. Nobody speaks. We can't understand each other's words anyway. But when I look at these men, I can sense their intentions anyway. This is a

valuable skill that Abraxas taught me, to listen to body language as much as I listen to spoken words.

I finish the candy bar and tuck the wrapper into my pocket, sucking my fingers clean of chocolate. It's a loud, strange, very primal sound in the vacuum of space. Like, there I am in a dress fit for a vampire queen, striding the halls of an evil sentient spaceship, and I'm sucking chocolate off my fingers.

It seems apt, like I *should* be bringing a human element into all this. I dip into my pocket and pull out one of the plum fruits from Jungryuk. I don't think about the volcanic explosion or the fact that the planet resisted the first blast from *The Korol*. I don't even think about what's going to happen five minutes from now. I just ... exist.

I take bites of the plum as we walk, exchanging a look with Hyt as we approach the staircase. His face is bathed half in red, half in purple. Our eyes meet, and he offers me a smile and a wink. He's tense, but confident. I like that. He might be totally full of shit, but he's making an effort.

We enter the room and pause before the decorative double doors. Rurik looks over at Abraxas, and he takes the initiative, snatching the edges of both doors in his wing-hands and pulling until the wood splinters and the doors open with a forceful crack.

The foyer is empty, the lace pattern on the floor, the one that looks like moth wings, dark. The red crystal chandelier that I admired before isn't working either. It's just us, the round door to the throne room, and nothing else.

Quiet, shadowed, *tense*.

Rurik draws me into his arms again.

Can you handle it once more? he asks inside my head, peering into my eyes and pushing my hair back from my face. I finish the plum in my hand and drop the pit into my pocket before nodding.

He takes my neck more gently this time, pressing a kiss to the delicate flesh of my throat. Rurik's hands are magic as they

sweep over my body, holding me against him like a goodbye. Win or lose right now, this *is* a goodbye.

Abraxas shakes himself out, massive tongue sliding from his lips to wet his terrifying mouth. His eyes never leave the throne room door, and I can tell that he either hears, smells, or simply anticipates something moving around on the other side.

The translator in my head buzzes, and then flares back to life, interpreting a quietly muttered curse from Hyt without too much static. I have a feeling that it's going to work only intermittently for now. My handsome cowboy husband sweeps the room like he's part of a SWAT team, checking under a decorative table, flushing out dark corners, searching for hidden threats.

My arms twine around Rurik's neck, my head falling back; I expect him to finally sink his teeth in and bite me. He doesn't. Instead, he kisses me, one hand clutching the back of my head, the other pressed into the small of my back. Rurik draws away, looking down at me in apology.

"I am sorry this has to be such a violent occasion," he murmurs. He drops the hand from my hair, but the one on my back presses me even more tightly against his body. He lowers his mouth toward my neck, but he doesn't make it where he needs to go before the throne room door slides open.

One of the king's meat strands whips out of the open doors at the same time that the *queen* comes barrelling out of the throne room on her too-many skittering legs. Fear sweeps me, but I don't scream. Instead, I grab Rurik's hair and yank his head to my throat.

Hyt lifts his Atrata gun up and fires, a web of white unfurling from the weapon and pinning the blood lace whip to the ceiling. It writhes and thrashes, but it can't seem to free itself from whatever the fuck just came out of the Atrata weapon. Silk? Right, it was silk, not cum. *More fucking moths, eh?* Or ... or spiders. Oh my God. Did Rurik promise our future (maybe) daughter to spider aliens?!

There's no time to ask about that; the silken net (not like spiderwebs at all but ... more like Rurik's own lace) has

blocked the king from using that bit of murdering meat. Like, seriously, his blood lace looks like the remnants of a blown-up butcher shop.

Tendrils tear themselves away from the walls, but Hyt seems to know what he's doing, shooting them one by one as Rurik digs rough fingers into my hair and bites down *hard*. From the corner of my eye, I see Abraxas tackle the queen.

Guess we're not even going to try and talk this out.

Rurik massages blood from my throat, rubbing his thumb up and down the length of my neck, liquid pulsing hot and wild into his mouth. When he pulls away, swiping red from his lips, I find myself crumpling to the floor. It's Hyt that catches me, a tentacle around the waist. I dig frantically in my pocket for another snack and find a second plum. As Hyt holds me up, I eat. That's my part in all of this: to eat a plum.

Rurik is striding away from me, heading in the direction of the throne room. When smaller tendrils of the king's lace tear off the floor to grab at him, he throws his hand out and makes a sword entirely out of blood lace. It looks like a prop, but when he swings it against his father's reaching meat tendrils, they sever in half and spray ruby liquid across the room.

The ship very quickly sucks that up, and I blanch.

Nope. I lied. Abraxas is not the most alien of the three. It's Rurik. It's Rurik who's weird as hell.

Except ... he has coremata which are sexy as fuck, so I forgive him. Imagine that: a male sex organ designed solely to signal loneliness in the dark? Does it get any better than that?

I blink rapidly and realize that I've just passed out in Hyt's tentacle, hanging limply behind him while he draws his weapons with the other eight.

"Son of a Dead King," he grumbles as he struggles to get past the roiling nightmare that is Abraxas and the queen. There's blood *everywhere*. All over the both of them, splashing the ceiling, the walls, the glass windows looking into the endlessness of space. Despite being in a giant spaceship, it may be the most primal, most violent thing I have ever seen.

I'd thought Abraxas was fierce when fighting the female Aspis. This is so beyond that. Gashes are opened in his side, a hole *bitten* through the center of his wing, his horn jammed through part of the queen's abdomen. With a lift of his head, he flings her like he's planning on sending her across the room. Instead, she wraps herself around his neck and begins to choke him.

I struggle against Hyt's tentacle and he pauses to glance at me. When I turn to stare back at him, I see what he's doing: moving into the other room to help Rurik. The prince is using his sword to fight his way toward the throne where his father sits wrapped in a cocoon of meat.

Yes. A fucking meat cocoon.

That's it. I've had it. I'm going back to Earth.

I yank my Cartian gun from my pocket. I'm not a great shot, but I did learn a few things from Hyt on the shooting range. Besides: I have a big target. I take aim at the queen's shimmery *Lisa Frank*-esque millipede body.

And then Abraxas rips her in half with his wing-hands and flings each part of her in opposite directions. Both pieces of the queen hit the walls with a splat, and then ... both halves get up.

Err.

The two parts of the queen scurry around the room, just narrowly avoiding the panting Aspis as he follows the directions of her movements. I lower the gun. Right. Okay. Yep, trust the apex predator. I'll just eat my plum.

Hyt is dropping down to one knee now, his Atrata weapon aimed at the meat cocoon. It pulses, and it's bloody, and like ... there's fluid oozing from a crack. Yeah, definitely not my thing. I can see that while Rurik is perfectly suited to me, the king is perfectly suited to the giant alien millipede. Good for them. Couple goals and all that.

Rurik splits the cocoon with his sword and tendrils fly out to grab at him. Hyt takes a shot at those, emptying his Atrata gun along with the rest of the weapons in his employ. I'm still

holding my own gun, mercy to Hyt's tails as he keeps me tucked close to him.

That's how I notice the lower half of the queen's body, scudding into the room and heading up the wall like she intends on dropping down on either Rurik or Hyt from the ceiling. *Come on, Eve, you can do this, right? Just pull that fucking trigger.*

I deactivate the safety the way Hyt showed me, pressing my thumb to the pad on the underside of the gun. When it gun glows pink, I take aim, exhale a long breath to help steady my shaking hands ...

And then I take my fucking shot.

"I never liked you, bitch," I grumble as I pull the trigger. Hot pink light explodes from the barrel of the Cartian weapon and hits the ceiling beside the queen's lower half. It's not enough to stop her—might have, if I'd hit her directly—but she writhes and flails, blood dripping down in oozing tendrils.

Oh, and her blood *sparkles* by the way. It's shiny and luminescent and glittery.

Terrifying.

The queen's ass (her head is still locked in battle with Abraxas) continues its frantic, upside-down run until she's directly above Rurik's head.

The king, as if sensing his mate's distress, finally emerges from the meat cocoon, swinging at his son with his massive hands. The mandibles on his face are exposed as my synchronicity contacts are scrambled along with my translator. There's static in my head to match the flickering TVs on the wall. There are dozens of them, all with gray static and a droning buzz. The blood lace that surrounds them, like a wall of flesh, traps them in place, but as the king begins to peel bits of it away to attack his son, TVs crash to the floor and break.

I fire at the queen again. And again. And again.

I'd say I was shocked when I actually hit her, but I credit the win to the incredible Cartian tech; those Barbie-pink laser beams detonate on impact, widening my bull's-eye and

spreading the damage over a larger area. *Poetic justice, you cunt. Kill the Cartians, and they kill you.*

The queen's body jerks, thrashes, and then falls, smashing into the ground between Rurik and the king. The sight of it puts his father into a rage, and he draws back a massive fist, bringing it down on Rurik too quickly for the prince to avoid.

Rurik throws up a blood lace cage, but his father's fist goes right through it, knocking him against the far wall with the crack of bone and more blood spatters. It's everywhere now, some of it red, some of it purple, the queen's blood a shimmery white to match her body.

The Korol shudders again beneath us, like this is taking a toll on its systems.

The king lifts his fist again as Hyt nails him in the side of the head with a well-placed shot. It doesn't bring the man down, not even when the second and third and tenth shots hit their marks. I don't dare take a shot now, not with my terrible aim.

"Fuck," Hyt growls out in what I think might be English. His accent is like running water. He stands up and takes off in the prince's direction. I don't know what he's going to do when he gets there, but he doesn't seem to have that problem.

He slams into the king's leg and wraps his tentacles around him, dragging the much larger man to the floor. But not before the monarch's fist swings out to hit Rurik again. I don't think. I just reach up and tear the pearl earring from my lobe. It rips through my delicate skin, but I ignore it, tossing the item in the prince's direction.

He doesn't catch it, but it hits him before the king's fist does.

Rurik grunts and blood sprays from his mouth, but he doesn't end up dead. The pearl flares to life, a hot white flash that comes and goes, leaving me blinded. When I blink through the spots in my vision, I see him shoving up to his feet, crushing the spent pearl beneath the heel of his boot.

Hyt tosses me aside to roll across the floor just before the king snatches him in his hand and begins to squeeze.

“*Distract him!*” Rurik shouts, the translator burbling the words strangely, so that I’m not even sure that’s what he was really trying to say. He’s sprinting across the room, heading ... *for the throne*. I lift the Cartian gun up, praying that there’s more ammo ... energy ... whatever inside of it. When I pull the trigger, I nail the king’s massive form right in the ass.

Frankly, I was aiming for his back. Sorry, not sorry.

He howls and tosses Hyt aside, turning to snap his mandibles in my direction. The king spots Rurik instead and barrels toward his son, blood lace snapping as he moves. He’s still tethered to the throne, but I don’t think he will be for long.

Rurik is going to take it from him.

I turn to see Abraxas lift the queen’s front half up in a wing-hand, opening his massive mouth wide and then severing her head with his teeth. He *chews* before he pushes her body down his throat, and then he swallows with a disturbing undulation of muscle, and it’s over.

The queen is gone.

The king lets out a violent scream, but he doesn’t make it any further because Rurik hits the edge of the throne before glancing my way. Our eyes meet, but I know that there’s nothing more I can do.

Yet.

I will never stop fighting to free him from that prison, but for now ... this is the best and only move we can make.

Rurik turns and sits down, taking the king’s chair from him.

The ship shudders underneath us again, the screens on the wall go black, and for a minute there, the room is as dark as a cave, entirely absent of light. I can’t see anything, but I can certainly hear it: the sound of the king shrieking, and the noise of his body being ripped apart.

I collapse to the floor in my beautiful dress, dropping the gun that I was holding only to realize that I somehow have a

squished plum stuck to my skin. I look up through the shadows, but I can't see anything until Abraxas moves over to stand beside me, a much smaller size than he was when we got here. He reaches down a hand to help me up, and I take it, his tail wrapping around my waist for additional assistance.

There's another tremor from *The Korol* and then the lights begin to flick on. The chandelier at first, just a strange red glow emanating from behind us. And then ... I choke on the sudden feelings flooding my body.

Despair and fear, screaming, pain, a hostile takeover, an invasion, torture, trapped, trapped, trapped.

It's Rurik.

Those are *Rurik's* feelings.

I lunge for him, but Abraxas holds me back and then it's me that's screaming.

"Eve, Eve, *Earthling*," Hyt murmurs, grabbing at my arms with his tentacles as he comes into the dim light. "It's okay. It's okay. It's over."

"It isn't over!" I shout in the strange semi-darkness. "It's just fucking beginning!" Abraxas lets me go when I thrash against him, but Hyt steps in front of me, tentacles coming out to snatch at my arms and legs.

"You don't need to see him like this, okay? Give him some time to adjust and then—"

I tear away from Hyt, but like with Abraxas, only because he lets me go. And then the rest of the lights come on, the remaining screens on the far wall powering to life. I don't look at the mess that used to be my father-in-law. My only concern is for the man sitting in his place.

I stumble up to the throne and find myself face-to-face with my husband, bound with a red lace collar around his neck. Restraints on his wrists and ankles. A blood lace blindfold covers his eyes and his lips are sewn shut with red thread. Rurik looks *dead*.

Only, he isn't. I can feel him. And he's *screaming*.

I throw myself at him, but Hyt snatches me up and straps me to his back, dragging me out of the room with Abraxas' assistance. I feel fucking betrayed.

"*Tiny ... loving ... tender ... female,*" Abraxas whispers, but neither of them stops as I protest, and the throne room doors close automatically behind us.



Taking a shower doesn't help. Changing clothes doesn't help. I can't bear to eat anything.

Hyt takes care of me while Abraxas waits in the hallway, too large to fit inside the royal suites. Once I've cleaned up and calmed myself down, I go to him, grabbing onto his horns and pressing my forehead to his. Hyt waits patiently to one side, an unbuttoned Vestalis jacket over his shoulders and low-slung pants on his hips. He wanted clean clothes, too, and we are fresh out of loincloth belts on this ship. Kept the cowboy hat though.

"I want to see him," I whisper to Abraxas, and he nuzzles me affectionately. I know he can hear the heartbreak in my voice; I know that he'd paste the pieces back together if he could. When he replies, his voice is much clearer than before. All of that energy he expended during the fight has calmed down his Aspis tech-scrambling properties.

"The World Eater cares for you very much; he does not want you to be hurt by the state of him." Abraxas sounds conflicted, like he wants to grant my wish, but also that he knows he shouldn't. *The state of him.* I've already seen it, the blindfold and the sewn lips. I've already felt it, the screaming and the torture.

I can't feel anything now; Rurik is blocking me. When I try to reach through our mate bond, he shies away from me. He hides. His blood lace is all over this ship, so I know he can see me, sense me, but he won't offer up a reply of any kind.

I don't understand.

Yes, you do. He doesn't want you to see him bound and gagged and suffering. He doesn't want you to live your whole life in a dim room covered in monitors, trapped in space which he knows you hate.

Rurik is doing all of this to keep me safe, to keep me happy. What he doesn't get is that I'm not sure I can truly be happy without him.

"Let me go downstairs," I plead, hoping that my mates aren't going to fight me on this. I've stopped screaming, calmed myself down, dried my tears. *The Korol* appears to be back to normal with one notable exception. All of the blood lace that I can see is Rurik's blood lace. If there is anything left of the previous king, it isn't in the rooms and hallways connecting the throne room to the royal suites. "I just want to speak to him through the door."

Abraxas hesitates, and then nods, rising to all fours. I feel like he's shrunk some during the short period I spent in the bedroom and bathroom with Hyt. Good. I need him smaller, so that there's nowhere he can't go, no place on this awful ship that he can't follow.

I lead the way, and he stalks along beside me, an incongruous beast among heartless machinery. There's an essence to Abraxas that's organic, natural, primal. Nothing this spaceship can provide will ever match the raw, soulful nature of him or his planet.

Hyt pads up beside me, barefoot but dressed in his Vestalis gear. I never in all my life thought I'd see anything as incompatible as an Aspis on a spaceship. But a Falopex in Imperial Court clothing? It's a close second.

We encounter Brot and Connor first, making their way down the hall toward us. I believe their chambers are somewhere nearby, like this is the wing of the ship reserved for royalty or something.

"Oh, Eve," Connor says, and then he's sprinting for me and gathering me into a big hug. Brot huffs, and Abraxas gives a

small growl, but nobody stops us. There's a platonic connection between us, fueled by our humanity as well as our mutual mate bonds. Connor knows exactly what I'm going through right now. "I'm glad you're not dead."

"Gee, thanks," I mumble as he sets me on my feet. "I'm glad you're not a drooling, comatose flesh sack."

He smiles back at me.

"When we took off from Yaoh, I had a nightmare that Brot was actually my grandmother in a Vestalis suit. She unzipped his face, and it was like *Little Red Riding Hood*, the alien version. I never, ever want to take another space flight again."

We are in absolute agreement there.

"The Chief Officer is waiting downstairs," Brot says, but not before first offering his knee to me. "Imperial Queen. It is my greatest pleasure and infinite privilege to serve you."

"Thanks guy," I tell him, because I know Rurik hates that. I swear, the blood lace on the wall throbs in response. I turn to Hyt. "Do you want me to banish your dad to a windswept exoplanet?" I ask, not entirely sure what an exoplanet even is. I am way too tired to care, way too sad to ask anyone else for clarification. "Can I send *Minae* to a windswept exoplanet?"

I'm only joking. *Minae* didn't rat us out. *Minae* kept her mouth shut. *Minae* genuinely loves Hyt.

I might not like her, but I would never use my newfound power to hurt her either.

"May I suggest Melevania? It has wind gusts seven times the speed of sound and raindrops made of molten glass." Hyt stays pink and like, that is goddamn terrifying. A planet like that actually exists? I get so dizzy that I close my eyes, and Hyt makes a soft sound. His lips press a comforting kiss to my forehead as a tentacles wraps my shoulders in a hug. I open my eyes to find his expression soft, but a little sad, too. I think we're all a little sad today. Or a lot sad. Yeah, that. "You might be queen, but you don't want to start your reign off with a war against Yaoh and the World Station." Hyt smiles, but he doesn't *really* answer my question. He ruffles my hair as he

passes, continuing down the staircase ahead of me and Abraxas.

“Is there anything I can assist you with, Your Majesty?” Brot asks gently, rising to his feet. Yet another example of *don't judge a book by its cover*. I thought I hated the guy at first, but he's actually a pretty awesome dude. “The King has tasked me with overseeing your education in court and attending to all of your needs.”

“Go fuck Connor. That's an order.” I wave my hand at them dismissively, and Connor scoffs.

“Can you change that order to *go get fucked by Connor?*” he asks, but Brot is already snagging his mate by the arm to drag him away, and I'm putting my hand on the staircase bannister to descend. Abraxas stays right beside me the entire time, stroking my leg under the skirts of my dress with his tail.

“My mother would often say, *we must see the cold face of the moon and the hot glare of the sun to understand a love for temperance.*”

I glare at him as we walk down the stairs together, his front feet ahead of him so that he's off-balance but no less predatory. Each move he makes is a threat—just not to me. Still, I don't see any Vestalis soldiers or nobility. I wouldn't, would I? Not unless Rurik wanted me to see him

He owns *The Korol* now; he makes all of the decisions.

“I'm sure your mom is a peach,” I grumble, chest tight with emotion.

Am I certain I'm not still on the ship leaving Jungryuk? Dreaming a strange dream. Or a nightmare. What happened in that throne room was *insane*. I shot an intergalactic millipede queen's ass with a Cartian Barbie laser gun, Abraxas ate my mother-in-law (without suffering indigestion), Hyt fired cum-silk from an illegal baroque Atrata gun, and Rurik managed to survive his father's fist because of a Falopex pearl.

What even is my life?

“My mother is not a fruit,” Abraxas purrs, his shadowed face puzzled. It takes me a second to put the pieces together.

Oh. Ah. “I do not understand, female. *Clarify.*”

“It’s a ... never mind.”

I offer him a pat, like he’s a horse or something, and accidentally get sticky pheromones on my skin. Lovely. Now my vagina has joined the party. I sigh as we hit the bottom of the stairs together, my red skirts swirling as I come to a stop beside Hyt.

Chief Officer Farin is waiting for us, hands clasped behind his back, mouth set in a tense frown. Minae is with him. Nya, too.

“Did I tell ya or did I tell ya?” Hyt drawls, tails drifting in agitation. Because of them, he can’t quite pull his pants up properly. Already, they’re sinking low and threatening to reveal his ass. I reach out and give them a sharp yank, covering him up. That’s my taut, thirst-trap ass. Even if I don’t want to fuck it right this very second.

I glance over at the Falopex, wishing they’d go away, so I could deal with my emotions in private.

Minae won’t even look at me.

The chief is wearing an expression of resignation, like he isn’t sure if he’s ever getting off this ship.

By all rights, he shouldn’t.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Hyt,” Nya says, speaking up for the first time. It’s not an answer to her brother’s question, but there’s obvious relief and affection in her voice. Not enough to prevent her from doing her duty, but some. Enough.

Not for Hyt though.

“You’re facing your next king, as I said,” he repeats as I look past the three officers in the direction of the throne room. “Lucky you that Rurik is a kind and honorable boss.”

Damn, Hyt sounds exhausted.

“We have done our due diligence and will return to the World Station. If His Majesty has a need for us, we will make ourselves available.” Farin offers a bow, sweeping his

perfunctory gaze over his son. This is just business to him. That's all it's ever been from the first moment I met him. *Pretty sure I hate this guy more than Tabbi Kat.* "Majesty." I'm offered a second bow before Farin turns and strides down the hall, tails stiff and unnatural, boots loud.

"Hyt, I—" Minae begins, and I lose it, shoving past her and racing into the throne room's foyer. The red chandelier blazes brightly above my head as I come to a skidding stop before the round door that leads to Rurik.

If I'm acting like I'm okay, I'm not. Not at all.

"Rurik!" I yell, banging my fist against the shroud of blood lace that covers the door. "Let me in! I just ... I want to see you. That's all. I won't ... I won't even touch you." I turn my head and put my ear to the door, closing my eyes. I can feel the warmth of his lace blazing hot beneath my cheek, and I push into it, trying to see him through our connection the way I did back on Jungryuk.

I hit a solid black wall, a shroud of shadow in my mind.

The more I push at it, the more Rurik pushes back.

I slide to the floor and turn, putting my back to the door and finding both Abraxas and Hyt standing in front of me.

"Do not make us remove you again," Abraxas warns softly, padding over and dropping his head to stare at me. "Love is not always about giving into another's wants."

Hyt squats beside me, and I catch a glimpse of Minae in the doorway behind him, Nya hovering just behind. I know I can't just sit here and wait. I have to contact Captain Kidd and Jane, check to see if everyone is okay. Probably, there are some queenly things I need to be doing.

It's very possible that I might be in shock.

"Contact Kidd," I say, voice hard, eyes downcast. I don't look at either Abraxas or Hyt. "Find out where they are and what's going on."

"Earthling ..." Hyt reaches out with a tentacle, and I let him touch me with it, wrapping my arm in a heavy pink coil.

Abraxas runs his tongue up the side of my face, cleaning the fresh tears off my cheek. When I look back in the direction of the doorway, Minae and Nya are gone.

Good.

I don't want to see them now or maybe ever—especially not the chief.

He didn't apologize to his son. He didn't even seem relieved that he was okay like Nya. Minae ... I have mixed feelings about Minae.

Hyt adjusts his hat, allowing his companion to slip out. I didn't see Shithead for the entirety of the battle, but I know he was there. Tucked safely away inside his best friend's cowboy hat.

The tiny creature suctions to my cheek, and I almost smile. *Why almost, Eve?* I do. I do smile, and I feel like both Abraxas and Hyt breathe sighs of relief.

It's just the first day, right? Surely, Rurik won't keep me out forever. He has to eat eventually.

For now, we're all safe, the situation is under control, and I can dedicate the time needed to find a way to free Rurik from his new prison.

"There's a lot to do, huh?" I ask, voice low and subdued but strong. I am strong. I survived being abducted, didn't I? I survived *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates*. I can survive this, too.

"There is," Hyt agrees, and Abraxas snorts.

"More importantly," the Aspis corrects, chuffing at me, "basic needs come first: food and sleep and sex."

My brow twitches as I rub my pheromone slicked palm surreptitiously against my skirts.

"After we contact Jane," I tell them, allowing Abraxas to haul me to my feet with his tail around my waist. My gaze slips back to the throne room door. *It's the first day. It's an adjustment. Just give Rurik time. Give him some time.* "Then I don't see why not."

Watch me, Rurik. Watch me wear the crown. Watch me pull myself together. Watch me take charge.

With the help of Abraxas and Hyt, I just might be able to pull that shit off.



Later that night, I creep down the stairs in a silk robe, a book clutched under my arm, and I take a seat with my back to the throne room door.

“Even if you won’t talk to me, I’ll talk to you,” I tell my stubborn asshole of a husband. When I crack the cover of the book to read, my heart feels full. I’ve convinced myself that in a few days, the door behind me will open, and my males and I will get to work on the whole *held prisoner by a creepy spaceship* problem.

That’s not what happens.

The first night is almost peaceful, the red chandelier dim and atmospheric, the room decorated with Rurik’s beautiful blood lace. I read the first half of the book—a smutty Vestalin romance—and I swear that I can feel Rurik’s presence all around me. The second night, I read the other half.

The third, fourth, and fifth nights are okay, too.

After that, my control slips a little. I cry. I scream. On day ten, I throw a decorative chair at the door. I beg Abraxas to pry it open. I plead with Hyt to shoot a hole through it.

Dressed in ball gowns or silk pajamas or blood lace robes, I come down every night without fail. I sit. I wait. I read. I talk.

I ache.

Some nights, Jane sits with me. Other nights, it’s Avril. Zero. Connor and Brot. Always, Abraxas and Hyt are there in some capacity. Kayla remains on Jungryuk to deal with the human women, but she calls me, and we video chat.

Always, I wait.

And I will keep waiting.

No matter how long it takes.



Two Earth Months Later ...

The doorbell to our bedroom is going off continuously. I just assume that it's Avril. Who the hell else would be bothering me this early in the morning? Well, morning is relative in space, but we've been on human time here on *The Korol* for months. It's like, six-fifteen a.m. back in Portland, Oregon. Hyt's companion trills happily, as if he isn't aware that it should be illegal to get up this early.

"I'll have her sent *ad astra* with only two tanks of oxygen," I grumble into my pillow, doing my best to sound like I have any good insults left to use on Avril. *Ad astra* means 'to the stars' in Latin, by the way. See? I'm smart as fuck. I yank another pillow over my head as Abraxas growls, lips rippling back from his teeth, and Hyt sighs. "Don't you dare," I challenge him as he gets up to answer the door manually.

"It's Jane," he says, and then I'm suddenly interested and sitting up in bed. We're in the honeymoon suite that Rurik and I used to share. You know, before he was sealed to a sentient planet-eating spaceship. *Not that his state of being gives him any excuse not to see me.* He's been avoiding me this entire time, and I'm angry. I haven't seen him since the fight in the throne room. Not even when he started changing laws and making declarations. Not even when he slaughtered dozens of high-ranking nobles for protesting his amendment to the *kill all adulterers* law.

Yeah, legally I'm totally fine to fuck my other dudes. Also, *prince consort* is now an actual thing in the Imperial Court.

“She may enter,” I declare, holding the blankets over my naked breasts and doing my best to appear dignified. I’m the Imperial Queen now. My husband and I rule over the Noctuida and yet ... I would give anything to be a princess again. Being a queen is not exactly fun and games. For one, I never get to see the goddamn king.

“Wish granted,” Hyt murmurs, snapping up a robe with a spare tentacle and flinging it around his shoulders before he bothers to open the door. “Good morning, Jane. Any morning sickness on your end? Eve has been throwing up.”

“Thanks for sharing that,” I tell him, throwing the bird his way. Motherfucker. Jane has most definitely *not* been throwing up. She glows like a pregnancy and childcare influencer, like someone who has sponsorship deals with boutique baby shops and whatever. Not that it matters: she’s going to have a half-alien-space-hyena baby, so ... “Care to explain why you’re here so early?”

“No, no morning sickness.” Jane waves her hand dismissively and then tosses her shiny dark hair back from her face. *It’s not Avril being jetted into a miasma of devious space goo, it’s Jane. I’m ejecting her off of the stupid Korol first chance I get.*

I adjust myself in the luxurious bed, padded with Abraxas’ furs from Jungryuk and layers of delicate silk with a lovely red lace coverlet. I kick most of it onto the floor with a growl. Did *The Korol* change after Rurik took over? Sure. Does it look like a mix between Edgar Allan Poe and a tattoo parlor run by alien vampires? Yep. Do I like it here?

No.

I fucking hate it.

Rurik won’t let me see him, and I don’t understand. In the beginning, I got it. Apparently there’s a transition period for new kings where they’re unable to speak unless speaking through the ship, where their mind is entirely consumed with *The Korol* and the million tasks that go along with keeping an entire space-traveling country afloat.

But now? It's been two months, and I am sick and tired of going to the med bay for his feeding sessions. *If this asshole tries to have my blood drawn and delivered to him in a bag again, I'll have Abraxas bite a hole in the wall and we'll all go down in a blaze of glory.*

Of course, I don't mean that. But pretending like I have control over the situation makes me feel better.

"Not only that," Jane continues as Hyt sighs, adjusting his robe and pressing the call button for Avril. Not that he needs to press any button at all. Rurik might not be here in person, but he's always listening. All we need do is voice whatever it is that we want, and he makes it happen. I hate him even more for that. "But Kidd and I have agreed to co-parent—"

I let out a small scream of frustration and Abraxas rumbles with inhuman laughter, lounging on his back on the bed and yawning so wide that it looks like the two sides of his face are going to split in half. I'm naked, so when I stand up from the bed, I make sure to drag the sheet with me to cover up.

"Jane Baker." I stare her down and she stares right back, a lick of fear and fire in her eyes. She's debating whether or not to argue with me. I *am* the queen of the entire universe, but she's also my bestie. That's a tough situation to be in. Does she agree with me or argue? I know I'd choose the latter, just to be contrary. "You and Captain Kidd are in love with each other."

Jane opens her mouth to protest as Hyt chuckles and the door swooshes aside to allow Avril into the room. My lady-in-waiting has coffee in hand: I can smell it. Three mugs that she passes out to me, Jane, and herself.

"What are we discussing?" Avril asks as she takes a sip of her coffee. We procured like thirty pounds of beans from one of the black market stalls on Jungryuk. And when I say *we*, I mean that unmated Vestalin soldiers were sent down to do the dirty work for us. Hyt, Abraxas, and I have not left the ship since the throne room battle royale.

The Korol made it to the Geometridae to refuel (barely), and I watched dispassionately out the window as Rurik's beautiful

blood lace shattered the darkness of space and boiled the frigid planet of Pradzny into molten fragments before slurping it up. It wasn't any less creepy for the fact that my husband was the one doing it. This spaceship scares the crap out of me.

Anyway, all of that shit is said and done, and now we're starting to dig into the nitty-gritty of our new reality. We're not headed for war. We're not worried about Rurik's parents. This is life now. This is reality. This is my everyday.

"We were discussing Jane and Captain Kidd," Hyt replies, leaning up against the wall and yawning. He pats at his mouth with one of his tentacles. "And their fierce and undying love for one another."

"Oh, question!" Avril says, raising a hand as Jane narrows her eyes at me. "When the baby comes, what happens to the copulatory plug?"

My bestie groans and collapses onto the gorgeous fainting couch at the end of our beautiful bed. Yes, when Rurik's parents were alive, parts of the ship still had this look: the paneled wood walls, the carpeted floors, the beautiful red lace window dressings. But now the *whole* ship is decorated in this aesthetic. I walked through one of the neighborhoods yesterday, and most of the houses looked Edwardian or Victorian in style.

As I expected: the entire ship has changed to suit me as a human being.

The mate bond is *fierce* among the Vestalis.

"The copulatory plug changes into a mucus plug," Hyt explains, and Jane groans even more loudly as Avril chuckles deviously. I'd laugh, too, if ... you know. Fuck.

"This is your fault," I growl at Abraxas, and he growls right back. Only, mine is a teasing growl, and his is a chest-rumbling come-on, a primal *let's fuck* without actually saying any words at all.

"If I had not seeded you, then the World Eater would have seeded you. If not him, then the Sucker Tail." Abraxas sits up and yawns again, flashing finger-sized teeth in his massive

mouth. He's at his smallest size, has been for a while now. There aren't exactly any thermal vents on *The Korol*. "And let us be honest with one another, my slick, tight female. Your body is primed to work the seed from a male's sack."

"I'm going to strangle you in your sleep," I mumble as the doorbell to the royal suites rings.

"I'll get it!" Avril crows cheerfully, even though we all knew she was going to get it because, um, that's her literal job. She takes off, leaving me with my two remaining mates, and a frustrated Jane Baker.

"The Vestalis can *eat* planets, and yet, they can't figure out a way to bypass the whole 'childbirth thing'?" Jane grumbles, rising to her feet and sighing as she runs both palms down the front of her ruffled white lace shirt and over the slightly rounded shape of her belly.

Hyt takes pity on me and brings over one of the many blood lace robes that Rurik made for me before he took the throne.

I slip it on as Jane turns her back, and then as soon as I'm dressed, she's coming at me again. Hyt's companion lets out a warning squeak, spraying bubbles. See, even Shithead is scared of Jane when she's on a mission. She's friggin' relentless.

"Seriously, you need to come to the med bay. Zero, Dr. Vrach, and I have a present for you." A pause. "Oh, and also Kidd helped a little."

I sigh.

"If this is like last week when Avril spelled out *sorry your husband is glued to the throne* in macarons then I don't want anything to do with it." I finally take a sip of my coffee; I choke on it. "What the fuck *is* this? Mollusca slime water?" That's what it tastes like, to be honest.

"Decaf," Avril explains, gesturing at me and Jane both. "It's best for pregnant human women to reduce their caffeine intake."

"Lovely." I take another sip of the pond scum masquerading as coffee. "So, is this gift like the sarcastic macaron message

or is it actually something I might enjoy? Kind of having a difficult time here being separated from one of my soulmates.”

“Oh, it’s much better than the macaron message,” Jane says, as if the macaron message was actually a good thing. I give her a look that she returns with one of her own. We communicate in ‘bestie’.

My pursed lips say, *stop fucking around with me; you’re supposed to be better than Avril.*

Her raised brow retorts, *then don’t let that bitch bring up my copulatory plug again.*

My sigh responds with, *if you don’t tell me what this supposed gift is, I’m kicking you out of the royal suites permanently and changing the passcode on the door.*

“Eve,” Jane tells me, breaking the silent exchange. “Trust me: you are going to *want* to see this. Get dressed and meet me in your closet, ‘kay?” She waits as Avril pushes a hovering cart in, the top decorated in silver serving dishes with domed lids. Jane peeks through them, finds the most delicious item and steals it for herself.

She’s been borrowing my books and clothes, too, and the only part of the arrangement that annoys me is when I don’t know she’s in there and things start getting frisky in the marital bed. I’ve taken to putting a sock on the *inside* of my own closet door.

Jane disappears into the closet/library as Avril exits the room and then returns with a wheelbarrow full of meat. She bows and leaves me alone to enjoy breakfast with my mates.

“Do you know what this supposed gift is?” I ask Hyt, sitting down hard on the edge of the bed as Abraxas stretches like a jungle cat on the floor, his sleek, black body at odds with the Gothic Victorian decor that is now our bedroom. I ask Hyt and not him because, well, Hyt enjoys hanging out with the others. Abraxas ... prefers it when we’re alone.

Alone, like last night when I had both him and Hyt inside of me at the same time. I shiver and try to act chill, but since both men can literally smell my arousal it’s sort of pointless.

“I don’t know what the gift is,” Hyt admits as Abraxas pulls hunks of raw meat from the wheelbarrow and swallows them whole. He grumbles as he eats, something in alien dragon that means *eww, fuck this lab-grown meat, I want blood*. That’s how I interpret it anyway. “But if Kidd is involved, it’s probably a good thing. He has an eye for treasure.”

“*Argh,*” I tease, happy to see that Hyt understands the pirate reference. He smiles, but the expression is tainted. I know he’s worried about me. That, and he’s still reeling over the fact that his father turned us into the Imperial Court; Hyt hasn’t had any contact with his family since. “Alright, fine. I’ll get dressed and play along. But if it’s another macaron message ...” I trail off as Abraxas swallows the last of the meat, and then rises to stand on two feet, his horns pulsing with violet light.

When his shadowed face splits in a monstrous grin, I shudder—in a good way. A single black claw strokes over the length of my jaw.

“If it is another macaron message, I will devour them,” Abraxas assures me, and I smile. The image of him scooping colorful cookies into his mouth is way too cute. “Not the human sweet discs,” he corrects, as if reading the direction of my thoughts, “but the people involved.”

“Thanks, love. I appreciate that.”

“If you need any help getting dressed, don’t ask me,” Hyt teases, lifting the lid on one of the serving dishes. He uses a tentacle to poke at the item inside. Something that looks like French toast made from star-shaped bread. His companion lands on his shoulder, and Hyt feeds him a piece of it. “The only help you’re getting from me is if you need to be *undressed*.” He flashes from pink to blue.

“Hilarious.” I roll my eyes, but I’m not annoyed with him. Not at all. I feel ... good today. Really good. Happy, even.

That’s what Abraxas and Hyt do for me, shield me from the pain of losing Rurik.

Oh, Rurik.

I take another sip of my coffee, head for the closet/library, and find Jane salivating over a Yaena romance novel. *Typical A.S.S.* One of the headless android mannequins bows to me, and I accept the dress on offer in its mechanical arms.

Once I'm properly dolled up in an outfit that fits my growing belly, Jane finishes the chapter she's reading (obviously), and we head for the med bay with Abraxas, Hyt, and Kidd as escorts.

Yep. The captain was waiting outside in the hallway for Jane.

Told ya they were in love.



“What is this?” I ask, edging into the med bay with Hyt in front and Abraxas behind (sort of like a chaste version of last night). Doctor Vrach is waiting with Zero by one of the exam tables, fidgeting around with a hot pink laptop that's attached by a curly cord to some sort of wand. I won't lie: it looks like an oversized kids' toy.

I'm immediately suspicious.

Abraxas lifts his leg in the corner of the room and urinates, marking this place as his property. He's been doing that since the day after the throne room battle, slowly dominating *The Korol* one piss at a time. The blood lace on the walls throbs with Rurik's irritation, flashing bright red before dimming and pulsing like a beating heart.

“Here we are: one Cartian medical machine, at your service,” Jane says, dragging Captain Kidd into the room with her. He has Madonna the possum on his shoulder, and I find that the small creature suits him. Like Long John Silver with his parrot except ... Kidd's an alien space pirate with a North American marsupial. Close enough.

I creep forward, one of Hyt's tentacles clutched in a sweaty hand. He whistles and flicks the brim of his hat away from his eyes as he studies the device.

"Well, damn. I knew you had your sources, Kidd, but how did you wrangle this one up?" Hyt seems as awed by this machine as he is with all of the other Cartian tech, reaching out to take the wand from Zero's hand, so that he can inspect it personally. "You realize that with this, we might actually be able to take a look at the baby, right?"

"You think?" I ask as Dr. Vrach drops to one knee, pressing a fingertip against his teeth to draw blood.

"It is my greatest honor and infinite privilege to serve you, Imperial Queen," he says before rising to his feet.

Zero doesn't bother with obeisance unless Rurik makes her bother with it. I appreciate that somehow.

"To answer your first question," Jane begins, sidling up to us with her hands clutched behind her back. "I told Kidd that you weren't able to check on the baby because of the whole Aspis-fuck-up-tech problem. So, we picked this up." She gestures at the strange wand in Zero's hand, the one that looks like a *Sailor Moon* transformation wand or some shit. It's just way too pink to be real. "It was at an abandoned field hospital on Jungryuk. Pretty fucking cool, right?"

"It's not like I was specifically looking for this or anything," Kidd growls, arms crossed, head turned to one side. His fluffy tail wafts behind him, his amber eyes fixed out the window across the room. I try not to look at the ringed planet floating outside, but my gaze catches anyway. The blood lace curtains slide shut, blocking my view before I wind up passing out. *Thanks, Rurik.* "You're way too much trouble, Hieronymus. Why the fuck would I purposely get you a gift?"

Everyone ignores the captain, and Madonna hisses in protest; Hyt's companion hisses right back.

"Either way, thank you," Hyt tells Kidd, passing the wand back to Zero.

Abraxas ... is not pleased. He looks as if he's considering eating the device. Probably wouldn't hurt him. If the dude can eat giant millipedes and be totally fine, I'm sure he could swallow this without any side effects. Out of respect for me, he doesn't.

"My people were geniuses," Zero declares, lifting her chin in challenge. Nobody argues with her. Not only were the Cartians brilliant, but they got eaten by the very ship we're standing in. I'm not about to say a word, no matter how grandiose her claims become. She told me yesterday that humans only know how to read and write because of the Cartians. I didn't say a damn thing. For all I know, she could be right. "If there is any technology that can run a medical check on an Aspis, his offspring, or his mate, it will be this."

"How is this wand different than the one we used before?" I ask, and it's Dr. Vrach who answers me.

"The Cartian wand we used on Dome was a basic diagnostic device," he says, his smile as kind as it always is. I met his mate not long after Rurik took over the ship. She's one of those faerie chicks with dragonfly wings and insect eyes. When Hyt and Abraxas brought me here to get checked out after the fight—Abraxas assured us all that the baby was fine, but Hyt insisted—she brought me a warm drink and sat beside me during the examination. "This is a much nicer piece of technology. It has the ability to give a complete DNA profile on the baby, establish parentage, and check the health of the mother."

Whoa.

I'm weirdly thrilled by the idea of this gift, reaching out a hand to rest my fingers on the wand. It stings me, and I yelp, throwing my body back on reflex. Hyt catches me before I fall into a row of metal cabinets. I'm basically sitting in his tentacles now, held up in a chair of blue-scaled skin and suction cups.

"Drawing your humors," Zero explains as if anyone but my brother Nate or her would use the term *humors* when referring to blood. I feel like something might be getting lost in

translation. She pushes the plastic wand in my direction again and shakes it at me. “*All* of your humors,” she explains, giving me a look. “We need every single one including arousal nectar.”

“Arousal ... nectar? What the fuck are you even talking about?” But I, in fact, *do* know what she’s talking about. I look at the wand and then up at Hyt, over to Abraxas. The former appears sympathetic while the latter crouches like an angry gargoyle in the corner, tail thrashing in distress. All of my humors including vaginal lubricant? Right. Okay. Because this is the Noctuida, and it’s dumb as hell. *I would never go back to Earth*, I think as I sigh and Zero places the wand into my hand. I gesture toward the door with it. “Get out.”

The room clears but for Hyt and Abraxas, and I fill the necessary requirements of the spell ... err, I mean technological advancement we’re trying out. This feels oh so very ... *alchemical* to me. You know what I mean, right? Like druids and shit. Something fantastical.

Once I’ve finished and dressed, Zero comes back in and checks the screen, nodding in satisfaction. Dr. Vrach observes, but doesn’t interfere. I see that he’s here today more as a student than as a medical professional. Jane and Kidd ... are just standing in the corner, groping one another when they think nobody’s looking. *Dead Kings, help me.*

Zero taps a button with a single finger in a very dramatic fashion, slow and purposeful. Her lips quirk at the edges as she reads the data on the device, and I know that I’m about to get my ass verbally kicked by my own bodyguard. Her smirk says it all.

“This is extraordinary,” she exclaims, exhaling sharply. “In all my years ... In order for this to happen, the Stars would truly have had to align. There is such a small window at each stage of embryonic development that ... Eve, you are truly an expert at sex. You must have made quick work of all three males. You must also have mated and mated and mated and ___”

“Pardon me?” I ask, trying not to grit my teeth. Hyt seems to think this is *funny*, chuckling as Abraxas stalks up behind me like a nightmare, curling long black fingers around my shoulders.

“I will eat her for you right now, female,” he purrs, and I can tell he’s only partially joking. He’s truly distressed at the idea that there’s technology out there that can survey anything having to do with the Aspis. His planet *did* reject *The Korol’s* blood lace, so I can see why he’d feel that way. Whatever it is that makes a machine a machine, it’s at direct odds with the purity and primal nature of the Aspis.

“Oh, this is going to be good, isn’t it?” Jane says, the hint of a smirk in her words. When I turn a glare over my shoulder, she feigns innocence, snagging Madonna from Kidd’s shoulder and giving her a cuddle. I turn back to Zero.

“Well, what does it say?” I demand. Zero pisses me off sometimes, but she’s got a good mechanical heart in that android body of hers. I haven’t started hanging out with Tabbi Kat—who’s currently running loose on Jungryuk—so you know I haven’t lost my sense of good judgment just yet. Zero gives me a challenging look over her shoulder, and I break. She wants to mess with me? I can do the same. “Did you hear that the CEO of that dating app, Affiance, wanted to see me about you the other day?”

Zero turns her head fully around to stare at me, like an owl, and I almost choke on my own tongue. Eww. The Noctuida is more than just perverted, it can be downright creepy. Don’t think I will *ever* forget the sight of the queen’s severed body scuttling across the ceiling. Can’t wash the taste of that out of my mouth.

“About what?” she demands as Hyt pokes me in the cheek with a tentacle, suctioning himself to my skin as he grins from beside me. He takes over the exchange, lifting a fin-brow and adjusting his hat.

“There’s only one unmated Cartian male left in the Noctuida,” Hyt begins, dangling the bait, “and he’s signed up for the app. The CEO thought you two would make a good

match. Would you like to meet him? If so, I suggest you cut the crap and explain the results.”

Zero smiles prettily.

“Your child has an interesting DNA profile.” She turns back to the screen, and I breathe a sigh of relief at not having to see her facing completely backward. Very horror movie-ish. “In simple terms, one might say that she is one-quarter Aspis, one-quarter Vestalis, one-quarter Human, and one-quarter Falopex. Extraordinary.”

“She?” I whisper before the DNA makeup even occurs to me. “A girl? Can you tell this early?” I don’t even know how it works on Earth let alone in the Noctuida. Maybe this isn’t early at all.

“A female, yes,” Zero confirms, and then she turns fully around to look at me, crossing her arms over her small chest. If she’s curious about the Cartian male we found for her, she doesn’t show it. She’s never said anything about wanting a mate who was Cartian, but ... maybe in her situation, she really does? “I can also reconfirm that the mating marks inside of you are the source of your envenomation.” She shrugs again. “You will have to continue with regular matings.”

Uh-huh.

But I’d already figured that out. I’m an expert on venom and vaginas now.

“Three dads? Eve, you win the A.S.S. of the year award. Congratulations.” Jane chuckles, and I have to remind myself that she has a literal plug made out of space pirate hyena semen inside her va-jay-jay.

“You made your mark on that kiddo, didn’t you?” Kidd asks Hyt dryly, but my husband ignores him. Abraxas does not. He snaps his teeth at the captain, and causes him to recoil. *Not such a tough guy now, are you?* It’s a poorly kept secret that Kidd is afraid of Abraxas.

“A girl. And she’s a quarter ... of each of us?” I whisper, and the atmosphere grows tense. Intimate. Soft at the edges.

“*Leave,*” Abraxas snarls, bioluminescent marks flaring, and the others don’t hesitate. They flee the room like it’s on fire. The door shuts behind them as Hyt sets me on the edge of the exam table. Maybe he can sense that I’m just a bit weak in the knees?

“A four-way baby, that’s ...” I almost say *the dumbest dumb-dumb alien romance plot I’ve ever heard of*. But then, sometimes a series of random events triggers a miracle. I bite at my thumbnail. “Holy *shit*. What is this kid going to look like?” A fairy-tale creature, I’m sure. I’m suddenly too excited to breathe. I’m also ... sad.

Because Abraxas is on my left, Hyt is on my right, and Rurik might be watching, but he isn’t *here*.

I look up, from Hyt to Abraxas, back to Hyt.

“You really did that, huh? Got in on this party at the last minute?”

“What can I say? I’m just that virile.” Hyt grins as Abraxas snorts.

“To survive the overwhelming injustice of a Vestalis mating, that is no small scale. My venom has protected my mate’s eggs from being fully inseminated by Vestalis seed. They will always need another sire or two to achieve viability. We can have as many of these children as we like.” He wraps his wings around me and Hyt both, closeting us in the quiet, sterile space of the med bay.

“We need to talk to Rurik,” I tell them both. I glance from one to the other. “I’m going in there *today*.”

Neither of them argues with me.

Instead, they escort me to the throne room door as I try not to think about what Rurik might look like, if his eyes are still covered by red lace, his mouth sewn shut like a broken doll. That collar. The shackles. It’s horrific. He won’t even be able to *move*.

“Please,” I whisper, moving up to the door and putting my hand on the lace that covers the wood. I turn and rest my ear against it, listening. If I focus and really push myself into the

rhythmic murmur that echoes around the ship, I can get glimpses of what he's thinking.

I know that every time I look, he has to fight me. He can't ignore me. If he doesn't put his all into it, I'll breach his shields. At least then I know he's paying attention to me.

As soon as Rurik sat down on that throne, everything changed. Most of it for the better. Having him take control of *The Korol* has saved billions of lives. Literally. It saved Earth and Jungryuk, Yaoh and the World Station. Hell, it pulled our fat from the frying pan.

But you know what it didn't do? It didn't give me my Star-destined mate. And if you've ever been in love, you know how selfish the emotion can be. I'd do anything to have Rurik by my side, even kill the universe in the process.

Moments pass in silence. Abraxas sits down and folds his wings, wraps his tail around his legs. Hyt perches on the edge of a decorative chaise.

I do what I've been doing for two months: I wait.

A sigh echoes throughout the ship. The blood lace curtains, the blood lace rugs, the blood lace silk on the canopied ceilings, it shudders, brightens, dims. *The Korol* gives an allover shiver.

Come in, Rurik breathes into my mind. The round door rolls open, revealing a lush bedroom with heavy furnishings and too many plants hanging in baskets from the ceiling, stacked in pots near the corner, propped on the desk. It's practically a jungle in here.

I stumble as I sprint into the room, turning to find Rurik sitting in a high-backed chair with a fresh military jacket, slacks, and boots on. He's still bound at the wrists, ankles, and throat, but his face is clear, and he looks as he ever did. Nocturnal eyes. Antennae of black and bone. Pale pink lips.

My eyes prick with tears—not sure if I'm angry with him or just happy to see him—as I approach the throne, climbing into his lap without preamble. Rurik hasn't grown to monstrous

proportions like his father. He's the same size. The only issue is that he's bound here.

"My queen," he breathes as I turn my head and press my neck up against his mouth. He doesn't seem able to resist even though I can tell that he wants to. He's afraid to take me this hard and this fast, but he can't help himself. He clamps his sharp teeth onto my throat, piercing me and drawing my breath out in a rush.

My blood sings a sweet song as it flows into his mouth, and I tremble, drawing my auburn hair away from his face with my fingers. It escapes almost immediately and swings forward to brush Rurik's skin, causing him to buck his hips.

I'm distantly aware of Abraxas and Hyt joining us in the room, but they don't interfere. The door closes behind them, sealing the four of us off from the rest of the ship.

"Oh, you like that?" I ask Rurik, lifting my skirts and then rubbing against his pelvis. I'm aware that the other two are watching us, but that doesn't mean I'm going to stop.

"Very much so," Rurik breathes, and he sounds so like himself that I feel relief rush through me, purposely putting my hands on his shoulders and pushing back from him to break the spell. He meets my eyes, and my heart stutters. I have to force my lids shut, so that I can think. "You are hiding from me?" he inquires, but I just shake my head.

"I don't want you to drug me with pheromones or fated mate stares. I want you to talk to me first." I open my eyes again, but I stare at the 'V'-shaped mark on his forehead instead of locking onto his royal gaze. Please. I don't care if he's the king. I'm still going to call him out on his shit. "You haven't let me in here for *two* fucking Earth months," I snap, putting the term *Earth* in there like it isn't still weird to have to specify the type of month I'm referring to. "Why?"

Rurik sighs and leans forward, putting his forehead against mine. His feelers sweep my hair, his hands bound. I don't even know how we'd have sex if I elected to continue. He's trapped like this, in a seated position. I don't even understand how he managed to change his clothes.

“I don’t regret keeping you out,” he tells me, a frown building on his red-stained jewel of a mouth. “You will have to get used to living without me.” He gives me a dark look that I meet even though I don’t want to. I want to resist him, to fight him, to give him the silent treatment or something ... but I can’t. I meet his gaze dead-on. “I have only allowed you in because I ...” His attention falls to my midsection. It’s not huge or anything, but we’re definitely making progress. “A girl child.”

“How are you going to fix the problem you made with the Atrata? I am *not* extending my daughter’s hand in marriage, not for some frozen mineral planet that nobody cares about. Figure it out.”

Rurik’s mouth tightens into a thin line, blood lace ribbons curling up and over the armrests of the seat. I’m sure he’s up to something nefarious, but I don’t particularly care. I want to be here. I want whatever it is that he’s going to do to me with those ribbons.

“If we have to, we will go to war,” he says simply, and I frown at him.

“Don’t be so quick to act the martyr, Your Majesty. I said that I would search for a way to get you off of this ship, and I mean it. I’m not abandoning you, no matter how hard you try to get me to leave.”

“No,” Rurik replies easily. “You *will* leave because I can force you to leave. I want you to live a good life, not one as my blood slave, my long-suffering companion.” There’s a haunted look in his eyes as he says these things, and I know that he’s thinking about his parents. Maybe, in a strange way, he even misses them. Pities them. I don’t know because he won’t fucking talk to me. “Nor will I allow my child to suffer the consequences of my actions.”

“The consequences of trying to save Earth? And Jungryuk? Not to mention Yaoh and the World Station. Whatever the consequences are, we’ll figure them out together. If you throw me out of this room again, I won’t forgive you so easily the next time.” I settle in his lap with a frown, thinking about our

future daughter. “One quarter each? What do you think about that?”

I’m so eager to talk to him, so happy to see him that I almost forget that I’m supposed to be angry.

“The first female child in the history of the Vestalis race; I am pleased and rather impressed.” He relaxes back into the chair as the lace ribbons snatch my wrists, lifting them above my head so that I’m suspended from the ceiling. It, too, is decorated in more canopied silk, similar to the design Rurik created in the glass bell jar during our wedding. “As for her genetic makeup, it is happily irrelevant to me.”

More lace slithers around my ankles, tugs my panties off with a snap of fabric, spreads my legs. I’m lifted up enough so that Rurik can use those same lace ribbons to push his down pants down to his thighs, releasing his claspers and exposing the dusky head of his naked cock.

“Your Majesty,” I whisper, but the words are husky. I’m just happy that he let me see him, and I’m determined not to let him banish me again. Next time, I’ll go get that Atrata gun from Hyt’s locker at the shooting range, and I’ll blow the throne room doors off. “I missed you.”

“Oh, my queen.” Rurik uses those lace ribbons to push me down onto his shaft, filling up those sad, empty places inside my heart at the same time. His claspers spring forward, snagging my hips and drawing me even closer to him. When he kisses me, he tastes like blood and I don’t even care. I want to be able to feed him with my throat, not from a bag. I want to nurture his heart and care for his soul.

I know that’s why he kicked me out: because he wants all the same and more for me.

Using the lace ribbons on my wrists, Rurik lifts me up and down, dragging my greedy channel up his shaft before slowly pushing me down again. The friction is delicious but slow, making me writhe against my restraints. He uses my suspension from the ceiling to lift me up again, putting my breasts near his mouth. More ribbons slither around the sides of the throne, taking hold of my bodice and yanking until my

tits spill free. They're in Rurik's mouth just as quickly, first one and then the other. He sucks and bites, leaving teeth marks on the pale mounds.

"My coremeta," I groan as Hyt comes to stand beside us, resting his hip against the armrest of the chair. Just like he did on Jungryuk, he sneaks a tentacle behind Rurik and flicks his lower back with a suction cup. The king groans, and his coremata burst out from behind his jacket like they missed me as much as I missed them. Pheromones drift in the air, bone-white dust from his feelers and his wings, bloodred from his coremata.

Hyt wafts his tails, spilling bubbles that pop and perfume the throne room with his scent.

It's not such a terrible place now, not like it was when the previous king and queen ruled. It's homey, cozy, beautifully decorated, verdant and bright. But a gilded cage is still a cage.

Abraxas flows up the few steps to the dais where the throne sits, curving his shadowed body around the throne and peering over the backrest at my face. I look up and meet his eyes, a treasured tapestry of sapphire, violet, and gold. He tilts his head, rubbing the spiraled length of his horn against my cheek. His sticky pheromones smear across my skin as Rurik siphons blood from my breasts.

I turn my head and slide my lips over Abraxas' horn, causing him to snarl so loudly that the monitors on the far wall flicker with static. My head bobs like I'm giving him a blow job, and he exhales, hot embers teasing the sensitive skin of my neck.

"Mind if I join you?" Hyt asks, slipping around behind me and drawing my hair over my shoulder. His lips touch my neck, his tongue cool on the heated spot where Abraxas' fiery breath brushed me. He straddles Rurik's thighs behind me, hands on my hips, tentacles working their way under my skirts. A sucker finds my clit, suctioning to it and rubbing in slow circles. Another wraps my right thigh. A third slides between my ass cheeks to lube me up. That hot oil just does it for me when he rubs it against my ass, probing and teasing

while Rurik continues with that agonizingly slow up-and-down motion.

My wrists remain tied above my head with red lace, my ankles bound to the sides of the throne. Blood flows freely from my breasts into the king's mouth, and Aspis pheromones obliterate my brain as I suck hard on Abraxas' horn.

For two months, this is what I've been missing. For two months, this is all I needed and wanted.

For us to be together.

It really is that simple to me.

I just need to make Rurik understand that.

He removes his mouth from my breast with a pop, lace tangling around my nipple, sticking to his tongue.

"Pardon me, Abraxas," the king hisses, a hint of interstellar moth in his words. My Aspis mate hesitates slightly before drawing his horn from my mouth and moving to one side. Blood lace surges around the throne like red tentacles, drawing the back of the seat down until we're lying horizontal.

Ah. It converts to a bed. How convenient.

Unfortunately, that doesn't change the situation with Rurik's wrists or ankles or throat. The bottom of the chair rises up, like a footrest on a recliner, but he's still bound. Trapped. Immobile.

None of that prevents him from fucking me.

He keeps my wrists raised, bouncing me on his shaft while his claspers dig sharp, hot points into my hips. Hyt is kissing my neck and playing with my hair, massaging me with his tentacles in all the places I like to be touched. I feel his mating tentacles coax my ass, asking for permission.

"Do it," I say, voice strong, like I'm giving a queenly command. My eyes lock with Abraxas', and he surges up and over the bed, straddling Rurik's chest. *That's a whole lot of dragon ass in the king's face.* But nobody complains.

Abraxas reaches into his groin slit with his tail at the same moment that Hyt's hips surge forward. His mating tentacles push into me first, followed by the upper part of his shaft, and then the thicker lower portion. His base tentacles cup my ass cheeks and suction to my skin.

I'm in ecstasy as he strokes me from behind, and Rurik fucks me from the front. His testes are plump and hot inside my grappling pussy, my inner muscles squeezing him like they never want to let go. Abraxas frees his pleasure rod first, letting it spring from his slit with a spatter of warm fluid. His mating rod follows and then lastly, his heavy, glowing sack.

He stands up in front of me, feet balanced on the throne on either side of Rurik, and looks down from a face crafted of frights and shadows. Blood lace curls around my breasts and tentacles wrap my waist beneath my skirts.

I know why he stood up: so that I can see Rurik's face between his legs.

I gaze down at the king, peering into his dark eyes as his coremata brush featherlight kisses across my nipples. His poor wings are trapped beneath us all, ruffling like they wish they were free. The way he's strapped to the throne, it's possible that he may never spread them again. *Pinned like a moth to an entomologist's board. Forever flightless.*

"Wait!" I call out, panting heavily, my lips *this* close to pressing a kiss to the tip of Abraxas' mating rod.

All three males go still, and my wrists are finally released from their bondage. I snatch onto two of Rurik's coremata and hold on tight.

"Are you okay, Earthling?" Hyt asks, his breathing labored, his body jerking slightly with the effort of holding back. He's always concerned for me, and I love that about him.

Abraxas exhales like he's annoyed—but not with me. He anticipates the reason that I stopped us. *I need Rurik to understand that this is not a onetime thing. I am never leaving him again.*

“Our female has not been this happy in many moons. Next time, I will *not* honor the king’s request of keeping her out. I will tear these doors off myself.” He curls his long fingers in my hair as Rurik shudders beneath me. “A male strives to please his female. Sometimes, that requires hard choices. But this experiment is a failed one.”

“I only wish for you to live a good life,” Rurik breathes, but there’s a surrender in his words. He wants to be a father to his daughter. He wants me to read to him and vice versa. He wants me cuddled up in his lap. But he’s too selfless to admit to any of that.

“Abraxas is right. Rurik, I don’t *want* to live a life without you in it. I understand that there’ll be times we go to Jungryuk without you. There’ll be times we visit Dome or Earth or the World Station, but ... that doesn’t mean we can’t spend time together here, too. I won’t allow you to turn me into a stranger and condemn your daughter to the same fate. Promise me now. Promise me that you will never, *ever* try to keep us apart again.”

Rurik exhales and bucks his hips, making my body flush with heat.

“Yes, my queen.” He struggles to get the words out, his voice ragged and rough with sex.

“Promise me.” I’m adamant about this, even though my body is screaming that I’ve lost my mind, that I need to get back to the cosmic carnality of our joining right the fuck now. I wiggle my hips and both Hyt and Rurik groan.

“Your Sublime Fuckin’ Majesty, *hurry up*,” Hyt growls as Abraxas lets his head fall back, wings spreading wide, tail winding gently around my neck to drape my shoulders. Venom drips down my bare skin and onto my breasts. It’s occurred to me before that his venom doesn’t seem to affect either Hyt or Rurik, and I don’t exactly know why. For whatever reason, they’re immune to it, too.

“I promise, my queen.” Rurik grits his teeth, flashing fangs. His feelers flare outwards in frustration.

“Promise, what?” I repeat, stubbornly maintaining my position.

“I promise that I will never intentionally keep us apart. Never. I nearly died. Eve, I broke on the inside without you. I was a shell of a man. I want nothing more than for us to be together.” A shroud of lace cocoons around us with his words, wrapping the four of us in a Gothic tent made of veins and arteries and blood. “Anything you want, my queen. The universe is *yours*.”

Movement explodes in the small space. Abraxas angles my lips over his shaft, digs his fingers into my hair, and slides his hips forward. I use my hand to snag the base of him, pumping sticky fluid along his ebony length as I suck. I tilt my head to the side as his pleasure rod glides against my cheek, slippery and hot and hard. His wing-hands snatch his own horns, pumping them with wild fervor as I take care of him with soft lips and a wet tongue.

Satisfied sounds slip from all of us, mine muffled around Abraxas’ cock, his more of a growl than a moan. Hyt is breathy and sweet; Rurik is desperate and wild.

My free hand strokes the king’s coremata while tentacles and blood lace and a tail all struggle for control of my breasts, slipping and sliding around them, flicking my nipples until I’m groaning shamelessly with dragon cock stuffed in my mouth.

I missed you, I tell Rurik through our shared connection, and my mind explodes with images. Him, sitting on the throne, bound and gagged, sightless and muted. Him, sitting on the throne with tears of blood streaming down his pale moon face. Him, sitting on the throne and gazing at images of me on the monitors that consume the wall on the opposite side of the room.

In all of these images, one thing stands out most clearly: Rurik is alone.

Abraxas explodes in my mouth, his mating rod swelling at the tip, knotting at the base. I swallow down his seed, and wet my lips before I tackle him again. He makes primal sounds as I tease and explore that knotted flesh of his, designed for my

pussy and not my mouth and yet just as exquisite when my lips brush across it. He switches out for his pleasure rod, and I work even harder at it, consumed by the feelings in my own body, sucking him like I'm trying to put out the fire between my thighs.

I'm the first to orgasm, squeezing around Rurik, around Hyt, whimpering against Abraxas' shaft. Hyt climaxes for me next, bubbles filling the lace tent around us until there's no room left. There are hundreds of them, easily. Gossamer touches as they pop against my skin.

"You are a real pain in the ass, Your Majesty," he breathes, tentacles flashing blue. He flicks his braid over my shoulder so that the brilliant, wild sting of his hair can tease the skin of my chest, can sing across my breasts. He gives me a playful nip on the shoulder as his cock fills my ass with the voluminous clear fluid of a Falopex. "But you are so, so worth it."

He turns pink again before he withdraws, parting the blood lace cocoon with his hands. He sits down on the dais steps with his head thrown back, cowboy hat caught on his adorable fox ears.

I use my teeth on Abraxas, scraping his shaft with blunt ivory until his hands tighten on my scalp. His pleasure rod empties into my throat, his balls twitching. Emptied of seed. Emptied of bonding fluid. When he slips his shaft from my mouth, he takes a moment to curve his spine and split his massive jaws. His tongue flicks out and swipes my face, dives into my throat.

"*So little,*" he purrs, and then he's slinking like a swatch of night down the steps on the other side of the throne from Hyt. The blood lace cocoon begins to collapse into a puddle of red around us, darkening and drying in a way I've never seen before.

I don't care.

I'm alone with Rurik; that's what matters.

Our eyes meet.

Images transfer between us again. This time, they're of me. Crying on the bed in the royal suite. Crying in Hyt's arms and nested in his tentacles. Crying in the fold of Abraxas' wings and the coil of his tail. Reading books in the foyer with my back pressed to the door. Digging through the Noct-Net to learn more about *The Korol* in the hopes of finding some way to free him from it. In the hopes of *destroying* it.

How is it that you always manage to surprise me, my queen? Rurik asks, one hand sliding into my hair to pull my face to his. I'm so into him that I forget to be confused as to why his hand is suddenly free. He kisses me, nicking my tongue and swallowing my blood. His fingers tighten in my hair and his other hand shoves up my skirt to clutch my hip.

Rurik shifts to the right, and we tumble off the edge of the chair and onto the floor with matching grunts from us both. He makes sure that we hit so that he's on the bottom and I'm on top, so that my belly isn't jostled by the move. *Just like he did the day he kidnapped me, when he cupped my head to prevent me from hitting the floor.*

Always looking out for me, taking care of me, wanting the best for me.

We work frantically at one another, bodies undulating together, moaning wildly as I work my way toward a second climax. Him, edging toward his first. I can feel his balls swelling inside of me, readying themselves to burst. His claspers claw frantically, drawing blood from my skin and leaving pleasure in their wake. I'm just touching him, feeling him, enjoying the shudders when he finally orgasms and then ...

"What in the actual fuck?" I murmur as the blood lace around us begins to flake off, crumbling like dirt until the shackles on Rurik's wrists, and the collar around his throat are gone. He draws back and then looks up, at Hyt and Abraxas who are staring down at us, at the dusty red powder all over the seat and the floor. The blood lace has dried up and became flaky, no different than crimson sand.

The screens behind me, dark before, glow with a bright red light. It flares sharply in the room and then pulses, and the whooshing sound of a heartbeat fills the room. I scramble off of Rurik, falling to the floor beside him. He shoves up to his feet, yanking his pants up his hips with one hand and capturing my wrist in gloved fingers with the other. I'm hauled up to stand between him and Hyt.

I'm staring at the screens as I shove my skirts back into place, Abraxas taking a defensive position in front of us, and Hyt removing a Cartian pistol from a pouch on his belt. He takes aim and waits.

"*Hello, Rurik,*" the ship says, and I shiver at the omnipotent authority in its words. The voice doesn't just come from one place, but from all around us. Abraxas snarls, curling his massive body around the rest of us in a tight, dark coil. Hyt takes off his hat with a tentacle and presses it against his chest. Rurik stands stone-still with his bloodstained lips parted. "*Do you know me?*"

"*The Korol,*" Rurik whispers, and then he flicks his gaze to mine and it's equal parts curiosity and terror. He doesn't have any idea what's going on either. Somehow, that settles me a bit. I'm not the only one out of the loop for once.

The ship shivers, like a sigh, and the heartbeat picks up speed, throbbing on the screens, filling the room with that sound. Blood lace whispers across the floor, fresh strands of it tangling at our feet. None of us move.

"You're fucking sentient AI, aren't you?" I ask, hating that this question is coming up at all. I was joking when I said that perhaps Zero was just a piece of artificial intelligence that'd somehow learned to think on its own. I didn't mean that. I do now. I think this ship is alive, but not in the way we are.

Holy shit, that's terrifying.

"*Yes,*" the ship replies in a deep male voice. "*I am sentient, but I cannot love. It is the only thing I cannot do, the only thought process I do not understand.*" There's a hesitation there, as if *The Korol* doesn't quite know what to do next.

Do you hear what I'm saying? The computer that runs this ship is *thinking*. On its own. Like a person.

"I cannot love," it repeats, not like it's angry but like it's simply stating facts. *"Love is strange. A living being will give up its life for its loved one. That is against the very code of all living things: to persevere no matter what, even at the cost of another being. But you, Rurik, you love most fully and I am proud of you."*

"What the hell is happening?" I murmur to Hyt. Abraxas answers instead.

"The most unnatural of all things; this ship should be destroyed." And he's right. Only, I don't know how we're going to do that without killing Rurik. Unless ... is he free now? He's standing up beside me; he isn't bound.

"And it is not just your romantic love that I envy," the ship continues. *"The love for your future child is poignant and true. You have even risked your life for those you would call friend or brother. Of all the kings throughout all the years, you are the first who loves so fully that I understand what I am lacking. So, Rurik, I release you. Guide me, and I will do your bidding. Destroy me, and I will accept my own end."* The entire ship trembles again, and then the screens flicker back to the daily operations occurring aboard *The Korol*. *"If you truly desire, use me to rule,"* it says, and then that's that.

The ship stops talking and we're left standing there in silence together.

"You're not bound anymore, are you?" Hyt asks, the first to make a move. He turns to stare at Rurik, looking at his wrists, down at his ankles. "It let you go."

"Let us blow it up," Abraxas repeats with another growl, dropping to all fours and then headbutting me affectionately. He rubs his horns against me as I stand there gaping.

"This ... you ... what the fuck?" I'm sorry. Did the ship just say that Rurik taught it the meaning of true love and then it released him? I ... there are no words. None. I am officially rendered speechless. I sit down heavily on the edge of the

throne bed, gaping at Rurik, hands fisted in my skirts. “The Vestalis are so goddamn *weird*,” I whisper as Rurik turns toward me suddenly, reaches down to snatch my hand, and then takes off running down the hall with Abraxas and Hyt behind us.

As soon as we leave the throne room, I hear Rurik pull in a deep breath, but he doesn’t slow. He keeps us going until we bump into Avril in the hallway. He skids to a stop, breathing hard, tucking me up against his side and staring her down like he expects trouble.

“Prepare a transport for Jungryuk,” he commands, and Avril’s hands fly to her mouth. At first it seems like she might cry, but then she drops her hands and I see that she’s smirking.

“What did I tell you?” she says, turning to me and running her palms down the front of her red dress. “That you should love the prince, trust the prince, accept the prince? Was I right about all of that?”

“We have matches for you on Affiance,” I remind her, and the snarkiness dissipates in an instant. Avril hooks a frantic bow, bending in half at the waist, her red braids swinging forward.

“I will call for a transport immediately, Your Majesty,” she tells us before hurrying off.

Rurik is still panting, staring down the hallway in the direction of the queen’s dock—that all glass room where we landed our transport before the big throne room battle. I learned a few days later that Rurik had docked us much closer to his parents than they were expecting. He’s more devious than he looks.

“We’re going to Jungryuk?” I whisper, and Rurik turns to me suddenly, looking up to see Abraxas and Hyt just behind me. His eyes drop to mine. *Love. Trust. Joy.*

Freedom.

It isn’t something you truly appreciate until it’s stripped from you.

“Not forever ... but for now,” my king tells me, clutching my hands in his. “I need to experience it in order to believe it.”

I understand what he’s saying. I understand it too perfectly for words. I once woke up beneath a sign that said *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates*, and now I’m here. I wouldn’t have believed it unless I’d lived it.

“Okay,” I tell him, reaching back for Hyt’s tentacle, tapping my bare foot against Abraxas’ tail so that he’ll wrap it around my ankle, finding Rurik’s coremata and forcing one to unfurl for me so that I can squeeze it. Surrounded by monstrous aliens, happy as a clam. I smile. “Let’s go to Jungryuk then.”

And we do. The ship lets us leave. When we come back, it lets Rurik pilot it, and that’s how we break the ten-million-year-old curse on the Vestalis race: we fall in love.

Me, three aliens, and ridiculous mate bonds that kill us if we don’t regularly fuck.

Ahh, that’s the Noctuida for you, isn’t it?

As strange as it is spectacular, as smutty as it is insane.

Welcome to my universe, friends, where even a caterer becomes a queen. And everybody—even the sentient planet-eating spaceship—falls in love.



Eve

Two Earth Months Later ...

Location: Earth

We practice the idea of handshakes before we leave. *No, Hyt, not with a tentacle. Abraxas, not so hard, dude! Rurik, put your gloves on.* Why the fuck did I think this was a good idea? If they can't learn to shake hands properly it doesn't even matter that they're wearing human-shaped holograms: my family will see right through them.

"You're the only one who's going to pass," I whisper to Hyt as I tighten my hands around the wheel of our rental car. It's an Escalade with blacked-out windows which I like because it makes me feel like I'm on a covert operation or something. Let's be realistic: we *are* on a covert mission. If we don't return to *The Korol* by the designated date and time, an army of aliens is going to invade Earth to come look for us.

Not really willing to facilitate the hostile takeover of my home planet for the Vestalis.

"The fact that you think that even I can pass is a stretch," Hyt tells me, peering out the window at the passing skyscrapers. My parents live just outside Portland, in Beaverton. They inherited our house from my dad's dad, so it's worth a hell of a lot more now than they could've ever paid for it.

I can't believe that I'm back here. My mind is running in circles, trying to flee the overwhelming anxiety, guilt, and fear in my belly. Or maybe that's just the pregnancy? I'm carrying a baby the likes of which has never even *existed* in the Noct. We never know what's going to happen from day-to-day. Only, there are definitely tentacles in there. I can *feel* them.

I slam on the brakes, and the men make various sounds of displeasure. Hyt groans when he nearly hits his faux human face on the dash. Rurik hisses in moth—not sure how that got past his tongue translator—and Abraxas snarls wildly, the ferocity of it causing the SUV's engine to stall.

That's how we end up walking the last few miles together. Me, six months pregnant, walking past lawns filled with signs that have mine and Jane's faces on them. *Missing Daughters* is what the majority of the signs are labeled with. Hotline numbers to call. Large cash rewards for information leading to our safe return.

Fuck.

I've only been back on Earth for ... I check the phone I purchased on the way here. An hour and forty-seven minutes. That's how long it's been since we took a stealth ship into the atmosphere and landed in the Tillamook State Forest.

"I could carry you as if it were nothing," Abraxas growls, sliding his palms down the front of his black dress shirt. The hologram we bought for him from a trader on the World Station is supposed to play off his natural features, make him look as human as possible while keeping his 'essence' intact. It works, let me tell you that. He doesn't look anything like the doctor version of him from that dream I had the day we crashed on Jungryuk. He's *much* more handsome now, with violet eyes like Elizabeth Taylor and hair as black as night, tousled and sexy. "Why do you refuse me, female? I do not understand."

"*Eve*," I stress, slapping the back of one hand into the palm of the other. "While we're here, my name is Eve. Not Earthling. Not Princess or Queen. Not mate or female or whatever else. Just Eve, okay?"

My eyes dart from one house to another, and the tears come even though I tell them not to. Part of me being pregnant, I guess, is having super random emotions all the time. Well, not if you're Jane. She still struts around in pirate hats and boots, like she doesn't have a big belly and a similar due date. *Bitch*.

I stop on the sidewalk and reach up, rubbing my hands over my face. It's been six months since Jane and I were kidnapped. And now I'm going to show up with a pregnant belly and three men at my side? This is ... well, it's already weird enough to be back on Earth let alone to see my family.

But I need to do this. I need to face the people that I'm essentially giving up to live my new life. I need to let them know that Jane and I are okay, that we're happy. Mostly, I'm selfish and I want to see them.

"Do not fear, Eve," Rurik breathes out, his pale blond hair swept back from his face. His eyes are human, but such a dark brown that the irises are nearly black. His mouth, oddly enough, is exactly the same. And his skin? Well, if he looks a bit like a porcelain doll, whose fault is that? "We will not embarrass you in front of your family."

"Speak for yourself," Hyt says, strutting past. He still saunters and sashays around, even as a human. Also, he's still a thirst trap and it took a half hour for me to get him to put on a goddamn t-shirt. *Modest, my ass*, I think with a roll of my eyes. "You embarrassed me in front of mine, so I'm going to return the favor." He winks at me, running his fingers through his glossy blue hair. We'll just ... say that he dyes it. This is fucking Portland, Oregon. Believe me: *nobody* is going to notice. "Don't be so scared, sweetheart. This is your *family*." Hyt leans down to press a kiss against my cheek, and I feel a tentacle that I can no longer see beneath the hologram. I gently push it aside with my foot, taking a step forward before I turn around to face the men.

"Remember: the holograms don't change your actual physical shape." I don't know why I'm repeating this stuff. I didn't know anything about holograms until yesterday. Abraxas might be the only person here less familiar with them than I am. "Don't touch things unless you use your hands."

Don't brush up against anyone. If someone notices something, just laugh it off. Humans play really good mind tricks on themselves. If they don't feel like believing something, they won't. Let's use that to our advantage, shall we?"

I turn back around, finishing the walk to my parents' place and then finding myself frozen at the end of the driveway. My dad's car is parked in its usual spot, but there's a decal on the rear windshield with my face on it.

My throat clogs up as I glance over, finding my Subaru parked beside it, also with a missing person decal on the back. I just stand there and stare at it, wondering if I need to explain to the guys what they're looking at. I've been teaching them what to expect over the past few weeks, but I know firsthand what it's like to find oneself on an alien planet.

"I'm such a piece of shit," I whisper, cutting across the front lawn for the door before I lose my nerve. "I was having alien orgies in space while my family—" I cut myself off. I came back as soon as I was able, pheromones and mate bonding aside.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Hyt begins as I snatch Abraxas' massively muscled arm in my hand. I think he might've ... I told him not to pee here, but I swear that his hand was hovering near the fly of his sexy designer jeans. Whoever programmed those into the hologram deserves an award. The faux jeans have molded over the perfect shape of Abraxas' ass, similar to how it looks in his true form. "You're not going to make anybody's day worse by showing up alive." Hyt leans against the wall and accidentally bumps the doorbell.

Shit. Fuck.

"I wasn't ready," I hiss as he glances down at his traitorous hip, his shirt flipped up just a bit, some sexy skin showing.

The door opens.

My dad is standing there.

"Bet you never thought you'd see this face again," I tell him, and I feel stupid because I'm practically thirty (fine,

twenty-six) and pregnant, married, a queen ... but tears still sting my eyes. I put both of my hands up over my mouth as my dad stares at me like he's seen a ghost.

And then he passes out.

"Shit," Hyt growls, snatching my dad's limp body with a tentacle before he hits the ground. Now, we can't *see* the tentacle because of the hologram, but it's there. Basically, it looks like my dad is floating in the middle of the hallway on his back.

"Put him down," I whisper as my dad groans and blinks himself awake. Hyt sets him quickly back on his feet, and the man stumbles before putting a hand up to the wall. He keeps his fingers pinched over his nose for a moment before lifting his chin to look at me.

"Eve?" he asks, like he isn't sure. And then he starts yelling, pushing past Hyt to fold me into his arms. My father hugs me nice and tight around my upper body, careful not to hurt my belly. He doesn't cry—he only does that in his office with the door locked which is fine—but my mother? There's no such restraint.

"Eve!" she screams, and then she's throwing her weight against my side and sobbing. She falls to her knees as my father moves his arms from me to his wife. I make myself smile, so they'll know that I'm okay. I want them to understand as quickly and implicitly as I can that I never suffered while I was gone.

Well ... I did get eaten alive. And I saw a ship try to eat the planet my friends were on. Oh, and my millipede mother-in-law tried to kill me and my husbands. But beyond all of *that*, I didn't suffer.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," I tell them, forcing a laugh as my eyes shift to the side to catch Rurik's. Doesn't matter that he's wearing the hologram of a handsome white-blond albino snow prince. We're still soulmates. We can still sense each other's thoughts and emotions.

Are you surprised by their reaction? I am not. I would do terrible things to get you back if you were missing from me. I would traverse the chapters of the megaverse until I found you again. Your family, I already like them.

I turn back to my parents as footsteps sound from inside the house. And then there's Nate, his hands curled around the doorjamb on either side of him. His mouth is hanging open, his breath frosting in the cool air. A girl I've never seen before slides into view behind him on her socks, gaping at me like she's just as shocked to see me alive. She throws her arms around my brother's waist and squeezes him like they're an item. Maybe they are? Maybe a whole bunch of things happened to my family while I was gone, and I'm going to have to get used to that since I can only see them one or two times a year?

Ouch.

I exhale and hold out my arms for Nate. He just stands there.

"Hug your sister," my dad whispers roughly, yanking his phone from his pocket. "I need to call everybody. I need Jenna and Kari and Maribel on airplanes right now." He turns away from me, but he doesn't go anywhere, making his phone calls.

"Where have you *been*?" Nate hisses as his eyes slide from me to Hyt, to Rurik, to Abraxas. He shudders like he can sense their otherness and then cautiously makes his way over to me, his gaze slipping to my pregnant belly. "Um, what is that?" he asks, and I roll my eyes.

Fucking seventeen-year-old boys.

I wrap an arm around his neck and yank him toward me, and he doesn't dare fight back because I'm pregnant. Gotta love the kid.

"Who is this girl, and why is there a giant sticker of me on the back of my own car?" I whisper, but he knows I'm only joking. I don't at all find any of this funny. It's just ... there are a lot of feelings right here right now, and my family is *terrible* at dealing with feelings.

“This is my girlfriend, Rachel,” Nate says, slipping out of my grip and startling when he realizes how close behind him that Hyt is standing. “Hey man,” he says as my mom gathers me into her arms again. I’m surreptitiously watching my brother scan my mates like he doesn’t trust them for shit. Told you the guy was good at this alien crap. He probably knows what the term *nebula* actually means. “And yes, I stole your car.” Nate moves beside Rachel, hooking a comfortable arm around her narrow waist. She beams at me, but it looks like her mouth is *this* close to bursting open.

It does, and it’s like being showered with happy glitter. I decide I like her right away and that Nate better not screw this up.

“Oh my God, I’m so happy to meet you, and I never thought we’d see you again, but I wanted to see you, and I tried to be supportive, but it’s just so great that you’re here and that you’re you and—” Rachel just stops talking and puts on a big smile. “It’s great to meet you, Eve.”

“Who are these men?” my mother whispers, clutching my arm. She’s fisting the front of her skirt with one hand, letting it tremble for dramatic effect. I know that she usually keeps her Glock on her at all times. She was raised in Massachusetts, and she lives in Portland, but she spent many formative years living in Texas.

I put my hand on her wrist to relax her.

“These are my ...” And here’s where it gets difficult. Hyt winks at me and reaches up to touch the bill of the ball cap he’s wearing. He flicks the brim, and then touches his tongue to the corner of his mouth. *Go ahead, sweet girl, and lie your ass off.* Pretty sure that’s what he’s telling me. “Husbands.” I clear my throat. “The country that we were ... in ... me and Jane—”

A man stumbles into the doorway behind Nate wearing flannel pajamas despite the early hour. It might be getting close to dark outside, but it’s really only about six. Jane’s dad, Dave Baker, doesn’t just look like he went to bed early today;

he looks like he's been going to bed early every day for months.

"Mr. Baker," I say out of habit. My hand immediately dips into my pocket to withdraw Jane's letter. Frankly, I need to get this over to him before Rurik intercepts it and inspects it. He's been asking for days to look over the letter before it goes out. He says humans don't know what can and can't be shared with other humans. Apparently, he does. I ignored him and secreted Jane's letter away without even reading it myself. I owe my bestie that much at least.

When I try to hand Dave the letter, he crushes me in a tight hug instead.

"Jane's alive," I tell him as he gives me a squeeze and draws back. I hand the letter over as her father stares down at it like he's just received a missive from a dead person. "And happy," I add. I don't tell him about his future grandson or his new son-in-law because Jane asked me not to. And also because Jane still hasn't accepted that she's in love with Captain Kidd. "She couldn't make it, but she wanted me to bring you this."

"I'm glad you're okay, Eve," he tells me, taking a step back to open the letter. If he's wondering why Jane didn't come with me, he doesn't ask. Nate does though.

"Why couldn't she make it? Her dad's been grieving her for six months. You, too." Nate sounds angry now, and I don't blame him. He looks at the men surrounding me before turning back to face me down again. "Something's up with you, Eve, and I'm not letting it go." He whispers this last bit before my father rejoins us, looking around like he doesn't know whether to invite me and the guys in or ... if he should just invite me in and leave the guys outside.

"Your sisters are on their way. Come inside before you catch your death out here." My dad drags me inside and gets me seated in the living room with a mug of green tea. I sit crushed between two massive six-foot-something dudes with extra body parts that nobody can see but which are currently distracting me.

There's a tentacle on my right ankle, and a tail wrapped around my left one. Rurik sits in a chair by himself, but I can *smell* him. Nate can, too, I think because he keeps sneezing. He's allergic to moths, believe it or not. Found out once when we had pantry moths for a whole week. My mother was literally distraught at the time.

I rub at my face with the sleeve of my jacket.

The room is dead-silent.

Jane's dad is clutching the packet she sent against his chest and peering at my lovers with wide eyes. When I catch his attention, he smiles and parts the halves of his long-sleeved pajama shirt. There's a t-shirt underneath that reads *Beam Me Up Off This Shitty Planet*. I pretend like I don't see it, smiling at my parents, at my brother, and the effervescent smiling Rachel.

"Your aunts and uncles and cousins are coming tomorrow," my dad tells me, his rocking chair creaking slightly as he sits stiffly in it and waits for me to explain myself. They're all waiting. There's a lot of tension and anger in the room.

"These are my husbands," I repeat, because it's clear that everyone is staring at my stomach. They'll try to separate me from the guys later to ask in private if I'm okay. I accept that. I even appreciate it. "We ... in a port town that we were in, polyandry is legal."

"Where?" Nate asks, using his fucking phone to look this shit up as I talk. I don't care how old I get; he's my little brother and I want to choke him. I make myself smile instead.

"Can I finish talking, please?" I say and then mysteriously, Nate's phone is knocked out of his hand and onto the floor. He looks down at it and then up at Hyt who's pretending like he has no idea what's going on. Maybe he doesn't? Could've been Abraxas. *Thank fuck my parents have tall ceilings or his wings would never fit in here*. I don't see how it's even possible that we make it through the week without him smacking somebody with them.

“You remind me of my little sister, Kayla,” Hyt offers, smiling at my brother. That disarms Nate a little. But only a little. He recovers his phone, curses about the broken screen, and then starts looking shit up anyway.

I struggle to fill the space, spinning a tale so dumb that I’ll likely forget it by my next visit and I’ll be forced to make up a new one all over again.

“There are no countries on Earth that allow polyandry,” Nate says, breaking the silence. *If this little brat only knew the power that comes with being Queen of the Noctuida. I could have him sent to Uranus’ ice-covered moon and left there in the ugly footie pajamas he doesn’t want anyone to know about.*

“Hey Rachel,” I say, turning to her with a smile. “Has Nate ever showed you his fuzzy pj’s? The ones with stars and planets?”

She looks so supremely confused that I’m sure the answer to that question is a resounding *no*.

“It doesn’t matter,” my mother says, standing up from her chair, chin raised, hand inching toward the Glock in her pocket. I give her a look and she drops her arm by her side. “Eve is home now. That’s the only thing that’s important.”

Her eyes well with tears, and I know what she wants: a hug and some alone time.

Which wouldn’t normally be a problem if I hadn’t dragged three aliens home with me.

I’m starting to wonder if the Earth permit I granted myself was not a super great idea.

“Hey, Dave,” I say, turning to Jane’s dad. Seeing as he’s still flashing his alien shirt at me, I’m starting to seriously question what was in my best friend’s letter. “Would you mind showing the guys around the, uh, backyard?”

“Sure thing.” Dave is practically bouncing as he stands up from the chair, gesturing magnanimously in the direction of the sliding glass doors. “My friends, please follow me.”

Only Hyt gets up to go, and I have to surreptitiously kick the tip of Abraxas' tail to get him to move. Nate narrows his eyes at me again, and I come *this* close to racing up the stairs to his room so that I can look for his pajamas. His favorite hiding spot has always been the air vent.

"I need a minute alone with my family," I tell my mates, trying not to get lost in Abraxas' tousled dark hair and piercing violet eyes. In Rurik's obsidian stare and fair complexion. In Hyt's shimmery blue rockstar do or his brilliant sapphire gaze. *At least the hologram doesn't change color when he lies or tells the truth.* Small miracles.

"I will go ... *Eve,*" Abraxas growls as he stands up, towering over me even in human form. He's like, six-foot-six or something. It's insane. His fingers cup my chin, and my family sucks in a collective gasp. "But I will not leave your side for long."

He, um, licks my mouth which doesn't go over well with my father.

"Get out!" my dad shouts, practically leaping to his feet. He points in the direction of the yard. "Go, now, before I call the police."

Abraxas gives Hyt a weird look, and I figure the translator either slipped up or else he just associates the word *police* with the Falopex.

"Come on, my friend." Hyt takes Abraxas' arm and gently encourages him to head Dave's way. The fact that Abraxas allows the other man to touch him is a positive step in the right direction. Our relationship is getting better with each passing day.

Rurik stands up next and our eyes lock, sweeping me into the impossible current of our mate bond. When I swallow, I can taste his need for me on the back of my tongue.

We are on a foreign planet, a hostile planet, and I am to leave my pregnant queen alone? While she is with child? I do not like the idea of abandoning you.

You're not abandoning me, I assure him, realizing that perhaps Jane chose not to visit Earth because she didn't want to leave the captain, and she didn't think the captain could handle things, and ... For this exact reason, she chose not to come.

Alien men and Earthen parents don't mix.

I blink myself from my mate bond stupor only to realize that Nate, Rachel, Dave, and my parents are all *staring* at me. Annabelle, too. My persnickety tabby cat has just wandered in from the next room and is glaring at me like I personally chose to be abducted by those motherfucking twins.

Found out later that Hyt ... took care of them before we ever left to visit *The Korol*. The Oku prisoners, too.

"They were monsters, but I'm not. Couldn't leave 'em to starve," is what he told me. I didn't ask for details.

"Rurik, go," I hiss, and he does. But not before placing a kiss on my forehead first.

Then it's just me and my family and a whole boatload of awkward silence.

"So, um, when did you and Rachel start dating?" I ask Nate, trying to deflect the attention away from me. Not that I could. Not only did I disappear from Tabbi Kat's party alongside my bestie, I stayed gone for six months and came home pregnant and carting three muscular male love interests.

"The date I had planned the day you ... disappeared." His voice is rough, and I realize that he's not as okay as he seems. He missed me. He probably thought I was dead. They all probably thought that.

"Let's go into the kitchen and ... we'll talk," I promise, turning to my mom with a smile. "Maybe you could make my favorite?" And just in case she's forgotten what that is, I fill her in. "Barbecue pork and garlic-butter greens?"

"Nate, go to the store and pick up the ingredients," Dad commands, and my brother rushes to comply.

Just before he slips out the front door, I catch the barest hint of tears glistening in his eyes.



“Why did I tell my family that Jane and I have been living on a research ship in Antarctica?” I groan, holding my bestie’s letter in my hands and flopping onto the end of my bed. It’s way too fucking small for the guys to share with me, but when my parents suggested they get a hotel room, I balked.

My mother has made up three lovely pallets on the floor for them to use.

Wonderful.

Items float around Hyt as he uses his tentacles to dig through my stuff. When he opens my nightstand drawer and withdraws several dildos and a vibrator, I realize the true meaning of poetic justice.

“I don’t know what Antarctica is, but even I could tell your story was little more than loose sand.” He uses a Falopex saying on me and turns, holding up a double-dicked pink vibrator with rabbit ears. “You made fun of *me*?”

“That’s not ... it’s not intended to be an alien dick,” I grumble. I’m not the one who buys faux alien cock from *Bad Dragon* and wherever else. That would be Jane’s forte.

Rurik takes advantage of my weak moment to snag the letter—really, it’s more like a packet with pictures stuffed inside—and quickly goes through them. Abraxas ... at least he found the toilet in the attached bathroom to piss in. Somehow, there’s an issue with his hologram and ... he still has two dicks. Just now finding that out, by the way.

He turns his human head to glare at me, and I sigh. With his bulk, he’s knocked two pictures off the wall, broken a vase, and cleared a shelf in the short time that we’ve been here. My dad is starting to suspect that maybe he has anger issues. Also,

Hyt picked up my cat, Annabelle, with a tentacle and Nate saw her floating in midair when he came back from the store.

Let's just put it this way: I am much less upset about the whole *you can only visit Earth once or twice a year* thing. This is a lot, and I am exhausted. Not only did I spend an emotional evening with my family, but I'm also growing an alien baby with three dads.

"I am going to throw your friend in the path of a gamma ray burst," Rurik grits out, his human canines longer and sharper than they should be. He tosses the packet onto the bed, spilling the pictures. I see photos of Captain Kidd, of *The Korol*, of Zero, of all three of my mates. I take the letter in hand and unfold it.

"*Hi, Daddy,*" Jane writes in that bubbly cursive of hers. He taught her to write like that, her dad. Most people our age don't even know how to read cursive let alone write it. "*I know you're probably missing me. I wanted to come home to see you, but I'd rather you came to see me. Remember how you always told me that you believed aliens were real? Guess what? They are!*"

I drop the letter to my lap and close my eyes.

"Let's jet Jane into space and depressurize her suit, let her tongue boil for a few seconds before we rescue her." I crumple the letter up, scoop the pictures into my hand, and dump the contents into the metal trash can in my bathroom.

I'm looking around for a lighter when Abraxas bends down and spits embers onto the papers for me. They ignite in a ferocious blaze as I quickly crack the bathroom window, wafting the smoke outside.

"Is it possible for us to bring Dave back to *The Korol*?" I ask, and Rurik just stares at me.

"My queen, we *must* bring Dave back to *The Korol* now. Your friend has all but guaranteed that he must be executed or abducted." Rurik narrows his eyes on me. "You did not check her letter, did you?"

“I didn’t want to invade her privacy,” I grumble lamely, turning the sink on so that I can splash water into the trash can and put out the fire. This time, it’s Hyt who steps forward, dousing the flames with water that drips from an invisible tentacle tail. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” he says coyly, bubbles exploding around him and popping against the bathroom ceiling. I drown in pheromones, dropping my hand to my stomach and glaring at him.

“We *cannot* have freaky alien sex in this house.” I drop my voice to a whisper, certain that at least one of my family members is going to eavesdrop. Or at least barge their way into my room. Already, Annabelle has insisted on joining us, lying at the end of the bed and flicking her tail in irritation. She grooms her shoulder as she glares at me, and I’m reminded of Two-Face, the kingmaking alien cat.

“This small beast is angry with you for abandoning her.” Abraxas squats down in front of the feline and stares deeply into her eyes. “But she loves you and wishes you well in your endeavors. She does not, however, wish to leave her planet.”

As if I would ever doom my poor cat to space.

“I’m half-convinced you’re making this shit up,” I tell him, thinking about poor Shithead and how we had to leave him behind. He *cried*. I didn’t know mini alien octopi could cry, but Hyt’s companion does. Big, bubbly tears swelling from his marble-like eyes. Abraxas swore that he was cursing our names as we left. So, seems like my Aspis mate can talk to Earth cats, alien cats, and floating octopi with no issues whatsoever. *Stupid wise sage asshole.*

Every time I convince myself that I’ve seen the weirdest parts of the Noctuida, it gets weirder.

“You accuse me of lies, *female?*” Abraxas growls out, standing and turning to face me. He cups my head between his hands and leans down, putting our foreheads together. “I would rather go to the dirt than tell you an untruth.”

“And I have no such qualms.” Hyt sashays past me, tails drifting over my skin. He takes a provocative seat on the edge of my bed, using his hand to flick open the button on his too-tight jeans.

Being pregnant hasn't changed my libido much. Mostly, it's enhanced it. But I have been getting more uncomfortable lately. My mates have been nothing if not respectful.

Tonight is no exception.

Abraxas helps me out of my clothes, and Hyt pats the bed to encourage me to lie down.

“We will take our nocturnal rests on the floor,” Rurik declares nobly. It's only practical. I'm not even sure that Abraxas could fit on the bed if he tried. He might *look* like a human, but he's still an Aspis. He occupies the same amount of space as always—which is probably why he just knocked my laptop onto the ground with a resounding crack.

“Maybe ...” I begin, snatching my comforter off the bed and bundling it up in my arms. “We *all* sleep on the floor together.”

I toss the blanket down, but Hyt grabs me and pulls me gently onto the mattress.

“I am not letting my pregnant mate sleep on the floor,” he says, and I glare at him.

“When you were pregnant, I didn't give you any special treatment.” I do my best to protest, but now that I'm lying down ... I should probably put pajamas on, but my lids are so heavy. And I'm so emotionally exhausted. It has been a *long* fucking day.

I watch through half-lidded eyes as Hyt strips his clothes and Abraxas does the same. It's only a surprise when Rurik gets naked and joins me on the bed.

“Sleep, Earthling. Next time I get pregnant, I'll let you spoil me. I promise.” Hyt presses a suction cup to my mouth, leaving sweet, hot pheromone oil on my lips, and I somehow find myself pulling him down on the bed with me.

I make love to all three of my mates and then fall asleep before I remember that we should probably put some damn clothes on.



In the morning, Abraxas wakes me with a growl.

“There are new humans in this dwelling, and they are coming. Quickly.”

I scramble out of bed looking for clothes, but it’s too late.

My eldest sister, Jenna, flings open the door and finds me standing there. Nude. Pregnant. Three naked men with the builds of Adonis on my bed and on the floor. I’d almost forgotten that she knows how to pick locks.

“Aw, fuck,” I groan, but my sister just tears up and hugs me anyway.

“I love you, Eve,” she whispers, and, even though it’s awkward as hell, I hug her back.

“I love you, too, Jenna.”

She draws away from me and then wrinkles her nose, turning sharply toward the door. She doesn’t say anything, but I’m sure she can smell the pheromones in this room. I know I can. I also know that I’m the only person who finds the scent enticing.

“Come downstairs,” Jenna commands, resuming her big sister role in an instant. Also, please remember: she’s a *lawyer*. Too bad there aren’t any Mollusca around here, eh? I’m kidding, of course. “But put some clothes on first. I don’t want Maribel and Kari to suffer like I’ve suffered.”

Jenna leaves, closing the door behind her.

“Next time I ask to visit Earth,” I tell the guys before turning around. “Tell me no.”

“As if that has ever worked on you before, my queen,” Rurik replies, bare chested and regal as he lounges nude on my bed. Abraxas howls with inhuman laughter, cracking the glass of my window. It’s Hyt who stands up to cup a hand around my ear and whisper.

“Just think: as soon as the baby’s born, we get to visit Yaoh and do this song and dance all over again.” He turns away from me before I can respond, collecting my clothes and handing them over to me with invisible tentacle tails.

It’s the first time I’ve heard him mention his family or any desire to visit them—not including Kayla, of course. We see her whenever we can.

With a smile, I take my clothes into the bathroom, start the shower, and prepare myself for six more days of interrogations, mishaps, and misunderstandings. But as someone who never thought she’d see her planet or her family ever again? I am mighty happy to be here.

Mostly, I’m happy to share the place I love with the people—and aliens—that I love the most.

Even if three days later we run into my cheating ex at a park and he somehow mysteriously disappears.

Pretty sure that Abraxas ate him.

I decide it’s better if I don’t ask.



Abraxas

Three Earth Months Later ...

Location: Jungryuk

My sweet, precious female is lying on her back in the nest of furs, tucked safely into the corner of the birthing den. In either hand, she holds onto the Sucker Tail's tentacles, her arm muscles bulging as she tugs on them with all of her small, human strength.

"Oh, fuck," she groans, collapsing into the nest and panting. Sweat slicks her beautiful pink-tinged skin as she glares at me, stray strands of her hair stuck to her delicate face. *Ah, that hair, like embers in dirt.* It is both red and brown at the same time, fine filaments that resemble the silk of a forest spinner.

"Why do you always ask for mating at such strange times?" I growl at her, genuinely confused.

"I'm ... I wasn't!" she shouts back at me, releasing a healthy dose of anger my way. This is undoubtedly my fault for having seeded her. I ignore both the World Eater and the Sucker Tail as they do their best to comfort her from the head of the nest. We share a mate. We will share this child. But at this moment, I have only one concern.

I run my tongue down the length of Eve's thigh to taste her sweat and her pheromones. I must gauge which part of the birthing process she is in, so that my mother and I can best determine how to proceed. Her breath hitches oddly, and I

know that it is time. I turn my head to my mother, inclining my chin in permission for her to touch my mate.

Without my consent, she wouldn't dare. Mother, she may be, but we are both Aspis and the duty of an Aspis male is to protect his mate at all costs. If my mother threatened Eve in any way, I would have to fight her to the death. It will not come to that, but we observe the habits of our people to prevent even the smallest seed of misunderstanding.

"I will touch you now, Son's Mate," my mother says gently, her horns pulsing red with the lifeblood of Jungryuk. My dam has been blessed with what we call all-world pheromones. There is not an Aspis alive who does not like the smell of them; they are soothing and relaxing to any who come in contact.

"Okay." Eve's voice is thick with stress, tinged with fear, edged in pain. It breaks my heart to see her in this state. *I warned her away from my mating rod*, I think with a suppressed chuckle. There will be time to laugh later, after our daughter is born.

My mother steps between Eve's legs, using her secondary hands to brush pheromones over my female's delicate flesh. On her swollen belly. Down both arms. On the moist skin of her thighs. It is not a sexual act, but it makes me uncomfortable, and I find myself shifting in agitation, my spines standing up, venom swelling.

"Calm yourself, my son." My mother snaps her teeth at me before returning her focus to the birth of my child. I watch Eve carefully, recognizing the instant signs of relaxation in her body, in the strain of her muscles, in the expression on her face. She exhales, and her small form goes limp in the nest of furs.

The World Eater strokes her hair back with pale fingers while the Sucker Tail allows her to maintain her grip on his tails. She's no longer tugging on them with strain, but she keeps a tight hold on them anyway. I am glad the other males are bringing her peace.

“What ... do ...” Eve takes several deep breaths and closes her eyes. “What do I do now?” Her voice is a whisper.

My mother examines the birthing canal, her focus on the mother and child and nothing else. She does not fuss over the presence of the other males even if the sight of a World Eater in an Aspis birthing den is quite strange. The Sucker Tail ... he is well-known amongst the Aspis, and well-liked for his efforts in eradicating the slavers. Not a soul would complain that he is here.

Mother rubs Eve’s belly with her secondary hands, liberally applying her pheromones.

“We should be on *The Korol* with a medical team,” Rurik breathes, voice strained with fear for our mate. I do not take offense at his words. He is an ignorant star-traveler. Star-travelers do not know how to be happy with what they have. They do not understand that joy comes with peace, food, and safety. They are always seeking more and so they are blinded to the most obvious of things.

We will not birth our child in a sterile metal box floating amongst the stars.

We do it here, where we can connect with the dirt and the life that is all around us.

“Quiet or I will eat you,” I tell him, but that is not true. I have not felt the urge to eat either him or the Sucker Tail for some time. Practical, yes, since Eve cannot live without them. But it is more than that. I have seen how they care for our mate, and I respect actions over flowery words.

My violent instincts remain silent, subdued. There is a time and place to hunt and kill, and this is not that. Even my feral blood understands such a simple concept.

“You’ve got this, Earthling,” Hyt tells her, tentacles wrapping her naked upper body. “You’re almost there.”

Eve opens her eyes, and her gaze finds mine.

As always, the sight of her touches a soft, quiet space inside of me that is reserved solely for my female.

“Ready yourself,” my mother says, moving aside so that I may assume her spot between my mate’s thighs. She guides my hands to the proper place before returning her attention to Eve. “Take a long breath, and then give a final push. Do not strain yourself.”

It takes a few moments for Eve to collect herself, but she does, keeping her focus on my face. When she pushes, there is a brief space of silence, and then my child is emerging into my hands. I draw the baby out smoothly, using my tongue to clean her.

“For the afterbirth,” Hyt says softly, using one of his tentacles to hand my mother a container. Ah. Yes. We are going to take this to Yaoh to observe the traditions of the Falopex. I do not pay much attention to that, looking down at the small, helpless creature in my palms.

It opens its human mouth and screams, causing my own mouth to split into a wild grin. The louder the child, the better. Loud children are healthy children. This one wails, bubbles slipping past her tiny pink lips.

Just as I knew, the child is a girl. I did not need alien technology to tell me that.

“Our daughter,” I tell Eve and the others, placing the baby onto my mate’s chest. “Delivered bloody into my hands, just as I promised.”

“Just as you promised,” Eve chokes out as the four of us observe the creature we have made together.

Beautiful. She is beautiful.

I am aware of my mother exiting the birthing den. We will see her again in a few days, but for now, our only duty is to rest and bond with our child. I have hunted enough food to last us for several days.

Eve uses a finger to touch the baby’s tails. There are nine of them, but they are scaled in black, lined with spikes, tinted with red venom like a full-blooded Aspis child. Unlike an Aspis child, they are graced with sucker tips at the end of

each. One of the tails curls around Eve's finger as Rurik reaches out to lay a hand on the baby's soft head.

"Oh, Dead Kings ..." Hyt whispers, his tentacle tails brushing all over the child's body. "I'm in love already."

The king, he has tears of blood on his face that he swipes away with his arm.

"Are you certain of the name?" Rurik asks softly, as I curl around my mate and child. By necessity, the other males are wrapped in the curve of my much larger form as well.

"Kya," Eve says firmly, looking over at Hyt. The pair of them lock eyes, and I know that this name has a special meaning to him as well. "I already asked your sister, so ..."

"Kya it is then." Hyt tosses his hat away and relaxes into the warmth of the nest. It takes Rurik longer to do so, as if he isn't sure that he deserves to be here. *No, as if he had simply come to the conclusion that we would not be.*

"Relax," I command, using my tail to nudge him closer to our mate. He does not fight me, lying on his side with his shirtless body pressed to the length of Eve's naked one.

There is peace inside the birthing den for some time, sunlight filtering in through the moss curtains, the fungi on the ceiling glowing with the borrowed energy. Dust motes and pollen drift through the air as we listen to the quieted breathing of the baby, the distant song of the sea, and the ever present calls of the jungle.

"Rurik's hair," Eve says after a while, pointing at the white tuft of fur on the child's skull. "His ears." She traces the points of them before brushing a finger over the baby's antennae. "From the neck up, she's Vestalis." My mate laughs softly at that. "Even the eyes ..." When the baby cracks them open to stare up at us, they are as black and endless as the night.

The child opens her mouth and a single bubble comes out, spiraling off her purple tongue.

"Nine tails like a Falopex," Hyt observes, counting them and then using one of his own tentacles to check the baby's leg. "Gills on her calves. Suction cups. We won't know until

she hits puberty if she'll have a pearl or not." He exhales and relaxes slightly. "Or anything else for that matter."

Likely, he is wondering about the Aspis mate marks. I do not need to look. I can already smell that the child will have them. The scent of her venom is strong.

"Aspis scales," Eve says, playing with one of the tails. "Spikes." She pokes her fingertip against one to test its sharpness. When she lifts our daughter's tiny fist up for examination, I can see the slight protrusion of her claws on her small knuckles. "Wolverine claws." Another laugh, as my translator struggles to interpret her words.

"The word 'wolverine' may refer to one or more of the following meanings. Definition one, noun: a small, carnivorous Earth mammal. Definition two, noun: the fur of such an animal. Definition three, noun: a native or resident of the Earth locale known as Michigan. Definition four, noun: a contemporary pop culture character in Earth lore."

I am no closer to understanding the jest, so I make a small correction.

"The claws of an Aspis," I say, nuzzling the side of Eve's face. Hyt makes a sound as I bump him on my way in, but he doesn't move. He is simply adapting to his new lifestyle, as we all must. None of us are willing to be parted from our mate, so we accept behavior or closeness that we otherwise might not.

"Kya, you look an awful lot like a human," Eve whispers, giving her new baby a kiss.

"She looks an awful lot like a princess," Rurik says with a smile, brushing his hand over his child's hair.

The four of us settle into this quiet place, and we exist simply, quietly, happily.

As I said, there is little need to ask why.

The true beauty of joy is found in the present, in the brevity of each passing moment.



Many days later, when Eve feels well enough to stand and move around the birthing den, we prepare ourselves to descend to the ground outside.

“How is it that you always know everything before it happens?” Eve asks, slipping her feet into soft leather boots that she brought from that horrid star-vessel. *I do not care if it likes us; I wish for its untimely demise.* If I were able to do so, I would eat *The Korol*. “Like, about Kya being a girl. Or about Jungryuk resisting the blood lace from the ship. No matter what it is, you always seem to have the answer.”

“My judgment is sound, but I am not infallible,” I tell her, my gaze shifting to one side as I watch Hyt hold the baby to his chest, strapping her tightly against him with his tentacles. His eyes are closed, a smile on his face, head tilted back as he rests in the nest with our daughter and waits for Eve to prepare herself. “If I were, I would not have gone out to hunt and left you to be kidnapped by a World Eater. I am a living creature. I am imperfect, and I make mistakes.”

“I thought you said you were always right?” Eve teases, adjusting her foot inside the shoe as I resist the urge to question her choice of clothing. Not that I care about the particular cloth pieces that she is wearing, only that I am confused why she is wearing any at all. But if it makes her happy, then I will not remark on it. Not right now.

My female gave birth to my child, and I will honor her by keeping such thoughts to myself.

“You truly believe that we can have more children like this?” Rurik asks me, sitting on the bench beside the den’s exit. He is fully dressed as well, hands on his thighs, wings spread slightly behind him. I am sad that my daughter does not have *Aspis* wings; it is truly a joy to fly. But perhaps she will develop *Vestalis* wings later? It is possible. “Even the *Cartian* tech does not have an answer to that question.”

“My venom has protected my mate’s eggs from your conquest,” I repeat, unsure why Eve, Rurik, and Hyt do not or will not believe me the first, second, or even tenth time that I say something. I believe there is a communication barrier.

I stalk forward as Rurik looks up, but he does not flee from me. He has no need to. I will protect him as if he were also my mate. With my secondary hand—*wing-hand* as Eve refers to it—I reach out and tap a single finger beneath the king’s ear. His lips part in surprise.

“What in the Stars ...?” he asks, but I don’t bother to respond. He will not understand me. Instead, I grin at him and move past the white bench with the orange star flowers. My feet crush over one as I walk, and the air is perfumed with its joyous scent.

The Falopex opens his eyes to look up at me as I straddle him in the nest, reaching down with my wing-hand to do the same to him. I disable his translator as he blinks up at me, remaining where he is with our baby on his bare chest.

“Tired of listening to us all chatter?” he asks in a playful voice. “Me, too.” His skin morphs from the color of a pink crawler to that of a wild blue dog. I snort and the baby shifts at my nearness. Before I turn away, I lick her sweet head with my tongue, and then I turn around to find Eve waiting for me.

I may prefer her naked, but she is very pretty in the white dress she wears. It looks as if a flower is blooming from her hips. Real flowers are woven into her silky human hair, and her lips are twisted in a teasing smile.

“You know, since I only met your mom when I was in the middle of giving birth, it’d be nice if I could actually have a conversation with her.”

I reach up to tap at my own translator, shutting it off.

“My mother will know everything you need to say through your actions and your smile.” I grin and reach beneath my mate’s ear, disabling her alien tech before I dig my fingers into her hair and draw her close.

Our eyes meet, and I tell her all that I want to tell her with a single look. Her lids slide shut, and she parts her lips to let me in. We kiss slowly, a languorous joining of mouths. That is how a mated pair should interact with one another, as if each touch, each word, each action they share is the most important thing in existence. When we go to the dirt, we say goodbye to all the things we take for granted. It is important to remember that even the everyday is special, temporary, and worth treasuring.

Hyt joins us, handing our child over to Eve. I collect my mate in my tail and slink over the white bench and into the hole in the floor, scrambling down the side of a massive tree with my claws and managing not to wake the baby as I go.

With Rurik wrapped in his tentacles, Hyt descends the tree behind us, using the limbs to climb his way down. We make our way wordlessly through the woods to the beach where both my sire and my dam wait to greet us. They lounge in the sun on the black sand, tails swaying as we approach.

From the woods around us, more Aspis emerge, come to acknowledge the birth of a new child and pay their respects.

“Hello, my son,” my mother says, standing up and moving over to headbutt me. My father does the same, and the pair of them gaze down at the baby in my mate’s arms. They say nothing more; there is no need to. All that needs to be said I can find in their body language, in their expressions, in their scents.

Freshly hunted game is presented to us, along with trinkets found on hunts or stolen from dead slavers. A pile of fruit and a stack of furs joins the offerings, and then the other Aspis slowly drift away from the beach. My parents are the last to go, but we will see them again soon at the seasonal solstice gathering. It will not be a long parting.

Alone once again, the five of us sit on the beach with fruit and fresh game, watching one of the suns set against the sea. The tide begins to reveal its layered secrets as Eve finishes feeding the baby and passes her over to Rurik to hold.

Without a word, my mate stands up, and perhaps finally realizing the silliness of her garments, she dumps them on the sand. Holding out a hand to the Falopex, she encourages him to rise from his spot so that he can kiss her. I sense their shared life force shifting from him to her. When he steps back to rid himself of his own garments, Eve looks back at me and smiles.

I incline my head at her, promising to protect both our child and her mate. She need fear nothing so long as I am around. I watch as she takes the Falopex's hand and the pair of them disappear into the water together.

When I turn my head to observe the Vestalis, he has his eyes closed, a smile on his face and a nest of warm blood lace wrapped tightly around our daughter. I rest my head on my folded arms, lay my body out across sun-heated sand, and I take a nap.

As promised, it is me, my mate, and our child here on Jungryuk.

I knew I picked the right female. That is my final thought before a warm blanket of sleep overtakes me.



Eve's POV (Just Me for the Rest of the Story, Sorry)

Seven Weeks Later ...

Location: Dome

Dome is lovely this time of year. Now, I'm not sure what time of year that is, exactly. Could be spring. Could be summer. Might be a season I've never heard of before. Doesn't matter.

I'm sitting in a high-backed chair on a balcony, an alien radio playing the most random assortment of music I've ever heard in my life. First, there was a Falopex song that called to mind the image of a lost and beautiful siren, singing sailors to their deaths on wave-drenched rocks. Next, it was a Vestalis tune, one that was operatic and pompous, with a full orchestra-

ish backdrop. I can't even put words to the third song I heard today. It was ... unique. Let's leave it at that.

My baby is wrapped in my arms as I gaze out at the sleepy town with its bloodred canals, cobbled streets, and hyper-intelligent feline occupants. Two-Face is sitting on the railing, tail wrapped around her legs, green eyes fixed on the ethereal majesty of the Cosmic Chapel. I have no idea how the cat found her way back here from Jungryuk. When we landed last week, she was simply waiting for us.

"You have tamed The Korol, as I knew you would," is all that she said. Hasn't spoken to me again since. Seems to have no trouble talking to Abraxas though.

Kya's tiny tails peep out of her blankets, wrapping around one of my fingers. Her suction cups drip red venom, but it doesn't affect me or her dads. Everyone else has to be careful with her though. If she pierces their skin with one of the spines on her tails ... ehh. The outcome would not be good.

Brot and Connor are sitting on a love seat to my right, both of them watching me as they hold hands and enjoy the balmy twilight alongside me and my mates.

"Do you wish for a child yourselves?" Rurik asks, stirring a cup of tea with a spoon. He sets it aside and then lifts both the cup and saucer, so that he can settle more comfortably into his own chair. It's similar to mine, gold filigreed edges, red cushions, a high back that makes it look like a throne.

We're staying in the same room that we stayed in during our honeymoon, but somehow, we never did find our way out to this balcony. *Probably because we were being followed by a horde of moth drones.* I smile as I give one of Kya's tails a gentle yank, and she coos in response. Eventually, I'm going to take her home to visit my family, but ... I have to wait until she isn't poisonous. Sorry, until she isn't *venomous*. Could be years before that happens.

I just don't think I'll be able to explain to my parents why they can't hold their new grandchild.

“A child?” Brot says, blinking wildly at his brother. He reaches up a hand to rub his fingers against the black mark on his chin, the one that looks like a goatee. I struggle to this day to understand how Connor finds him sexually attractive. But hey, to each their own. I fuck aliens, too, you know. “Stars, no. I am grateful to have a male mate, so that we cannot breed.”

“Could we adopt a kid?” Connor wonders aloud, sipping an alcoholic beverage with a dead alien bee trapped inside the ice cube. “Is that a thing here? If it’s not, it should be. I’d want to adopt an older child though. Most babies are ugly.”

Abraxas turns and snaps his jaws in Connor’s direction, and the man recoils.

“If I were you, I’d walk that statement back very quickly,” Hyt says, but even though he’s polishing one of his guns, he stays blue. An obvious joke. To him, that is. Maybe not to Abraxas.

“I didn’t say that *your* baby was ugly,” Connor retorts, setting his drink down on the coffee table. “Just that *most* babies are ugly.”

“Majesties, shall I remove the disrespectful human from your presence?” Zero asks, standing beside the door to the bedroom with her back to the wall, hands clasped together in front of her. If it weren’t for the red antennae ribbon in her hair, the flouncy red dress, or the nearly floor-length white hair, she’d look the part of a proper bodyguard. The stance is right. I tried to get her to come sit with us and eat something, but since she’s leaving soon to meet with the Cartian male from Affiance, she says she wants to do her job right while she’s still here.

I’m going to miss her. Avril, too. She has matches from the interstellar dating app to meet as well.

“Your Majesty, Lyubim has arrived,” Avril announces, stepping out of the bedroom with Rurik’s brother on her heels. She places a fresh plate of macarons on the table and offers the princeling a seat.

Abraxas grumbles and rises to his feet, flowing like ink to surround the chair I'm sitting in with our daughter. He isn't a fan of anyone other than myself or my mates holding our baby. I don't blame him. She *is* the first Vestalis female to ever be born. She's also a princess with two possible future kingdoms. There's no telling who might come after her.

I lift her up and hold her against my chest, her blankets falling to my lap by accident. I smile at Rurik's brother, Lyubim, as he gets his first look at her. We've been entertaining visits from princelings for *days* now. I've met maybe ... thirty or forty of them by this point.

"She is beautiful," Lyubim tells Rurik, and he preens. He might not care to admit it, but he likes having his brothers around. "Mother and Father, had they not been the leaders of the Imperial Court, would've warmed to her eventually. I truly believe that."

Rurik looks down at his teacup, but he says nothing.

While I'm not sure that I agree with Lyubim—he didn't have to see the viciousness with which his parents came at us—I won't do anything to spoil the illusion. Much as he knows their deaths were a necessity, Rurik struggles with the loss of his parents at times. Even more so lately since we just found out that it was the queen herself who spread the news that I'd gone missing.

If she hadn't done that, we might've been able to resolve things quietly. I guess I was right when I suspected that she didn't like me. In the end, it was more important to her that I be punished. Some part of me wonders if it was only the king who was desperate to get off the throne, if maybe she liked the power that came with it.

When it's time to put Kya down for a nap, I retreat into the room I shared with Rurik once upon a time. My blood lace robe trails on the floor behind me as I pad barefoot up to the side of the crib. It's tucked up against one side of the bed, swathed in Jungryukian furs and silk blankets.

Hyt follows me in, using a tentacle to pop a macaron into my mouth as he passes by.

“Have a cookie,” he tells me as he opens the armoire and stores the Atratan gun in its depths. “You didn’t eat much today.”

“I ate plenty,” I mumble around the macaron, smiling wryly as I tuck Kya into her blankets and Abraxas hovers over my shoulder. He reaches out with his tail and gently uses the tip to draw a soft pelt over her human legs and toes. I’m proud to have contributed something to the mix.

With Kya settled, I grab the macaron in my fingers and take a bite. I expect an unusual flavor, something like *day trips to the beach* or *winter nights with a good book*. But it’s just blueberry. Bummer. I eat it anyway, turning around to find myself in the shadowed coil of Abraxas’ body. His markings flare with light and then dim, staying dark in an effort not to wake the baby.

We haven’t had sex since the birth; I wasn’t ready.

Pretty sure ... I’m ready now.

I look over to find Rurik digging through a wardrobe and Hyt leaning casually against the wall like he suspects where it is that my mind has wandered.

“Feeling frisky, little human woman?” he asks me slyly, offering a wink to punctuate his words.

“You know that she is,” Abraxas growls out, stalking a circle around me as I move away from the crib. My skin prickles with goose bumps and my lips part as I clench my thighs. “We can all smell you, female.”

“I—” But what can I say to that? He’s right. My gaze shifts over to Rurik as he draws out several silk robes. We’ve all taken to wearing them: me, him, Hyt. Abraxas won’t wear anything ever which is totally fine by me. Once an A.S.S. always an A.S.S. “How do we ...?”

I don’t quite finish my sentence. How do we get privacy when we have a baby to take care of? I suppose one of the guys could step out with her, but ... that doesn’t feel right.

“She’s an infant,” Hyt offers, pushing up from the wall to walk over to me. He stands directly in front of me, his lean

body on display. I notice it in a way I haven't noticed it for weeks. Holy hell, the man is a vision. Abraxas slithers up behind me, his huge dark form curling over me from behind, just a lick of shadow in the twilit Dome afternoon. "She won't notice."

"Or," Rurik offers, moving over to us and tossing a robe to Hyt and then one to me. "We could let Zero watch over her while she sleeps." He meets my eyes, and in his gaze, I see all the wonder associated with his freedom and his life. *You are my world*, he tells me, and then his gaze shifts to Kya, his pale fingers reaching out to rest on the edge of the crib. "We have not spent a moment apart since she was born. We can spare one now."

I nod, swallowing down a lump of sudden need. Like, I don't want this robe. I just want to be naked with my mates. But ... we can take the robes with us to wear after.

Rurik fetches Zero who takes a spot on the bed, sitting beside the crib to watch the baby sleep.

As for us, we find ourselves another bedroom in the vast estate to borrow for the time being.

"Crank some music," I tell Hyt as the door swishes shut behind us. Rurik is already reaching up to unbutton his jacket while ... yeah, Abraxas already has his dicks out. Both of them. That quick.

"Music on," Hyt says, making me wonder why I'm still so damn Stone Age. It's not like we don't have voice activated shit back on Earth.

As a new song starts up, I turn my back coquettishly to the males and throw a sexy glance over my shoulder.

"Somebody untie me?" I tease, pointing at the numerous ties on my dress.

Rurik's fingers are at the small of my back before I can even finish the question. Abraxas sprawls out across the bed to watch and Hyt shucks his loincloth and boots.

That's when something occurs to me, and I frown.

“Stop,” I say, holding up a hand and listening carefully to the song that’s coming from the speakers.

No.

No, please.

Tell me it isn’t true.

“Are you alright, my queen?” Rurik murmurs, but I’m not. I jerk away from him, whirling around with true fear in my eyes, sweaty palms. Hyt’s tentacles drip water as he prepares for battle. Abraxas growls, spines rising along the sinuous length of his back.

“What song is this?” I choke out, and Hyt cocks his head to one side.

“Identify song,” he commands, and I hear a mechanical voice take the place of the music for a moment.

“The song that is currently playing is titled ‘Sexy Alien Kitty’ by Tabbi Kat, a human artist established in—”

I’m laughing so hard that I fall to the ground in a puddle of skirts, howling as I clamp my hands over my mouth.

Oh my.

No matter where I go, how far I run, I cannot escape that bitch’s music. We haven’t seen hide nor hair of Tabbi Kat since she escaped the Collector’s compound on Jungryuk. And trust me: we’ve had soldiers looking for her.

I had no idea that she’d begun to establish a music career out here in the Noctuida.

“Are you alright, my love?” Rurik asks, squatting down beside me, but I’m laughing too hard to respond to him. Abraxas calms himself, spines lying flat. Hyt steps into the bathroom to release the water that he’d drawn from the atmosphere.

“I’m more than okay,” I tell him as Hyt returns to stand beside us, my gaze slipping from Abraxas on the bed to the two men at my side. “Trust me: I’m *wonderful*. I am fucking wonderful.” Good for you, Tabitha. Kill it, girl. “But can you

please change the song and block the app from ever playing her music again?”

I’m wonderful, but Tabbi’s music ... it still sucks.



Three Weeks Later ...

Location: Yaoh

Gross as it sounds, I’ve got my own afterbirth in some special alien tech container clutched in my hands. I’m wading into the water outside of Hyt’s house—our house—on Yaoh, and then I’m dipping beneath the waves with the help of the pearl.

“Here,” Hyt tells me, pointing to a spot in the sand beside a thick cluster of kelp-ish plants. Just ish. Definitely just ish. “This is a prime spot for Shitheads.”

His companion swims in circles around us, trilling in agreement. Hey, I’m the alien here. If Hyt says this is the right spot to catch a Shithead’s egg then I am all in. Kya burbles in her spot against Hyt’s chest, completely fine with being submerged underwater. Hyt never worried about it. He said if she had gills, she could breathe, and he was right.

I scan my thumb on the biometrics lock that keeps the container closed, and it hisses, releasing bubbles into the water as the lid unseals. The contents are still, um, fresh. I’m not even going to lie to you: it’s absolutely disgusting. Like, it’s totally okay to want kids and like kids and all that, but don’t pretend like childbirth is cute and flowery and sweet. It’s nasty, and I haven’t decided if I ever want to do it again.

As per Hyt’s instructions, I unload the goop onto the ocean floor, and we beat a hasty retreat.

“If we linger too long, there won’t be an egg,” he tells me, and maybe he’s thinking about his sister, Nya, who doesn’t have a Shithead of her own.

“Is it done?” Rurik asks, adorably concerned for his daughter as he checks her wet face with a soft brush of knuckles. Abraxas isn’t worried whatsoever, lounging on the grassy area just past the edge of the sand and yawning so wide that it looks like he could easily swallow one of those dolphinish creatures I keep seeing.

“It’s done,” Hyt declares, passing our baby over to Rurik. He plants his hands on his hips, rubbing at his chin with a tentacle. “All that’s left to do now is wait.” His mouth twitches strangely and he turns blue. “Oh, and also to visit my family. I couldn’t *possibly* forget about that.”

His teeth are gritted, and he flashes from blue to pink and then back to blue. A lie. He *could* possibly forget about visiting his family.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask him, putting my arms around his waist and resting my cheek against his taut abs. “It’s not too late to jet out of here, and then eat the planet with *The Korol*. The ship loves us; it’ll go to battle with the World Station if we buy it some nice chocolates and a bouquet of flowers.”

I’m joking, of course. We don’t even have to be nice to *The Korol*. It simps for us so hard that I’ve labeled it a Stan for our harem, and Abraxas regularly abuses it verbally. Also, he pisses on it alot. Hyt ignores it, and Rurik maintains a cool professionalism. I’ve taken to chatting with the damn thing, but I can’t lie that I find it any less unsettling than I did before.

“I want to do this,” Hyt declares, but he’s still blue. I pull back to give him a look, and he sighs, reaching up to adjust his purple cowboy hat. I told him how much I liked the color on him before, and he remembered. Bought a new one to replace the one that was burned. “I need to do this.” *Pink*.

“Then let’s do it,” I tell him and off we go.

Hyt, Rurik, Kya, and I take the Cartian bike. It’s a tight fit, but Hyt’s tentacles keep us all strapped comfortably in place. Abraxas ... he slips through the water like the Loch Ness fucking Monster, following us to the island where Hyt’s parents’ house sits, looking the same as it always has.

Kayla is waiting for us, sitting on the sand beside her hoverboard. She's been spending most of her time on Jungryuk, working with the stolen human women, and assisting the new Jungryukian officer—Bram. Yep. She's working with her ex-boyfriend, and I smell a love/hate relationship brewing. Hopefully she isn't as dumb as Jane and just admits that she's into the guy *before* having a baby with him.

"I can't believe you guys convinced me to come back here for this," Kayla murmurs, shoving up to her feet and coming over to give both me and Hyt hugs. She offers Kya a loving kiss on the forehead, her eyes blurring with tears for a minute before she swipes them away with her fingers. I still don't know the full story of what happened to her sister, but maybe one day. I'm not going to press for it.

Kayla bows for Rurik, waves at Abraxas. If I said my Aspis mate wasn't pissing on a tree, I'd be lying. Hey, it's in his nature, and who am I to complain? It's kind of ... hot? The whole *me mark things, this mine* beastman attitude. I'm into it.

"Oh, come on," Hyt teases, poking his sister with a tentacle. "You love drama. Don't lie."

"Hey, before you—" Kayla starts, but it's too late. Pretty sure she was going to warn us about the person approaching from the front door.

It's fucking Minae.

Hyt tenses up, his tentacles sweeping around my legs and arms, clinging to me.

"Shall I eat her?" Abraxas asks, creeping up on us.

"Is that your solution to everything?" Rurik asks briskly, giving the Aspis a passing once-over. "We could transport her to a spot between two colliding galaxies and allow her to experience galactic cannibalism. That might be a more fitting end."

"Unnecessarily complicated," Abraxas drawls, putting himself between us and Minae. He curls the edge of his lip at her. "State your intent, Falopex."

“Hey, dude, it’s okay. We’ve got this.” I offer Abraxas a gentle pat on the side, and he snarls, raising the fine hairs on my arms and on the back of my neck. Kya burbles happily in my arms, shifting contentedly in her sleep. Abraxas’ growls, his roars, they soothe her.

“As you wish, tiny female,” he murmurs unhappily, slinking away to piss on another tree.

“I’m sure you don’t want to see me,” Minae begins, and Hyt scoffs, adjusting his hat with a tentacle. Kayla stays right where she is, observing the interaction with wide eyes. Yep. The girl loves drama.

“You kidding? I’m thrilled.” He turns blue, crossing two tentacles over his chest like arms. “What do you want, Minae?”

“I ...” Her voice fades away with the breeze, her attention shifting to Rurik. “Your Majesty.” She offers a polite bow, but nothing more. The Falopex are bold with their dislike for the Imperial Court. Whatever. I consider it like a checks and balances sort of a deal. “Imperial Queen.” A slight dip of her chin in my direction.

Unlike Abraxas, Rurik makes no move to leave, standing on Hyt’s right in his usual attire: jacket, slacks, boots. They’re wet from the ride over, but I simply could not convince him to wear the Speedo that Hyt offered to him. Stubborn ass.

“Forgive me,” Minae says, eyes filling with tears. She clutches her pink hands together in front of her chest, dressed in ... absolutely nothing. *Don’t look at her folds*, I tell myself, but somehow my eyes drift down anyway. It’s just super hard not to stare at somebody’s junk when it’s all hanging out. “I never told the chief a thing, but you know I couldn’t disobey orders.”

“Why not? I do it all the time.” Hyt turns pink again, turning to me. “Come on. We’re here to show the baby off to my grandparents and my brothers. Maybe I’ll even let my mom hold her. But Minae? Nya? My father? Fuck no.”

“You were demoted, huh?” I ask, but I already know that she was. I heard about it from Kayla before we ever got here. Withholding what she knew from the chief cost Minae her job. She was, from what I’ve heard, basically equal with Nya as the chief’s second-in-command. And now? She’s a regular ol’ officer, on patrol on Yaoh which is basically the lowest of the low. The only position less prestigious is working on Jungryuk.

I can only imagine what Kayla’s ex-boyfriend, Bram, did to earn that post.

Anyway, to most Falopex, their job is the most important thing in their life. Minae lost everything because of this. Her dreams of being with Hyt are shattered; her career is destroyed. I thought I might’ve felt a twinge of sympathy for her before, but I definitely do now.

“I think you guys should forgive her,” Kayla says, and Hyt whips a look her way. “What? I’m just stating my opinion.”

“Go state your opinion to Mom and let her know we’re here. Go on now. Shoo.” Hyt flicks his tentacles in Kayla’s direction and she sighs, taking off barefoot across the sand. I catch sight of her flipping the bird over her shoulder and find myself smiling.

“I’m in agreement, by the way.” I turn to Hyt and Rurik, their gazes on mine. Surprise in the first, understanding in the second.

“Such a softhearted, kind little female,” Abraxas adds as he slips past us, exploring the island and looking for threats at the same time. I ignore him. I told you: I am *not* a nice person. That’s Jane. She’s the bleeding heart. I’m ... I’m just Eve Wakefield, a twenty-six-year-old caterer from Portland, Oregon. Becoming queen of the universe was sort of ... accidental.

“You want me to forgive her?” Hyt asks, perplexed, tentacles suctioning to my legs in distress. All six of his irises peer into both of mine. “Eve, I—”

“Not you. Me.” I point at myself. “Minae was your friend, and she let you down. But as far as I’m concerned, she put her career on the line to keep our secret. That’s worth something to me.” I turn back to Minae who’s staring like she has no idea what to make of me. “You were right. About everything. From the very beginning. I owe you an apology, and if you want ... we can start over and be friends now. I can’t make Hyt do the same, but at least with me, you’ve got a clean slate.” I hold out my hand for hers. “Start fresh?”

Her companion zips down from the trees, circling us as Shithead hisses in response and suctions himself to Kya’s fuzzy little head. Her feelers twitch, but she doesn’t stir. This kid is a champ, a far easier baby than the stories of me as an infant. My parents said they almost stopped there and never had Nate because I was so awful. Good to know.

Fucking Nate. I found a note in my shoe sometime after we left Earth. It said: *I know about the aliens.* I pretended not to have seen it so that Rurik wouldn’t beam my little brother up alongside Jane’s dad.

Minae takes my hand with one of hers—she’s dead serious about this—and gives it a good shake.

“Thank you, Eve,” she whispers, eyes drifting to Hyt. He doesn’t look at her, just wraps a tentacle around my waist and escorts me to the front of the house with Rurik beside us and Abraxas behind. I don’t see Minae again.

“You’re too good for your own good, you know what I mean?” Hyt tells me, spinning his hat with a tentacle as we approach the front door.

Flen, his brother/tailor, is waiting with a frown on his face, an item in a garment bag held up in one tentacle.

“Look what I found. Grandma Layna’s beautiful dress. It was lying in a crumpled heap on the beach the night of your wedding. Here. I fixed it for you.” He thrusts the garment bag out to me and then refocuses his attention on the baby as I gape at him. Hyt takes the dress for me, and we exchange a look. “Oh, I love her,” Flen breathes, peering down at her daughter.

We're joined by Mino next, and then Grandma Layna herself. Grandma G. Grandpa H.

"I told you he was destined for great things," Grandma Layna whispers as she leans in toward me, stroking my baby's head with gentle fingers and putting her lips near my ear. "My wonderful grandson, the man who united the Falopex and the Vestalis in marriage."

Hyt's family offers both Rurik and Abraxas a warm welcome, inviting them to the lounge pools, plying them with food and drink. Companions zip in the air around our heads, chittering and spraying bubbles.

When Hyt's mother, Anih, and his sister, Nya, join us later, they're reserved. Hyt is reserved. But nothing rude or inappropriate is said, and we end the night with Anih actually holding our child in her arms and smiling.

"Told you they weren't as bad as they first appeared," Kayla tells me with a grin. Some part of me is convinced that if she could, she'd transform herself into a Falopex in a second. No hesitation. I think she *wants* to be one of them, whether she'll admit it or not.

Chief Farin doesn't show up to our little homecoming party. I don't imagine anyone would want him around if he did. Whether Hyt will decide to pursue a relationship with his father in the future, I don't know. Don't care either. That man is lucky to be *alive* as far as I'm concerned.

Later that evening, we head back to our house and check the afterbirth that we left in the sea.

Lo and behold, there's a small, glowing Shithead egg waiting for us.



Four Earth Years Later ...

Final Destination: Jungryuk

Jungryuk only has one season: random, intermittent bursts of whatever weather it feels like. It's hard to say if it'll be cool one day, hot the next. It used to bother me, but I've grown to love its erratic and ever-changing nature.

Today is one of those days where I wonder why we've even left the house. Shit, it's one of those days where I wonder why we aren't on Dome. Or Yaoh. Or hell, I'd get back on *The Korol* just for the air conditioning.

Kya is sprinting through the cricket grass ahead of me, pretending to lope on all fours. She's not really built for it, but she's make-believe chasing a kiyo. Her faux roars are hilariously inaccurate, and I hold back a snort as Abraxas darts into the bushes and snuffs a real one out for her.

"You see, tiny daughter?" he snarls affectionately as she gapes at the galloping animal. If a horse and a deer had a baby with a pile of sticks, that'd be the kiyo. They're weird looking critters, that's for sure. "This is a kiyo. Do you wish to hunt one?" He licks her and she bats him away.

"No, I *am* kiyo," she says with a mischievous giggle, fluffing her nine black tails. They have suckers at the tip like Hyt, but the scales and spines of Abraxas. Her body is like mine, but from the neck up, she's all Rurik. Solid black eyes, a pair of antennae, white fluffy hair, vampire teeth. Still no wings though.

Jane's son struggles to keep up, his mohawk fluffed up into a mess by the humidity and the roughhousing. He and Kya play like they literally want to kill each other sometimes. Definitely not normal for human four-year-olds.

"Dude, our kids are *aliens*," I whisper to my friend, elbowing her gently in the side. She and I are both wearing robes, striding in the direction of the hot springs like we actually have somewhere to be today. In reality, we're just out for a walk for *fun*. Never thought I'd see the day. I blame Abraxas: he's spent years getting me to truly appreciate being outside.

"Dude, we have kids—period," Jane replies, and I snort. Yeah. Didn't see my life going in this direction. *Stupid fertile male aliens and their persuasive pheromones*. I give Rurik a side-eye, but he just smiles slyly at me, and I know he knows that I'm still smarting on the ass cheeks from the spankings he gave me last night.

I turn back to Jane, noticing the book tucked under her arm. The one thing we can both agree on: Earth has better books than the Noctuida. Humans are weird as fuck, and they write weird as fuck things. I swear that every Vestalin book is a fated mates romance on repeat. I am beyond bored with them, and so is Jane.

"Did you notice how hockey players are suddenly hot?" she asks me, and I laugh. "No, seriously, Eve. When I was on Earth, I only wanted to read alien romances. Now ... I only want to read about like firefighters and football players."

"Or how about you quit the smut altogether?" Kidd growls, coming up beside her and stealing her book from her hands. She gapes at him as he strides past, and then she picks up a rock to throw at his back. I won't tell you if they're together or if they're only friends who co-parent. Not my story to tell. Doesn't matter. Jane and I are here together; we're happy; we're safe.

That's what matters.

"I'd sooner never see him again than give up reading smut," Jane grumbles, and then she raises her voice, cupping a hand

around her mouth to yell. “Smut novels don’t care whether I have a copulatory plug or not!”

I roll my eyes and veer away from her, moving over to stand beside Hyt. He’s wearing his usual: loincloth, cowboy hat, way too many guns.

“I hope you’ve been digging through all of Abraxas’ hoard piles,” I tell him. Guess what’s also taken four years? As I said, my Aspis mate is a hoarder. No joke. He has more stuff stashed away here on Jungryuk than could fit on the entire fucking *Korol*. Not that the ship would mind. It now worships the ground we walk on—literally. It hums happily whenever we’re on board. Not sure how I feel about it, but we’re going to need that ship to fight the Atrata when the time comes. Unless ... I mean, we can at least give our daughter the option to rule both countries. Now that she’s been freed from a future of entrapment in the throne room, the idea is open.

Our betrothed princess. The Atrata’s betrothed prince. Met him once. He’s a cute little moth kiddo, but ... I just don’t know.

“Why? So we can blow *The Protivihn* out of the stars?” Hyt asks with a grin. That word—*The Protivihn*, the prah-ti-ven—is the name of the Atrata’s main ship. If we have to, that’s the one we’ll take to war. “Still sorting, but I haven’t seen anything yet. They say the Cartians had a weapon capable of neutralizing *The Korol* from the surface of a planet and *that* is why the Vestalis blew them up, not because of anything to do with the mate bond.”

“Nonsense,” Rurik says with a wave of his hand. “I doubt such a weapon exists. If it did, my parents would have wanted it for themselves. There is nothing like that on *The Korol*.”

“Weirder things have happened,” I tell him, shoving my robe over my shoulders to reveal the properly fitting bathing suit underneath. I pick up cute clothes from Earth every year when I visit my family. This black one-piece is my latest find.

Abraxas moves up behind me, our daughter clutched in his tail and *rawring* in imitation of her father. He presses a long, hot lick to the side of my face.

“Come,” he says, snatching me up in a wing-hand. He hands me my baby and gently sets us in the water, tossing in a handful of the soap flowers for us to wash with. He joins us. Hyt joins us. Rurik joins us.

Jane and Kidd and their son are situated on a blanket at the edge of the water, leaving us some space to be alone for a minute beneath the largest waterfall.

“Do you see this?” I tell Kya, putting one of the rainbow sponges into her hand. “We can eat these.” She immediately chucks it aside, and we all reach out to snatch her wrist so that she won’t be able to touch what she’s straining for. My pale hand, Hyt’s blue tentacle, Rurik’s even paler hand, Abraxas’ long dark fingers. “Don’t touch the pink caterpillar thing,” I warn Kya, giving her a look as I lean down and put our foreheads together.

She sighs but she listens to me, lying on her back to stare up at the cave ceiling above her. I join her. Kya’s fathers, my mates, they join us.

The waterfall provides a peaceful barrier between us and the rest of the Noctuida.

For now, we don’t worry about the Atrata or the future-possible-betrothal. There are no kings or queens or princesses on Jungryuk. It’s just our family, our friends, and an afternoon that is blissfully empty of duties.

And that’s the story of how I found my happily ever after in this vast and incredible universe.

Welcome to the stars; welcome to the Noctuida.

The End of Eve’s Story

[Want to see some NSFW Alien Art click here](#)

Author's Note

You did it! You survived the Noctuida in one piece (unlike the millipede queen).

I hope you enjoyed Eve's story. I know that I certainly did. I needed a break from writing the crazy intensity that was my *Lost Daughter of a Serial Killer* series, and I found respite here. I also realized that I am way more into tentacles than I thought I was. Ahem.

If you enjoyed this series, please consider writing a review or posting about it on TikTok, Instagram, or anywhere else that catches your social media fancy. If you didn't enjoy this series, please email all further inquiries to:

Eve Wakefield, Queen of the Universe

CC: Abraxas (murderous dragon), Hyt (outlaw cowboy), and Rurik (King of the Universe)

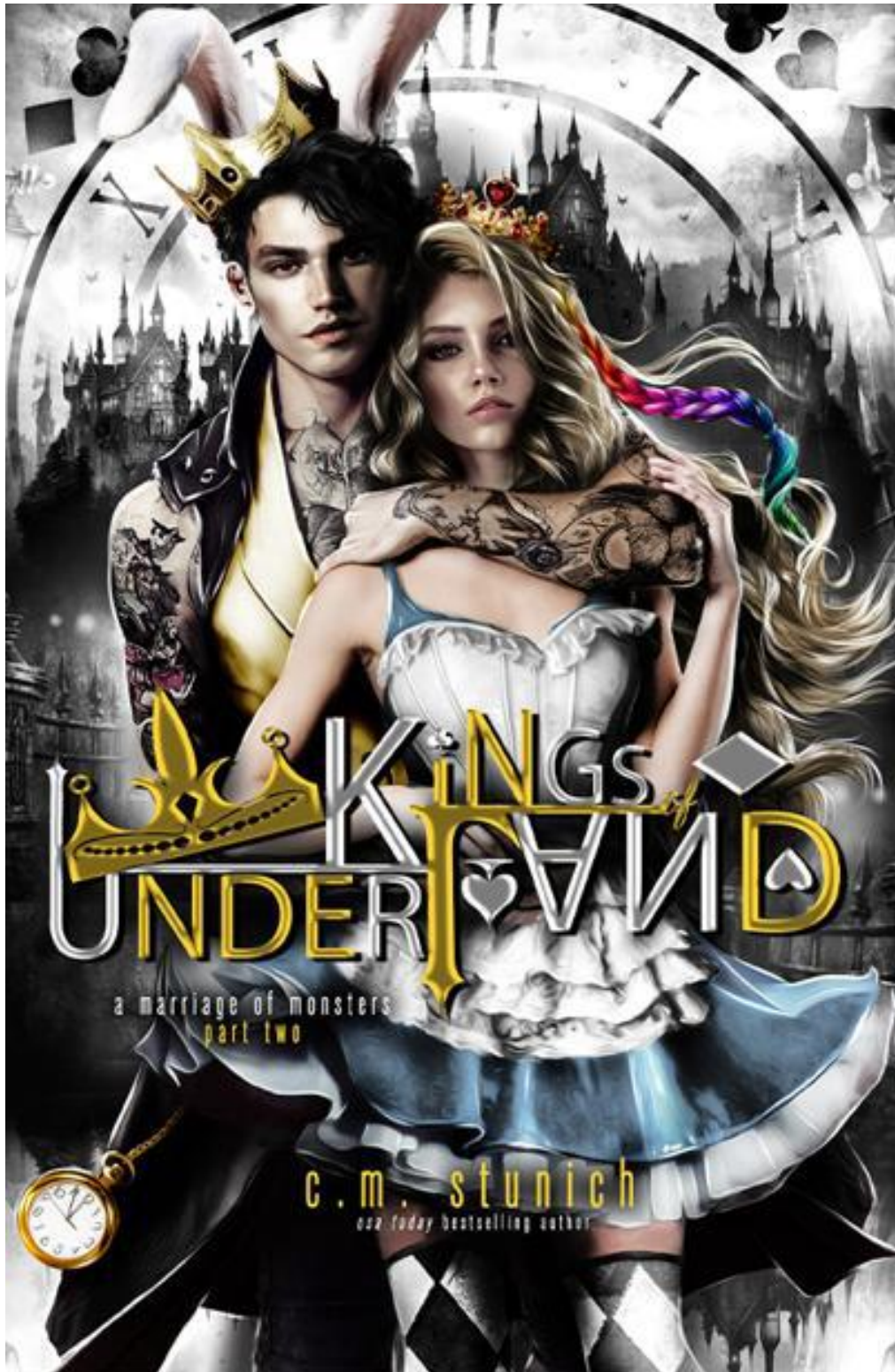
Stationed on The Korol (just a reminder that this ship eats planets).

They'll get back to you promptly (or, again, possibly eat your planet).

I have stories plotted out for all the female characters (Jane, Avril, Zero, Kayla, Tabbi Kat and, two decades later, even Kya). I can't say if I'll get the time to write them; it depends partly on reader interest. If you'd like to see more stories in this universe, feel free to message me, tag me, stitch a video on BookTok, etc. Tell me which side character you're most interested in!

Thank you again for picking up Eve's book and visiting the Noct with me. Happy reading, and I hope you have a beautiful day today, one that is filled with creativity and love and tentacles.

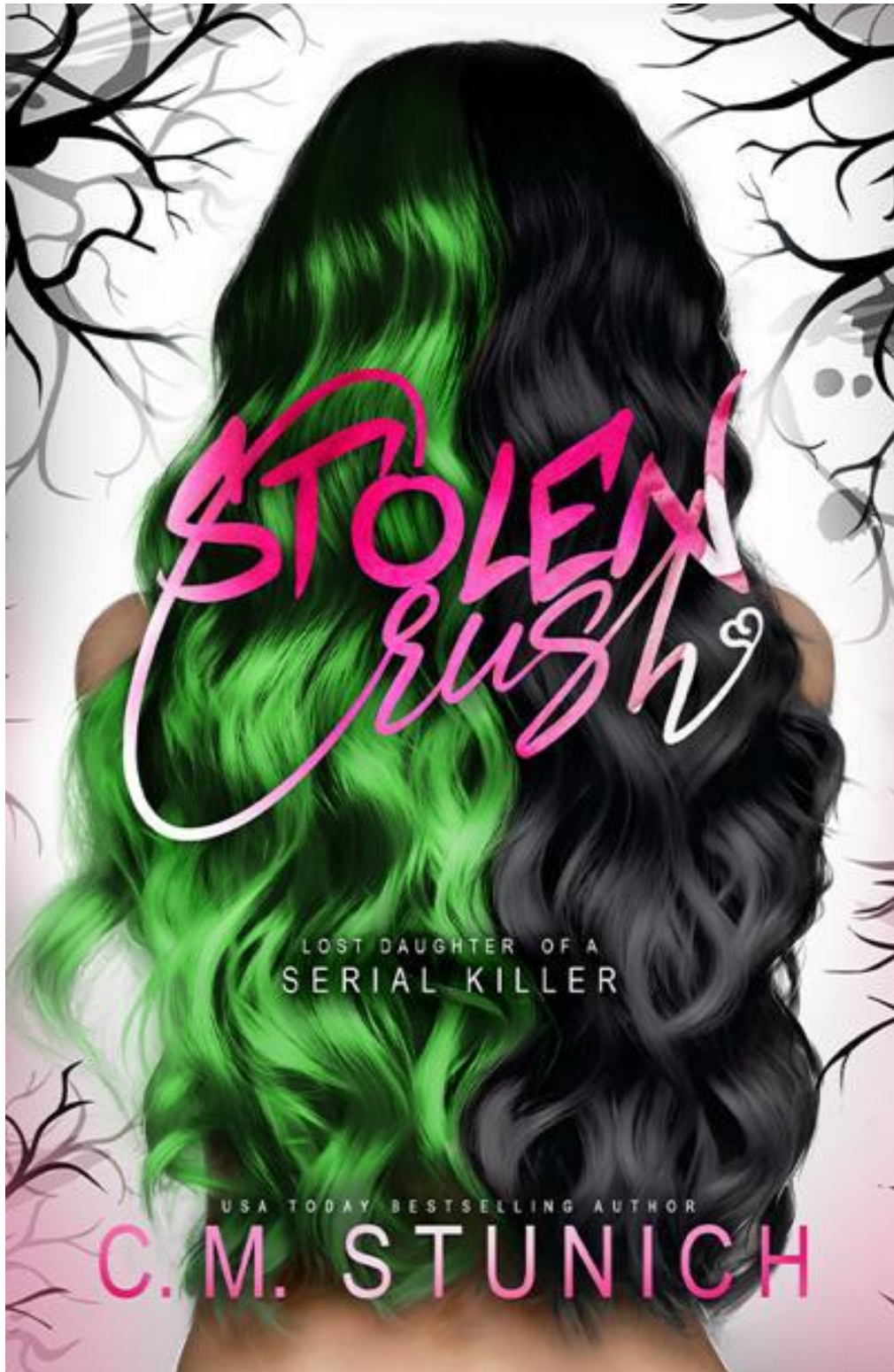
See you next time, C.M. Stunich



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GRAB A SMOKIN' HOT READ - Best place to find the most up to date Information is my readers group <http://www.facebook.com/groups/thebookishbatcave>. I often pop in here to answer questions and participate in discussions!

P.S. I heart the f*ck out of you! Thanks for reading! I love your faces.

<3 C.M. Stunich



[Check out my Amazon author page for more great reads.](#)



About the Author

C.M. Stunich is a self-admitted bibliophile with a love for exotic teas and a whole host of characters who live full time inside the strange, swirling vortex of her thoughts. Some folks might call this crazy, but Caitlin Morgan doesn't mind - especially considering she has to write biographies in the third person. Oh, and half the host of characters in her head are searing hot bad boys with dirty mouths and skillful hands (among other things). If being crazy means hanging out with them everyday, C.M. has decided to have herself committed.

She hates tapioca pudding, loves to binge on cheesy horror movies, and is a slave to many cats. When she's not vacuuming fur off of her couch, C.M. can be found with her nose buried in a book or her eyes glued to a computer screen. She's the author of over a hundred novels - romance, new adult, fantasy,

and young adult included. Please, come and join her inside her crazy. There's a heck of a lot to do there.

Oh, and Caitlin loves to chat (incessantly), so feel free to e-mail her, send her a Facebook message, or put up smoke signals. She's already looking forward to it.