

UD DARK VOYAGE

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS 78

matters of the mind

I. T. LUCAS

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Dark Voyage

MATTERS OF THE MIND

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS

BOOK SEVENTY-EIGHT

I. T. LUCAS



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Published by Evening Star Press

EveningStarPress.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-962067-08-9

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Ani



Tears shone in Sofringhati's eyes. "There are revelations that change the course of destinies. Brace yourself, Ani, for what I am about to tell you is thus." The Supreme Oracle took Ani's hands. "Your son had a daughter, and she is alive and well on Earth. This is not a vision or a prediction, my dearest friend. This is reported by Aru, who met her in person."

The news struck Ani like a bolt of lightning. It was as if time had come to a halt, and for a few heartbeats the world around her blurred, with only Sofri's voice and the fire in the braziers anchoring her to reality. But then logic and doubts burned away the haze.

"That is impossible. She must be an imposter."

Sofri smiled. "She is not. Aru told Aria that Annani's resemblance to you is striking. The moment he saw her, he knew right away that she was your descendant because your faces are identical. Unlike you, though, she is petite, has red hair, and is quick to laugh. According to Aru, she also exudes immense power. Does that remind you of someone? It is also obvious that your son paid homage to you by naming his daughter Annani."

Could it be? Had some part of Ahn survived?

He hadn't had red hair, and he had been a tall male, but he'd exuded power, and his glow had been legendary—a glow that had been snuffed out by his own father.

A torrent of suppressed emotions came flooding back. The pain of Ahn's death resurfacing, the wound that Ani had dressed in duty and resolve bled anew.

She had never allowed herself to truly feel the depth of sorrow and despair that had threatened to swallow her whole, always putting the needs of her people first. But now, with the news Sofri had brought, those old scars were torn open, revealing her raw, unhealed grief.

Memories of Ahn danced before her eyes, the serious young boy who had grown into a remarkable man. He had given her and the people of Anumati hope, but he had acted too soon, and the price of his haste had been his life.

Ani had suspected that the exile was only the first step in the Eternal King's plot to get rid of his one legitimate heir and the other gods who had conspired against him, including Ekin and Athor, two of the many children he'd sired with his scores of concubines. But there had been so little Ani could do without being accused of treason and sent to join Ahn on that accursed planet at the far reaches of the galaxy.

Had it been only her life on the line, she would have done that in a heartbeat, but with Ahn gone, she was the only one left to continue her son's work and lead the resistance. She had been the only one who could save Ahn and the other exiled gods from the king's assassins.

Except, everything she had done had been for naught.

She had arranged for the arrival of the Kra-ell settler ship to be delayed by thousands of years, and in the meantime, she had sent seven Odus to Earth, hoping Ekin would know what to do to restore their memories and build an army of Odus to defend against the Eternal King's emissaries of death.

But Ekin must not have understood the significance of the gift, or perhaps he had lacked the means to manufacture more of them with the limited resources he had on Earth.

Ultimately, the king's assassins succeeded in their mission despite her efforts.

In a rare unsolicited vision, Sofringhati had seen what the king had done, but even the greatest oracle of all time had not dared to make her vision public.

How had Ahn's daughter survived the bombing?

Tears stung the back of Ani's eyes, but she refused to let them fall, even if only in the presence of her best friend and confidant.

"Why have you not seen my granddaughter before?" she asked.

Sofri lifted her hands. "You know that I do not see everything, my queen, and even what I see is not always easy to interpret. The universe chooses what it wants to show me."

It was not Sofri's fault. It was hers.

She should have asked whether Ahn had any children born to him on Earth. Her spies in the king's court had told her that the king suspected their son had fathered the Kra-ell queen's twins, and his suspicion had been reinforced when it became known that they had been smuggled among the settlers aboard the Kra-ell ship.

Except, Ahn had never told Ani about his relationship with the Kra-ell queen, or rather the princess she had been before ascending to the Kra-ell throne, not even a hint, and Ani very much doubted that there was truth to her husband's paranoid suspicions.

It had been just one more excuse to despise his own son and justify his murder.

Gods did not easily produce offspring, and they did not rush into official matehood unless they were fortunate enough to find their fated true love. Ahn had still been a young god at the time of his exile. Given the selection of goddesses accompanying him to his new home, Ani could not see him officially mating any of them.

None had shone as brightly as her son.

Ahn might have chosen a mate after the communications with Earth were severed, but he also could have fathered Annani with a concubine.

"Do you know if she is legitimate?" she asked.

"Aru did not say anything that would lead me to think that she is not. Besides, do we care if Ahn had her with his official wife or a consort? Who would be

able to deny our claim that Annani is the daughter of his official wife?"

"It will be demanded of her to prove that she is legitimate. Her word alone will not suffice. To be an heir to the throne, Annani has to be the child of Ahn's official wife and be able to prove it. But for now, we should not worry about that. First, I need to ascertain whether she has what it takes to be the next leader of Anumati. Tell me everything Aru told Aria about her."

The cloudy look in Sofri's eyes was troubling. Hopefully, she was still lucid enough to relay the information factually and not embellish or mix it up with visions and fantasies.

Being the most powerful oracle on Anumati came with a price.

Sofri squinted as if she was trying to see in the dark, and perhaps that was precisely what she was doing—looking into the vast fabric of the universe instead of trying to remember what she had been told.

"I took great care to memorize what Aria told me." Sofri lifted a hand to clutch the Supreme Oracle's amulet as if it could ground her in reality and prevent her mind from wandering. "Annani is benevolent, and she leads her clan of immortals with wisdom and care. They call her the Clan Mother, and they all love and respect her. The clan is only several hundred people strong, but even though their numbers are small, they have done a lot of good for the humans throughout the millennia since Ahn and the gods were lost. Not only that, they have done so while fighting their archenemy, who has a stronger army of immortals and whose goals are opposite to theirs. Annani and her people want humans to become an enlightened global society that promotes equal opportunity for all and meets all the basic needs of every person on Earth. Their enemy encourages infighting and wants humans to remain dumb and ignorant so he can easily subjugate them."

That sounded a lot like what Ahn would have done if he had been allowed to live. It seemed that his daughter was continuing his legacy.

But what was that about immortals?

Had Sofri gotten confused?

"You said immortals. Did you mean gods?"

Her friend shook her head. "There is more I need to tell you—things that Aru told Aria before, and I did not share with you."

"Why didn't you?"

Sofri tilted her head. "Until Aru found out about Annani, I did not want to upset you by telling you what Ahn had allowed."

Ani had a feeling that she already knew the answer to that.

"He allowed the gods to procreate with humans."

Ani knew that such unions would not result in abominations like most believed thanks to the propaganda, but despite her sympathy toward the created species, she was not in favor of gods procreating with them. Why dilute the genetics they had perfected over countless years and numerous generations?

Sofri nodded. "He had no choice, Ani. The few gods on Earth did not have enough genetic variety for viability. Once the contact with the colony was severed, Ahn knew that no more gods would be coming to fortify their genetic pool and that their only chance of survival was creating a new hybrid species. Part god and part human."

The irony was not lost on Ani. "Humans were created with the genetic material taken from the gods. Ahn just took it one step further by ignoring the taboo and allowing the creation of immortals."

Dagor



As Dagor slowly stirred to wakefulness, he was greeted by the warm morning sunlight filtering through the gaps in the curtains and casting a soft glow on the room. He'd dreamt about home, about being with his family, his neighbors, his friends, and for a moment he thought that he was still on Anumati, but the illusion didn't last long.

Anumati's sun cast a red glow, not yellow.

Blinking rapidly to dislodge the cobwebs of dreams, he became aware of the woman sleeping beside him.

Frankie.

He was in her cabin, in her bed, and it was morning. It was also the second time he'd spent an entire night with a human female and had woken up beside her.

It was against the rules that he and his teammates had adhered to throughout the five years they had been on Earth, but if Aru could break them for Gabi, Dagor could do the same for Frankie.

It was nice to spend the night with her and not sneak out to go back to the cabin he shared with Negal. There was something special about waking up next to someone he cared about—a sense of belonging, a sense of connection, which Dagor had not felt with any female before, not even with the one goddess that he'd thought he loved.

What was it about Frankie that made him feel that way?

They weren't even from the same species.

Shifting to his side, Dagor propped his elbow on the mattress and supported his chin on his fist. As he watched her sleeping, he wondered why her forehead was scrunched in a frown.

Was she having a bad dream?

That shouldn't happen after a venom bite. She should be calm and blissed out.

As he smoothed his finger over the creases, her facial muscles relaxed, but she didn't wake up, which didn't really surprise him. Frankie was human, and she needed much more sleep than he did.

What was it about this human girl that made his heart swell with emotion in a way that none of the perfect beauties back home ever had?

Dagor was starting to understand Aru's infatuation with Gabi. Had Gabi also made Aru feel more alive than he had ever been?

Tracing the curve of Frankie's cheek with his finger, Dagor wanted to kiss her, but he stifled the impulse and just watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

So vulnerable. So human.

A pang speared through his heart as a new realization hit him. Frankie's charm, the thing that attracted him the most to her, was deeply rooted in her humanity and her approach to life. She wasn't living in a holding pattern like most gods were. She strived to enjoy each moment, and she'd somehow managed to infect him with her exuberance.

Given that he was a humorless, logic-driven guy who did not find most things worth getting excited about, that was no small accomplishment. Nevertheless, in his logical mind, he was well aware that falling for a human was not good for him in the long term, no matter how good it made him feel in his heart in the short term.

Dagor had always been a guarded person, and people thought of him as dry and flat, and they weren't wrong. Before meeting Frankie, the only thing that excited him was finding a piece of tech that he could take apart and

reconstruct. He wasn't impressed by stories someone had dreamt up, so fiction was a pass, whether in books or in movies. Music did not move him, and art left him indifferent.

But with Frankie, he felt like more. He felt alive.

Damn, he had to get a grip on himself and stop this foolishness. He needed to distance himself from the girl, perhaps not physically but definitely emotionally. It might be difficult at first, but it would spare them both heartbreak when the cruise ended in seven days, and they went their separate ways.

He'd given her his promise that they would be together for the duration of the cruise, and Dagor wasn't the type who went back on his word, but he didn't need to spend every moment of every day with her to fulfill his promise.

If Frankie was a Dormant, the more time he spent with her, the more he risked bonding with her, and then it would be game over for him like it was for Aru. He could kiss his life plans goodbye and accept that he was going to stay on this godforsaken planet for the rest of his never-ending life.

In the back of his mind, a small voice whispered that Aru was happy with his immortal mate, but a louder voice countered that Dagor wasn't like Aru and that he could never give up on going back home someday.

He had to cling to that hope.

He could spend his days away from Frankie, claiming he had things to do. They could meet for dinner and continue to bed, but once she was asleep, he would leave and go back to his cabin.

Once they picked up Frankie's best friend on their way back from Acapulco, she would have someone to spend her days with, but until then Frankie had nothing to do, which meant that she would want to spend time with him.

Avoiding her would be difficult.

With a sigh, he gently brushed a stray strand of hair from her face and feathered his fingers over her cheek one more time before gathering the resolve to get out of bed.

Searching for something that could distract him from obsessing about Frankie, Dagor thought about the only fascinating piece of equipment on board the ship—the robotic bartender on the Lido deck. Hopefully, examining him and learning all he could about him would do the trick.

Regrettably, Dagor couldn't take Bob apart, so he would have to be satisfied with just talking to him and perhaps getting him to reveal the name of his creators. If they were on board, Dagor would love to have a chat with them.

Amanda



The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air, enticing Amanda to get out of bed. She stretched her arms over her head, reached for her silk robe, and draped it around her nude body.

Now that she and Dalhu were parents, Amanda no longer indulged in parading naked through the master suite as she used to do. Their daughter was only six months old and didn't mind her mother's state of dress or undress, but Dalhu didn't approve. He was a by-the-book kind of parent, which was annoying.

Those archaic modesty rules existed for humans and did not apply to immortals, but it wasn't important enough to make a fuss about. The secret to a good relationship was not to sweat the small stuff.

At least in Amanda's book.

Dalhu also didn't like her parading naked around Onidu, which was absolutely ridiculous. So yeah, her Odu was sentient now, but he didn't have sexual urges because he was sexless. Besides, he had seen her naked plenty of times before. Dalhu had even insisted on Onidu staying in a cabin on the lower decks so they would have their privacy. It was utterly uncalled for, but she humored her old-fashioned mate because she wanted him to be comfortable and enjoy the cruise.

As it was, their upcoming wedding was stressing Dalhu, so she was trying to be as accommodating as possible.

And to think that people called her difficult, high maintenance, or spoiled. She was none of those things. She was a paragon of compromise.

Entering the living room, Amanda smiled at her mate and sauntered toward him. "You know how to get me out of bed in the morning."

He chuckled. "Ever since I kidnapped you, I've learned how to take care of you."

"That you have." She nodded as memories of their stay in the remote mountain cabin filled her mind.

Was she weird for thinking fondly of when she'd been Dalhu's prisoner?

Not at all.

They were fated mates, and she'd known that from the very start.

Well, maybe not at first glance, but shortly thereafter. At first, Dalhu had terrified her.

Amanda leaned to kiss Evie's drool-covered cheek. "Good morning, sweetie."

"Ma-ma." Evie offered Amanda her teething toy.

"Thank you, sweetie." She kissed her again. "Mommy is going to drink her coffee now, so you can keep chewing on your toy."

Whenever their daughter called her Ma or Ma-ma, Amanda's heart swelled with love. Dalhu was Ta or Ta-ta instead of Da or Da-da, but he didn't mind. The guy was putty in their daughter's little hands.

He placed a bowl of instant oatmeal with blueberries on the table. "That's the best I could do with what I had to work with."

"It's perfect." Amanda wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. "Do you know why?"

He smiled. "Why?"

"Because you made it for me with love."

His smile widened. "Does it taste better when sprinkled with affection?"

"Of course." She let go of his neck and sat down.

Dalhu took out two cups of coffee from under the coffeemaker, put them next to the oatmeal bowls, and then added a container of creamer and another one with sugar cubes.

Sitting on Evie's other side, he glanced at their daughter's half-eaten cereal. "Do you want to feed her?" He lifted his gaze to Amanda. "She might be inclined to eat a little more if you are the one holding the spoon."

"If she doesn't want to eat any more, I won't force it. She'll eat when she's hungry."

It was one of the things that they did not agree on. Dalhu wanted to do everything by the book, while Amanda believed in being flexible and taking her daughter's wishes into account even though she was just a baby.

She wanted their daughter to grow up to be independent and resourceful.

Dalhu grimaced. "Evie doesn't eat enough because she's teething and it hurts her gums, not because she's not hungry."

Rolling her eyes, Amanda lifted the baby spoon, dipped it into the cereal, and offered it to their daughter.

Surprisingly, Evie opened her mouth.

"Look at you," Amanda grinned. "Such a good girl."

"You shouldn't say that," Dalhu murmured. "It's in the book. If you praise her for eating, she might associate that with pleasing you and overeat."

"Make up your mind." Amanda put the baby spoon down. "Do you want her to eat more or not?"

Running his hand over his hair, he sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm irritable today."

Amanda had a good idea why, and it was sad. They were getting married tonight, and this day was supposed to be idyllic, but the closer it got to the ceremony, the more stressed Dalhu became.

She put the cream and sugar in her coffee, gave it a stir, lifted the cup to her lips, took a sip, and sighed. "This is perfect. Thank you."

Perhaps the compliment would help Dalhu relax. He'd been tense since the day they packed their things for the cruise, and he got a glimpse of her wedding dress.

Her big guy believed in silly superstitions—like seeing the bride in her wedding gown before the wedding was bad luck—and even though he'd only seen the train peeking out from the garment bag, he still thought it was a bad omen.

Of course, the real reason for his nervousness was his aversion to being the center of attention, and everything else was like sprinkling more pepper on an already uncomfortably spicy dish.

Dalhu offered her a half-smile, his gaze drifting to the window. "You are most welcome."

He always got overly polite when he was anticipating a difficult task.

It may have been ingrained in him during his service in the Brotherhood. Meeting his commanders and getting his despicable orders had been painful, and he had been forced to do that while bowing graciously and acting as if they were all that.

Reaching across the table, she placed a comforting hand over his. "This is our day, Dalhu, and there is no reason to dread the ceremony just because you don't like having all eyes on you."

He winced. "You know why I dread it. Not everyone is okay with me joining the clan and mating their princess."

Squeezing his hand, she leaned closer to him. "They have all accepted you, and no one is going to give you the stink eye. If anyone dares, they will have to deal with me, and no one wants that. We're celebrating our love, and everyone here is happy for us."

Dalhu nodded. "Perhaps, but I intend to look only at your mother and you and ignore the crowd."

Amanda chuckled. "You also have to look at your groomsmen."

"Right."

"And the bridesmaids."

"Fine. But that's it."

Amanda's gaze softened. "Don't forget to smile during the ceremony, my love. When our daughter sees the recording when she's older, I don't want her to think that you were not happy about marrying her mommy."

He turned to look at Evie, who lifted her eyes to him with a toothless smile with the toy still stuffed in her mouth. "Speaking of Evie," he said as he shifted his gaze back to Amanda. "Are we bringing her to the ceremony? I worry it might be too much for her and also about the practicality. You will be in your wedding dress, and I will be in my tux, and we don't want her drooling over either of us. But having her in the stroller during the ceremony would be weird."

"What if Onidu holds her?" Amanda suggested.

"That could work. He can stand behind us."

"Or even better, I can ask one of the bridesmaids to hold Evie." Amanda grinned. "That's actually perfect. Evie can be one of my bridesmaids, and I even ordered a dress for her from the same fabric and in the same style as theirs." She leaned and pressed a kiss to the top of her daughter's head. "If you were older, you could have been our ring girl, but I think being a bridesmaid in your mom and dad's wedding is special enough."

Ani



Ani did not condone Ahn's decision to allow gods to take human partners and produce offspring with them. She had supported almost everything he had wanted to change about Anumati and about the way the lesser species were treated by the gods, but there was a big difference between allowing them the same privileges that were available to the commoner gods and actually producing hybrid offspring with them.

"Are those immortals abominations?" She pinned Sofri with a stern look.

"They are not. They are precisely what you would expect a child of a god and a human to be. They heal fast but not as fast as gods, and they are immune to diseases. They can thrall and shroud in varying degrees of ability, and they possess an array of other mind talents like we do. But since there are so few of them, their talents do not run the full gamut as ours do. Aru met a seer who has occasional visions, but she is not nearly as powerful as even our weakest oracles."

"That is a relief." Ani let her shoulders relax a fraction. "El always feared that hybrids might be more powerful than us, and naturally, he could not allow that."

"It is possible that a child born to a Kra-ell and a god parent will have superior powers."

Ani let out a breath. "You never should have told the Eternal King that prophecy. He was already paranoid, but after hearing that a descendant of his would be more powerful than him and would usher in a new era of revival

and prosperity to Anumati, he became much worse."

Most fathers would have loved to receive a prophecy like that, but all the king had heard was that he would be replaced and outshone by a descendant.

Tears leaked from the corners of her friend's eyes. "He asked, I have seen the future, and the prophecy just left my mouth. I am not always in control, and you know that."

"I do."

The weight of her own isolation, of the sacrifices she had made, and of the love she had lost pressed down on Ani, but she had not let them bring her down before, and she would not do so now that Sofri's prophecy might finally come true.

There was a glimmer of hope, a new purpose. Her bloodline had not ended with Ahn. There was still a part of him, a part of her, alive and breathing on Earth.

Could it be that Annani was more powerful than her grandfather?

The truth was that only fools relied on visions and prophecies. El had thousands of offspring, and any one of them could one day produce a descendant who was more powerful than the Eternal King.

For all she knew, the rumors were true about Ahn having fathered the Kra-ell queen's twin children, and one or both of them could be more powerful than El.

They were not legitimate, but did it really matter? If it was true, they were the descendants of two royal houses, and the female twin could ascend to the Kra-ell throne with ease.

But what if it was Annani, after all?

It was both comforting and terrifying to hope for. But whether Annani was more powerful than the Eternal King or not, Ani needed to protect her granddaughter, no matter the cost.

"There is more," Sofri said.

Ani arched a brow. "Does Annani have siblings?"

Sofri snorted in a very undignified way. "Not that I know of. But Aru is concerned about the king finding out that humans are no longer a bunch of primitives fighting each other on horseback. They have developed technology, and their population has exploded. There are eight billion of them. Your mate might decide to cull the numbers and destroy their progress, or he might decide to do away with them altogether."

Ani hated it when people referred to the Eternal King as her mate. It had been a political marriage, and she had not loved him for even one minute of it. She had endured him until she had produced an heir, and if she had known what he would do to his own son, she would have refused the king in her bedchamber from the very start. She had enough political sway of her own to prevent him from punishing her for that.

"He will not do away with all humans, but he might send a pathogen to cull their numbers. What is the state of their medical progress?"

"I do not know," Sofri admitted. "Aru might have told Aria, but she did not tell me."

"I need much more information." Ani adjusted the folds of her gown. "Instruct Aria to collect as much as she can. I will come to see you every day from now on."

The Oracle paled. "You cannot. It will be suspicious."

"I can easily excuse it. I can say that you are in one of your states of fugue, and I cannot get you to counsel me on the important issues I rely on you for. That is why I need to be here every day. Or I might come up with something better. I need to think about it some more."

Sofri shook her head. "I have petitioners who have been waiting for centuries to have an audience with me. I cannot just turn them away, not even for the queen."

Ani waved a dismissive hand. "From now on, shorten every visit by a few minutes. Review the protocol with your attendants and see where you can cut corners. By the end of the day, you should have saved enough time to dedicate an hour to me."

Sofri bowed her head. "As you wish, my queen."

"Oh, stop that." Ani slapped her friend's thigh. "I am Ani to you, never the queen."

Sofri lifted both brows. "You sounded so imperious just now that I was compelled to call you 'my queen'."

Ani winced. "Ingrained habits. Can you pull it off?"

"I will do my best."

Frankie



"He left before I woke up this morning," Frankie complained to Margo.

"Did he leave a note?"

"Nope." Frankie sighed. "But enough about me. How are you doing?"

"I'm good. Lynda and her friends are much nicer when drunk, which is most of the time now. They finally let loose and stopped their silly posturing."

"Good." Frankie chewed on her thumbnail. "I'm glad that you are enjoying yourself."

She could really use Margo right now. They could go to the Lido deck, flirt with all the hunky immortals, and make Dago jealous.

He might have left early for a good reason like his boss needing him or a meeting with the goddess or with Kian, but he could have left a note or a message on her phone. So yeah, he was an alien who had only been on Earth for five years, and most of them had not been spent in the States, so he might not know that he was supposed to do that, but it still rankled.

If he cared for her, he would have bothered to let her know why he'd left and when she could expect him back.

"By the way, don't go ashore in Acapulco," Margo said. "I heard really bad things from the girls."

The ship had docked in the port early in the morning, and Frankie had

planned on exploring the city with Dagor or without him.

"Like what?"

"The cartels have turned it into a war zone. They are kidnapping people and killing them. Very few cruise liners go there these days."

"What are the Mexican police doing about it?"

Margo snorted. "Most are on the cartels' payroll. Anyway, if I were you, I would skip it. Stay on the ship and enjoy margaritas by the pool."

"I wouldn't be going alone. Some of the guys here look fierce enough to scare off a horde of potential rapists and murderers."

Cartel thugs were nothing to the immortal security force, but Frankie didn't know whether they would be escorting the people getting off. The port area was probably safe, but she would feel better if some of them were around.

Dagor alone could most likely take care of any human with nefarious intentions, but she didn't know for sure what powers the gods possessed. Besides, he might have other plans.

Perhaps she could check with Max and ask him if he was going ashore with some of his buddies. If he was, she had a feeling he wouldn't mind if she wanted to tag along.

Toven and Mia might plan on going sightseeing, too, so she could opt to go with them. Toven wouldn't risk taking Mia to see the city if he didn't believe that he could protect her, and if he thought he needed more protection, he would take a large security detail with him.

"You're just saying that to ease my mind," Margo said. "You know that I love computer geeks, but I wouldn't describe them as formidable with anything other than a game controller. Well, maybe they can also shoot well after all the shooting games they play, but I wouldn't bet my life on that, even if they were armed."

Right. Margo still thought that this was a company cruise for the Perfect Match employees.

"Not everyone here is a programmer. Tom's partners employ a large security

force, and I plan to join a group that has at least several of them accompanying it."

It was a little white lie, or rather, a half-truth. Members of the security force were not on board in any official capacity. They were part of the community and had come to celebrate their friends' and family's weddings.

That they could also defend their clan while enjoying the celebrations was an added bonus for everyone involved, and it was good to know that she was safe because the people around her knew how to defend her and the other guests on the ship.

Once Margo got on board, she would not only learn the real story but also get to meet some of those guys, and she could find someone to have a vacation fling with, too.

Frankie winced.

Dagor was supposed to be just that, but he was turning into more, and it was evidently one-sided.

"Are the security people armed?" Margo asked.

"I don't know, but I assume that they are."

"Make sure. Muscles won't be much use against machine guns."

"I'll check, and if they are not armed, I'm not going."

"Promise me, or I won't be able to enjoy myself until you are back safe and sound on board the ship."

"Who said I'm safe here?" she said to tease Margo. "What if those gangs decide to attack the ship? To them, a luxury cruiser like this would be an irresistible target, what with all the rich people on board who they can kidnap for ransom."

Margo groaned. "I know that you are not serious, but it could happen. Now I won't be able to relax for sure."

"Forget I said anything and stop worrying for nothing. You know how the news is. They only report the bad stuff, so it seems like the world is ending."

"Yeah, you're right." Margo let out a breath. "I'm going to join the ladies in the bar, get drunk, and spend the rest of the day by the pool."

Frankie frowned. "By the way, is Cabo safe? You seem better informed about the cartel problem than I am."

"It is safer than Acapulco, and I have no plans to leave the resort to explore, so I don't feel threatened."

"It's sad." Frankie sighed. "What is the world coming to?"

Margo snorted. "Says the girl who only a moment ago blamed the news for making everything seem more dire than it is."

"It does, but it's always done that, and yet it seems like it's much worse now than it was only a few years ago."

"It's anarchy," Margo said. "Today it's Mexico, tomorrow it's the States. Soon, there will be nowhere safe to hide." She chuckled. "Maybe Tom's eccentric partners are not so eccentric after all. Perhaps they are better prepared for the bleak future than the rest of us plebs. They have their own security force and a secret compound. We are lucky to get invited there."

"Yes, we are."

Margo didn't know how right she was. The immortals were hiding from all humans, not just the bad players from Mexico and other evildoers from around the world, and that made their village a real sanctuary.

Was there a chance they would let her bring her entire family if things got really bad in California?

Probably not.

What was she going to do?

Frankie was not about to abandon her family while she had a nice cozy place to hide.

"Tom and his partners are rich and well connected," Margo murmured. "They might know things that the general public is not privy to. The elite is in the know, while the rest of us are fumbling in the dark while trying to survive."

"Right. But Tom and his partners are the good guys. It will be beneficial for us to be around them because when they hear about the danger that the rest of us aren't aware of, they will sound a warning."

"Or so you hope. Should I remind you what happened on the Titanic? The rich got in the rescue boats while the crew barred the poor from leaving, condemning them to drown."

"Don't believe everything you see in the movies."

"I don't." Margo huffed out a breath. "Usually, they try to sugarcoat things, not the other way around. Face it, Frankie, we are part of the faceless, voiceless masses, and the elites don't care what happens to us. They only care about power and money."

Frankie rolled her eyes. "You read too many conspiracy theory books and get upset over things that you cannot change regardless of them being true or false. Switch to romance novels, and you will be much happier. Ignorance is bliss, right?"

"Yeah, but it's also irresponsible. I refuse to be a sheep, ignorantly and blissfully led to slaughter."

Dagor



When Dagor got to the Lido deck it was still early in the morning, and there was hardly anyone there. One guy was swimming in the pool, two sat on the edge with their feet dangling in the water, and several females were sunbathing on the lounge chairs with their eyes covered with dark sunglasses.

No one was at the bar, which was a great opportunity for an uninterrupted chat with Bob.

As Dagor sat on one of the barstools, the robot turned around to face him with a silly grin on his shiny metallic face.

"Hello, Master Doug. What can I serve you?"

"How about a glass of sparkling water?"

"Certainly, master." One of his long arms reached for a glass and put it under a spout while the other one pressed the lever to release the stream.

"Do you know what my real name is?" Dagor asked as Bob handed him the glass.

"Of course, master. I thought that you preferred to be called Master Doug, but if you wish, I can call you Master Dagor."

"Why do you use the honorific 'master'? Most humans use Mister or none at all."

Bob blinked, which looked oddly human on his metallic face. Not that he'd been designed to approximate a human. His head was much too small for the size of his body, he didn't have a nose, and his eyes were round, but they had a shutter that looked like an eyelid.

"This is how I was programmed to address my clients. Master for a gentleman and mistress for a lady."

Dagor chuckled. "They should have expanded your gender vocabulary, but I guess your creators are old-fashioned."

The robot blinked again, which seemed to be his way of expressing confusion or astonishment. "I do not know what you mean, master."

"That's okay." Dagor took a sip from his sparkling water. "So, tell me, Bob. What can you do besides serving drinks?"

"I can clean the glasses and the countertop, order new bottles when needed, and I can schedule my own maintenance."

"Is that all?" Dagor asked.

"What else would you have me do, master?" Bob smiled in what was a pretty good imitation of a real smile.

"You also know the names of all of your customers and what they look like. Have you been equipped with facial recognition software?"

"Of course, master. Otherwise, how would I know who I am looking at?"

"Good point." Dagor emptied the rest of his glass and handed it to Bob. "I'm a little hungry. What do you have as far as food?"

"I have snacks, master." Bob waved one of his arms at the selection of chips, nuts, and pretzels. "What would you like, master?"

"Can I have one of each?"

"Of course." Bob pulled down several bags and put them in front of Dagor. "Master must have skipped breakfast."

"That's a very good observation."

The robot nodded. "I am constantly learning, master. I have noticed that people eat more snacks when they do not have a proper meal. I also learn more facial expressions every day." The robot tilted his head in a very human manner. "Right now, master looks tense. Perhaps a cocktail is in order? Bloody Mary is a good morning drink."

"That's a great suggestion, thank you."

Unless Bob had been trained before in the immortals' village, he was learning fast, given that he had been working only two days.

"Here you go, master." The robot put a napkin on the counter and a red drink on top of it.

"Thank you." Dagor took a sip. "This is very good."

"My pleasure, master."

"I have another question. Are your creators here on board the ship?"

"Yes, master."

"Can you tell me their names?"

"Many were involved in my creation, but Master William was the head of the lab."

That was easier than Dagor had expected. Bob volunteered the name without having to be tricked into it. "I would love to have a chat with Master William. Are you capable of projecting his image so I would know who to look for?"

"I do not possess projection abilities, but I can point him out to you." Bob moved a foot to the side. "He is the gentleman wearing a Hawaiian shirt."

Dagor turned around in the direction that Bob was looking. A couple that he hadn't seen before were sitting on two loungers by the pool, and the male had a blue Hawaiian shirt on. He was wearing dark sunglasses like everyone else on the deck, but his mate wasn't.

"Thank you, Bob." He finished his drink and put the empty glass on the bar. "I'm going to ask William a few questions. I hope he won't mind."

"He will not," Bob said. "From what I observed while in the lab, Master

William enjoys talking about his work."

"Excellent." Dagor smiled. "A guy after my own heart."

Kian



"I've never been to Acapulco before." Jacki spread jam over her toast. "I'm excited." She glanced at Kalugal. "And I'm even more excited about visiting the Tehuacalco site."

Kian turned to Kalugal with a raised brow. "What's in Tehuacalco, and why do you want to take your wife into dangerous territory? After reading about the cartels ruling the entire area, I didn't even want to stop at this port, but my sisters twisted my arm." He cast Sari an accusing look. "With you being the most vocal one."

She shrugged. "David and I were planning to just tour the area near the port, which is safe. I wanted to do some shopping, but now that Kalugal's mentioned the archeological site, I'm intrigued."

Kian groaned. "Don't. Do you have any idea how bad it is in this area? Not too long ago, four dismembered bodies washed up on a popular beach."

"That's terrible." Alena put a hand over her pregnant belly. "I'm not leaving the ship."

Sari leaned over and put her hand on Alena's. "You and Orion are welcome to join David and me. I think we are going to stick to our original plan for the day."

Kian was relieved. "Smart."

Kalugal waved a dismissive hand. "Tehuacalco is a popular tourist attraction, and it's only an hour's drive away. I don't expect any trouble. I hired a

reputable local guide with a converted truck that can take seven passengers, so we can easily accommodate one more couple and three Guardians. If more want to join the expedition, I can arrange for drivers with more vehicles. The more of us go, the safer we will be, right?" He smiled at Kian. "Not that I really need much help. With my compulsion and shrouding ability, I can handle any human threat. But I don't want you to worry, so I will ask several Guardians to join us."

Kian had forgotten about Kalugal's compulsion ability. However, for it to work Kalugal needed to be heard, and if thugs ambushed him and started shooting, would they hear him above the gunfire?

"Can we come?" Negal asked from the table next to theirs. "Aru and I are fighters, and we can easily handle a gang of human criminals."

"Speak for yourself," Aru said. "I'm not risking Gabi. She's a newly turned immortal, and her transition is not complete yet."

Negal shrugged. "Then I'll go alone or with Dagor if he wants to join." He pulled out his phone. "I'll ask him."

"Excellent," Kalugal said. "The more the merrier."

Kian wasn't sure about that, but he couldn't forbid them from going. Thankfully, Syssi didn't seem interested at all.

After a quick exchange of texts, Negal leaned toward Kalugal. "Dagor asks what's so interesting in Tehuacalco?"

"Aha." Kalugal leaned back in his chair with a satisfied smile. "A while back, I bought an ancient treasure map. Supposedly, a powerful amulet is hidden under the ruins of Tehuacalco. The source and authenticity are questionable, but since I'm already here, I want to take a look." He lifted Jacki's hand and kissed the back of it. "The amulet is supposed to magnify a seer's ability to see the future. It will be the perfect gift for my lovely wife."

She smiled. "Provided that we find it, which we most likely will not. But it's a good excuse to have a little adventure. I also want to try the Xtasea. It's supposed to be the world's longest zip line. I haven't done anything daring since turning immortal, and this seems like a great opportunity to confront my former fears."

Kian shook his head. "You don't have the time to explore the ruins beyond a brief tour. Amanda and Dalhu's wedding is tonight. You need to get back in time to shower and get ready."

"The reception starts at eight in the evening," Sari said. "That's thirteen hours from now. We have plenty of time to enjoy both attractions and get back by six to get ready for the wedding."

"Dagor says that he would love to come." Negal looked up from his phone. "He also wants to bring Frankie along."

"Not happening." Kian crossed his arms over his chest. "She's human. Too vulnerable."

"Dagor and I can protect her." Negal's smile never left his mouth, as if he were mocking Kian's concerns.

"Let me give you some more information about what's going on in the lovely city of Acapulco and its surrounding area. It is experiencing one of the highest levels of violence in Mexico as gangs fight over control of the port with the support of much larger cartels that operate on a national level. At least sixteen crime syndicates are active in the Guerrero state. They engage in drug and human trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion, and they have such control over the local communities that when two drug lords were arrested, thousands of residents showed up in the state's capital, demanding their release."

"Why?" Syssi asked. "Don't they want to get rid of the cartels?"

"They do." Kian uncrossed his arms and put his hands on the table. "But they were told to do that, and if they hadn't, the repercussions would have been horrific. The cartels are so powerful that the police and even the Mexican army are afraid to engage them."

Kalugal didn't look impressed or frightened in the slightest. "That's the reality of this region, and there is nothing they can do about it, but we don't need to worry."

Kian took a deep breath. "I can't stop you, but I hope that you have enough sense to leave your son on the ship."

That wiped the smug smile off Kalugal's face. "What do you take me for? An irresponsible fool? Darius is still human. He will stay on the ship with Shamash."

"Forgive me." Kian dipped his head in mock apology. "But you seemed so certain there was no danger that it worried me."

"To immortals and gods, there is no danger, and we can probably keep one or two adult humans safe, but that's as far as my risk tolerance goes."

Dagor



Dagor walked over to where William and his mate were lounging. "Good morning." He produced his best smile. "I hope I'm not interrupting. I'm Dagor." He dipped his head.

"Hi." The blond shaded her eyes with her hand and squinted at him. "We know who you are, and you are not interrupting. You and your friends are celebrities." She sat up and offered him her hand. "I'm Kaia."

"A pleasure to meet you, Kaia." He gently took her slender fingers in his and gave them the slightest of shakes.

"I'm William." Her mate offered him his hand. "Please, join us."

"Thank you." Dagor sat down. "I was chatting with Bob and was impressed with how quickly he was learning to anticipate and respond to conversations. He told me that you headed the team that created him. I'm fascinated by the technology, and I would love to learn more about Bob's capabilities. He's definitely not like any of the other robots serving drinks on cruise ships."

Not that Dagor had been on any other cruise ship or encountered any other server robots, but after meeting Bob, he had read about them and watched a few YouTube videos.

William smiled, but his shoulders tensed, and his mate regarded Dagor with suspicion in her eyes.

"There is nothing unique about Bob," she said, lifting her drink from the side table. "We used widely available technology to build him. Usually, ships'

robotic bartenders have limited capabilities because there is no reason to invest in a more sophisticated model, and Bob is by far too advanced for the simple task we gave him, but it was a good opportunity to test the prototype. We intend to test his performance and learning capabilities in a wide array of tasks, not just bartending."

As Kaia launched into her explanation, Dagor noticed William's shoulders losing their rigidity, but he still didn't take part in the conversation. Bob had said that his creator loved talking about his work, so his lack of response wasn't because he was shy and preferred his mate speaking for him.

Dagor had a feeling that Kaia was simply better at evasive answers, and there was more to Bob than she had admitted.

"I'm surprised that you find Bob so fascinating," William finally said. "Coming from Anumati, the planet that created the Odus, you must have encountered much more sophisticated artificial intelligence?"

"I have, but I was not privy to the technology."

"The creation of Odus was outlawed, right?" Kaia asked. "That's what the Kra-ell told us, but things might have changed after the settlers left."

"A less humanoid-like version was created to replace the Odus. Also, everything manufactured on Anumati is now tamper-proof. This means that after a product leaves the factory, neither programming nor any other component can be altered. If something malfunctions, it's decommissioned and disposed of."

Kaia put her glass down. "Isn't that wasteful? They can't even reuse the parts?"

Dagor shrugged. "Building new is less resource demanding than ensuring that the technology isn't stolen or altered to be used in nefarious ways."

William nodded in what Dagor interpreted as agreement. "That actually makes sense to me. Companies invest heavily in research and development only to have their products reverse engineered by unscrupulous competitors and sold for less. I wouldn't be surprised if human tech goes a similar route. If the product is destroyed when tampered with, no one can reverse engineer it." He smiled at Dagor. "I encountered that problem when I tried to take apart

the trackers that we removed from the Kra-ell. How did you manage to alter the trackers you found in China?"

"Older technology," Dagor said. "They were made before the shift to solid state."

"Did you alter the trackers?" Kaia asked.

Dagor shook his head. "I'm mostly self-taught, and my knowledge is limited, so I couldn't do it alone, but I helped, and after it was done, we erased the memories of the techs we hired for the task."

"I'm mostly self-taught as well," William said. "I've attended classes in various engineering schools, and I've also engaged experts in one-on-one lessons, but my official degree is fake."

Dagor regarded the guy with even more respect. "I would appreciate your guidance in self-education. I had dreams of returning home and applying to one of Anumati's engineering schools, but since I'm not going home anytime soon, I'd better utilize the time to learn what I can on Earth."

He didn't add that his chances of getting accepted to one of those schools were nearly nonexistent. As a commoner, he needed to be truly gifted and exceptional to have a chance, and he wasn't. He was smart and somewhat talented, but that was not enough to get him in.

"What fields are you interested in?" Kaia asked. "There is so much to learn even on our backward little planet."

He rubbed his chin to hide his smile at her comment. "Anything that has to do with robotics interests me, but I'm also interested in communications and spyware. The problem is that much of Anumati's technology is based on our genetic expertise, and that field is just in its infancy on Earth."

Kaia's eyes sparkled with interest. "That's where my expertise comes into play. I'm a bioinformatician. William and I are collaborating and merging our knowledge to—" A sharp look from her mate had her clamping her mouth shut for a moment. "To research the possibilities." She smiled sweetly at Dagor. "Perhaps your limited knowledge from Anumati can help point us in the right direction."

"I would gladly share with you everything I know."

As Dagor's phone buzzed with an incoming message, he pulled it out of his pocket and read it.

"It seems like a group of your friends is going ashore and heading to a nearby archaeological site."

"Not interested." Kaia lifted her drink and leaned back in her lounge.
"Sweating on a dusty dig site is not my idea of fun."

Frankie



Frankie sat with Mia and Toven at the breakfast table while keeping an eye on Dagor's teammates, who were seated several tables over.

She'd thought she would find him in the dining hall, but evidently, he was somewhere else, and it wasn't in a meeting with Aru and Negal or with Kian. He also wasn't having tea with the Clan Mother because Kian would have been there as well.

Where the hell was he?

"You are not eating," Mia said. "What got your panties in a twist?"

Mia knew very well why Frankie was upset. They had been friends forever, and it shouldn't be too difficult to guess that dining alone after spending the night with a guy was disappointing, to say the least.

"Nothing." She reached for a piece of toast and added it to the heap of scrambled egg she'd put on her plate before.

"Did you have a disagreement with Dagor?" Toven asked.

"We had a lovely time last night at the wedding and later in my cabin. I don't know what chased him out of my bed early in the morning or why he didn't bother to at least leave a note."

Toven's eyes shone with understanding. "He probably didn't mean anything by it. He just doesn't know what is expected of him in a relationship."

Frankie tried very hard not to glare at the god. "I'm sure things are not much different where he came from, and the ladies there expect the same courtesy that we lowly humans do."

Toven opened his mouth to say something but closed it and shook his head. "I don't know what the customs are on Anumati. I was born on Earth."

Mia and Toven had told her about what had happened to the other gods. They hadn't elaborated, and what she knew could barely fill one page of the series of books that would be needed to contain all there was to know about the gods and the immortals, but she knew that a small group of gods had arrived on Earth a long time ago and some of them had taken human partners, which was how the first immortals had been born.

"Just think about how your father treated your mother." Mia put her coffee cup down. "And if your parents were born on Earth too, how your grandparents interacted with each other, and you will have your answer."

Toven smiled sadly. "My father was a great god who wasn't born on Earth, but he was a philanderer. My mother was one of many goddesses he bedded, and his relationship with her was cordial at best. They preferred not to be in the same room at the same time."

Without giving it a second thought, Frankie reached over the table and patted Toven's hand. "I'm sorry. That must have been difficult for you growing up."

"Not really. Whenever I felt too stifled in my mother's house, I would go to visit my father and have a grand time building all kinds of contraptions with him. He realized early on that I didn't have a knack for science and engineering like he had, so the projects he pretended to be working on when I visited were simple, and I had fun making things with him and trying to solve problems. I learned a lot, and I got to spend time with my father, whose household was the exact opposite of my mother's."

Mia put down her fork and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "And yet you married a goddess who was precisely like your mother."

Frankie's eyes widened. "You were married before?"

He nodded. "My wife perished with the rest of the gods while I was away. I've never forgiven myself for not being there for her."

"You would have died too." Mia took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'm so happy that the Fates prompted you to get away in the nick of time."

Mia and Toven were so adorable together that it brought tears to Frankie's eyes. She averted her gaze to spare them the emotional display, and as she looked at the table where Aru and Negal were sitting with Kian and several other immortals, her phone buzzed with an incoming message.

Pulling the device from her pocket, she looked at the screen, and if not for Toven sitting right next to her, she would have stuck out her tongue at it.

Dagor's text didn't contain an apology or an explanation for his stealthy morning departure. Instead, he was inviting her on an outing to some archeological site that Kalugal was arranging. It was only an hour away from Acapulco, and there was a treasure hunt for a lost amulet. He also mentioned that it might be dangerous because of the cartels operating in the area but promised to keep her safe, which was the only thing that stopped her from ignoring the text and not bothering to answer him.

"What is it?" Mia asked.

"Kian's cousin is organizing an outing to Tehuacalco, and Dagor's invited me to join them. Do you want to come?"

"It's too dangerous." Toven put his hand on Mia's thigh. "You shouldn't go either."

"Dagor thinks that it's fine. He promises to protect me." She leveled her gaze on Toven. "Aside from being stronger and faster, what can a god do that a human cannot?"

"It depends on the god." Toven shifted in his chair. "I can compel the gangsters to drop their weapons or turn on each other, but as far as I know, Dagor doesn't have compulsion ability."

"But Kalugal does," Mia said. "His compulsion even works on other immortals, which is a big deal, but he is not as powerful as Toven."

Ani



"Will there be anything else, Your Majesty?" Lileth asked after turning Ani's bed down.

"No, thank you. You may leave."

"Good night, my queen." Her maid bowed and retreated from the room, walking backward as was customary for servants when leaving the presence of a royal.

It occurred to Ani that the nobles should do the same. Although most of the backstabbing was political in nature, assassinations usually happened off the planet, on one of the colonies where locals could be blamed. It was never prudent to turn one's back on the vipers in court.

That was the main reason Ani never left Anumati to visit the colonies, even though it was one of her queenly duties. Getting rid of her was not politically beneficial to her husband, but even though he kept her in the dark about most of his machinations, she still knew too much for his comfort.

With a sigh, Ani walked to the window and peered outside at the city below.

The beauty of it never ceased to move her despite the many thousands of years she'd been gazing at it from her palace quarters.

Bioluminescent flora cast a serene glow over the subterranean city, mimicking a starry sky, and the buildings that were carved from the very bedrock were aglow with the soft light of embedded crystals. Bridges arched

over chasms, connecting districts that, during designated daylight hours, burst with activity.

In the center of the palace's plaza, terraced pools cascaded in a series of concentric circles, each level pouring into the next. The water, which was infused with minerals, gleamed like flowing silver, reflecting the luminescent glow from above and around.

The lush gardens surrounding the terraced pools had been cultivated to flourish in the bioluminescent light, their leaves and petals shimmering in hues of emerald, sapphire, and amethyst.

Stone pathways meandered through the gardens, dotted with benches positioned to afford the best views of the pools and the flora, and along the edges, luminous orbs hung from the sculpted archways, providing soft light to complement the natural bioluminescence.

If not for the many sculptures depicting the Eternal King that dotted the gardens, it would have been Ani's favorite place to stroll through, but it was impossible to walk more than twenty paces without bumping into her husband's likeness.

For the sake of appearances, several statues were dedicated to pivotal figures in Anumati's history, and there were even three of her, but the one of Ahn had been demolished after his exile and replaced by one more of the king.

From her window high up, though, Ani could only see the tops and could still enjoy the beauty of the plaza.

The gardens extended beyond the palace, and a river surrounded the gardens, with bridges connecting it to the rest of the city. It was wide enough to make jumping over impossible even for a Kra-ell, and any attempt to swim through or fly over would have been dealt with by the patrol drones.

Only those with legitimate business in the palace were allowed through the checkpoints, and the scanners verified that no contraband or uninvited guests got smuggled in.

Still, it didn't mean that assassinating the king was impossible. If Ani put her mind to it, she could probably pull it off, but that was premature. His hold over Anumati was such that his elimination would plunge it into chaos, and

as a historian, Ani knew the horrors that could and would ensue.

The resistance needed to replace the king with an equally competent ruler and to make the transition smooth, the new queen or king had to be a descendant of the king. Ani's royal bloodline was ancient, but it would be much more difficult for her to take the throne than it would be for El's granddaughter.

Ani was popular and capable, but at least half of Anumatians would not accept her as the Eternal Queen. She might be able to hold things together for a short time, but she lacked El's charisma and political genius to cement her rule for eternity.

Did her granddaughter have what was needed?

Even if Annani had all of her grandfather's attributes, she would still need massive training in Anumati's complicated politics, and the only one who could provide it was Ani.

Could she do that from afar?

Communicating through the telepathic twins was an incredible advantage that Ani wished had been available to her when Ahn was still alive, but it was cumbersome. To teach Annani what she needed to know, Ani would have to teach Sofri, who would need to teach Aria, who would have to teach Aru, who would need to teach Annani.

There was no way it would work.

Could Annani learn what she needed just from watching pivotal moments in Anumati's past and reading Ani's records?

The team of historians working for her did a great job recording events, but she doubted reading about them would be enough for Annani to understand her grandfather's special gifts.

Most of the Eternal King's opponents assumed that his incredible compulsion ability was the main ingredient in his success, and possibly it was, but it wasn't the only one. El had something extra that was beyond charisma and charm. It was that nameless extra quality that had blinded Ani to his real nature when she had agreed to the arranged mating, but the truth was that she would have mated El even if she had known his true nature.

The union between them solidified Anumati and allowed it to prosper. Ani represented the noble families controlling the manufacturing conglomerates, and the king needed them on his side, which was why she did not fear assassination.

The only way her husband could get rid of her without losing the support of the leading families was if he found out her role in the resistance and could prove it.

Her mistake had been giving El an heir, which she would not have done if she had known what was hiding beneath the façade her husband projected. Then again, if Ahn had never been born, his daughter would have never existed either, and Annani might be the only hope for the future of a free Anumati.

Ani sighed.

For a short period of time in Anumati's history, things were good, or as good as they could get with a vast population like theirs, and people practically worshiped her husband for bringing peace and prosperity to all while respecting personal freedoms and being mindful of the people's needs.

Not everything had been perfect, though, and the Kra-ell problem had been festering without most of the gods being aware of it, but things had started to deteriorate long before the Kra-ell rebellion, and they had continued getting worse long after it had been quelled.

Dagor



As Dagor watched Frankie walk across the deck, he couldn't help the smile that spread over his face.

Her excitement was evident in the quickness of her steps, the sparkle in her eyes, and the smile on her face. He wondered whether she was excited about seeing him or about the excursion to Tehuacalco that he was starting to have second thoughts about.

She wore khaki cargo pants and a black T-shirt, but that was where her safari look ended. Her feet were clad in a pair of flip-flops, and he suspected the reason for the inappropriate footwear was that she hadn't packed anything more suitable.

After all, visiting Tehuacalco hadn't been on the itinerary, and for a good reason.

Dagor hadn't been aware of how volatile the area was. Lawlessness ruled, and the criminals were armed to the teeth and cruel in the extreme. The vile barbarian acts served to cow the local population and prevent opposition in any form.

He was confident in his ability to protect Frankie, and the large group of Guardians accompanying them could handle any human threat, but she was so fragile, and her life could be snuffed out too easily.

Regrettably, Aru had not allowed him to bring the disruptor or any of their other weapons, and the only ones who were armed were the Guardians.

He'd watched them gather around their leader and listened to the instructions they had been given. They seemed to know what they were doing and were capable of protecting the civilians in the group.

"Hi." Frankie smiled up at him. "I didn't know what to bring. Were we supposed to pack lunch?"

It hadn't occurred to him because he could go without a meal until dinner tonight, but Frankie needed to eat at regular intervals.

"No one said anything about it." He pulled her in for a quick kiss on her lush lips just because he couldn't help himself. "I'll ask."

"That's okay." She patted his arm. "I know Max over there. I'll ask him." She left his side and sauntered over to the leader of the Guardians.

Wasn't Max the guy who had flirted with her by the Lido bar?

Jealousy surging in his chest, Dagor followed Frankie to the guy and stood behind her as she inquired about lunch arrangements.

"We didn't pack anything." Max turned to Kalugal, who was the organizer of the trip. "Do we need to bring food?"

Kalugal smiled. "No need. Luis is bringing water and snacks for us."

"Who is Luis?" Dagor asked.

"Our tour guide." Kalugal wrapped his arm around his mate's waist. "He's such a find. Originally, it was supposed to be just Jacki and me, my second-in-command with his mate, and a couple of Guardians, but when the group grew to twenty-two people, I called him, and he said that he would arrange three more vehicles. There is room for eight in each, including the driver. The front truck will have mostly Guardians, the next one will be ours, with three couples and one armed Guardian next to the driver. If you and Frankie want to ride with us, we can chat on the way."

"Can I get a weapon? I'm not comfortable having just one armed guard in our vehicle."

Grinning, Kalugal lifted his vest to reveal two handguns strapped to his chest. "I'm pretty good with these, and my second is even better." He turned around

and waved over a formidable-looking dude with a machine gun strapped over his shoulder and his arm wrapped around Edna, the judge who had probed their team.

"This is Rufsur, and this is his mate, Edna."

"We have met." Dagor dipped his head to the judge.

"But we haven't." Rufsur extended his hand to Frankie first. "I know who you are. You are Mia's friend."

She nodded. "I'm Frankie. Nice to meet you both." She shook his hand and then offered hers to the judge.

"Hello." Edna regarded her with a smile. "You're a brave soul for coming with us."

"Why, because I'm human?"

"Why else?" Edna tilted her head as if that was a silly question. "Until you transition, you are vulnerable. By the way, do you have any paranormal talents?"

"I can sniff a sale a mile away. Does that count?"

Edna laughed. "It might. Depends on how accurate your predictions are."

"I'm rarely wrong."

"Then perhaps that's your paranormal talent."

"I think everyone is here." Kalugal scanned the group. "Is anyone missing?"

"Negal," Dagor said. "Where did he go? He was here a few moments ago."

"He went to get guns for the two of you," Max said. "Do you know how to use it? I don't want you to accidentally shoot yourself or, worse, your mate."

"We know how to operate firearms, and Frankie is not my mate."

The grin that spread over Max's face demanded a punch to wipe it off, but Dagor stifled the urge. "Don't get any ideas." He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. "For the duration of the cruise, she's mine."

Max arched a brow at Frankie. "Is that true?"

She shrugged. "It depends."

Dagor glared at her. "On what?"

"On how well you behave." She smiled sweetly at him. "I can give you the list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors right now or later. Your choice."

"Have I offended you in any way?"

"As I said. Now or later. Choose."

With Max being an ass and listening in eagerly, the answer was obvious. "Later."

Grinning, Frankie stretched up on her toes and kissed Dagor on the lips. "That's what I thought."

Frankie



Usually, Frankie didn't like jealous, possessive guys. They were bad news. But in Dagor's case, she welcomed his jealousy.

He'd been so smug with his assertions that their romance would only last until the end of the cruise, but given his reaction to Max's barely-there flirting, he was falling for her, and it felt effing awesome.

A god was falling in love with her.

Talk about bragging rights. Except, she was under compulsion to keep her mouth shut about gods and immortals, and that was a damn shame.

As their group walked down the gangway, Frankie eyed the four converted trucks lined up just beyond the inspection point. They had canvas canopies for shade and four rows of two seats in each.

Having no air conditioning was going to be miserable, but it was too late to back out now. Besides, it was an opportunity to spend more time with Dagor, and Frankie wasn't going to give it up just because she was a spoiled city girl who didn't like to sweat.

Thankfully, she'd had the foresight to smear bug repellent over every area of exposed skin, including her feet.

She showed her passport, Dagor flashed his, and they walked through.

"What nationality do you claim?" she whispered.

"We all got Portuguese passports. They are one of the best in the world. It gives us the right to settle and work in any of the EU countries, and it also provides us with visa-free access to nearly two hundred countries and territories."

"Who do you mean by all? Everyone in the clan or just you and your god friends?"

"I don't know what the clan does for passports. I was referring to Aru, Negal, and myself."

At that, Frankie looked over her shoulder to glance at Negal and found him chatting with a couple of Guardians. "Is he okay back there? I don't mind him hanging out with us. I don't want him to feel as if he has to keep his distance."

Dagor waved a dismissive hand. "Negal is loving this. He's missed having the camaraderie of fellow troopers."

"Good. I'm not the kind of girl who hogs her guy's time and wants him all to herself."

He arched a brow. "You still didn't tell me your rules of engagement."

"Later." She followed Kalugal to the second vehicle in the row. "I'll tell you when we are back in my cabin. Alone."

"I don't think I can last that long," Dagor murmured as he climbed into the vehicle behind her. "Something is bothering you, and I want to know what it is, so I don't repeat the mistake."

She waited until he'd sat next to her before leaning her head on his shoulder and whispering, "Next time you wake up before me and decide to leave, you should scribble a note or send me a message. Otherwise, I might think that you were disappointed about our night together and that you don't want to see me again."

His arm tightened around her. "I'm sorry that I made you feel that way. It wasn't my intention."

She looked up at him. "Then what was it?"

He let out a breath. "Let's talk about it later."

The two other couples in the jeep were pretending not to hear their exchange, but she knew that they had heard every word, and she didn't want to give them any more gossip fodder. Besides, she hadn't actually made a list other than what she'd already told him.

How was she going to explain relationships to an alien? Especially since she didn't know whether he was really clueless, overwhelmed by how fast their relationship was moving, or just emotionally stunted.

But maybe he was being smarter than her about it. She could already feel the pain of separation, and they had a full week left to enjoy each other.

As the vehicle in front of them started moving, Frankie watched Negal talking with a couple she wasn't familiar with. The guy was tall and lanky, and the girl was short and pretty.

"That's Vlad and Wendy." Edna turned to look at her as if she had been reading her mind. "They are one of the couples who are getting married on this cruise." She turned back.

"Good to know," Dagor said.

"Are they both..." Frankie stopped as the word immortal refused to leave her mouth, "...you know, different?"

Frankie had forgotten that she couldn't talk about the forbidden subjects because the driver was human. She was pretty sure that Kalugal had taken care of thralling Luis or compelling him so it was safe to talk around him, but that didn't change the nature of Toven's compulsion. Unless the god altered the phrasing, she couldn't say anything about gods or immortals.

"They are." The judge's mate turned to look at them. "You can talk freely around Luis. Kalugal told him about the movie script we are working on." He winked and added in a lower voice, "Later he's going to thrall his memories of this excursion away. As to your question, Wendy is a newly turned immortal." He shifted his gaze to Frankie. "You can talk to her about transitioning."

"Mia can tell me all I need to know."

The movie script idea could be a convenient work-around of Toven's compulsion. If Frankie pretended that she was talking about a script, she could say anything she wanted.

"True, but it's always good to get another perspective," the guy said. "Especially on something as pivotal and irreversible as turning immortal or remaining human."

The vehicle cruised along the smooth pavement, but the comfortable ride didn't last long. As soon as they left the city limits, cutting a swath through the foliage on either side of the road, things became bumpy even though it was still paved. There were potholes everywhere, and fallen vegetation necessitated maneuvering around them.

The seats were old and stiff, and bumping over them was sure to leave her sore by the end of the trip.

"This is going to be tough on my butt," she murmured.

"That's unacceptable," Dagor said, and the next moment she found herself sitting in his lap. "Better?"

"I'm not sure." She smiled and leaned against his chest. "There is still something hard under my butt."

Edna's mate snickered, but the judge remained focused on the road, her shoulders tense and her eyes vigilant.

Dagor must have noticed that as well because he asked, "Forgive me, Edna, but seeing how you are scanning the jungle, I wonder if you can sense the intentions of potential attackers?"

"Unfortunately, no. I need to be close and preferably touch the person. But two of the passengers in the vehicle behind us have intuitive powers. Yamanu and Arwel can sense if anyone has nefarious intentions toward us and sound the alarm."

"What about the others?" Frankie asked.

Edna smiled. "Mey and Jin's talents are incredible as well, and I have no doubt that Kalugal invited them to join our expedition so they could help him

locate the artifact."

Kalugal



Kalugal turned around and looked back at the two rows of elevated seats. Rufsur and Edna were about six inches above him, and the last row where Dagor and Frankie sat was higher by a foot.

It was a good configuration for sightseeing, but it forced him to crane his neck.

"I'm particularly interested in Mey's talent. She can listen to conversations embedded in the walls. So, if this map is for real, which I very much doubt, then perhaps she can hear long-ago conversations that can lead us to where the amulet is."

Edna lifted a brow. "If you are doubtful about the authenticity of the map, why are you taking us into the jungle?"

The female had no sense of adventure. "The search for the artifact is as exciting as finding it, my dear Edna, and while we are at it, we can appreciate this unique site." He assumed his Professor Gunter voice, just without the German accent. "Tehuacalco was the cradle of ancient mystique, dedicated to the worship of mountains, which the Yope people and many other indigenous cultures revered as gods. The mountains were thought to be pillars of the world and the source of divine power."

Rufsur snorted. "That's a nice spin to put on the selection of a strategically advantageous location."

"True," Kalugal agreed. "In the past, everything was attributed to the gods."

He smiled at Dagor. "The site's architecture aligns with the solstices and equinoxes, which is their nod to the gods. As for defending their city, the Yope fortified the natural barrier of the terrain, making it a natural stronghold against invaders."

"What happened to the Yope?" Jacki asked with a smile lifting the corners of her lips. "And it would be fun if you could deliver your lecture in Professor Gunter's accent."

He arched a brow. "Really? You like that?"

"I love that. It always makes me laugh."

"Well, in that case, I'm happy to oblige you, my love." He leaned over and planted a chaste kiss on her lips that promised more passionate kisses later, provided that Darius slept as soundly as he had the previous night.

Their son seemed to love the gentle rocking of the ship.

"Thank you." Jacki's eyes gleamed with the same promise his kiss had made.

Shifting to make himself more comfortable and hide the evidence of his desire for his wife, Kalugal pointed at the village they were passing by. "The Yope were eventually absorbed into these communities," he continued as Professor Gunter. "The Yope didn't leave many written records, so there is very little known about them, and their language and customs are lost to us. What we know about them comes from the stones of Tehuacalco and the legends passed down through generations."

As the paved road ended and the truck thundered over the gravel, Kalugal had to raise his voice to be heard. "It's said that the Yope were fierce warriors, but they also had seers who could commune with the divine. Some believe that their seers helped guide the construction of Tehuacalco, to make it not just a place of worship, but a conduit for celestial power."

Once again, Rufsur snorted. "Is that factual, or are you embellishing it to make our excursion more interesting?"

Kalugal mock-glared at his second-in-command. "I was extrapolating as a preamble to the amulet quest. Way to steal my thunder."

"I'm sorry." Rufsur lifted his hands in the peace sign. "Please, continue."

Kalugal regretted not having the round spectacles he wore as Professor Gunter or the rumpled brown suit. Hopefully, the accent was enough to embellish the story and please his mate. "Legends speak of an artifact of great power capable of bridging the mortal realm with that of the gods. The map I obtained claims that it is hidden in Tehuacalco to safeguard it from those who would use its power to harm others."

"Isn't that what an amulet is supposed to do?" Edna asked. "Protect those who wield it against their enemies and therefore harm them?"

"Well, yes, but then it is used in a righteous way—in self-defense. Those who are not righteous would use it to harm others, subjugate them, and do other terrible deeds." He sighed dramatically. "Perhaps the amulet's discovery will unveil the fate of the Yope—whether they merely faded into history or ascended beyond it as some stories suggest."

"Star people?" Frankie asked. "Is that what ascending beyond means?"

Kalugal shrugged. "Maybe. The truth is that I'm not an expert on Mesoamerican cultures."

"You sound like an expert to me," Dagor said.

"Thank you." Kalugal dipped his head. "I'm well-read, so I know a little, but there is much more to learn, and I wish I had the time, but I'm a father to an infant son who still doesn't sleep well most nights, and my free time is extremely limited." He turned around and wrapped his arm around Jacki's shoulders. "This is the most fun we've had as a couple in a long time."

She settled against him. "We should do this more often. You still haven't taken me to Egypt as you promised."

He winced. "Things were a little iffy in the area, and I kept waiting for them to get better before I took you there, but they just seem to be getting worse."

Jacki frowned. "In what way?"

"I don't want to bore you with the details, love. Let's just enjoy this trip without worrying about things we cannot control."

"I thought that you controlled everything."

"I wish I did, but I'm not there yet, and perhaps I never will be. Have you heard about the law of unintended consequences?"

"Of course."

"It's a bitch, and it has teeth."

Dagor



What had Kalugal's mate meant by her comment about him controlling everything?

It might have been a joke or a tease, but usually it referred to something real.

Dagor hadn't gotten the impression that Kalugal was a pivotal figure in the clan, let alone someone who controlled everything, but he had an arrogant aura about him that reminded Dagor of the royals and other high nobility on Anumati. He mitigated it with charm and humor, and his impersonation of an old German professor had provided comic relief that had eased some of Dagor's anxious energy, but he still didn't like the guy.

"Trouble with InstaTock?" the judge asked.

What the hell was InstaTock?

Kalugal sighed. "The young people of today are too easily impressed by the wrong kind of players, and my platform is being hijacked by promoters of evil ideology. I hate censoring free speech, but I can't condone what's going on, especially since it is so grossly misguided. This generation is figuratively digging its own mass grave and has no clue what is going on. Their ignorance is appalling."

That was a far cry from the levity the immortal had displayed only moments ago.

"What do you mean?" Dagor asked.

Kalugal waved a dismissive hand. "It's not something I want to discuss while we are on our way to a pleasurable treasure hunt. I want to show my wife a well-deserved good time."

Given the tightening of the judge's lips, she didn't like Kalugal's answer. "Is it something we should put on the agenda of our next council meeting?"

Kalugal nodded. "I don't think the clan can do much about it, but I suspect that most of the council members are not aware of what's going on with the human youth of today. If not for my involvement with InstaTock, I wouldn't have been aware of the severity of the problem either and would have continued operating in mindless bliss. I feel that it is my obligation to share what I know with the council."

Jacki rested her head on his shoulder. "You are so wise, my love."

Dagor turned to look at Frankie. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

She shrugged. "I'm not a fan of social media in general, and InstaTock in particular. Those platforms are a mindless time suck. I prefer to spend my time more productively."

"Oh yeah?" He arched a brow. "What do you like to do in your spare time?"

"Visit with family and friends." She grinned at him. "That's what's important in life. Spending time with the people you love and care about is so much better than staring at your phone's screen for hours and reading bullshit that someone or some bots posted. Haven't you noticed how all the articles recycle the same information without even trying to rephrase it? I don't know how they are not sued for plagiarism."

He chuckled. "I did it when we were trying to find hints about surviving gods and Kra-ell. It's frustrating, but how else are we going to find clues that will lead us to the missing Kra-ell pods?"

The smile slid off Frankie's face. "Yeah. How else?" She leaned back and returned to watching the vegetation on her side of the vehicle.

It took him a moment to figure out why she'd gotten upset. Talking about his

mission was a reminder of the limited time they had left together, and it didn't make Dagor happy either. He didn't like to think about leaving Frankie behind, and he liked even less the idea of her finding an immortal male to induce her transition. But he had a mission to complete, and as impossible as it was, he had to do it if he wanted to ever get back home.

As the vehicle bumped along the dirt path, the vegetation on both sides was so overgrown that they had to occasionally duck to avoid being hit by branches. He pulled Frankie closer to shield her, and she let him, for which he was grateful.

At the moment, he wasn't sure whether she was even willing to continue their romance, tryst, hookup, or whatever it was that what they had could be described as. It could only work as long as both of them kept their hearts out of it, but he was struggling with that, and she seemed to be as well.

He would have to ponder the situation later, though. Right now, he needed to keep his senses alert to defend the little sprite who was depending on him to protect her.

His eyes flickering constantly to the dense foliage flanking the road, Dagor searched for hidden signs of danger. The green façade could hide any number of threats, and regrettably, he wasn't gifted with telepathy. Still, he was a god, and he was equipped with a primal alarm system that had served him well in the past.

It wasn't easy given the cacophony of sounds, which might have seemed calming to mortal ears. Birds called to one another in a chorus of high-pitched melodies, and the rustle of leaves and branches moving in the wind could mask the approach of assailants. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth, its musky aroma mingling with the sweet fragrance of flowering vines and the sharp tang of ripening fruit. It was sensory overload, yet beneath it all, Dagor searched for the distinct rankness of ill intentions, the kind of scent that would taint the air with the stench of malevolence.

He could not shake off the feeling of foreboding, and he didn't know whether it was rooted in what Kian had said, the few articles he had read earlier, or his instincts that were fueling his unease the deeper they drove into the heart of the territory.

Over the roar of the old engine, Dagor cataloged every snapped twig, bird call, insect buzz, and distant rustle.

He had to remain vigilant. Reaching out with his senses beyond their immediate surroundings, he scanned for malevolence. If he got even a whiff of danger, he would sound the alarm and shield Frankie or do that in reverse order.

His first priority should be protecting her.

Frankie



It felt as if they had left civilization behind and entered a wild world untouched by humans, but that was just an illusion created by the dense vegetation and the sounds of nature surrounding them.

Frankie had never traveled far away from home. Heck, the farthest she'd gone had been Vegas, and she hated to admit it, but it was nicer than this expedition into the jungle or rain forest or whatever it was called. She'd imagined a jungle being even more dense than what they were passing through.

She didn't like the oppressive heat and humidity, and she didn't like the bugs, but she very much liked having Dagor next to her even though clinging to him was making her sweaty.

He, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed by the heat or by her body being pressed closely to his, but his eyes kept darting around as if he expected someone to jump at them out of the foliage.

She wasn't worried, though. Luis, their driver, appeared unconcerned, and he knew the area and its dangers well. After Kalugal's little lecture, he took it upon himself to explain the history of the region, the various plants that grew there, and the local customs. His English was surprisingly good, and she wondered whether Luis had spent time in the States or was just talented with languages.

He pointed out the towering ceiba trees considered sacred by many Mesoamerican cultures, including the Yope people, explaining that the

colossal trees were believed to connect the underworld to the terrestrial realm and the skies above.

"The ceiba trees were also used to make medicine," Luis said. "The bark is boiled, and the water is used as a diuretic, an aphrodisiac, to relieve headaches, and even to treat diabetes." He turned around and grinned at them. "Have you heard of Ayahuasca?"

"Of course," Kalugal said. "It's a psychedelic drink with some nasty side effects."

"The ceiba tree bark is also used to make different versions of it. Many of the flowers that grow here were used for medicine making." Luis pointed to the orchids clinging to the tree trunks. "Like these ones."

While Frankie found the tour guide's prattle relaxing, it was obvious that Dagor didn't. His posture was stiff, and his eyes were constantly scanning, but he wasn't looking at what Luis was pointing out.

"Hey," she said quietly. "Relax. If there was any danger, do you think Luis would have been talking about trees and flowers? He would have been scanning the area the same way you're doing."

"What if he is in cahoots with the criminals?"

She chuckled. "Kalugal hired him, and I don't think that guy would have taken chances with someone un-vetted. I'm sure he came highly recommended."

Dagor didn't look convinced. "I don't know Kalugal well, and neither do you. I prefer to keep my eyes open, especially since you are here. I need to protect you."

Her heart warmed at his words. "That's sweet." She lifted her head to kiss his cheek. "I feel safe with you."

"Look at this *cotorro*." Luis pointed at a parrot with vibrant colors perching on a limb above their heads. "The Yope people have a legend about a god who could communicate with the people through parrots."

Frankie chuckled. "Can you talk with them?"

"Only if they speak a language I understand."

As the vehicle skirted the edge of a deep ravine, Luis looked back, and Frankie's heart lurched into her throat. "Please look ahead, or you'll get us killed."

He grinned at her as if she was being foolish. "I've driven this road so many times that I can do it blindfolded."

"Please do not," Kalugal said in a stern voice.

Shrugging, Luis turned to look at the road ahead. "I just wanted to say that the Yope utilized the topography created by volcano activity to build their settlements in defendable fortresses. In a moment, we will start seeing the ruins."

The vegetation suddenly cleared, and stone structures appeared.

"This is the ball court," Luis said. "The games were ceremonial, and the losing team was sacrificed to the gods."

Frankie shivered. "I hate that part of history. People used to be so bloodthirsty."

Edna turned around and gave her a sad smile. "They still are, Frankie."

Dagor



As the vehicles rolled to a stop, Dagor stepped out of the truck and took a moment to cast his senses far and wide to scan the area.

Nothing suspicious registered, but he couldn't shake the unease in the pit of his stomach.

"Stay close to me," he said, offering his hand to Frankie.

"That's not a problem." She took it and let him pull her against his body as soon as her feet were on the ground.

He wondered whether she'd acquiesced so quickly because she wanted to be close to him or because she also had a gut feeling that not everything was as tranquil as it seemed.

The air was thick with the scent of earth and growth, the sound of the surrounding forest a steady buzz against the quiet of the weathered stones of the ruins, but aside from the sounds of nature and the noise their group was making, he couldn't discern any other human activity.

Casting a sidelong glance at Kalugal and their tour guide, Dagor noted that neither looked concerned, which should have been reassuring but wasn't. He'd learned long ago not to put his trust in the ability of others to keep him safe.

As Negal sidled up to him, Dagor leaned toward his teammate. "Is it just me, or does something smell off about this place?"

Negal shrugged. "I don't smell anything that is not supposed to be here, but I'm not letting my guard down." He patted the weapons he had strapped under his vest. "I wouldn't mind giving these a try, but I doubt any animals would dare attack us. We are at the top of the food chain predators, and they know that."

Frankie chuckled. "Is that what gods are? Top of the food chain predators?"

"You betcha." Negal's eyes scanned the area.

"Doesn't it bother you that we are the only tourists here?" Dagor whispered. "This is supposed to be a major tourist attraction, so where are all the visitors? Were they all scared away by rumors of cartels operating in the area?"

"Perhaps it's for the best," Negal said. "If we get ambushed, which we won't be, because we will hear them coming from miles away, the Guardians won't need to worry about protecting random humans in addition to the members of our group."

"I know." Dagor let out a breath. "I don't know why I'm so antsy. We are gods. What can a bunch of humans do to us?"

"Precisely." Negal clapped him on the back before walking over to where Kalugal stood.

"Please gather around." Kalugal lifted his hand, and when they'd formed a small circle around him, he produced a stack of folded pages from his pocket. "I made copies of the map for everyone and included translations wherever possible. We can either proceed as a group or split into teams to search for the amulet."

Looking at the piece of paper, Dagor had his doubts about the original's authenticity, and not just because the map looked like something a kid had scribbled.

Noting his expression, Kalugal smiled. "Given the source of this map, I don't really expect us to find anything, but a treasure hunt is a fun way to explore the ruins." He motioned for one of the Guardians to come forward. "If any of you want to get your hands dirty, I also brought some tools for you to use."

As the guy opened the large duffle bag, several people approached, including the two females with the special talents that Kalugal had mentioned before.

"The ancient Yopec carved their lives into these rocks, leaving behind a legacy beneath these roots and vines for us to uncover." Kalugal's gaze swept over the crumbling pyramids and fallen columns.

The tall immortal who could shroud a city block walked up to the Guardian and took an ax pick. "I prefer for us to stay together if you don't mind." He glanced at the human drivers and then back at Kalugal. "Do you want me to employ my special skill on them?"

"What does he mean?" Frankie whispered in Dagor's ear.

"He can shroud our entire group, including the trucks, so no one will see us. It will be as if we are not even here."

"Nifty trick," she murmured.

Kalugal frowned. "That's not a bad idea, Yamanu, but I don't want you to miss out on the fun. Save it for now, and if needed, employ it later. Sounds good?"

The Guardian nodded. "You are right. I'd rather keep an eye on Mey."

His mate scoffed. "I can take care of myself."

"I know you can." He wrapped his arm around her. "But we came here to have fun together." He flashed her a bright smile. "Who knows? Maybe we will find the amulet after all?"

She laughed. "If we find anything, it will be a fake that Kalugal planted in the ruins beforehand."

"Hey!" Kalugal affected an offended tone. "When would I have done that? We arrived here together."

With a hand on her hip, she struck a pose. "You could have sent Luis or someone else to bury it somewhere, and you could have done it days in advance."

The immortal smirked. "Perhaps I did, and perhaps I did not." He scanned the

faces of everyone gathered around him. "We have two hours to find the treasure. Let the hunt begin."

Kalugal



"Once we find the entrance to the underground, I will need volunteers to stay behind and guard it." Max looked at Yamanu and Arwel. "I assume the two of you want to escort your mates on the hunt."

"Correct." Arwel nodded. "I don't sense anything threatening in the vicinity, but things can change in a heartbeat, so it's a good idea to leave a couple of Guardians on watch duty."

"I'll stay," Sheldon said. "Unlike most immortals, I don't like being underground."

"I'll stay too," Eric volunteered. "I came along for the zip line, not the ruins and a fake treasure hunt."

After two more Guardians joined the sentinels, Kalugal was happy with those who were left. Nine Guardians, including Yamanu and Arwel, two gods with unknown abilities, one three-quarters god with formidable compulsion power, and Rufsur were more than enough to safeguard the ladies in the underground portion of the hunt. Then there was Vlad, who was half Kra-ell and rumored to be incredibly strong. He didn't have any training, but sometimes brute force was more important than skill. Kalugal still remembered quite vividly what had happened at the excavation site in China. The underground passage had been booby trapped, and if not for the Odus, they would have had a much more difficult time with the rescue.

Then again, they might not need any of that if they didn't find the entrance to the underground, or if it didn't exist at all.

The crook who had sold him the thing had been convinced that the map was an authentic artifact, and the parchment was the right age to support his claim, but Kalugal had gone on enough treasure hunts to know not to expect anything other than some excitement and entertainment.

It was also possible the amulet had been a legend of the Yope, and someone a long time ago had decided to draw a treasure map either to preserve the story or to sell to some long-dead patsy.

The original map was in a safe back in his home, and Kalugal unfolded the copy to remind himself of the directions.

"Follow me, people." He walked over to a section that was in disrepair and marked with a 'do not enter' sign.

He threw a leg over the rope and then offered his hand to Jacki to help her do the same, even though she didn't need his help.

"Please, be careful." He turned to the group following him. "We don't want anyone to break anything."

Negal looked up from his copy of the map and frowned. "That doesn't look anything like what's on the paper. Are you sure you know where you're going?"

"I'm sure." Kalugal smiled indulgently. "Don't forget that the map was drawn when these buildings still stood in all of their glory. It takes the eye of an archeologist to imagine what was from what is."

Negal nodded. "You're the expert."

"That's right." Kalugal held on to Jacki's hand as he led her and the rest of their group toward a section of the wall that had caught his eye. "Do you see how precisely the stones are aligned?"

She nodded. "Maybe it's a more contemporary section of the structure. The stones look less worn, and the carvings are clearer."

"That they are." He grinned as he ran his hand over several of the symbols. "What we are looking at is an ancient locking mechanism." He moved aside so the others could see. "If you look at your maps, you will notice a sequence

of symbols next to what is marked as a doorway. Compare it to what's on this wall."

"I see it," Jin said. "What do they say?"

"I don't know," Kalugal admitted. "I don't think it matters. What matters is pressing them in the right sequence."

He looked at the symbols on the map before finding their equivalent on the wall and pressing them in the order indicated. When he pressed the last one, and nothing happened, his heart sank with disappointment, but then a low rumble started, a cloud of dust flew into his eyes, and as he blinked it away, a section of the wall receded and shifted to reveal a passageway.

"I'll be damned," Rufsur murmured. "Frankly, I did not expect that."

Kalugal chuckled. "Neither did I."

The entrance was small, barely large enough for one person to squeeze through, and the darkness beyond was so complete that even his immortal eyesight couldn't penetrate it.

Reaching into one of the many pockets of his vest, he pulled out a flashlight and pointed the beam into the opening.

The walls of the passage were lined with the same stones that the exterior of the structure had been built from, and it sloped down.

"I'll go first," one of the Guardians volunteered.

If Jacki weren't with him, Kalugal would have scoffed at the suggestion and gone first, but he wouldn't risk his mate, and there was no way she would let him go ahead of her.

"Thank you." He stepped aside and let the Guardian through.

A moment passed before the guy called out the all-clear, and the rest of them followed inside.

"At least it's cool here." Jacki pushed a strand of hair out of her face. "It's a relief to be out of the sun."

"I'm surprised at the technology," Edna said. "This guarded the secret of the

site from the uninitiated for centuries. I assume that only the priests knew the right combination to enter the underground complex."

"Correct." Kalugal turned his flashlight on the walls, searching for writing or drawings, but they were devoid of decoration. "Given the unadorned walls, I suspect that we are heading to some kind of storage facility. It doesn't seem like this passage was used for ritual purposes."

Dagor



Dagor made sure that he and Frankie were walking in the center of the group, which was the safest spot in case they encountered booby traps. He also held her tucked close to his side, almost carrying her, because he was worried about her inappropriate footwear that left her toes vulnerable.

He was starting to realize that keeping a human safe was a full-time job. It wasn't that he minded being Frankie's protector. In fact, it filled a void in his soul that he hadn't been aware of having, but he was very much aware of how impossible their relationship would be if he wanted it to continue past the cruise.

His decision to keep it casual had been sound, and he needed to stick to it even if it was getting harder and harder to do.

As his arm around Frankie tightened further, she chuckled. "Do you want me to just hop on your back?"

"That's a fantastic idea."

She was so tiny that holding an arm around her and propping her up wasn't comfortable. It would be much easier for him to just carry her.

He was about to swing her onto his back when she stopped him with a vigorous shake of her head. "Don't even think about it. I was just teasing. Trust me. I'm not as fragile as you think I am."

She was, but arguing with her about it was futile. He admired her spunk and

her fearlessness, and he didn't want her to lose her confidence, but she was much more fragile than she thought.

At the front, Kalugal stopped. "Houston, we have a problem."

As far as Dagor knew, none of the people in their group were named Houston.

He leaned to whisper in Frankie's ear. "Who is Houston?"

She smiled up at him. "It's a quote from a movie. People say that when they encounter an obstacle that is difficult to overcome."

When those ahead of them split down the middle to allow everyone to see what had caused the halt in their progress, Frankie gasped. A deep chasm split the passage ahead of them, its depth hard to measure since its walls plunged into the darkness.

Dagor craned his neck as Kalugal shone his flashlight into the void and then on the walls around it. The gap was too wide to jump even with his superior abilities. He might have been able to use the small crevices in the rock walls to climb across, but it was too dangerous for Frankie and probably the other ladies as well.

A treasure hunt wasn't worth anyone getting injured.

"Can we make a bridge?" Kalugal's mate asked.

He shook his head. "The gap is too wide, and the edges are crumbling. Even if we had the materials and tools to build it, I wouldn't trust it to carry us over safely."

"So, what now?" She put her hands on her hips. "Do we go back?"

"Not necessarily." Kalugal shone his flashlight first on one wall and then the other.

"The symbols carved into the stone on both sides are similar to the ones at the entrance to the subterranean tunnel. I bet that they are another Yope puzzle." He walked closer to the wall on the left and started pressing symbols in a sequence that made no sense to Dagor.

When nothing happened, Kalugal shone his flashlight on the other wall. "Someone needs to press the corresponding symbols on the other side." He took out a folded piece of paper and traced the outlines of the symbols in the same sequence he had pressed them before and handed the page to his mate. "I numbered them. When I say one, press the first symbol, and so on. We need to do that simultaneously."

"Got it." Jacki walked over to the other wall. "I'm ready."

As Kalugal called out the numbers and he and his mate pressed the symbols, Dagor wondered about Kalugal's confidence that he had figured out the sequence correctly. What if they pushed them in the wrong sequence and, instead of creating a bridge, collapsed the entire tunnel?

It was good that some of the Guardians had stayed outside so someone would know to come to rescue them. The problem was Frankie and whether he could shield her when the stones came crashing down on them.

Preparing to cover her with his body, he leaned over her so her head was protected.

Except, Kalugal had been right, and as he and Jacki pressed the last symbol, a grinding rumble began, and a few minutes later a platform rose from the depths of the chasm. It kept inching up until it was flush with the floor of the tunnel.

"Don't step on it yet," Rufsur said. "Let's test it first." He took off his heavy backpack and tossed it as far as he could onto the platform.

When it didn't even shake, he nodded. "Seems stable, but I suggest that we cross with extreme caution, one person at a time."

"I agree." Kalugal started walking without further preamble.

When he was on the other side, he motioned for his mate to proceed.

Rufsur lifted his arm to stop her. "Your mate is too rash sometimes. I'm more careful. Allow me please to tie a rope around you. Once you make it to the other side, release it so we can tie it around the next person."

Jacki nodded. "Good thinking." She looked at Kalugal. "You shouldn't have

crossed without a rope."

Rufsur grinned. "Keeping your hubby safe is a full-time and thankless job. He never appreciates what I do for him, and he hardly ever listens."

"That's not true," Kalugal said from the other side of the platform. "I appreciate everything you do, but that doesn't mean I have to follow your suggestions to the letter."

Holding the length of rope over his arm, Rufsur arched a brow. "Do you want me to tie it around Jacki or not?"

There was a moment of hesitation before Kalugal nodded. "I'm almost certain that there is no need for it, but now that you've planted the seed of doubt in my mind, I can't ignore it."

Frankie



Once they were all safely on the other side of the platform, Frankie smiled up at Dagor. "I feel like I'm in an Indiana Jones movie. I hate to think these wonderful memories will be erased at the end of the cruise. It would be such a shame to lose them."

Dagor's eyes seemed haunted as he looked at her. "Since you're going to their village right after the cruise, there's no need to erase your memories."

Frankie didn't want to point out in front of everyone that she had only a limited time to find an immortal to bond with and then transition. If she didn't, she couldn't stay in the village, and her memories would be erased.

"It might be necessary," said the Guardian mated to Jin.

She couldn't remember his name. Was it Ariel? No, that didn't sound right.

"Why?" Dagor asked.

"Two weeks' worth of memories is more or less the limit of what can be safely erased with a thrall. Compulsion to stay silent about us lasts longer, but it needs to be periodically reinforced, which means that we would have to keep tabs on Frankie throughout her life. The best thing for her is to attempt transition as soon as she can, so if she's not a Dormant, and we need to make her forget about us, the damage will be minimal."

Dagor swallowed. "I understand, but Frankie is not ready to decide whether she wants to turn immortal, and it's too big of a decision to rush into."

Arwel, now she remembered the name, cast Dagor a knowing smile. "The decision is much easier when the Dormant bonds with an immortal." He paused for a moment. "Or a god."

"We are not—" Dagor halted mid-sentence as Kalugal lifted his hand to signal for everyone to stop.

Nevertheless, Frankie had no trouble guessing what he had intended to say, and the rejection pierced her heart. It shouldn't have, not after all the self-talk of convincing herself that she was just having a shipboard fling.

Swallowing, she affected a nonchalant tone. "What is it? Why did we stop?"

"Take a look." Dagor tapped the shoulder of the Guardian blocking her view.

As the guy moved aside, Frankie gasped.

Ahead, the tunnel turned into a wide corridor that was lined with statues of fierce warriors, each gripping a weapon and poised for battle. The detail was extraordinary, making the statues look eerily lifelike. Each held a different battle pose as if they had been frozen mid-movement.

Kalugal pulled out his phone and started snapping pictures, but he didn't move from his spot, and soon everyone else was following his example and taking photos, including Frankie.

If she didn't transition, would they erase the pictures she'd taken on the trip as well?

Probably. But maybe she could convince them to just alter her memories so she wouldn't remember anything about them being immortals or gods but could retain everything else.

"These are the guardians of the treasure," Kalugal murmured while snapping away. "I bet that this corridor is booby trapped."

His matter-of-fact voice echoed through the gallery, breaking the oppressive silence that emanated from the frozen statues. He was right about suspecting the significance of their battle-ready poses. They were a warning as much as a threat.

"The floor tiles have a pattern," Jacki said. "Some are a little elevated

compared to the others. The question is whether we should step on the elevated ones or avoid them."

"Most likely, we should avoid them." Kalugal crouched to observe the floor. "The elevated stones probably house pressure-sensitive triggers."

"Let's test it." Negal moved forward with his pickax. Crouching, he reached with his tool for the nearest elevated stone and tapped it.

Nothing happened.

"Apply more force," Kalugal said. "It's supposed to respond to a person's weight."

"Right." Negal lifted the pickax, turned it to its blunt side, and brought it down on the stone with enough force that dust rose from it in a billowing cloud that blocked Frankie's view.

At the same time, a swishing sound was followed by a thump, and when the dust settled, she saw an arrow embedded in the head of the statue nearest the stone.

"As I said." Kalugal rose to his feet. "The elevated stones have triggers. But I think some of the others do, too." He lifted his flashlight to the face of the warrior whose bow had released the arrow. "His eyes are trained on the stone Negal activated, and so was his arrow before he fired it. I bet that's true for the other statues as well."

He turned to Rufsur. "I need some chalk."

When his second-in-command handed it to him, Kalugal extended his hand to Negal. "I also need that pickax."

"What are you going to do?" Negal asked as he handed it to him.

"I'm going to tap the stones that I think are safe, step on them, and mark them so the rest of our group can cross safely."

"I can do that," Negal offered.

Kalugal hesitated for a moment before nodding. "You need to avoid the ones that are in the statues' direct line of sight and where their weapons are

pointed. Those are the rigged ones."

"Got it." Negal took the chalk from Kalugal and proceeded to tap the stone next to the one he'd activated a moment ago.

Frankie held her breath as Negal tested one stone after the other, marking a zigzagging pattern for the rest of them to follow. It took him a long time to mark a path across the corridor, or maybe it just seemed like that to her.

"Breathe," Dagor murmured. "Negal is a god. Even if he gets hit with one of these arrows or javelins, it's not going to kill him."

"I know. But I don't want him to get hurt." She looked up at Dagor's gorgeous face. "You feel pain the same way as humans do, right?"

He nodded. "Yes, we do."

Dagor



Frankie had meant physical pain, and she was right. Gods felt pain the same way as humans, but right now, the pain Dagor was thinking about was the one in his heart.

Why the hell had he gotten attached to the little sprite so fast?

Without her high heels she was tiny, barely reaching his chest, and they probably looked ridiculous together, but that was the least of his concerns. Princess Annani was just as tiny, and she was a magnificent goddess, powerful beyond compare and just as lovely.

Still, Frankie had managed to burrow into his heart and sink her little claws into him.

It had been a mistake to invite her on this adventure. The danger was more perceived than real, but it still triggered every protective instinct in him, and that exacerbated the complicated feelings he already had for her.

When everyone had finally made it over the stone warriors' gallery, Kalugal continued at a snail's pace, examining every etching on the walls and every paving stone under their feet.

Sloping down and turning in large circles, the tunnel continued for about five hundred feet until it opened into a cavernous chamber.

Once again, Negal tested the archway and the area right in front of it before allowing the rest of them to follow.

Dagor had a feeling that they had been going in circles around this chamber, and since the path was sloping down, they had gone about seventy feet below, which seemed to be the height of the ceiling. The Yope had carved this chamber out of the bedrock, along with a tunnel spiraling around it.

What these primitive people had managed to achieve was quite impressive.

It occurred to Dagor that Kalugal might have planned this trip months in advance and that he had created the entire experience as some sort of future amusement attraction that tourists would pay handsomely to visit, and their group was the test run.

Dagor hadn't had many opportunities to talk to the guy, but he'd gotten the impression that the immortal was very smart and motivated by financial gain. He might have seen an opportunity to exploit the ruins to make money.

Then again, given that tourism to Acapulco had dried up because of the cartels, that wouldn't have been a smart business decision.

Shifting his eyes back to the chamber, Dagor waited for Kalugal to make his next move.

The large circular platform in the center of the room was surrounded by a moat-like gap that was about thirty feet wide. He and Negal could probably jump over it, but he doubted even the immortal Guardians could do that.

The ladies, for sure, had to use the stepping stones, and those were probably just as tricky as in the two previous obstacles.

Kalugal took a couple of steps forward and examined the symbols etched into the platform. "These are ancient astrological signs," he said. "Each of them corresponds to a celestial body known to the Yope. The sequence of the stepping stones might be determined by the correct chronological sequence of the astrological areas as they understood them during the time they built this place."

"No offense, but that sounds convoluted," Dagor said. "I would trust more the pattern of wear and tear on the stones. Those that were used often will show more signs of erosion and have smoother edges."

"Let's draw a map." Kalugal reached into his pocket and produced another

folded piece of paper. "I will chart the path based on the sequence of the astrological signs, and we will see whether those stones have more wear and tear."

Once he had the map, Kalugal took the chalk out of his pocket and proceeded to the edge of the moat.

"Wait," Negal said. "I can probably jump across. Do we all need to get to the platform? There is nowhere to go from there, and if the amulet is on it, I can just retrieve it, and we will be done with this adventure."

"What would be the fun in that?" Kalugal murmured while reaching into his pocket. "Let's consult the map." He pulled out one of his folded pages, unfurled it, and examined the drawings. "According to this, there is a staircase leading from the center of the platform down into another chamber and from there to a smaller one where the amulet is supposed to be. So, it seems that we all need to cross." He lifted his eyes to Negal and smiled. "Besides, I wouldn't want you to risk making the jump and missing. I would much rather employ the scientific approach and deliver you uninjured and in one piece back to the ship."

Negal shrugged. "You're the boss."

The tall Guardian who could shroud a village chuckled. "I could jump across and check whether there is a staircase leading down or not, but I know better than to suggest it." He smirked. "Kalugal would never forgive me if I take away an opportunity for him to prove how smart and knowledgeable he is."

Kalugal scoffed, "I can also jump thirty feet with ease, but why take the risk? To save a few minutes? It doesn't make sense. Using smarts is always better than relying on brawn."

"Boys." His mate lifted a hand. "You can compete to find out who can jump farther when we get back on the ship. We have a wedding to attend, and this has already taken almost two hours. We need to finish this treasure hunt and head back."

Frankie



As Frankie had expected, Kalugal had been right about the sequence following astrological signs, and they had all crossed safely across the moat, stepping on the stones he had marked for them.

He waited until everyone was over before pointing to the opening in the floor. "The staircase is right here, just as it was marked on the map, but it's narrow, and there is no guard rail. Please, watch your step."

He was probably talking to the only human because the others would have no problem navigating the narrow staircase.

When their turn arrived, and Frankie looked down, she turned to Dagor. "You need to let go. We can't fit side by side on the stairs."

He grimaced and reluctantly removed his arm from around her waist. "Give me your hand. I'll go first, and you follow, so if you fall, I'll catch you."

Smiling, she stretched on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I like your protector act. It's kind of cute."

"It's not an act."

"I know." She gave him her hand. "Let's go. We are holding up the line."

The truth was that the narrow staircase scared her. It was a spiral, so she couldn't assess how deep down it went, and that bothered her.

Holding on to her with one hand and the flashlight in the other, Dagor started

the descent, going one step at a time and annoying everyone behind them who didn't need to be as careful.

"We can go a little faster." Frankie put her other hand on the wall for balance more than anything else. There was nothing to hold onto, and she was grateful for Dagor's hand.

He kept the same pace despite her comment, and it was a good thing because the staircase kept spiraling down without any landings to break it up, and she was getting dizzy. Not only that, but her leg muscles were starting to hurt something fierce, and she cursed herself for not keeping up with ballet practice or at least hitting the StairMaster in the gym.

When they finally reached the bottom, she leaned her forehead against Dagor's side. "My head is spinning. I need a moment."

"Take your time." Dagor rubbed soft circles on her back.

She was still sweaty and warm from going down the stairs, but the chamber was so cold that soon she was shivering.

Wrapping an arm around her, Dagor brought her tighter against his side. "My offer to carry you on my back still stands. You'll be warmer."

"Not a chance." She wasn't going to embarrass herself in front of all the immortals.

The only illumination in the chamber was coming from the flashlights that they were all holding, but it seemed like it was empty. Perhaps at one time it had served as a storage area for the temples, but now all that remained were some etchings on the walls that seemed much cruder than the ones they had encountered before.

"Should I do it here?" Mey asked Kalugal.

"Do you feel like you should?"

She nodded. "This place gives me the creeps, so I'm not sure that I want to. I have a feeling that the echoes in these walls are not going to be pleasant."

Kalugal regarded her for a moment. "Can you even do that with everyone here?"

She let out a breath. "Usually, I would have said no, but this place reeks of tragedy."

"It's up to you," Kalugal said. "If you don't want to do it, don't. After all, we are here to have fun, right?"

Frankie was disappointed but also relieved. She would have liked to see Mey's talent at work, but she didn't want to hear about ancient tragedies. She wasn't much of a history buff, but the ancient Mesoamericans were known for their bloodthirsty religions and rituals. What if this was a ritual chamber where they had sacrificed people to their gods?

"I'll do a quick listen." Mey motioned for everyone to give her space. "If you can all be quiet for a few minutes, that would be helpful."

Her mate looked worried, and as the two exchanged silent communication, Frankie was sure that he was trying to convince Mey not to do it.

Yeah, good luck with that.

If Frankie had Mey's talent, she wouldn't have been able to resist either. How often did Mey have a chance to be in an ancient chamber that seemed like it hadn't been visited in centuries?

Well, perhaps this was her job, so it might be quite often.

Frankie didn't envy Mey. She wouldn't have wanted to have her talent and listen to sad stories lingering in ancient walls, no matter how well it paid.

Mey

Why am I doing this?

It was morbid curiosity, and Mey knew she would pay for it with nightmares, but she couldn't shake the urge to listen to those tragic echoes.

Was it Kalugal's doing?

Was he compelling her somehow without actually saying the words?

As far as she knew, that wasn't possible. Compulsion didn't work like thralling. He couldn't reach into her mind and command her to do something she didn't want to do. He had to verbalize his command, and he hadn't.

He had left the choice to her.

The thing was, no one else could bear witness to the lives lost in this dark place, and Mey felt like it was her obligation to do so because she was the only one who could.

As her companions moved aside to clear space for her and the chamber fell silent, she sat on the floor in the lotus pose and closed her eyes.

She didn't even need to meditate to hear the echoes. The walls vibrated with the intense emotions embedded deep within the rock. At first, the whispers were indistinct, a cacophony of highs and lows, but as she attuned herself, the emotional pitches became clear—sharp cries of fear, the authoritative shouts

of orders, the low murmurs of desperate pleas.

The language was foreign, and Mey couldn't make out the words, but emotions transcended the barriers of language. The terror was palpable, the suffering deep, and the finality of the cries indicated a tragic end. The vibrations spoke of a massacre, of lives violently and abruptly extinguished within these very walls.

The intensity of the emotional imprints was overwhelming, and with a gasp, Mey opened her eyes and severed the connection. Her heart was racing, her breath shallow, and with a hand on her chest, she shook her head.

"I shouldn't have done this. It was a slaughter. So much fear and pain..." She trailed off, unable to continue.

Yamanu knelt next to her and wrapped her in his arms. "It was a very long time ago, love."

"I know." She lifted her eyes to him. "But tragedies like this still happen today. We think that humanity has evolved since those dark days, but it hasn't. Not really." She turned to look at the two gods. "When I was still human, I believed in God, the creator, the divinity, and I held on to that belief even after turning immortal, only adding the Fates to my arsenal of entities to pray to. But after witnessing things like this, it's difficult to believe in a benevolent force."

Negal looked lost for words, and Dagor regarded her with sympathy in his eyes. "We don't have any answers, either. Perhaps the Kra-ell have it right, and their Mother of All Life is a merciless deity that rewards the brave and punishes the cowardly. Who knows, right?"

Mey offered Dagor a sad smile. "Apparently, no one. We are just specks of nothing on the enormous tapestry of the universe."

"I prefer to think that we are everything," Kalugal said. "We are the creators of reality, and therefore, we are all divinities. Each one of us." He grinned. "Well, the good who create are divinities. The bad who destroy are monsters and demons, and it's a never-ending battle in which the good eventually wins."

Mey didn't know whether to laugh at Kalugal's bombastic statement or to

actually ponder it, but in either case, it made her feel a little better.

Rising to her feet, she dusted off her jeans and leaned on Yamanu for comfort. "I don't know if that's true, but it's definitely a more positive outlook. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Kalugal tilted his head. "Now, the question is whether you learned something useful from these walls."

"Only that this chamber was used for sacrifices. If the amulet is nearby, perhaps we shouldn't touch it. What if it induces a killing spree?"

"Or turns people insane," Jacki said. "Did anyone think to bring gloves?"

"I did." Jin produced a pair of latex gloves from her back pocket. "I thought that Kalugal would make us dig for the treasure, and I didn't want to get my fingernails dirty. They are a bitch to clean."

"Good thinking." Mey clapped her sister on her back. "If we find the amulet, we will use the gloves to pick it up."

"Where to now?" Jacki asked Kalugal.

He consulted his map again, turned in a circle, and pointed toward a length of the wall that didn't seem any different than the rest except for the symbols carved on it.

"I guess we need to decipher the riddle of the symbols again."

Jacki peered over his shoulder at the map. "It doesn't provide the sequence for this entrance."

"It doesn't, but I think I can figure it out. If not, we can always blow a hole in the wall to get in."

Rufsur patted his huge duffle bag. "I have all we need for that in here."

Frankie



When a section of the wall started to retract, Frankie wasn't surprised that Kalugal had figured out the sequence. He had repeatedly proven that he knew what he was doing.

When the wall stopped moving, a narrow entrance less than five feet tall was revealed. Even Frankie would have to duck to get through, and Yamanu would probably need to bend in two.

"Wait." Negal stopped Kalugal with a hand on his shoulder. "Let me go in first."

Turning, Kalugal blocked the entrance with his body. "I am grateful for your assistance, Negal, and for putting yourself in harm's way to protect me, but I am three-quarters god, and I really don't need protecting."

Negal frowned. "How can you be three-quarters god?"

Frankie wondered the same thing. As far as she knew, Annani and Toven were the only two gods other than Dagor and his teammates, and they were cousins who had never been romantically or otherwise involved. Also, neither of them was Kalugal's parent.

"That's not important," Kalugal said. "I'm going in first, and if you are so concerned about my well-being, you can follow right behind me."

Negal waved a dismissive hand. "You are the boss."

"Thank you." Kalugal smiled before ducking through the narrow entrance.

Negal followed and, a few moments later, reappeared to tell the rest of them that they could come through.

Frankie and Dagor entered behind Mey and Yamanu, with Jin and Arwel entering right behind them.

Frankie was surprised to see torches flicker, casting the stark chamber in soft illumination.

Kalugal hadn't brought them with him, so they must have been left behind in the chamber, surviving for centuries. Was there magic involved?

The hewn-out room was simple and unassuming compared to the elaborate decorations and contraptions they had encountered on the way.

Humidity clung to the air, making Frankie's breathing laborious. It indicated that there was a source of water somewhere in the underground because she doubted that the moist air had come from the outside. But then, she was no expert on caves and underground structures, and maybe the moisture from above was seeping through the earth and stone.

After all of Kalugal's hype, she'd expected the inner chamber that housed the amulet to be grand, and after Mey's revelations, she'd expected to find skeletons lining the walls, but the only two interesting elements about the place were the cleverly disguised entrance and the pedestal that stood at its center.

From where Frankie stood, it just looked like a column of rough stone with some symbols etched on its surface. Unless the amulet was housed inside a hidden compartment, it wasn't there.

"What does it say?" Jacki asked as Kalugal carefully approached the column. The subdued lighting from the flickering torches was not optimal.

"No clue." He reached out and tapped the top of the stone with the pickax. "The only thing I can tell you is that they are different than the ones that opened the way. My guess is that they are warnings."

"The map doesn't say anything either," Rufsur's mate said.

Frankie pulled out the copy Kalugal had given her and unfolded it to confirm, even though it made little sense to doubt Edna's assessment.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Jacki rubbed her hands over her arms. "Maybe we should just leave it be."

Kalugal turned to look at her with a frown. "How bad is the feeling?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. I need to touch the column."

"Not happening until I determine that it's safe." Kalugal moved closer and tapped the column with the pickax again, more forcefully this time.

Leaning against Dagor's solid body, Frankie felt safe enough, but she shared Jacki's premonition of dread. It wasn't overwhelming, but it was there.

The question was whether it was just a reaction to what Mey had said, the buildup of anticipation, or something that she should actually heed.

Kalugal repeated the tapping a couple more times, and when nothing happened, he put his hand on the pedestal and shone his flashlight on its top.

"I think I've found what we came here looking for." He turned to Jin. "Can I have the gloves, please?"

She shook her head. "They won't fit your hands."

"They will fit mine," Jacki said. "I only need one."

"Be careful." Jin handed the glove to her. "There might be snakes, scorpions, or poisonous spiders in there, or worse, a booby trap that will chop off your hand when you reach for the amulet."

Jacki grimaced. "Thanks for the images. I hate spiders."

Frankie hated all creepy-crawlies, but she was more worried about a possible booby trap. From everything they had encountered so far, that was the most likely danger.

"There's an item right at the top of what appears to be a carved-out bowl," Kalugal said. "I can't see what's under it, and I'm worried that once the weight is removed, the entire chamber will collapse around us."

Rufsur chuckled. "This isn't an Indiana Jones movie."

"It sure feels like one," Jacki murmured. "Does anyone have anything that can fit in here that weighs around a pound and is disposable? We need to make a quick swap."

"You can take this." Edna removed her chunky necklace and handed it to Kalugal. "I knew there was a reason for choosing to wear this particular accessory today."

"Thank you." Kalugal walked around the pedestal and held the necklace. "Are you sure you don't mind losing it?"

"I'm sure," Edna said. "It's a relief to get it off."

Snapping the glove onto her hand, Jacki looked at Kalugal. "On the count of three."

He nodded.

Frankie held her breath, and at her back, Dagor wrapped himself around her, shielding her with his body.

If the situation wasn't so tense, she would have turned around and kissed him.

"One," Jacki started the count, "two, three!"

As she snatched the thing up, Kalugal replaced it with Edna's necklace so fast that Frankie didn't see him move.

For a moment, everyone held their breath, waiting for the ceiling to start crumbling on top of them or the walls to start moving in to crush them, but when several moments passed and nothing happened, a collective sigh of relief sounded.

"Now I know for sure that Kalugal planted the trinket." Dagor pointed at the package in Jacki's hands. "No paper or twine would have survived this long without falling apart."

Kalugal smiled and put a hand over his chest. "I don't know whether I should be flattered or offended. To plan such an elaborate setup would have been the work of a genius." He winked at Dagor.

Jacki

Jin approached Jacki with the other latex glove in hand. "You can't unwrap the package with just one gloved hand without it touching your skin. You will need both."

Looking at the small package she was holding, Jacki didn't reach for the glove. "I need to touch it to know what it does." She lifted her eyes to Kalugal. "How else will we know?"

He seemed conflicted, but then his mouth narrowed. "Let me touch it first. If it doesn't bite, I'll hand it over to you."

His gallantry was appreciated, but Jacki wasn't some wallflower who needed to be swathed in bubble wrap and protected. Why should her mate put himself in harm's way for her sake?

"What can you do that I can't?"

He smiled indulgently. "I don't like to point it out, but my lineage makes me much more resilient. If this thing is dangerous and unleashes hell, I have a better chance of surviving whatever it does."

That was a fair point. Jacki was a weak immortal who'd taken forever to transition, and her mate was three-quarters god, as he liked to boast.

"Fine." She handed it to him.

"Thank you." He took the package without hesitation, tore the twine apart with ease, and then carefully unwrapped the material that wasn't paper like

Dagor had thought but some kind of fabric that was soaked in faintly fragrant oils.

"Do you feel anything?" Jacki asked.

Kalugal shook his head. "It's old, it is made from gold, and it houses a large fire opal." Kalugal lifted the amulet by its chain to let everyone see.

The opal was magnificent in size and in color. The kaleidoscope of fiery hues started with a fierce orange core that looked as if it was alight with an inner flame. It was bordered by flashes of red, green, and yellow that shifted as the amulet gently swung from Kalugal's fingers on its chain. The gold edges of the housing were etched with symbols or glyphs, and Jacki assumed that they were either incantations that were supposed to be uttered at ceremonies or represented power, protection, or maybe even a blessing.

It didn't radiate evil, but it didn't project anything good either. In fact, it seemed like a pretty trinket that looked impressive but held no power.

"It's beautiful," Frankie said. "But it's also terrifying."

Jacki frowned. "Why do you say that? Do you feel anything?"

She shook her head. "I'm not talented that way, but those red splotches look like blood. It's possible that I'm still being influenced by what Mey said about the other room."

Frankie might have the simple gift of human intuition, and Jacki wasn't going to dismiss it. Turning to Kalugal, she extended her hand. "Can I hold it now?"

"Not yet." He dropped the amulet into his other hand and closed his fingers around the stone. "I need to make sure that it's not poisonous."

Jin snorted. "If you are worried about poisons, you should have worn the gloves when you unwrapped the amulet. The fabric was soaked in some sort of oil."

"I'm well aware of that, and I did it on purpose. If there was anything in it, I wanted to feel its effect before I handed the amulet to Jacki." He opened his fingers and extended his hand to her. "You can take it now."

Finally.

Under her mate's watchful gaze, Jacki took the chain and lowered the stone into her other hand. She didn't even need to close her eyes for the vision to surge into her mind with perfect clarity.

But unlike most of her visions that were of an object's distant past, the amulet sent Jacki's mind to a recent scene.

As she watched the horrific events unfolding, Jacki was dimly aware that there was no way that the amulet was being worn or held by any of the victims or the monsters attacking them. The power of the amulet enhanced her psychic ability, showing her an event that was unrelated to her or anyone she knew.

Jacki had never witnessed such brutality, and wanting the vision to stop, she dropped the amulet, but the images continued, and she was forced to watch as the cartel monsters slaughtered adults, children, and babies, as they violated young girls and old women alike, and after corralling the young girls and women, they set the village on fire to eliminate the evidence of the slaughter.

One by one, the faces of the kidnapped girls flashed before her mind's eye—their red-rimmed eyes brimming with tears of pain and grief, their broken souls calling out to her.

The amulet was no longer in her hands, but it still funneled the horror of their reality into her mind with a visceral force, each sob and plea another bleeding slash to her heart.

"Jacki!" She heard Kalugal's panicked voice. "Open your eyes, sweetheart. You are safe. I've got you."

His voice chased the last of the horrors away, and she collapsed into his arms, sobbing. "We have to save them. They are not far from here. There is still time. We have to get them before they are moved, and we lose them forever."

"Who, sweetheart? Who do we need to get?"

"The girls. We need to save the girls."

They also had to destroy the accursed amulet, but that wasn't urgent. They would do it after rescuing the victims.

Dagor



As Kalugal's mate recounted the atrocities she'd seen in her vision, tears streamed down her face, and her voice trembled. Her words painted a harrowing picture of the suffering inflicted on the innocent, but Dagor had a feeling she was censoring some of the most horrific parts to spare Frankie and the other ladies the worst of it.

Males were better equipped to deal with such things than females, the pain turning into rage and igniting a fire that prompted them to action.

Dagor would tear off the heads of those monsters one by one with his bare hands.

It wouldn't help the dead and the tortured, but justice would be served, and the innocents would be avenged. To let evil triumph by allowing it to get away was almost as bad as standing by and not doing anything to stop it.

He didn't care that it wasn't his fight and that he and his teammates were specifically forbidden to intervene. He was stuck on this rock anyway, so he'd better clean up his new home as best he could.

First, though, he had to get Frankie to safety.

Turning to her and seeing her tear-stricken face only hardened his resolve to get her as far away as possible from this blasted place and back to the ship.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I won't let anything happen to you." He leaned to kiss the top of her head.

"I know." She turned to bury her face in his shirt and continued crying.

If only he could lend her some of his rage, maybe it could burn away her tears, but he couldn't.

Frankie was strong, and Dagor had no doubt that she would find her own coping mechanism.

"Can you guide us to where they are being held?" Kalugal asked his mate.

Nodding, she took the amulet from him. "I will use this thing to find the girls, and once they are safe, we will drop it in the middle of the ocean." Her face twisted with disgust as she lifted the chain and let it dangle from her fingers. "It derived its power from all the people who were sacrificed in the other chamber. I will use it to save the lives of these girls but for nothing else."

For a moment, Kalugal looked like he wanted to argue with her, but then he nodded. "Let's move out. There is no time to lose."

Dagor ran soothing circles over Frankie's back as she continued sobbing quietly against his shirt. "Negal and I will fight by your side, but we need to get Frankie and the other ladies to safety first. We can give them one of the vehicles, and they can return to the ship."

"I'm not going anywhere," Jin hissed. "I will tear those monsters' throats out with my fangs, and before I do that, I will gouge their eyes out with my claws."

Her ferocity was a song to his ears, but it was also shocking to see her elongated fangs. Had the immortals mutated over time? Or was she a descendant of the Kra-ell?

"I'm not going back either," Mey said. "I can fight humans. Besides, those girls will need to see women coming to their rescue. After what was done to them, they will be terrified of men." She glanced at Frankie. "I'm sorry, but we can't give you one of our three vehicles so you can return to the ship. You'll have to come with us."

Frankie nodded. "I want to help in any way I can."

Mey smiled. "The best way for you to help is to stay in the truck and hide

while we take care of business."

Kalugal nodded. "I agree." He turned to Dagor. "Your job is to keep Frankie safe. The rest of us can handle the cartel and the rescue operation."

"I'm a god," he protested. "I can freeze them in place with one mind command."

"So can I," Kalugal said. "I know that you have military training, but we are not going to fight an army, and the Guardians are well trained for precisely these kinds of operations. Your abilities will be best utilized protecting Frankie."

Dagor's jaw clenched. The need to avenge the lives lost and destroyed was burning in his soul, but he also needed to protect Frankie, and Kalugal was right.

Besides, Negal could fight on the immortals' side, and he was a more experienced trooper than Dagor.

"I'll shroud our convoy," Yamanu said. "They won't know what hit them, and it will be over before it started."

Max bared his elongated fangs. "That sounds like a letdown. I want them terrified and peeing in their pants; I want them to experience what these innocent villagers did when they attacked them out of the blue, and I want to tear their throats out and watch them bleed."

"Gross," Frankie murmured against Dagor's shirt. "But I totally approve."

If Dagor wasn't already in love with her, he would have fallen for her right then and there.

Wait, what?

He loved her?

Right now wasn't the time or place to panic because he had feelings for the girl, but he would revisit that disturbing revelation after the mission was executed, the cartel monsters were dead, and the girls were on their way to safety.

Frankie



As they retraced their steps through the labyrinthine passages of the caverns, Frankie's heart pounded with a mix of fear and resolve. Thankfully, Kalugal's chalk marks had not been erased by the many footsteps that had passed over them, and they carefully navigated the traps without triggering them on their way out.

She kept close to Dagor, his solid body and protective presence a comfort against the sheer magnitude of what Jacki had seen and what they were about to do.

The most dangerous thing Frankie had ever done was fighting off a horde of shoppers at the semi-annual Nordstrom sale, and even though they had been vicious, none of them had carried machine guns.

Emerging into the sunlight, she squinted and pulled out her sunglasses. Next to her, Dagor did the same.

Some of the other immortals and Negal also donned protective eye gear, but Mey and Jin didn't. By now, Frankie knew that harsh sunlight was a problem for the immortals, and she speculated whether the sisters were transitioned Dormants, and that was why they were less sensitive to the sun.

After Kalugal explained the situation to the Guardians who had stayed behind, he also told Luis and the other drivers about what Jacki had seen. They reacted in alarm and wanted to rush off to check on relatives who lived in the small villages in the area.

There was no cellular reception, but the clan's phones operated via satellite, and the Guardians allowed the drivers to each place a couple of calls to check with loved ones.

The curious thing was that none of them doubted Kalugal's assertion that his wife had seen the massacre in a vision.

When they were reassured that their relatives were fine, an argument started when they tried to guess which village had been attacked, but Kalugal put a stop to it with one voice command.

Kalugal's Spanish was flawless, but Frankie's was barely enough to understand what they were saying.

As their group quickly settled in the trucks, the engines roared to life, but this time Frankie and Dagor were not riding together with Kalugal and Jacki.

They were once again in the middle vehicle, but the other couple took the lead so Jacki could point the way.

Dagor's arm was tight around Frankie's shoulders, and she was grateful for him being there for her. Knowing that a god who was practically indestructible was protecting her kept the panic at bay.

She reminded herself that all of them were formidable immortals and that the cartel monsters stood no chance against this force of tourists turned rescuers—defenders of the innocent against the encroaching shadow of evil.

A sense of stupid pride filled her for being associated with this group of extraordinary people. Upon hearing Jacki's account of what was at stake, none of them hesitated even for a moment before rushing to help the victims.

In the back of her mind, Frankie cataloged that feeling in the pro-transition arguments. Her family was a heavy weight in the against-transition pan, but this impromptu rescue tilted the scales so the two pans were almost balanced now.

Frankie wanted to be part of the force for good.

Except, Dagor wasn't part of the clan and never would be. If a miracle happened and he changed his mind about leaving right after the cruise, he

still couldn't come with her to the immortals' hidden village.

This reminded her that Yamanu was supposed to be shrouding their convoy, but since she could still see everyone, he wasn't.

"When is Yamanu going to start shrouding us? These trucks make so much noise that they can probably be heard all the way to the ship."

"He's already doing it," one of the Guardians sitting behind them said. "You are not affected by it because he's excluding you and the human drivers from the shrouding."

"Ha," Dagor exclaimed. "I didn't know that it was possible. He needs to teach me his trick."

The Guardian smiled. "It took him a long time to learn to do it, and his shrouding ability is legendary. I don't think he can teach you to do it overnight."

"How do you know the shroud is on?" Frankie asked. "I don't see or hear anything different. Is it like a bubble around us?"

"That's how he does it," Dagor said. "He's not excluding the humans from the shroud. Instead, he creates a bubble around the convoy. The drivers can see and hear what's going on outside of it, but no one can see or hear inside."

"I guess so." The Guardian rubbed a hand over his light stubble. "I'm not much of a shrouder myself, and I can't sense Yamanu's shroud, so I'm not sure what technique he uses."

"Let me get this straight," Frankie said. "To someone looking at the convoy from the outside, we are invisible and soundless, right?"

Both Dagor and the Guardian nodded.

"What about the tracks the wheels make in the mud?"

Dagor regarded her with appreciation in his eyes. "The bubble moves with the convoy, so once it passes over a spot, anyone can see the tracks it leaves behind. But to notice that, someone would have to be watching the ground right as we drive by and see that the tracks are new. I don't think it's much of a problem."

Ani



In her private dining room, Ani sat at the head of a gleaming white table and listened with half an ear to the idle chatter of her ladies-in-waiting.

It was not that they were dull or insipid. Her four companions were shrewd manipulators and spies, each installed by one or more of the leading families to follow her every move and listen to her every word so they could report back what they had learned.

There was nothing wrong with that, and it was not personal. They were not her friends, nor were they her enemies. They were just doing their job.

Ani's only real friend was Sofri, and she cherished that friendship dearly.

Ani had no siblings and no cousins, and many thousands of years ago her parents had chosen the long slumber to escape the ennui of their never-ending life.

One day, she would awaken them, but not before the resistance triumphed and her husband was king no more. Perhaps they would find the new world order interesting enough to stay awake for a while.

In the background, tucked into a corner of the room, a quartet of string instruments filled the space with a pleasant melody by a new composer who had won many accolades.

There was really nothing that could compare to live music, no matter how advanced the recording and reproduction technologies were. Naturally, not everyone could afford live entertainment during a nothing-special midday

meal, but being queen had its perks.

The first course was served with the practiced dance performed with perfect precision and choreography born of countless meals just like this one, and Ani smiled at her attendants to show her approval.

The delicate consommé was served in fine crystal bowls that were as much a work of art as the soup itself, and the rich aroma was appetizing enough.

The chef was a true master of the craft, coming up with new flavor combinations she would have never expected, and given how many meals she had consumed throughout her long life, that was impressive.

As Ani savored the chef's latest masterpiece, her ladies-in-waiting kept chattering about new gowns for the upcoming ball and casting her occasional glances to see if they could pull her into their conversation.

Ani couldn't care less.

Dressing her was a job for her designers, and they did it well. She had no reason to waste her time on picking out fabrics, going over styles, or getting fitted by seamstresses.

A perfect replica of her had been made for them to work with.

If only she could animate the copy and use it to attend the various functions for her, that would have been such a relief, but actual cloning was prohibited, and for good reason.

Ani shivered at the thought.

It was an abomination.

"I've commissioned a gown with layers of silk and gossamer," Avinshti said between one spoonful and the next. "Silver is the color of the season." She glanced at Ani. "It is your favorite color, Your Majesty."

"It is favored by my designers." Ani's tone communicated her lack of interest in the subject, and her ladies were intelligent enough to pick up on it.

Having lunch in her quarters with just the four of them was a rare occurrence. Most days, Ani's lunches were political or industrial meetings with the

movers and shakers of Anumati. Thankfully, there had been nothing scheduled for today, so she had time to come up with a plan for communicating with her granddaughter, but it was not easy to think and plot against the backdrop of chatter and the servers milling around.

The second course was a selection of fresh salads garnished with edible flowers and an array of dressings that were as much a feast for the eye as for the palate. It was a parade of vibrant colors and exquisite flavors, another masterpiece of the talented chef.

Hopefully, he would never plot to poison her, or she would have to send him away to one of the more violent colonies to meet a certain death.

"The new university will be an architectural marvel," Vanashaia said. "I have seen the holographic model, and it is so exquisite that I am tempted to go back to school."

"I just hope we raise the necessary funds during the ball." Avinshti put her fork down and reached for the wine. "The project is ambitious even for Anumati's building mastery. It is going to cost a fortune."

"The guest list is impressive," Yashanoda said. "When they auction the university's name, the bidding will be rabid. All the major families want it to be named after their houses."

As the main course arrived, the attendants unveiled platters of roasted pivoats from the Palmoara colony and vegetables from Santica. The rare delicacies were served only in the royal palace and perhaps a couple of the richest houses. The cost of transportation was prohibitive.

If only Earth was not a forbidden planet, Ani could have found a way to smuggle records of Anumati's history to Annani. She could potentially smuggle them on the next patrol ship that left for the sector, but that would take too long, and Ani was impatient, which was a novel sensation for her.

She was the queen of long-term plans, never in a rush, and always looking for the safest way to go about them. But discovering that she had a granddaughter was a game changer. She wanted to talk to Annani, to get to know her, and that would not happen if she used the method that she had devised the day before.

Ani wanted to communicate with Annani in real time, which meant that Aria needed to be there when she visited Sofri. It also meant that Aru would have to be with Annani at the same time she was with his sister. That way, she could have a direct conversation with her granddaughter, or as direct as it could be when communicated through the twins.

The problem would be to come up with a convincing reason for Aria to be present during Ani's visits to the Supreme Oracle, and that was a major obstacle.

The rulers of Anumati always met with the Supreme in private to safeguard her prophecies regarding them. Her predictions about matters of state were not made public unless the queen or king made them so, and no one had ever questioned the need for secrecy during those meetings.

But no one had expected the queen and the Oracle to become best friends and co-conspirators.

The progression of their relationship had been long. It had started off formal, then became more friendly, and at some point, Sofri had started looking through the fabric of the universe for rare new talents at Ani's behest.

Finding them before the king's secret service did so was crucial. With the help of the resistance, they were given passage to one of the safer colonies, avoiding detection. Had the king's agents found them first, they would have been forced to work for him or sent to one of the more volatile colonies that had low survival rates.

That was how Sofri had discovered the twins' existence. It had taken some manipulation to get the two of them to the capital and give them jobs that allowed them access to Sofri and, through the Oracle, to Ani.

The Supreme had much more leeway than the queen, and her activities were less scrutinized, but that did not mean that she could be anything less than super careful. Every move was shrouded in layers upon layers of relays, so nothing could be traced back to her.

As the quartet shifted to a livelier melody, Ani allowed herself to get distracted and enjoy the music and the spectacular array of sweets that were served for dessert.

When tea and coffee were served along with the sweets, she sipped on her tea and pretended to look at the musicians as a new plan started forming in her head.

Kalugal



When Jacki put the amulet around her neck, Kalugal grimaced, but he knew that arguing with her about it was futile right now.

His mate was a stubborn woman.

Still, he couldn't just say nothing. "You said that this amulet was evil. I know that you need to touch it, but you don't have to wear it."

"I didn't say that it was evil. It's just an object."

"Semantics. You said that what was done to imbue it with power was evil, and that makes it evil."

Jacki let out a breath. "Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't, but it doesn't matter. I need its help to navigate toward the captives."

He couldn't argue with that. "As soon as we find the girls, take it off. I don't want this thing to contaminate you."

Jacki let out an exasperated sigh. "The amulet is neither good nor bad, and that's despite it having been imbued with power by human sacrifices. It's like a container of blood. The way the blood is collected doesn't affect the container. That being said, I still intend to toss it into the ocean as soon as we are done with this mission, not because it is evil, but because I don't want it to fall into the hands of someone who would exploit it for any other reason than saving lives."

Kalugal hoped she wasn't thinking of him as that someone, yet at the same time, he also didn't want to get rid of the amulet. He just didn't want her to wear it. "Think of it from another angle. If we can keep using the amulet to save lives, we honor those who died to give it power."

When she arched a brow, he put a hand over his heart. "You wound me, mate. I would never use the amulet for gain. But if you don't trust me, we can give it to my goodie-two-shoes cousin. You trust Kian to use it only for good, right?"

Jacki deflated. "I trust you. I know that you will never go back on your promise to me."

"Good. I wasn't sure for a moment there." He gave her a bright smile. "So, we are keeping it?"

"I don't know. Let's see how this mission turns out. I'll decide when we get to the ship."

Kalugal was smart enough not to point out that the decision wasn't exclusively up to her. Technically, the amulet belonged to him because he had paid for the map and had organized the treasure hunt. He was also willing to share it with the clan and let Syssi use it whenever she needed a boost to her prophetic powers. It wasn't fair for Jacki to decide the fate of the amulet for everyone involved.

Still, he was a married man, and he knew what was good for him. He was also a patient guy who knew that sometimes it was better to keep his mouth shut until it was the right time to start an argument.

Right now wasn't the right time.

Clutching the damn amulet and holding it to her chest, Jacki pointed at a thicket of trees about five hundred meters ahead. "That's where the girls are being held. Do you want to stop here and continue on foot?"

"They can't hear or see us, so there is no need for us to trudge on foot. We could drive right over the scum, and they wouldn't even know what hit them until they were under the wheels of the trucks. The only problem with that plan is that it's not satisfying enough. I want to get up close and personal with their throats." He flashed her a smile with his fully elongated fangs.

Jacki grinned at him. "You say the nicest things, my mate."

He leaned over and kissed her. "I love you, my bloodthirsty wife."

"When should I stop, boss?" Luis asked without turning back to look at him.

Kalugal had thrall'd him to ignore the fangs and glowing eyes that many of the immortal males were already sporting, and he had compelled him to follow his instructions to the letter.

"Drive up to that truck over there."

"Where?" Luis asked. "I don't see anything."

The camouflage the cartel thugs had done to hide their vehicles was pretty shoddy, but it seemed to be enough to fool Luis.

"Just drive. I'll tell you when to stop."

The drivers had been instructed to stay in the trucks and hide under the dashboard while the Guardians took care of business. Kalugal had used compulsion to ensure that none of the human men decided to be heroic and join the fight.

As their convoy came to a halt near the grim enclosure where the girls were being kept, the barbed wire gleaming in the harsh sunlight made Kalugal's blood boil in his veins.

The girls were huddled together, some rocking back and forth, while others were slumped on the ground, either asleep or catatonic from the trauma they had suffered.

His fangs itched, and his venom glands pulsated, but he suppressed his murderous urges in order to clear his mind and think. He wouldn't be doing the girls any favors by attacking without taking into account the situation and formulating an appropriate plan.

Jacki's vision had focused on the girls, and she couldn't tell him how many cartel thugs they would be facing or what weapons they had.

From what he could see, they were all armed with machine guns, and their vehicles were probably armed with rapid-fire equipment, too.

Most of the monsters were gathered around a fire pit, laughing while roasting some animal, and there weren't even that many of them. He counted fifteen around the fire and six more guarding the enclosure.

He needed the Guardians to split up, with some taking out one group while the others took out the second.

Casting his senses wide, he scanned for more of the scum and found two more inside the vehicles and three deeper into the wooded area, taking a piss or a shit.

Even with their superior fire power, the scum had no chance against a bunch of angry immortals, but the trick was to take them out before they had a chance to fire and just as importantly, without letting the girls see them getting torn to pieces by what would look to them like a bunch of demons.

They were traumatized enough already, and Kalugal didn't want to add to it by tearing out the throats of their captors in front of them.

Yamanu was still concentrating on keeping the shrouding bubble around them, and Kalugal wasn't sure if he could just incorporate all the cartel thugs into the bubble so the fight would be invisible and soundless to the girls.

Kalugal could shroud the small enclosure area separately, but his fangs were itching for some monster blood, and he couldn't do that and shroud at the same time.

Leaning over, he put his hand on the Guardian's shoulder to get his attention. "Can you create another bubble around the girls? I don't want them to see the bloodbath. "

"I can't do more than one. I can only include them in our bubble, but that is not going to help them."

"Right. Can you include the perpetrators instead?"

"I'm not sure. They are spread out."

So, he sensed it as well.

"Perhaps Dagor can help. He's not joining the fight anyway. I'll go talk to him." He jumped out of the truck and walked to the middle one where Dagor

and Negal were seated with Frankie, Jin, Arwel, and two Guardians.

The god was holding Frankie against his chest and not letting her see the girls, but his own eyes were trained on the enclosure, and his fangs were on full display.

He looked up at the god. "Can you create a shroud around the girls so they won't see us tearing their captors to pieces?"

Dagor frowned. "Can't Yamanu extend the shroud to cover the battlefield so the girls won't see or hear anything?"

"The thugs are too spread out, and Yamanu can't cover all of them. I could shroud the women, but I'm itching for some scum blood, and I can't do both at the same time. You are not joining the fight because you are staying to guard Frankie, so you are the only other option, provided that you can create a large enough shroud bubble."

Dagor



The truth was that Dagor wasn't sure he could cast a bubble large enough to encompass the enclosure. It wasn't that the place was big, and there were only about twenty women in there, but he had never created a shroud bubble that size before.

He had done simulations during training, but that had been a long time ago, and the only shrouding he had done since arriving on Earth had been limited to covering himself and his companions.

"I'll give it my best shot," he said. "But it's not going to be nearly as good as Yamanu's."

Kalugal smiled. "I don't expect it to be. Just do your best, starting now."

"Yes, boss." Dagor gave him a mock salute.

"Much appreciated." Kalugal repaid him with a dip of his head.

"Here goes nothing," Dagor murmured as he cast his shroud over the enclosure.

The women should have noticed that they were suddenly encased in silence and couldn't see their captors, but none of them reacted, which was a sad testament to the state they were in.

He still hadn't let Frankie get a good look at them, and thankfully she was happy to have her face buried in his shirt.

As Kalugal motioned for those of their group who wished to get their fangs dirty to disembark, one of the thugs guarding the enclosure turned to look their way and frowned.

Obviously, he couldn't see them, or he would have sounded the alarm, but there was no doubt in Dagor's mind that the thug was sensing something.

He was about to tell Negal to take care of that when the thug lifted his machine gun and fired blindly in their general direction.

Chaos erupted as the rest of the gang followed, their gunfire slicing through the still air. Inside the truck, Dagor's reflexes kicked in, and he grabbed Frankie, pulling her down to the truck's floor and shielding her with his body. A rain of bullets pelted the truck, and he winced as several hit his back and his left arm, but he wasn't worried about them doing any lasting damage. His body was already expelling the foreign objects and healing the damage.

Beneath him, Frankie shivered and whimpered, probably feeling every impact as his body vibrated when hit with bullets, but he couldn't offer her words of solace while ignoring the pain and still trying to maintain the shroud around the barb-wired enclosure.

The snarling sounds of his companions were music to his ears, and as the screams began, he grinned like a savage despite the excruciating pain in his back and his left arm.

When the scent of blood reached his nostrils, it confused him. It wasn't his, and the thugs who were being torn to pieces were too far from him for the smell to be so strong.

Besides, the blood smelled too good to be theirs...

Lifting a few inches off the woman he was shielding, he saw where the smell was coming from. Frankie's side blossomed with vivid crimson, the blood that was seeping out too quickly painting a terrifying picture.

"Frankie!" He dropped the shroud and gently turned her face to look at him, but her eyes rolled back in her head, and she passed out.

With his own pain only a distant thunder against the lightning strike of Frankie's injury, Dagor knew he had to act fast, but he was momentarily

paralyzed with the kind of fear he had never experienced before.

Around them, the battleground was still a whirlwind of noise—full of the Guardians' snarls, the crack of gunfire, the screams of the thugs, and the terrorized girls who could now see and hear the horrors he had been shielding them from.

"Luis is wounded," Jin said from somewhere behind him. "We need to get him to a doctor."

He heard the sound of tearing fabric and then Luis groaning.

"Frankie was also hit," he finally managed to say.

"Oh, crap," Jin cursed. "I'm taking them both to the ship."

"I'm coming with you," Negal said, and then the truck dipped as he jumped in. "Pedal to the metal, Jin. I'll call Aru to send the doctor to meet us halfway."

Thank the merciful Fates for the clan's satellite phones, but would the doctor make it in time to save Frankie?

"Don't let her bleed!" Jin yelled from the driver's seat. "Take off your shirt and hold it against her wound!"

As she turned the truck around and raced towards salvation, Dagor followed her instructions, tearing off his shirt and pressing it against Frankie's side.

The roar of panic in Dagor's mind was pierced by the whine of the engine as Jin navigated the rough terrain like a bat out of hell. The jostling and bumping were not doing Frankie any favors, but slowing down to make the ride a little smoother was not an option either.

With the truck careening through the landscape, time became the enemy, and each second stretched out with excruciating sluggishness.

While Negal made the call to Aru, explaining the emergency, Dagor cradled Frankie in his arms, trying to absorb as much of the bumps as possible.

With panic clawing at Dagor's insides, the tremor of his own heart mirrored the stuttering beat of hers, and he pressed the shirt down on her wound

harder, trying to stem the tide of her life's blood seeping out.

Kian



Kian scrubbed a hand over his face. "This is not happening. Can I have one effing day of peace?"

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Aru asked.

"I'm calling the doctor. Give Negal my phone number and have him call me in a couple of minutes to give me a full update."

The phone Negal had been given didn't have Kian's number programmed into it, and the only one of the newly arrived gods who had it was Aru.

What Negal had told his leader was that Frankie and the human guide had been shot during an altercation with cartel thugs and the girl needed urgent medical assistance. They were driving toward the ship but asked that the doctor drive toward them because they weren't sure Frankie would make it.

Given the urgency of getting the girl medical help, he hadn't given Aru any other details. Nevertheless, Kian could guess what had happened. They had been attacked by cartel thugs just as he had warned them they would, and on top of that, they had disregarded his advice and taken the human with them.

He really hated being the prophet of doom. For once, it would have been nice to be wrong.

Shaking his head, he called Bridget. "We have a medical emergency," he said without preamble. "Frankie and one of the drivers were shot. Jin is driving them back here, but Frankie is losing a lot of blood, and they might not make it in time. You need to head out to intercept them. Collect what you need, and

Anandur will take you on his motorcycle."

Anandur arched a brow. "I will?"

"I'm on my way." Bridget ended the call.

After Julian had gotten a new bike, Anandur bought his old one and brought it to the ship. Perhaps he had been prompted to do so by the Fates so he could now save the injured human.

Kian turned to him. "Do we have any other vehicle available to us immediately?"

"Not that I'm aware of." Anandur pushed to his feet. "I'll take it to the dock and meet Bridget there."

"Thank you."

As Anandur left the cabin, Brundar frowned, which was almost as uncharacteristic for him as smiling. Usually, his face was expressionless. "Isn't it dangerous to send Bridget and Anandur out alone? What if they get ambushed?"

"It will take too long to arrange for another vehicle, and the motorcycle is the only thing we have on board aside from the jet skis. I don't think they can be used on dry ground."

"I'll take care of getting us more vehicles." Brundar pulled out his phone. "If Jin took one of the three trucks, they will be short on seats."

"Wait." Kian stopped him. "I need to hear from the guys what's going on and what exactly they need. I can't believe none of them have called me yet."

As his phone rang, though, it was Negal and not one of his people.

"The doctor is on her way. Please tell me what's going on in as few words as you can."

"Yes, sir," Negal said. "Kalugal found an amulet, Jacki touched it and had a vision about abducted women, and we decided to rescue them before they got moved and we lost track of them. Yamanu shrouded our convoy, but one of the thugs must have sensed us and started shooting, and then all his buddies

did the same, and bullets were flying everywhere. I think the one that got Frankie went straight through Dagor because he was shielding her with his body and taking the hits. The driver was also shot. Jin took the wheel and is driving us back like she's being chased by demons. The driver is holding on, but Frankie is losing a lot of blood. Dagor is pressing his shirt to the wound, but with all the jostling, I don't know how effectively he is staunching the blood flow."

"What about the abducted women?" Kian asked.

"They are in pretty bad shape. There are about twenty of them, and they are traumatized. That's all I know. As soon as I realized that Frankie was hit, I left your people to finish the job of tearing the monsters apart and jumped back into the truck to escort Dagor and Frankie back. They needed someone to cover them in case they encountered more thugs."

That had been good thinking, probably born from Negal's military training.

"Given what my people are probably doing to those thugs, I can't even contact the local authorities."

"Yes, that has occurred to me," Negal said. "We will need to torch the evidence, and we also need a few more trucks or a bus to get the women out of there."

"I will arrange it."

"When is the doctor going to get here?"

"I don't know. I have no idea where you are."

"So how will she find us? I assume that there aren't many roads out here, but there must be more than one."

"Her driver will hone in on Jin's signal."

"She has a tracker?" Negal's tone lost its warmth.

Kian chuckled. "She has a clan phone. That's just as good as a tracker."

"I see." Negal's tone returned to its normal amiability.

"How is Frankie doing?" Kian asked.

There was a short pause before Negal answered, and Kian imagined him checking with Dagor. "Not so good, but she's still breathing."

That didn't sound encouraging, but it was what it was.

"If anything changes, let me know."

"I will."

As Kian ended the call, he turned to look at Brundar, and the Guardian lifted his head from his phone. "Anandur and Bridget are on the move."

That was fast. "We need to get four trucks or a bus to the scene."

Brundar nodded. "I'm on it."

When Kian's phone rang again, he was glad that the caller was Yamanu, but he was also mad as hell that no one had thought to update him before rushing to rescue the humans without a solid plan or asking for backup. He was going to chew the heads off everyone who should have known better, including Yamanu's, but not right now.

"I assume that the thugs were dealt with, and the kidnapped women are safe?"

"You assume correctly," Yamanu said. "The thugs are in pieces, and I don't mean that figuratively. Even if we hadn't known what they did from Jacki's vision, it was enough to see the state the women were in to get all of us into a killing rage. I don't think any of us fired a single shot. It was all done with fangs." He sighed. "And now we have twenty-three severely traumatized women and girls on our hands, not only because they were violated repeatedly after seeing their families slaughtered by the cartel, but also because they saw a bunch of demons tearing apart the monsters who did it."

"You should thrall them to forget what they saw."

"I tried to calm them down, but it wasn't enough. Kalugal put them to sleep first to stop the hysterics and is thralling them to forget what they saw while out."

"Good. That's the first step. Brundar is trying to arrange vehicles to transport them so we can return them to their people."

There was a pause before Yamanu responded. "They no longer have a home. Their entire village was destroyed, and all their relatives murdered."

Cursing under his breath, Kian shook his head. "Can we take them to some of the other villages? They should have relatives there who would be willing to take them in."

"I don't know about that," Yamanu said. "I'll try to speak to them after Kalugal is done manipulating their memories."

It didn't sound like Yamanu thought that finding the women new homes in the surrounding villages was a viable solution, but Kian had no intention of bringing them on board. This wasn't the same as the rescue missions they ran back home, where they brought the victims to the sanctuary for rehabilitation. This was a cartel war, and the rules were different. Taking these women away from everything they knew was not a good solution to the problem, but scattering them among the other villages might not be a good one either.

Kian couldn't think of any other options, but he had learned a long time ago to accept that not every problem could be satisfactorily solved. Sometimes, slapping on a temporary patch was all that could be done.

Aru



Aru had asked Negal to call him right after he was done talking to Kian, but more than five minutes had passed, and he hadn't called yet.

Given Frankie's condition, time was of the essence, and Aru needed to tell his teammate about the lifesaving transfusion that could be given to her.

Kian had asked him to keep secret the information about what a god's blood could do, but this was an emergency. Frankie was important to Dagor whether he wanted to admit it or not, and if she died, he would be devastated.

Besides, her life was more important than the promise Aru had given Kian.

In this case, it would be best to provide the information to his teammates first and ask for Kian's forgiveness second.

He could lie and say that his friends knew about their blood-healing properties and that he hadn't told them a thing, but Aru preferred not to.

When several more minutes had passed, Aru refused to wait any longer and placed the call to Negal, and when he didn't answer immediately, Aru's gut twisted with worry.

Were they under attack?

Had their truck crashed? The female driving the truck was probably not being too careful in her rush to bring the injured humans to someone who could help them.

"Nothing new here," Negal finally answered. "The doctor is on her way."

Negal's tone, along with the cacophony of sounds streaming in from the other end, painted a vivid picture of urgency. The rumble of the truck's engine as the vehicle pushed across rugged terrain was punctuated by sharp jolts and thuds, and Aru could hear the clatter and rattle of items in the vehicle as they rolled about.

If Aru closed his eyes, he could see the vehicle hurtling through the landscape, with the female in the driver's seat battling against nature's resistance and time itself.

"How is Frankie doing?" he asked.

"Not good. I hope the doctor gets to her soon."

"Damn." Aru rubbed a hand over his face. "Do you know about the healing properties of a god's blood?"

"What are you talking about?" Another bump had Negal's voice hitched on the last word.

"A small transfusion of your or Dagor's blood can save Frankie. It will give her system a boost that will help her heal, but you need a syringe to perform it. Is there a medical kit in the truck?"

"There isn't. We searched because we could have used some bandages and tape to staunch the blood flow."

"Damn. You will have to wait until the doctor arrives and take one from her. After you are done, you will have to thrall the immortals and the human driver to forget that they saw you doing it. No one is supposed to know what our blood can do. I promised Kian that I would not reveal the secret because if humans learned about it, it would put the heir, Toven, and us at great risk. But we have to save the girl, so I will just have to apologize later and tell him that we've mitigated the risk."

"How much blood does she need?" Negal asked.

Not beating around the bush and getting straight to the point was one of the things Aru appreciated about the pragmatic trooper.

"Very little. About the size of the very tip of your pinkie. I think it's better that you do it because Dagor is most likely not thinking straight, and he might give her too much, which for all we know could kill her."

"How do you know about it in the first place? We were never told that our blood could heal humans."

"Since only a few of us would ever have contact with humans, there was no reason for us to be told. But it works the same on most of the created species. My sister had told me about it. She studied to be a healer, and they were taught to use their blood if there was no other choice and it was important to save the person."

"Well, that's good to know. So, let me repeat. When the doctor gets here, I ask her to give me a syringe, take some of my blood, inject it into Frankie, and then thrall everyone to forget what I did."

"That's right."

"Does it matter where I take the blood from and where I inject it?"

Aru couldn't tell him that Aria had given him instructions on how to help Gabi, but if asked, he could say that he'd learned it from YouTube and wouldn't be lying.

"You can take the blood from the crook of your elbow and inject it into any visible vein. Whatever healing properties our blood has will help heal Frankie no matter where it is injected."

"Good deal. I'll keep you posted, boss."

Dagor



The world narrowed to the pale, unresponsive girl in Dagor's arms. Her bleeding had lessened, but the pallor of her skin and the erratic, faint rhythm of her heartbeat sent waves of fear through him.

As the truck raced over the rough terrain, each bump and jolt fueled his anger and added to the sense of helplessness that he detested.

He was a god, for Fates' sake.

Why couldn't he do something to help her?

The rough ride couldn't be avoided, but each vibration and harsh jerk worsened Frankie's fragile state. Unyielding and relentless, the rugged dirt road was the enemy, but it was leading them to the doctor who could save Frankie's life.

Dagor prayed to the Fates that they would make it in time.

Now that he was experiencing what Aru had when Gabi had texted him from the hospital, he could empathize with Aru so much better.

No wonder Aru had been going insane.

The difference was that Gabi hadn't been bleeding or unresponsive, not while she'd texted Aru anyway. Later, when her transition had kicked in full force, she had been going in and out of a coma, and he'd seen how difficult it had been on his commander.

Squashed between the two front rows of seats, Dagor was absorbing all the bumps and shielding Frankie as best he could, ignoring the cramping in his legs and the ache in his back that had nothing to do with the bullets it had expelled. With his rapid healing, he could barely remember where he'd been hit, but the back of the seat in front of him was digging into his skin, and there was nothing he could do about it without moving Frankie.

Any attempt to adjust her position might worsen her condition, and the fear of causing further harm kept him frozen in place despite the discomfort.

The helplessness was suffocating, debilitating.

Dagor's body was one big knot of tension. His chest felt like it was being squeezed in a vise, his arms and hands tingled, and not just because he hadn't moved or because his blood circulation was impaired. It was the anxiety that made it hard for him to breathe and boiled his blood, so it was running hot in his veins and making his hands tingle.

Underneath it all was the gnawing fear of loss.

Frankie's unresponsiveness was a deafening silence in the chaotic drive, a void that he was terrified would become permanent.

The thought of losing her was unbearable. He tried to push the thought away, but it refused to go, lurking in the background and submerging him in despair.

Dagor's world had been reduced to a maelstrom of fear, anger, and desperate hope, all centered on the fragile human in his arms.

Behind him, he could hear Negal talking on the phone, but the engine roar combined with the howling wind and the turmoil in his mind made it impossible for him to hear what was being said.

"Dagor." Negal leaned forward, poking his head between the seats so his mouth was as close as it could get to Dagor's ear. "Aru just called," he said quietly. "There is something we can do to help Frankie heal faster, but it requires secrecy and careful handling."

Hope warring with skepticism, Dagor nodded. "Whatever it is, I'll do it."

Pushing his shoulder through the gap between the seats, Negal got even closer to him. "Did you know that a god's blood could heal a human?"

Dagor frowned. "I've never heard of such a thing. Did Aru tell you that?"

Negal nodded. "A small amount no bigger than the tip of your pinkie can make all the difference. The problem is that we need a syringe, and there is no medical kit in the truck. We have to wait for the doctor. The other problem is that it's a closely guarded secret. Kian doesn't want anyone to know, not even his own people, because it could put the heir, Toven, and us at risk. If word ever reached the humans, they would do everything to get to us and use our blood to heal those who would pay the most for it."

"Yeah. He's right about that. But how do we do it without the doctor knowing? Do we thrall her?"

Thankfully, immortals were almost as susceptible to gods' thralling as humans, but Dagor didn't feel right about deceiving their new allies.

Negal glanced at Jin's back, but nothing in her posture indicated that she'd heard anything. "That's precisely what Aru told me to do if we can't swipe a syringe from the doctor and administer the transfusion while she is tending to Luis. You can draw your blood yourself and administer it to Frankie, or I can do that if you don't have the stomach for it, with either my blood or yours."

"Mine," Dagor said. "Your hands are probably steadier than mine right now, so you will have to do it, but you will use my blood."

Negal smirked. "I knew you would say that."

Dagor ignored what Negal was trying to imply. "What are the risks?"

"To Frankie?"

Dagor nodded.

"None that Aru mentioned. He just said not to get overzealous and give her too much. That might be dangerous to her."

"But there is a chance it can save her?"

"That's what he said."

Aru had thrown him a lifeline to pull him out of the turbulent waters of despair, but to implement Aru's suggestion, they needed the doctor to get there in time.

"I just thought of something," Negal said. "It's not only our blood that has healing abilities. Our venom and our saliva do, too. I don't think the saliva would be effective for this, and the doctor still needs to get the bullet out anyway, but you don't need to wait for the doctor to bite Frankie. It might just give her enough of a boost until the doctor arrives."

Negal's idea of using venom to help Frankie was absurd. The notion that he could bite her while she was unconscious and barely clinging to life was utterly ludicrous.

"Do you think I can get my fangs and venom glands going while Frankie is unconscious?"

Negal shrugged. "You can think about the monsters back there and get your venom going with aggression."

Dagor shook his head. "It doesn't work like that, and you know it."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, right? I was trying to think outside the box. Maybe you can think back to when you and Frankie were intimate, and the memory will be enough to activate your fangs and venom."

"I can't think sexy thoughts while my mate is dying in my arms."

Mate?

Why had the word slipped from his lips?

With Frankie's life hanging by a thread, the realization that she might be his mate hit Dagor with the force of a freight train.

The term mate had always been a distant concept for him, something that was not relevant to his carefully-laid-out future plans. But the fear for Frankie's life was like a jolt of clarity amidst the fog of urgency and desperation.

This recognition brought about a surge of protectiveness and a profound sense of connection. Could Frankie, the human girl who had unexpectedly entered his life, who had challenged him, fascinated him, and now lay dying

in his arms, be his mate?

Aru



Aru had planned on waiting to confess to Kian what he had done after the transfusion was administered and Kian couldn't stop it, but his conscience wouldn't allow that, and he found himself walking over to Kian's cabin and ringing the doorbell.

Since his calls were no doubt monitored, it wasn't the kind of conversation he could have over the phone, but even if no one was listening it still needed to be done face to face, no matter how awkward it was.

As the door swung open and he stepped in, Kian regarded him with a raised brow. "How can I help you, Aru?"

Aru glanced at the blond Guardian, who was sitting on the couch with the phone glued to his ear. He was talking with someone in rapid Spanish, arranging rental vehicles to be delivered to the dock.

At the dining table, Kian's assistant was busy typing on his laptop, and he only acknowledged Aru with a slight nod.

Aru nodded back before answering Kian. "I need a word alone with you if you don't mind."

A knowing look in his eyes, Kian rose to his feet. "We can talk out on the balcony while I smoke my cigarillo. Can I interest you in one?"

Aru only smoked when he needed to conduct a private conversation and used smoking as an excuse to step outside, but in a way, this situation fell into the same category, so he nodded. "Thank you. I would love to try one."

Kian smiled. "What about a shot of fine whiskey? Can I interest you in that as well?"

"Sure. Why not."

Kian walked over to the bar, poured two shots, and handed one to Aru.

"Thank you." He sniffed the whiskey the same way Kian did and followed the immortal out the doors to the expansive balcony of the luxurious cabin suite.

Kian closed the doors behind them and motioned for Aru to take a seat on one of the loungers.

A pack of cigarillos was on the side table, along with an ashtray and a lighter.

Kian sat on the other lounge, took the box, and opened it to offer Aru one of the brown sticks. "Every time I try to quit, another disaster pops up, and I turn to my one vice."

"You have only one?" Aru pulled out one of the cigarillos. "That's not so bad."

"Why? Do you have more?"

Aru laughed. "Apart from being in the resistance, not really."

"I wouldn't call fighting for your rights a vice." Kian flicked the lighter on and lit Aru's cigarillo.

"It's not good for my health, that's for sure." Aru took a puff of the surprisingly tasty and aromatic tobacco.

Smiling, Kian lit his own stick. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

For a moment, they sat in silence, puffing smoke and enjoying the mild ocean breeze.

"So," Kian broke the silence. "What is it that you need to talk to me privately about?"

"You've probably guessed it already. I told Negal about the healing properties of a god's blood so he could tell Dagor. I know that I promised you I wouldn't

tell anyone, but given the situation, it was necessary. The problem is that they need to wait for the doctor because they need a syringe. I instructed Negal to take precautions so the doctor and Jin wouldn't find out, and if they do, to thrall their memories away."

"I see." Kian didn't look like he approved. "You should have checked with me first."

"Frankie is not doing well, and if she dies, it will devastate Dagor. He's stubborn and not willing to admit how much she means to him, but it's evident in every look he casts her way. Besides, she's Toven's mate's best friend, and Toven would never forgive us if we didn't do everything we could to save her."

That was his trump card, and given Kian's sigh, it had worked.

"Right." Kian leaned back. "Toven doesn't know what's going on yet, and neither does Mia. It's not that I'm trying to hide it from them, but I'm using the lack of time as an excuse to postpone it."

Aru took another puff of his cigarillo. "Do you want me to inform them? I'm at your disposal for any task you need to be done."

"Thank you." Kian took a sip of his whiskey. "But I'd prefer to wait until Bridget sees Frankie, and I can tell Mia that her friend is not going to die." He put the glass down on the side table. "If Frankie holds on until Bridget gets there, and Dagor gives her his blood, I can tell Mia that her friend is going to make it, and I'd rather do that than worry her needlessly."

"Makes sense. Thank you for understanding."

"I still don't like it," Kian said. "The more people know about the healing properties of a god's blood, the bigger the chance the secret will be exposed. Make sure that your teammates keep the information contained. We can't afford a breach."

"You have my word that I'll do everything I can to keep it contained. I know that Negal and Dagor will follow my orders, but I will restate the need to keep this in the strictest confidence, and if need be, I'll thrall the doctor and Jin myself to forget they ever saw Dagor or Negal with a syringe."

"Be careful. Bridget's mind is too precious to mess with."

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing."

Kian tapped his cigarillo to dislodge the ash. "The transfusion might not be necessary. Bridget is a very capable physician, and Frankie is a young woman. The doctor's intervention might suffice."

Aru nodded. "I'll call Negal and tell him to hold off on the transfusion and only administer it if it's absolutely necessary." He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "The problem is that neither Negal nor Dagor can judge that accurately, and they can't ask the doctor without showing their hand."

"They shouldn't wait until the last moment. After Bridget patches Frankie up, she will give them an assessment of her condition, and she's not the type to sugarcoat anything. She tells things like they are."

"Good." Aru took another small sip from the whiskey. "We will play it by ear. I appreciate your pragmatic approach, Kian. I was afraid you would forbid it."

"I'm not happy about it, but I don't want to lose the girl either. That being said, there is more at stake than just keeping the secret contained. Do you know what the blood transfusion will do to Frankie besides saving her life?"

"What?"

Kian tilted his head. "I thought that I told you that. If Frankie is a dormant carrier of godly genes, the transfusion might induce her transition. But since she is unconscious, she can't give Dagor her consent, which is problematic. This is not the kind of thing that should be decided for her."

"You are right, but what choice do we have? We can't let her die without doing all we can to save her."

"I know, and I agree." Kian sighed. "Decisions are never as simple as black and white, yes or no, this or the other. Most involve an array of conflicting factors and are about making a choice between different shades of gray."

Aru's mind raced with the implications. "How soon after the transfusion would we know if she's transitioning?"

"It varies," Kian said. "Each Dormant responds differently. Some might start showing signs the next day while others might take longer."

"Is that a sure thing? I mean, will one small transfusion guarantee her transition, provided that she's a Dormant?"

Kian frowned. "Not necessarily. Come to think of it, one of our Dormants was very sick before attempting his transition, and we gave him a transfusion to heal him first and then another one to help him transition. Since Frankie is injured, it might work the same way for her."

Aru let out a breath. "I hope that's what happens. I don't know her well, but she seems like the kind of woman who will hate having the decision made for her."

"You should inform Negal and Dagor about the possible unintended consequences."

"Of course." Aru extinguished his cigarillo and pushed to his feet. "I need to call Negal right away. I hope I'm not too late."

"You are not. Anandur would have called me if he had found them already."

Aru didn't know whether he should be glad or concerned that the physician wasn't with Frankie yet.

"Let me know if there is anything I can do to help."

Kian waved a hand. "Call Negal. I have enough people helping me with this situation. I just hope it's resolved before the wedding tonight."

Dagor



As Negal's phone rang, Dagor's anxiety spiked. Had the doctor encountered a problem on the way?

She could have been ambushed by the cartel, or her vehicle could have crashed.

With how Jin was driving, it was a wonder that they hadn't. The dirt road was not meant for fast driving, and Jin was flooring it.

Cradling Frankie's limp body in his arms as the truck jostled them mercilessly over the rough terrain, Dagor dreaded each bump. He could feel Frankie's heartbeat, but it was weak and erratic under his touch.

"What's going on?" he asked Negal after the call ended. "Where is the doctor?"

"She's on her way." Negal poked his head between the seats. "The redhead is bringing her on his motorcycle, which should make their journey even faster." He glanced at Jin over Dagor's head and continued in a hushed voice, "Aru says to wait on the transfusion. Kian wants the doc to assess Frankie first, and if she says that Frankie is going to make it, we don't need to do it."

"Why not? It can only help."

Negal winced. "There's more to it. If Frankie is a Dormant, a god's blood could trigger her transition. It shouldn't be done without her consent unless it's the only way to save her life."

Dagor's heart sank even further. The idea of Frankie undergoing such a monumental change without consenting to it was disturbing, but the alternative was unthinkable. He glanced down at her pale face and the way her chest was barely moving with the shallow breaths she was taking. He didn't know much about human bodies, but it was obvious that her condition was severe.

"She can hate me for it later," Dagor muttered, more to himself than to Negal. "If it comes to that, I'll beg for her forgiveness. But I can't let her die."

"It might not come to that," Negal said. "The clan's best doctor is going to treat her, and that might be all she needs."

"I hope so."

A surge of anger filled Dagor's chest. He was angry at the circumstances that had forced them into the impossible situation, angry at the unpaved road that was impeding their journey and causing more damage to Frankie, angry at himself for not doing a better job of protecting her. But beneath that anger was an overwhelming fear.

Fear of losing Frankie or having to force her to transition without her consent.

"I don't know why it's taking the doctor so long to intercept us," Negal said, giving voice to Dagor's frustration. "I thought that the motorcycle could navigate the terrain better, and they would get to us faster."

The truth was that it hadn't been even half an hour since Jin had taken the wheel, and if his estimate was correct, they had been more than an hour away from the ship at the start of the mad rush back.

Dagor adjusted his hold on Frankie, trying to make her as comfortable as possible in the cramped space between the seats. She probably couldn't feel a thing, though, which was a small blessing.

As the roar of a motorcycle cut through the tense air, announcing the arrival of the doctor, Dagor released a relieved breath.

Jin slowed the truck to a stop, and as the redhead pulled up alongside it, the doctor dismounted and retrieved a cooler from the bike's storage

compartment.

Bridget's swift, purposeful movements offered him a measure of reassurance.

"Get her on the floor and give me space," the clan's physician instructed as she climbed into the truck.

Dagor laid Frankie down on the floor with the utmost care, his eyes lingering on her for a moment longer before he climbed up to sit beside Negal in the back. From there, he could observe everything without being in the doctor's way.

Jin, who had jumped out of the truck the moment she'd pulled to a full stop, watched the doctor from the side with a concerned expression on her face. Even the injured driver propped himself up so he could watch what Bridget was doing.

There were too many eyes on the doctor and Frankie, and Dagor worried that the onlookers might distract the physician, but she seemed unfazed, and her focus remained laser sharp as she worked.

"I'm giving Frankie a morphine shot first to make sure that she doesn't wake up from the pain." She administered the shot with a practiced hand. "I'm going to take out the bullet now, so if anyone is squeamish, I suggest that you look away."

Dagor usually wouldn't have been fazed, but this was his mate's body that the doctor was about to poke into, and his stomach roiled. Still, it was his duty to watch over Frankie, and hopefully, he wouldn't puke.

As the doctor started cutting off Frankie's shirt, Dagor glared at Luis, who was watching from the front. "Turn around," he commanded.

Negal didn't need to be told and shifted his gaze to the side.

As the doctor ignored the exchange and removed the bullet with steady hands, Dagor swallowed the bile that had risen in his throat, and when she stitched up the wound, he had to look away for a moment to settle his stomach.

The physician's confidence and singular focus calmed him, dulling the sharp

edges of his fear, but evidently the effect didn't extend to his stomach.

"Now I'm going to give her blood to replenish what she's lost." The doctor opened the cooler, revealing its contents. "These are units of packed red blood cells and plasma, and both are universal, so don't worry. We were lucky to have them on board. I ordered several units of them because of the human crew."

As Dagor watched the doctor begin the blood transfusion, he felt a strange sense of detachment, as if it wasn't Frankie lying there and receiving a stranger's blood to save her life. It was as if he was watching a scene from a movie.

Throughout the procedure, Dagor remained by Negal's side, his eyes never leaving Frankie. The doctor worked efficiently, her hands steady and sure.

She looked up at Dagor. "I need you to come back here and hold the IV bag up so it doesn't fall."

It was hanging from a portable stand that the doctor had assembled, and it looked flimsy, but he could see the blood begin to flow into Frankie's veins, and that was a relief.

"This will help stabilize her," the doctor said with a comforting note of confidence.

"Tell me the truth," he said. "Is she going to make it?"

The doctor smiled. "Frankie won't die from this injury. But we need to get her to the clinic."

As Bridget turned her attention to Luis's injuries and took her equipment with her, Dagor and Negal exchanged loaded glances as they both realized that they had missed the opportunity to secure the syringe without alerting the physician.

It seemed like it wasn't needed at the moment, but they still had to get Frankie back to the ship, and things might take a turn for the worse.

"I need to take a piss," Negal said with a wink as he jumped down from the truck.

Was he planning on swiping the syringe from the doctor without thralling her, Jin, Anandur, and the driver?

They had too many witnesses to pull it off without employing mind tricks.

Anandur, who had sidled up to Jin and had been observing from the sidelines, stepped closer and offered Dagor a reassuring smile.

"Trust the doc. Bridget wouldn't have told you that Frankie was going to be okay if she didn't believe it a hundred percent. You can take her word to the bank." He chuckled. "Though in her case, it would be the blood bank."

Jin snorted as if the redhead had just told her a joke, but Dagor failed to see what was so funny about it.

"All done," Bridget said. "Let's get these two to the ship where we can properly clean them up."

She closed her bag and looked back to where Negal had been sitting. "Where did he go?"

"He needed to relieve himself," Dagor said. "He should be back in a moment." Hopefully, before the doctor took her bag back to the motorcycle.

It seemed like Negal had really needed to take a piss, and it hadn't been an excuse to steal a syringe.

"I'm riding back with you." She offered Dagor a small smile. "In case my patients need further assistance."

Anandur laughed. "Liar. You just don't want to ride back with me."

She huffed. "That's a given. I'm not a fan of motorcycles on a paved road, let alone off-road."

Kalugal



It had taken Kalugal a long time to thrall away the memories of the most recent horrors the abducted women had witnessed. While he was at it, he had been tempted to also erase the worst of what they had been subjected to before their rescuers arrived, but doing so without their consent was unethical.

They were entitled to remember and mourn their families and friends, and what had happened to them after they had been taken was also their choice to remember or forget. The problem was that to do that, he would have to wake them up, and the cleanup of the area hadn't been completed yet.

The one thing he couldn't allow them to remember was how the monsters were dealt with. Upon waking up, they would remember that the cartel barbarians had run away when their rescuers arrived.

Yamanu waited for him outside the enclosure. "I spoke to Kian about what to do with the women. He wants us to take them to the neighboring villages."

Kalugal shook his head. "We can't. These people are barely scraping by and are terrorized by the cartel. They will be afraid to take them in. Besides, they need therapy and rehabilitation, and they will get none of that here."

Jacki joined him and Yamanu even though he'd told her to stay in the truck and not look at the carnage. "I agree. There is no future for them here, and I don't need to spell out the reasons for it. We need to take them to the sanctuary."

"They don't speak English," Yamanu pointed out.

Living in Southern California, where a large percentage of the population spoke Spanish, meant that most of the immortals residing in the village were fluent. The Scottish and Alaskan members of the clan less so.

The question was whether the therapists working in the sanctuary spoke the language.

"Is there any room left?" Jacki asked.

"I can check with Vanessa," Yamanu offered. "She didn't join the cruise because Mo-red couldn't come."

With so many clan members on board, Kalugal hadn't noticed Vanessa's absence, which should have clued him in that he was getting complacent. Usually, he wouldn't let a detail like that escape his notice.

"We need to enlarge the sanctuary," Jacki said. "Is it okay with you if I double the donations so the clan can add another building or two?"

Kalugal smiled. "Of course, it is. But the problem is not only where to house them. Vanessa is constantly understaffed. Therapists just don't last long there. For many, dealing with what victims of trafficking suffered is too much."

She nodded. "I get it. I'm not squeamish, but I don't know if I could do that day in and day out."

"Vanessa will make room for them," Yamanu said. "Also, most of her therapists speak Spanish because many of the girls we rescue are native Spanish speakers who were trafficked to the US."

"Good." Kalugal expelled a relieved breath. "Now, all we have to do is convince Kian to let them onto the ship." He looked at Yamanu. "You will have to shroud our arrival."

"That's not a problem." The Guardian flashed him a smile. "Convincing Kian is. I think you should call him."

"Why me? You are his trusted head Guardian. He will listen to you."

"And you are a council member." Yamanu turned to scan the two remaining

trucks. "Where is Edna? We need her to help us make a case."

"She's over there," Jacki pointed. "Helping bury the evidence." She shook her head. "Edna is one gutsy lady."

"She is," Kalugal agreed. "She's lived through much bloodier epochs than you, my dear. This is nothing new to her."

Jacki's eyes softened. "It's sad. No one should get used to things like that."

He put his arm around his mate's shoulders. "Death is part of being human. One way or another, they all die. Regrettably, not all from old age."

Mey joined their group, rubbing her hands to clean them as best she could. "I pray for the day when no humans die from disease, acts of violence, or natural disasters, but I know that day will never come. Living peacefully is not in human nature."

Yamanu pulled her against his chest and kissed her forehead. "Why did you go digging? We have enough males to do that and not enough shovels."

"I wasn't digging. I was decorating the graves so they would not stand out. Besides, I want to be done with it sooner rather than later so we can get out of here. The trucks Kian sent our way should be arriving shortly, and unless you want to thrall the new drivers as well to forget what they find, we need the place to be free of body parts by the time they arrive. We also still have a wedding to attend tonight, and I want to at least shower first."

"Are we going to make it on time?" Jacki asked.

Kalugal glanced at his watch. "Not unless they set it back a couple of hours. I'd better call Kian."

Kian



When his phone rang with Kalugal's ringtone, the anger Kian had managed to stifle resurged. "Hello, cousin. I've been waiting for you to call me."

"You must be psychic because up until a minute ago, I was arguing with Yamanu about who was going to call you."

"I plan on having a word with my Guardians later, but the fact that neither you nor any of them bothered to call me before rushing to rescue the women from the cartel monsters is so irresponsible that I still can't wrap my mind around it. What were you thinking?"

"Would you have tried to stop us?" Kalugal sounded incredulous.

"I would have asked you what the plan was, arranged for transportation, and sent reinforcements. If you had made a better plan, perhaps no one would have been injured."

Kalugal sighed. "You are right. I should have called you. What Jacki saw in her vision stirred such a killing rage in us that we didn't stop to think. We wanted to obliterate the monsters as much as we wanted to save the women, and we were afraid that they would be moved from where Jacki had seen them, and the opportunity to do both would be lost."

Kian's eyes widened in surprise, and the rage inside of him subsided. "That's as close to an apology as I have ever gotten from you."

"I never had a reason to apologize before."

"Really? What about kidnapping my head Guardian and Jacki and holding them hostage?"

"If you expect me to apologize for that, then you need to apologize for sending Jin to tether me. I've never made a move against you, so you had no justification for that."

"It was a preemptive measure to ensure that you had no malevolent intentions toward my people. I'm not going to apologize for it."

Kalugal let out a sigh. "Fine. Let's agree that neither of us needs to apologize to the other. The important thing is that we have overcome our initial rough introduction and found common ground. Who would have thought that we would be living together in peace and harmony?"

"Indeed. We've achieved something truly rare, and I'm proud of it. I'm also glad to have your devious mind on my council. You offer a perspective that my other council members don't have."

Kalugal chuckled. "You just can't help yourself, can you? You can't give me a compliment without caveats."

"That wasn't my intention. Everything I've said was meant as a compliment. You are incredibly smart, and you think outside the box. You are one of the most interesting people I have ever had the pleasure to converse with."

"Oh, wow, cousin! You make my heart fill with fuzzies. I enjoy bantering with you and don't mind the occasional barbs. They are actually quite fun. But this unqualified praise is new, and it's welcome."

"It's also overdue. I just wanted you to know I really like you despite our banter sometimes getting out of hand."

"Thank you. The same is true for me. I greatly enjoy our talks, especially when they are over your fine whiskey and cigars."

"You are invited any time."

"Much appreciated, cousin."

Kalugal was being more amiable than usual, which meant that he wanted something, and Kian had a feeling that he knew what it was. "Did the transport Brundar arranged for arrive?"

"Not yet, which is a good thing. We are just finishing the cleanup, and the girls are still asleep. I thrall away their memories of our attack, but I didn't feel it was my right to thrall away the rest of their trauma. They need to agree to it first."

"Indeed, but if you want to thrall those who want it, you should wake them up before the transport's arrival. There won't be much time to do that when they get there."

"Yes, about that." Kalugal paused. "I didn't thrall those memories away, but I've seen them, and there is no way the other villagers are going to take the women in. They are terrified of the cartel that controls this area. We've only taken out one team of many, and we can't stay and clean up all of them. The women also require a lot of rehabilitation after what they have been through, and there will be none of that available in these poor villages. Yamanu contacted Vanessa, and she said that she had room for them in the sanctuary. Also, most of her therapists speak Spanish, so the language barrier is not going to be a problem either."

Closing his eyes, Kian let out a breath. "Let me guess. You are suggesting that we bring them on board."

"I would have sent my jet to collect them, but there isn't enough room. Your big jet could have sufficed, but both of your pilots are here. We have plenty of room on the lower decks, and I'm sure some of the ladies will volunteer to take care of the women and provide solace until they can get professional help. Vanessa can provide them with a crash video call how-to session."

"I see that you have it all figured out."

"Yes, well, it's not like it requires a genius to arrive at the conclusion that this is the right thing to do. I also think that you should ask Amanda to organize a shopping trip in Acapulco to get new clothing and other necessities for the ladies. Jacki says that they need everything, and that Amanda will know what she means by that."

"Amanda is getting ready for her wedding tonight, but I'll ask Syssi and Alena."

"Yes, about that." Kalugal sounded apologetic. "We should push the celebration back by at least a couple of hours. Otherwise, there is no way we will get it all sorted out in time for the wedding."

"Good idea. I'll let Amanda and the kitchen staff know."

Amanda



Amanda held up her empty margarita glass. "Onidu, another round, please."

Sari chuckled. "You should go easy on the alcohol, or you're going to show up drunk for your own wedding. *No bueno.*"

She was overdoing it a little, and if her mother was there she would not approve, but she wasn't, and until she came, Amanda was going to keep drinking.

"Look at you." Amanda grinned at Sari. "You are learning Spanish for our Mexico trip."

For some reason, Sari had never spent more than a day or two in Spain, and her visits to California had also been too brief to learn the language.

Her sister laughed. "That's the only phrase I know, and I've been using it for years. It has nothing to do with the cruise."

Syssi raised her glass, which was still mostly full. "*Hasta la vista, baby.*" She snorted. "Turning immortal didn't make me any better at learning languages. That's about all I know in Spanish."

"I'm fluent," Amanda boasted.

"Of course, you are." Syssi affected a grimace. "You are good at everything."

Amanda snorted. "Except singing. The Fates decreed that this would be the

one thing I suck at, which really rankles since my mother and sisters all have wonderful singing voices."

She was slightly tipsy but in a good way. It was still many hours until the wedding reception, and her fast immortal metabolism would ensure that she was completely sober by then.

The only thing casting a shadow on her jubilant mood was Dalhu's reluctance to have his own bachelor party with the guys. Knowing her brother though, Kian would not take no for an answer, but he hadn't called Dalhu yet, so maybe they were not ready, or maybe they were preparing something special.

Naturally, there would be no strippers or any other kind of debauchery that was common in human bachelor parties, but perhaps Anandur was planning on pulling a prank on Dalhu like he had done for Kian, and dressing as a stripper, complete with fishnet stockings and lipstick.

"What are you smiling about?" Syssi asked.

"Anandur dressing up as a stripper for Kian's bachelor party. I was thinking that maybe he was going to do that for Dalhu. My guy needs a good laugh to loosen up before the ceremony."

"A bottle of whiskey and a couple of cigars should do it," Sari said. "He'll be fine."

Amanda sighed dramatically. "Dalhu would prefer to stay with Evie in the other room and watch baby shows with her. It's sweet that he loves spending time with his daughter, but I just wish he'd show more enthusiasm about our wedding tonight instead of dreading everything about it."

"Not everything." Syssi smiled. "He doesn't like the idea of pledging his life to you in front of the entire clan, but I bet he would love it if it was just your mother and the two of you."

Alena nodded in agreement. "I have no doubt."

Amanda took the fresh margarita from Onidu. "Thank you, darling." She took a sip as she considered how to respond. "I know that, but I can't accommodate his wishes, and not just because I love big parties. I'm a public figure whether I like it or not, and my wedding celebration needs to be grand

and shared with my entire clan. He knew that when he mated me."

"It's not like he had a choice," Sari pointed out. "The Fates chose to bring the two of you together."

Amanda grimaced. "That sounds as romantic as doing laundry." She snorted. "The only time I've actually laundered my own clothes was when Dalhu kidnapped me. We were in the cabin, and he bought me horrendous outfits that I wouldn't wear even to bed, so I tried to wash what I had on." She laughed. "That didn't end well."

"I bet," Sari scoffed over her margarita.

As the doorbell rang, Amanda lifted her tablet to see who was on the other side and was delighted to see that it was Kian.

It was so nice of him to come to collect Dalhu in person. That way, her mate could not decline the invitation.

Onidu opened the door and bowed. "Good afternoon, Master Kian. Please, come in."

"Thank you." Kian strode into the cabin's living room. "Hello, ladies."

Amanda rose to her feet. "If you've come to get Dalhu, you should have called first because he's not dressed yet." She kissed his cheek. "I'll let him know that you are here."

The look of regret in his eyes gave her pause. "What's going on, Kian?"

"Let's sit down." He walked over to where Syssi was sitting in an armchair and joined her. "I didn't come to take Dalhu to his bachelor party, which regrettably is not likely to happen. The group that went to visit the ruins at Tehuacalco decided to turn the tour into a rescue operation."

When Amanda took her seat again, Kian continued to explain what had happened, and the cheerful atmosphere they had been enjoying turned somber.

"Those women have been through hell," Kian said. "And they have nowhere to go. Kalugal convinced me to take them to the sanctuary, which means that they are coming here. I need help organizing cabins for them on one of the

lower decks, getting them clothes and other necessities, and helping them get settled. Tonight's celebration has to be moved back by at least two hours."

"That's not a problem," Amanda rushed to say. "I don't mind waiting until almost midnight. I just need the ceremony to be done before that so Dalhu and I can welcome the new day as a married couple."

"I can do the shopping," Syssi offered.

Alena lifted her hand. "I'll help."

"So will I," Sari said. "We will bring our Odus with us to help carry everything back to the ship. How many women are there?"

"Twenty-three," Kian said. "Aged fourteen to twenty-two."

"Damn," Amanda cursed under her breath. "Fourteen?"

He nodded. "The monsters have been dealt with."

"Good. I'm glad. I hope our guys didn't show them mercy."

"They didn't." He smiled at her with a pair of elongated fangs. "They got up close and personal if you know what I mean."

"Oh, I do. Good for them."

Kian had been careful in his description of what had been done to the women's relatives and to them, but only as far as his choice of words. He hadn't omitted any of the atrocities they had committed, and if Amanda had fangs, she would have helped tear those monsters apart.

"Are they bringing the amulet on board?" Syssi asked.

Kian's eyes blazed with light as he turned to look at her. "Don't even think about touching that thing. It's evil."

"Is it?" She arched a brow. "Did Jacki or Kalugal say that?"

"They didn't need to. It was powered with the life force of countless victims."

Syssi shivered. "Yeah, you have a point. But it has just helped us save these women, so at least those lives weren't lost for nothing. It's not that I want to

touch it, but maybe we should save it in case an emergency comes up, and we need a glimpse of the future."

"There is always one emergency or another, so using that logic, we would be using the damned thing all the time. Luckily, it belongs to Kalugal, so the only one who will be using it is Jacki."

Syssi frowned. "I'm sure he would let me borrow it if I asked."

"He probably would, but I don't want you to ask."

Syssi's expression turned stubborn. "We will see about that." She pushed out of the chair. "If we want to get stuff for the girls, we should get moving."

"I'm coming with you." Amanda started rising to her feet.

"No, you don't." Syssi put a hand on her arm and pushed her back down. "You need to rest and take it easy. Your sisters and I can handle a simple shopping trip."

Dalhu



As the door to the bedroom opened, Dalhu looked up at his gorgeous mate. "Evie fell asleep."

"I can see that." Amanda smiled at the sight of their daughter curled on her side next to him on the bed. "Did she get bored with her shows?"

"Not really, but she got tired and couldn't keep her eyes open. It was funny to watch her trying to fight it."

Amanda sat on the bed next to Evie and caressed her small back. "We shouldn't let her watch that much television. It's not good for her."

"I know, but I ran out of ideas for keeping her entertained." He tilted his head and glanced at the door that she had left ajar. "What happened to your bachelorette party? I can't hear anyone in the living room."

"It's over." Amanda cast him a sad smile. "They all went shopping."

He gaped at her. "Without you? How dare they?"

"I know, right?" She sighed. "Something came up, and we have to move the wedding reception back by two hours."

"What happened?"

When she was done telling him, Dalhu shook his head. "Maybe this is an omen that we shouldn't get married. We're perfectly fine as we are. We don't need a ceremony to prove our commitment to each other."

She chuckled softly. "I love it that you are superstitious like some old grandma, but this is not a bad omen. The way I see it, it's a sign that what we are doing is right."

His mate was an expert on manipulating things to her advantage, but she rarely used that talent on him.

"I can't wait to hear how this is a sign of something good."

Amanda kicked off her shoes and lay on her side next to Evie. "We get to help others on our wedding day, which implies that our future together will be filled with good deeds, compassion, and love."

Dalhu looked into her warm eyes. "You actually believe that?"

"I'm convinced of it."

Her ability to find the upside in nearly every situation was just one of the many things he loved about her. "Then you must be right."

She arched a brow. "What? Not arguing with me and trying to convince me that our nuptials will bring the end of the world?"

"I've never said that." He reached for her cheek over their daughter's sleeping form. "I'm only uncomfortable about the ceremony and having to pledge myself to you in front of all these people who still judge me. If I survive that part, I know that everything else will be wonderful because you will make it so."

"That's so sweet." She leaned over their daughter and kissed his cheek. "Speaking of vows, are you done with them?"

He'd been struggling for weeks to come up with the right words, and he still wasn't sure that what he had ended up with would convey the enormity of what he felt for her.

"I am, but don't expect much. I'm not as eloquent as Orion."

"You don't have to be." She propped her elbow on the mattress and her chin on her fist. "All you need to say is that you will love me forever and stand by my side no matter what. I don't need any fancy words."

"Says the professor who has probably written the most beautiful and elaborate pledge ever made."

Her sheepish smile confirmed his suspicions. "I can tone it down if you want."

"No way. I want to hear every word of it and have it etched on my soul forever."

Amanda beamed at him, her eyes sparkling with emotion. She got off the bed, came to his side, and kissed his lips.

Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her down on top of him. "I love you, and I will always stand by your side and have your back no matter what." He smiled. "I just wanted to say that in case something else comes up and our wedding gets postponed again."

"I love you too, but it's not going to work." Touching her nose to his, she rubbed it Eskimo style, or rather what she had told him was Eskimo style.

Dalhu had no idea how northern people kissed and if it involved rubbing noses.

"What's not going to work?"

"You are not going to trick me into pledging myself to you right here, in our bedroom. If you want to hear my pledge, you will have to stand by my side at the altar and let my mother join us."

"Worth it." He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss.

Dagor



During the mad rush up to the meeting point, dust had been flying everywhere as Jin navigated the rough dirt roads, but after Bridget had patched Frankie and Luis up, she drove the rest of the way at a much slower pace.

When they reached the dock, two Guardians waited for them at the gangway with a gurney for Frankie, but since there was no room to maneuver in the truck, Dagor lifted her in his arms while Negal held up the IV bag to keep the transfusion going.

As he laid her down on the gurney, one of the Guardians started pushing it, but Dagor stopped him. "Thank you, but I'll take her."

"No, you won't." Bridget gave him a stern look. "Go to your cabin, wash the dirt off, and then come to the clinic."

"I'm not leaving her side."

"She's not in critical condition, but she is human, and I don't want any bacteria that might be clinging to your clothing or body to infect her. Scrub yourself clean, and then come to see her."

Dagor was shirtless because he had used his shirt to stem the blood flow, but the doctor was right about him being covered in dirt and blood.

He looked at Frankie, who was just as dirty as he was. The doctor had cut off her T-shirt, so the only thing covering her was Negal's shirt, leaving him bare chested as well, and his shirt was just as dirty as everything else they had on.

"What about Frankie? She's dirty too."

"The nurse is waiting for her, and she will clean her up."

He didn't know that they had a nurse on board, but he wasn't going to stand there asking questions and delay Frankie's arrival at the clinic.

"I'll be there in five minutes," he told the doctor and started sprinting for the elevator to the upper floors.

From his previous visit to the clinic, Dagor knew that the doctor would take Frankie in the service elevator to the lower deck where it was located. Otherwise, he would have taken the stairs to the top deck even though it would have taken him longer.

When he burst through the door, he was glad that Aru and Gabi weren't in the cabin and thanked the Fates for the small mercy.

He didn't have time to explain.

After a rushed but thorough shower, he threw on clean clothes and ran out of the place.

People jumped out of his way as he sprinted toward the elevator with his god-like speed, and as he stepped in, no one followed him inside.

Thankfully there was no one in the elevator, and as he pressed the button for the clinic level, he prayed that no one called it on the way.

Of course, the Fates couldn't be that merciful, and when the elevator stopped on the second deck, he lifted his hand to stop the people who wanted to come in and pressed the button to close the doors.

He should have taken the stairs.

Running ten floors down would have taken longer than the elevator ride, but not if the damn thing stopped on the way. Besides, it would have saved him the aggravation of having to deal with people when his nerves were frayed, and his patience was stretched to its limit.

When he burst through the clinic door, he was greeted by a female who appeared to be the nurse, even though she wasn't wearing the right apparel.

"Hi, Dagor." She smiled at him. "I'm Hildegard, and I was just about to wash Frankie. You can wait here if you wish."

"Can I be there while you do it? We are a couple, and I know she wouldn't mind me seeing her nude."

Hildegard hesitated momentarily, but the frazzled look in his eyes must have touched her heart because she nodded. "Bridget will have my head for this, but I'm sympathetic to what bonded mates go through when their partners are hurting."

"We are not bonded. I'm a god, and Frankie is human, but I care deeply for her regardless."

Smiling, Hildegard gave him a knowing look. "Right." She opened the door.

Frankie looked so pale and so small as she lay on the hospital bed. The wires connected to her body served to monitor her vitals, and there were tubes delivering essential fluids that were keeping her alive.

Dagor was grateful to Hildegard for letting him come in, for volunteering to work while on vacation, and for caring for Frankie with the tenderness of a mother.

Did Hildegard have children?

Was that why she was so gentle?

He watched the nurse cut off the rest of Frankie's clothing, clean her up with wash cloths, and remove all the dirt and grime accumulated during the mad rush to get her to the ship.

Frankie didn't look good despite the doctor's reassurances, and he had second thoughts about not giving her some of his blood. Aru's instructions were to not do it unless Frankie's life was in danger, but Dagor contemplated disregarding his commander.

Right now, his blood was the only thing that could help her heal faster, and the need to keep it a secret from everyone was not a good enough reason to deny her. He was a god, and these immortals were as susceptible to his thrall as humans.

He could give her the transfusion and keep the secret from getting out.

Kian



Kian met Aru at the elevators. "Are you going to see Frankie?"
Aru nodded. "Are you?"

"Yes." Kian looked around to make sure that they were alone. "Do you know if Dagor did what you advised him to do?"

"He didn't. Negal said that the doctor stabilized the girl and assured them that she was going to make it." He looked over his shoulder at the group of immortals heading their way. "He also admitted that they were so busy watching the doctor and helping her that they forgot to take the thing that they needed for the mission."

Acknowledging that he understood with a slight nod, Kian turned to exchange a few pleasantries with his clan members.

With Syssi's coaching, he was getting better at that, but then, anything was an improvement over ignoring them or acknowledging them with a grunt. Thankfully, his people appreciated what he was doing for them and had been forgiving of his lack of social skills. But if he had been a human running for office, he would never have been elected.

"Does Frankie's friend know?" Aru asked.

"I asked Toven to hold off on her visiting Frankie until I spoke with Bridget and got an update about the girl's condition."

Aru arched a brow. "The doctor said that Frankie's condition was stable."

"That's doctor speak for she's not going to die right now."

"I see." The god pushed his hands into his pockets. "That's not very reassuring."

"No, it's not." Kian smiled as the last of their elevator companions departed on the main deck.

When the doors opened again on the clinic level, the two of them stepped out and strode side by side toward the clinic.

Bridget met them at the reception room, which was less than one-fourth of the waiting room in the village clinic, and that room wasn't big. Perhaps he should make some modifications and enlarge the size of it. After all, not everyone on board was immortal, and humans were prone to getting sick and injured.

Given that Bridget's hair was still wet, and she had no makeup on, the doctor had been in a rush to return to her patient, which again told him that Frankie wasn't in great condition.

"Hello, Bridget," Kian said. "How is the girl?"

She cast a quick look at Aru as if she wasn't sure he should be there, listening to her providing information that usually was reserved for the patient's family members, but she must have decided that he was okay.

"The bullet entered from the side, but since it was slowed down by going through Dagor first, it didn't do as much damage as it would have otherwise done. Still, Frankie's lost a lot of blood and experienced what we call hemorrhagic shock. I've given her IV fluids to help stabilize her blood pressure and replace the lost blood volume. The goal is to ensure adequate blood flow to her organs and prevent further complications. She's stable now, and we're monitoring her closely. The next twenty-four hours are critical, but I'm optimistic about her recovery."

Kian wondered whether the minuscule amount of godly blood that the bullet collected while passing through Dagor had any effect on Frankie's recovery. Perhaps that was why she had not been on death's doorstep when Bridget got to her. Her body might have already started fixing the damage.

"So, is she out of the woods or not?" he asked.

"As I said, I think she will recover, but I can't guarantee it. Frankie might have other underlying issues that she will have to address later, and they might interfere with her recovery."

"Well, it is what it is, right?" Kian darted a look at Aru. "It's a waiting game. What is certain is that Frankie won't be dancing at Amanda's wedding tonight, and I bet she will be upset about it when she wakes up."

His attempt at lightening the mood worked, with the doctor and Aru smiling.

"Can we see Frankie?" Aru asked.

"Dagor is with her, but I guess you can come in for a few minutes to offer your support. The guy looks like he was hit by a freight train. I would have offered him some anti-anxiety medication, but I don't know if it would work on a god." She looked at Aru.

"I can't give you an answer because I've never tried any. I know that people back home use all sorts of recreational drugs to entertain themselves and alleviate boredom, but I've never tried them, and neither have my teammates." He smiled. "It's not about the three of us being goodie-two-shoes, like humans like to say. It's that those drugs are very expensive, and none of us come from rich families."

Bridget chuckled. "It's similar here, but people still find ways to finance their bad habits."

Kian grimaced. "That's what feeds the cartels and other monsters around the world. They get rich by ruining people's lives or just snuffing them out to spread terror so no one dares to oppose them."

Aru put a hand on his shoulder. "There is no point in getting upset about things that you can't change. You are already doing everything you can to save as many victims as possible."

"That's rich coming from you—a member of the resistance. Would you have joined if your attitude was like that?"

Aru smiled, but there was no mirth in it. "I joined to do everything I can to

change things for the better, and I'm doing my best. I try not to get upset about the slow pace, and I accept that things will probably get worse before they get better. It's not easy, but it's better than spending my life in a state of rage."

"Mizaru, Kikazaru, and Iwazaru," Bridget said. "These are the Japanese names for the three wise monkeys: see not, hear not, and speak not. The monkeys advise us not to dwell on evil thoughts because they are corrosive to our minds and bodies. In the West, the monkeys symbolize a lack of moral responsibility by people who refuse to acknowledge wrongdoing, look the other way, or feign ignorance, but that's not the original meaning of the proverb."

Kian shrugged. "I wish I could compartmentalize like that, and I applaud those who can, but I can't, especially not when I'm about to receive a group of traumatized women who have seen their families murdered in front of their eyes and then were violated by the monsters who did it."

Dagor



As the doctor opened the door, Dagor was surprised to see Kian and Aru standing behind her.

"They would like to come in," Bridget said. "Is it okay?"

"If it's okay with you, it's okay with me."

She smiled. "Usually, I'm not so accommodating, but Frankie is not the only one who needs help."

He cast a worried glance at Kian. "Did anyone else get hurt?"

"Bridget meant you." Kian pushed a rolling stool into the room and sat down on it. "She's concerned about you."

Except for worrying for Frankie, Dagor was perfectly fine. Why would the doctor be concerned about him?

Aru walked in, holding another stool. "It must have been difficult for you. Negal told me that you shielded the girl with your body and were hit multiple times."

Dagor waved a hand in dismissal. "I've already forgotten about it. My body expelled the bullets and healed almost immediately."

"I'll leave you guys to talk in private." The doctor closed the door.

Aru put a hand on his shoulder. "It must have been terrifying to see the woman you care for bleeding and not knowing if she would make it."

Dagor wouldn't have admitted the fear voluntarily, but he wasn't about to deny it either. "It was difficult, and I'm still worried." He looked at Frankie's pale face. "She should have woken up by now."

"Maybe Bridget put a sedative in the IV," Kian said. "It might be better for Frankie to sleep for a few hours."

The doctor had admitted that the next twenty-four hours were critical, and Dagor had reconsidered using his blood to help Frankie recover, but the ramifications were not just a faster healing, and he didn't want to induce her transition without getting her consent first. He wanted to ask Aru and Kian to tell him more about it, but he wasn't sure that it was safe to do so in the clinic.

Kian was adamant about keeping the information about the healing properties of a god's blood a secret.

Glancing around the room, Dagor looked for hidden cameras or listening devices, but he knew better than to trust his eyes. The spy drones his team used were so small that even someone with his superior eyesight could miss them.

Supposedly, the ship had been commissioned by the clan, so Kian should know every security measure that was installed in every room.

"Is it safe to talk in here?" he asked.

The guy nodded. "There are no listening devices in here. The monitoring equipment is sending information to Bridget, but she can't hear what's being said in here."

Dagor released a relieved breath. "I didn't give Frankie the transfusion, but I think I should. I don't want to risk her taking a turn for the worse."

Kian shook his head. "It's no longer an emergency, and now that Bridget knows the precise extent of Frankie's injuries, she would know that something was up when Frankie healed too fast. I can't justify the exposure."

Dagor wanted to point out that it wasn't Kian's decision and that he had no say in what Dagor did with his blood, but he was well aware of the delicate diplomatic position they were in.

Antagonizing their host was a bad move.

He needed to convince him.

"I don't want to take any chances with Frankie's life. Aru or I can handle the doctor. We can thrall her and make her believe the wound wasn't as severe as she thought."

Kian shook his head. "Bridget is not stupid. Frankie's wound might mend completely, and that kind of miraculous healing of a human can't be explained away, which means it can't be thrall'd away either. The only way to do that would be to erase the entire incident from her mind and from the minds of everyone who was there and saw Frankie get shot."

Was it possible to perform such a massive mind wipe? Perhaps if Aru and Negal joined the effort, the three of them could do that. Hell, they could even thrall Kian to forget that it was ever an issue.

But again, subterfuge wouldn't help them in the long run and might undermine all the work they had done so far.

As Dagor's gaze shifted back to Frankie, he was torn between his desperate need to ensure her safety and the potential consequences of his actions.

"Maybe we should look at this as an opportunity," Aru said. "Maybe we should tell the doctor the truth. Bridget is a trusted member of the council, and one of your top advisors. Is it really necessary to keep this secret from her?"

"It is." Kian's brows furrowed. "It's for her own protection. If she doesn't know, she can't be forced to reveal the information under torture." He shifted his gaze to Frankie, and his expression softened. "It's not that I don't empathize with you, Dagor. I do, and I wish my answer could be different, but revealing this secret to anyone is too risky."

"There are pros and cons," Aru said. "And personally, I believe that the pros outweigh the cons. I'm not advocating making this common knowledge, but in my opinion, your council members should know."

Kian shook his head again. "Once they know about it, they might tell their mates even if I have them vow to keep it to themselves. It's very difficult to

keep secrets between bonded mates. I would have to have all of them compelled to silence."

"Then do it," Aru said. "Your mother is a powerful compeller, and so is Toven. Either of them could ensure that none of the council members would reveal the secret even under torture."

"You are forgetting the elephant in the room." Kian leveled his gaze at Dagor. "The transfusion might trigger Frankie's transition. I've spoken with Toven, and apparently, he gave Mia small transfusions for weeks before she started her transition, so perhaps her body needs to be fully healed first, and perhaps the venom is still a necessary component, but if I were you, I would still get her consent first."

Dagor arched a brow. "Even if she was dying?"

"Except that. But Frankie is stable, and she should be waking up soon. When she does, ask her."

Dagor nodded. "I will. What about the doctor?"

Kian sighed. "We will cross that bridge when we get to it. I need to discuss sharing the information with the council members with my mother and Toven."

Frankie



The smell was the first thing that clued Frankie in to where she was, and the second was the soft hum of equipment in the background with the occasional beep.

She still remembered those smells and sounds all too vividly from when Mia's heart had given out. She and Margo had spent too many days to count in the hospital, anxious and distraught as their best friend had fought for her life.

Frankie wished never to see the inside of a hospital again, but that was where she was now, and she'd better open her eyes and take a look.

Easier said than done.

Her eyelids fluttered open for a moment and then closed again, refusing her command. With a herculean effort she forced them to obey, and at first, everything seemed like one big blur to her until her vision managed to focus and piece together her surroundings. She was either in a private hospital room or back in the clinic aboard the Silver Swan.

"You're awake." Dagor's face filled her field of vision. "Thank the merciful Fates."

He looked haggard, his usual cocky confidence nowhere to be seen, his expressive blue eyes full of worry, even fear.

Frankie's throat felt dry as she tried to speak. "What's wrong? You look like someone has died."

"You almost did." Dagor clutched her hand. "You lost so much blood, and I was afraid the doctor wouldn't reach us in time."

She remembered the shooting and Dagor covering her with his body, and then there was pain and then nothing.

"I got shot."

"Yes."

"How? How did it manage to get to me?"

He swallowed. "The bullet went through my arm and into your side. Thankfully, it slowed it down enough so it didn't kill you, but it could have." He swallowed again. "I'm sorry. I did a shitty job of protecting you."

As the implications of what he had told her finally sank in, Frankie's eyes widened in horror. "Are you okay? I mean, your arm? Were you hit anywhere else?"

He'd been shielding her with his body, and if one stray bullet found its way to her, she could only imagine how many more he had stopped from hitting her.

He let out a short, humorless laugh. "I'm a god, remember? My body heals incredibly fast. It expelled the bullets and mended the flesh and skin. But you... you're human. I never want to go through that with you again for as long as I live, which is forever."

Forever.

What had he meant by that? Did he want her by his side for as long as he lived? Or was she reading him wrong, and all he meant was that he didn't want to experience seeing a human he cared about getting hurt?

The way he looked at her, his haunted expression, the slight tremor in his voice, it was so unlike him that it was jarring. The only thing that could explain his reaction was that he loved her, but he hadn't said so explicitly or implicitly.

She wanted to ask him if he did, but she was afraid he would give her an evasive answer and shatter her hope. The question lingered in her mind, but even though the answer shone in his eyes, she couldn't bring herself to voice

it.

He would tell her when he was ready.

Perhaps if she closed her eyes and opened them again, the emotion in his gaze would be gone, but she was afraid to put it to the test, because first, she wasn't sure she would be able to open her eyes again, and second, she didn't want to lose what she saw in his expression.

Frankie's eyelids were so heavy, though, and keeping them from dropping down was as much of an effort as it had been lifting them in the first place. She felt woozy, and there was a dull ache where she'd been shot, but she wasn't in any real pain, which meant that the doctor had pumped her full of painkillers, and she was thankful for that.

The downside was that staying awake was a struggle.

Dagor leaned closer to her, and his hold tightened on her hand. "I'm going to tell you something that's a big secret, and I need you not to freak out. Can you do that for me?"

He was so serious that she couldn't help but let her sass come out to play despite the shitty state she was in. Feebly squeezing his hand back, she mimicked his serious expression. "That's okay, Dagor. If you are pregnant, I will marry you and make an honest man out of you. We will raise the child together."

He frowned. "Are you delirious? Should I call the doctor?"

She rolled her eyes. "It was a joke. You looked so solemn, and usually when a girl tells a guy that she has big news and asks him not to freak out, the news is that she's pregnant."

He still looked like he didn't understand. "That's not what I was about to say. The big secret is not me being pregnant, although that could have been huge, but it's something that I can do to make you heal much faster."

"Oh, right. Your venom bite." She looked at all the wires and tubes connected to her body and grimaced. "I bet that I look as sexy as I feel, but if you can close your eyes and imagine how I am when not recovering from a gunshot, maybe you can get your fangs and venom going."

He let out an exasperated breath. "I wasn't referring to the venom. My blood can do for you even more than the venom can, and all it will take is a tiny transfusion."

"Really? What will it do?"

The way he looked at her made her heart race. "You'll heal faster, much faster than normal. Instead of weeks, you might be healed in hours, and there will be no scars left."

That got her attention. "Then what are you waiting for? Is it dangerous? Are there side effects?"

He winced. "Yeah, there might be. It might induce your transition. Kian thinks that it might not, because you need to be healthy to transition, but there is a chance that it will, and I didn't want to do it without your consent. I know that you haven't yet decided whether you want to become immortal, and there is also the issue of choosing someone to bond with after I leave."

His words were like a punch to her gut, and if she had the strength, she would have punched him in his too-perfect face for hurting her like that.

Instead, she did the next best thing and closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to look at him.

"I need you to be safe, Frankie," Dagor continued, his voice breaking slightly. "I can't lose you. I can't stand the thought of you being hurt or worse."

The anger that burst out of her burned through the wooziness and made her eyes fly open effortlessly. "You are so full of shit, Dagor."

Dagor



That was the last thing Dagor expected Frankie to say.

He tilted his head. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Her eyes shot daggers at him. "How can you say that you can't lose me or see me hurt right after saying that you are leaving and that I might have to find an immortal to bond with? How can you be so disconnected from your feelings?"

Every word she said radiated hurt and frustration, and her voice, so full of anger and pain, cut through him.

There was a tightness in his chest that he struggled to understand.

Was it fear for her life and well-being? Or perhaps it was fear of losing Frankie, not because she died, Fates forbid, but because she didn't want anything to do with him.

Did he love her?

He'd called her his mate after she'd been shot, and he'd felt the rightness of the word when he said it, but he'd been under a lot of stress, and that might have sharpened his feelings for her. Now that the worst of it was behind them, he was no longer sure of that.

Frankie couldn't be his mate.

As lovely as she was, she was human, and gods couldn't bond with the lesser

species. As the rebel gods had proven, they could love them, be with them, even have children with them, but not bond with them.

If Frankie was an immortal, there might have been a slight chance that they had bonded, but he was certain that it wasn't possible before she transitioned.

"Frankie, I..." he started, his voice trailing off. How could he explain the conflict raging within him? "It's not that I feel nothing. You know that I care for you. It's just that things are complicated, and we can't be together no matter what we want. That doesn't mean that I don't have feelings for you, I do, and I would be devastated if you died."

Frankie's eyes softened slightly, but her expression remained guarded. "Because of your duties? Because you are a god, and I'm a lowly human?"

Dagor sighed. "Yes, but there is nothing lowly about you." He would never tell her that the gods referred to humans as a lesser species. The polite term was created species, but everyone knew what it meant. "After this cruise, I'm bound for Tibet with Aru, and you have your own path to follow. You've been invited to join the immortal village, which is a big deal. You told me how much you were looking forward to working as a beta tester for the virtual reality studios."

"Where there is a will, there is a way," she whispered. "You just need to figure out your priorities."

Dagor felt a pang of pain at her words. He wanted to reach for her and pull her into his arms to comfort her, but she was hooked up to all those things that beeped, buzzed, and dripped.

"I'm not free to prioritize, Frankie. I follow orders, I do my duty, and—"

He couldn't finish his sentence, the words catching in his throat. It sounded cold even to his own ears, but Dagor had never allowed himself to feel this deeply for anyone, and he used his duty as armor to block anyone from getting inside his heart and to protect himself from reaching out to anyone as well. And yet, here he was, bleeding from the cuts Frankie had inflicted on his stupid heart with just a few words.

He cared for her, yes, but to admit to love, to a bond he had vowed never to form—that was a step he couldn't take. Not when their worlds were so vastly

different, not when he knew there was no future for them together.

Frankie sighed and closed her eyes. "I'm too tired to try to pierce through your armor. I need to go back to sleep."

There was resignation in her voice that slashed another cut across his heart, and yet he couldn't bring himself to say the words that would chase away that sadness from her face.

"You didn't answer me about the transfusion. I need to know that you are okay with that in case your situation worsens, and I need to do it to save your life."

"If it looks like I'm dying, you have my permission to give me the transfusion." She didn't even bother to open her eyes.

"Can I also do it just to make you heal faster? You're not feeling pain now because the doctor put something in the IV bag to numb it, but without my intervention, the wound you suffered might bother you for the rest of your life."

"Not if I turn immortal." She cracked one eye open. "When I get to the village, the first thing I'm going to do is find a nice immortal male to bond with, and once I transition, all my blemishes will disappear. So, you see, you have nothing to worry about. You can leave for Tibet with a clear conscience."

Frankie



Frankie had never resorted to the underhanded tactic of making a guy jealous to get him interested.

She was awesome enough not to need silly tricks like that, but she was at her wits' end with Dagor. He was so stubbornly clinging to his rigid convictions and ignoring what was obvious to everyone else that she needed to shake him out of the mental cage he'd locked himself in. He needed to internalize what it would feel like when she chose someone else because he had left for Tibet.

When he said nothing, Frankie opened her eyes to look at him, and seeing the glow in his eyes and his elongated fangs, she felt a sense of profound satisfaction, but when he still remained silent, her temporary giddiness evaporated.

"What, nothing to say?" she taunted. "You can start with wishing me the best of luck on finding my perfect mate, or with just having a great life after you leave, or maybe even asking me to send you a picture of my firstborn. That's what a friend would do. Someone who cared about me."

The angrier Dagor became, the more alive Frankie felt. Maybe she didn't need his blood to heal faster after all. Maybe all she needed was to continue poking the dragon and to enjoy his squirming as he tried to deny his feelings for her.

Dagor pushed to his feet. "I'm going to look for a syringe in case you decide to accept my offer."

"Coward," she murmured under her breath. "Running away when things get uncomfortable."

He scowled at her. "I'm not a coward. I'm just pragmatic."

"Whatever you say." She let out a breath and turned her head away from him.

She would have loved to turn on her side, but with all the tubes and wires connected to her, it was too much of an effort.

As Dagor huffed out a breath and turned around, a part of Frankie felt guilty for pushing him, for making him confront his emotions and push the boundaries of his comfort zone. But the other part of her, the part that had gotten her in trouble countless times, felt exhilarated. She had managed to make a crack in his resolve, and that was satisfying, even if it amounted to nothing.

At least she had fought for them.

The little human had more guts than the god. Figure that one out.

As the door closed behind Dagor, Frankie let out a sigh, her gaze drifting to the cream-colored ceiling of the clinic. She was tired of the games, tired of the unspoken words and buried feelings. She had always been direct, always spoken her mind, and sometimes it had gotten her in trouble, but it never felt wrong. She was living authentically, truthfully, unswayed by the convictions and expectations of others.

She was a rebel and proud of it.

As a dull ache in her chest made breathing difficult, she closed her eyes and concentrated on drawing enough air into her lungs.

Perhaps it was the wound's fault or whatever was dripping into her veins from the IV line, but most likely it was her silly heart that was aching for Dagor and wishing he would wake up and tell her he loved her.

If he would just admit it, she would wait for him to be done with his expedition to Tibet, maybe even meet up with him from time to time if her new job allowed it and if she made enough money to afford the plane tickets.

Frankie had never had to chase after a guy before or manipulate him into

chasing after her, and she wasn't going to do it now. She didn't regret showing him the consequences of his stubborn refusal to admit his feelings, but this was as far as she was willing to go.

If Dagor didn't get it, so be it.

She would get over him and find someone else.

Yeah, keep saying that to yourself until you actually believe it.

She would be no better than Dagor if she pretended that was an option.

Perhaps she was approaching the whole thing from the wrong angle?

Dagor doubted that she was a Dormant, which to be honest she doubted herself, and as long as he thought of her as a human, he couldn't envision a future with her.

It wasn't even a remote possibility.

But if she turned immortal, that would change everything. He could no longer hide behind the excuse of her short lifespan causing him tremendous heartache if he let himself love her.

Glancing at the medical equipment around her, Frankie felt oddly reassured by the steady hum and the beeping of the heart monitor. The dull pain in her side and the lethargy she felt was a reminder of her brush with death and her fragile state, but the machinery was a reassurance that she was in good hands and that she wasn't going to die from her injury.

So yeah, not having an ugly scar was a bonus that she would gladly accept, but that wouldn't be the main reason she would agree to Dagor's blood transfusion.

It wasn't just about healing faster or more completely. It was also about finding out if she belonged in the magical world of gods and immortals she'd been invited to by Mia and Toven.

The truth was that she was afraid to find out, and that made her as much of a coward as Dagor.

There was also the issue of her family, but just as she demanded of him that

he make an effort to work things out for them, she should do no less. She had a couple of decades until her lack of aging became noticeable, and then she could use makeup and maybe even wear a padded suit to make herself look the age she was supposed to be. The extra effort was a small sacrifice to make in the name of love.

Did she love Dagor, though?

Or was it the classic response of a damsel in distress to her savior?

So yeah, he was gorgeous and a real god in bed, and he was fun to be with despite his dry humor and his obsessive interest in technology. But was it love?

As her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door opening, she turned her head, half expecting, half hoping it would be Dagor returning not just with the syringe but also with some newfound clarity or confession.

Instead, it was a woman she vaguely remembered seeing at Alena and Orion's wedding.

"Hi, Frankie." She smiled. "I'm Hildegard, your nurse. How are you feeling?"

She didn't look like a Hildegard. First of all, she wasn't blond, and secondly, she was way too young for an old name like that. But then, she might be centuries old.

"Nice to meet you, Nurse Hildegard. I feel as well as can be expected. What's my prognosis?"

"It's very good." The nurse went about checking her vitals. "You are young, strong, and you are healing. It will take time, and you will probably feel that wound for years to come, but you will live, and that's what's important."

"I won't feel the wound if I transition, right?"

The nurse lifted her eyes to her. "That's right. You will also have no scars left. The downside is that you can never get a tattoo or a piercing." She glanced at Frankie's ears. "The ones you have will close up, so you will have to switch to clip-ons."

"That's a small price to pay for immortality."

"Indeed."

"Do you think I will, though? I don't have any paranormal talents, and I'm as average as they come." She chuckled. "I just compensate for that with a lot of attitude."

The nurse looked at her with fond eyes. "I think that the Fates brought you here for a reason. They wouldn't have bothered if you had no chance of making some lonely immortal or god happy."

Dagor



After leaving Frankie's room, Dagor scanned the small reception area for the medical supplies closet. When he couldn't find it, he stepped out of the clinic and strode down the hallway, searching for a door that was identified as a supply room. But with his attention turned inward and his mind churning with the accusations Frankie had hurled at him, he might have missed the place because he reached the end of the corridor and had to turn around.

Her words still echoed in his head. She'd called him a coward, and although he'd scoffed at the notion, her accusation stung.

He was many things, but he wasn't a coward.

Would a coward have joined the resistance?

Would a coward conspire against the might of the Eternal King?

Of course not. Only the brave or the foolish dared to do so.

Striding fast, he almost bumped into the nurse as she stepped out of one of the rooms. "Excuse me," he apologized. "I didn't see the door opening."

"That's okay." She smiled at him. "Were you looking for the restrooms?"

"Yes, I was," he lied easily. "None of these doors have signs on them."

She tilted her head. "You must have been preoccupied. The bathrooms are clearly marked, and you've just passed them."

Embarrassed, Dagor rubbed the back of his neck. "My head was somewhere else. Frankie is awake, by the way."

"I know. I'm going to see her now."

She patted his arm before heading down the hallway and opening the door to the clinic.

He waited a few seconds to make sure she wasn't coming back and ducked into the room she'd just left. Hopefully, there were no surveillance cameras inside.

The light turned on automatically, and Dagor found himself inside a supply room that held much more than just stuff for the clinic.

Shelves with janitorial supplies lined one wall, and towels and other housekeeping items lined the other. The medical supply cabinet was straight ahead at the back of the room.

The good news was that he could claim to have needed a new bottle of shampoo or soap, and that would provide him with plausible deniability. The bad news was that the cabinet was locked, and his burglary skills were lacking.

He could easily break it open, but that would defeat the objective of keeping the operation a secret.

The lock seemed simple, though, like the ones people put on their mailboxes that anyone with a thin blade could open, but he didn't have any tools on him and needed to improvise.

A quick scan of the room revealed a section of the shelving that was dedicated to cutlery, and he found what he needed there.

Fortunately, the lock was as simple as he had imagined, and as he gently turned the blade inside it, the door swung open.

Finding what he needed, he swiftly pocketed a package containing a syringe. The needle portion looked too big for the task, but it seemed to be the only kind they stocked. All the other packages looked exactly the same as the one he took.

On his way out, he stopped by the toiletries section and put two little shampoo containers in his other pocket and two small soap bars on top of the syringe packet.

Even if someone had seen him going in and came to investigate, he doubted they would frisk him or search his pockets. He would just show them the toiletries, and if they insisted on doing more, he would thrall them to forget about it.

After all, he was a god.

Stepping out into the hallway, Dagor glanced both ways to ensure no one had seen him and closed the door quietly behind him.

As he made his way back to Frankie's room, Dagor once again reflected on what she'd said to him. Was she right? Was he refusing to acknowledge his feelings and hiding behind his duty and his determination not to tie himself to a female who wasn't a goddess?

Shaking his head, Dagor tried to streamline his thoughts.

The problem with love was that it was impossible to quantify or measure it, or to determine its validity. Everything else about the big decisions he had taken throughout his life had been rational and straightforward, and he didn't have the necessary tools to deal with abstract notions and feelings that contradicted his own.

Frankie



The Fates wouldn't have bothered putting Frankie in Dagor's path if she had no chance of making him happy. That was what the nurse had implied, and her words had been playing on repeat in Frankie's head.

She was the only human onboard the ship who wasn't a confirmed Dormant, and from what she'd been told, Kian had made an exception for her and Margo only because Lisa, Geraldine's fake niece, had said that she felt they were Dormants.

The girl's ability wasn't confirmed, but her endorsement was better than its absence.

In either case, Frankie decided to let Dagor give her the infusion. At the very least, it would get her back on her feet faster and maybe eliminate the scar that she would otherwise have.

Not that it was such a big deal. A small scar under her ribs could be easily hidden with clothing, and even if she wore a bikini, she could just keep her arm over it. Still, if there was such a simple way to get rid of it, why not?

As the door opened and Dagor walked in, she welcomed him with a smile. "Success?"

"Yes." He patted his pocket as he walked over to her bed and leaned to kiss her forehead. "You seem to be feeling better." He brushed a lock of hair off her cheek.

"I am. Hildegard said I'm doing well; the wound is healing nicely, and my

blood pressure is more than okay given how much blood I lost." She smiled. "I'm a healthy girl despite the fainting spells my first day here."

"Thank the merciful Fates." He sat on the stool next to her bed. "Have you given the transfusion some more thought?"

She nodded. "I want it."

"Do you accept the possible consequences?"

What was he doing? Was he trying to convince her not to do it now?

"I'm well aware of them. Are you having second thoughts?"

"Your life is no longer in danger, so it's not necessary, and the truth is that Kian wouldn't approve of me giving it to you under these conditions. He was only willing to allow it to save your life. Also, I will have to thrall you to forget that it ever happened. In fact, I should have done that before the nurse came to see you."

"I didn't tell her anything. You said it was a secret."

"She could have plucked it right out of your head. Luckily, the clan has rules about thralling humans for frivolous reasons, so she wouldn't have done that unless she was forced to do it to save someone's life or to keep the existence of immortals a secret."

Despite the gentle kiss he'd given her, Dagor sounded so cold and detached that Frankie was starting to have second thoughts about her decision.

Perhaps she'd been wrong, and what she'd interpreted as love was a worry for her life or guilt for failing to protect her as he had promised.

If he didn't love her, she didn't want him to be her inducer. She would do what everyone was expecting her to do and choose a nice immortal male who would be delighted to have her as his mate.

She deserved to be wanted, goddammit, to be desired and cherished, and she wouldn't settle for less.

"You know what? Forget it. I don't want to antagonize Kian. Although I don't understand what the difference is between this and being later induced in the

village by an immortal who would fall head over heels in love with me." She batted her eyelashes at him. "I deserve nothing less."

"You are absolutely right." He took her hand and lifted it to his lips for a kiss. "You deserve to be cherished and adored. But the difference between giving you a transfusion of my blood and doing this the traditional way is that the blood is a big-time secret while the venom bite is not. If you miraculously heal, Bridget will know that something is up because you are in no state to get randy with me right now."

"So? You can just thrall her like you were planning to do to the nurse."

"What about everyone else on the ship? The rumor about your injury has spread all over by now."

"It has? Then where is Mia? Why hasn't she come to see me yet?"

"Toven is waiting to hear from Aru that it's okay. He didn't want her to see you while you were unconscious, and since I needed to discuss the transfusion with you, I didn't inform anyone other than the nurse that you were awake."

"Right." She let out a breath. "Well, since it's not really necessary and it will anger Kian and create a huge headache for you, I'd better not do it now."

In a way, it was a relief.

People thought that she was impulsive, but the only impulsive thing about her was her big mouth, which she didn't know when to shut. Other than that, Frankie was levelheaded and she didn't like to rush into things.

She'd known Dagor for such a short time. Even if he had been all for it, she shouldn't tie her life to his based on the little time they had spent together.

If she hadn't promised Dagor to be his for the duration of the cruise, she could've started scoping out the available immortal males as soon as she was up to it. But she'd promised, so it would have to wait until she got to the village, which was better anyway because she wouldn't have to rush.

She would have plenty of time to choose a mate and make sure that he was someone she could see herself spending her immortal life with.

Dagor



Dagor's relief was mixed with a profound sense of loss that didn't make any sense. Frankie was right about refusing his offer, and he should feel relieved instead of disappointed.

"You're making a wise decision." He tried to sound unaffected and hide the turmoil he felt. "It doesn't make sense to rush into life-altering choices in the absence of a compelling reason."

He could feel a wall building between them, a barrier made of unspoken words and unacknowledged feelings, but he couldn't see a way around it.

Despite Frankie's naive belief that where there is a will, there is a way, not every challenge in life has a workaround. Sometimes, the price is either too high or too difficult to determine to justify moving in one way or another.

"There are plenty of compelling reasons," Frankie murmured. "I don't want to spend the rest of the cruise stuck in the clinic or in my cabin. I have nine more fancy dresses to wear to nine more weddings, and I want to have fun with you. None of that will be an option if I have to heal at a normal rate."

His heart skipped a beat.

Frankie still wanted to do it with him, not some immortal in the clan's village, and the only reason she had told him that she'd changed her mind was what he'd said about Kian disapproving of the procedure and how difficult it would be to hide her rapid recovery from everyone on the ship.

But what if they found a way to do that so no one would know?

The hope in Frankie's eyes as she looked at him added fuel to his determination to find a solution. It wasn't about turning her immortal because it probably wouldn't, but rather about making her whole again.

"I have an idea." He took her hand. "How good are your acting skills?"

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Once you no longer need to be hooked up to the IV, I can thrall Bridget into releasing you from the clinic into my care. I can convince her that I was trained as a medic and release her from the need to take care of you. She will have enough work with the women who are on their way here as we speak. I will give you the transfusion, which will most likely heal you in a matter of hours, but you will have to pretend to still be injured. You can't dance at the weddings, and you will need to affect a wince here and there, but at least you'll get to attend and wear your fancy dresses."

The smile that bloomed on Frankie's face was bright enough to melt his heart. "I can do that. I will also hold my side and limp a little." Her smile turned sultry. "But when we are alone, I won't have to pretend, and we can dance as much as we want."

Dagor chuckled. "Are you sure that we are talking about dancing?"

"Among other things. After all, if the transfusion is not enough to induce my transition, we will need to do it the old-fashioned way."

The room seemed to spin as he processed her words. "I thought that you wanted to wait until you got to the village?"

"I changed my mind again. I want you to do it."

"Why? Don't you want to find a mate among the immortals?" The words tasted like dirt in his mouth, but he needed to say them.

Frankie needed to enter this with a clear head.

It suddenly occurred to him that her indecision, which was not typical of her, might be the result of drugs that the doctor had put into the drip bag. He didn't know much about that, but he'd read that opioids used for numbing pain could have undesirable side effects and even become addictive.

How could Frankie give him her informed consent when she was in a compromised state?

And why hadn't Kian thought of that when he suggested Dagor should wait for her to wake up and then ask her?

Pulling her hand out of his, Frankie sighed. "You are even worse than me. One moment, you are trying to persuade me to accept your transfusion, and the next, you are trying to dissuade me. Make up your mind."

He groaned. "I'm sorry, but it has just occurred to me that you might be under the influence of drugs and that you are not in the proper state of mind to give your consent."

"Don't be ridiculous. My mind is perfectly clear, and I know precisely what I want."

"It doesn't look like that from where I'm sitting."

She glared at him. "So maybe you should change seats."

"Or maybe you need to convince me that you are not compromised."

Frankie



Frankie had never been so close to slapping someone across the face as she was now.

Good thing that she didn't have the energy to lift her hand to do so or Dagor would have been the first person she'd ever assaulted.

He was so infuriating. Not only was he obtuse and disconnected from his feelings, he couldn't make up his mind about a single thing.

Instead of harming him physically, not that a slap from her would have hurt anything other than his overinflated ego, she just glared at him. "You want me to convince you that my mind is clear?"

"Yes, please."

"How very polite and considerate of you."

"Is that sarcasm?"

"Brilliant observation, my dear Watson."

He frowned. "That's not my name. Are you sure you are thinking clearly?"

"Ugh, you are insufferable. Watson is a fictional character from a famous detective series. The detective is the very astute Sherlock Holmes, and Dr. Watson is his assistant."

"Oh, okay. I get it now. I've heard of that detective. British, right?"

As if that had anything to do with anything. "Yes. He is. Or was. I don't remember the name of the author, but he was British."

Dagor nodded. "I'm still waiting for you to convince me that you are not affected by drugs and that your judgment is sound."

Frankie huffed out a breath. "My judgment is probably not sound, but it has nothing to do with me being under the influence of drugs or not. For some unexplainable reason, I want you despite how annoying and hardheaded you are, and it has nothing to do with you being a damn god, so don't you dare say that." She pointed a finger at him.

"I'm not saying anything."

"Good. So here is what I've been thinking. It made sense only minutes ago, but I'm no longer sure. So, I know that you don't want to get attached to me because I'm human, and I'm not going to live long even if I die from old age. But if I was immortal, that objection would be out, and the only one that would remain would be me not being a god like you, but that's just snobbish on your part, and I figured it wouldn't be too difficult to beat it out of you."

He shook his head. "It's not about snobbishness. I don't care whether you are a pureblooded goddess or a hybrid half-human, or even ninety-nine percent human and one percent goddess, as long as it makes you immortal. What I care about is that if I bond with you, I would never be able to go home. Hybrids are considered an abomination on Anumati, which means that I can't take you with me, and I can never introduce you to my family or live near them. My parents' greatest wish is to see their son bring home a mate and perhaps one day bless them with a grandchild. It's the greatest wish of any parent in my home world, and it's my duty as a son to do my best to give them that."

Frankie swallowed.

As much as she would have loved to poke holes in his reasoning, she couldn't because she knew precisely what he was talking about. One of her biggest objections to becoming immortal was her family and how she could manage to be with them while keeping her immortality a secret. She hadn't even thought about the complications of bringing her mate to meet her parents, her brothers, her cousins, and aunts and uncles. Would she be willing to give all

of that up for a guy?

For Dagor?

She'd only known him for such a short time. There was no way she would give up her entire world for him.

Or was there?

Her gut was whispering quite loudly that she would because he was the one for her, and he was worth it, but her mind didn't agree.

Given that her heart always spoke louder than her mind, she might have followed her heart's advice, but Dagor was much too cerebral for that.

His mind was in the driver's seat, and he was putting up a ferocious fight with his heart, which she had a strong feeling was whispering the same things to him as her gut was whispering to her.

With a sigh, she reached for his hand and clasped it. "It seems to me that the one who needs more time to decide is you, not me. I love my family, too. They are very important to me, so I understand why this is difficult for you and why you cannot commit to me yet. But you will. It's only a matter of time."

Dager



Frankie's certainty that he would commit to her in the end was both unsettling and comforting. The notion that she believed so firmly in a future for them was both a balm to his conflicted heart and a challenge to the barriers he had meticulously constructed around it.

She wasn't wrong.

He knew in his gut that she was right, but his mind was still refusing to cooperate. He had too much to lose. But he also had so much to gain.

To have someone else grapple with the enormity of the choices he had been wrestling with in the silence of his own mind was a novelty.

Aru and Negal knew his preference for a traditional mating that would meet with his parents' approval, but they had no idea how close he'd come to giving it all up to be with Frankie.

Hell, he hadn't even admitted that to himself.

"Are you okay?" She smiled. The warmth from her hand clasping his was spreading through his body and bridging the chasm of differences and uncertainties between them. "You look a little shell-shocked."

"I am." He smiled back. "You are very confident. I like that."

"Do you still think that I'm under the influence of drugs and not thinking clearly?"

He shook his head. "You have more clarity than I do."

He was still acutely aware of the complexities of their situation and the expectations and responsibilities placed on him. Choosing Frankie would entail a price he wasn't sure he would be allowed to pay, but he was starting to believe that if the choice was left to him, he would choose to pay it because it was worth it.

Gazing into her warm eyes, he saw something he had never dreamt of having—the love of a mate. But the hope filling his chest was thwarted by fear.

"I'm glad that you understand. It means a lot to me, and it also lessens the guilt I feel. But it's not just about me and my decisions. You and I are pulled in different directions, and I don't see a solution for that."

Dagor refrained from saying that choosing her might mean losing everything he had ever known to be true about himself for a woman he had just met. He needed space, he needed to think, and he felt like he had his back up against the wall.

It was suffocating.

Frankie's grip on his hand tightened slightly. "The only thing you need to decide on right now is allowing yourself to feel. All I'm asking is for you to open your heart to me and let me in. What happens next happens. You don't need to feel obligated to me just because I want you to induce my transition. This is my way of giving us a chance. We still might say goodbye to each other at the end of the cruise, but at least we will get to enjoy what's left of our time together. And if what we have does deepen, we will figure out how to proceed from there." She smiled hesitantly. "I don't have to become a beta tester for Perfect Match. I can accompany you on your quest to Tibet."

He snorted. "I can't imagine you camping out in the wild and wearing the same clothes for days on end."

Frankie pouted. "What kind of woman would I be if I demanded you make all the sacrifices? I'm willing to suffer some discomfort to give us more time together. After all, great things require great sacrifices. Besides, you and I sleeping in a small tent doesn't seem so bad. We will keep each other warm."

He arched a brow. "With Aru and Gabi in the tent right next to ours and

Negal on the other side?"

"Aru and Gabi will be busy with each other, and Negal will have to put on earphones and blast loud music."

"You have it all figured out, don't you?"

She laughed and immediately winced. "Don't make me laugh. It hurts."

"I don't understand what's funny."

"I don't have anything figured out. I'm making it up as I go along."

"You're very good at it."

"I know." She smirked.

Her logic was hard to argue with, and it had done a better job of crashing against the shores of his rational mind and eroding the barriers he had so carefully built than her previous appeal to his emotions. She had given him a glimmer of something that had been absent in his life for a long time—a thrill of the unknown and the allure of a path less traveled.

"So, what's our next step, lady strategist? Do I administer the transfusion now, or do I get Bridget to release you to my care first?"

"Do it now, and then call her and convince her to release me before the women arrive so she will have room in the clinic. I will not heal as fast as you do, but if I'm a little better when Bridget comes to check on me, you might not even need to thrall her to convince her. After that, she will be so busy with those poor women that she will forget all about me."

"How did you get to be so smart?"

She rolled her eyes playfully. "I was born that way. Now get that syringe out and do it before Hildegard decides to check up on me again."

"Yes, ma'am." Dagor's hand trembled as he reached into his pocket.

He had no idea what he was doing.

"Can you do it?" he asked. "I've never held a syringe in my hand, and I don't want to hurt you."

"I know what to do. Give it to me," she commanded.

"All you need is this much." He showed her the tip of his little finger.

Frankie nodded. "Got it."

Kian

Kian stood to the side of the gangway and scanned the group of women being carefully guided inside.

They were in a semi-thrall, their expressions calm and unquestioning while they were gently herded along. Walking beside them, Yamanu shrouded their arrival from the Mexican authorities guarding the port.

Kian regretted that Syssi wasn't there. She hadn't returned from the shopping mission that she, Alena, Sari, and several of the other females had embarked on to supply the victims with fresh clothing and other items.

Kri was there, though, spreading her calming influence and aiding the thrall that Kalugal had cast over the women.

With plenty of experience dealing with similar situations, Kri navigated the role she'd taken upon herself with practiced ease. She'd talked with the human staff serving on the ship and assembled a group of older females to help the women once Kalugal released them from his thrall.

There was a limit to how long it was safe to keep their minds floating on whatever fantasy he was feeding them, and Kian didn't want to be there when they woke up.

First of all, after what had been done to them, they would be terrified of any male in their vicinity, and secondly, he didn't have what it took to handle their pain.

He knew how to lead and how to kill, and if the monsters who had done that

to these poor women weren't dead already, he would have killed them, but he was not good at offering comfort, and the rage bubbling inside of him had no outlet.

Hell, he doubted that even Syssi could have handled the enormity of what these women had been through. She was too soft, too empathic, and seeing them would have slain her.

If he could keep her away from them, he would.

The human ladies were doing great, though. With their kind faces and soft murmurs, they were a soothing presence. They didn't speak Spanish, but their gentle demeanor transcended language barriers.

As they took the elevators to the lower level where they were to be housed, he took the stairs and got there just as they exited.

He watched as Kri and the older ladies escorted them to the cabins, putting two in each, not because they lacked available rooms but because they needed each other's company for support.

Kalugal walked up to him with an uncharacteristically somber expression on his face. "You didn't have to come."

"I did."

"Your eyes are glowing, and your fangs are elongated. Luckily, none of them saw you because of my thrall."

"When are you going to release them?" Kian asked.

"I'm waiting until the last of them is in her cabin, and then I'm going to ease them into reality."

It was an impressive ability to keep up the thrall while conducting a conversation. "How are you doing that and talking to me at the same time?"

"I'm using a very simple thrall and running it on repeat. A placid lake surrounded by green meadows with chirping birds and beautiful butterflies. I can do this in my sleep."

"In that case, what did you do about the drivers?"

"Well, I had them under compulsion to stay in the vehicles and ignore what was going on as we took care of the cartel thugs. Once we got everyone to the dockside, I looked inside their minds to make sure that there was nothing there that shouldn't be and thrall'd away whatever memories they managed to retain despite the compulsion to ignore what we were doing."

"Good. Now, tell me more about the amulet."

Kalugal grimaced. "I've never believed in dark magic, but that thing proved me wrong. There is true evil in this world, and it has nothing to do with our esteemed parents, the gods."

"There must be some other explanation."

Kalugal quirked a brow. "You believe in Mey's ability to hear echoes of past events in the walls, and you believe in Jin's ability to attach a tether of her consciousness to people. Why is it such a stretch for you to believe that an object could be powered by the life force of human sacrifices?"

"Good point. Can I see it?"

"You'll have to ask Jacki because it belongs to her. At first, the plan was to toss it into the ocean once the mission was completed, but Jacki changed her mind. She wants to keep it for emergencies."

"What kind of emergencies?"

"When we need answers we can't get any other way, and we need to either induce a vision or make it clearer. It seems that the amulet magnifies prophetic visions. It's possible that its power was depleted to fuel the one vision that Jacki had, but it's also possible that it can fuel more until it runs out of juice."

"We don't need the damn amulet for that. We have Mia."

He wondered how it hadn't occurred to him before to suggest that. Syssi could ask Mia to be next to her when she courted a vision, and Mia's enhancing power could provide her with the same boost that the amulet had given Jacki, but without the evil taint.

"Right." Kalugal nodded. "Why haven't we used her in that capacity before?"

"I don't want Syssi to chase visions, so naturally, I didn't think of ways to make it easier for her. But she found her own methods. Evidently, our daughter's presence has a similar effect on her as Mia's presence has on other talents."

"Allegra must be a seer," Kalugal said.

That was a given, but it didn't make Kian happy. He wanted his daughter to have a good life and not to struggle with visions of doom like her mother. "I hope Allegra chooses to be a musician or a painter and lets her natural paranormal ability remain dormant. I want her to be passionate about something that doesn't involve darkness and pain."

Frankie



"How are you feeling?' Dagor asked for the umpteenth time.

He'd given Frankie the transfusion about half an hour ago, but he had also snuck in a cup of coffee for her, so she wasn't sure whether her improved vitality was the result of his godly blood or the elixir of the gods, which coffee must be.

"I feel just as well as I did when you asked me five minutes ago."

He looked disappointed. "Perhaps try to move a little and see whether it hurts?"

She could do that, but it would have been better if Dagor had just peeled back the bandage and taken a look. She'd suggested that, but when he turned a shade of green, it was obvious that he didn't have the stomach for it.

And to think that the guy was a soldier, or a trooper as he called himself. Was there a difference? She planned to look it up when she had a chance...

"Oh, damn. Do you know what happened to my phone?"

He frowned. "I don't know. Bridget cut off your clothes, and I covered you with Negal's shirt because mine was saturated with blood. I don't know what she did with them."

"Ugh." Frankie slapped a hand over her face. "Margo might have called and gotten frantic when she couldn't get me. Or my mom or my cousins. I need

that phone."

"I can ask the nurse." He pushed to his feet.

"If Bridget was the one who cut off my clothes, she's the one you should ask."

"She's busy with the women we rescued from the cartel. I don't think she will be available anytime soon."

"Can you at least call Mia for me? If Margo couldn't get ahold of me, she would have called Mia, and the same goes for my family."

"I can do that." He sat back down. "Do you also want me to tell her that she can come visit you?"

"Yes, please." Frankie smiled. "Do I really need to pretend that I'm half dead when she comes?"

The green hue returned to his pale face. "Please don't say things like that. Just dial back on your energy level."

Everyone who knew her was accustomed to her exuberance. If she pretended to be subdued, they would assume that she must be half dead.

"I'll try." Frankie let out a breath. "Or I can blame the contraband coffee."

"Please, don't. If Bridget finds out, she might kick me out. By the way, do you happen to remember Mia's number? It's not in my contacts."

"I don't. Who remembers numbers these days?"

"Right." He smiled. "I'll text Aru and ask him to get it for me."

"Good thinking."

As Dagor typed a message to his boss, the door opened and Hildegard walked in. "How is my favorite patient doing?"

"I'm your only patient, and I'm feeling fine, thank you."

"That's good to hear." The nurse walked over to her bed and checked the readouts. "Your blood pressure is back to normal all of a sudden. It might be

a malfunction of the automatic monitor."

The thing started on its own in half-hour intervals, and every time it did, Frankie felt as if it was cutting off her circulation and her arm was going numb.

The nurse pulled out an old-fashioned blood pressure cuff from her coat pocket and wrapped it around Frankie's other arm.

Thankfully, she was much gentler with it than the automatic cuff had been, and after measuring Frankie's blood pressure twice, she shook her head. "It must be your youth." She put the cuff away. "I'm going to replace the blood transfusion with just liquids."

"Can you take everything out?" Frankie asked. "I can drink now on my own, so I don't need an infusion of liquids, and if you take out the thing down below, I can probably get to the bathroom with Dagor's help."

Hildegard looked conflicted. "That's something for the doctor to decide."

"I know. But she's busy, right?" Frankie cast the nurse her most charming smile. "The sooner I can get out of here, the sooner she can treat other patients that might need this bed."

"True. I'll stop the transfusion and call her." As the nurse went about removing the needle from Frankie's hand, she cast a glance at Dagor. "Can you give us a few moments, please? You can wait in the front room until I call you."

He didn't look happy about it, but Hildegard's tone didn't leave room for argument.

Nodding, he pushed to his feet and walked to the door. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Frankie smiled at him. "While you are there, can you get me more of that wonderful elixir?"

"I'll see what I can do about a cup of water for you."

When the door closed behind him, Hildegard chuckled. "Don't think that I don't know about the coffee."

Frankie feigned innocence. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Right." The nurse put away her equipment. "The most common reaction to transfusion is mild itching or hives. That's an allergic reaction and can be treated with antihistamine." She folded the sheet up to expose Frankie's lower half and gently removed the catheter. "The other potential side effects might be a fever in the first twenty-four hours following the transfusion. You might also experience some dizziness, a bit of nausea, headache, chills, or a general feeling of discomfort. These are normal reactions, and you can take Tylenol to ease the symptoms. But if you are experiencing anything more serious than that, you need to let us know."

"Got it." Frankie let out a breath when Hildegard covered her with the sheet.

The nurse put the blanket over the sheet. "Are you warm enough? Do you want me to get you another blanket?"

"That would be nice, thank you."

When the door opened, Frankie expected it to be Dagor and wondered why he hadn't waited for the nurse to tell him that it was okay. It wasn't like he hadn't seen everything Frankie had to offer up close and personal, but that wasn't the point.

Except, instead of Dagor, a woman entered. "Hi, Frankie. Sorry to interrupt, but I'm here to replace Hildegard. I'm your new nurse, Gertrude."

"Hi." Frankie forced a smile.

She liked Hildegard, and she wasn't happy about having a new nurse.

"What's going on?" Hildegard asked. "No one told me anything."

Gertrude winced. "The women are here, and Bridget needs your help with them."

"I see."

"I've already packed the supplies she requested. They are on the desk in the reception area."

"Thanks." Hildegard cast a smile at Frankie. "I'll ask Bridget if it's okay to

release you when I see her."

Frankie nodded. "Thank you. You were very kind to me."

"It was my pleasure. Gertrude will take care of you now. You're in good hands."

"I have no doubt. Can Dagor come back in now?"

Hildegard nodded. "If he's done hunting for the elixir." She winked before going out the door.

Gertrude arched a brow. "What elixir is she talking about?"

"Just water." Frankie smiled sweetly. "The elixir of life."

Dagor



"You can go in now," Hildegard told Dagor while lifting the package the other nurse had prepared for her.

"Thank you. Is there anything I should be aware of? Anything to look out for?" He cradled the coffee cup he'd gotten for Frankie, pretending it was his.

"I told Frankie what the possible side effects are, and they are mostly mild. But she's not going anywhere yet. Gertrude will keep an eye on her, and if Bridget approves her release, which I doubt, Gertrude or I will come to check on her from time to time, so you don't have to worry about it."

He didn't want them coming to check on Frankie. "I'm sure the two of you will have your hands full with those poor women. I can keep an eye on Frankie, and if I think that she needs to be looked at, I'll either bring her here or ask you to come see her at her cabin."

The nurse regarded him with a critical eye. "Are you going to be with her twenty-four-seven?"

"Absolutely. I will not leave her side."

She tilted her head. "What if your boss calls a meeting?"

"I'll either bring Frankie with me or tell him that he has to hold the meeting in her cabin."

That seemed to meet with Hildegard's approval, and she nodded. "Good. I'll let Bridget know."

After she left, he let out a breath and knocked on the door before opening it and walking in.

"I was just leaving." The new nurse straightened the blanket over Frankie. "If you need me, I will be in the front room."

"Can I ask you a question, Nurse Gertrude?" Dagor put the coffee cup on the side table.

"Just Gertrude, and sure. What do you want to know?"

"Why did Hildegard leave to help the doctor, and you took her place here instead of just going down to assist Bridget?"

She grimaced. "Hildi is better suited for that kind of work, while I'm better at monitoring patients."

There was a story there, but he felt like the nurse didn't want to talk about it, and he didn't want to press. "Frankie's friend Mia is on her way. I hope that's okay."

"Of course." The smile returned to Gertrude's face. "I'll let her in as soon as she arrives. Will Toven accompany her?"

"I don't know," Dagor said. "Can he come in as well?"

"If it's okay with Frankie, it's okay with me."

"It is," Frankie said.

After the door closed behind the nurse, Dagor handed her the coffee cup. "Here is your elixir, my lady."

"Thank you, my brave knight. Did you have to fight a dragon for it?"

He laughed. "If Hildegard was a dragon, then yes. I pretended that it was mine, but she saw right through me."

Frankie took a sip and rolled her eyes. "I can't believe that crappy instant coffee tastes so good when there is nothing else."

"All the sugar and creamer I put in it masks the taste." He sat on the uncomfortable little stool and rolled it closer to the bed. "Mia said that Margo

didn't call her, and neither did your parents or any of your cousins."

She frowned. "That's disappointing. It's good because they're not worried about me, but why the hell not? Shouldn't they check on me?"

He put his hand on her thigh. "It feels like a lot of time has passed since you spoke to them last, but it was only yesterday. They have no reason to worry about you."

"Right." She sipped her coffee. "I really feel better now. Like a lot better. It's amazing what a difference a tiny amount of your blood can do. What's in it? Do you have nano-healing or something?"

"It's part of my genetics. I'm not a geneticist, so I can't tell you what exactly it does and how. The truth is that I didn't even know my blood could heal you. Aru told me, and the reason that he knew was that his sister studied to be a healer for the lesser species."

Frankie's forehead creased in a deep frown. "Lesser species? Is that what they call us?"

Oh damn. He shouldn't have said that. "Created species is a better term, but many still use lesser. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, and I don't even believe it. I'm a member of the resistance."

"What kind of a resistance?"

He'd forgotten that Frankie wasn't privy to all that the clan had learned about him and his teammates, and he hadn't told her much about himself other than the basics. They really needed to have a long talk about who he was and what his goals and aspirations had been before he'd been told that Earth was it for him for the next thousand years or so, or maybe even forever.

Aru



"You look stunning." Aru rubbed a hand over his face, commanding his fangs to behave. "That dress is even more beautiful than the one you wore for Alena and Orion's wedding."

Gabi beamed at him. "Thank you. What do you think of the sandals?" She lifted one foot to clear the full-length skirt of the gown.

"Very pretty. But will you be able to walk in them?"

She chuckled. "Walk, yes. Dance, I'm not sure. You might have to hold me tight."

His fangs vibrated in his mouth. "I can do that."

Sauntering up to him, she cupped his cheeks and planted a soft kiss on his lips. "Hold that thought, lover god. Karen is waiting for me to come over so she can do my hair. Cheryl is in charge of makeup, which is a little scary, but if I don't like what she does to my face, I will just wash it off and do it myself."

He frowned. "Isn't she too young to wear makeup?"

"She's sixteen, and Karen allows her to put on only a little, but she watches lots of tutorials about it on InstaTock and is supposedly an expert."

"I need to check that platform out."

"Don't." She waved a dismissive hand. "It's mostly nonsense posted by

misguided teenagers and influencers pushing products that they are paid to advertise. The makeup tutorials are probably the only ones worth watching."

Are you alone? Aria's voice sounded in Aru's head.

Give me five minutes, he sent over their telepathic connection.

"Aru?" Gabi waved a hand in front of his eyes. "Where did you go just now?"

He shook his head. "I was just thinking that Dalhu is probably not going to get the bachelor party that was planned for him, which is a shame. I was looking forward to one of Kian's superb cigars and a few shots of equally excellent whiskey."

It wasn't a lie per se because everything he'd said was true, except for what had really been the cause of his momentary distraction.

Gabi pursed her lips. "There is still plenty of time, and Dalhu doesn't seem like the sort of guy who will fuss about his appearance."

"It's not so much about the lack of time as it is about the lack of motivation. Everyone is in a bad mood, and it seems wrong to celebrate when we have the victims of a horrific tragedy on board."

Visibly deflated, Gabi nodded. "I know. I'm trying not to think about it." She sighed. "On the one hand, I'm thinking that by allowing it to crush my spirits I'm letting the monsters win, but on the other hand I feel like a weakling who can't handle that much suffering and shuts her mind to it."

Walking up to Gabi, Aru pulled her into his arms. "Cling to the first part because it's the right approach. We can't let evil win by demoralizing us, but we cannot turn a blind eye to it either. We all need to do our part to eradicate evil, even if it's just by pushing against the darkness to celebrate a joyful occasion."

"You are right." Gabi took a fortifying breath, squared her shoulders, and plastered a smile on her face. "I'm going to have fun with my sisters-in-law and my nieces even if I need to drink myself silly to enjoy my time with them."

"That's the spirit." He kissed her forehead. "Just don't drink too much."

Smirking, she pushed out of his arms. "I'm immortal now, and it takes a lot of alcohol to get me drunk. I also burn through it in no time." She patted his shoulder. "Call the guys and try to organize a bachelor party for Dalhu. It's not fair to deprive him of the one time in his life that's all about him."

"I'm not a close friend of his, and it's not my place to organize anything, but I can send Kian a text and ask him if it's still happening. It will serve as a nudge in the right direction."

"You're such a diplomat, my love. I don't know why you were relegated to a simple reconnaissance mission on Earth instead of getting promoted to something more, but their loss is my gain."

It pained him that he couldn't tell her how important his mission really was and who he was reporting to. The search for the Kra-ell settlers and the missing pods was just a cover for his real mission on Earth.

So far, he hadn't had great success with the former, but his success with the latter exceeded everyone's wildest expectations.

Frankie



"Frankie!" Mia rolled into her room with such speed that Frankie feared she would crash into the hospital bed, but she stopped by pivoting the wheelchair at the last moment and aligning it with the bed.

Dagor had jumped out of the way just in time, but he shouldn't have been worried. Mia's chair hadn't even touched him.

Frankie chuckled. "You can be the first getaway wheelchair driver."

"How are you doing?" Mia reached for her hand. "And don't you dare say fine."

"But I do feel fine. Bridget's taken great care of me. She patched me up and gave me some blood to replenish what I'd lost, and I'm on the mend. You have nothing to worry about, at least not about me."

Frankie wasn't doing a great job of pretending to be worse than she was, but what choice did she have? Mia was accusing her of doing the exact opposite.

"But I do worry." Mia gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I worry about all the dresses that you are not going to wear for all those weddings that you were hoping to dance at."

That was indeed a pity. If not for Dagor's blood, she definitely wouldn't have been able to dance at those weddings, so there was no way she could do that without arousing suspicion. She would have to dance with him in the privacy of her cabin suite, and when Margo joined them, she would be even more restricted.

Eh, who cared.

She was alive, and she owed her life to Dagor who had taken the barrage of bullets for her. And now she was getting back on her feet much faster thanks to his blood transfusion. She should be grateful, and she was.

"It's okay." Frankie squeezed Mia's hand back. "Thanks to Dagor, I will get to dance at many more weddings, just not on this cruise."

Mia turned to him. "Thank you for saving my bestie. I heard that you took bullets for her."

"Of course, I did. I'm practically indestructible."

When Mia pressed her lips together in that stubborn way of hers, Frankie braced for a lecture.

"You should have let Dagor induce you instead of waiting until you got to the village."

"It wouldn't have happened that fast even if we went for it. From what you told me, I understand that it can take days, and sometimes weeks. Dagor and I haven't been together long enough."

"True." Mia brushed a hand over her short hair. "It just seems like so much longer. It's funny how time moves differently depending on the situation, and the paradox is that it's counterintuitive. When a lot happens in a short period of time, it seems like it stretches on forever. But when nothing happens, it sometimes feels as if days passed instead of years."

"Profound," Frankie said. "You should put that in one of your books."

Mia chuckled. "My books are for children between the ages of two and four. I don't think they are even aware of the concept of time."

"I was joking. Maybe you can put it in one of your Perfect Match scenarios."

"That's a better idea." Mia sighed. "It's such a shame that you are going to miss Amanda's wedding."

A pang of regret hit Frankie. She had been looking forward to that one in particular. Amanda would no doubt wear the most magnificent wedding

gown, and she really wanted to see it. "Yeah, I'm bummed about it. You'll have to take lots of pictures for me. I want you to snap a photo of Amanda in her wedding gown from every angle."

"She's going to look spectacular." Mia snorted. "Not that she doesn't look like a million bucks first thing in the morning when the rest of us mere mortals are a mess."

"Reminder. You are no longer mortal, mere or otherwise." Frankie glanced at Dagor, who was standing very quietly next to the equipment and looking at them with a small smile lifting the corners of his lips.

He was so motionless that she'd forgotten he was there for a moment.

Mia sighed. "The truth is that I feel weird celebrating and having a good time while those poor women are grieving in their little cabins on the lower deck."

"Life goes on," Dagor said. "What happened to them was tragic, but it wasn't our fault. We saved them, and Kian is taking them to a place where they will get help."

"I know." Mia turned to look at him. "I'm really proud of how our community came together to help these strangers. Syssi, Alena, Sari, and several others went shopping so the women would have fresh clothing to change into after they showered and got patched up by Bridget, and several ladies from the service staff volunteered to take care of them. "

"They've been through so much," Frankie said quietly, her gaze drifting. "It's going to be a long road to recovery."

Mia nodded. "They are getting the best help possible. The clan has been rescuing trafficking victims for years, and they operate a charity that rehabilitates them. The lady who runs it has plenty of experience dealing with traumatized victims."

"I'm glad." Frankie glanced at Dagor. "We were at the right place at the right time to save them. Perhaps your Fates had something to do with it?"

"I'm sure they did," Dagor said. "But we won't know their plans until they are ready to reveal them."

"How true." Mia let go of Frankie's hand. "I should let you rest. Is there anything you need? Do you want me to get you a nightgown from your cabin? A brush?"

Until Mia's offer, it hadn't occurred to Frankie that she probably looked like roadkill. And to think that she'd been talking with Dagor about commitment and feelings while looking terrible was so damn embarrassing that she felt like pulling the sheet over her head.

"Yes, please. I need a brush and a mirror, my facial creams, deodorant, perfume... in short, the works."

Mia patted her arm. "I've got you, girl. I'll pack a bag for you and come right back."

"Thank you. You are a lifesaver."

"I thought that was me," Dagor murmured.

"You too, darling. You are both my life savers."

Aru



In his bedroom, Aru lay on his back, closed his eyes, and opened the channel to his sister.

I am alone now, he sent.

It took a couple of moments for her to answer. *This will take some time. Are you going to be alone for a while?*

Aria's mental voice was devoid of its usual warmth, which probably meant that she wasn't alone, and that someone was telling her what to say. It didn't matter that only he could hear her. Her demeanor influenced her inner voice.

I have about an hour.

That is sufficient. The Oracle assures me that while I am in the temple, we can communicate without fear of anyone eavesdropping on our telepathic communication. This is important in the context of what I need to tell you next. The queen wants to speak to her granddaughter through us. Meaning that I will be present when she comes to visit the Supreme, and you will need to be with the heir at the same time.

Aru frowned. *That is too dangerous. For thousands of years, the two of them have met in complete seclusion. Is there a way for you to sneak into the reception hall without the queen's attendants noticing? Some secret passage that only the Supreme knows about?*

There is not. But the queen came up with a good cover story for why she suddenly needs to visit the Supreme Oracle daily and why I need to be there.

No cover story will be good enough, Aria. Any deviation from tradition will be met with suspicion.

As Aria chuckled inwardly, the inner sound of her amusement traveled over their communication channel in the form of bubbles that were a little tickling. You are talking about the queen of Anumati, Aru. The most seasoned politician after the Eternal King. She is going to announce her latest project at the gala for the new university that is in three days, and it cannot be suspicious if she makes it public.

What kind of a project?

The only one that could involve the Supreme Oracle and her scribe. Making a written record of all the greatest prophecies. She will ask the Oracle to look back into the distant past and report what her predecessors have predicted. The queen will decide which prophecies should be included in the official canon and which should be kept in the royal archives for the king's and queen's eyes only. That not only gives a legitimate reason for her daily visits, but it is also something that the king will covet and encourage.

Aru was impressed. Their queen was as devious as she was brilliant.

Naturally, she will need a scribe to write them down.

Aria chuckled again. Naturally.

That sounds patriotic enough, but how are the three of you going to pull it off while facilitating conversation between the queen and her granddaughter? Are you going to make the prophecies up?

Some are already engraved on the columns, so I only need to copy them. Nothing says that everything the Oracle sees needs to be new. Great prophecies have been engraved on the columns from time immemorial, but since the king does not trust their accuracy, he would be very happy about the Oracle verifying that they were recorded properly and also that they came to pass according to the prophecy. That will require the Oracle and me to spend some time courting those visions, but we do not need to rush. The queen will warn that the project might take many years because the Oracle's visions are often unclear and the requests need to be repeated.

Aru could see the queen's plan working. The more she talked publicly about

her project, the more believable it would be. That would cover her side, but he still needed to figure out obstacles on his.

I see one more problem that the queen might not have taken into account. If I need to stay near Annani and be available daily to her, I can't continue searching for the missing pods, which is the official reason for my presence here.

Well, to call it official was a misstatement. The public wasn't aware of the galactic patrol ship stopping by the forbidden planet and dropping off scouts to search for the Kra-ell. It was a secret mission authorized by the king.

How am I going to explain that?

Give me a moment, Aria said. I need to consult with the two most important ladies on Anumati.

As he waited for Aria to return to him with a solution, he wracked his mind for ideas as well. Even if the queen or the Oracle managed to change his mission on Earth to something that would require him to stay put, how was he going to explain it to his teammates? Also, how was he going to excuse his daily visits to Annani?

More than a moment had passed until Aru sensed Aria's presence again.

I have some questions, Aria began. The communication device you use to get in touch with the clan, does it come with global connectivity?

It does. Kian gave me one of the clan phones, and they are connected to the clan's satellites. They work from anywhere in the world.

Excellent. The queen says that there is no need for you to be in the heir's presence while they converse through us. You can talk with her via the device.

That is not going to be easy to explain either. Kian knows, and obviously, the princess would have to know as well, but we cannot let anyone else know about our telepathic connection.

Give me a moment, Aria said.

This time around, it really did take only a moment for Aria to return to him.

Here is what you need to do: you will explain to the heir that she must publicly demand that you call her daily and educate her about Anumati, its politics, and the Eternal King. The princess should repeat the request in front of your teammates, so they won't question it. Even if they overhear you talking about those things, they will have no reason to suspect that you are being fed the information. They will assume that you are talking from personal knowledge.

Our queen is brilliant.

Aria chuckled. Thank you. That was my idea.

You were always the smart one, sister.

Dagor



"I have good news for you, Frankie." Gertrude entered the room, pushing a cart with various medical equipment. "Hildegard has convinced Dr. Bridget that you can be discharged on two conditions. One is that Dagor watches you for the next twenty-four hours, and the other is that I check in on you from time to time."

Dagor rose to his feet and pushed his stool against the wall to give the nurse room to maneuver.

"That's awesome." Frankie pushed up on the hospital's elevated bed, forgetting that she needed to pretend to be in pain.

When Dagor lifted his brows as a reminder, she affected a wince and slid back down a little. "I feel so much better that I keep forgetting that I should limit my movements."

"On the contrary," Gertrude said. "As long as you don't do anything to pop the stitches, which is difficult to do even if you try, you should move as much as you can to encourage circulation."

Dagor hadn't known that, and given Frankie's surprised expression, neither had she.

"That's good to know. In fact, I should have known that. My cousin Monica was encouraged to walk within hours after her C-section."

"That's right. Back in the day, it was believed that bed rest sped up healing. But today, patients are encouraged to walk as soon as they can." The nurse

smiled. "Not while receiving blood, though."

Frankie lifted her arms, which were free of tubes and wires. "That's done."

Slanting a glance at Dagor, Gertrude lifted a brow. "Are you squeamish?"

"I don't think so. Why?" He was when it came to Frankie's injury, but he wasn't going to admit it.

Besides, it should be mostly healed by now.

"I'm going to change Frankie's dressing and check on her wound."

"I held a shirt to that wound to slow the blood loss for over half an hour until the doctor arrived." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll be fine."

He needed to be there to thrall her in case she questioned Frankie's rapid healing, which she would.

With a nod, the nurse went to work.

Dagor watched intently as Gertrude gently peeled the bandaging away and exposed Frankie's wound, and as the last layer was removed, the nurse's expression shifted from professional focus to surprise.

"That's remarkable," Gertrude murmured as she examined the wound, or rather the thin scar, bruising, and discoloration that remained. "I've never seen a human heal this quickly." She looked up at Frankie and Dagor and lifted her brows. "Did you two start on the transition process? Because if Frankie is transitioning, that could explain the rapid healing.

Winking at Dagor while the nurse's attention was on him, Frankie chuckled. "We did, but I didn't expect it to happen so fast."

The lie wouldn't work once Gertrude did the math and realized that there was no way Frankie could have been induced and transitioned so quickly.

He would need to thrall the nurse once she'd re-bandaged Frankie.

Gertrude shrugged. "I guess every Dormant transitions differently, but I'm surprised your injury hasn't halted the process. From the limited experience we've gathered, it appears that the body needs to be healthy to be able to sustain the transition."

Employing a subtle thrall, Dagor changed the narrative in the nurse's mind. "You'd better be done quickly. I'm sure the doctor needs this room for her new patients."

Gertrude blinked, her expression clouding for a moment. "Yes, she needs this bed. I'd better remove the stitches."

Frankie winced a little as the nurse clipped the stitches and pulled them out one at a time using tweezers, but Dagor didn't feel any distress coming from her.

When the nurse was done, she looked at the wound again and shook her head. "I don't even need to bandage it."

"Yes, you do," Dagor said while pushing an image of a much angrier-looking wound into her mind.

He could remove the bandage after the nurse was gone, and when she came to check on Frankie again, he would employ another thrall to convince her that she'd seen it and it was fine.

It wasn't a good idea to use thralling that often, but he was using so very little that it wouldn't have a significant impact on Gertrude's brain.

"On second thought, I'd better re-bandage it." The nurse reached for the supplies she had brought with her.

"Thank you," Dagor said.

It took mere minutes for Gertrude to be done, and when she rose to her feet, she gave both of them a fond smile. "If you don't mind people seeing you in a hospital gown, you can leave now. I don't have a wheelchair for you, but your mate can carry you."

They both stiffened at the nurse's casual use of the word.

"I'm waiting for Mia to bring me a change of clothes," Frankie said. "She should be here any minute now, but if you need the bed urgently, I can wait in the front office."

"No rush." Gertrude smiled. "I don't expect new patients just yet."

As the nurse left, Frankie let out a breath. "Is she going to be okay? I mean, you thrall'd her twice, right? Mia told me that thralling should be used sparingly."

"Gertrude will be fine. I barely touched her mind."

Frankie



Mia drove into Frankie's patient room at a much slower speed than during her previous visit. "I'm sorry it took me so long." She lifted a small bag from her lap. "I couldn't find anything in your cabin that you could wear comfortably with that injury. All your clothes are form-fitting, even your pajamas."

Frankie grinned. "As I have always told you, if you've got it, flaunt it, and I have it." She mimicked, smoothing her hands over her sides.

Thanks to Dagor, she would be back in her clothes much sooner. It was a shame she had to pretend to be hurting for a while.

Mia chuckled. "Indeed, you do, but right now, the only thing you will be flaunting is a Mumu."

"What's a Mumu?" Dagor asked.

Frankie affected a horrified expression. "I'll show you in a moment, but the better question is how a Mumu found its way into Mia's wardrobe." She shifted her gaze to her friend. "Even your grandmother doesn't wear them."

Mia shrugged. "It's long and roomy and hides my legs, so I don't need to drape a blanket over them when I hang out by the pool. It's way too hot outside for that." She pulled the floral monstrosity out of the bag. "It's actually a pretty print. And the fabric is so soft that it's like wearing a nightgown." She pinned Frankie with a hard look. "This is not the time to think about fashion and looking good. It's about healing and not having

anything rub against your wound."

Frankie was dying to tell Mia that she was almost healed and could probably wear her yoga pants and a T-shirt, but she had to maintain the charade even in front of her best friend. It felt wrong, but then Mia had hidden plenty of stuff from her and Margo as well, and for a good reason.

"Fine. I'll wear your Mumu. Now, hand me the mirror and the brush." She grimaced. "I'm scared to look at myself."

"You look fine." Mia brought the chair closer to the bed and handed Frankie the bag. "Considering that you were injured, that is."

"Was that supposed to cheer me up?"

It had done the opposite, and as she pulled the compact mirror out of the bag and flipped it open, she braced herself for what she was about to see. It wasn't as bad as she'd imagined.

She looked like roadkill, but not one that had been rotting for days.

Pulling out the brush, she started working on the tangles in her hair. The nurse had washed it with a special moist towel that was made just for the purpose of cleaning the hair of a patient who couldn't shower, so it wasn't gross, but it was all tangled up and sticking in all directions.

If she needed proof that Dagor loved her for who she was and not because he just lusted after her, she'd gotten it and then some. He hadn't left her side unless it was absolutely necessary and had fussed over her like a good boyfriend should.

He hadn't declared his love for her yet, but he would soon. She'd get it out of the stubborn god.

"Much better." Frankie put the brush back in the bag

"Did you call Margo?" Mia asked.

"Not yet, why?"

"I need to know what to tell her if she calls me."

"Don't tell her anything. If she asks about me, tell her that I will call her and

tell her myself."

Mia grimaced. "We are talking about Margo. She will be on me like a dog on a bone."

Frankie waved a dismissive hand. "I'm much worse than she is. Just pretend like you don't know anything, and if need be, I'll back you up."

Mia's eyes narrowed slightly, not in a squint but enough to sharpen her gaze, giving the impression that she disapproved, but she knew better than to argue with Frankie. "I should get back." She put her chair in reverse. "I need to start getting ready for the wedding."

"When is the ceremony?" Dagor asked.

"Eleven at night. It got postponed because of everything that has happened, but it's all good. Immortals like to celebrate late at night for some reason."

"Maybe it's because they don't need to sleep as much," Frankie said.

"I guess." Mia cast her a smile. "Maybe you will feel up to it by then. I have a portable wheelchair I can loan you, and Dagor can push you."

Frankie lifted the tent-like dress. "I'm not showing up to the wedding wearing this."

"Of course not." Mia rolled her eyes. "I have a very nice evening dress that is not clingy and will look incredible on you. It's pearl pink, shimmery, ties at the neck and cascades down to the floor, or the footrests in our case."

Frankie turned to Dagor. "I would like to at least witness the ceremony. I heard that the goddess makes up a new one for each wedding, and I'm curious what she will do for her youngest daughter."

"Call me," Mia said. "Or better yet, I'll just ask Toven to bring the chair to the clinic, and I'll drop the dress at your cabin. If you decide to come, you'll have everything you need."

"Thank you." Frankie blew her friend an air kiss. "You are the best."

"Right back at ya, bestie."

Syssi



"I hate shopping." Syssi removed her shoes as soon as they crossed the gangways and put them in her tote. "I thought it would get better now that I'm immortal and have the stamina for it, but the heat and the humidity were too much."

Alena, who looked as calm and collected as ever, cast her a soft smile. "I don't enjoy going from store to store either, but it was for a good cause. I'm sure the things we bought will be appreciated."

Behind them the four Odus were barely visible under the pile of boxes they were carrying, and the two Guardians who had accompanied them were holding multiple shopping bags in each hand.

They'd probably gone a little overboard with the number of things they had gotten, but Syssi's reasoning had been that they weren't equipping the women just for a few days. They had nothing, and they needed everything. Gifting each one with a duffle bag that she could stuff with things that fit her would bring a tiny measure of normality to their shattered lives.

It was a naive thought. Syssi was aware of that. New clothing couldn't heal the deep wounds that would require years of therapy just to scab over, let alone heal. But there wasn't much else she could do, so she'd poured her heart into buying everything she could think of.

Kri met them at the lower deck that had been designated for the women. No one who wasn't there to help them would step foot on that deck.

The Guardian cocked a brow. "You know that there are only twenty-three of them, right? It looks like you bought stuff for a hundred."

Alena shrugged. "We figured that the women would feel better about arriving at the sanctuary with a duffle bag full of their belongings. No one wants to go to a new place feeling like a beggar."

"True." Kri let out a sigh. "I wish we could take them straight there instead of keeping them down here until we are done with all the weddings. They need Vanessa and her helpers now."

Syssi frowned. "You are right, and there is no reason we can't do precisely that." She handed Kri the two bags she was carrying. "I'll speak with Kian." She turned to her shopping companions. "Do you need me here, or can you manage without me?"

"Go." Sari waved her off. "We can manage from here."

"Thank you." Syssi shifted her eyes to Alena and the three other clan ladies who had joined them on the shopping expedition. "Are you sure it's okay with you?"

When they all nodded, Kri motioned for them to follow her. "We can sort the supplies in the laundry room."

Syssi had forgotten that the laundry was located on that level, and she was very happy to have an excuse not to enter another space that was hot and humid.

Pulling out her phone, she dialed Kian.

"Hello, my love. Did you ladies leave anything in the shops in Acapulco?"

It didn't surprise her that he knew she was back. He probably had the Guardians reporting their location and progress to him every fifteen minutes.

"Not much. Where are you?"

"Our cabin. Are you coming up?"

"Yes. I need to talk to you about something."

He chuckled. "That one sentence still fills me with dread even though I know

you love me with every fiber of your being."

"I don't believe it." She entered the elevator and waited for the doors to close behind her. "But just not to keep you in suspense, I'll tell you what I want to talk about."

"I'm all ears."

"I'll get straight to the point. Kri says that the women shouldn't have to wait to get help until we are done with our celebrations. It's not fair to them or to us. Everyone feels guilty about partying when there are brutalized women on board who are grieving the loss of their families and trying to deal with what was done to them."

"What do you suggest? That we cancel the weddings and go home?"

He sounded way too eager to do that.

"No." Syssi exited the elevator on the top deck and headed to their cabin. "We can turn around, sail back to Long Beach, where a bus will wait for the women to take them to the sanctuary, and then continue cruising."

Kian waited for her with the door open and pulled her in for a quick kiss. "It's not as simple as that. Vanessa is in the village, and the place is on lockdown until our return. She can't leave."

The clan's therapist had decided to stay in the village with her mate. Syssi had tried to convince Kian to allow Mo-red on board, but he'd been adamant about the Kra-ell remaining behind. His excuse had been that according to his sentence, Mo-red was performing community service, and going on vacation wasn't one of the conditions of his sentencing.

"Then unlock the village so Vanessa can get out. You can even let her take Mo-red with her. He can continue his community service in the sanctuary."

Kian



"Mo-red would scare the crap out of the residents. He looks too alien."
Kian looked down at Syssi's bare feet and smiled. "What happened to your shoes?"

"They are in my bag." She walked over to the couch. "It's nothing that dark sunglasses and a baggy shirt can't fix. You know that Vanessa will be miserable there without him, especially if she has to stay for a few days, which I suspect is unavoidable. These women are even more traumatized than the trafficking victims we normally rescue."

She dropped her large purse on the coffee table and waved at Shai, who was working on his laptop. "Hi, Shai. Enjoying your vacation?"

He snorted. "What can I say? Your husband is a slave driver."

"You enjoy it, so stop complaining." Kian walked over to the bar and poured himself a shot of whiskey. "Can I get you a drink, my love?"

"Yes, please. I need one."

"Margarita?"

She shrugged. "Why not? When in Mexico and all that. What are you working on?"

"The impossible." He ran a lime wedge around the rim of the margarita glass. "What I've been striving my entire life to do." He poured salt over a paper towel and dipped the glass in it. "Eradicating evil."

She grimaced. "Good luck with that. You know what they say, though. In the same way as cancer needs nutrients to grow, evil needs money. Cut the money supply, and you might be able to at least shrink it. But as long as there are big profits from selling drugs and sex slaves, that's not feasible."

Kian opened the bottle of tequila and poured a shot into the glass. "That's precisely what Shai and I are trying to figure out—how to stop the money flow to the cartels, but I'm afraid that we are too small of a fry in the big monsters' game. They all seem to be connected."

"Like attracts like." Syssi let out a breath. "Only it seems that evil is better organized."

"Of course." He squeezed fresh limes into the glass. "There is a fortune to be made in perpetrating evil, while doing good costs money."

Closing her eyes, Syssi slumped against the couch cushions. "It's hopeless."

Guilt assailed Kian for bringing her mood down even more than it was when she walked in.

"Hey, you're supposed to say that I'm your invincible knight and that I can do anything I put my mind to."

She cast him a smile. "If anyone can do it, it's you, my love."

"That's better." He smiled back and added ice to her margarita.

"Did you check on Allegra?" Syssi asked. "Should I go get her?"

"My mother doesn't want to hear about giving her back. They are enjoying each other's company."

Syssi's eyes sparkled with excitement. "I'm glad that Allegra is spending so much time with the Clan Mother. I want her to turn immortal as soon as possible. I want our baby to be indestructible."

Kian nearly choked on the sip of whiskey he'd taken a second ago. Syssi still didn't know how his mother turned the little girls immortal and believed in the story that just being around the goddess triggered their transition.

"You know that she won't really be indestructible, just more resilient."

"Of course. But I'll take it over her remaining human."

"Yeah. I know what you mean." He handed her the margarita. "So, what do we do about the weddings, cancel them?"

"We keep them going," Syssi said. "Those couples have waited long enough. We can head out to sea tonight and go straight for Long Beach instead of stopping at Cabo and the other two ports on the itinerary. After we drop off the girls, we go back to Cabo to collect Mia's friend and continue the cruise as scheduled. This will add two to two and a half days to the trip, so maybe I'll manage to convince Sari to celebrate her union with David on board as well."

"Even if it was possible to add days to the trip, there is no chance Sari will agree." He sat next to her on the couch. "She didn't get a wedding dress. Besides, she wants to get married in her castle. It's a matter of pride for her."

Syssi lifted a hand. "Hold on. Why can't we add days to the cruise?"

"Because the crew can't stay longer."

"What if you offer them a bonus? That always works."

He smiled. "They have prior obligations, so adding days to the cruise is a no-go. We also can't make it back in two days. We were going full speed to get to Acapulco first and then planned to go slow on the way back. It will take us about twice as long to get back to Long Beach, so you need to figure on three and a half to four days. We can still do it and just idle at sea for the remainder of the cruise, but we won't be able to pick up Margo, which is not a big deal. If she wants to join the cruise so badly, she can fly to Long Beach and meet us there. "

Syssi sighed. "That just adds complexity and doesn't solve the problem."

Cupping her cheek, he leaned and took her lips in a soft kiss. "Let me suggest a better plan. We will stop at Cabo like we planned, spend half a day there so people can get ashore and enjoy a taste of the place, and collect Margo. Then, instead of continuing to Mazatlán and Topolobampo, we continue to Long Beach, drop the women off, and head out to sea again just so we can finish celebrating the rest of the weddings."

"That doesn't shorten the time the women have to spend on board by much." Syssi worried her lower lip. "Do you think Vanessa can help them via tele-meetings?"

"That's the best idea you've had so far, my love." He took her hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss. "That way, I don't have to lift the lockdown, and Vanessa doesn't need to leave Mo-red behind. She can choose to do group therapy or have individual sessions with the women."

This latest idea seemed to cheer Syssi up. "We need to clone Vanessa. Do you know if there are any therapists in the other clan locations? Maybe we can bribe them to join the village."

"We can ask my mother. She would know."

Oddly, the study of psychology didn't seem to attract more immortals, even though issues of the mind afflicted immortals as much as humans. Then again, one therapist had been enough to take care of the clan population, but that equation changed when Vanessa took upon herself the management of the sanctuary.

Perhaps now that she was mated to Mo-red, who couldn't join her there, she would be open to transferring the job to an administrator. After all, the humans they rescued were served by human therapists, and the only reason an immortal needed to be in charge of the operation was to make sure that no one figured out who the rescuers were.

Dagor



T oven had arrived with Mia's spare wheelchair before Frankie had a chance to get dressed, but he hadn't entered the room, and wished Frankie a speedy recovery without looking in.

After he left, Frankie sat up in bed and put the garment her friend had brought for her in her lap.

"I can't believe that I'm being allowed to leave here so soon." She fumbled with the ties on her hospital gown.

"Can I help you with that?" Dagor offered.

"I am fine." She opened them one at a time and let the gown drop back.

He loved that she was comfortable enough around him to get naked without asking him to turn around.

From his experience, women got bashful about their nudity when not actively engaging in sex, but his Frankie was a confident female, and rightfully so.

Her breasts were perfection, and he had a hard time telling his fangs to stand down and stop elongating. Despite her rapid recovery, she was still not well enough for rigorous activities.

"I'm not going to bother with a bra." She pulled the shapeless garment over her head, hiding her perky breasts from him. "No one will notice it with this tent on, and I'm going to hit the shower as soon as I get to my cabin, so there is no point." She offered him a hesitant smile that was not like her usual ones.

He frowned. "Is something wrong? Are you feeling any discomfort?"

"No, I don't feel any pain at all, which is freaking me out a little."

Maybe that was why she wasn't smiling at him as radiantly as usual. Hopefully, it wasn't anything he had done or said or something that he had failed to do or say. Females had a tendency to expect their partners to know what they wanted and to get upset when they didn't.

Dagor was in a unique position of being able to peek into Frankie's mind and see what she wanted, but that was an invasion of privacy, and the only time it was justified was when lives were on the line. That left him guessing, and he wondered whether other males had such a difficult time figuring out what the proper thing to say or do was.

As with everything else, there was a spectrum, and he was probably closer to the lower end of the spectrum when it came to the ability to decipher subtle cues.

As Frankie swung her legs over the side of the bed, he caught her before her feet touched the floor. "Small steps." He held her to him for a little longer than necessary before helping her into the wheelchair.

It had just felt so good to hold her like that, but now he was paying the price with an uncomfortable erection straining his jeans.

Frankie lifted her face to smile at him with the full radiance he had gotten used to seeing before her injury. "That was nice. I was afraid that seeing me like this had cooled your attraction to me. I'm glad to be proven wrong." She lowered her gaze to his zipper, which was right at her eye level.

Crouching next to her, he put his hands on her knees. "You are always beautiful to me, Frankie. Even when you are covered in dirt, and your hair is sticking out in all directions."

She cupped his cheek. "That's sweet of you to say, but I know that you like seeing me nicely put together."

"I do," he admitted. "But I also love seeing you unravel when I pleasure you and you don't have a stitch of clothing on you. I see the real you underneath the makeup, the form-fitting clothes, and the high heels, and I love what I

see. I appreciate the care you put into your appearance because it reflects your personality and not because it makes you look better for me."

Her expression turned soft. "I would kiss you, but I haven't brushed my teeth, and my mouth stinks."

He leaned forward and gave her a soft kiss on her lips. "Never." He straightened up, grabbed the bag Mia had brought, and handed it to Frankie. "Let's get out of here."

"Wait." She lifted a hand to stop him. "I need to find my phone."

"We can ask Gertrude where it is." He opened the door and pushed the chair into the front office of the clinic.

"Leaving so soon?" Gertrude asked.

"The sooner the better," Frankie said. "Do you happen to know where my phone is?"

"If you didn't lose it in the commotion, it should be here." Gertrude opened one of the desk drawers and pulled out a zip-lock bag with a phone and some spare change. "Is that yours?"

"Yes, thank you." Frankie took the bag, pulled out her phone, and opened the case. "I'm glad to see that none of my credit cards were lost." She chuckled. "Not that I need them. They are for decoration only at this point because I can't charge anything until I start earning an income again."

Dagor frowned. Frankie didn't seem to be poor. He didn't know much about female fashion and how much it cost, but she had a lot of clothes and shoes.

The nurse gave her a knowing smile. "I've heard that you are going to work in the new Perfect Match studio as a beta tester. I bet that pays well."

"Yeah," Frankie answered without much enthusiasm in her voice. "I can't wait to start."

Frankie



As Dagor pushed Frankie's chair toward the elevator, she thought about what he had said to her before they'd left the clinic.

The word love had passed his lips several times but not once in reference to his feelings for her. He just loved how she looked in various states of dress or undress.

The question was what to do about it.

Should she just tell him that she knew he loved her and dare him to deny it?

If she weren't a coward, she would have done that, but on the remote chance that he would refute her claim and break her heart, she preferred to take a less bold approach.

She hadn't told him that she'd fallen in love with him either, so what did she expect from an emotionally stunted god?

Perhaps she should be the one who went first.

Except, that was just as scary as informing Dagor that she knew he loved her and chancing that he would deny it.

The fact was that under normal circumstances, neither of them should have been talking about love yet, but these were anything but.

Dagor had taken a barrage of bullets for her, had stayed by her side like a husband or a boyfriend would throughout her stay in the clinic, and had given

her his blood, which could potentially activate her transition.

If it didn't, she had every intention of letting him induce her the traditional way.

No more condoms for them.

Then, there was the impending end of the cruise and the fork in the road awaiting them.

Dagor was going to Tibet while she was heading to the village, where he was not invited for whatever reason. He still hadn't given her the details about his team's relationship with the clan and why they were prohibited from visiting the village, but it was strange that he and his friends had been invited to the cruise but not to where the clan lived.

The village was supposedly a hidden compound, but if she and Margo were invited, why not let the gods visit?

The thing was, there wasn't much Dagor could do about that or about changing the path he had to follow, but Frankie could.

If she gave up on the job offer to beta test for Perfect Match, she could go with Dagor. Gabi was joining their team, so there was no reason Frankie couldn't. Well, except for the pitiful state of her bank balance, the amount she still owed on her student loans, and her credit card debt.

She couldn't just globe-trot with Dagor and not work for a living.

He might have the resources to cover both of them, but she never wanted to be dependent on anyone for her every need. Not even someone she loved and who loved her back.

"Are you okay?" Dagor asked as he opened the door to her cabin. "You've been uncharacteristically quiet."

"I'm tired. That's all."

It wasn't a lie. Perhaps the effect of Dagor's blood was subsiding, and she was finally feeling the exhaustion her ordeal entailed.

Heck, even if she hadn't been injured, the events of the day would have been

enough to sap her energy.

Dagor patted her shoulder. "I'll help you shower and then tuck you in bed. A few hours of sleep will do you good."

"Sounds like a plan." She waited until he stopped pushing the wheelchair to get up and immediately swayed on her feet.

Dagor caught her elbow. "Easy, tigress. You've been through a lot and shouldn't push yourself."

"Getting up and walking is not pushing myself, and Gertrude said I should move as much as possible."

"Carefully." He led her to the bathroom and sat her down on the bench in the shower. "Is it okay if I undress you? Or do you want to do it yourself?"

Suddenly, she felt a little more energetic. "You can help. But if you want to be in the shower with me, you need to get naked too."

At the moment, it was more bluster than any real intent to engage in fun and games, but seeing the god naked was a treat she could enjoy even in her weakened state.

He pretended to scowl at her. "Don't get any ideas. You need to rest."

"Me?" Frankie batted her eyelashes at him. "I don't have any ideas." She smirked. "For now, I will be happy to just watch. After I rest, though, I do have a few ideas that pertain to both of us being naked."

"Ugh, you are wicked." He cupped his erection over his jeans. "Look what you have done."

Frankie laughed. "Get naked, and I promise to be good and not to tease you."

"Too late for that." He whipped his shirt over his head.

His jeans hit the floor a moment later, and then he was standing in front of her in all his naked glory with his erection pointing at her face.

She was tempted to reach for it, but she'd promised to be good, and Frankie always kept her promises.

Closing her eyes, she let out a groan. "I'd better not look, or I might get naughty."

"We wouldn't want that." His voice sounded pained, but she still kept her eyes tightly shut.

In the next moment, he removed her dress and started on the bandages Gertrude had so carefully wrapped around her wound.

"You should take a look at this," Dagor murmured. "Even the bruising is fading."

She opened one eye and glanced down her side. "Unbelievable."

"Indeed."

Dagor got the water running, checked that it was the right temperature, and proceeded to wash her hair with a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes.

Luckily, he couldn't see them with the water running down her face or smell them over the strong scent of her shampoo.

When Dagor was done washing her, he wrapped her in a big towel, carried her to the bed, and gently laid her down. "Rest." He pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"Thank you." She sighed in contentment as he covered her with the blanket and tucked the edges in. "Please wake me up in a couple of hours," she murmured. "I don't want to miss Amanda's wedding."

Annani



As the doorbell rang, Oridu opened the door and bowed. "Good evening, Master Kian. The Clan Mother is expecting you."

"Thank you." Kian walked in. "Good evening, Mother." He leaned and kissed her cheek. "How are you? Did my daughter tire you?"

"Not at all, my son." She patted the spot next to her on the couch. "I had a wonderful time with Allegra today, and I was sorry to see her go, but Syssi insisted that she needed a nap so she could attend Amanda's wedding tonight."

Kian smiled. "You must have exhausted her because she fell asleep on the way to our cabin. Syssi is napping with her, which is adorable."

Annani frowned. "You should have stayed with them and napped as well. You look tired and troubled."

He let out a breath. "I am much less troubled now than I was earlier when the women arrived."

"I can imagine." Annani sighed. "I wish I could assist in some way."

He shook his head. "The less they interact with us, the better. Kalugal has already thrallled them to ease some of the emotional pain, and I don't want to have to thrall them more than necessary."

"I understand. What can we do for them before delivering them to the sanctuary?"

"Syssi and I came up with a solid plan to help, and I came to give you an update."

"Thank you. I appreciate you coming to deliver it in person. You've had a busy day, and it is not over yet."

"Ain't that the truth." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Kri, Bridget, and several human volunteers helped the women settle in their cabins. Bridget has administered medical care to those who needed it, and we even found a local pharmacy that carries the morning-after pill."

Her son did not need to explain why the pill was needed, and Annani applauded Bridget's foresight.

"Physically, they're stable," Kian continued. "But emotionally, it's a long road to recovery, which brings me to the plan Syssi and I hatched. Vanessa is going to help them via video calls, and once she deems it safe for them to talk to humans, she will organize a group of human therapists who will start working with them one-on-one via the same method. Syssi wanted us to head straight back to Long Beach so we can deliver the women to the sanctuary as soon as possible, but it wasn't practical for several reasons, so we are going to continue with our itinerary as planned and arrive at Long Beach when the trip is over."

Annani was relieved. The couples about to get married on this trip had waited long enough for their special day. It was not fair to them to postpone it again. If the women's situation was critical, it would have naturally superseded that, but if they were physically stable and were getting emotional support on the way, there was no reason to shortchange everyone's enjoyment of the trip.

It was not every day that nearly the entire clan spent time together and celebrated joyous occasions.

"I am glad you found a way to continue the trip while helping these poor women." She patted his arm. "You and Syssi are a good team."

That got a genuine smile out of Kian. "We are. By the way, do you know if any of our younger members have studied or are studying psychology? Vanessa has too much on her plate, and we need more than one therapist for the clan."

"Sheila is about to graduate college this year, but she still has a long road ahead of her until she becomes a doctor, and you need people now."

He chuckled. "I need to beseech the Fates to send us Dormants who are already licensed therapists."

"Indeed." Annani motioned toward the coffee table. "Oridu made tea. Can I offer you some?"

"Sure. I've had too much coffee today, and tea sounds lovely right now."

As Oridu rushed over to pour each of them a cup, Annani leaned closer to her son. "In all of today's turmoil, you must have forgotten about Dalhu's bachelor party."

"I didn't forget. There wasn't time."

"A shorter party is better than none. Please make an effort for him. The poor male is so anxious about facing the entire clan, and he would benefit from a relaxing hour with friends, whiskey, and a good cigar. Your sister will be grateful."

"I'll see what I can do." As Kian's phone buzzed with an incoming message, he pulled it out of his pocket. "May I?"

"Of course." Annani nodded. "It might be an emergency."

As Kian read the message, his forehead furrowed. "Aru requests an audience with both of us. He says he has something urgent that he needs to discuss with you."

"Then invite him over. I just hope it will not take too long and prevent you from spending time with Dalhu."

Kian



Kian suspected the reason Aru wanted an audience with Annani was that he had gotten instructions from his counterpart on Anumati or he had a message for her from the leaders of the resistance.

What Kian didn't know was whether he should be excited about that or anxious.

First, though, Aru would have to tell Annani about his ability to communicate telepathically with someone on Anumati and reveal who the message or instructions were from.

"Do you know what Aru wants to talk to me about?" Annani asked. "He promised to tell me more about Anumati, but I doubt he will insist on doing so now while we are dealing with a crisis and getting ready for Amanda's wedding."

"I have an idea what this is about," Kian admitted. "But I don't want to presume. We will hear what he has to say in a few moments."

When the doorbell rang less than a minute later, Oridu opened the way and bowed. "Good evening, Master Aru. Please come in."

"Thank you." Aru walked in with an expression that radiated excitement tinged with trepidation.

That was enough to confirm Kian's suspicion.

"Good evening, Your Highness." Aru bowed to Annani.

"Good evening, Aru. Please, take a seat." She motioned to the armchair across from the couch.

"Thank you, Your Highness." Aru sat on the very edge of the chair.

"Would you like some tea?" Annani asked.

"Thank you. That would be lovely."

The god was definitely nervous, and it was affecting Kian. After seeing the battered and haggard women arrive, Kian had already been in an agitated state, and Aru's energy was just fueling it.

Oridu rushed over with another teacup and saucer for the god, poured him tea from the teapot, and handed him the cup.

"Thank you." Aru leaned back and looked at Kian. "I communicated with my source, and I have a response."

Kian nodded. "You should start by explaining to my mother the method of your communications with the resistance and also why you demanded secrecy from me."

"Of course." Aru turned to Annani. "My apologies, Your Highness, for not telling you sooner, but I had to get approval. Kian guessed how I communicated with the resistance, but I asked him not to reveal it until I was ready. That's why he kept it from you."

Annani tilted her head. "I assume that you are ready to tell me now?"

The god glanced at the Odu, who was hovering nearby. "This requires absolute secrecy."

Annani lifted her chin and looked at the god haughtily. "My Odus would never reveal anything that is said in my presence, and their loyalty is unquestionable. They have been with me for five thousand years and have not betrayed my trust even once. I guess that is their advantage over a fully biological being. Their programming is infallible."

"I believe you, Your Highness, but I would appreciate it if you sent your Odu away and asked him not to listen to our conversation."

"As you wish." Annani turned to Oridu. "Please go to your room, close the door behind you, and do not listen to anything that is said here."

Oridu bowed. "Of course, Clan Mother."

When the Odu closed the bedroom door behind him, Aru's pinched expression visibly relaxed. "I understand that you have a mother and daughter in the clan who can speak mind to mind regardless of the distance between them. I can communicate this way with someone on Anumati. To safeguard my counterpart, I guard this secret with my life, and I beg that you do not tell a single person about what I am about to reveal. Kian knows because he guessed, but it must stay between the three of us. Not even my teammates know about my special connection."

Annani regarded him for a long moment. "First of all, you can drop the 'Your Highness' honorific. I prefer Clan Mother or simply Annani. Secondly, should I assume that you were sent to Earth on a different mission than the one your teammates were tasked with?"

"Not different, Your Highn...Clan Mother, but additional. My team's job was to find out whether the Kra-ell settler ship had arrived on Earth, and we did. My secret mission was to find out whether there were any rebel survivors, and I did that and much more." He grinned. "Your grandmother was overjoyed to discover that she has a granddaughter on Earth. She wishes to talk to you."

Annani



Annani's heart skipped a beat, then another, and then started hammering with such vigor that she lifted her hand and put it over her chest. "You can communicate with my grandmother?"

"Not directly," Aru said. "I communicate with someone who works for someone she trusts."

Next to her, Kian groaned. "I understand your need to protect your sister, but it is obvious that she is the one you are communicating with telepathically. Your secret is safe with us, and it will save us a lot of roundabout talking if you just call your contacts by name."

Aru looked as if Kian had punched him, and it took a long moment for him to finally nod. "I guess you are right. It's just difficult to find the balance between safety and moving forward. Perhaps that's the resistance's biggest problem. We don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past and lose so much again, so we progress at a glacial pace."

Kian nodded in agreement. "Luckily for us, we live among humans, and their short lifespans add urgency to our lives that we might not otherwise feel."

"Makes sense." Aru lifted his teacup to his lips, gulped down the liquid, and put the empty cup back on the coffee table. "My sister works for the Supreme Oracle of Anumati, who is Queen Ani's oldest and dearest friend. For thousands of years, the queen and the Oracle met once a month in private in the Supreme's temple. The reception hall in the temple is probably the only place on Anumati that is entirely devoid of technology and, therefore, free

from spyware. It has no windows, the walls are at least a meter thick and made from Anumati's equivalent of granite, and the illumination comes from torches and the fire pit. The Supreme learned about my sister and me in a vision, searched for us, and brought us to the temple. At the time, my sister was studying to be a healer, and I was training to become a trooper. She recruited us both."

"To do what?" Kian asked.

"At first, nothing unusual. Aria became the Oracle's scribe, and I was introduced to the captain of the galactic patrol ship that was leaving for this sector. At the time, we didn't know what our mission would be or that we would actually be working for the queen. The Oracle and the queen have been searching for telepaths like Aria and me for many years. It's an extremely rare ability and one that the Eternal King considers a threat and tries to eliminate. People like us are demonized in Anumati's society. Aria and I were lucky not to manifest our ability until we were old enough to understand that we needed to keep it a secret. Not even our parents know. But we couldn't hide from the Oracle."

Annani lifted her hand to stop him. "You call the queen's friend the Supreme Oracle. Does it mean that there are many others less powerful than her?"

He nodded. "There are many oracles. Along with the Fates, they constitute Anumati's religion. The oracles are said to transcend space and time and connect to the energy source of all the known universes. The Supreme can even get glimpses from the other universes that co-exist alongside ours but resonate at different frequencies."

The concepts Aru was talking about were too esoteric for Annani to wrap her mind around, but she felt no need to understand them fully at this time. What she wanted to know was how Aru and his sister were hidden from all the other oracles.

"If the Supreme saw you and Aria in a vision, what would prevent other oracles from seeing you too?"

Wincing, Aru rubbed the back of his neck. "I do not know, but the Supreme assured us that no one else could find us. I don't know whether she did something to hide us from the other oracles or if searching for individuals

with special talents is beyond the scope of the other oracles' abilities, but I trust her word."

"Did my grandmother relay a message to me?" Annani asked.

"Her Majesty wants to talk to Your Highness directly, or as directly as possible, with Aria and me acting as your mouthpieces. The queen will talk to Aria as if she is talking directly to you. Aria will repeat it through my telepathic connection, and I will repeat it. It's not ideal, but since it will be happening in real time, there is less chance of things getting lost in the retelling; the same thing will be done in reverse. Your Highness will talk to me. I will repeat it for Aria through our channel, and she will relay it to the queen."

Aru



"Thank you." Tears shining in her eyes, the princess did the last thing Aru had expected.

Pushing to her feet, she walked up to him and embraced him. "I am grateful for the incredible gift you are giving me at such great risk to you and your sister. I will forever be in your debt."

Frozen in place, Aru could not string two words together in response even after the heir let go of him, smiled, and returned to her spot on the couch.

The heir to the throne of Anumati had touched him, embraced him, and told him that she was grateful for the service he was providing her. None of the nobles back home would have done so, let alone any of the royals.

It was unheard of.

Kian chuckled. "I think you stunned Aru, Mother."

She laughed, the sound sending goosebumps up Aru's arms. All goddesses had beautiful voices, and the sound of their laughter was melodic and beguiling, but it was obvious that Annani was not like other goddesses. Even if she weren't the spitting image of the queen, he would have suspected that she was a high-ranking royal, most likely one of the Eternal King's many children.

They were all-powerful, but they did not have that something extra that the queen brought to the mix. Ani was extremely powerful in her own right, and it was not due to any hidden supernatural talent. She was smart, calculating,

and a seasoned politician. There were very few Anumatians, if any, who did not like the queen, and what was more important, the king knew how popular she was and that getting rid of her was not an option.

"I apologize for stunning you into silence," the princess said with amusement lacing her voice. "But I need you to snap out of it and tell me when my first conversation with my grandmother will take place. Since I will be presiding over weddings every evening until the end of the cruise, I do not want this all-important conversation to happen during the celebrations."

He shook his head to dispel the shock and comply with her very pragmatic demand. "Of course, Clan Mother. The queen will need to be in the temple to conduct those conversations in private, and those visits are usually arranged ahead of time, so I can ask for a schedule."

Kian leaned forward and refilled his teacup. "I'm sure that Anumati's days do not align with Earth's. Scheduling will be problematic."

"What is Anumati's orbital speed?" Annani asked.

"It's actually not that different from Earth's even though it is a much larger planet. I think there is only a few minutes' difference. We also measure it in twenty-four intervals, but those are not precisely the same length as Earth's. On the other hand, it takes Anumati thirty times longer to complete one orbit around our sun."

"So essentially, we can schedule a specific time," Annani said. "How often does the queen intend to speak with me?"

"Once a day."

The princess and her son were both taken aback.

"Why so often?" Kian asked.

Aru shrugged. "I was not told. But we will find out soon enough. The queen came up with a fictional project of collecting ancient prophecies that required daily meetings with the Oracle in her temple. The project will take many months or even years to complete, so I assume that the queen has a lot to say to you."

Annani smoothed a hand over the skirt of her gown. "I prefer midday meetings, but I will try to accommodate any time that is convenient for the queen except for the nine evenings of the upcoming weddings." She smiled. "I am not used to working around someone else's schedule, but I cannot make demands on the queen of the gods."

Aru dipped his head. "I will communicate your wishes, Clan Mother."

Kian's forehead furrowed. "How will you be able to attend those daily meetings when you are supposed to be searching for the pods? Can the queen arrange your release?"

Aru shook his head. "It would look too suspicious, especially to my teammates. I need to keep up the charade, but there is a solution to that. I do not need to be in the same room with the Clan Mother for it to work. I will call using the clan phone that I am told has reception everywhere. If you wish, we can even do a video call."

"How will you explain those daily calls to your teammates?" Kian asked.

"Easy." Aru smiled at the princess. "You will publicly demand that I call you every day and tell you about Anumati's history, economy, politics, demographics, etc. When I make the calls, I will use earpieces and distance myself from my teammates, but if they overhear me talking, they will assume that I'm answering the heir's questions from my own knowledge. They will have no way of knowing that I'm being fed the information."

Amanda



Syssi regarded Amanda's reflection in the mirror with a smile. "Do I want to know how much that wedding dress cost?"

As celebrity wedding gowns went, it wasn't nearly as expensive as the one Rena McGregor had worn for her wedding or Talia Smith's, but it probably cost half of an average yearly salary. Amanda had commissioned it from an unknown designer, who she had no doubt would someday be dressing leading ladies for the red carpet, but since the designer was only starting out, her price had been reasonable, and the dress turned out spectacular.

Crafted from beautiful cream-colored silk and sheer, strategically placed inlays, it had a high neckline that looked modest from the front but plunged so low at the back that it was almost indecent. Tight through the bodice and hips, it flared toward her feet and ended in a long train. The sleeves were long but sheer, and the entire thing was adorned with tiny pearls that would sparkle beautifully in the reception hall's lighting.

Not much had gone into styling Amanda's short hair because there wasn't much that could be done with it, and her makeup was as flawless as usual but a little more dramatic for the occasion.

She smiled at her sister-in-law in the mirror. "It didn't cost nearly as much as it should. I'm selfish and vain, but I'm not an egomaniac."

"You are vain," Sari said. "I'll give you that, but you are not selfish, and I don't want to hear you deprecating yourself on your wedding day."

Turning around, Amanda lifted the skirt of her dress so the long train wouldn't drag on the floor. "I can't help but feel guilty for celebrating while those poor women on the lower deck are grieving. Dalhu wanted to cancel the whole thing, and I gave him a pep talk about how our celebration was an affirmation of the important work we are doing for the victims of trafficking, but I still feel guilty about being happy today."

Alena rose to her feet, walked up to her, and took both of Amanda's hands in hers. "What happened to them is not your fault. You could not have prevented it, and you should not feel guilty for being happy. Letting evil depress us is letting it win."

Amanda shook her head. "I know, but witnessing evil is depressing. It is incomprehensible to me that humans are still capable of such atrocities after all we have done for them, and I can't stop thinking about it." She lowered her voice. "Maybe the gods are right in calling humans and other created species lesser."

"Stop that." Alena squeezed her hands gently. "The gods are not so great themselves. They had millions of years of a head start, and genetic science so advanced that they could have bred evil out of their citizens, but they didn't. Mortdh is proof of that."

"Do not say that name on this joyous occasion." Their mother floated into the bedroom, wearing her ceremonial gown. "You look absolutely spectacular, Mindi." A radiant smile spread over their mother's face. "I am so excited about marrying you and your darling Dalhu. You should have celebrated your union a long time ago."

Something was off about her mother, but Amanda couldn't put her finger on it. She was too excited, too bouncy, and Amanda doubted it was joy over marrying her daughter. She hadn't been that giddy before Alena's wedding.

Leaning forward, she sniffed, expecting to smell alcohol even though her mother rarely indulged, but all she could smell was a faint aroma of Annani's favorite tea and her innate scent that was no doubt the product of the gods' genetic engineering. No one smelled that good without putting on cologne or perfume.

"We almost canceled getting married tonight." Amanda waved Onidu over.

"Can you please pour me a gin and tonic?"

"Of course, mistress."

"Since when do you drink that?" Syssi asked.

"Since I don't want any stains on my beautiful wedding gown, so I'm drinking only non-staining liquids as long as I'm wearing it."

"Makes sense." Syssi glanced at where Evie was playing with a mobile on the floor. "Although it's inevitable."

"As long as I walk down the aisle with a clean dress, I'm good. Whatever happens after the ceremony is less of a concern for me."

Her mother's joyous expression faded a little as she tilted her head to regard Amanda from under her lowered eyelashes. "Why did you consider canceling your wedding? Did something happen?"

Amanda huffed out a breath. "Of course, something happened. We saved a bunch of women from monsters, tore those monsters to pieces as they deserved, and brought the victims to the ship to deliver them to the sanctuary. My darling Dalhu is superstitious, and he took it to be a bad omen. I had to convince him to go ahead with the wedding. But the truth is that I should have offered my help instead of spending the afternoon and evening pampering in preparation for the party."

"We have enough volunteers to care for the women," Syssi said. "Your particular talents lend themselves to many tasks but not to dealing with traumatized females."

Amanda lifted her glass. "To my lack of nurturing instincts." She emptied half the glass in one go.

"We each have our own unique talents," Alena said. "You don't have to be the best at everything."

"I'll drink to that." Sari lifted her margarita glass and waited for Amanda to clink it with hers. "May we all recognize our limitations along with our strengths and learn how to best utilize them for our own satisfaction and for the greater good."

Dalhu



On the sprawling balcony of Kian's cabin, Dalhu gazed out at the gentle waves. The ship had left the harbor hours ago and was sailing toward Cabo, but his heart was no longer on the trip.

He and his groomsmen, all dressed impeccably for his wedding, were talking loudly and gesturing with their hands, trying to affect the same boisterous atmosphere that Orion's bachelor party had enjoyed, but he could tell that their hearts were not in it.

They were doing it for him, though, and he appreciated the effort. The least he could do was to pretend along with them.

"Fake it until you make it," he murmured under his breath.

The weight of the day pressed down on his shoulders, as it did on the shoulders of his groomsmen, and the nervous energy pulsating between them was explosive. If they were a less civilized bunch, it could have easily turned into a brawl.

He wished he could have been there when the Guardians had torn the monsters apart. Perhaps revenge would have eased the tension squeezing his chest and making his breathing laborious.

Opening his by-now-famous cigar box, Kian got their attention. "Gentlemen, pick your cigars. We don't have much time, so I suggest you choose the smaller ones this time."

As the groomsmen approached Kian, Dalhu hung back, waiting his turn.

"Nathalie is going to grumble about the stink," Andrew said as he drew out one of the big cigars. "We should have done this earlier so we could shower and change clothes before the reception."

"There was no time," Kian said. "We needed to get the women settled in their cabins, get them medical assistance, and arrange for Vanessa and her volunteers to speak to them via video chats. Most of that was done by the ladies, but I figured it wasn't fair for us to be drinking whiskey and smoking cigars while they were still busy performing all those tasks."

Andrew nodded. "You're right." He accepted a glass of whiskey from Anandur, who was working in tandem with Okidu, distributing the glasses.

The scene was so normal, one that Dalhu had taken part in many times, and he still wondered how he had gotten so lucky.

How these males had accepted him as one of their own.

Not everyone did, and some clan members still looked at him with resentment in their eyes or avoided looking at him altogether, but those were people he didn't know. Those who knew him appreciated him for who he had become and had forgiven who and what he had been.

Dalhu hadn't.

He still felt guilty over his past deeds. Perhaps if he had joined the rescue missions, he would have felt as if he was more deserving of the life he had with Amanda, but he needed to stay away from combat as much as he could.

From time to time, the itch to go on a killing rampage became almost unbearable, especially on days like today when evil had been so close that he could still smell it in the air, but the problem was that succumbing to that itch was dangerous.

He didn't want to be the male he had been before. Violence was tainting, even if it was morally justified and directed at evildoers to make it safer for the decent and the innocent who were the monsters' victims of choice, the filthy cowards who would piss their pants rather than engage someone like him in battle.

"Easy, my man." Anandur handed him a glass of whiskey. "You look like

you are getting ready for a battle, not the wedding altar."

"Thank you. I need it."

"No shit. I could feel the waves of aggression wafting from you." Anandur regarded him with a knowing look. "I'm sorry to have missed the fight too. It would have helped with the riot going on inside me. I didn't know how bad it was until I heard reports from the Guardians."

Dalhu didn't even try to pace himself with the alcohol and emptied his glass. "Yeah. I didn't hear all the details, and I don't want to. Not today."

"Right." Anandur lifted the whiskey bottle and refilled Dalhu's glass. "One detail I heard will interest you, though." He leaned closer to whisper in Dalhu's ear. "Dagor stayed in the truck to protect Frankie, but Negal joined the fight, and in the scant moments before Frankie got injured, he dispatched six monsters with his own hands and fangs. Max said that he moved with the speed and strength of the Kra-ell, at least. Not that of a god. Then, when Frankie got injured, he jumped back into the truck to protect his teammate as Jin drove them to meet me and Bridget."

"Negal doesn't look anything like a Kra-ell. Besides, don't the gods frown on hybrids?"

"He is not a hybrid, but he's definitely enhanced, and I bet that the other two are enhanced as well."

Dalhu shrugged. "Since they are on our side, I'm not worried."

He took another sip, the warmth of the whiskey easing the pressure in his chest, or maybe it was Anandur's gossip about Negal's impressive fighting skills.

In either case, it was welcomed, if not sufficient to dispel the dark shadow of rage lurking just beneath the surface and threatening to boil over.

Kian lifted his glass high in the air to get everyone's attention. "It is difficult to set aside the anger each of us feels clawing at our souls. But despite this day's events, this night is all about love and hope. It's about the happy home that Dalhu and Amanda have built and the celebration of their union." He turned to Dalhu. "Don't let the pain and anger overshadow the love you feel

for my sister. The celebration tonight symbolizes everything that's good about this world, and it shows us that even in the darkest of times, there's light, there's joy, and those are worth fighting for."

Kian's words resonated with Dalhu, peeling away another layer of darkness and letting warmth spread in his chest.

Raising his glass, he met the eyes of the males standing around him. "To love, to hope, and to the brighter future we're all fighting for."

Frankie



A soft brush against Frankie's lips pulled her back to consciousness. Blinking her eyes open, she smiled at Dagor. "That's a nice way to wake up. How long was I asleep?"

"Several hours." He sat on the bed next to her. "The wedding is in an hour. Do you still want to go, or do you want to stay in bed and sleep until tomorrow?"

"I want to go." She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "Oh, wow. I totally forgot about the wound. It didn't even hurt." Curiosity piqued, she lifted the blanket and looked at her side.

The wound looked almost healed, the skin knitting together in a way that would have been impossible in such a short amount of time if not for Dagor's miracle blood. She prodded at the area gently, expecting to feel at least some tenderness, but there was none.

"Can I keep you around me always? Does your blood also cure headaches and menstrual pains?" Seeing the panicked look in his eyes, Frankie laughed. "I'm just joking. But seriously. Can I keep some of it in my freezer for emergencies?"

"Is that another joke?"

"It is." She reached for his neck and pulled him down for a proper kiss.

When she had to let go to draw a breath, Dagor groaned. "That wasn't fair."

She smirked. "I told you that after I rested, I would have a few ideas that pertain to both of us being naked." She flung the blanket off. "I'm already not wearing anything, and I know how fast you can get naked."

"If you want to attend the wedding, that's not happening."

"Why?" She pouted. "We have plenty of time. I don't need a full hour to get ready."

He cocked a brow. "Did you forget what happens to you after my bite?"

"Oh, right. I pass out. Can you maybe not bite me this time?"

He shook his head. "I'd better not test my restraint." He leaned closer and cupped one of her breasts, tweaking the nipple. "But since you can't dance at the wedding, we can leave early, and then you are mine. I intend to make love to you all night long."

"That's not fair." She arched her back, pushing more of her breast into his hand. "You can't start things and just leave me hanging. I have needs."

His smile was wicked when he moved his hand to her other breast and repeated the gentle teasing. "Delayed gratification enhances pleasure. You'll be thinking about me doing all those deliciously naughty things to you throughout the wedding, and you won't argue when I say it's time to go."

She glared at him. "I'm going to get you back for this."

"I'm counting on it."

Frankie was about to describe in detail how she was going to torment him when the doorbell rang in the living room.

"Hold that thought." Dagor threw the blanket over her and pushed to his feet.

When he left the room, she got out of bed and pulled the Mumu over her head.

She had to admit that Mia was right about how comfortable and airy it was. The colors and pattern were pretty, reminiscent of Hawaii, but it was like wearing a tent.

When she heard Dagor welcome Mia into their cabin, she jumped back into

the bed, pulled the blanket up, and affected a pained expression.

Dagor entered the room first. "Mia is here. She brought you a dress to wear for the wedding."

"Oh, that's so nice of her." She winked at him. "Tell her to come in. I don't have the energy to get out of bed."

Mia didn't wait for Dagor to issue the invitation and drove her wheelchair into the room. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better, thank you." Frankie offered her a small smile. "It still hurts, but not as badly. I showered and slept, and that helped a lot."

Mia aligned her chair with the bed and lifted a garment bag off her lap. "You can't wear any of the evening dresses hanging in your closet, and the Mumu is good as a poolside coverup but not as a party dress. I brought you something that you might like."

Despite how Mia had described the dress in the clinic, Frankie doubted that it looked as good as it had sounded. It was probably another tent-like dress that she would have to draw in.

"Let's see." She pushed up on the pillows, took the garment bag, and pulled down the zipper. "What is this?" She pulled out a shimmery piece of fabric that felt like liquid on her skin.

"It's shaped like a toga but nicer. It's not form-fitting, but it's not huge, either. You will look great wearing it."

The thing probably cost a fortune because Toven, aka Tom, only bought designer clothes for Mia. Frankie had never worn something that felt so luxurious, so even if the fit wasn't perfect, she would still feel like a princess in it.

"It's beautiful." She shifted her eyes to her friend. "But what about you? Didn't you plan on wearing this to one of the weddings?"

Mia shrugged. "It's not long enough to cover my feet or lack thereof. I wasn't going to wear it anyway."

Frankie didn't ask why Mia had brought it with her if she hadn't planned on

wearing it. Her bestie would just make up another excuse for why Frankie should have it.

"Thank you." She reached for Mia's hand. "You're the best."

"Back at ya, bestie."

Amanda



Amanda took a deep breath, steadying the fluttering in her stomach as she stepped into the grand reception hall. The room was elegantly decorated, every detail precisely as she had planned it, but all she could focus on was the male waiting for her at the dais.

Dalhu, her love, her life, stood there with his groomsmen, his eyes glowing with excitement and love for her.

She was flanked by her bridesmaids, three on each side, a support system of family and close friends. Her sisters, Sari and Alena, stood proudly by her side, beaming. Syssi, her sister-in-law, radiated happiness. Jacki, Kalugal's wife, Carol, Lokan's mate, and Nathalie, Andrew's wife, completed the line of strong, amazing women accompanying her to her mate.

So yeah, none of them was a maiden, but Sari and Carol had not had a wedding ceremony yet, so they could count as such.

Not that it mattered.

Every clan mating celebration was different and tailored to each couple.

The song she and Dalhu had chosen, "You are the Only One for Me," by Jalina, filled the hall with its upbeat melody and lyrics that encapsulated her and Dalhu's unique love story.

Onidu walked in behind her, holding Evie, their precious daughter, who was growing to be a miniature vision of Amanda and was dressed for the occasion in a gown similar to those of the bridesmaids.

In the end, Amanda had decided that her butler would hold Evie throughout the ceremony instead of handing her over to one of her bridesmaids. Her precious butler had been by her side since the day she was born, and Amanda wanted him to be part of the wedding ceremony. He couldn't be a groomsman or a bridesmaid, so holding Evie was the best way to include him.

As Amanda walked towards the dais, her heart swelled with love for her incredible mate. They had been each other's one and only since the day Dalhu had unexpectedly entered her life, kidnapping her from a store after obsessing about her for weeks.

She'd had one moment of fear but had realized pretty quickly that the hulking Doomer was much more than he seemed. That had been the beginning of their extraordinary journey together.

As she walked toward Dalhu, their eyes never veered from each other, and as a smile bloomed on his handsome face, she felt a wave of gratitude wash over her. Their journey hadn't been easy, and they'd had to fight for each other, but neither of them had given up, and it had all been worth it.

Taking the final steps towards Dalhu, Amanda reached out to him, her hand slipping into his, their fingers intertwining in a familiar, comforting grip.

Together they turned to face her mother, who beamed happily at them.

Slowly, the hall hushed, and every eye fixed on them and the luminous goddess presiding over the ceremony.

Annani's eyes shimmered as she smiled at them. "Tonight, we gather not just to celebrate the union of two souls but to acknowledge the power of love, resilience, and compassion. Amanda and Dalhu, your journey together has been unconventional in many ways. You proved that former enemies could become not only lovers, but also life-long mates and that no difficulty was too great for true love to overcome." She paused, her gaze sweeping over the crowd before settling back on Amanda and Dalhu. "The beginning of your love story is the stuff of legends, and it will be told for many generations to come. It is therefore not a surprise that the day of your joining is also marked by extraordinary events. A magical amulet, the rescue of those twenty-three women from a terrible and short-lived future is, on the one hand, a reminder of the darkness that still fills this world, but it is also a reminder of the

opposite. Our clan is a beacon of light piercing the darkness, even if no one knows its source. We are the champions of light, love, and compassion."

As tears prickled the backs of Amanda's eyes, she commanded them to retreat. It wouldn't do if she started crying and ruined her makeup.

Her mother continued, "Amanda and Dalhu, my youngest daughter and her formidable mate, your extraordinary love story is one of courage and transformation." She turned to Dalhu. "You came into our lives unexpectedly, to say it mildly, and your welcome was challenging, but you have done everything in your power to prove your love and dedication to my daughter, redeeming yourself and, in the process, gaining our respect. You have become a cherished part of our family."

Dalhu dipped his head. "Thank you, Clan Mother."

As another surge of emotion rocked Amanda, it became more difficult to hold the tears back, and then her mother turned to her, and Amanda prayed she wouldn't say anything that would cause the dam to burst.

"Amanda, my beautiful daughter. You have the heart of a lioness. Full of love, courage, and dedication both to your family and your life goals. Your journey with Dalhu is a reflection of your strength and your unequalled ability to see the good in others. Together, you've faced challenges with grace and emerged victorious."

Annani reached out, placing a hand on each of their arms. "Let your union be a symbol of hope and resilience. May your love continue to grow, to inspire, and to bring light into our lives."

Her mother turned to the guests. "Tonight, we celebrate the power of love to overcome any obstacle, to heal the deepest wounds, and to bring forth the brightest light. Amanda and Dalhu, may your marriage be blessed with endless love, joy, and the courage to face whatever lies ahead." She smiled. "Is there anything you want to say to each other before I place the rings on your fingers and tell Dalhu to kiss the bride?"

Dalhu dipped his head. "We do, Clan Mother."

Dalhu



Dalhu turned to Amanda and took her hands. Feeling the weight of every gaze in the room on him, some approving and some not, he couldn't remember the words he'd written and memorized.

"Look into my eyes," she whispered so low only he and her mother could hear. "Ignore everyone else."

Obedying her words, Dalhu locked his gaze with hers. In that moment, the room seemed to melt away, the murmur of the crowd fading into a distant hum. All that remained was Amanda, his gorgeous, courageous, smart mate, whose eyes were brimming with love, acceptance, and trust. She was his anchor, his calm in the storm.

"My love," he began, his voice strong despite his momentary freeze. "From the first moment I saw your picture, I was enthralled and obsessed by you, and that was before I knew who you were. Then, when I first saw you in person, walking down Rodeo Drive, you were so much more than a picture could ever convey, and I knew that I would move mountains to be with you." He smiled. "And as it turned out, that wasn't an exaggeration. You captivated, challenged, and changed me in ways I never imagined possible. You've shown me the true meaning of love, compassion, and partnership. I vow to cherish and honor you and to stand by your side through stormy seas and sunny days. I vow to support each of your dreams and goals, respect our differences, and nurture our love. I will be your confidant, your partner, and your best friend. I commit to being there for you in your moments of joy and your times of sorrow, to always listen with an open heart and mind. I promise

to love you unconditionally, to protect you, and to be the best father to our daughter and, Fates willing, her brothers and sisters. You are my one and only, my true love mate." He took the ring from Annani and slipped it on Amanda's finger.

Amanda's eyes shimmered with tears of joy. She looked radiant as she smiled at him, and he felt profound gratitude for the love she had for him, love he always felt like he didn't deserve.

And yet, this female who had become the center of his universe loved him without reservation.

"Dalhu, my love, my one and only, my mate." Amanda's voice rang clear and strong. "From the day you entered my life, you turned my world upside down and changed me in ways I couldn't have imagined. Fighting for you taught me courage, and keeping you taught me forgiveness. Both made me a better person, a better mate, and a better mother. Your unwavering love and dedication to me have become my anchor. I vow to stand by you through thick and thin, through good times and bad, with laughter and tears, and always with love and understanding. I vow to support your dreams, encourage you, push your boundaries, and catch you if you fall. I will be your anchor, your rock, and together we will overcome any challenge the Fates throw our way. You are my one true love, my destiny, and tonight, in front of everyone we love and who loves us back, I reaffirm our commitment to each other, our daughter, and her future siblings, Fates willing."

Amanda took the ring from her mother's hand and slipped it on his finger. The moment felt surreal, and the ring felt right, a tangible reminder of the commitment they had just made to each other.

"Mine." Amanda wound her arms around his neck and kissed him.

The room erupted in cheers and applause, but Dalhu was only dimly aware of the other people around them.

It felt as if he and Amanda were the only two people in the world.

He kissed her back, his arms winding around her back and his hands landing on the incredibly smooth skin of her exposed back.

She hadn't allowed him to see the dress before the wedding, and he had only

seen the front, so it was a surprise to discover that her back was fully exposed.

Too exposed.

As a surge of jealousy coursed through him, he had to remind himself that most of the males present were her family, but even if they weren't, her commitment to him was so complete that he shouldn't begrudge others getting an eyeful of the perfection that was his mate.

As they pulled away, the cheers and applause suddenly became thunderous, as if the moment their lips parted, his singular focus on Amanda was broken.

The sound reverberated through Dalhu's body, and as he looked around and saw the sea of faces, all smiling and cheering for them, for him, he was stunned by the level of acceptance. He hadn't expected so many to approve of their princess's chosen mate.

Taking Amanda's hand, he turned toward their guests, lifted their conjoined hands, and smiled, really smiled, at the people who had welcomed him into their fold, grudgingly at first, and then wholeheartedly.

They were his family, his clan, and he was theirs—his commitment to them was as strong as his commitment to their princess.

Dagor



As the ceremony ended with the couple holding up their conjoined hands, the impact of the vows they'd exchanged stayed with Dagor. Clapping and cheering with everyone else, he wondered why he felt tightness in his chest.

Typically, he was not the type to get emotional, but he'd found himself unexpectedly moved by the heartfelt exchange between Amanda and Dalhu.

Their vows resonated with something inside of him.

It wasn't only the words, though. People often exaggerated their feelings or their statements for a greater impact on their audience. But the looks Dalhu and Amanda had exchanged, the expression of devotion on their faces, those were much more difficult to fake or seem more remarkable than they were.

Their love was authentic, deep, and evoked a yearning in Dagor that he was tired of fighting against.

He wanted what Amanda and Dalhu had, and he wanted it with Frankie, a human who might or might not be a Dormant who he might or might not turn immortal.

How could he allow himself to fall for her, given so much uncertainty?

Perhaps the nurse was right, and the Fates had brought him and Frankie together for a reason, and hopefully, it wasn't to torment them.

Dagor had done things that he wasn't proud of, but none had been serious

enough to justify retribution from the Fates. A few pranks that hadn't been as funny as he had hoped and a few arguments that had gotten heated and resulted in hurt feelings or long-held grudges did not make him a bad guy who needed to be taught a lesson.

Everyone had some of that in their past.

Had Frankie? Perhaps the Fates wished to teach her a lesson?

Casting a glance at her, he chuckled. She was clapping much too enthusiastically for a human recovering from a gunshot, but when he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes, he didn't have the heart to tell her to stop.

Evidently, she'd been moved by the ceremony as much as he had been.

Were the same thoughts coursing through her mind?

Of course, they were.

Then again, even though she had been very clear about her expectations of him, she hadn't really verbalized her feelings for him.

Did she love him?

Feeling ridiculous, he shook his head. He was a god, young but not a boy, and he had always been pragmatic and goal oriented. Loving Frankie was illogical and impractical, and therefore, he should stop with the nonsense of thinking about her as his mate.

When Frankie had gotten hurt, Dagor had been overwhelmed with guilt and shame for failing to protect her as he had promised, and those feelings had clouded his thinking.

"It was so beautiful." Gabi wiped tears from her eyes with the napkin. "I need to start working on my vows for when we get married because the competition is stiff. Amanda and Dalhu's vows were even more impressive than Alena and Orion's."

Aru shook his head. "It's not a competition. All I want you to say is that you are mine forever, but since that doesn't need saying, a smile and a kiss will suffice."

"I need food." Frankie glanced at the doors leading to the kitchen. "When are they going to serve dinner? It's nearly midnight."

"I'm hungry too," Negal said. "All I've had since we came back were peanuts and pretzels."

As dinner was finally served, Frankie attacked the roasted chicken, mashed potatoes and asparagus with gusto, and at the rate she was going, Dagor would need to ask the servers to bring her another helping.

Was it a sign that she was entering transition?

Had Gabi been more ravenous than usual when hers had started?

Regrettably, Dagor couldn't ask Aru without revealing what he had done.

Aru had been the one who had suggested the transfusion, but only if it was necessary to save Frankie's life.

She hadn't been in danger when they had decided to do it anyway for their own very selfish reasons. They wanted to enjoy each other for the remainder of the cruise, which wouldn't have been possible if Frankie had spent the entire time convalescing.

Besides, Dagor didn't want any scars to mark her perfect skin. He felt guilty enough for failing to protect her as it was. Since it wasn't certain that she would transition, the only way to eliminate scarring was with the help of his blood.

From the corner of his eye, Dagor noticed Bridget looking at Frankie with a frown and probably wondering why her patient had such an appetite while recovering from a gunshot wound and taking strong painkillers.

He leaned over to Frankie and whispered, "Slow down. The doctor is watching."

"I can't," she said between one forkful and the next. "I'm starving,"

"Perhaps we should get food delivered to the cabin." He waited for Bridget to look away before swapping Frankie's plate with his.

"What did you do that for?"

"So it won't be so obvious that you gobbled down everything on your plate in two minutes."

Frankie turned to him. "You'll be hungry."

"I'll go to the kitchen and ask for a box to go." He leaned closer to her. "We can leave right after you finish what's on the plate."

They had plans that he was getting impatient to get to.

"I want to stay a little longer." She smiled. "I want to see the bride and groom's first dance. After that, we can leave."

Frankie



After enjoying two hearty plates of delicious roasted chicken, Frankie finally felt sated. Dagor's blood was the catalyst in her fast healing, but it seemed that her body needed more fuel than usual to facilitate it.

"Full?" Dagor asked. "Or should I request another plate and pretend to eat it?"

He had done so with the two previous ones, so it looked like he had eaten those enormous quantities of food.

Leaning toward him, Frankie smiled. "My knight in shining armor, always ready to come to my rescue."

He winced. "I didn't do such a great job of it today."

She lifted her head and mock glared at him. "You saved my life, so stop blaming yourself."

He opened his mouth, ready to argue, when the background music changed to a love song, and the newly married couple took the dance floor.

"They are so beautiful together," Gabi said across the table. "Amanda is stunning, and Dalhu is sex on a stick."

"Hey!" Aru leaned away from her and whispered, "You are not allowed to talk like that about anyone other than me."

"Shhh!" an immortal from the next table over hissed.

Watching Amanda and Dalhu take to the dance floor, a wave of longing washed over Frankie. Their love was radiant, evident in every movement as they swayed in perfect harmony to the music and in every look and smile they exchanged. It was as if the rest of the world ceased to exist for them.

Reaching for Dagor's hand, she gave it a light squeeze, which he returned.

Frankie wanted to get up, tug Dagor to his feet, and join the newlyweds as other couples started drifting toward the dance floor.

She hated being a silent observer of the festivities. She longed to feel the rhythm of the music, to move freely and celebrate the occasion. Instead, she had to maintain the pretense of being injured.

At least she wasn't sitting in the wheelchair but on a normal dining chair, which had been a small victory. At first, Dagor had argued against it and had made room at the table by moving one of the chairs out. But when she'd insisted, he had lifted her from the wheelchair and placed her gently in the regular chair, and she'd played along, pretending that she couldn't have done it without his help.

They were an awesome team.

Her heart ached for Mia, who had been stuck in a wheelchair for over six months.

Mia must have sensed Frankie thinking about her and drove over to their table. "How is the dress?" she asked.

Frankie had forgotten about it. Suddenly concerned that she'd stained it in her rush to gobble down an entire chicken, she looked down at the shimmery, flowing fabric. "It's perfect. I'll have it dry-cleaned before returning it to you."

"No need." Her friend waved a dismissive hand. "Keep it for the other weddings. I know that you had your heart set on wearing a different gown for each of them, but you can't. They will make you miserable."

"It's okay." Frankie smiled. "I'm more peeved at having to sit while everyone is dancing. You can dance, you know. Toven can easily hold you."

Mia shook her head. "I will dance when my feet are fully regrown. By the way, Margo called me, and as I expected, she's mad at you for not calling her."

Frankie gasped. "I hope you didn't tell her about the injury? I didn't call my family either, and I don't want them to find out from Margo."

Mia gave her a look that spelled 'are you serious.' "Of course, I didn't. I told her that you had a scary run-in with cartel thugs, but our security force scared them off. You were so shaken by it, though, that you had to take a nap to recuperate, and that's why you haven't called her yet."

Frankie let out a breath. "Good save. I'll call her tomorrow. It's too late to call now anyway."

"I don't know how late Lynda's friends stay up and party, but Margo might still be awake."

"I'd rather do it tomorrow. The nap helped, but I am still really tired. I think I should call it a night and get in bed."

"Of course." Mia gave her an understanding look and gently squeezed her hand. "I hope you will wake up feeling much better tomorrow."

Dagor



"Ready to call it a night?" Dagor pushed to his feet.

"I really wanted to dance." Frankie's gaze followed the couples on the dance floor with an expression that conveyed wistfulness thinly veiled in a mask of feigned resignation. She was still playing the part of a convalescing patient, probably for the doctor's benefit.

Bridget was watching her once again, but Dagor couldn't tell whether she was motivated by suspicion or just concern for her patient.

"Before you go, Frankie." The doctor rose to her feet. "I want to remind you that I expect you to be in the clinic tomorrow morning."

Frankie frowned. "Gertrude didn't tell me that I need to come in for a checkup. She said that she would come to my cabin."

The doctor looked surprised. "She must have misunderstood my instructions." Bridget lifted her hand to look at her wristwatch. "Given that it's nearly two in the morning, let's make it ten?"

That wasn't good. Dagor had a feeling that the doctor would be much more resistant to his thrall than the nurse. Her personality type usually was.

Frankie cast him a worried sidelong glance. "I'm so tired that I might oversleep. Dagor will most likely have to reschedule for me." She turned to him. "Do you have Bridget's number?"

"I do. Gertrude programmed it into my phone along with her number and

Hildegard's."

He would have to make the doctor see a wound that was no longer there or, even better, thrall her to think that she'd already seen Frankie.

Bridget gave him a stern look. "Call me if Frankie develops a fever, a rash, or any other sign of trouble."

"Of course. I want to thank you again for the exceptional care you've given Frankie. You saved her life."

Bridget's expression softened. "I feel bad about discharging a patient without seeing her first, but sometimes shortcuts are necessary."

"That's okay," Frankie said. "I'm fine, and those poor women needed you more than I did."

The doctor nodded. "I'm glad that you are healing so well. Have a good night." She cast a sidelong glance at Dagor. "Frankie needs a lot of rest. I advise against any strenuous activity."

Dagor bit the inside of his cheek to stop the chuckle that her warning evoked.

"I promise to take good care of Frankie."

With one last nod, Bridget turned on her heel and walked over to the family table where Amanda and Dalhu were taking a break from the dancing.

Frankie's gaze followed the doctor. "Should we go to congratulate them too?"

He was eager to take her to the cabin and engage in all those strenuous things that the doctor advised against, but good manners demanded that they do.

"Let's do it quickly." He gently lifted her from the chair, pretending to be mindful of her injury.

She wound her arms around his neck and rested her cheek on his chest. "I love how strong you are."

He chuckled. "You are practically weightless." He carried her to the wheelchair that he'd parked next to the dining hall entry.

"You're such a flatterer."

He wasn't, and he wouldn't have known how to be even if he tried. Frankie was tiny, and her weight was insignificant even though the way her body molded to his was very much the opposite.

"It's the honest truth. Given that I can carry a car, you really weigh nothing to me."

She pouted. "You shouldn't have said that."

He frowned. "Why?"

Smiling, she cupped his cheek. "I'll explain some other time. You need to put me down now."

Dagor hadn't even noticed that he was standing next to the wheelchair. "What if I don't want to? Can I carry you back to your cabin? I can come for the chair tomorrow morning."

"We still need to congratulate Amanda and Dalhu, and I'm not doing it while you are holding me in your arms."

"Right." Reluctantly, he lowered her to the chair and started pushing it back into the center of the dining hall.

"What about Aru, Gabi, and Negal? Shouldn't we tell them that we are leaving?"

They were all on the dance floor, and Dagor had no wish to wiggle his way between the dancers with Frankie in her chair just to state the obvious that they were leaving.

"They'll figure it out." He navigated the chair toward the family table.

"Congratulations," Frankie said as they got within Amanda and Dalhu's earshot.

As Frankie gushed over the moving ceremony and Amanda's beautiful wedding dress, Dagor's eyes shifted to their little girl, who was in Alena's arms. The baby was a miniature of her mother, but there was a fierceness in her that was all her father's. Kian's daughter was sitting in a highchair and watching him with eyes that seemed too old and too knowing for such a young child. Physically, she was the perfect combination of her parents, but

he had no doubt whose character she'd gotten. She was all Kian's fierce determination. But then she smiled at him, and as his heart melted a little, longing molded that softened tissue.

He would love to have an adorable little girl or boy like those two, a child who looked like Frankie and had her lively personality. The wistful thought brought a smile to his face, but it wilted with the realization that if Frankie was the mother of his children, his mother would never get to see them.

If he chose the selfish path and remained on Earth forever to be with Frankie, he would live with endless guilt.

His only hope would be the resistance, finally toppling the Eternal King and ending the prejudice against hybrids. With Annani at the helm, those would be gone in no time. She would never allow anyone to think less of her children, who were all hybrids.

When Frankie was done, Dagor leaned over and offered Amanda his hand. "Congratulations. The ceremony was beautiful."

The bride smiled brightly. "Thank you. I thought it was lovely, too." She shifted her gaze to Frankie. "I wish for the two of you to be as happy as Dalhu and I. As you have probably figured out, the beginning of our story was not easy, and there were many obstacles to overcome, but love persevered."

This time, Dagor was smart enough not to say anything other than thanking Amanda.

After shaking hands with Dalhu and congratulating him, Dagor and Frankie exchanged a few pleasantries with their family members who were sitting with them and then said their goodbyes and headed out.

Frankie sighed. "Can we make up an excuse for the next wedding so I can dance?"

A smile curled the corners of his lips, and he leaned over the back of the chair to whisper in her ear. "We can have a private dance in your cabin, provided that you are not tired, that is."

Frankie's eyes sparkled with mischief. "I'm not."

Exiting the reception hall, Dagor made sure that no one could see them and jogged toward the elevators, pushing the wheelchair in front of him.

Frankie laughed, lifting her legs and her arms as if she was on a rollercoaster.

"That was fun," she said as he came to a halt and pressed the button to summon the elevator.

Leaning over her, he nuzzled her neck. "I can't wait to peel this dress off you. Those perky nipples of yours tormented me the entire evening, and I could barely manage to keep my eyes from straying away from your beautiful face, not to mention keeping my fangs from elongating."

Her cheeks pinkening, Frankie giggled. "I didn't have the right type of bra to wear with a one-shouldered dress, so I didn't wear one. I thought that no one would notice."

"Oh, I noticed, and I wasn't the only one. I wanted to pluck all those males' eyes out, figuratively, of course."

Frankie



Frankie shouldn't have enjoyed the jealous note in Dagor's tone so much. Possessive guys were bad news—they were jerks with confidence issues.

Right.

Not Dagor, though. Who would a god be jealous of?

Other gods, of course, but Toven and Aru were taken, and the cool thing about immortals and gods was that once they bonded with their true love mate, they couldn't even have sexy thoughts about anyone else.

Fidelity for life was guaranteed, and there was no room for jealousy.

As soon as Dagor closed the door behind them, Frankie started to rise, but her feet never got the chance to touch the floor. Grabbing her, he pulled her into his arms, and the room blurred as he carried her into the bedroom.

She half expected him to throw her on the bed, but she should have known that he wouldn't risk hurting her.

After gently laying her on top of the covers, Dagor pulled back to look at her with a pair of glowing blue eyes.

"Dagor," she whispered. "Your eyes are so incredible."

"You are incredible." He leaned over and kissed her softly and then pulled back and looked at her again as if he was trying to memorize every little

detail about her.

There was need in his eyes and lust, but there was also more, and the urge to tell him that she was in love with him got so overwhelming that Frankie had to bite her lip to stop herself from uttering the words and scaring him away.

Slowly, with a gentle touch that belied his incredible strength, he pulled the dress down her body until it was down around her hips.

She should have known that he would want to check her wound, but it had already been mostly healed before they had left for the wedding, and now all that remained was a hairline scar and a yellow bruise.

Dagor feathered his fingers over it. "Does it hurt?"

She chuckled. "I can't even feel you touching it."

When he applied a little pressure, she smiled. "Stop fretting. I'm more than fine to engage in the most rigorous activities you can dream up."

"Oh yeah?" Smirking, he ran his hand up her side until it reached her breast and cupped it in his large hand. "I might not be the most imaginative guy, but I can think of a few things that even you couldn't dream up."

"Like what?"

"Like this."

Dagor hadn't moved, but suddenly, she felt a phantom hand fondling her other breast.

"How are you doing that?" she breathed.

His grin widened. "It's called a thrall. Your mind doesn't know the difference between what's real and what I put in there."

It was hard to think with what he was doing with his hands, the physical one and its phantom twin. "So, it's all in my mind?"

"It feels real, though, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

When he pulled the dress all the way down, it was with a real, physical hand. Mind tricks could only affect what she felt, they couldn't remove garments any more than they could turn the lights off remotely.

Her panties were next, leaving her nude, and as Dagor leaned back to admire what he'd revealed, two phantom hands kept stroking her body.

"Can you feel it?" Frankie murmured. "Does it feel as if you are touching me?"

He shook his head. "When I'm in your head, I feel what you feel. It's a different experience. It's fascinating."

His tone was just as full of wonder as his expression, and Frankie was jealous. "When I transition, will I be able to get into your head and feel what you feel?"

"I don't think so." He whipped his shirt over his head and tossed it on the nightstand.

"Bummer."

"Yeah." He got rid of his pants. "Are you ready for more mind tricks?"

"Yes." She wasn't sure.

What if he did something she wasn't comfortable with?

Dagor smiled. "I'm in your mind. If something isn't pleasurable to you, I will stop."

If he was any other guy, that wouldn't have reassured her, but she trusted him.

"Okay."

As the glow in his eyes intensified, she felt four phantom hands grip each of her limbs, and then he was on her, licking and sucking on her nipples as his hands slipped down her sides, her hips, and then dipped between her thighs.

A moan escaping her throat, Frankie arched, willing him to touch her where she needed him most, but his fingers only skimmed over the edges of her moist lips, teasing her.

"Touch me," she pleaded.

"I'm touching you," he murmured around her nipple.

"You know what I mean."

"I do, but I'm not ready yet."

Insufferable god.

Dagor pretended that he was in no rush and that he had all the time in the world, but the hard length pressing against her thigh was evidence to the contrary.

Frustrated, Frankie tried to tug her wrists free, but the phantom hands were just as strong as his real ones. Still, their touch was soft, warm, and reassuring.

Finally, when Dagor was done feasting on her nipples, he slid down her body and positioned himself between her spread thighs, and when his tongue slid along her slit, she nearly orgasmed just from that.

If only he would touch her clit, she would detonate like a firecracker, but he was adamant about keeping her on the edge and not letting her climax yet.

Damn, the god was wicked. What was he trying to do?

"Dagor, if you don't stop teasing me right now, I'm going to start calling you names."

Lifting his head, he smiled at her with his fangs on full display. "That's not much of a threat."

The crazed look she was sure he saw in her eyes must have been more effective than her silly threat because he shifted up her body and positioned himself at her entrance.

"Tell me what you want, Frankie."

"I want you inside me. No more teasing and no condom."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

His wicked grin was the only warning she got before he slammed into her.

She'd been more than ready for him. "You feel so good."

"It's just the beginning, my precious."

His precious, not his love.

Would she have to pry the words out of his mouth?

Frankie made a feeble attempt to tug her wrists free from the hold of his phantom hands, but as he started moving inside of her and a phantom tongue started circling the most sensitive spot on her body, the fight left her, and she surrendered to the coil winding tightly inside of her.

"Dagor," she mewled as the stimulation became too much.

The overload prevented the coil from springing free, winding it impossibly tighter instead.

Suddenly, the hold on her ankles was gone, and as she lifted her legs and wrapped them around his torso, the angle changed, and as his thrusts became more frenzied, the hold on her wrists was gone along with the tongue.

Likely, he was unable to keep his concentration and had been forced to let go of the phantom extensions of himself, which was good because Frankie couldn't have survived another minute of the overstimulation.

Digging her fingers into his nape, she was dimly aware that her nails were probably drawing blood, but as his shaft swelled impossibly large inside of her, all coherent thought fled her mind.

When he surged into her one last time, and the tightly wound coil inside of her was sprung, his hand clamped on the back of her head and he tilted it sideways.

Erupting, Dagor hissed, and the next moment, his fangs sliced into the soft skin of her neck. The pain registered almost as an out-of-body sensation, and then it was gone, and a venom-induced climax rocked her body.

The aftershocks continued until the euphoria stole her bodily sensations and

she soared to the clouds, but not before she heard him say those most important three words.

"I love you."

Kian



Kian watched his people swaying on the dance floor, enjoying the happy expressions on the dancers' faces. This late, most of the couples had retired to the tables, and the ones left were predominantly the clan ladies. They were dancing with each other, some trying to talk over the music, others singing along. Occasionally, a peal of laughter could be heard over the noise.

He wondered why females seemed to enjoy dancing more than males. Were they less reserved because of differences in upbringing?

Or maybe it was innate? Perhaps their perception of rhythm and their ability to move in sync with music was better?

"What are you frowning about now?" Amanda asked. "Be joyful, brother of mine. You finally got to marry me off."

He smiled at her. "I am joyful. I was just wondering why the dance floor is full of single ladies but markedly less single gentlemen."

Amanda snorted. "That's obvious. Females dance for the joy of it, but males dance only to impress females, and since all of these ladies are their cousins, they have no incentive to get out there and perform for them."

His sister was beyond merely tipsy, but that didn't invalidate her observation.

"That's more or less what I was thinking. Females are naturally happier than males provided that they are safe, and I hate that so many are not."

Dalhu nodded. "I'm glad that our daughters will be immortal and able to deal with human male scum. I just wish that they could do the same with our own kind."

Dalhu's comment was a chilling reminder that the Brotherhood was still out there and that most of those Doomers would do incomprehensibly evil things to their daughters if given the chance.

The relative quiet the clan had enjoyed in recent months could have been intentional, a tactic to lull them into a false sense of security.

"Oh, please." Amanda huffed out a breath. "Enough of that. Tonight is all about joy. You can be all gloomy tomorrow. "

"It is tomorrow," Kian pointed out. "But you are right."

The party was gradually winding down, and the energy in the room was slowly shifting from lively celebration to a comfortable, tired hum, but people seemed reluctant to leave, maybe because they wanted to remain in the happy bubble of celebration for a little longer. The moment they set foot outside the reception hall, reality would rush back, and the events of the day before would remind them of all the ugliness out there.

Syssi kissed the top of their daughter's head before laying her down in the stroller. "We really should go and put Allegra to bed." She turned to Jacki. "Is there a chance you can show me the amulet before we retire for the night?"

Kian frowned at her. "What's the rush? It's still going to be there tomorrow." He turned to Jacki. "You are not still planning on throwing it overboard, right?"

"I'm not." She grimaced. "But I'm not planning on touching it either. I have it wrapped in a cloth and tucked into one of Kalugal's shoes."

The horrified expression on Kalugal's face was comical. "Why did you use my shoe for that? Now, I can never wear it again."

She smiled sweetly at him. "That's why I didn't put it in mine. There is no safe in the cabin, and I need every pair I brought, while you have three pairs of black dress shoes that are almost identical. Besides, my shoes are not big enough to house it."

Kian stifled a chuckle. "I'm sure we could have found a proper container for the amulet so no shoe would have to be sacrificed on its altar."

Kalugal groaned. "Bad choice of words, cousin."

"It was deliberate." Kian lifted his whiskey glass. "I thought it was quite clever, but I see your point."

"I really want to see the amulet," Syssi said. "I've been thinking about it the entire evening."

"Why?" Kian put his glass down. "I hope you are not entertaining any ideas about touching it."

Given the guilty expression on Syssi's face, that was precisely what she'd been planning. "I just want to see it. I'll get some gloves from the kitchen so I don't touch it by accident."

Annani, who until now had been happy to hold the sleeping Evie to her chest and leave them to their conversation, shifted her granddaughter so her head was resting on her shoulder. "I am curious about the amulet, too. I suggest that we all meet for breakfast in my cabin tomorrow morning and take a look at it together."

The idea of a shared breakfast was appealing. They could observe the artifact all at once and be done with it. Kian could wake up early and find a proper container for it so it could be locked away. A portable safe would be a good choice.

When they got back, he would have William put it in one of his impenetrable lead containers, the kind he'd used to store the alien trackers in. If Jacki agreed, he would also store the artifact in one of their warehouses downtown instead of keeping it in the village.

But all that could wait until tomorrow.

Right now, all he wanted was to enjoy the rest of his night and think as little as possible about future threats from humans, Doomers, and Anumatian gods.

Dagor



The bedroom was dimly lit, the muted light coming from the moon casting a gentle glow through the slightly parted curtains of the balcony doors. If Dagor could tear his eyes away from the slip of a girl lying next to him in bed, the barely perceptible sway on the ship as it glided over the waves would have lulled him to sleep, but even though he was tired, he couldn't stop looking at her.

Propped on one arm, he lay on his side and watched Frankie sleep. Her chest rose and fell with steady, peaceful breaths; her expression was relaxed, even blissful, and her pouty lips were swollen from their kisses.

His heart swelled with emotion that could only be described as love.

The one time he had thought he'd been in love couldn't compare to what he felt for the tiny human, and it was ludicrous given that he had known her for mere days compared to the many years he had known his first and only love until now.

It was time to stop deceiving himself and acknowledge that he was in love with her.

He'd said the words in the height of passion, but that didn't make them any less true.

He was keenly aware of all the downsides of loving Frankie, of all the reasons why a relationship with her was asking for heartache and devastation, but all the cons seemed suddenly inconsequential compared to the alternative

of not having her in his life.

As the deep, resonating truth of that settled over his heart, he replayed in his mind all the moments they had shared that had somehow coalesced into something meaningful. Something deep.

She was only human, at least for now, and yet she was more perfect for him than any goddess he had ever met.

The mischief and lightness in her eyes, the innate humor, and the unfailing assertiveness were refreshing. She was gutsy without being reckless, and she was unapologetically herself. He thought of her laugh, the way her eyes sparkled when she was excited, the way she spoke her mind.

Being with her was fun, and to him, it was all the more precious because he rarely experienced levity.

As he watched her in the moonlight, a realization dawned on him. Love wasn't just the sensation of tightness in the chest, the pangs of desire, or the burning of lust. Love was a choice, an acceptance, a completeness of being.

It settled over him like a warm blanket.

As the first light of dawn filtered through the curtains, Frankie's eyes fluttered open, and as she saw him, her face lit up with a radiant smile. "You're awake."

He chuckled. "And so are you."

"I had the most incredible trip. It was so vivid that I felt like I was coming home, except I had a tether tied to my pointer finger with a bow, and I knew that I had to follow it back to you."

"I'm glad that you remembered me. It's scary to hear you say that you felt like the alien place was your real home."

Her eyes softening, she lifted her hand and cupped his cheek. "You are my home, Dagor. The alien place was just somewhere I felt welcomed and accepted, but even while experiencing it, I knew it was a dream." She scrunched her nose. "It's hard to explain. It's like that moment you are drifting off to sleep and feel the calm wash over you. That's the feeling I had there."

Resting his elbow on the mattress and his chin on his fist, he leaned toward her as he listened to her tale of alien landscapes and of soaring over otherworldly terrains that were bathed in ethereal lights. Her descriptions were so vivid that the images they painted played like a movie in his mind, but as incredible as they were, he was more focused on watching her talk with a sparkle in her eyes and excitement in her voice.

Frankie's energy, her spirit, her unrestrained joy as she shared the experience with him, brought about a warmth that spread through him, and the words just slipped from his lips again, "I love you."

She fell silent for a heartbeat, the weight of his confession hanging between them, but then her smile widened, and she threw her arms around his neck. "I thought that I dreamt you saying that before I blacked out. I love you too, Dagor. So much that my heart is full to bursting."

Frankie



The love words they had exchanged hung in the air, feeling almost surreal.

But as the initial rush of finally hearing those words and saying them back subsided, reality crept in, and Frankie's mind raced with thoughts, most of them worries.

What if her transition didn't happen?

What future could they possibly have?

She looked into Dagor's eyes, searching for answers to questions she was afraid to ask. "It feels like I've been waiting forever for you to say that you love me, and I'm so happy that you finally did, but now I'm thinking that maybe we shouldn't have said that to each other."

The smile melted off Dagor's face. "It's too soon, isn't it?"

"No, it's not that at all. What if I don't transition?"

Shifting over her so his body blanketed hers, Dagor braced his forearms on the mattress on both sides of her head and looked into her eyes. "I don't have all the answers, and it doesn't sit well with me either. I like having everything planned out and organized. I can't have it with you, but I can't not have you either. All we can do is take one day at a time and try to make the most of it. Whatever happens, happens."

It was hard to argue with him when his hard length was pressing against her

inner thigh and distracting her.

Was he doing it on purpose?

Did she care if he was?

Mustering her resolve, Frankie pushed on his chest, and he let her roll him off her and then straddle him. "I know so little about you." She braced her hands on his chest. "We really should spend more time talking to each other."

He grinned at her. "Talking is overrated. I'd rather be doing." He lifted his hips, grinding his erection against her needy center.

"I don't even know why you're here on Earth, aside from looking for the pods everyone talks about. What's in those pods that's so important?"

"People." He cupped her bottom and squeezed. "The Kra-ell settlers. But that's a long story that I'm not in a mood for right now." He moved her back and forth over his length, coating it with the moisture that gathered at her lower lips.

Frankie opened her mouth to argue, but seeing the look in his eyes, she closed it.

It wasn't just lust, or need, although both were there.

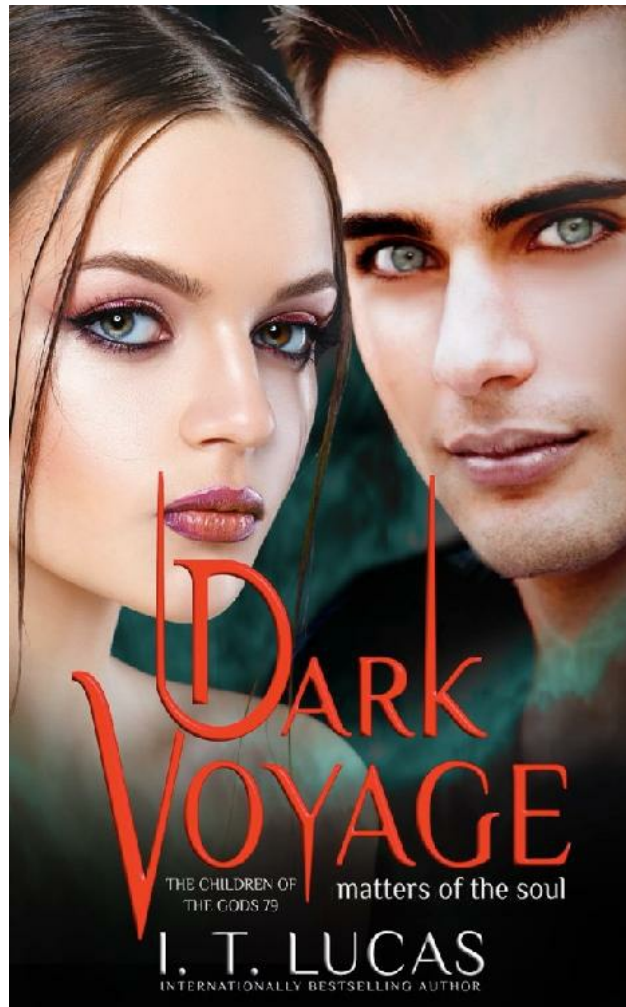
In that moment, with his gaze locked onto hers, his eyes were full of love, and Frankie felt a surge of warmth that was only partially because of the delicious friction he was creating below.

Talking could wait.

So, yeah, there were uncertainties, fears, and a thousand unanswered questions, but there would be plenty of time to address them later. Right now, all of that seemed to fade into the background.

"Don't think you are off the hook." She leaned and took his lips. "But I have my priorities straight. Making love to you comes first."

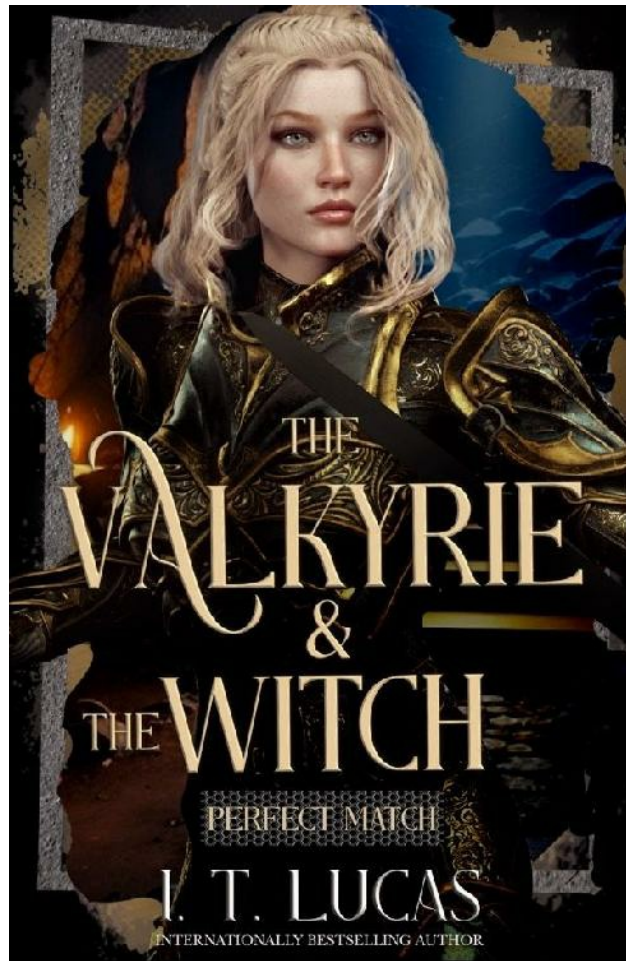
COMING UP NEXT
The Children of the Gods Book 79
DARK VOYAGE MATTERS OF THE SOUL



As the Silver Swan leaves Acapulco, Frankie and Dagor expect smooth sailing, eight more wedding celebrations, and, hopefully, Frankie's transition, but fate has other plans.

The ancient amulet has more secrets to reveal, and when a new vision necessitates a change of course, Dagor and his teammates are pulled into the millennia-old battle between the clan and the Devout Order Of Mordh.

Coming up next in the
PERFECT MATCH SERIES
THE VALKYRIE & THE WITCH



After breaking up with my boyfriend, I vow never to date a physician again and avoid workplace romances like the plague. Seeking an escape from bad memories and hospital politics, I apply for a job at the Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy Studios, where I hope to explore fantastical scenarios and beta-test new experiences.

I have no intention of entering a new relationship anytime soon, but it is difficult to ignore Kayden, a fellow trainee who's good-looking and charming but regrettably has aspirations of becoming a physician.

Hoping never to get paired with him to beta test an experience, I choose the Valkyrie adventure. It seems like a safe bet to avoid a guy like him, who would never select an experience where the female is the kick-ass heroine and the man only gets a supporting role. However, the algorithm has other plans in store for us. It seems to think that we are a perfect match.

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Note

Dear reader,

I hope my stories have added a little joy to your day. If you have a moment to add some to mine, you can help spread the word about the [Children Of The Gods](#) series by telling your friends and penning a review. Your recommendations are the most powerful way to inspire new readers to explore the series.

Thank you,

Isabell

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS ORIGINS

1: GODDESS'S CHOICE

When gods and immortals still ruled the ancient world, one young goddess risked everything for love.

2: GODDESS'S HOPE

Hungry for power and infatuated with the beautiful Areana, Navuh plots his father's demise. After all, by getting rid of the insane god he would be doing the world a favor. Except, when gods and immortals conspire against each other, humanity pays the price.

But things are not what they seem, and prophecies should not to be trusted...

THE CHILDREN OF THE GODS

THE DARK STRANGER TRILOGY

1: DARK STRANGER THE DREAM

Syssi's paranormal foresight lands her a job at Dr. Amanda Dokani's neuroscience lab, but it fails to predict the thrilling yet terrifying turn her life will take. Syssi has no clue that her boss is an immortal who'll drag her into a secret, millennia-old battle over humanity's future. Nor does she realize that the professor's imposing brother is the mysterious stranger who's been starring in her dreams.

Since the dawn of human civilization, two warring factions of immortals—the descendants of the gods of old—have been secretly shaping its destiny. Leading the clandestine battle from his luxurious Los Angeles high-rise, Kian is surrounded by his clan, yet alone. Descending from a single goddess, clan members are forbidden to each other. And as the only other immortals are their hated enemies, Kian and his kin have been long resigned to a lonely existence of fleeting trysts with human partners. That is, until his sister makes a game-changing discovery—a mortal seeress who she believes is a dormant carrier of their genes. Ever the realist, Kian is skeptical and refuses Amanda's plea to attempt Syssi's activation. But when his enemies learn of the Dormant's existence, he's forced to rush her to the safety of his keep. Inexorably drawn to Syssi, Kian wrestles with his conscience as he is tempted to explore her budding interest in the darker shades of sensuality.

2: DARK STRANGER REVEALED

While sheltered in the clan's stronghold, Syssi is unaware that Kian and Amanda are not human, and neither are the supposedly religious fanatics that are after her. She feels a powerful connection to Kian, and as he introduces her to a world of pleasure she never dared imagine, his dominant sexuality is a revelation. Considering that she's completely out of her element, Syssi feels comfortable and safe letting go with him. That is, until she begins to suspect that all is not as it seems. Piecing the puzzle together, she draws a scary, yet wrong conclusion...

3: DARK STRANGER IMMORTAL

When Kian confesses his true nature, Syssi is not as much shocked by the revelation as she is wounded by what she perceives as his callous plans for her.

If she doesn't turn, he'll be forced to erase her memories and let her go. His family's safety demands

secrecy – no one in the mortal world is allowed to know that immortals exist.

Resigned to the cruel reality that even if she stays on to never again leave the keep, she'll get old while Kian won't, Syssi is determined to enjoy what little time she has with him, one day at a time.

Can Kian let go of the mortal woman he loves? Will Syssi turn? And if she does, will she survive the dangerous transition?

THE DARK ENEMY TRILOGY

4: DARK ENEMY TAKEN

Dalhu can't believe his luck when he stumbles upon the beautiful immortal professor. Presented with a once in a lifetime opportunity to grab an immortal female for himself, he kidnaps her and runs. If he ever gets caught, either by her people or his, his life is forfeit. But for a chance of a loving mate and a family of his own, Dalhu is prepared to do everything in his power to win Amanda's heart, and that includes leaving the Doom brotherhood and his old life behind.

Amanda soon discovers that there is more to the handsome Doomer than his dark past and a hulking, sexy body. But succumbing to her enemy's seduction, or worse, developing feelings for a ruthless killer is out of the question. No man is worth life on the run, not even the one and only immortal male she could claim as her own...

Her clan and her research must come first...

5: DARK ENEMY CAPTIVE

When the rescue team returns with Amanda and the chained Dalhu to the keep, Amanda is not as thrilled to be back as she thought she'd be. Between Kian's contempt for her and Dalhu's imprisonment, Amanda's budding relationship with Dalhu seems doomed. Things start to look up when Annani offers her help, and together with Syssi they resolve to find a way for Amanda to be with Dalhu. But will she still want him when she realizes that he is responsible for her nephew's murder? Could she? Will she take the easy way out and choose Andrew instead?

6: DARK ENEMY REDEEMED

Amanda suspects that something fishy is going on onboard the Anna. But when her investigation of the peculiar all-female Russian crew fails to uncover anything other than more speculation, she decides it's time to stop playing detective and face her real problem—a man she shouldn't want but can't live without.

6.5: MY DARK AMAZON

When Michael and Kri fight off a gang of humans, Michael gets stabbed. The injury to his immortal body recovers fast, but the one to his ego takes longer, putting a strain on his relationship with Kri.

THE DARK WARRIOR TETRALOGY

7: DARK WARRIOR MINE

When Andrew is forced to retire from active duty, he believes that all he has to look forward to is a boring desk job. His glory days in special ops are over. But as it turns out, his thrill ride has just begun.

Andrew discovers not only that immortals exist and have been manipulating global affairs since antiquity, but that he and his sister are rare possessors of the immortal genes.

Problem is, Andrew might be too old to attempt the activation process. His sister, who is fourteen years his junior, barely made it through the transition, so the odds of him coming out of it alive, let alone immortal, are slim.

But fate may force his hand.

Helping a friend find his long-lost daughter, Andrew finds a woman who's worth taking the risk for. Nathalie might be a Dormant, but the only way to find out for sure requires fangs and venom.

8: DARK WARRIOR'S PROMISE

Andrew and Nathalie's love flourishes, but the secrets they keep from each other taint their relationship with doubts and suspicions. In the meantime, Sebastian and his men are getting bolder, and the storm that's brewing will shift the balance of power in the millennia-old conflict between Annani's clan and its enemies.

9: DARK WARRIOR'S DESTINY

The new ghost in Nathalie's head remembers who he was in life, providing Andrew and her with indisputable proof that he is real and not a figment of her imagination.

Convinced that she is a Dormant, Andrew decides to go forward with his transition immediately after the rescue mission at the Doomers' HQ.

Fearing for his life, Nathalie pleads with him to reconsider. She'd rather spend the rest of her mortal days with Andrew than risk what they have for the fickle promise of immortality.

While the clan gets ready for battle, Carol gets help from an unlikely ally. Sebastian's second-in-command can no longer ignore the torment she suffers at the hands of his commander and offers to help her, but only if she agrees to his terms.

10: DARK WARRIOR'S LEGACY

Andrew's acclimation to his post-transition body isn't easy. His senses are sharper, he's bigger, stronger, and hungrier. Nathalie fears that the changes in the man she loves are more than physical. Measuring up to this new version of him is going to be a challenge.

Carol and Robert are disillusioned with each other. They are not destined mates, and love is not on the horizon. When Robert's three months are up, he might be left with nothing to show for his sacrifice.

Lana contacts Anandur with disturbing news; the yacht and its human cargo are in Mexico. Kian must find a way to apprehend Alex and rescue the women on board without causing an international

incident.

DARK GUARDIAN TRILOGY

11: DARK GUARDIAN FOUND

What would you do if you stopped aging?

Eva runs. The ex-DEA agent doesn't know what caused her strange mutation, only that if discovered, she'll be dissected like a lab rat. What Eva doesn't know, though, is that she's a descendant of the gods, and that she is not alone. The man who rocked her world in one life-changing encounter over thirty years ago is an immortal as well.

To keep his people's existence secret, Bhathian was forced to turn his back on the only woman who ever captured his heart, but he's never forgotten and never stopped looking for her.

12: DARK GUARDIAN CRAVED

Cautious after a lifetime of disappointments, Eva is mistrustful of Bhathian's professed feelings of love. She accepts him as a lover and a confidant but not as a life partner.

Jackson suspects that Tessa is his true love mate, but unless she overcomes her fears, he might never find out.

Carol gets an offer she can't refuse—a chance to prove that there is more to her than meets the eye. Robert believes she's about to commit a deadly mistake, but when he tries to dissuade her, she tells him to leave.

13: DARK GUARDIAN'S MATE

Prepare for the heart-warming culmination of Eva and Bhathian's story!

DARK ANGEL TRILOGY

14: DARK ANGEL'S OBSESSION

The cold and stoic warrior is an enigma even to those closest to him. His secrets are about to unravel...

15: DARK ANGEL'S SEDUCTION

Brundar is fighting a losing battle. Calypso is slowly chipping away his icy armor from the outside, while his need for her is melting it from the inside.

He can't allow it to happen. Calypso is a human with none of the Dormant indicators. There is no way he can keep her for more than a few weeks.

16: DARK ANGEL'S SURRENDER

Get ready for the heart pounding conclusion to Brundar and Calypso's story.

Callie still couldn't wrap her head around it, nor could she summon even a smidgen of sorrow or regret.

After all, she had some memories with him that weren't horrible. She should've felt something. But there was nothing, not even shock. Not even horror at what had transpired over the last couple of hours.

Maybe it was a typical response for survivors--feeling euphoric for the simple reason that they were alive. Especially when that survival was nothing short of miraculous.

Brundar's cold hand closed around hers, reminding her that they weren't out of the woods yet. Her injuries were superficial, and the most she had to worry about was some scarring. But, despite his and Anandur's reassurances, Brundar might never walk again.

If he ended up crippled because of her, she would never forgive herself for getting him involved in her crap.

"Are you okay, sweetling? Are you in pain?" Brundar asked.

Her injuries were nothing compared to his, and yet he was concerned about her. God, she loved this man. The thing was, if she told him that, he would run off, or crawl away as was the case.

Hey, maybe this was the perfect opportunity to spring it on him.

DARK OPERATIVE TRILOGY

17: DARK OPERATIVE: A SHADOW OF DEATH

As a brilliant strategist and the only human entrusted with the secret of immortals' existence, Turner is both an asset and a liability to the clan. His request to attempt transition into immortality as an alternative to cancer treatments cannot be denied without risking the clan's exposure. On the other hand, approving it means risking his premature death. In both scenarios, the clan will lose a valuable ally.

When the decision is left to the clan's physician, Turner makes plans to manipulate her by taking advantage of her interest in him.

Will Bridget fall for the cold, calculated operative? Or will Turner fall into his own trap?

18: DARK OPERATIVE: A GLIMMER OF HOPE

As Turner and Bridget's relationship deepens, living together seems like the right move, but to make it work both need to make concessions.

Bridget is realistic and keeps her expectations low. Turner could never be the true love mate she yearns for, but he is as good as she's going to get. Other than his emotional limitations, he's perfect in every way.

Turner's hard shell is starting to show cracks. He wants immortality, he wants to be part of the clan, and he wants Bridget, but he doesn't want to cause her pain.

His options are either abandon his quest for immortality and give Bridget his few remaining decades, or

abandon Bridget by going for the transition and most likely dying. His rational mind dictates that he chooses the former, but his gut pulls him toward the latter. Which one is he going to trust?

19: DARK OPERATIVE: THE DAWN OF LOVE

Get ready for the exciting finale of Bridget and Turner's story!

DARK SURVIVOR TRILOGY

20: DARK SURVIVOR AWAKENED

This was a strange new world she had awakened to.

Her memory loss must have been catastrophic because almost nothing was familiar. The language was foreign to her, with only a few words bearing some similarity to the language she thought in. Still, a full moon cycle had passed since her awakening, and little by little she was gaining basic understanding of it--only a few words and phrases, but she was learning more each day.

A week or so ago, a little girl on the street had tugged on her mother's sleeve and pointed at her. "Look, Mama, Wonder Woman!"

The mother smiled apologetically, saying something in the language these people spoke, then scurried away with the child looking behind her shoulder and grinning.

When it happened again with another child on the same day, it was settled.

Wonder Woman must have been the name of someone important in this strange world she had awoken to, and since both times it had been said with a smile it must have been a good one.

Wonder had a nice ring to it.

She just wished she knew what it meant.

21: DARK SURVIVOR ECHOES OF LOVE

Wonder's journey continues in *Dark Survivor Echoes of Love*.

22: DARK SURVIVOR REUNITED

The exciting finale of Wonder and Anandur's story.

DARK WIDOW TRILOGY

23: DARK WIDOW'S SECRET

Vivian and her daughter share a powerful telepathic connection, so when Ella can't be reached by

conventional or psychic means, her mother fears the worst.

Help arrives from an unexpected source when Vivian gets a call from the young doctor she met at a psychic convention. Turns out Julian belongs to a private organization specializing in retrieving missing girls.

As Julian's clan mobilizes its considerable resources to rescue the daughter, Magnus is charged with keeping the gorgeous young mother safe.

Worry for Ella and the secrets Vivian and Magnus keep from each other should be enough to prevent the sparks of attraction from kindling a blaze of desire. Except, these pesky sparks have a mind of their own.

24: DARK WIDOW'S CURSE

A simple rescue operation turns into mission impossible when the Russian mafia gets involved. Bad things are supposed to come in threes, but in Vivian's case, it seems like there is no limit to bad luck. Her family and everyone who gets close to her is affected by her curse.

Will Magnus and his people prove her wrong?

25: DARK WIDOW'S BLESSING

The thrilling finale of the Dark Widow trilogy!

DARK DREAM TRILOGY

26: DARK DREAM'S TEMPTATION

Julian has known Ella is the one for him from the moment he saw her picture, but when he finally frees her from captivity, she seems indifferent to him. Could he have been mistaken?

Ella's rescue should've ended that chapter in her life, but it seems like the road back to normalcy has just begun and it's full of obstacles. Between the pitying looks she gets and her mother's attempts to get her into therapy, Ella feels like she's typecast as a victim, when nothing could be further from the truth. She's a tough survivor, and she's going to prove it.

Strangely, the only one who seems to understand is Logan, who keeps popping up in her dreams. But then, he's a figment of her imagination—or is he?

27: DARK DREAM'S UNRAVELING

While trying to figure out a way around Logan's silencing compulsion, Ella concocts an ambitious plan. What if instead of trying to keep him out of her dreams, she could pretend to like him and lure him into a trap?

Catching Navuh's son would be a major boon for the clan, as well as for Ella. She will have her revenge, turning the tables on another scumbag out to get her.

28: DARK DREAM'S TRAP

The trap is set, but who is the hunter and who is the prey? Find out in this heart-pounding conclusion to the *Dark Dream* trilogy.

DARK PRINCE TRILOGY

29: DARK PRINCE'S ENIGMA

As the son of the most dangerous male on the planet, Lokan lives by three rules:

Don't trust a soul.

Don't show emotions.

And don't get attached.

Will one extraordinary woman make him break all three?

30: DARK PRINCE'S DILEMMA

Will Kian decide that the benefits of trusting Lokan outweigh the risks?

Will Lokan betray his father and brothers for the greater good of his people?

Are Carol and Lokan true-love mates, or is one of them playing the other?

So many questions, the path ahead is anything but clear.

31: DARK PRINCE'S AGENDA

While Turner and Kian work out the details of Areana's rescue plan, Carol and Lokan's tumultuous relationship hits another snag. Is it a sign of things to come?

DARK QUEEN TRILOGY

32 : DARK QUEEN'S QUEST

A former beauty queen, a retired undercover agent, and a successful model, Mey is not the typical damsel in distress. But when her sister drops off the radar and then someone starts following her around, she panics.

Following a vague clue that Kalugal might be in New York, Kian sends a team headed by Yamanu to search for him.

As Mey and Yamanu's paths cross, he offers her his help and protection, but will that be all?

33: DARK QUEEN'S KNIGHT

As the only member of his clan with a godlike power over human minds, Yamanu has been shielding his people for centuries, but that power comes at a steep price. When Mey enters his life, he's faced with the most difficult choice.

The safety of his clan or a future with his fated mate.

34: DARK QUEEN'S ARMY

As Mey anxiously waits for her transition to begin and for Yamanu to test whether his godlike powers are gone, the clan sets out to solve two mysteries:

Where is Jin, and is she there voluntarily?

Where is Kalugal, and what is he up to?

DARK SPY TRILOGY

35: DARK SPY CONSCRIPTED

Jin possesses a unique paranormal ability. Just by touching someone, she can insert a mental hook into their psyche and tie a string of her consciousness to it, creating a tether. That doesn't make her a spy, though, not unless her talent is discovered by those seeking to exploit it.

36: DARK SPY'S MISSION

Jin's first spying mission is supposed to be easy. Walk into the club, touch Kalugal to tether her consciousness to him, and walk out.

Except, they should have known better.

37: DARK SPY'S RESOLUTION

The best-laid plans often go awry...

DARK OVERLORD TRILOGY

38: DARK OVERLORD NEW HORIZON

Jacki has two talents that set her apart from the rest of the human race.

She has unpredictable glimpses of other people's futures, and she is immune to mind manipulation.

Unfortunately, both talents are pretty useless for finding a job other than the one she had in the government's paranormal division.

It seemed like a sweet deal, until she found out that the director planned on producing super babies by compelling the recruits into pairing up. When an opportunity to escape the program presented itself, she took it, only to find out that humans are not at the top of the food chain.

Immortals are real, and at the very top of the hierarchy is Kalugal, the most powerful, arrogant, and sexiest male she has ever met.

With one look, he sets her blood on fire, but Jacki is not a fool. A man like him will never think of her as anything more than a tasty snack, while she will never settle for anything less than his heart.

39: DARK OVERLORD'S WIFE

Jacki is still clinging to her all-or-nothing policy, but Kalugal is chipping away at her resistance. Perhaps it's time to ease up on her convictions. A little less than all is still much better than nothing, and a couple of decades with a demigod is probably worth more than a lifetime with a mere mortal.

40: DARK OVERLORD'S CLAN

As Jacki and Kalugal prepare to celebrate their union, Kian takes every precaution to safeguard his people. Except, Kalugal and his men are not his only potential adversaries, and compulsion is not the only power he should fear.

DARK CHOICES TRILOGY

41: DARK CHOICES THE QUANDARY

When Rufsur and Edna meet, the attraction is as unexpected as it is undeniable. Except, she's the clan's judge and councilwoman, and he's Kalugal's second-in-command. Will loyalty and duty to their people keep them apart?

42: DARK CHOICES PARADIGM SHIFT

Edna and Rufsur are miserable without each other, and their two-week separation seems like an eternity. Long-distance relationships are difficult, but for immortal couples they are impossible. Unless one of them is willing to leave everything behind for the other, things are just going to get worse. Except, the cost of compromise is far greater than giving up their comfortable lives and hard-earned positions. The future of their people is on the line.

43: DARK CHOICES THE ACCORD

The winds of change blowing over the village demand hard choices. For better or worse, Kian's decisions will alter the trajectory of the clan's future, and he is not ready to take the plunge. But as Edna and Rufsur's plight gains widespread support, his resistance slowly begins to erode.

DARK SECRETS TRILOGY

44: DARK SECRETS RESURGENCE

On a sabbatical from his Stanford teaching position, Professor David Levinson finally has time to write the sci-fi novel he's been thinking about for years.

The phenomena of past life memories and near-death experiences are too controversial to include in his formal psychiatric research, while fiction is the perfect outlet for his esoteric ideas.

Hoping that a change of pace will provide the inspiration he needs, David accepts a friend's invitation to an old Scottish castle.

45: DARK SECRETS UNVEILED

When Professor David Levinson accepts a friend's invitation to an old Scottish castle, what he finds there is more fantastical than his most outlandish theories. The castle is home to a clan of immortals, their leader is a stunning demigoddess, and even more shockingly, it might be precisely where he belongs.

Except, the clan founder is hiding a secret that might cast a dark shadow on David's relationship with her daughter.

Nevertheless, when offered a chance at immortality, he agrees to undergo the dangerous induction process.

Will David survive his transition into immortality? And if he does, will his relationship with Sari survive the unveiling of her mother's secret?

46: DARK SECRETS ABSOLVED

Absolution.

David had given and received it.

The few short hours since he'd emerged from the coma had felt incredible. He'd finally been free of the guilt and pain, and for the first time since Jonah's death, he had felt truly happy and optimistic about the future.

He'd survived the transition into immortality, had been accepted into the clan, and was about to marry the best woman on the face of the planet, his true love mate, his salvation, his everything.

What could have possibly gone wrong?

Just about everything.

DARK HAVEN TRILOGY

47: DARK HAVEN ILLUSION

Welcome to Safe Haven, where not everything is what it seems.

On a quest to process personal pain, Anastasia joins the Safe Haven Spiritual Retreat. Through meditation, self-reflection, and hard work, she hopes to make peace with the voices in her head.

This is where she belongs.

Except, membership comes with a hefty price, doubts are sacrilege, and leaving is not as easy as walking out the front gate.

Is living in utopia worth the sacrifice?

Anastasia believes so until the arrival of a new acolyte changes everything.

Apparently, the gods of old were not a myth, their immortal descendants share the planet with humans, and she might be a carrier of their genes.

48: DARK HAVEN UNMASKED

As Anastasia leaves Safe Haven for a week-long romantic vacation with Leon, she hopes to explore her newly discovered passionate side, their budding relationship, and perhaps also solve the mystery of the voices in her head. What she discovers exceeds her wildest expectations.

In the meantime, Eleanor and Peter hope to solve another mystery. Who is Emmett Haderech, and what is he up to?

49: DARK HAVEN FOUND

Anastasia is growing suspicious, and Leon is running out of excuses.

Risking death for a chance at immortality should've been her choice to make. Will she ever forgive him for taking it away from her?

DARK POWER TRILOGY

50: DARK POWER UNTAMED

Attending a charity gala as the clan's figurehead, Onegus is ready for the pesky socialites he'll have a hard time keeping away. Instead, he encounters an intriguing beauty who won't give him the time of day.

Bad things happen when Cassandra gets all worked up, and given her fiery temper, the destructive power is difficult to tame. When she meets a gorgeous, cocky billionaire at a charity event, things just might start blowing up again.

51: DARK POWER UNLEASHED

Cassandra's power is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and destructive. If she doesn't learn to harness it, people might get hurt.

Onegus's self-control is legendary. Even his fangs and venom glands obey his commands.

They say that opposites attract, and perhaps it's true, but are they any good for each other?

52: DARK POWER CONVERGENCE

The threads of fate converge, mysteries unfold, and the clan's future is forever altered in the least expected way.

DARK MEMORIES TRILOGY

53: DARK MEMORIES SUBMERGED

Geraldine's memories are spotty at best, and many of them are pure fiction. While her family attempts to solve the puzzle with far too many pieces missing, she's forced to confront a past life that she can't remember, a present that's more fantastic than her wildest made-up stories, and a future that might be better than her most heartfelt fantasies. But as more clues are uncovered, the picture starting to emerge is beyond anything she or her family could have ever imagined.

54: DARK MEMORIES EMERGE

The more clues emerge about Geraldine's past, the more questions arise.

Did she really have a twin sister who drowned?

Who is the mysterious benefactor in her hazy recollections?

Did he have anything to do with her becoming immortal?

Thankfully, she doesn't have to find the answers alone.

Cassandra and Onegus are there for her, and so is Shai, the immortal who sets her body on fire.

As they work together to solve the mystery, the four of them stumble upon a millennia-old secret that could tip the balance of power between the clan and its enemies.

55: DARK MEMORIES RESTORED

As the past collides with the present, a new future emerges.

DARK HUNTER TRILOGY

56: DARK HUNTER'S QUERY

For most of his five centuries of existence, Orion has walked the earth alone, searching for answers.

Why is he immortal?

Where did his powers come from?

Is he the only one of his kind?

When fate puts Orion face to face with the god who sired him, he learns the secret behind his immortality and that he might not be the only one.

As the goddess's eldest daughter and a mother of thirteen, Alena deserves the title of Clan Mother just as much as Annani, but she's not interested in honorifics. Being her mother's companion and keeping the mischievous goddess out of trouble is a rewarding, full-time job. Lately, though, Alena's love for her mother and the clan's gratitude is not enough.

She craves adventure, excitement, and perhaps a true-love mate of her own.

When Alena and Orion meet, sparks fly, but they both resist the pull. Alena could never bring herself to trust the powerful compeller, and Orion could never allow himself to fall in love again.

57: DARK HUNTER'S PREY

When Alena and Orion join Kalugal and Jacki on a romantic vacation to the enchanting Lake Lugu in China, they anticipate a couple of visits to Kalugal's archeological dig, some sightseeing, and a lot of lovemaking.

Their excursion takes an unexpected turn when Jacki's vision sends them on a perilous hunt for the elusive Kra-ell.

As things progress from bad to worse, Alena beseeches the Fates to keep everyone in their group alive. She can't fathom losing any of them, but most of all, Orion.

For over two thousand years, she walked the earth alone, but after mere days with him at her side, she can't imagine life without him.

58: DARK HUNTER'S BOON

As Orion and Alena's relationship blooms and solidifies, the two investigative teams combine their recent discoveries to piece together more of the Kra-ell mystery.

Attacking the puzzle from another angle, Eleanor works on gaining access to Echelon's powerful AI spy network.

Together, they are getting dangerously close to finding the elusive Kra-ell.

DARK GOD TRILOGY

59: DARK GOD'S AVATAR

Unaware of the time bomb ticking inside her, Mia had lived the perfect life until it all came to a screeching halt, but despite the difficulties she faces, she doggedly pursues her dreams.

Once known as the god of knowledge and wisdom, Toven has grown cold and indifferent. Disillusioned with humanity, he travels the world and pens novels about the love he can no longer feel. Seeking to escape his ever-present ennui, Toven gives a cutting-edge virtual experience a try. When his

avatar meets Mia's, their sizzling virtual romance unexpectedly turns into something deeper and more meaningful.

Will it endure in the real world?

60: DARK GOD'S REVIVISCENCE

Toven might have failed in his attempts to improve humanity's condition, but he isn't going to fail to improve Mia's life, making it the best it can be despite her fragile health, and he can do that not as a god, but as a man who possesses the means, the smarts, and the determination to do it.

No effort is enough to repay Mia for reviving his deadened heart and making him excited for the next day, but the flip side of his reviviscence is the fear of losing its catalyst.

Given Mia's condition, Toven doesn't dare to over excite her. His venom is a powerful aphrodisiac, euphoric, and an all-around health booster, but it's also extremely potent. It might kill her instead of making her better.

61: DARK GOD DESTINIES CONVERGE

Destinies converge, and secrets are revealed in part three of Mia and Toven's story.

DARK WHISPERS TRILOGY

62: DARK WHISPERS FROM THE PAST

A brilliant scientist and programmer, William lives for his work, but when he recruits a young bioinformatician to help him decipher the gods' genetic blueprints, he find himself smitten with more than just her brain.

A Ph.d at nineteen, Kaia is considered a prodigy and expects a bright future in academia. But when William invites her to join his secret research team, she accepts for reasons that have nothing to do with her career objectives. William's promise to look into her best friend's disappearance is an offer she just can't refuse.

63: DARK WHISPERS FROM AFAR

William knows that his budding relationship with the nineteen-year-old Kaia will be frowned upon, but he's unprepared for her family's vehement opposition.

Family means everything to Kaia, so when she finds herself in the impossible position of having to choose between them and William, she resorts to unconventional means to resolve the conflict.

64: DARK WHISPERS FROM BEYOND

The sacrifices Kaia and her family have to make for a chance of gaining immortality might tear them apart, and success is not guaranteed.

Is the dubious promise of eternal life worth the risk of losing everything?

DARK GAMBIT TRILOGY

65: DARK GAMBIT THE PAWN

Temporarily assigned to supervise a team of bioinformaticians, Marcel expects to spend a couple of weeks in the peaceful retreat of Safe Haven, enjoying Oregon Coast's cool weather and rugged beauty.

Things quickly turn chaotic when the retreat's director receives an email with an encoded message about a potential new threat to the clan.

While those in charge of security debate what to do next, Safe Haven's first ever paranormal retreat is about to begin, and one of the attendees is a mysterious woman who makes Marcel's heart beat faster whenever she's near.

Is the beautiful mortal his one true love?

Or is she the harbinger of more bad news?

66: DARK GAMBIT THE PLAY

To get to Safe Haven's inner circle, the Kra-ell leader sacrifices a pawn. He does not expect her to reach the final rank and promote to a queen.

67: DARK GAMBIT RELIANCE

Marcel takes a big risk by telling Sofia his greatest sin. Can he trust her to keep it a secret? Or maybe it's time to confess his crime and submit to whatever punishment Edna deems appropriate?

Three miserable centuries of living with guilt and remorse are long enough.

Once the dust settles on the Kra-ell crisis, he will gather the courage to put himself at the court's mercy.

DARK ALLIANCE TRILOGY

68: DARK ALLIANCE KINDRED SOULS

A daring operation half a world away devolves into a full-scale crisis that escalates rapidly, requiring the clan's full might and technological wizardry to manage and survive.

Hardened by duty and tragedy, Jade is driven by a burning desire for revenge. When Phinas saves her second-in-command, Jade's gratitude quickly becomes something more.

69: DARK ALLIANCE TURBULENT WATERS

When a dangerous foe turns the tables on the clan, complicating the Kra-ell rescue operation in unforeseeable ways, Kian and his crew bet all on a brilliant misdirection.

On board the Aurora, Phinas and Jade brace for battle while enjoying a few stolen moments of passion.

Drawn to the woman he sees behind the aloof leader, Phinas realizes that what has started as a calculated political move has evolved into a deepening sense of companionship.

Jade finds reprieve in Phinas's arms, but duty and tradition make it difficult for her to accept that what she feels for him is more than just gratitude and desire.

After all, the Kra-ell don't believe in love.

70: **DARK ALLIANCE PERFECT STORM**

After two decades in captivity, Jade is finally free, her quest for revenge within grasp, but danger still looms large. A storm is brewing on the horizon, gathering momentum and threatening to obliterate Jade's tenuous hold on hope for a better future.

DARK HEALING TRILOGY

71: **DARK HEALING BLIND JUSTICE**

The sanctuary is Vanessa's life project. The monumental task of rehabilitating the traumatized victims of trafficking doesn't leave much time for personal life, let alone dating or finding her one and only.

When Kian asks her to help the Kra-ell, she's torn between her duty to the sanctuary and a group of emotionally wounded aliens who no other psychologist can treat.

She's the only immortal with the necessary training to get it done.

The Kra-ell culture and the purebloods' nearly androgynous alien looks shouldn't appeal to her, and yet, she finds one of them disturbingly attractive.

Is it the dangerous vibe he emits?

Does it speak to her on a subconscious level?

Or is it her need to put the broken pieces of him back together?

And why is he interested in her?

She cannot offer him a fight for dominance like a Kra-ell female would, but some strange and unfamiliar part of her wishes she could.

72: **DARK HEALING BLIND TRUST**

Riddled with guilt over the crimes he was forced to commit, Mo-red is ready to stand trial and accept the death sentence he believes he deserves, but when the clan's alluring psychologist offers a new perspective on his past and hope for a better future, he resolves to fight for his life.

73: **DARK HEALING BLIND CURVE**

Kian is still reeling from the shocking revelations about the twins when a new threat manifests, eclipsing everything he's had to deal with up until now. In light of the new developments, Igor, the other Kra-ell prisoners, and the pending trial are no longer at the forefront of his mind, but the opposite

is true for Vanessa. As her relationship with Mo-red solidifies, she is determined to save the male she loves, even if it means breaking him free and living on the run.

DARK ENCOUNTERS TRILOGY

74: DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE CLOSE KIND

Convinced that her family is hiding a terrible secret from her, Gabi decides to pay them a surprise visit.

Something is very fishy about the stories her brothers have been telling her lately. Her niece, a nineteen-year-old prodigy with a Ph.D. in bioinformatics, has gotten engaged to a much older guy she met while working on some top-secret project, and if Gabi's older, overprotective brother's approval of the engagement wasn't suspicious enough, he also uprooted his family and moved to be closer to the couple.

What Gabi discovers when she gets to L.A. is wilder than anything she could have imagined. Her entire family possesses godly genes, her brothers and her niece have already turned immortal, and she could transition as soon as she finds an immortal male to induce her. Finding a suitable candidate in a village full of handsome immortals shouldn't be a problem, but Gabi's thoughts keep wandering to the gorgeous guy she met on her flight over.

Could Uriel be a lost descendant of the gods?

He certainly looks like them, but that doesn't mean that he's a good guy or that he's even immortal. He could be a descendant of a different god—a member of an enemy faction of immortals who seek to eradicate her family's adoptive clan, or what is more likely, he's just an extraordinarily good-looking human.

75: DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE UNEXPECTED KIND

Who is Uriel?

Is he a lost descendant of the gods or just a gorgeous and charming human who has rocked Gabi's world?

76: DARK ENCOUNTERS OF THE FATED KIND

As Aru and his team embark on a perilous mission, their past and present converge in a meeting that holds the key to their fate.

Dark Voyage Trilogy

77: DARK VOYAGE MATTERS OF THE HEART

As Annani and Syssi set out to unravel the mysteries of Syssi's visions about the gods' home world, the long-awaited wedding cruise sets sail with Aru, Gabi, and Aru's teammates on board.

While the gods find themselves surrounded by immortal clan ladies eager for their affections, they soon

discover that destiny has a different plan for them.

78: [DARK VOYAGE MATTERS OF THE MIND](#)

As conflicting expectations strain Dagor and Frankie's budding relationship, they join a shore excursion to the ruins of Tehuacalo, where an ancient map of dubious origins claims a powerful amulet is buried. Despite Kian's reservation about the danger of entering cartel territory, Kalugal is set on leading the group of immortals, gods, and one human on an adventure and promises they will be back in time for Amanda and Dalhu's wedding.

When the leisurely archeological quest turns into a deadly conflict, the group stumbles upon a much more precious treasure than the amulet they have set out to uncover.

79: [DARK VOYAGE MATTERS OF THE SOUL](#)

As the Silver Swan leaves Acapulco, Frankie and Dagor expect smooth sailing, eight more wedding celebrations, and, hopefully, Frankie's transition, but fate has other plans.

The ancient amulet has more secrets to reveal, and when a new vision necessitates a change of course, Dagor and his teammates are pulled into the millennia-old battle between the clan and the Devout Order Of Mortdh.

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VAMPIRE'S CONSORT

When Gabriel's company is ready to start beta testing, he invites his old crush to inspect its medical safety protocol.

Curious about the revolutionary technology of the *Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy-Fulfillment studios*, Brenna agrees.

Neither expects to end up partnering for its first fully immersive test run.

KING'S CHOSEN

When Lisa's nutty friends get her a gift certificate to *Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy Studios*, she has no intentions of using it. But since the only way to get a refund is if no partner can be found for her, she makes sure to request a fantasy so girly and over the top that no sane guy will pick it up.

Except, someone does.

Warning: This fantasy contains a hot, domineering crown prince, sweet insta-love, steamy love scenes painted with light shades of gray, a wedding, and a HEA in both the virtual and real worlds.

Intended for mature audience.

CAPTAIN'S CONQUEST

Working as a Starbucks barista, Alicia fends off flirting all day long, but none of the guys are as charming and sexy as Gregg. His frequent visits are the highlight of her day, but since he's never asked her out, she assumes he's taken. Besides, between a day job and a budding music career, she has no time to start a new relationship.

That is until Gregg makes her an offer she can't refuse—a gift certificate to

the virtual fantasy fulfillment service everyone is talking about. As a huge Star Trek fan, Alicia has a perfect match in mind—the captain of the Starship Enterprise.

THE THIEF WHO LOVED ME

When Marian splurges on a Perfect Match Virtual adventure as a world infamous jewel thief, she expects high-wire fun with a hot partner who she will never have to see again in real life.

A virtual encounter seems like the perfect answer to Marcus's string of dating disasters. No strings attached, no drama, and definitely no love. As a die-hard James Bond fan, he chooses as his avatar a dashing MI6 operative, and to complement his adventure, a dangerously seductive partner.

Neither expects to find their forever Perfect Match.

MY MERMAN PRINCE

The beautiful architect working late on the twelfth floor of my building thinks that I'm just the maintenance guy. She's also under the impression that I'm not interested.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

I want her like I've never wanted a woman before, but I don't play where I work.

I don't need the complications.

When she tells me about living out her mermaid fantasy with a stranger in a Perfect Match virtual adventure, I decide to do everything possible to ensure that the stranger is me.

THE DRAGON KING

To save his beloved kingdom from a devastating war, the Crown Prince of Trieste makes a deal with a witch that costs him half of his humanity and

dooms him to an eternity of loneliness.

Now king, he's a fearsome cobalt-winged dragon by day and a short-tempered monarch by night. Not many are brave enough to serve in the palace of the brooding and volatile ruler, but Charlotte ignores the rumors and accepts a scribe position in court.

As the young scribe reawakens Bruce's frozen heart, all that stands in the way of their happiness is the witch's bargain. Outsmarting the evil hag will take cunning and courage, and Charlotte is just the right woman for the job.

MY WEREWOLF ROMEO

The father of my star student is a big-shot screenwriter and the patron of the drama department who thinks he can dictate what production I should put on. The principal makes it very clear that I need to cooperate with the opinionated asshat or walk away from my dream job at the exclusive private high school.

It doesn't help matters that the guy is single, hot, charming, creative, and seems to like me despite my thinly-veiled hostility.

When he invites me to a custom-tailored Perfect Match virtual adventure to prove that his screenplay is perfect for my production, I accept, intending to have fun while proving that messing with the classics is a foolish idea.

I don't expect to be wowed by his werewolf adaptation of Red Riding Hood mesh-up with Romeo and Juliet, and I certainly don't expect to fall in love with the virtual fantasy's leading man.

THE CHANNELER'S COMPANION

A treat for fans of *The Wheel of Time*.

When Erika hires Rand to assist in her pediatric clinic, she does so despite his good looks and irresistible charm, not because of them.

He's empathic, adores children, and has the patience of a saint.

He's also all she can think about, but he's off limits.

What's a doctor to do to scratch that irresistible itch without risking workplace complications?

A shared adventure in the Perfect Match Virtual Studios seems like the solution, but instead of letting the algorithm choose a partner for her, Erika can try to influence it to select the one she wants. Awarding Rand a gift certificate to the service will get him into their database, but unless Erika can tip the odds in her favor, getting paired with him is a long shot.

Hopefully, a virtual adventure based on her and Rand's favorite series will do the trick.

THE VALKYRIE & THE WITCH

After breaking up with my boyfriend, I vow never to date a physician again and avoid workplace romances like the plague. Seeking an escape from bad memories and hospital politics, I apply for a job at the Perfect Match Virtual Fantasy Studios, where I hope to explore fantastical scenarios and beta-test new experiences.

I have no intention of entering a new relationship anytime soon, but it is difficult to ignore Kayden, a fellow trainee who's good-looking and charming but regrettably has aspirations of becoming a physician.

Hoping never to get paired with him to beta test an experience, I choose the Valkyrie adventure. It seems like a safe bet to avoid a guy like him, who would never select an experience where the female is the kick-ass heroine and the man only gets a supporting role. However, the algorithm has other plans in store for us. It seems to think that we are a perfect match.

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