



INSATIABLE
INSTINCT
BOOK ONE

HIS
DARKEST
DECEIT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ADDISON CAIN

HIS DARKEST DECEIT

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FREE BOOK! Download BORN TO BE BOUND!

“Unapologetically raw and deliciously filthy!”

- NYT Bestselling author Anna Zaires

I dedicate this book to Karen the Emu, who resides in all her rage at Useless Farms. Karen, the terrifying noises you make, the drumming and booming, are so chilling that they had to be celebrated. Your vocal threats have now been bastardized into sexy racket made by horny hybrid humans in the Insatiable Instinct series. You're welcome.

Please do not complain to your manager.

To fail within the academy amounted to certain death.

To shine, to draw our illustrious general's attention, would result in ruin.

Every last recruit contained within the academy's walls had been created by the human government of Risa Colony. We were owned by their military, our genetics mixed with the hostile planet's apex predator, the vorec. Given life for a single purpose—to protect humans.

Fail to perform in that purpose, demonstrate that you were unworthy of the vast expense and time spent in one's creation and training, and your life was forfeit.

Once per annum, a compulsory evaluation was required for every hybrid recruit. A student would enter the cold-blooded General Cyderial's office. My colleagues, friends who had grown up beside me—some would enter those doors and... never come out again.

I had learned from the age of five that if I portrayed a front of absolute mediocrity, I would mostly be ignored by those in power.

Never test too high, regardless of how well one comprehended the materials.

Do not build strong relationships with professors or staff.

Be immemorable.

Stay respectful but distant.

Friendships were for later in the day, in the privacy of dorms, when the vault separating the female students from the academy proper was sealed. Armed watchers—elite male guards—were forbidden from female spaces. With no one cataloging our every move, there was a semblance of freedom. Our own secret after-hours culture.

But where the watchers lingered, conversations were to be kept to an absolute minimum.

Making eye contact with an authority figure was tantamount to instant punishment.

Minor infractions could result in death.

Never get caught breaking the rules, break them in such a way that culpability was questionable. If you were apprehended, it was smarter to say nothing, accept the punishment, and leave without complaint.

With only six weeks until graduation, it was required that I endure only one final meeting with General Cyderial until my future placement would be decided. I had calculated the exact scores I would need to squeak by and maintain my façade of middling intelligence. With a ranking so unimpressive, I would be given the position of surveyor—a dangerous job for the more expendable hybrids.

A post the majority of my colleagues would cringe to be associated with.

One I greatly coveted. One where I could explore this fog-covered hostile planet with a small team of genetically modified hybrid humans like myself.

Leave the academy behind, forever.

I had no fear of the wilderness that surrounded our burgeoning city. I was mesmerized by what I might find within its dense mists. Heard the call of the beasts who lived there, and knew the fog was where I belonged.

One final meeting with a terror and I would be free.

I was so close to my ultimate goal.

And damned proud of myself for making it so far.

Formal uniform impeccable, brown hair pulled away from my face and

tightly knotted at my nape, I walked through the general's office door stiff with decorum—in exactly the way expected of me. The nature of the chamber was unusual for a workspace, the main area housing his desk past an extended museum-like vestibule.

But it was beautiful... so many pretty things on so many delicate shelves.

Once, when I was very young, in a fit of temper, I'd swiped a little geode off the fancy display near the door. I still had it tucked away where no soul would ever find it. It was pink, glittery, and still one of the prettiest things I had ever seen.

Even though I had been only twelve when I had taken it, I'm pretty sure that if he had ever noticed it was missing or had the general suspected it was me, I would have received far more than a beating.

Hybrids regenerated at an extreme pace, making torture survivable and a real threat to consider. Every student had seen the consequences of his wrath in those who failed to live up to the academy's high standards.

Death.

It had not always been so bad for recruits. General Cyderial did not take the position of Academy Director until I was twelve. His predecessor had been stern but far more gentle. Too gentle, by Cyderial's estimation.

He expected killing machines and perfect poise. There was no room for anything soft. Not when we were reminded that this was a boot camp for children. That we were being trained for war.

Against what? A planet where everything wanted to kill you.

That's why humans had broken an ancient taboo and genetically modified select embryos for a higher purpose—so hybrids, like myself, might keep the humans alive and guarantee that the survivors of a desiccated earth might build civilization anew.

For a human mother to undergo the treatments and bear a hybrid baby was a guarantee of comfort for the rest of one's short human years. It raised a family's status socially and was done with great honor.

I had even been told there were some human women who saw gestating hybrids as their holy calling. However, it was not easy work to bear and birth my kind.

To bond with an exotic baby you knew you could not keep.

We looked more or less the same as our human counterparts, but hybrids were stronger, faster. For some, the reptilian Vorec genes were more dominant—iridescent scales blended with our skin. Unusual colorings in moments of high emotion.

Much of what set us apart was concealed at all times under uniforms, yet some key traits could not be hidden.

My nails were hooked and required daily tending to remain at a length that made holding a stylus possible. Extremely sharp talons were a common trait amongst the females in the dorms. We were not taught human anatomy, so I had no basis of comparison, but I did know they had only one heart. We had two.

Our respiratory systems were more advanced than a humans, to facilitate breathing the planet's toxic fog with no issue. Hybrids possessed a vorec internal organ tucked near our lungs. Its purpose? To pulse out a drum-like rhythm when we grew especially aggressive.

For the vorec, that thumping sound alerted whoever was on guard that an enraged beast was preparing an imminent attack. In the hybrid population, to be able to create that deep booming drum came with age. I had only accidentally let out a series of threatening thumps and hisses when engaged in rigorous hand-to-hand combat training or in battle defending the humans from wildlife that strayed too close to civilization.

It was considered the apex of threatening, and absolutely unallowed in the academy, the aforementioned circumstances aside.

Most remarkably, hybrids lived significantly longer than unmodified humans. Physical aging ceased upon maturity. Some of the earliest hybrids still lived hundreds of years after their birth.

I had been five when my birth mother completed her duty and handed me over for collection. Five when an instructor handed me a sharp training sword, locked me in an empty room, and unleashed an enraged adolescent vorec looking for blood. Through an observation window, I was observed fending it off with my unfamiliar weapon. Ultimately, I had killed it quite by accident. My jab pierced its soft palate, and the poor, small female died in minutes.

I was given top grades.

Nothing like a brush with death to welcome one to one's new home. And those were the gentle years.

That was the previous general who didn't look at me as if he wanted to swallow me whole.

General Cyderial possessed an unholy stare that even the blond hair that hung over his eyes could not conceal. Broad-shouldered, anything but relaxed, my first impression of him was... to steer clear.

Only twelve, I had polished my brass buttons, donned my best uniform, stood at attention before his desk, and made the mistake of meeting his eye.

Lesson learned from that point forward—avoid eye contact with the man at all costs.

Not once did he speak to me upon that first appointment. No comment on my subpar marks, no feedback nor encouragement. Nothing more than that unnerving, weighty glare.

I'd left that odd encounter feeling as if I had been marked and found wanting. The whole exchange was painfully uncomfortable. Keyed up and agitated, I had done the unthinkable on my way out. I swiped that pretty pink geode off one of his fancy shelves.

I still couldn't tell you why I dared such a petty, stupid crime. Perhaps it was because I was young and embarrassed. Perhaps I had wanted to punish him for making me feel so strange.

Perhaps it was because his office had been so unusual and smelled so

nice, yet the man within it was awful.

I learned to hate him.

Change for the academy came hard and fast after our initial meeting. Life became much more complicated. Training harder, classes more intense.

Punishments far more severe.

Recruits entered the office and were never seen again.

One of them had been my seat partner in biology, a nice boy who smiled at me and shared his notes.

Shortly after, classes became fully segregated. Girls to the right, boys to the left. Our classrooms were invaded by grown men, armed watchers positioned in every corner to ensure the genders did not intermingle.

Violence would be used on any boy caught glancing at the female side of the room. Those boys who thought to tease by sticking out their incredibly long tongues were beaten beyond recognition. The watchers were relentless.

There were no more jokes in the hall. There was no more comradery at meals.

The women had no one but each other, and the culture in the dorms underwent a dramatic shift.

After a few years, it seemed almost normal to live in such isolation, but there were mental consequences to the general's edicts.

It appeared worse for the boys, but the girls suffered too. Loneliness, an unnatural life of isolation. It took some time to find a new female-only equilibrium.

Changes in behavior that no one talked about, lest they get a fellow sister in trouble.

Some of the older girls began to act in strange ways. They started to wander in the night. Headed for our male counterparts.

To be caught out in the halls unchaperoned was unthinkable.

The older the student, the more severe the reprimand.

A young man caught fornicating with one of the older female classmates

led to immediate public execution.

I had witnessed frightened boys dangling from a rope more times than I cared to remember. Had to live with the terrified girls in the barracks. The brokenhearted, the lonely, and the very, very sad.

The women who participated in sexual escapades and got caught were never seen again. Their fate, I feared, was far worse than a noose.

At twelve, I had little more than a passing interest in boys, but I understood the older girls' sorrow. They had already taken our parents, then they had segregated us from our brothers, and finally stolen their sweethearts.

And I was one last meeting and six final weeks of training away from freedom.

Assuming the general was unaware of the contraband hidden in my dorm room: a tube of lipstick, three women's magazines, and a dress I had sewn myself from old uniform scraps collected over the years. A very pretty dress, considering what I'd had to work with.

Pretty, but not beautiful like the space he had chosen for his office. Thousands of books in exquisitely carved cases outlined the room. White millwork and glowing walls. Bits of art, pottery, even artifacts from old Earth.

General Cyderial's office looked nothing like the rooms I trained in, ate in, or lived in.

Shelves of glittering stones, a few well-tended, native toxic plants. Pretty things that bloomed and made the air sweet. Polished wood floors, soft rugs, well-crafted furnishings that led to the impression the general was an avid reader in his spare time. The terror of an immaculate white couch. Creamy tufted softness, a beacon of comfort. A lie.

Only once in my life had I been ordered to sit there—those following moments something I didn't want to think about, nor would I.

That horrible memory aside, had the room not housed a particularly insane and very dangerous tenant, I would have risked serious punishment in

my younger years to sneak in and touch all the things.

I liked pretty. I liked soft.

So, I mentally reminded myself to perform perfectly. To let him stare, to keep my answers short and impersonal, and that I would graduate and be free to seek out my own collection in the wilds.

Only ten steps remained between myself and his desk. Five breaths more and I would come to attention.

One lifetime of freedom was so close I could taste it.

All would be fine, and I would no longer be under General Cyderial's thumb. He would sit there, call me unremarkable, pass me, ordain my new position as surveyor, order me away, and I would sleep the sleep of the soon-to-be free.

Except, once I stood before his desk, the man began to stand from his chair.

My alarm at his unexpected movement was quickly concealed. Yet I could not fail to notice the looming largeness of him, an internal warning telling me it would be wise to take a step back.

Yet, I remained at attention, determined not to ruin my chance.

Uniform immaculate. Brass buttons perfect. Not a wrinkle or a stain upon the cloth of his station. His various insignias and rankings sparkled, on display, winking with his movement as he grew taller. Fully upright, he could have been a portrait. Beautiful, deadly, horrible, unkind.

And I'd made a grave mistake. Broke my one precious rule of survival in this hell.

I'd stupidly met his unblinking stare.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

Entering General Cyderial's space was already an anxiety-inducing endeavor, but I felt an overpowering sense of danger standing in his shadow at that moment.

Attention on high alert, I calculated why he might be looking at me that way. What I might have done to offend him.

And fought with all I had to suppress a desire to rumble a warning drum from my chest.

No one was safe when this man did unusual things.

Not only had he stood upon my arrival, towering over me, his massive desk between us, but something in his usually bleak demeanor, something I could not put my finger on, had altered.

But what?

Blond hair was styled in his customary method, long in front, hanging in his eyes. His uniform had no new adornment, nor was it missing anything I recognized.

He looked exactly the same as he always did. Leveling me with a menacing and acutely focused glare—as he always would when I was forced to endure his presence.

His jaw did not appear to be ticking, and his eyes were not narrowed. The room did not smell of anger or aggression.

But I was unsafe.

Locked in his gaze, I tried my best to read what I found there, and came up at a loss.

He possessed that same measured, unblinking stare, pouring it over me. A glare that would make a grown man cower. Hell, I had seen him make grown men cower with a glance. Twice, in fact, both watchers—armed men—who had looked away from the general when they were being addressed for some breach in behavior.

Not a clue what that behavior was. Watchers never did anything but stand there silently... unless they were actively disciplining a student.

And I'd gone and met his eye like a fool and was trapped and extremely pensive.

This had to be some kind of test. I just didn't know what the right action would be. Break eye contact and appear weak and affected? Hold his gaze and be judged aggressive or overly informal?

When instinct failed, I fell back on logic. Focusing on his eyes, unable to look away, I worked to separate the ocular organ from the man. Assessing as coldly as I could. Vorec green, an acidic shade that announced his hybrid status at first glance. It was a common enough color amongst our kind, so I looked for what made him unique. The human limbal ring, darker green than most. There were also flecks of gold in the mix, a sign that his mother must have possessed honeyed eyes. I wondered if she was as pretty as him.

Was it her bone structure that gave him high cheeks and a sharp jaw?

The cruel mouth that never smiled was as severe as always.

But something was very different. Hating that I could not figure it out, I waited, tamping down rising panic, reminding myself that I only had to get through this one last meeting.

Perhaps this was going to be another one of those strange appointments

where he just stared at me for a good half hour before commanding me to leave.

“Private Lorieyn.”

Okay, he wanted to speak. I had prepared for that as well. “Sir.”

“Remain at attention.”

An easy enough command to follow. Or so I thought, before the general circled his desk and came to stand before me.

Seldom had he ever come this close. The rare occasions where he had, had been disciplinary and terrifying.

The first time?

A boy had been killed. I had been terrorized.

It was the only time I’d been told to sit on his fancy white couch—only sixteen, certain my death was being ordered and the noose was already strung up.

Over a stupid misunderstanding. Mixing genders after hours was strictly prohibited. It didn’t matter if the reason was innocent or well-intentioned.

And as I mentioned, a boy had been killed.

Because I had tried to secretly tutor Private Cullen in math, so he might pass our next test and not be executed for failure to perform up to standard.

Being caught after hours, pouring over books with me, he was dragged to execution on the spot.

I was towed to General Cyderial’s office for punishment. He’d ordered me to sit on the beautiful couch, yelling me down for a solid ten minutes about the importance of following the rules. I had never seen him so manic, ranting about the dangers of young men and how there was no room for foolish female compassion for unworthy boys.

Meanwhile, sweet Private Cullen was being strung up in the yard.

I’d dared to start crying, and that had sent the man from manic to full-blown insanity.

Tearing at his hair, he gave me such a look. “There had been incidents

before I took over this position. Incidents where girls were harmed, Lorieyn. It's a harm we cannot undo."

But the harm, the fear, had all come from the general. Life had been better before he'd taken over leadership of the academy and begun disposing of students—my brothers and sisters—as if they were trash. "If he failed trigonometry, you were going to kill him!"

"Has your interference changed the outcome in any way?" He scoffed, letting the question go unanswered. "It isn't your job to save these kids. It's mine! This is not a charity. This is a training ground that will decide if you live or die."

As I was well aware. Dysregulated, angry at the injustice of it all, it was my turn to raise my voice. "Kill me already! I hate it here, and I don't want to listen to you anymore!"

"You are very young. Lorieyn, you would gain so much if you would just focus and absorb everything we are trying to teach you. This is a dangerous world full of desperate people. Equip yourself with wisdom. Private Cullen could have gone to his instructors for help. Instead, he asked you to meet him in the dark, knowing he was going to die anyway. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

I understood that this man was horrible. "You killed a boy who did nothing wrong."

Exasperated, he hardened his voice. "I saved you from rape."

"I don't even know what that word means." And I didn't care about General Cyderial's assumptions or brooding. I just wanted to go to my room and cry.

Releasing an extended, shaky exhale, the general pinched the bridge of his nose, swearing under his breath.

I watched him collect himself, watched when he stood taller and straightened his jacket, as I hunched into myself on that damned couch. My arms wrapped tight around my middle as if it might hold in all the grossness I

felt inside.

“You will be severely punished for your lapse in judgment. If I catch you outside the female dorms after dark again, you will force me to do something you are not ready for.” A strange change came over the man, as if he was trying to speak reasonably and gently. “I am asking you to please take better care of yourself.”

My lip shook as I asked, “You’re not going to kill me?”

“No.” He let out another exasperated breath and made damn sure I was looking him dead in the eye. “But I will kill any boy you are caught with. Remember that next time you want to help a failing student study for math. Their death will be on your hands.”

He may not have beat me, but the general kept his word. I was heavily punished for my part in the late-night escapade. One full year of extra labor every day after classes—time I used well. Always, an armed watcher supervised my work, yet they never engaged. And as I scrubbed the halls on hands and knees, day in and day out, I found something close to privacy for the first time in my life. Time to learn the secrets of my prison.

Mapping out surveillance devices when you had reason to linger in one place wasn’t as complicated as one would think. I knew exactly how I’d been caught last time.

I watched the instructors’ habitual movements and schedules. I discovered the best hiding places. Within five months, I began to sneak away from the females’ dorms simply out of spite. Just to see if I could.

Twice over the following year, I had run into a boy doing the same. Both times, I had let them kiss me in the dark.

After asking the older girls what the word rape meant, I had a better understanding. It meant boys kissing without permission. Well, it wasn’t rape if I asked them to do it.

In an awkward fumbling moment of foolishness, I even let one touch my breasts—a redhead who looked a lot like the boy I had tried to teach

trigonometry to. They may have even shared the same birth mother.

We didn't quite know what we were doing, groping in the dark, and I'm not sure either of us enjoyed it the way we were supposed to. But it had been my moment in that dirty alcove, using my body the way I wanted to use it. And he had kissed me a great deal.

I liked the kissing a lot.

He graduated days later. I never saw him again.

I attained my goal and enjoyed a brief sense of empowerment. One that fell away almost as quickly as it arrived.

A week later, I was summoned to the general's office in the middle of the night.

And avoided his silent stare for ten straight minutes.

He must have known *something*, for he gazed at me with such deranged wrath. It was the only time I had ever seen the man untidy. Uniform wrinkled as if he'd been rushing to dress. Hair mussed, eye twitching, tense, he sat in his chair and seemed to go a little more insane by the minute.

He looked pointedly at the white couch as if to remind me what it signified yet said nothing else.

I know I must have looked pathetic in my adolescent uncertainty. Which broken rule had he discovered? For I had broken all of them in my rebellion against his tyranny.

Thinking about that poor, dead redheaded boy stirred up anger that had been growing for a year. Resentment for the unfairness of losing all my free hours. Bitterness that the general held all the power and I had none.

Angry, it was easier to finally meet his treacherous gaze. To really look at my tormentor as a person, not just a force of nature.

A person I did not like very much.

"Do you understand the consequences of consorting with the opposite sex after hours?"

I could be snide too. "Deeply, sir."

“Tonight, a boy was apprehended on his way back to the boys’ dorm. There were signs of fornication. He had something on him that looks to be yours.”

Not only had I not been in the halls that evening, but I now knew how to make him just as uncomfortable as he was making me. “What is fornication?”

“Private, were you in the halls tonight?” He was in no mood for my games. “I smelled you in every room.”

Our sense of smell may have been slightly better than a human’s, but to blame me for a crime because he “smelled me” somewhere was absurd.

My adolescent years did not always lean toward the wisest responses, especially when faced with someone I loathed so deeply. “It’s my job to clean every room, sir.”

He barked an order. “Take your hair down.”

That one caught me off guard. “Sir?”

“Your hair. Take it down.”

He’d looked as if he was about to get up and do it for me. All bravado replaced with confusion, I looked around, unsure of what I was supposed to do.

“Well?”

Hesitant, my hands slowly moved to the knot at my nape. One at a time, hair pins were removed, some falling to the floor as the coil unfurled.

Half done, I gingerly stepped forward and set a handful of pins at the edge of the polished wood, then went back to unfurling the standard issue coil.

When it was done, hair brushed my lower back. And I had never felt more naked.

I knew I was blushing, that my speckling of scales would be glittering from the blood flow, and I couldn’t conceal how uncomfortable I was. But I cleared my throat, glanced at some random thing on his desk, and asked, “What now, sir?”

Without a word, he produced a thin braid of long brown hair and laid it out between us. Hair similar enough to mine, but not quite the same. Mine was a bit darker, a bit coarser. Sylvia's hair was softer, and if it hadn't been twisted into that sad little rope, it might have still had a little bounce.

The general watched me, eyes flicking over my unbound tresses as if searching for the clipped edges that might match.

And then I knew. She had given this to someone. To a sweetheart.

The next part was easy, because it was the right thing to do for a sister. "I confess. It was me. I did the fornication with a boy. It wasn't rape, because I gave him permission to kiss me. Therefore, you can't kill him."

In a blink, the man went from wild and glaring to exasperated and exhausted. A groan of, "God, help me, Lorieyn. Who does the braid belong to?" followed.

Never would he get that name out of me. "I don't know what you're talking about, sir. That's my hair."

He pushed back his chair and stood. Leaning forward, scary as hell, he stated, "I need to confirm if they are mates before I can decide if he lives or dies."

I didn't have a clue who the boy was, but I absolutely knew Sylvia. She was like a sister to me. And we all knew better than to trust the general. "I already told you. It was me. I accept the punishment."

Leaning farther over his table, Cyderial ordered, "Let me see your hair."

Grabbing the mass behind my back, I pulled it over one shoulder.

"Closer."

I came forward and held it out for him to observe, yet it was all the more obvious the little braid did not come from me once he held it up to compare.

"Lying to your commanding officer is a serious offense." The hand holding up the braid, the backs of his fingers brushed my hair as he lowered it.

"It was me."

Sitting back in his chair, unsmiling and austere, he warned, "I will find out who she is."

He may, but not until I'd given her warning to lighten her hair with the chemicals we used to remove blood stains from our uniforms.

Determined to get even with me for insubordination, I was then tortured for five awful minutes.

My punishment was to endure an explanation of what the word fornication meant and a vague description of how it was performed. From the general... while I turned beet-red.

My very sincere reaction at the age of sixteen had been *ewww*.

And I finally understood what he'd been so worried about. "So, rape is when a boy does *that* without permission?" Making out in that closet had been fun, letting a boy touch my boobs had been a bit weird, but the idea of someone doing *that* to me was completely repulsive. "That happens here?"

The general did not answer my question. He had one of his own instead. "Are you still going to lie to me about whose hair this is?"

Deeply disturbed, I would not and could not meet his eyes. "Yes. That's my hair. I did the fornication."

Picking up the hairpins from his desk, the general passed them to me. "Go back to bed, Lorieyn."

After being escorted to the female dorm and locked away behind the vault door, I disobeyed the general. I did not go back to bed. Instead, I secretly helped a strangely woozy Sylvia lighten her hair just enough that the shade of the braid would never match. They still found her out. By that evening, she was summoned to the general's office.

She did not return.

I missed her terribly.

After that, there was no more walking the halls at night nor kissing unknown boys in the dark.

The man who explained sex to me for the first time that evening had not

touched me since. Nor had I been forced to endure any conversation of that type in his presence.

That had been six years prior.

Now, it seemed the unspoken rules had changed.

“Remain at attention, soldier,” General Cyderial murmured, stepping around his desk. And for the first time in years, there was no shield of furniture standing between us. Nothing to offer a flimsy illusion of distance or protection from this man I hated.

“In the ten years since I took over leadership of the Academy, we have met in this office on twenty-eight occasions. Not one of those meetings has been a commendation for exceptional performance. Seven of them have been purely disciplinary.”

Five by my count, but clearly I had missed some. I also didn’t really enjoy where this final conversation had begun... unless, of course, he was just going to comment on how mediocre my performance had been.

Which had been my life’s mission to achieve.

But he kept edging closer, expression severe. “You have lied to your superiors a total of forty-seven times in the last decade in an attempt to cover for fellow students’ crimes. Three times, directly to my face.”

So close I could sense the oddest low-pitched vibration coming from his chest, he narrowed his eyes, continuing, “You’ve received numerous punishments, yet not one of them has altered this insubordinate behavior.”

Having one’s loyalty questioned was concerning, especially six weeks from freedom. “Sir, I have not been written up in two years.”

“What makes you think that’s true?”

If he’d wanted to begin this assessment by twisting me into knots of anxiety, he’d accomplished his goal with an artful perfection. Nervous, I asked, “Is there a disciplinary issue I am unaware of, sir?”

He stepped even closer, closer than any instructor ever dared stand unless offering instruction in combat. Close enough I could feel the heat of his body

warming the air between us.

I was still struggling to determine what infraction might have been reported, adding up every rule I had knowingly broken, terrified my stash of contraband—the dress, magazines, and lipstick—had been discovered and confiscated without my knowing.

If he knew of those things, there would be no graduation. I would be killed.

Could he read the guilt in my expression? Was that why he stared?

Maybe this was a test all graduates had to endure. One final, unbearable interrogation by a madman.

That thought was the only thing that kept me from flinching when General Cyderial's hands slowly reached for my throat.

Startled, I froze. A shocked inhale stuck in my chest.

He was so close I could feel his breath upon my cheek.

Yet it seemed General Cyderial was not intent on causing bodily harm. A few tugs at the fabric of my collar, and it was clear this was nothing more than a standard dress uniform inspection—pulling at bits and bobs to assure I donned the uniform exactly as every last recruit had been trained to.

It should not have been so thoroughly unsettling, except that no grown man *in my entire life* had ever touched me before. Not a single, mated male professor. Not one male arms instructor. Even hand-to-hand combat was taught solely by women.

Not even an armed watcher had dared, even if I'd reached a point of reprimand. Instead, I had always been ordered to follow, and I had always obeyed.

Corporal punishment for females was meted out by a woman.

And here I was, about to graduate, and a man was touching me for the first time.

Flipping the hem of my jacket to check my belt, inspecting if my trousers sat exactly as they should upon my hips, he touched. Liberal in his exploration, only to find my seams were in place, everything starched and crisp.

Hem dropped, inspection of my rank and various pins on my chest continued.

Still, I did not breathe.

Focused eyes ran over every possible angle. His touch fiddled with bits of my uniform, and it felt as if he were performing an act deeply forbidden.

A taboo in the tilt of polished brass buttons that held the ugly black jacket in place, a scandal in the way his attention lingered on my shape.

He was breaking the rules.

Rules that had gotten more than one of my peers killed.

Was his hand lingering on my lapel longer than it was supposed to? Was this some sort of test?

Unlike the boys in the academy, this man would not be hanged for accidentally brushing against me as he circled my frame. Which he did, moving to the back of my body to continue his inspection.

It was almost intimate when his palms brushed unseen lint from my back. Warming how big his hands felt when he tested the fit of my coat where it cinched in tight at my waist.

And still, I held myself immobile. Far too nervous that he was waiting to catch me in some mistake.

Was I supposed to push away from him? Was there a rule about male leadership I was forgetting?

Light fingertips moved over me in the exact way ranking females conducted dress uniform inspections in the past, but it felt like *so much more*.

Because this was illicit. Right?

Did he see the question in my eyes when he came full circle, back to where this whole escapade began? He was certainly close enough, and there was no hiding the fact that my cheeks heated to an embarrassing shade of pink.

Face hovering close to mine, Cyderial inhaled slowly before moving his fingers to conduct one final tug at the seams of my sleeves. "You smell of

children. Yet there is not a single smudge or fingerprint on your buckle, buttons, or epaulet.”

What?

Tongue-tied, I caught myself searching for words and rushing my answer as all the air in my lungs suddenly rushed out. “The itty-bitties know to be careful with dress uniforms. They only give leg hugs to wish us well—in case they don’t see us again, sir.”

He was smirking. “Itty-bitties?”

I might have just died of embarrassment. Clearing my throat, cheeks going from pink to red, I corrected my blunder. “The youngest recruits, sir.”

He made pointed, focused eye contact, a light touch on the cuff of my sleeve. “Do you enjoy the company of children?”

Everyone likes children. Don’t they? They are hilariously clever in finding ways to play in this hellhole and, unlike the adolescents, had not yet grown jaded and depressed. Even when I was at my most agitated, time with the youngest helped me get my head back in order. “I enjoy the company of all my fellow recruits.”

He gave a noncommittal hum before replying, “It’s a pity one of your fellow recruits did not inform you that your uniform is not up to code.”

“Sir?”

“It’s too tight. The seams are pulling.”

It was hardly that dramatic. Sure, it was a bit snug around the chest, but I only had to wear it once more in the next six weeks. Then I would be granted the deep-gray of a graduate, and I would be free of the academy forever.

And my sisters *had* warned me. They had even helped me bind my breasts painfully tight. That was what we all did when bodies altered faster than clothes could be adapted. And frankly, asking management for items outside of yearly regulation vestments was a surefire way to draw unwanted attention.

Which went strictly against my rule of avoiding attention at all costs.

“I shall place an order for a new jacket at once, sir.” My voice came steady, masking all sense of my irritation on the topic.

Perhaps if they designed uniforms to fit a female body, tight material over a woman’s chest wouldn’t be an issue. Not that I had any intention of sharing my thoughts on the subject with General Cyderial.

The man who was uncomfortably close and infinitely dangerous.

Voice soft, he gave his next order. “Present your hands.”

Easy enough, though there was barely enough space between us. Hands before me, fingers fully spread, I put my talons on display.

They were buffed and shining, just as they were supposed to be. Clean, filed, and boring.

I’d heard that human girls painted their nails in all sorts of colors for fun. Mine were merely the natural dark-gray shade most common amongst my kind. Though some girls did have lovely ivory talons.

Theirs were kind of glittery, very pretty to look at. Much more interesting than common dark-gray.

If I could paint my talons, the first color I would try is pink. But a vibrant pink. Adventurous and playful, leagues away from the bland world I was used to.

A pink the general would hate.

Paired with a floral dress, like I’d seen in one of my secret magazines, my long hair would be in a fluffed braid, hanging over my shoulder. My legs below the knee would be on display, skin and scales warmed by the weather.

If I could just pass this last meeting without any more mistakes.

Just about jumping out of my skin at the contact, the general did the unconscionable and took my hand in his. Turning them this way and that, inspecting the way the light shone off my buffed nails. The touching was unnecessary. No female instructor had ever done more than measure the length of the nail with a ruler to ensure they were short enough to be safe.

He took it much further. Testing the tip to see if it was sharp, the man

stupidly pricked his own flesh and brought forth a tiny bead of blood.

Of course they were sharp! Razor sharp. It was why ladies could not wear white gloves like the men when in formal uniform.

The minor wound instantly healed, leaving a bit of the general's blood tinting the tip of my nail. But it would seem he was utterly unconcerned that his fluids were drying on my body, far more interested in the translucent webbing only visible at the base of my fingers when my hand was awkwardly spread for inspection.

A hybrid feature less common in the dorms.

When the man thought to trace over the sensitive membrane beside my pointer finger, I sucked in a quick breath. Sensation zinging stronger than anticipated, I snatched back my hand, indignant. Fist to my breast, I watched him with the same hyperfocus I'd use to observe a dangerous vorec testing the edge of the fog.

He is absolutely up to something. And it set the tiny scales all over my body to tingling.

An excruciatingly long, silent second hung between us, in which he stared, waiting for me to realize I had broken protocol—that he had ordered me to display my hands—and that I was to return them to him at once.

I told myself this, the attempt at steady breaths useless with so much binding around my ribcage. Light and shallow, my breathing only displayed how unsettled I'd grown.

But I needed to pass this test. And what had he really done besides crowd me and touch my hand?

So, I offered it again, without apology or acknowledgment that things between us had gone wrong. Fingers spread, talons on display, webbing glittering with tiny scales catching the light.

When he took my hand a second time, I did not startle. Instead, I employed the distraction of study to ignore how warm his touch was on my far colder appendage. I noted he did not have the same pretty webbing

between his fingers. Nor did he have sharp talons.

Blunt, trimmed nails. Useless and fragile. Yet, his hands were far more masculine. Much larger than mine. Dangerous in a different way. I could cut him to ribbons—he could crush me without a thought. Skin healed faster than bone, and in this, the general had the ultimate advantage.

My palms were flipped upward, calluses on display. There wasn't anything remarkable to see, but he took his time running a keen gaze over every bit until satisfied with what he found. It even seemed that while his hands cradled mine, he'd run his thumb over the inside of my wrist.

If he'd felt my pulse, it was racing to a humiliating degree.

I had killed countless vorec while on patrol over the years, and one jerk superior officer standing too close and touching my hands had me sweating as if I were about to be swallowed whole.

Mercy came when his touch withdrew. Hands sinking to my sides, I found great relief in knowing the inspection was at an end.

Yet weighty male attention landed once more upon my face. When he dared something beyond the pale, when he took my chin and began to study my features, turning my head this way and that, I confronted whatever it was that was going on.

Breathless, I accused, "You are breaking the rules."

Still doing as he pleased and touching as he would, he gave an unmoved response. "Name the rule."

I... couldn't. Stammering, I defended my unease. "It is an unspoken rule."

Another smirk yet no reply.

My ears were observed. My hairline, the shape of my eyebrows. I swear he counted every tiny iridescent scale at the corners of both eyes.

Next came my nose. The line of my cheekbone. Turning my chin up, his attention found my lips, which were tight with discomfiture.

Meanwhile, I kept my gaze locked to the side, staring at anything but him

while he did as he wished. I tried not to wonder what he thought of my features, assumed there had to be a reason for this, a flaw that needed to be addressed.

“You have a new freckle.” The tip of his finger bounced softly once against my cheek. “Right here.”

His tone had not been chastising. It had been spoken lowly, as if... in appreciation.

My brows drew down tightly, and I did look at the man—the man who had tormented academy students for a decade—and my nostrils flared.

That’s when I noticed it. Sweetness in the air, competing with the perfume of the toxic potted flowers dotted around the room. A smell reminiscent of the fog—dangerous and exciting.

Distracting.

Inhaling as deeply as the binding around my breasts would allow, I realized not only had I dismissed his touch on my face, but I had leaned close in my attempt to suck more of that scent into my body.

It was him.

Something emanating from *him* that I very much wanted to...

To what?

I was here to graduate. Shaking my head to clear it, I came back to my senses.

Once I collected my wits from God only knew where, it seemed he was willing to ignore my momentary lapse in judgment.

Not that he seemed intent on backing away. Instead, he grew conversational about his thoughts on my features. “It is rare for a hybrid to possess dark eyes. The majority of us possess the green shades of a vorec. You take after your mother. You could almost pass for human if not for these little secrets.”

The webbing, the scales, the lack of body hair, the talons.

But... what did my appearance have to do with any of this? Why was his

voice so raspy?

Even more concerning, why did I feel a small tinge of warmth when he noticed how closely I resembled my birth mother? I had a secret pride that I shared features with the human: her straight, thick hair. Her dark eyes. The yellow undertone of her skin.

A way we were still connected, even if we could never be together.

Suddenly, it was as if the previous softness in his voice had never been between us. In his usual direct voice, he said, “Your medical records display an excellent adaptation to the vorec integration. You developed without fault.” My chin was set free, the general taking a measured step back. “Physically perfect.”

Wasn't that the point of creating us? Physically perfect killing machines designed to keep the human population alive.

“However,” he continued, “you did not pass inspection.”

Because of the jacket?

I'd burn that damn jacket should it cost me the fog.

“But that is not why I am failing you. Private Lorieyn, your request for graduation has been denied.”

Astonishment crushing my composure to bits, I blurted out a high-pitched, “You’re failing me?”

No! I had done the math to perfection. There was no way my marks were not enough to skim by with a little wiggle room to spare.

Was it because I’d sniffed him? I might literally fling myself off the building if that was what ruined my life.

Before I could begin to babble, he expounded his brutal edict. “This farce of ineptitude ends today. You will repeat courses and submit to an extended syllabus of my choosing. Until you achieve top marks, I will not allow you to leave the academy.”

Devastated was not a strong enough description of what I felt.

Horror twisted my face into one of desperation, and I was ashamed to admit my eyes had grown wet. “Sir, I don’t understand. I passed every course. Completed every level of combat training. I have been defending humans against vorec since I turned sixteen. When on patrol, there has never been an incident or a casualty on my watch. Not one in six years. No other student in this school can boast such a record.”

There was no pity in that man. Instead, he sneered. “Your new duties will include assisting Weapons Instructor Dirum in training the youngest recruits. You clearly demonstrate more skill in the field than you’ve shown in your

classes. There must be something to your technique”—he met my eye, daring me to object—“if a student of your lackluster marks has never let a human worker die on her watch.”

Damn it!

“And, did you not just admit that you enjoy the company of children?”

I did not offer a “yes, sir,” and it was noted by my superior, who waited... and watched.

Insubordination was not tolerated at the academy. But what did I have left to lose, when he had ruined everything I’d worked so hard to achieve?

Never argue with that man.

Just agree and do what you wish in privacy to the limit that you can.

Like making a damned dress out of rags.

And bolt your door.

Don’t wander at night.

Yet I could not restrain myself from pathetically begging him for mercy. “Please.” My lips trembled, the dark eyes he had just commented on filling with tears. “General Cyderial, please.”

I should have known better than to expect compassion from that man. “Should you adequately educate the children and stop wasting my time pretending you only have a general grasp of the course work, I will consider your request for graduation in a year or two. You, Lorieyn, will not be placed outside your *true* skill level.” The bastard had the nerve to smile. “Though I commend your many years of effort to mislead your instructors. You’re quite cunning.”

The way his eyes sparkled, my flagging self-control barely restrained me from thumbing them right out of his skull.

And I? I willed both of my hearts to stop beating so I might die before he saw me cry. “Sir, I think you’ve overestimated—”

“I wondered how a mediocre student thought she might have the skill to tutor a boy failing trigonometry. Yet it would seem upon further analysis that

your math skills are quite incredible. But your system grew too exact. I have been analyzing your overly consistent results for years. You always score in the low eightieth percentile. I suspect that during examinations you mentally answer every question, tally the point system to achieve your desired result, and laugh your way through fudging your written answers on purpose.”

That was exactly what I did, and as far as I was aware, not one instructor ever questioned my ranking nor cared.

Provoked, as I always was with the memory of that night, I had gone from weeping to full-on hiccupping spite. “I have been paying attention too. Hear me when I say that I have no interest in a leadership position, nor will my scores *ever* support one. Even you can’t do that.”

Or could he?

The blood all drained from my face. Of course he could. Otherwise, he would not have made such a threat in the first place.

“And you listen to me, Lorieyn. I can keep you in this academy for as long as I so choose. *And I do choose.* You will stay here until your scores reflect your skills. You will not be placed at a rank unworthy of your name. What is another year or two, when our lives are ageless?”

I didn’t want an ageless life!

“Reputation and rank mean nothing to me. If I wanted those things, they would be mine already. I have worked so hard to get to this point.” Which was utterly ironic, considering my machinations to avoid the very topic of my skill. “You’re right. I manipulated the tests. I have a goal.”

That confession earned his full, snide attention. “Then tell me what you want.”

To disappear into the music outside. “The fog.”

The way his expression slammed closed made it clear the fog would be forever denied me.

I had overplayed my hand and lost.

But I could not stop myself from blathering on. “I want to be a surveyor.

There is so much to explore on this planet.”

Had I not known how cruelly the general operated, I might have thought his tone conveyed some hint of apology. But he would not waste such a thing on me. “You may be of age, but you are still naïve. It isn’t safe in the fog, even for someone of your natural skill. Not a single surveyor has served more than fifty years before they’ve been lost.”

It didn’t matter. Knocking at my breastbone, I was passionate to explain. “But they would be *my* years.”

The familiar closeness he’d subjected me to—before he ripped out my hearts—ended. Taciturn, he moved behind his desk and took a seat, measuring me with disapproval. “No.”

I was in my twenties and had never had the opportunity to make a solitary significant choice about anything in my life. The general had made every single one for me. On a very real level, that was why I resented him the most. Pouring every ounce of hate I’d harbored for the man into a loathsome glare, I made it clear exactly how little respect I had for him.

General or not.

Fist banging against the desk, he barked, “Do not think I enjoy having to act in the role of parent. You’re willful, and it has been quite the undertaking to manage you in the decade since we met. You scheme, you have little faith in authority, undermine the very leadership that is eager to help you thrive. I have report after report of insubordination in the guise of compliance. Not every instructor is as gullible as you seem to think. Instead, they are patient. Because, like you, they too grew up in the academy and understand exactly what it’s like within these walls. You are not the only brilliant student who craved the fog and was denied a foolish suicide.”

I closed my eyes as if that might make him disappear, more tears falling down red cheeks.

General Cyderial was having none of it. “We’re not solely human, Lorieyn. We have been mixed with the apex predator of this planet for a

higher purpose. For survival. The primitive vorec live in the fog. Millions of other violent species live in the fog. Do not let your animal instinct override your human sense. Use your thinking mind. What point would it serve to allow you to traipse around in the dark for a few months of fun if it would ultimately lead to your death? There is so much waiting for you here. Furthermore, you should know better than most why unmated females cannot go into the fog. Vorec males do not understand that you are of a different species, or haven't you noticed it's only males on full display charging right for you?"

"And I kill them all, don't I?"

"Yes, when there is a city at your back. What would you do surrounded by rutting males ten times your size with no one to keep you safe? What would follow is unspeakable. Is that how you want to die?"

Swallowing, I shook my head, and a shaky exhale rattled out. I needed a moment to formulate a rebuttal. A moment to gather myself and prepare a reasonable argument.

Yet, he ruined that... all by broaching the subject—the inspection, the comments on my appearance—he must have been leading to from the start. "You've grown into a beautiful woman."

And I had been of age for four years. If I couldn't have the fog... yet, if I wanted out of the academy, there was only one other way.

Humans got to tour the city, go to restaurants, dance, and mingle without armed guards acting under the pretense of their protection. Hybrid females had only a single alternative to graduation.

Cutting my suspicious gaze back to the bastard, I found him measuring me *again* in that way that made my skin and scales tingle.

And it was getting to me. I was blushing and uncomfortable in an instant. "I have no intention of adding my name to *the list*."

A list of willing breeders registered to meet every unmated male until one of them recognized her as his mate. There was no undoing it once that was

done. Like the vorec we hunted, hybrid males mated for life. I would go from one choiceless hell to another.

A mate was not the answer.

And adding my name to *the list* was one thing even Cyderial could not command. Females of my kind had full autonomy over reproduction. Gestation only occurred with female intention. Bearing children could not be forced. If it could, God only knew what would have happened to girls like me in humanity's desperation to survive a world they didn't belong to.

"You do not need to be afraid of your mate."

I scoffed. "Don't I? *You* came to the academy and ordered girls to no longer engage with their brothers. You tore our family in half, creating rules stating that if a boy so much as looked at us, they could be killed, and we could be punished for enticing them. *You* taught me about rape. *You* murdered a boy for doing math with me. Math! Eluding that my life would have been ruined if he'd gotten his appendage inside me. Why would I want to hand my life over to someone who chose me from a catalog, but I could not be alone within my home?" Eyeing him with the full measure of my anger, I spoke his truth with my lips. "What fragment of my life has been improved by knowing men?"

The look on his face, that hint of astonishment as the cold veneer cracked, fed me to go on. "You want me to let some man change me to such a fundamental point that wild animals will know that I have been claimed? No. And know *this*. Enjoying children does not mean I want to birth one, only for it to be taken away and forced to live in this hell. I should have been with my mother. We all should have. We are people! Even if I were to be forced to mate one of you, I will never give a child to the academy. Send me out into the fog, because I am useless on every other level. I would rather die, crushed by rampaging, horny vorecs."

If the monster had a heart, it looked like it might have just cracked. Voice gravel, he said, "You misunderstand the role your male will play in your life.

Just as you fail to grasp that men are *made*—through rigorous training and self-discipline. Boys are not the same. They are as unpredictable as their vorec counterparts. And just as dangerous.”

“Bullshit.” I was more than just a cunning, deceitful student. I was a woman with nothing to lose and nothing to look forward to. “Let me *clearly* explain that I will not fornicate with one of the males to maybe, just maybe, get to explore the fog one day. I deserve the post of surveyor, and I won’t whore myself out to achieve it. Do you understand me, *sir*?”

Whatever had come over him faded as quickly as it came. Cold-blooded, disinterested, he stared his stare and stated, “I think you should sit down and catch your breath before you pass out.”

Okay, I’d been tearing at my collar in my rage, talons catching the fabric and making space for air. The damn thing was so tight. The whole ill-fitting jacket a nightmare of confinement. “Women have breasts! These stupid coats are cut for male bodies. You think I want to bind my chest to fit into this ridiculous uniform?”

He moved as if to stand. “I can get you some water.”

“*I don’t want water!*” I could not have screwed up this meeting more, the tragedy of it bleeding away my sanity. Grief was very real. Visceral. I could literally feel my hearts sinking in my chest. I’d gone from distraught, to rabid, to full-on hysterical.

Even the tight binding constricting my ribs could not fully muffle the pulsing, loud drumming that warned all who could hear it that I was unsafe to be near. That I might attack. My vorec call stuck between hissing and aggressive thumps.

Cornered animals were always the most dangerous.

Despite my protest, a cold glass of water was pressed into my hands—a sheer relief to swallow when breathing would allow. Fervently, I sucked it down, negligent of my strength and accidentally shattering the glass in my grip into bits.

That startled me enough to snap me completely out of madness.

The drumming ended.

Looking at my hands, the little cuts and the droplets of water, I watched my skin mend itself and lost all hope.

Cool and collected, as if I hadn't just signed my own death certificate and gone stark raving mad, General Cyderial ordered me away. "I am placing you under one week of confinement in the women's dorm. Cry if you want to. Shout. Steal another rock from my shelf on your way out, if that's what it takes. But understand me—you are *not* going into the fog."

I could not risk making the mistake of looking at him again. Dignity exhausted, I staggered toward the door. I only allowed myself to marvel over the fact that, for the last ten years, he'd known I stole something right in front of him. I had never been punished for it.

My pretty pink geode hadn't been a fun secret after all.

This time, there was no haphazard snatching of one of his fancy rocks on my way out. Instead, I took hold of one of his precious display cases and pulled until it fell away from the wall. Pretty little baubles cracked and scattered all over his polished wood floor.

The tiny bit of destruction did make me feel slightly better.

Until I heard him behind me offer a softly spoken, "Goodnight, Lorieyn."

“**W**hy won’t you tell anyone what happened?”

There were not many girls my age still at the academy, most having chosen the mating list in order to escape academy hell. Those born the same year as me? All of them would be graduating in six weeks. When they were gone, I would be the eldest, the last standing recruit aged twenty-two.

And with age came high expectations from the other girls in our secluded family. My mood would set their mood. My relationship with hope would determine their ability to keep faith.

It was an unfair position. At no point in my life had I craved a leadership role. I preferred being a big sister helper to the little kiddos, but the adolescents would come to me for advice. I had nothing of quality to offer the older girls. Like most of them, I didn’t want to be here either.

Nor would I be enthusiastic about directing them toward *the list*. Not when the fundamental idea of it was so utterly unsettling to me.

“You haven’t eaten in two days, Lorieyn. We’re worried.” My visitor, Maeve’s, voice dropped to a whisper, as if authority might actually be listening to the goings on in my tiny dorm room. “Don’t make me report you. You know what will happen if he finds out you’ve skipped meals.”

He? The general? The only reason he would give a shit was because punishment was his forte.

Sulking, I shut my eyes to her. “Then don’t tell him.”

Maeve joined the academy the same year I had, yet she was far more advanced in ranking. A true testament to her hard work and determination. Head of my year and de facto leader of the girls, the way her mind worked was highly enjoyable. She’d been a good friend and confidant my entire life at the academy. Caring and driven, she had spent two days trying to convince me to get out of bed. Wasted her limited free time between classes and training trying to cheer me up.

Tucked under the covers with me, she’d waited patiently in silence, offering bits of gossip or notes from class, while I sighed and blinked at nothing.

But her trust in me was about to be deeply shaken. Unlike myself, Maeve coveted rank and acclaim. As she should. She had earned hers through hard work and excellent leadership.

If I were forced to give legitimate answers in class, she was about to lose a great deal of standing, and everyone would know how much of a fraud I was.

It might be seen as a threat to her... and others, whose position and life-long assignment would suffer.

Some might consider my whole academic career one dirty trick I had saved in my back pocket to unseat them weeks before their graduation. A contender they had been fooled into considering unworthy of their concern on the academic front.

After all, she and my other dear sisters had not chosen *the list*. They had chosen military acclaim.

Worse, I would now be in a position of authority over all of them. An assistant instructor. The general might even force me to move from the student dorm to the teachers’ apartments. Upstairs.

Why couldn’t we just lay there and cuddle forever? Never talk about school or male expectations. We could pretend that nothing in the world was

amiss and dream the day away.

“Just one more day.” That’s all I’d said, though I did put my arm around her middle to let her know she was welcome to nap with me.

“Even the humans have been asking where you went. Tamsyn took your normal shift standing guard at Field 27. Your farmers don’t like it when you’re not there. They think you’re lucky.”

Why were we still talking when napping was an option? “I’m confined to the girls’ dorms for another five days.”

Pulling the sheet over our heads to make a private little tent for two, Maeve grew conspiratorial. “Well, they gave me something for you. I smuggled in cookies.”

A carefully wrapped package came out of her pocket to rest on the pillow between us.

Cookies—my ultimate favorite thing I may or may not have eaten a bite or two of on the rare occasion a human might pass me a *deeply* forbidden treat.

Outside food was absolutely not allowed to hybrid students. Our diets were specifically engineered for ultimate nutritional value. Meat cubes. Vegetable patties. Nutrition designed to help our complex systems develop properly.

Junk food was an extravagance that could not be wasted on a growing hybrid.

Humans seemed less concerned about their general state of health. After all, they were not government-funded military experiments. They had the luxury of sugar and chocolate.

Fortunately, the ones I had been working with for the last four years were also really nice. All women, save the occasional very young boy. One of them was a particularly good baker.

She’d made me a cake on my birthday when I’d come of age. Even the armed watcher standing on the parapet above had not reported my behavior

when I'd eaten a slice.

I could have died of pure decadence that foggy afternoon.

Chocolate ganache was a magnificent creation. Smooth and sweet and rich and... dear God... maybe as wonderful as the fog.

But it seemed even the promise of forbidden sugar was not enough to rouse me from my current despair. I pushed the illicit package back toward Maeve. "You should eat them. Becca makes really good cookies."

"This isn't like you. Why won't you leave your room?" Her pert nose wrinkled. "You *need* a shower. Everyone is imagining the worst. Think of the littles. They are worried about you."

Closing my eyes to my beautiful friend once again, I muttered, "Everyone is right."

Maeve had endured enough of my moping. And she certainly was not going to tolerate my refusal of a treat she'd risked her ranking to procure for me. "I will go from being nice, straight to violence, if you do not comply. Explain what is going on. Now!"

What was I even supposed to say? How much was confession, and how much was just social suicide? "I will not be allowed to graduate."

She looked deeply relieved. "Thank God that's it! We all thought you'd been given the position of surveyor."

I could not help but begin to openly cry at that word. At the broken dream and unfairness of life.

Sobbing, I said, "You don't understand. *I want to be a surveyor.*"

"That's ridiculous." She smiled, patting me kindly. "Don't be silly."

Nauseous and deeply ashamed, I confessed, "I've thrown every test since I was eight to guarantee that's where I would be placed. *He knew.* And now he won't let me leave."

There it was. A look of confusion followed by skepticism. "Why though? Why would you do that?"

Sniffing, so deeply, deeply sad, I met her eyes. "I want to go into the fog,

and I don't want to come back.”

Our little tent was thrown off, Maeve sitting up to glare at me. “That’s crazy, Lorieyn. You’d die out there. What about your obligation to society? What about your sisters? You were going to just leave us?” Her voice had grown louder, resentment heightening her pitch.

Essentially, yes, that had been my intention.

What did they all think was going to happen after we left the academy? There were ten thousand hybrids who would absorb us into their societal structure. Our little school family would be broken, each of us with new positions, new leadership, new customs, new sisters. There was not any guarantee we might see one another often. I wasn’t even sure how deeply my kind was allowed to intrude into the burgeoning human city.

Would we be allowed to meet at a restaurant and reminisce about our lives? Were friendships sustainable when dorms were exchanged for assorted barracks?

Putting my weight on my forearm, I sat up and rubbed my greasy hair off my face. “I’m not asking you to understand, and I am sorry if your feelings are hurt, but I don’t belong here. I hear a song in the fog the same way the men claim they hear our song when they recognize a mate.”

Eyes narrowed, she removed herself from my little bed. “Wanna know what I think? I think you hear what you want to hear. I mean, this is crazy! You’ve been given what may essentially be immortal life, the ability to survive on this planet in a way unaltered humanity could only dream of. To earn it, you must serve to your fullest capacity. All I hear from you is self-serving garbage. The fog? Who wants to go into the fog on purpose?”

There was so much more to it. So much excitement right outside the boundary of the city. “Don’t you want to know what’s out there, Maeve? Think of all the undiscovered species. Think of the unmade maps. Satellites can’t see through the muck. Robotics are destroyed by wildlife in days. The only way to know what awaits is to walk out there and see it firsthand. Isn’t

that a service? We need to mine to build, don't we? How do you think we find those resources? We need sustenance. There may be multitudes of unknown food sources just waiting to be tasted."

My dear friend looked as if I had grown two heads. "This idealistic fantasy you are describing is not based on reality. The fog is deadly. Everything that lives in it is deadly. Whatever is going on with you...." Hesitating, it seemed as if Maeve chose her next words carefully. "*The list*. That's the answer. A mate will fix this confusion. The little kids adore you. Have a baby and grow our numbers. There is no shame in settling down and starting a family. You'd be highly regarded for your contribution."

It wasn't bad advice, nor was it meant to be cruel, but it cut me deeply. "You sound like General Cyderial."

"He's right. You may not be cut out for military service." Her hands came up before her, Maeve softening her tone. "Don't take it like that. All I am saying is that we all care about you."

"There's more." Now they would know just how deeply I had pissed off the general. "I've been promoted to Assistant Combat Instructor. I will be training the youngest recruits."

It was Maeve's turn to look horrified.

The clear delineation between student and professor allowed for no wiggle room. Not if a student wanted to be safe from horrendous punishments. I would no longer be my sisters' equal. In their eyes, I would be duty-bound to report on every one of them. At least, that's how most would see it.

After all, soon, each of them would know I had lied about my skills. Their trust would be shaken.

Now, I would be their superior in rank. They would not be able to confide in me. The itty-bitties might no longer sneak into my room to crawl into bed with me when they were scared or missed their mothers.

At least a few would suspect I'd been reporting on them all along to

receive the promotion.

They would consider past injustices and wonder if I'd had a hand in them.

Begging my friend to understand, I whispered, "I will be alienated."

"That doesn't... make any sense. You're not very good with a sword."

Calculations were adding up in her brilliant mind, as it all occurred to her at once. Her standing would be rocked by this as well. Including the rank of top in her class, which she'd been busting her ass for years to achieve. "Are you?"

Yes. I was. "I don't want your position, but he's going to force me to take it away unless... I put my name on the list."

Relief flashed in her green eyes. "Then do it! I know you wouldn't do this to me."

I knew exactly how she felt, that hysterical terror that everything she'd worked so hard for was about to be stolen. But I could not put my name on the list. "I'm so sorry, Maeve, but I'm not ready to mate. Whoever heard my song would never let me go into the fog."

Stricken, it was her turn to share her horror. "You've betrayed me. You've betrayed all of us...."

"Not on purpose." Hearts breaking, I didn't know how to fix anything. All I knew was that I could not stand to think one of my sisters might hate me. "No one was supposed to know."

But it was too late. Her body language went from informal to stiff, Maeve already hardening her mind against her old friend. "Is my life some kind of joke to you? You're going to just sweep in and take everything away, because you don't want to submit to a man? You don't even want rank!" *Or do you?* Her unspoken suspicion was right on her face.

I was going to be sick. Reaching out for her, I said, "It's not personal. I swear."

Yanking herself out of my grasp, she spat, "The hell it isn't! I have plans, you know."

And that was the pure tragedy in all of this. “So did I.”

Maeve gave me a measured look of disgust—one made all the worse by the unbearable sadness beneath it. I had been one of her best friends, and now, she’d grieve the girl who’d been nothing but a lie.

Storming out, she slammed my door with the full strength of a hybrid female.

Knowing exactly how she felt, knowing I was done for in the sisterhood, I crawled right back into bed and stared at the wall. Numb and so very lonely.

It was deep into a moonless night when I heard them outside my door. Stealth was not Agnes's strong suit, the unmistakable cadence to her steps giving her away upon approach. The rest of them though, they moved silently.

At least three of my sisters had come to collect their pound of flesh.

Of course, they would.

I was a danger to them now.

A threat.

Softly clicking, the latch was manipulated.

My eyes may have been closed, my body in repose, but I had not slept properly since General Cyderial had stolen my dream away. I was awake, half dizzy with exhaustion, and fully intending to capitulate to the beating I had coming.

"God, she stinks!" Though spoken lowly, Agnes, one of my sweetest sisters, did not attempt to hide her intrusion. I could even see her fanning the odor away from her face.

Maeve spoke next, tone impassive. "I told you."

Tamsyn, a dangerous female to antagonize, muttered, "Let's get this over with."

Hands came, rough and pinching, harsh as I was wound up in my sheets.

I had intended to submit, but instinct led me to lash out when their claws found flesh, but it was a pathetic effort. Outnumbered, I had given them the advantage in every way.

I was starving. I was exhausted. I grieved the loss of the fog more than I remembered grieving the loss of my mother.

Deeply sorry for myself, I just wanted it to be over.

Abruptly trundled off between the forceful hands of three sisters, it seemed they had selected another location for my reprimand. Why not just bleed me out in my room? It would not be the first time sisters had staged an “accident” that could be reported later to the instructors.

Our family was self-policing. Involving our superiors was unnecessary and even dangerous for the collective.

Willingly, I had been a part of such group castigations in the past. They were rare and well-earned. Only one had ever ended in murder. An older sister had abused a younger girl. There had been five of us in that room when she was ended. One for each limb. One to cut her wrist.

I was deeply fond of the little girl, and she was too young to exact her own justice.

As she thrashed under our sisters’ weight, it had been *my* pleasure to rake my talon deep, from wrist to elbow. To curve the end of the wound in, toward her body... as if the vicious laceration was self-inflicted.

Once it was sliced, Maeve held her down as she bled out, while Agnes moved to sit on both her legs. Tamsyn and Tabitha had then gone to stand guard to make sure none of the younger girls were wandering the common area at night. I muffled the screams.

I’d let the wound close before I sent my talon down the length of that artery once more, blood still wet as I watched her heal at the speed of a healthy vorec, despite how sick her mind was.

And again.

And again, until the blood stopped flowing and the edges of torn flesh no

longer knit before my eyes.

It had taken half an hour for her to die.

No instructor had questioned the grisly scene when it was reported a body had been found the following morning.

That had been a spectacularly dark scenario.

Realizing that *my sin* ranked high enough with my sisters to warrant more than a few broken bones... more than a staged suicide... was devastating.

I wasn't going to be a social pariah—I was going to be a cold corpse.

Were they going to throw me off the building and make it look like I'd jumped? Would I scream on the way down?

They had to make this look self-inflicted, or all of them would suffer. Whatever they were up to, dragging me out of my room, was too theatrical to pass for self-harm. How much trouble would these girls be in when academy leadership found a mangled corpse on site? They might all be executed.

“Stop!” I began to flail about in my sheet cocoon. “Don't you understand what he'll do to you if you get caught?”

What the general would do to every last female student!

I had seen some truly heinous punishments in the years I'd been trapped in the academy. My sisters were not thinking straight if they thought this deserved bit of revenge wasn't going to earn them all severe consequences.

“He killed Darya for—”

“Shut up! He killed Darya for drooling every time she spoke. They won't let us stay here if we're not perfect!” Maeve hissed. “And you must think you're pretty goddamn perfect to get away with acting like a total sloth, while the rest of us are working our asses off.”

Had she...? Had she just slapped me through the sheet I was wrapped in?

Eyebrow and cheek smarting, I squished up my nose just in time to lose all sense of gravity. Weightless, I realized they had chucked me into the air, only to smash into a slippery, hard floor less than a second later.

Before I could continue to point out the flaws in their plan, icy water hit

the fabric wrapped around my frame. Soaking-wet sheets were even more annoying than dry ones, and I'd had enough of their shoddy plan. Talons made short work of the sad covering, sopping cotton ruined as I sputtered and fought my way out.

The round room was familiar—the women's communal shower. All water flowed from the center, where twenty of us might wash at the same time before the bell signaled that we were to rotate for the next group.

It was not like the pretty pools in my magazines. It was a place for utility and haste.

Cold water soaked through my rank pajamas and limp hair. My feet now beneath me, I squared off against my friends.

Maeve sneered. "If you expect me to wash you, I won't be gentle."

A waning bar of soap hit me right between the eyes. "What in the hell, Maeve?"

"You smell so bad that suffering through it to speak to you is impossible. For the love of God, take a shower!"

Why?

Indignant, and actually smelling quite ripe, I stood in the cold spray and eyeballed my aggressors. "You don't like the smell? Stay out of my room."

"We don't like the attitude." The usually reticent Agnes took a threatening step closer. "Not one of us deserves it from you."

Ouch.

None of my scheming was ever supposed to cost them anything. I'd never harm them on purpose. "Tell me what you want; you can have it. I'll even slice my own wrist to make sure the blood splatter is accurate."

"Dear God." Maeve's eye-roll was legendary—but also very unlike her. She motioned to Tamsyn. "Do you hear this one?"

"Right?" Eyes an unusual brown shade like mine, Tamsyn sneered and glared at me with disgust. "Cold-blooded to the core. You always were a pretentious bit of work, Lorieyn, but I can't believe you'd stoop to such

dramatics. That hurts, you know!”

“Excuse me?” My eyes must have been just about to jump out of my face.

Fast, because she was an overachiever to her core, Maeve moved like a blur, punching me full-on in the nose.

Eyes instantly watering, a bit of blood coming from one nostril, I stood agape, too stunned to even stop her from moving the bone back into place with a snap.

“Ouch!”

Fist before her as if she’d been waiting a lifetime to land that hit, she snarled, “That’s for thinking the worst of your sisters, imagining we would actually turn our backs on you. You conniving, arrogant bitch. Have you lost your mind? You could have just asked, you know? We will *help* you have your fog. And someday, I might even forgive you for thinking so little of me.”

She wasn’t done. “And while we’re talking about me, yes, I have goals too! And I am ready to punch you in the face, over and over and over again, until you listen to me and realize we’re not so egotistical that we wouldn’t ask for help when we need it.

“Also, it needs to be said. You’ve got a lot of conceit to think you can knock me out of my ranking at the top of our class based on one conversation with the old man. *But*, if you really do have some knowledge I don’t grasp, teach it to me! We have six weeks until graduation. Tutor me in exchange for the amount of risk I will be taking for you, and I just might not break your nose again.”

The water was making the blood run right down the drain. Making my sense come back. And also making me feel extra sticky and gross. None of those things mattered though. This wasn’t a game. “Do none of you grasp what he would do to you if there was so much as a rumor that a sister was helping me move against his will? He’d hang you.”

Tamsyn, dark skin and sloe-eyed, waved a hand in utter disregard. “No

one is hanging a fertile woman. They save that show for the boys.”

Thinking of the dead Cullen boy, I knew it was different for me. I didn’t know if the general held some sort of vendetta about the stolen pink geode, or if he was just a sadist, but he’d taken a stand regarding my future, and I knew he would not budge.

“He won’t allow it. I either stay another *year or two*, study a syllabus of his choosing, take the title of Assistant Instructor, or add my name to the list. How could I possibly earn a commission the general will not approve?”

“How could you expect us to know how to answer that, when you have told us nothing about your plans... in what? A decade?” Maeve softened enough to sigh. “None of us have made a secret of what we want.

“I want a political appointment—that requires the highest academic pedigree to even be considered for an internship position on that career track. And you know what I did? I asked for extra classes if I didn’t understand the subject matter. I stayed up late studying with smarter students. My sisters helped me achieve this goal, because *I will be an excellent leader.*”

That was true. The blonde spitfire might achieve great things if she avoided the list and followed her passion. In a few hundred years or so, she might even have the voice to make things better for hybrid females.

With a condescending boop to my healing nose, she cooed, “If you really think you can unseat me, you better have a solid plan on what to do with your ranking. Moping in your room isn’t helping anyone, least of all you.”

The shower was icy, but heat came from my growing agitation. “I don’t want a leadership position. I don’t want accountability to anyone but myself. Out in the fog, I can explore and provide knowledge to those who don’t love the wilderness the way I do. Ranking has only ever been in my way.”

Maeve threw up her hands, gesturing grandly. “I want what I want. You want what you want. We all want something, and we only have each other. In six weeks, we lose this family and go out into their society with massive gaps in our understanding and no idea where they will place us. In order to

leverage what we achieve here, we need to keep our eyes on the prize.”

Agnes shared a secret I had long suspected. “I want to study biology at the human university. I hate patrols. I hate the military. I might even hate humans, because they get everything we don’t, and we’re supposed to... what? Fight huge lizards or breed, so they can try to live on a planet that they are literally allergic to?”

Nodding in angry agreement, Tamsyn spoke up next. “Human women can go into the city, wear dresses, say what they want to whoever they want. I seriously want nothing more than to not have to do this”—she gestured at her uniform—“anymore. Why can’t I just be a young woman? I didn’t ask to be born to swing a sword at noisy dinosaurs. And I should not have to mate with a stranger to be allowed outside!”

“Do you all remember when we were younger, how we’d watch the older sisters slowly go insane? Some would wander about, confused. Others would start acting crazy.” Maeve cut a disapproving glare my way. “We can’t let that happen to us. Six weeks is a long time to plan an offense if we use it to our advantage. If we can’t find a way to force the general’s hand, we will help you attain a surveyor position, and you can walk into the fog free to die in it if that’s what you want.”

Maeve motioned to the bar of soap at my feet. “But none of us are helping you until you take a shower.”

I had bathed, as they'd ordered. Scrubbed my hair, cleaned my teeth. Fresh clothing had been fetched after I'd dried, and now, bone-cold from the icy shower, I sat huddled up with my sisters in a quiet corner of the females' common room.

Before me, a pile of food was slowly dwindling as I found my appetite. Food pilfered from their own trays while I'd been sulking. And to show my gratitude for the gesture, I ravaged even the stale meat cubes and my least favorite kind of compressed vegetation patties.

Accepted by my sisters, embraced even with my flaws and deceits, I began to thaw. Maeve's arm against me offering heat and support. Tamsyn's shoulder to mine. Agnes's feet tangled with my own across the couch.

I had taken them for granted.

It wasn't that I didn't love them; it was the desperation the academy drilled into a person. I needed out. I needed freedom.

And there was nothing I could do for them.

But it seemed they were more than willing to do anything for me—risk punishment, even execution. To help me.

“Cough it up. What exactly did General Cyderial say to you? Be specific, Lorieyn.” Maeve was prim, her blonde curls caught up in a bun, ignoring her damp sleeves as she prepared to take ubiquitous notes.

After a deep breath and a shaky exhale, I let my thoughts drift back over a situation I longed to forget. “General Cyderial was aware I’ve been throwing the tests.” An uncomfortable moment of remembered embarrassment flared to life, my cheeks going pink and my scales glittering. “Wait, that’s not right. First, I failed uniform inspection, because my jacket was too tight. He also noted that I smelled like children. Then he told me he was failing me and suggested that I should join the list.”

Maeve glanced up from her paper. “I’m going to need more than that.”

“How could he know you were throwing the test scores?” Idly braiding her hair, Agnes stretched out her legs and said, “None of us knew. And no offense, but you never struck me as brainy.”

Gloomy smirk on my face, I shrugged one shoulder. “What did I strike you as?”

“Stubborn.”

A dry laugh fell from my lips. Fair enough—I *was* stubborn. And apparently, also completely blind. “He knew because of the boy who died, Private Cullen. The one I was caught with when I was fifteen. I was tutoring him in trigonometry when we were found together after hours. There was enough there to get his attention, and he started analyzing the games I played with my tests.”

Agnes frowned, dropping her hair and growing sad. “I remember that. It’s when the lockdown intensified. I wasn’t able to see Phillip anymore.”

Tamsyn gawked. “You were seeing Phillip?”

She didn’t try to be flippant or hide how she felt, Agnes openly sharing a secret grief perhaps for the first time ever. “Yeah, until he stopped showing up. He stopped talking to me completely actually. Watching his friend be hung must have made kissing me after classes seem a lot less exciting.”

There was nothing we could say to soothe that kind of ache. No platitudes or empty promises. Fact was, unless it was Phillip who chose her off the list, she would never be his.

And he had not been willing to risk his life for her.

Happiness of that sort did not exist within the walls of the academy.

“We're getting off track here,” Maeve reminded gently, attempting to steer the conversation over ground we might actually alter. “Why exactly did General Cyderial state you could not be a surveyor?”

That was the problem. He had not said much. After all, what did he care if my tests were high or low? My future was nothing to him.

Agitated thinking about it, I brushed wet hair off my shoulder and said, “There were some veiled threats about unmated females being attacked by male vorec looking to mate. He said they can't tell we're half human and will... you know.” Sex was not something we'd been taught about in school. All most of us knew were gathered bits passed down from the older girls. As far as I was aware, I alone had suffered the detailed explanation from the general all those years prior. “They will try to breed me.”

Cocking her head, Maeve asked, “Implying that if you're mated, they'll only try to kill you?”

I shrugged. “I was not in the right frame of mind to do more than argue. He offered few reasons, most of them based on gender and the fact that I was unmated.”

Shrewd, Maeve leaned closer, reasoning the same as I had. “But if you put your name on the list, your mate will not allow you to go into the fog.”

“Exactly.”

Tamsyn interjected on our back and forth, “We have been taught about at least two female surveyors. The threat of that assignment held over our heads if our scores were unsatisfactory. So, females *can* have that position. But if they're not mated and they are also unsatisfactory for the list, then...?”

Feeling the first spark of hope in days, I felt my lips form into a real smile. “They have been *ruined*.”

My sisters nodded.

Tamsyn, by far the most cynical of our group, sneered. “Consider this.

All we know is that to be ‘ruined’ means nothing more than having sex with a male who did not hear your song. What if the men prevent us from intercourse, because if we are penetrated by someone who is not our ‘mate,’ then they won’t be able to control us? Have you ever met a woman who’d had sex outside of the bond?”

Maeve looked up from her notes, fully intrigued. “What about Sylvia—that night you helped lighten her hair? Did she seem different after having been penetrated?”

I paused to think back, recalling the scent of chemical lightener and glassy, far-off eyes, but shrugged. “She seemed out of sorts. Perhaps a bit lightheaded,” I said, remembering the way she’d staggered and swayed on unsteady feet. Unable to walk without whimpering. “I think she may have been sick before they took her away.”

“Sick how?” Maeve demanded.

“Feverish,” I offered. “She was sweating a great deal as we lightened her hair. Completely unable to sit still.”

Tamsyn, dark eyes flashing, made an excellent point. “They took her away, and we never saw her again. She was not publicly hanged. So either her execution was private, which I doubt, or she was placed with the male as his mate. Or, ruined, she is now in the fog, acting as a surveyor... assuming she’s survived this long.”

Maeve, studious as she considered, said, “Hypothesis. Lorieyn needs to fornicate with a male who cannot hear her song. But before we can consider that, we need to know what sex fully entails. Then, we’ll have to find a male who is not a student... and make sure the whole thing takes place away from General Cyderial’s authority.”

“What exactly will she have to do to be ruined? Kissing isn’t enough.” It was a fair question Agnes presented.

Thinking it over, I said, “What do we know of vorec mating customs? General Cyderial claimed that those males charging from the fog toward us

were looking to mate. All the vorec anatomy highlighted in training was to teach us how to kill them most efficiently. I'm not even entirely sure what part would go inside us, but something must penetrate."

"Hybrid boys have those really long tongues," Tamsyn added with a salacious wink toward Agnes. "Maybe that's how it's done."

Blushing Agnes confessed, "The *only* part of himself Philip tried to put in me was his tongue. It was always pleasant. He'd touch me too, but that was it. Clearly, I have not been ruined."

Tamsyn smirked, stealing a bite of food from my plate. "Ever notice that gooey protuberance that comes from between the plates on a vorec's belly once they have you down? Smells like sweets as they drag it all over you."

I should not have laughed, but I knew exactly what smell she was referring to. Vorec males smelled delicious, if one ignored the blood and shit wafting off their dead bodies. Better even than my birthday cake.

It was Maeve who shook her head. "No, I don't think you're right. I've always seen that bulge as a lure. There's no exit point for genetic material, and it's too broad and blunt to do anything more than smear scent on a potential mate. And they wag it at you when they rear. They try to rub it on you, not penetrate. It's what makes gutting them your best bet at close range." All business, Maeve went back to her notes, scribbling God only knew what. "Besides, we're getting off-topic. Vorec anatomy isn't the point. It's hybrid anatomy and why we are altered after mating."

Tamsyn said, "You have a point, Maeve, but let's consider this more. Lorieyn said the general was clear this was an issue for unmated females only. It's the vorecs's response to her that will ultimately affect how safe she might be in the fog. How would wild animals be able to tell the difference? Lorieyn, did Sylvia smell any different after she got caught with that boy?"

I shook my head. "No, but I remember the general saying there was no question that they had fornicated. The questions were if the boy was her mate and if he would let him live."

Maeve narrowed her eyes, tapping her stylus against her chin. “Why did the general think it was you who had been with the boy?”

“Sylvia had braided a lock of her hair, cut it off, and given it to her sweetheart. When the boy was caught, the braid was confiscated. General Cyderial showed it to me after I was summoned from my room. It looked a lot like my hair. The color was similar, and it was long like mine. And he mentioned my smell had been noted in the halls, as I’d just cleaned them that afternoon.”

“This might answer part of our question about what sets mated females apart from unmated. Once General Cyderial saw and smelled you, could he tell you were untouched?” Maeve asked, chewing her lower lip as if something was off about the whole thing.

“No. He could not tell. He even checked my hair for a trimmed piece after I lied to protect Sylvia, telling him it was my braid.”

Frowning, Maeve tapped her chin with the stylus. “But he didn’t believe you....”

I shook my head, saying, “I was under the impression that fornicating was equivalent to kissing. I misspoke, and that’s how he knew I was lying. After I was caught, General Cyderial briefly explained sex.”

Maeve went back to her notes. “You told us. Penetration, submission, and ejaculation with one’s mate. Something goes inside, genetic material comes out of it, and it combines with ours for the purpose of creating offspring. But General Cyderial didn’t notice at first if you were mated or not, so how would a rampaging vorec sense a difference?”

All of it was just more confusing. “Maybe he’s lying?”

Maeve didn’t blink. “He doesn’t lie. The general deceives.” It was said with no rancor and no fear. A simple fact Maeve had taken to heart. “All our female instructors are mated, but I don’t notice any difference in them in comparison to one of us. So it can’t be sight or scent. It must be the song... which only males can hear.”

My eyebrows rose. Of course! “Our song changes.”

Scribbling something in her notes, Maeve said, “That would be my theory. But it begs another question. Why do they teach us that we are ruined if we fornicate with a male who isn’t our mate? Especially as it seems to be the males who can sense their match when we cannot. It would be easy for the female to make a mistake.”

Agnes tapped the floor so we might give her our attention. “What if there isn’t any mistake? If you fornicate, it changes your song. If your song no longer calls to a mate, you are free. That is what they are trying to prevent.”

What if she was right? “It can’t be that simple.”

Smiling, Agnes offered another angle to her point. “Then think of it this way. Wild vorec males fight one another for a female—*that* we do know. The victor claims the prize. What if hybrid males designed this concept of the list to keep the men from infighting? Highest rank gets first pick should he hear her song?”

I hated the idea of that more than I could say. “Then we would all potentially have more than one mate. What if we like another man better?”

Pleased with our consideration of her concept, Agnes patted herself on the shoulder. “Which is why I think the boys are murdered if they pursue a girl for her song. If they mate her before a ranked man has his chance to see if they are compatible, the older generations have to wait for more rare female babies to be created. We are already outnumbered by the men five to one.”

“Ladies—” Maeve raised her eyes from her notes. “—this is a lot of conjecture.”

I could not help myself; there might be something to it. “But it's sound, isn't it?”

“It has potential.” Maeve smirked and put down her stylus. “If sex with a male who does not hear your song could free you from the list, you could have the fog. You’d be ruined in the sense that they might have no other use

for you.”

And that would be lovely. What else could the general possibly do with me but assign me to the position of surveyor?

I’d never be a proper mate. I would not bear children.

But, in a voice heavy with warning, Maeve added, “We need to do some more research before we make dangerous assumptions.”

An assumption I would not have considered while moping in my room alone. Looking at my sister, I offered my humblest appreciation. “Thank you.”

Teasing, Maeve threw a cushion at me. “Just make your way into the fog before testing ruins our rank.”



THREE DAYS LATER, I was back in classes, my confinement ended, routine restored. I didn’t see him, but I knew General Cyderial lurked. That instructors were reporting on me, that my every movement was monitored.

I didn’t have the freedom to explore the libraries for answers about vorec mating habits, hybrid sex, or the song. But my sisters did.

Yet they found nothing.

There were no texts on the subject. No way to ask female instructors that would not be massively problematic.

All my answers had to come from more unusual means: Humans.

I’d been assigned to guard a team of female farmers, and over the course of passing years, I’d grown to like them a great deal. They’d been kind, and in return, not one of them had been majorly harmed under my care.

There was trust between us. Even a few secrets.

Such as my love for sweets and my willingness to risk a beating for a bite of fudge.

My time with them was my favorite part of my routine. Outdoors, where

massive filters worked to keep fog out of the farmlands, a place where my boots could touch red soil and the air smelled fresh and sweet. My horizon nothing but tantalizing mist, fog rolling back like a churning wave. Almost as high as the tallest buildings in the city.

A large blanket around my little world, held back by whirring machines.

The smell of it, the sounds it made... I was absolutely in love.

Even the shrill screams and deep booming thumps of the vorec on the other side just waiting for me to ease closer were a pleasure.

However, I didn't enjoy killing the beasts. I understood why it was done, but I hated it all the same.

As I stood guard in midday sun, edged weapon drawn and ready, I watched an immature female vorec emerge from the fog. Staggering, she hissed, showing all the textbook signs of a beast at their most deadly as she moved with an unsightly gait. Pink scales glittering in the sun afforded a better look at the sickly thing—I understood at once why she dared approach.

Her back leg was twisted.

Badly deformed, it dragged behind her. Even so, the slight thing was moving as fast as she could, fleeing from the savagery of territorial vorec who would not tolerate weakness. Forcing her to risk approaching the human settlement and the point of my blade or be killed by her own kind.

It was a reminder from the universe, a warning that I should never underestimate my sisters again. They were my family, and they did not devolve to their animal instincts when I was weak. They were working with me, *the damaged female*, to help me. Not abandoning me to my fate.

The human farmers wouldn't understand that this wounded, petite vorec female could not charge them, so I swallowed my empathy and tightened my grip.

Running toward the limping thing, sword at the ready, I found the look of her comforting. Female vorec were much prettier than their larger male counterparts, their bones smaller, but their talons far more sharp.

Not to be underestimated up close.

Even wounded.

My sword moved in a beautiful arc as I turned my body so her claws would catch only air.

She was ended mercifully. A clean kill.

As she breathed her last, I observed her delicate and deadly body, aware it was a great pity she had not been a male. That her death served no purpose beyond fulfilling my duty to the military and the tight-knit group of human women huddling behind the granary.

I needed to see a male's sex organ. I needed to take a closer look at their bodies. But fate only sent me this one wounded female lying dead at my feet.

Matilde, an aging human female, crept closer to see the fresh corpse. "She was a pretty one."

A vibrant pink, very large, very dead lizard.

Coming to my side, Matilde poked the pink scales. "This would make a nice hide."

I could do that for her, skin the thing and make use of some part of it. A sword was a bit clunky for such work, but I had done it before, pulling the beast this way and that to strip its leather away.

While I had a human in a crouch assisting me, our backs to the armed watcher on the parapet fifty meters away, I took my chance and asked a direct question that would have seen both of my legs broken should an instructor have heard. "Matilde, I need to know what happens during sex."

Surprise caused her to freeze in her work, yet she recovered quickly.

"Ahh." She nodded, prodding the lizard as if she too knew such knowledge was forbidden to me and did not want to draw attention. Pulling out her communication device, she quickly accessed something and displayed it on the screen for me to see. "This is sex."

At first, I didn't understand what I was looking at. There was a lot of hair on both bodies where they joined. Then the male withdrew, and I saw a

rounded protuberance, slightly darker than the flesh of his belly, jutting from his hips. Below it was some sort of flopping sac. It didn't look very threatening, and now that I could see the full anatomy of the female, it was obvious where he fit.

But my body did not look like hers. I was not soft, I had no hair, and there was no slit or opening large enough for a male penis to penetrate.

Between my legs, all was smooth, solid flesh.

My expression must have been one of disgust, for Matilde tried to console me. "I know it looks strange, but sex is pleasurable for humans. I'm under the impression hybrids enjoy it as well."

How could I enjoy something that I could not physically do? "I don't look like that, Matilde."

"Hybrid pornography is prohibited, so I have no basis for comparison. But I have heard things—the right man knows what to do."

"And the wrong male?" I whispered.

She gave me a look of pity. "I don't know, sweetheart."

Weapons Instructor Dirum stood before the class, accepting no nonsense as she glared. Prepared to smack with her switch, or snap the tiny pinky fingers of those little kiddos who were not perfect soldiers at the ready, she asked, “Why do we use edged weapons in the fog and not firearms?”

A little boy, no more than seven, raised his hand. “Because we cannot see in the fog well enough to know what we are shooting at.”

“That’s right. Well done, Bruno.” Addressing the young class, Instructor Dirum went into further detail. “When humans first landed on this planet 643 years ago, many lives were lost to accidents in the fog. Friendly fire stole precious genetics we cannot get back. We no longer take such risks now that hybrids can protect fragile human life. Genetic diversity is necessary for the survival of us all.”

Standing at her side, silent as per my orders, I watched the instructor lead the class.

“Now, children, show me how to hold your weapon. Position one!” Instructor Dirum blew her whistle, and each of the littles did their best with their practice swords.

It was my job to silently correct their form. Moving from one to the next until the whole group of itty-bitties was perfect.

The whistle blew. “Position two!”

Nowhere near in unison, the children did their best to raise their sword above their head in preparation for a downward chopping movement. Should their position be correct, the single blade would face downward. However, several of my littles had their sword upside-down.

Gentle in a way Instructor Dirum could never be, I helped those who needed correction rectify their error, patting backs when the kiddos got it right.

This earned me a glare from the older woman.

It was the second time I had served as Assistant Instructor, and I had to admit, it was not as bad as it could have been.

Dirum wasn't unnecessarily cruel, but she was strict to an extreme.

And I had been forced to tolerate her tirades on what was expected of these children. That gentleness would not help them. A harsh reminder that the academy was a boot camp for children who would be exposed to monsters in a matter of years. And my soft pats were not going to help them when the first vorec charged.

A little girl with far more whimsy than focus was using her sword like some fairy princess's wand.

Quietly, I whispered, "Emiline, your sword is not a plaything. It is a weapon you must learn to wield properly, or you will get hurt when the vorecs come out of the fog."

The question was, had I not pointed out the mistake, would Instructor Dirum still have snapped Emiline's little fingerbone the way she did in the next moment? Or had Dirum noticed it herself?

That would be for Emiline to decide later, when the sobbing and tears were over. Unlike the sisters my age, a five-year-old didn't have reason to know I was only trying to help. She'd probably never climb into my bed for snuggles again.

This room in the academy hardened a young girl.

It changed our hearts.

We learned young that we were unsafe here. That grownups were dangerous.

That swords were not toys.

I had grown up in this training room, had my pinky fingerbones snapped more times than I could remember, and I could honestly say I despised Dirum. Resented her enough to feel an uncontrollable drumming beat pulsate from my chest as my little friend cried.

I couldn't help it. I was an adult, and every last drop of my female nature demanded I protect children. How on earth Dirum had lost that trait, I could not comprehend.

Yet she stared at me as if I were the one who'd lost my mind.

Fights between females were dangerous for those close enough to get caught in their claws. So, once Instructor Dirum hissed a warning that I better back down, and once I failed to acknowledge it, the kids began screaming, fleeing the room in a wave of chaos, while nearby watchers called in the incident.

Circling one another as if this might escalate, I found I was more than eager to take out my frustrations on someone who had earned it. "Do you remember how much it hurts to have your pinky finger snapped, Dirum? Why don't I remind you?"

With a level voice, Dirum answered, "You are making a poor choice, Private. Calm yourself down before I am forced to harm you."

Dirum was larger, far more experienced, and had handed me my ass so many times that I had an idea of how she would attack. So, I prepared for it.

Except the attack never fell.

She tried to speak reason, her chest knocking a clear warning to stand down. "You could do so well if you would stop treating life as a game. These children will die if they do not learn how to defend themselves!"

Existence within the academy was living death already. Why did every moment in these walls have to be filled with suffering? "Beating them will

only turn more of them into me. Do I seem stable to you?”

The woman shook herself out of an offensive stance, smoothing her uniform before she responded. “You seem mercenary, thinking only of yourself.”

Desiring a life in the fog may have had some shades of self-interest to it, but when had I even been allowed so much as an hour of freedom? Never. Every moment of every day of my life had been planned by someone else. And I could not be forced to watch this woman break a baby’s fingers! “And you wonder why recruits hate instructors. You’ve been through the academy yet grew complacent with how things are done here! You could have made things better. Instead, you make children experience the same shit you suffered. I’m not breaking the child’s finger for making a correctable mistake. And I won’t let you do it either!”

“Enough!”

The pair of us froze.

I had not heard General Cyderial enter, and it would seem from her flustered composure that Dirum hadn’t either.

Without turning to face the beast at my back, I stood my ground against the woman and shouted, “I meant every word!”

“You’re excused.”

Of course, he wasn’t talking to me—Dirum stalked past with haughty dignity.

The door closed, and the sword training room emptied of everyone, save myself and General Cyderial.

My chest still rattled, but the vehemence of my drum had slowed somewhat.

It was the first time I’d been in Cyderial’s presence since he had ruined my life, waves of resentment tensing my muscles and leaving me struggling to quiet.

I did not want to face him. To look at that deceiver's face and know,

again, how powerless I was to his control.

Making no secret of his approach, he came closer to ask, “If it was your daughter in the room, would you rather she learn perfect form and know how to protect herself? Or be coddled and soft, to die when that first vorec charged?”

Growling in my irritation, I snarled, “General Cyderial, did you think I was lying when I told you I would never give a child to the academy? I meant every word. No male can make me do such a thing.”

He came up directly behind me, faster than I could have anticipated, lips close to my ear as he whispered, “Is that why you’re so scared?”

Spinning about to face him head-on, I hissed, “Yes, old man! Don’t you think about your own children? Would you let that woman break their little fingers? Would you inflict the abuses of this place on your offspring? How sick are you?”

God, I wished I’d had the guts to strike him. To muss that unblinking stare of his and force him to back away.

As if he’d read my thoughts, he moved to the wall to inspect the practice weapons, daring to say, “You do not need to fear for your children.”

I laughed. He really was insane. “Why? Are you suddenly going to treat these littles better than you treated us? Not going to hang their friends in front of them? Are the beatings going to stop?”

“No one has ever beaten you more than you could handle.”

Hysterical laughter fell from my lips with such aggression it almost competed with the banging behind my breasts. My drum had come back in full force, every ounce of rage I felt for what he had done to me right there for him to see. “You are an evil man who has done unspeakable things. And I hate you more than I can say.”

Calm, he held out a practice sword, hilt first so I might take it. “I know.”

It fit in my hand perfectly, the balance of the unsharpened blade known to me. How badly I could hurt him with it despite its dullness filled me with a

vicious anticipation.

If I could land just one strike—just one—it would be the victory of a lifetime.

General Cyderial raised a matching sword, cold-blooded stare locked on me as he challenged, “You will not leave this room until you yield and calm yourself.”

Scoffing, I realized how foolish this was. How dumb I might be to hold up a sword to a male of his rank and experience and think I stood any chance of walking out of that room.

I’d be carried out on a stretcher. Patched back together in the infirmary and forced right back into my position as Assistant to Instructor Dirum.

My focus needed to be on getting the hell out of the academy, not petty squabbles with dangerous men.

Lowering my sword, I dropped it on the mat between us, striving to silence my drumming. Staring where the weapon lay at his feet, in a matter of ten breaths, I was quiet though still angry... mostly with myself. “I yield.”

The general, cruel as ever, snarled, “Lorieyn, put your name on the list!”

If I could not win against the man with violence, then I would have to use cunning. Maybe something could even be salvaged from this mess. “Witnessing abuse against children is going to inspire my response. There is no helping my nature, nor am I ashamed of it. To be blunt, I doubt you will ever allow me to graduate. This room is where you want me to suffer—a broken spirit breaking spirits—unless you can force me to submit to the list, which I feel is a trap. If it weren’t, I would not be so ignorant of what takes place once a male hears my song.”

Instantly guarded, his entire demeanor went ice-cold. “Explain.”

Deadpan, I met his unblinking stare and said, “I’m curious about sex.”

With a crook of his finger, General Cyderial bade me follow him to his office, a terrible sign that I had earned more than a beating with a sword.

Or a great sign that he might actually tell me something of value.

Information I could use to get what I wanted.

Word of what had transpired in the training room no doubt having spread, recruits witnessed my march in the wake of our mutual terrorizer. After all, I had done the unthinkable. I had threatened an instructor with the most vicious thumping sounds my body might make. Considering the crime, many students were most likely under the impression this was the final time they might lay eyes on me. Some must have thought that in mere moments they would be called to the yard to witness my hanging.

But Cyderial was not going to hang me.

Not today.

Punishment would come in another form.

I'm not sure how I knew it was true, but I did.

The walk ended, his door opening to swallow me up. Into its yawning maw I strode, desperately numb yet somehow vibrating with anticipation.

Functioning from rote muscle memory and not from sense. Doomed.

But hopeful.

The door closed.

“Come,” he said, bidding me forward out of the vestibule and into the office proper. Where he gestured that I should take a seat on the white couch of death.

My hands began to shake, so I turned them into fists. Managing to bend my stiff frame, I took a seat on the end of the soft perch, wary that something terrible was to come.

General Cyderial took the seat across from me, settling back as if this were a casual encounter. And stared.

Not once in all my years at the academy had I seen him casual. His ankle hooked on his knee as he settled into the oversized chair and said nothing.

Simply observed me.

This made me far more nervous than any dressing-down might.

Silence grew and grew, each heartbeat far more uncomfortable than the last, until I let out the breath I had been holding.

Once my lungs were empty, he said, “You had questions about sex.”

I had questions about my sanity to realize I broached the subject, with him of all people.

It was also highly unsettling that he was not behind his huge, tidy desk. There was no buffer, nothing but air between us.

Why was I not standing at attention? I had done wrong. But if he were going to hang me, why indulge my questions? Why invite me to sit?

Moving at a glacial and highly suspicious pace, I mirrored his body language, settling into the couch. Yet I kept both feet on the floor, an advantage should I need to run.

“What is your concern?” It seemed a genuine question; even his expression was searching.

Narrowing my eyes, I said, “Punishment is imminent. I’d like to get it over with.”

He said nothing.

Nervously, I tapped my claws against my trousers and waited.

Still, nothing from the man.

Huffing out a breath, I asked, “You are not going to punish me for threatening an instructor?”

“Should you not be calling me *sir*?”

No. It felt as if this was not the time for that language. In informal seating, sharing nearly the same eye level. “Not when we talk about sex.”

“I agree.” And he seemed very pleased by what I had muttered. “Ask me your questions.”

The whole thing felt like a trap, but it would be foolish to waste the opportunity.

There were so many things I needed to know if I wanted to be free, but I was unsure where to start. Unsure what the price would be should I be blunt.

Concerned I might rouse his suspicion.

I sucked my lower lip into my mouth, studied my hands, and sighed. “Why should hybrids mate at all? I was born from a human, as most of us were. It seems unnecessary.”

Cocking his head ever so slightly, he considered his answer at length before responding. “Back in the training room, you said you could not help your nature, did you not? Protecting children is innate to your being. Males are driven to fornicate, to give females children when they hear the song. That is their nature. *Our* nature is to be together.”

But I had no such interest. And confidence in men, I didn’t have at all. “What if males are lying about the song? Something only they sense. Something only they know. How can a female trust that it exists at all?”

Green eyes marginally narrowed, and I felt as if he was recording every last breath I took to memory. “I assure you, the song is very real.”

I did not sense a lie in his answer, but it didn’t give me anything worth using either. “So, men who hear the song are driven to mate a female that may not want to be owned. What if a woman refuses?”

“Submission cannot be avoided forever.” The green of his eyes dulled,

the man tensing in his chair. “Make no mistake, we are much stronger than you, Lorieyn, and the song has a power you cannot imagine. That is why procedures are in place to keep young girls safe. Females are delicate.”

Delicate? I was a trained vorec murder machine. I could break a human in half with my forefinger and thumb. But compared to his strength, I was... inconsequential. “So the list is basically consent that a female will allow a stranger to bond them the moment any random male hears her song?”

“Some may see it that way.”

Finding his answer useless, I stared as if I might uncover his secrets and asked, “How do *you* see it?”

One might have thought he was disappointed by my obvious disgust with the concept, yet he was gracious in his answer. “As hope for the future.”

Growing more uncomfortable with the lack of any relevant information, I asked, “What about your mate?”

“What about her?”

Fidgeting, I felt as if I had gone sharply in the wrong direction. “I mean... what if it had been someone else who heard her song first?”

His voice was frightening. “They would be dead, and she would still be mine.”

Okay. Noted, he was very possessive of his female.

Which gave me an opening to challenge my hypothesis. To find out what it took to ruin a woman. “Are there men that will fornicate with a woman, even if she is not their mate?”

The look in his eyes made it clear I was risking much by pushing the conversation this way.

Yet he answered me. Somber, he stated, “Young men can be impulsive and rash in their search for pleasure. The list assures that unmated females are not exposed to such males. Only those of high rank and demonstrated loyalty can access the females ready to engage in sex and enjoy a bond, not the unproven boys.”

“There are boys here,” I reminded him.

“And they know what I would do to them if they touched you.” Without hesitation, Cyderial leaned forward, proud to state, “Before I took over the academy, one in four females in these walls were *improperly handled*. Now, it’s less than one in twenty.”

That statement was too vague, and I had no basis to know what “improperly handled” might mean to such a man. “Who says it’s improper, the men or the women?”

His answer came succinct and steady. “Nature. The women become infertile, or the children, if she can even reproduce, are born wrong and do not survive. Ruined females live out their lifespan lacking a bond with a partner. Lifespans that are greatly reduced.”

We were getting closer to what I wanted to know. “What ruins the female?”

I didn’t think he was going to offer a reply, the extended pause in conversation awkward.

Staring at me, staring far too hard, General Cyderial said, “The song inspires certain actions. Males know, and we crave. Females accept, and they receive. A male who isn’t her mate lacks the ability to bond with that female or see to her physical needs properly. She’s left damaged. Her true mate is left without a partner. The man who went against nature and took what was not his has no drive to care for the woman he used, and will mate another, should he hear the song. To upset that natural balance means ruin for all.”

Very poetic but lacking any useful information. “Are you saying that if a woman doesn’t want a mate at all, either way, a male will come and ruin her or bond her? She can’t just live her life?”

Voice smooth, he said, “Mating is a pleasurable part of life. You will enjoy it.”

Bullshit. “It sounds awful. Is your mate happy?”

He took a breath. “I do everything in my power to assure she is safe and

able to thrive despite difficult circumstances for us both.”

That wasn't what I'd asked. “It's unfair that the males have this information, and you keep the females ignorant. Why do humans have sex education and pornography for reference, and we are told nothing?”

Though he remained deadpan, a glitter of humor came to green eyes. “Been talking to humans, hmm?”

Cheeks growing pink, I tried to cover my blunder. “I hear them talk to *each other*.”

Leaning closer, he leveled me with that stare. “And just what has made you grow so suddenly curious about sex?”

Why did he have to lean so close? “You're pressuring me to add my name to the list.”

Two heartbeats passed before he responded. “There is no pressure. You can take your time.”

“And stand by while I watch Dirum torture children? I'm not blind to what you have done here.”

His lips thinned. “It may not seem so now, but I am offering you a gift in this. You will be an excellent instructor. You were born for it, and that will be your path regardless of when you graduate.”

I stole my glance away from him before he might see the anxiety *that* imagined nightmare future created within me. The man must have disliked me a great deal to think to assign me to a lifetime tied to the academy. He must have hated me, in fact. “Unless I submit to the list?”

“Even then, you will have an assignment. Your mate will place you where you are safest. There is no safer place in the city for a hybrid female than the academy.”

“Then give me specifics.” I dared much to demand it, but I had so little hope left. “How does a male bond a female to him?”

Which he was clearly not going to share. “You will learn the specifics from your mate when you're ready to submit.”

Submission was not my forte. My greatest gift was perseverance. “What does the song sound like to you?”

Surprised at the new direction of my questions, he eased back and considered before speaking. “It would be best described as resonant music emitting from the perfect woman’s body at the exact frequency only I was born to hear. A beautiful sound, a siren’s call to be near her, to touch her, to please her in ways that it is my duty to provide. It calms me, yet entices my desire to kill every male who comes anywhere near my mate.” Measuring my reaction as he took a breath, he smirked. “I was quite struck the first time I experienced it.”

The idea of Cyderial being struck was laughable. It was too bad his *calming* mate wasn’t around the academy. More students may have survived. “Do the boys here experience the song?”

“If they do, the wisest bide their time. Acting upon it before their mate is sexually mature is abhorrent, though it does happen. And there is no guarantee that two males will not hear the same song from a single female. If that is the case, one male will kill the other, though it is rare now that the list is in place and introductions follow specific protocols.”

More confirmation females had multiple prospects for mates. “If more than one of you hears our song, why can we not choose who we prefer?”

The question curled his lip in disgust. “Though you may have several contenders, hybrid society cannot survive if men are murdering one another over partners. In the wilds, the strongest vorec male will slaughter all challengers for the rights to breed. A civilized list helps prevent infighting. Females are exposed to the highest ranked, the strongest first. And so on, until the song is heard and the bond completed.”

And why was this information not in the library? “What if she likes a lower-ranked man better?”

He’d grown his usual state of perturbed. “Do you honestly think the strongest male would allow an untried boy to have you? That he would trust a

pup to see to your needs properly?”

“What about courtship? The humans do that.”

Annoyance was obvious, though he tried to contain it. “Human customs do not apply. For hybrids, courtship takes place after mating. Otherwise, the carnage would be devastating. Unmated females are too attractive to males who’ve never heard a song. They are too attractive to boys incapable of self-control. And in the scenarios I just described, good men might die over a natural impulse to keep their female to themselves. Our kind may be new to the universe, but the eldest of us have deeply considered this topic. We must balance the insatiable animal drive with self-awareness.”

Frustrated, I countered, “Were women consulted in the making of these rules?” Because this sounded extremely male-centric.

“The protocol involving the list was their idea.”

I did not believe that for a moment. Furthermore, something was very unsettling about the idea a male student might have heard my song and was watching and waiting.

Swallowing down my nausea, I muttered, “Do I have any contenders you know of? Is that why you’re pushing me to the list?”

A sneer came to his cruel mouth. “Managing the number of males that have grown interested in you over the years has been an absolute nightmare.”

That made me feel very unsafe. “Is there anyone specific I should avoid?”

Did a muscle in his jaw just tic? “You could always end their suffering and submit to be mated. Once knotted, the lesser men won’t foam at the mouth to bed you. Should they live long enough, they might even hear someone else’s song. Furthermore, you’d have a protector for life who loves you in every possible way and would give you anything you desired.”

Cold terror filled me at the thought someone might be stalking me even now, but confusion overrode it long enough for me to ask, “What does knotted mean?”

His eyes flashed. “That’s enough for today. Return to your class and

apologize to Instructor Dirum. Do not make me interfere again.”



“YOU ARE LUCKY YOU’RE ALIVE!”

The vault had closed, sealing female recruits into their dorms. Having followed me to my tiny private room, Maeve shut the door, clearly anxious.

My actions earlier that day were inexcusable.

Instructor Dirum had been magnanimous in accepting my apology. One sharp slap to the face was all I received in response. But she had been harder on the next class, hard enough to challenge my flagging self-control.

My eyes had to stay on the prize.

To get out of the academy and find a male to ruin me.

Because I understood now that it was the only way to be free.

“Maeve, I asked him about sex. The answers were vague, but I know now. I have to be ruined. Otherwise... General Cyderial intends to assign me as a full-time instructor for the academy, regardless of my scores when I graduate. He is never going to let me out of this hell.”

My sister tucked her head and rubbed at her eyes, working through her thoughts, only to mutter, “You are a wonderful teacher though. The way you have explained swordsmanship to me the last few nights? I have an understanding of complex movements that I never had before.”

She wasn’t trying to flatter. I knew her well enough to know Maeve would never waste her time on platitudes. This was her honest opinion.

Voice shaking, I fought not to fall apart. “I can’t stay here! Help me get to the fog.”

With compassion, she nodded. “I will.”

Grabbing at her hands, I held them in mine, whispering, “There is a male at the academy who wants me for his mate. General Cyderial would not tell me who it is. But he is here, and he is watching me.”

Eyes wide, she squeezed my fingers. “Is that why he has been pressuring you to submit to the list? To prevent a recruit from trying to claim you?”

There was not a single boy in the entirety of the academy who I would consider interesting enough to mate. Not one. “I think so.”

Just the two of us in my meager cell, I filled her in on the conversation that had taken place between myself and the old man, unable to answer her questions, because General Cyderial had given me so little to work with.

She too agreed that ruin seemed the only loophole, considering the limited information we had.

Blonde curls loose so she might toy with them while we spoke, Maeve helped me outline a plan, all the while combing her mane into fluff.

The following day, we would break free of our prison and follow the path the instructors used to access the city. We would find a place where hybrid males congregated, approach in stealth, and get this over with.

Agnes and Tamsyn were not to be included, consulted, or considered. Lower numbers would keep the operation tight, and should we be caught, there was no point in all three of us being put to death. If they knew nothing, they had nothing to fear.

Seated at the edge of my cot, her ankles crossed primly, she gave me her vow. One that would lead to more than my ruin. “Lorieyn, tomorrow night, we will find you a mate. You will have the fog, and I will graduate top of class.”

Preparing my body so I might tempt a stranger into sex was more confounding than I'd anticipated. It wasn't often I looked at myself in the mirror in consideration of whether I was or was not attractive to males.

Secretly in the past, late at night, I had styled my hair to look like the pictures in the magazines. I had played with my lipstick and tried on my forbidden dress. But these things had been done only for my pleasure. To please *me*, not a man.

To feel female and pretty. To feel normal.

Mating had been far from my thoughts. And I had never needed to consider how to attract a male. My song assured a man would want me completely—my personality and appearance were unimportant.

Those boys who kissed me in the dark all those years ago probably didn't even know my name. I had hardly seen them; they could hardly see me. It was about breaking rules with who was there, nothing personal.

Trying to tempt a man to ruin me was *very* personal.

Were my lips too thin? My breasts had been problematic under my uniform, but in my dress, were they feminine enough?

Did men like brown hair? Or would they prefer bouncy blonde curls of the variety Maeve possessed?

There would be no song to tempt an unmated hybrid, and though General

Cyderial had claimed I was genetically perfect, I did not know if that translated into attractiveness.

My eyes were hooded, my lashes thick and dark but short and straight. They did not extend and curl upward as Tamsyn's did. I did not have Agnes's dimples.

I was a bit smaller-boned than many of my sisters, but not nearly as petite as Maeve. She was tiny, with a whole lot of personality packed into her diminutive figure.

My features reflected my mother's ancestry. And though I had always loved that I resembled her, and it was true I did think she was beautiful, but was that just because she was my mother?

In honesty, my memory of her had faded over the years, and much of it may have been idealized. I had spent more time imagining her than I could remember actually spending in her presence.

Five years old was too young to be taken from one's mother, and I had only been allowed to visit her once per year afterward. The highlight of my year, the reason I behaved as well as I could and followed every rule.

All for a precious thirty minutes of her presence, under the suspicious eyes of five watchers, of course.

But in her home, I had a chance to leave the confines of the academy and see the city through the windows of the transport vehicle.

False freedom that almost felt as good as the real thing.

General Cyderial eliminated such visits when he took command of the academy, the program terminated weeks before my scheduled trip into the city.

Ten years had passed since I saw her face. Since I had hugged her and smelled her hair.

It seemed sacrilegious that I was going into the city for any other reason.

Under my thoughts, the strangest guilt began to fester. As if I was doing something wrong by not rushing straight to her, my desire for the fog having

outranked my desire for my mom.

But I was an adult now, and it had been ten long years of growing up.

A decade ago, my mother welcomed me and my armed guardians into her home. Weepy and excited, she showed me my newborn fully human brother. Her third child since I had been given to the academy. The husband she found after I'd been given away, Richard, was there as well. Though I did not share any genetic material with him, he treated me with gentle kindness. The human male was also funny.

And they were all so grateful for the wonderful things they imagined I did within the academy.

So honored I studied hard so I might keep them safe from the fog.

Extremely proud to show me all the treats she created at her bakery and sold to the humans in her neighborhood. A display across her huge table just for me! All of it tucked in waxed pink boxes that shone in the light, so tempting and pretty it was hard not to eat what was on offer.

Though I had not been allowed to hold the baby—my mother worried he might dirty my uniform—she did let me watch her rock him as he wiggled and cooed. Richard patting my shoulder as if I were an adult, though I was barely eleven.

My mother told me she loved me, kissing my cheek when the team of armed watchers explained the allowable length of my visit had concluded.

She made me promise I would always do my best, that I would continue to make them proud and keep them safe.

Told me I was lucky to have such a blessed life.

My nice *parents* did not understand what it was like growing up at the academy, where failure was not tolerated and loneliness for one's home left children crying under their covers at night.

There was no room for weakness or personal wants when one's very life purpose was to ensure the survival of the human race. After all, she said how gratified both she and Richard were, and I could not bear to confess that only

pain and solitude awaited me.

With many soft kisses, my birth mother gave me a box of sweets she had made herself, just for me. And I clutched it to my chest as I said my goodbyes, aware I would not be allowed to keep it once back at the academy.

Just as I had been scared to eat one of her treats with the watchers lurking at my back, I was scared to open her gift once tucked into the transport vehicle.

My diet was strictly regulated and health monitored to ensure no errant genetic abnormality arose before I reached maturity. Sugar was absolutely forbidden.

But the team charged with my care that day let me eat two cookies on the short flight back to the academy. Chocolate chip and something covered in soft white dust. One gruff soldier even reminded me to wipe the powdered sugar from my lips before our transport door opened, so I would not be caught.

The remembered taste of that sweetness and the bitterness of my tears faded to an untrustworthy memory as the weight of academy responsibility stomped out all thoughts of what should have been my home.

Academy coursework ate up any time my mind might have wandered. There were injuries to heal from and the fog to pursue.

I had not seen the wonderful woman in over a decade. I had not smelled her or tasted the sweets I was certain she would prepare for me. I had not been gifted another beautiful pink box packed with treats that would be confiscated.

I knew the names of my half-siblings by heart but had no idea what they might look like now. Did Richard still have an easy smile and a ready laugh? Was my mother still beautifully demure and elegant in her movements?

Did she still hold a hand over her mouth when she laughed?

Once I was ruined, I would be free of the academy. No one could stop me from visiting my mom. From getting to know her before I might be assigned

to a surveyor team and sent out into the fog.

She would be excited to see me—I was certain. Proud of her hybrid daughter who had never let a human die on her watch.

I reminded myself of all of this when nerves came to tangle with guilt. It was only my conditioning making me feel as if leaving the grounds was a betrayal of everything I was raised to believe.

What was my anxiety's purpose, if it came between me and what I wanted: the fog, my family, my freedom?

Hair twisted atop my head, I had done my best to copy one of the photos in my forbidden magazines. The painstaking process involved every hairpin I might find, yet it was worth the effort.

I would make myself as beautiful as possible, corner a male, and get this over with.

One final pin, followed by a long lingering look to make sure I was acceptable. Hands to the bodice of my black dress, I smoothed the lines as if smoothing my uniform.

Around my breasts, it fit to my form, a full skirt blooming outward at my natural waist. Modest yet feminine. A creation years in the making, encasing my body and ready to serve a higher purpose.

Lipstick was saved for last. Pink and waxy, I dragged it over my pout and felt I looked very pretty indeed.

Pretty enough at least one male would desire me.

And all I needed was one.

Maeve had observed my preparations, watching from her perch on my bed.

Unlike my hand-sewn dress, she had procured a real one. Sprays of pink flowers on a dark-blue background, it was far more vibrant than mine.

Like her.

Blonde curls caught up on top of her head, her swan neck on display, she could have been one of the females in my magazine. And I could not help but

love that even if we were risking our lives, the two of us got to enjoy such a feminine moment together.

Never had I shown another sister my black dress.

Never would I have guessed she'd had one of her own.

"You look beautiful, Lorieyn." Smiling as she looked me over, she added, "But we may have a problem. Neither of us has shoes."

There was no getting around that issue. It was one thing to sew my dress, but to be caught asking a human to smuggle me pretty footwear was beyond stupid. "I'm quieter with none. Should we approach this correctly, no one should have time to see us long enough to observe our feet."



ESCAPING the academy had never been my motivation in the past. I preferred to simply sneak out of the dorm and wander my home at will. The path was not that different, only our end goal. However, I did enjoy the looks of shocked disbelief when I led Maeve through my catalog of tricks.

She had no idea the things I'd been up to in my unruly years. And I will admit, I had an innate need to rebel every time injustice pounded me down.

I was not the kind to be kept in a cage. I would gnaw the bars; I would find a way.

Even if that way caused me harm.

Leading Maeve out of the sealed vault of our dorm and into the academy proper, our escape was uneventful. One moment, we were inside; the next, we were out. Unremarkable, because what student would dare?

Roaming the halls was one thing. Roaming the city?

Unthinkable.

We may have all hated the academy, but where would we go if we left? Home? They would hang our mothers. Friends? We were not allowed communication with graduates.

The consequences were not worth the risk. Not unless your life was forfeit either way.

Mine would end if I had to stay in those walls one more day, trapped where I now knew a male heard my song and thought to make me his.

To be mated and owned by some random boy would end me.

Balmy air smelled of fog creeping over the ground. It hid our feet well, its dampness welcome as we set it swirling in our rush. Delightful, the night embraced us both as we ran down the street and into the unknown.

An hour of darting from shadow to shadow, unsure which way to go, passed before we found something breathtaking. An open reservoir, like a glittering lake banked with a walking path and eateries. A nearby restaurant had strung up twinkling lights, reminding me of things I had seen as a child on the rare occasion my mother had taken me outside of our home. Signs and colors, *brightness* that was never on display at the academy, all of it was there for any who might walk by.

The air smelled of mouthwatering foods. There was distant music and the hum of indistinct conversations.

Normalcy before me, right there, more alien than I could say.

In the distance, a couple walked hand in hand by the waterside. They laughed and talked, intimate and easy.

Looking down at my own empty hand, I wondered what it might be like to have someone hold it. To know a man's smile. To be treated like a female and not a vorec killing machine.

I envied enough to find myself unhappy and cut off such thoughts before they might serve as a distraction. Perhaps sitting at a restaurant and eating real food would be lovely. But I wanted the fog, and no mate would ever allow it.

Distractions or desires, I'd had years to learn to squash them into mental dust. All I required to live my life on my terms was one willing man, for however long it might take him to put himself inside me and end my

obligation to the academy.

Yet, it seemed I was not the only one romanticizing the view.

Voice dreamy, Maeve dared whisper, “Can you imagine what it must be like to go there? To sit by the water and feel the wind on your face?”

It was a dangerous fantasy. “It’s all couples. You’d have to be mated.”

Her lip curled at the thought. Like me, Maeve had no interest in wasting time bound to a man. “There must be places for women. This is just one small section of a massive city.”

A confusing city with labyrinth-like streets that made no sense and led in circles. Getting back to the academy would be far more difficult than getting to that manmade lake. “Over there. Do you see that hybrid male walking alone? I think we should follow him.”

Follow him, we did.

Past a small park of trees, down a street of shops closed up for the day, into a quieter neighborhood less tidy than the pretty reservoir circle.

His destination? A bar aptly named The Fog. It boasted the only working illumination on the street, seemed populated but not crowded, and there were many vantage points for us to run surveillance while we came up with a plan.

First, I had to get in unseen.

Next, I had to find a man willing to have sex with me.

Should all go well, I would be ruined by the end of the night.

“G od, it stinks in here.” Hand to her nose, Maeve stayed within the shadows, the pair of us having waited hours to make our approach.

Getting inside had not been complicated. The bar, after all, was not the prison of the academy. The business desired patrons, boasted windows and back doors, with zero security beyond a simple lock easily picked with a hairpin.

With the burgundy-papered wall to our back—as far from the majority of The Fog’s strictly hybrid patrons as possible—Maeve and I watched hybrid men in their native habitat.

They do stink.

I could not say it was necessarily one bad odor, but the blend of them... the commingling of so much scent was nauseating. The spicy, the sweet, the peppery, the musk.

Boys at the academy didn’t boast a smell I would describe as *thick*, not that they always smelled pleasant. But the air in The Fog was eye-watering.

Even if each breath was disgusting, all other factors seemed to play in our favor. Lights were low. Poor acoustics roughed up friendly banter, drowning our whispers beneath a noisy drone.

The space itself was not leaning toward cozy but utilitarian, peppered with amusements and random worn posters on the walls. A game of darts,

some recreation involving a large table and two sticks used to hit small balls into six evenly spaced holes.

There were jovial spirits and cheerfulness while hazy beverages were sipped. Comradery and excitement when another friend might come through the door.

I had never seen males relaxed, had never heard them share in genial conversation. It made them far less intimidating than expected. In fact, they were not much different than the females in our dorm after the vault was sealed.

A good sign we had found the right place to move forward with our plan.

Men of all sizes were on display, out of uniform and laughing with compatriots, some loud, some quietly listening. Everyone enjoying themselves.

Even we began to relax, leaning against the wall to marvel and observe.

It did not take long for one to notice me.

Our eyes met, and a look of confusion crossed the stranger's face.

I could only imagine his thoughts. A female in a male space who dared hold eye contact in a way that would have seen both of us beaten at the academy. Well, *I* would have been beaten. He might have been hanged.

Was I perceived as a dangerous intruder half-hidden by shadows?

Should I smile or wave to show him my intentions were good?

Awkward and unsure, I did nothing but watch him watching me.

Yet, without hesitation, he approached all the same and did so in such a way that it attracted no attention from his peers. One moment, he was part of the group; the next, he flowed to my side.

Dark hair styled short and tidy, he struck me as approachable and somewhat handsome. Even his expression was amiable, if not perplexed.

When the hybrid male was close enough to join us in our dark corner, a kind tone offered fair warning in a congenial voice. "You should not be here."

This was the first male besides an instructor who had spoken directly to me in years.

Where he seemed easy, I was a jumbled mess of nerves.

Even so, there was something about him I liked. The syrupy-sweet scent that came with him was far better than the cloud of stink wafting about the place. Nice enough to note and lean into.

Eyes a shade of smoky-gray, lacking all trace of vorec-green, and hair dark as midnight, he was everything the opposite of the man who put me in this position in the first place.

He was slimmer in stature than General Cyderial and far less intimidating. That was all I needed.

Offering a shy smile, I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “I know I shouldn’t be here, but I’m looking for someone.”

Eyebrows darting up, the man replied, “Here? Who?”

I liked the look of his face, that he spoke gently.

I liked that this might be quickly done and forgotten.

Nervous, I licked my lower lip and felt my hearts racing. “What’s your name?”

“You cannot stay in here, beautiful girl. It isn’t safe.” His voice dropped to a mere whisper as he leaned closer to say, “This bar is for unmated males.”

He’d called me beautiful. That was a good sign.

He did not crowd me, but he did come close. Close enough that I could whisper back, “I need help.”

Looking me over, shifting his body between myself and the crowd, he frowned to see my feet. “You’re not wearing any shoes.”

Tucking one foot behind the other as if that might cover my ridiculous state, I muttered, “Um. No, I’m not.”

The bell above the bar’s main entrance jingled, the crowd cheering as another of their comrades arrived.

I glanced quickly toward the door, a literal giant ducking so he might step

inside. Golden hair, golden skin—even from this distance, I suspected his eyes would glitter in the same shade. A low-contrast, monochromatic beast of a man who sauntered in with a friendly smile and ordered a drink.

He was absorbed into the crowd with many pats on the back, and my attention was regained by the properly sized male I'd moved unconsciously closer to.

The corner of the dark-haired stranger's lips quirked, and he looked at me as if charmed. "What's your name?"

My name didn't matter. What mattered was getting this over with.

Urgency churning in my belly, I took a deep breath. Aware I must seem completely out of my mind, I confessed, "I want to be a surveyor, but I will not be allowed into the fog unless my song is taken away. The vorec will try to breed me, and a mate will deny me the only future I want. I need someone to help me *ruin* my song, so I can live life on my terms."

His smoky-gray eyes lost some of their light, yet he remained kind. "I see."

Vulnerable, my expression open and honest, I said, "It has to be a man who doesn't want to keep me. Do you understand?"

Shaking his head, he refused, "I'm not going to hurt you."

I didn't have time to argue or convince. He may have seemed a good candidate, but I didn't have time to waste. There were other males in the bar to consider. "If not you, I will find someone else. *Someone* will help me."

Before I might edge away from him in the dark, his hand caught my wrist. "Wait. *I will help you*. But first, we need to get you somewhere safe. If one of them hears your song, there will be violence."

The stranger didn't strike me as a bad sort; even his touch on my arm was cautious. "You'll put yourself inside me so I can be free?"

Voice gravelly, he swallowed and seemed at war with his thoughts. "Come with me."

"Yes." Relief trickling down my spine, I glanced over my shoulder to see

if Maeve was ready to go.

And found... nothing but empty space.

My sister was gone.

Had vanished into thin air.

The stranger still had my wrist, gripping tighter. "It's too late for her."

Confused, dread churning in my belly, I frantically ran my eyes over every corner of the bar to find the crowd was staring, and it wasn't at me.

My gaze followed their attention to a scene that stopped my hearts.

Panic left me panting.

Had it not been for her bare feet poking out, and a bit of naked leg wrapped around the waist of a giant, I would not have seen her at all. The size of him blocked her little body. But I could tell by the way he moved, how his hips ground where she was pinned, that she was in far more than trouble.

The golden giant was trying to penetrate her right there against the wall.

Preparing to mate her, in front of everyone.

"Stop!" I screamed.

But he didn't stop. A golden hand ran over Maeve's hip, working under her skirt until I heard my friend squeal.

Every move that came from that moment forward was pure adrenalin. The gentle stranger who held my wrist felt my elbow strike his nose at full force. Freed of his grip, light-footed, I flew toward my friend and the beast madly kissing her.

The crowd had already given him his space, a few agitated males held back by their friends. Piled upon and warned by those pinning them down they would be killed if they dared try.

Yet of those clawing their way out of the mele, one had eyes for me.

"What's your name?"

And he kept shouting it, begging for my name over and over, as others held him back. Ice ran down my spine to see the way he looked at me, to

know he would have me pinned to the wall once he broke free.

And he *would* break free. A male who fought with such ferocity felt no pain, would remain single-minded even to his detriment.

The madness, the way that frantic total stranger looked at me.

He heard my song.

If freed, he would try to do to me what the giant was doing to Maeve.

Hearts in my throat, I launched myself onto the massive male's back, desperate to save my friend, terrified I would not be able to save myself.

Drumming loudly, prepared to end him utterly, I snarled with all my wrath, "Song or no, you cannot have her yet. She isn't on the list."

My talons were at his throat, already sunken into his skin, plucking at his beating carotid artery as if I were strumming the strings of a lute. One yank and I'd be able to practically sever his head from his shoulders.

Lips to his ear, my fist wrenching his hair, I hissed a second warning, "Forcing yourself on your mate before she announces her intention to partner will only make her hate you. Set her free, or I will shred your throat into ribbons. You'll bleed out no matter how fast your body tries to heal."

It was as if he didn't even notice I was there.

So I dug deeper.

At last, he stiffened and let out a growl.

I returned it with a snarl of my own.

Fingers pricking ever deeper, puncturing muscle and worrying tendon, I gave him as much pain as possible, my final warning.

A bit of blood trickled over my fingers when he finally eased back just enough that Maeve might find air.

The terrifying view of my sister that followed scared me more than I could say.

She was dazed, chasing after his mouth as if eager for more. Woozy, pupils blown, undulating against the male and making sounds I had never heard before.

“Maeve, snap out of it!” Shripping, clearly frightened, I shouted, “Don’t let him steal your dreams away!”

Pure horror washed over her features as her trance began to abate. Pretty green eyes blinking up at me, shaking from her growing shock, she began to cry.

My fist held a clump of the man’s hair tight. My limbs were wrapped around him, my talons buried in his throat, yet I knew I did not have the upper hand. “You’re okay, Maeve. I’m not going to let him hurt you.”

Clawed fingers over her lips, she began to hiccup. “I want to go home.”

The man with his hand under her skirt unhooked his grip from her thigh and allowed her to slide down the tight space between the wall and his bulk, her naked feet landing on the dirty floor.

Compared to his height and as small as Maeve was, she barely made it to his chest, where he was thumping loudly, and she was wobbling on her feet as his sound banged against her ears.

Barking an order, I demanded, “Now, back away from her.”

He obeyed by only one step, voice full of mischief, daring to lure her nearer. “Submit to me, *Maeve*. Submit, or run.”

Run, she did. Right out the door so fast she was hardly more than a blur.

I spared a glance for the dark-haired stranger who had warned me to leave, and I found he had drawn a blade, a utilitarian knife he clearly knew how to wield. It was the golden man he threatened with it. “Let her down, and let her leave. They will be safer together... from all of us.”

The dark-haired stranger spoke as if my assault on the golden giant was a joke, as if I were merely being tolerated and was the one in need of protection. It was my claws in the man’s throat, my control, that left his artery intact against my talons, *but I was absolutely in peril*.

And I knew it.

Rumbling under my grip, the golden giant conceded. “Run fast, you troublesome thing, because I will hunt you down in the streets, and you won’t

be able to stop me a second time.”

The door wasn't far, but I was not sure if I would make it once I pulled my claws from his thick neck. The longer I waited, the more of a head start Maeve might have, but knowing her, she was probably waiting in the shadows outside.

Terrified that she might have to come back in and fetch me.

More frenzied than before, the man fighting the restraint of his friends called out desperately, “What is your name?”

What was wrong with these men? They were all insane!

Dropping off the giant's back, I kept my back to the door, tiptoeing backward, utterly terrified, and staring down a pack.

“WHAT IS YOUR NAME?”

Jumping, I caught my breath as the crazed man broke free of several strong soldiers working hard to restrain him. He rushed right for me.

The dark one shouted, “Run!” as I shot through the door, calling out for my friend.

Just as I hoped, Maeve was there, reaching for me from a nearby roof.

We had already learned the streets were nothing but an unworthy labyrinth, that to trust them was to get disoriented. Like a pair of thieves, we chose instead to run from rooftop to rooftop. Scurrying like rats, we leaped, mindless of what we broke or knocked down in our flight from the hunting mob.

Echoes of “Your name? Tell me your name!” over and over bounced off the walls, the sounds of men fighting, groans of pain. Even laughter—it chased us, confounded our senses, and left us with no understanding of how near or far the danger might be.

But the pair of us were fast, lighter than males, and capable of fitting through spaces in which they could not pursue. Our only advantages, since the city was beyond our comprehension and the men clearly knew where to go, more than once cutting off our escape and forcing us to alter course.

We ran until it hurt to breathe, and pushed further still until the sound of their rampage grew distant.

The academy was the only true shelter we would find, the only place such men could not reach us. For the first time in my life, I longed for its embrace and the twisted sort of safety it offered.

Such irony grated at what was left of my sorry nerves.

How could our plan have gone more wrong?

It was easier to get back in than it had been sneaking out, as we were not attempting to waste our time with stealth. When the door locked at our backs, we fell to the floor, gasping for air and dripping with sweat.

It was there, on the cold flagstones, that I looked at my dear friend.

She was a mess, hair fallen and tangled, dress destroyed in our flight.

No trace of victory in her expression to have made it home in one piece.

This was not a victory.

Our punishment would be very real, and most likely eternal.

At least one of us would be killed.

As it was the last time I might see my friend—one who had risked a great deal so we both might have a better future—I gave her a sorrowful smile.

“Maeve, he knows your name.” I hadn’t been thinking in my panic to set her free. I’d shouted it out, and now she was fully culpable for her part in my exploits. “I’m so sorry.”

“Did you see the size of him?” The glassy-eyed look was long gone from Maeve’s pale face. Stunned dread was all she had left. “I... let him kiss me. I don’t know why. One moment, I was scanning the crowd, and then this warm flush came over me. It was him. His big hands were everywhere. He put his tongue in my mouth, Lorieyn.” Green eyes wide as plates, she begged me to explain. “Why would he do that?”

I took her icy hands, panting from exertion. “He can’t reach you now that we’re back inside. Okay?”

Maeve was shaking like a leaf, sitting up to hug her knees. “This is my

fault. I pushed you into this. I wanted you out of the way so I could take top ranking.”

“It’s not like you lied about a secondary motivation. You didn’t push me into anything.” Shrugging, I offered a forced smirk. “I’m a lost cause anyway. Let me take the blame. I’ll say I forced you.”

Scoffing, hand to her forehead, she squeezed her eyes shut. “How did you force me into a dress and makeup?”

That was a good point, but I was willing to lie through my teeth if I had to. “Then I’ll tell the truth... to a point. You were just trying to stop me. Understand? *You went after me to stop me.* What happened at the bar was my fault.”

Voice little more than a whisper, Maeve said, “I’ll be executed, Lorieyn.”

“Not if you can learn to lie in the next five minutes.”

A single shrill alarm blared, Maeve jumping with a screech. “He’s here!”

Code Yellow. Someone was trying to breach the academy’s front gates. “It won’t be much longer before they upgrade the threat from yellow to red. If we go into full lockdown, every door will lock, and my opportunity to tell the general my version of the story first will be gone.” I held her wet eyes, demand in my voice. “So, I’m going to ask you one more time. *What happened in the city tonight, Maeve?*”

It was hard for her to speak the words, knowing what the outcome would be for me. “I... I went after you to stop you.”

Smiling, I urged her to go on. “That’s right. You were just trying to help a sister who wouldn’t listen.”

Crying as she squeezed me tight, she said, “A sister I love very much.”

“I love you too.” A warm tear fell down my cheek. “Tell everyone I love them, okay?”

With one last look, I left my friend to find her way back into the women’s dorm, rushing at full speed straight toward the lion’s mouth.

Straight for General Cyderial, where I would fall on my knees before him

and beg him to spare Maeve's life.
I'd give him mine instead.

Breathless, I burst through General Cyderial's office door, breaking every rule of protocol, to shout before I could even see him, "Sir, I am to blame for all of it!"

Racing past the vestibule, I charged into the office proper, only to practically knock into a large, golden beast.

One who grinned at me. "Hello again, Private."

Maeve's behemoth had beaten me there.

Huge, he took up way more of the room than any one person should, smirking at me as if this were actually amusing.

Panting, sweating from exertion, I tossed loose hair over my shoulder and showed my teeth. Unsure how he'd managed access to the building, I flexed my fingers, claws ready. Circling the stranger who'd had his hands all over my friend, aggressive drumming left my breast, violent intention clear in my snarl. "You!"

Collected, he fiddled somewhat with his sleeve, indicating that he saw me as no threat whatsoever. "Me."

Perhaps I wasn't. But if I'd had my sword, I would have drawn it, tip pointed right at his thick throat. "You can't have her until she's ready! She's not on the list, so get out!"

The intruder turned his golden head toward the very man I had come to

see. A man leaning over his desk as if he might rip it in half.

Cyderial's eyes...

They were running all over me, burning with rage.

I was disheveled and sweaty, chest heaving for breath from the manic insanity of the last hour. The dress. The lipstick. My hair half-fallen from its pins and on display in a way that was highly inappropriate for an academy girl.

That green-eyed glare promised painful retribution, as did the inhuman growl he aimed right at me when I nervously tried to smooth a stray lock behind my ear.

Moving my hair had exposed the cut of my bodice, a tasteful swell of exposed breast pale against the black material. Breasts that were not bound down tightly, but very much female and *there*. It was there he leveled the full weight of his gaze, leaning closer, animal noises warning me to not so much as move.

Drinking me down, he took note of every sin.

I'd dared to appear as the woman I was before him, no uniform hiding my body. No tight bun securing my hair at my nape. Everything was in stark opposition to what was permitted.

Everything honest.

All of it forbidden.

The length of the skirt displayed strong, well-shaped legs. The shape of my waist highlighted where fabric nipped in. And my bare feet, dirty from a long run through city streets, were still dainty without boots to hide how I was formed.

When that weighty gaze came with all its judgment to rest on my pink-stained lips, I felt a powerful urge to wipe the lipstick off before he might have another reason to break my neck.

I could not be killed until I might advocate for my friend.

Fingers to my mouth, I smeared the pink wax, only to jump when he

barked a savage, “Stop!”

Frozen, never having heard such a guttural tone, I could barely swallow.

“You’ve been keeping secrets, Cyderial!” the large stranger bellowed with laughter. “Oh, this is rich.”

The intruder was not addressed by my commanding officer, not until the man began to tease, “Two of her suitors, one ranked highly enough to access the list, are outside right now. The younger fellow is so smitten all he can do is keep asking for her name.”

The general’s eyes left me to cut a dangerous glance toward the loudmouthed giant.

I’d seen Cyderial angry over the years, but that whole-body vibration was new. A shaking rattle blending with the internal thump of his drum. A moment later, the wooden top of his desk snapped under his grip.

Wisely, I eased a step back.

The stranger stopped laughing long enough to rebuke his unwilling host. “You’re making her nervous.”

“Nervous? I should be putting her over my knee and beating some sense into her!”

The general was infamous for his cold-blooded composure. On rare occasion, he’d marginally raised his voice to me in the past, but I had never heard him rage. Not like this.

Never could I have imagined him capable of it.

Eyes wide, I took another step back, trying to find words. “I—”

The stranger stepped over my sorry attempt at speech as if anything I might say held no consequence. “Your little girl here had her talons at my carotid artery not an hour ago.” He lifted his chin to show the dried, crusted blood. “She drew blood. Swore she’d shred my throat to ribbons if I didn’t let my Maeve go.”

He’d had the nerve to say it as if the general should be impressed.

I was not about to allow the man who assaulted Maeve to spin the story in

his favor. Turning on him, I snarled, “You had no right to touch her without permission! Maeve is not on the list!”

The amusement was back, darker in tone and full of malicious intent. With an audacious wink, the stranger said, “Do you really think one foolish miscreant can prevent a mate from taking what’s his?”

I could certainly try. He’d made her cry, now I was going to make him pay for it. “A man of honor would not behave the way you did. She’s terrified right now.”

That knocked the smirk right off his face. Hands in supplication before him, he said, “Maeve does not need to be frightened of me. Ever.”

Bullshit.

“Don’t say her name like you know her. My sister is special! She deserves to be treated with gentleness and respect.” Before the overly large one might interrupt me again, I turned my attention to the unmerciful general slowly distorting the shape of his cracking desk. “General Cyderial, everything was my fault. Maeve was only trying to stop me and would not have been there if—”

I had no idea hybrid males could sound like true vorec, but he hissed and drummed a pitch so awful I was very tempted to cover my ears. As he roared, wood splintered in his grip. The once beautiful piece of furniture snapped in half, and the general shoved the remaining bits out of his way, approaching at a measured, dangerous pace. “If you lie to me one more time....”

Petrified down to my bones, I only held my ground out of sheer inability to move, whispering, “She was only trying to help me.”

Savage, each breath stretching his uniform jacket, he snarled, “And what were you thinking, entering a bar full of unmated males?”

I was thinking I might never have to see his face again, that the only thing I’d need fear was the beautiful wild waiting for me. Instead, I whispered, “I needed to find someone.”

Voice a demonic pitch, I swear he went a bit more insane. “Who?”

I had no answer clever enough to give. Not one that wasn't going to see him snap my neck before I might advocate for my friend.

Shouting, he demanded an answer. "What man, Lorieyn?"

I'm not sure when my back hit the wall, but I found myself cornered. "Someone who could help me."

"What could another man give you that I have not provided?" And then it seemed to dawn on him. My dress, the cosmetics on my face. The fact that my hair was styled like one of the women in my magazines. I had been trying to entice male attention.

The drum in his chest hitched, breathing suspended.

The room was deathly quiet without that noise, tomb-like, only my labored breathing to be heard.

He never broke eye contact with me. "General Thayer, you may leave now."

General? What could possibly be worse? Maeve was going to lose her mind, everything, if that man got his hands on her and spoiled her future.

And it was my fault.

An unexpected voice of reason, General Thayer seemed to come to my defense. "She can't possibly understand what she was trying to do, Cyderial. She's a child."

Answering General Thayer but glaring at me, Cyderial grew icy. "She's a fully grown woman. The same age as Maeve."

Thayer countered, "So... she was curious?"

A muscle twitched in Cyderial's cheek, the man taking in my dress and lips once more. "This wasn't curiosity. Her scheme was planned to achieve a specific outcome."

Yes, it was. Chin ticking up a notch with the last of my tattered dignity, I made no secret of my intentions.

The stranger's dark scoff wasn't comforting in the slightest. "What could she possibly want? Chaos in the streets? Lovesick boys banging at the

academy door?”

I was a resentful young woman who wanted a great deal. One who had been forced into the position of fighting for what I desired.

Cyderial lost my attention completely, so I might snarl at his guest, “I can’t go into the fog unless I have been ruined.” The look of horror on the stranger’s face fed me to continue. “You have all the power, and we have none. Condemn me if you want, but I’m not sorry for wanting more than life in a cage.”

Golden head tilted, the stranger tutted at me and shook his head. “Tonight, you saw what happens when stupid girls leave their cage, didn’t you?”

I had seen much in my stolen time exploring the city—beautiful things that made me think there might actually be hope of a pleasant life outside these walls. I saw couples walking without fear. And then I saw the truth. “I saw men who couldn’t control themselves get to do as they pleased, wear what they wanted, and not be treated as if their very existence were shameful and dangerous.” The remainder of my rant was for General Cyderial, my attention and anger all his while it was my turn to glare. “So what if I want to wear a dress and explore the city I’m supposed to lay down my life for? There is nothing wrong with being feminine! Nothing to hide about what we are or the things we’re naturally drawn to. The academy forces us to live a lie. To dress like men. To act like men. *We are not men!*”

General Cyderial somewhat softened. “Lorieyn, if I let you wander, there would be wars fought in the streets over you. Two males are banging at the academy’s doors after a few minutes in your presence. By morning, one of them will have killed the other. A preventable loss of life.”

I had no idea men would act crazy just from hearing my song. That wasn’t exactly taught in the academy! “What of my life? I refuse to be accountable, when men in power fail to explain the details of mating to females. Even the humans don’t know!”

Jaw jumping, Cyderial ground his teeth. “I’ve answered every question you’ve asked.”

“Half-truths and generalizations! Women deserve to know how our bodies work and what you’re going to do to us.” Gesturing at the giant, I sent him a sneer. “Maeve is terrified right now, because this idiot stuck his tongue in her mouth and she doesn’t understand why.”

The idiot offered a response that almost sounded like an apology. “It takes a truly powerful man to be able to control themselves in the presence of their unmated female. Even I had Maeve against the wall with my hand up her skirt within moments of hearing her song. If anyone other than you had approached, I would have killed every man at that bar. Old friends, brothers, my subordinates... all of them.”

If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed an adult so incapable of self-control. Men really were feral. To Cyderial, I said, “Sir, I calculated the odds, ran as much surveillance as time would allow, and waited until there was low occupancy at the bar. I didn’t think anyone would notice me, let alone get hurt. I just needed to find *one* male willing to ruin me who wasn’t an academy boy you would murder. And like I said, Maeve was only trying to bring me home. When she couldn’t, she stayed to keep me safe.”

He wasn’t buying it.

It would seem General Cyderial understood far more than I’d hoped. “Things did not work out as expected, and you only returned to the academy to keep *her* safe. So that you could lie for her.” The general let out a careful breath, bones in his hands cracking when he tightened his fists. “If not for your loyalty to Maeve, you would have wandered the streets until a male agreed to mutilate you, assuming you didn’t get caught by a suitor and bonded in his frenzy.”

There had to be a way to get at least one male to understand why I had been pushed to such a point. Pleading, I said, “You hear the song from a

woman. *I hear a song in the fog.* What lengths wouldn't you go to for your mate?"

"I will go to any length for my mate." He looked at me as if he understood perfectly. Understood and despaired. "Even if my actions earn her hatred."

Maybe there was some hope after all! It felt as if a thousand-pound weight fell from my shoulders, my relief setting me alight. "Then you *do* understand!"

It felt as if for the first time the two of us shared a moment of pure agreement—a mutual accord. Something that might've even seen that night set right.

Far more collected, General Cyderial addressed his guest. "General Thayer, it's time for you to leave."

"Understood." Where I found hope, Thayer had only a look of measured concern, maybe even a look of pity for his compatriot. "I commend you on your restraint, old friend. She *is* a handful."

Turning to go, the stranger gave me a quick measuring look. "It would be a worthy thing if you could learn to care for your mate as much as you seem to care for my Maeve."

This again? "She's not yours!"

Cyderial stepped between us, adding an edict to Thayer's dismissal. "The academy will be in full lockdown until this situation is resolved. Maeve is off limits so long as she resides on these grounds."

No more jests or mockery, General Thayer retreated toward the door. "You have my word that I will follow your example, so long as I am able."

The door closed.

Only Cyderial and myself in the beautiful, terrifying room.

Unsure what to say, I muttered a soft, "Thank you for keeping him away from Maeve. She won't want him."

"I can't keep Thayer away from Maeve forever. He is a general. Nothing

can prevent him from taking her whenever his self-control runs dry.”

“But... you just ordered him away.”

His reply was stern. “From *you*.”

Scowling, he reached for a security panel near my shoulder. A series of codes were activated requiring voice identification and a retinal scan. Per lockdown protocol, the lights immediately dimmed, fading until only a soft red glow signified students were under the highest threat. Shutters would be falling over every window and entrance. Deadbolts tumbled into place, sealing every door within the academy, including the only exit from that room.

I was trapped in Cyderial’s office.

No men scratching at the doors would be able to breach the stronghold now. Not even another general. Maeve was safe.

But I was in grave danger.

The general who had killed my friends would order my gruesome execution next. Most likely a public hanging, so no impressionable young girls would be tempted to follow the terrible example I’d set.

Or, by the look of the vein jumping at his temple, the general might kill me right there with his bare hands.

Cyderial's face hovered over mine. The low red light sharpened the planes of his high cheekbones, exaggerating shadows and menace. Red shone off his pale hair, those vicious eyes behind the drape of blond glowing scarlet.

If I had not already known the man was incapable of mercy, I might have begun begging at that very moment.

A thrumming base began building low in his chest, reverberating in the air between us like a feather-light brush of sound against my skin. Far different than the pounding drums of aggressive threat, yet somehow much more perilous.

I didn't know this sound.

Unknowns made me nervous.

The awful pair of us were already close, but he eased closer still.

Too close.

If these were to be my final moments, I wanted to be brave. But I was not brave, my instinct to run screaming at me to move my legs and flee. But for some reason, the noise he made kept me pinned. Held me there—right there—to await destruction.

The fog was never going to be mine.

Maeve was never going to be truly safe from Thayer.

And I was going to die without having ever lived.

At least the room smelled nice and I was surrounded by pretty things. That is what I would think of, not that he was slowly reaching forward to take me by the throat.

Lightly, his grip circled my neck.

A ghost of a smile, malicious and starved, played over his lips when my racing pulse was under his thumb.

The man never smiled, a dry smirk all I had ever witnessed.

This smile let me know it was personal.

I would pay for what I'd done.

Voice heavily distorted with anger, he broke down every last word of condemnation. "The idea that you would have let some random man fuck you, desecrate your body...."

I swallowed, the action only emphasizing his grip on my throat. Expletives were rarely used by those around me, but the implication made it clear. "Fuck" was a dark word for intercourse.

Dangerous, he asked, "Would it have mattered whose cock was inside you?"

Another new word.

Tilting my head back so I might measure his every move, I confessed, "No."

"You would have let anyone touch you any way they wished?"

Was that pain in his expression?

"Yes." If that's what it took.

He closed his eyes, drew in a slow, deep breath, and released it.

"I should have done this a long time ago." The hand about my throat pulled me marginally closer, close enough that his breath warmed my lips. "If you are giving away your body, then consider it claimed."

Before I might fully grasp the insanity he'd just spoken, his mouth crashed down in a harsh, punishing kiss.

This was not a boy's tentative explorations in the secret dark, but a fully grown man taking whatever he wished from a woman with no experience in how to defend against such things.

There was no tenderness in the way his lips moved over mine, in what he tasted or took.

Stunned, my arms were uselessly frozen at my sides, my body stiff from shock. Yet I squeaked, each sound of protest swallowed down or covered with his demanding grunts and snarls.

No reprieve from a relentless opponent was offered.

No opening I could exploit.

The threatening hand at my throat altered its grip, burrowing into my hair until the base of my skull was cradled in his palm. His tongue dipped into my mouth, and I squealed as he teased.

The taste of him was sweet. When I bit down, his blood did nothing to injure the flavor.

He tasted exactly how the room always smelled—distracting and delicious.

The fact that I liked it, stupidly realizing the source of that fragrance had never been the toxic flowers around the room, enraged me.

Claws cutting through his uniform, burrowing straight into the meat of his arms, I maimed what I could. But academy females were forced to keep them short, and he either didn't care or failed to notice the damage I'd done, intent instead on pressing his chest to my breasts so that incessant thump vibrated straight into me.

His drumming, the rapid clicks, that unknown specific rhythm, brought a peculiar feeling tingling under my skin. Strange new sensations whispered to my brain that I better flee before the circling predator took down his prey and began to feast.

Too much adrenaline overburdened my system. I began to shake, to hyperventilate from all that sweet scent.

Lightheaded, I lost more ground.

An unfairly simple alteration of his hold took advantage of my sudden weakness. His lips left my mouth, pressing hungry kisses to the edge of my jaw as he worked toward my ear. The sensitive flesh of my earlobe was sucked into his mouth, sensation forcing me to my toes.

Sharp teeth nipped wet flesh. “You have no idea how long I’ve had to wait.” The flat of his tongue licked at the vulnerable shell before he might whisper, “How badly I’ve needed to fuck you.”

That word again.

His tone was *filthy*, and I was completely out of my depth.

With a shuddering exhale, woozy as if drugged, I finally found the will to demand he stop. “What are you doing to me?”

Pulling at the buttons on the front of my dress, he met my eyes with no shame. “You know exactly what I’m doing.”

Ruining me? Was he going to give me the fog after all?

No.

This was something different.

This was something that had to stop immediately.

“This isn’t right.” Breathless and muddled, my hearts raced so fast I could hardly think straight. “Don’t do this.”

Fabric tore, and he found my naked breast. A forceful grip took hold of flesh that felt strangely swollen, and my eyes rolled back. It felt so wonderful that before I might realize what I was doing, I arched my back to press against that warm touch.

Whatever noise escaped me left him groaning in response. The rattle in his chest grew louder, rhythmic, each vibration palpable.

I began to sway, so very dizzy, unknowingly matching his beat thump for thump. Paired with heady breaths and languid kisses, the pair of us made rhythmic music.

Drowning in the sweet smell and the feel and the taste, my defenses

crumbled.

Even my sight grew fuzzy around the edges.

There were no words, no coherent thought. Somehow, my hands had tangled in blond hair, pulling his head lower so those wicked lips might sample my exposed breast.

A hot mouth closed over a part of my body I had no idea could know such sensation.

Sucking my nipple into his heat, his tongue teasing each nerve, he drew an animal cry straight from my lips.

Delirious with pleasure and more of that sweet scent, I didn't think to resist when he kicked my legs apart. A muscular thigh came between my knees, propping me up so his mouth might attack my other breast.

Clinging to his shoulders, an uncontrollable urge to rub myself against his leg left me rolling my hips in search of something I could not name.

But when the scaled flesh between my legs made full contact with his bulk, horrible pain came upon me. Radiating from the apex of my thighs, a rolling wave of sharp agony went screaming through every nerve.

Rigid, I cried out, clawing my way up his body to end contact where it felt as if I'd been stabbed with a rusty blade, "Stop!"

No relief was found—the general pressed his advantage. Instead, that horrible tearing rip of awfulness moved higher, cramping internal agony following.

Sobering torment led to a moment of terrifying lucidity.

I was locked in a red-hued room, pinned to the wall by an untrustworthy male. One who was watching me with unflinching ferocity as he tore at what was left of my clothes.

General Cyderial—my tormentor—was the reason I was in such agony.

Lashing out, I raked my claws across his face. Yet I'd missed his eye, marking little more than four torn red lines from eyebrow to ear.

It suited him, the blood and the diabolic smile that followed. Lips swollen

from use, Cyderial pressed his mouth to my temple, breathing, “You would have let any male guide you through this?” A cruel laugh. “Trusted them when you were vulnerable and in pain? My foolish, beautiful girl. How would you have possibly been able to defend yourself against the unworthy?”

Another unbearable wave of torment left me doubled over. The sensation of a searing-hot poker scrambling my insides, leaving me to pant, “Wh-What are you doing to me?”

This was worse than death.

“Come.” Tender in his handling, he drew my stumbling, pain-wracked body from the wall and maneuvered me toward a mirrored cabinet. “Let me show you.”

When the pair of us were before the reflection, he brought my back flush to his thrumming chest. By breasts bared, my dress shredded and hanging on in tatters at my hips, I heaved for breath, wishing to fall to the floor and curl up in my misery.

But he held me to him. He made me look.

And then the velvet drumming continued, a pulsing reply ushered from my chest as it vibrated through my bones. And horrible pain grew into sheer misery.

He intended to make me watch as his music tore me in half.

My internal organs chose that moment to rip themselves apart, grinding against each other under the heat of the palm he pressed to my stomach, where he kneaded the flesh.

I screamed, driven to my tiptoes. Spine bent from pure agony, I began to pant like a wild beast and beg for death. “Please... stop.”

Nuzzling at my ear, he murmured, “Don’t fight it. Let yourself open for me.”

For him?

No. No. No!

It couldn’t be *him!*

Sobbing, I opened my eyes, hoping I might find something, anything that would show me this was just a terrible dream.

But the sight before me....

The mirrored face of one of his finer curio cabinets held the reflection of a dangerous man holding a smaller, exposed female in an unyielding embrace.

Low, glowing red light danced off my exposed skin, my precious dress torn to my waist so his hands might stroke the naked flesh of my stomach.

Breasts, swollen and heavy, moved with my erratic breath. Tears ran down cheeks flushed with shame and panic.

But him? General Cyderial possessed a look of utter demonic delight in that terrifying reflection.

The exact opposite of my clear distress in every way.

We were lurid in the mirror, the male fingertips dancing over my throat unsafe yet somehow beautiful.

Slowly, inch by inch, he grabbed handfuls of my tattered skirt, hiking the material higher, compelling me to watch as my thighs were exposed.

I couldn't stop him, not with the pain I knew. I could hardly stand, yet I struggled nonetheless.

The purr of his voice warned me to obey. "Look."

I watched him reach under my raised skirt, roughly grabbing the swollen scaled flesh between my legs.

There was one final moment of blinding misery.

Just one.

Followed by a gushing wave of instant relief.

Swooning in his arms, I would have fallen had Cyderial not supported my weight. While he had me docile and breathless, he forced me to watch in that mirror. Showed me his touch was succor, that his palm soothed, all the while kneading softness where there was none.

My head fell back against his shoulder. Exhausted from battle, a drug-like

lull growing inside me, I had no ability to prevent him from doing as he willed.

A single lingering kiss was placed on my damp forehead.

To our reflection, he asked, “Do you see?”

The tips of his fingers began to gently spread flesh that had previously been solid. My iridescent scales had split down the middle, flashes of vibrant purple tinged with a little bit of blood opening with his touch. New flesh, soft flesh, laced with a dripping cream that seeped out of some unknown crevice.

Showing me I was now soft and malleable, he dipped a careful fingertip between that freshly torn slit of flesh, running his touch up the length.

Dear God!

My leg involuntarily jumped. Knee bent, I kicked at air, gasping for breath.

Nothing in life could possibly have prepared me for such sensation. This new feeling eclipsed—*devoured*—all else.

Not rushing my education, the tip of his finger traced every external alteration, the interior of each soft fold, so I might learn where I was most sensitive. When he stroked the slit in its fullness, my hips chased his touch for more.

And there was more—a freshly opened, tight channel he burrowed his middle fingers into until I melted.

Wrapped in sweet scent, the pulsating vibration from his chest coaxing me to relax, I could not remember why I had been afraid. I could hardly remember my name.

Female sounds came from parted lips, my body liquid as it ground against a strong male hand.

The sound emanating from our shared music... a song more beautiful than anything I had ever heard in the fog, promised all was as it should be, should I submit.

A trickle of wetness ran down my thigh, something slippery that eased his

entrance, another finger added to thrust in and out. Palm rubbing circles on sensitive nerves in that new, beautiful slit, he began to encourage the strangest building pressure.

Pressure that grew into mounting pleasure unlike anything I'd ever felt.

Eyes rolling back into my head, I gave over to it, jerking my hips, riding the hand working between my legs.

“You're beautiful.”

That voice was so familiar. But before I might make sense of my sudden spike of concern, energy began to zip from my toes and fingers, gathering to thrash at that pressure in my core. When it was more than I could bear, an explosive starburst of bliss stole my breath.

The world went white.

“Good girl.”

Humming, I offered no resistance when he drew my drowsy self to the floor. I was far too tingly to care about anything further than the beautiful music and much-needed sleep.

But where I was growing quiet, the male's drumming crescendoed.

Something about that noise enticed more warm fluid to seep from my center.

My dress—what was left of it—I heard him tearing to shreds until I was fully bare. Some part of me was unhappy to know what he'd done, my eyes parting so I might complain. But I lost all words when I found him crouched over me, working his belt apart.

The button of his trousers popped open; the fly descended. His hand reached in and withdrew something... *concerning*.

Concerning enough to snap me out of whatever daze had taken over my brain.

That looked nothing like the human penis I'd seen in the video.

A video about human sex.

This was sex!

I went to my elbows, eyes huge. “Wait!”

Why was the room spinning? Shaking my head to clear it, I put a hand to my forehead and tried to get up.

But he moved one knee between my thighs, then another, forcing my legs to part, unsettling my balance so that I sagged back against the floor.

My new slit felt cool air, something slick and scented spilling out to trickle over my anus.

He took my wrists, pinning them beside my head.

Muddled, I mumbled, “Wait. Please.”

That thing began to prod me, the not-human appendage. Pointed spear-like tip, groped at my thighs, while the male restrained me firmly in place. Prehensile, rippled accordion rings ran down its length so the hybrid *cock*, as he’d called it earlier, might stretch and move, contract and thicken. Teasing its vibrant purple head down my seam, it rolled itself in the slick fluid that spilled from my core.

I watched, petrified, held firm by the man, as it prodded my opening and began to work itself inside me.

Hyperventilating, I fought and lost. It breached. Stretched, contracted, stretched, contracted, that male organ pushed deeper while my captor hushed me like this was not a nightmare but something to be treasured. “Shhh, my love.”

A full-body shudder moved through the man as he gained ground, more of his terrifying cock invading my body.

“Don’t do this!” I was sobbing from the stretch by the time he surged forward and seated himself fully within, begging for mercy and receiving none.

The sound, the smell, the way his lips kissed away my tears... those strange things kept trying to steal my attention.

But this was the general, a man I loathed, pinning me to the floor and forcing his terrifying, wriggling organ inside me. I was going to burst, stuffed

full of a writhing *thing* and losing the battle for clarity the more he squirmed in my guts.

And then he began to rock his hips, that monster within me dancing to the beat of each thrust. Surging forward, filling me to bursting. Pulling back, retreating through a mess of slippery fluid to leave an ache behind.

I could feel every ripple that made up the length of his cock stretch and stimulate my newly exposed, sensitive flesh. No matter how I tilted my pelvis in a bid to break free, he did as he wished, until another untamed surge began to build.

My mind said no, my mouth begging for mercy between relentless, delirious kisses, but my body began to move as it willed. Undulating in a dance against my aggressor, I realized I'd begun to dig my heels into his lower back, urging him on.

The brush of his pubic bone would send sounds from my lips that left him groaning. The arch of my spine—so my acutely sensitive nipples might drag over his chest—brought forth manic snarls. Faster the tempo built, no longer slow and cautious but passionate and unbearable.

It was as if the human half of me had dissolved into nothing, no voice or reason in the cries I made. All animal instinct and wonder, I enjoyed that beastly cock moving in and out of my body. How it thrashed and what it took—knew he was doing things with it inside me I could not even begin to understand but that I *needed*.

Submission promised pleasure that would change me into something new.

When he dared take my mouth, I drank down a male that was strong, beautiful, and well-made, my tongue tangling with his.

And he gave.

The male lips at my ear spoke in a language that meant nothing to me, yet I knew the words were decadent and rich. His cruel mouth bit down, sharp teeth breaking skin wherever he wished, over and over as I healed and gave him a fresh canvas to mark.

When my belly began to tremble, he reared back, intent on watching each expression that danced across my features. A whirring warmth moved under my skin, the previous pleasure from his hand a sad shadow in comparison. What churned within me was world-shattering.

My stomach clenched and rippled, the opening where he pierced me with that fat, prehensile organ gripping him hard, sucking him deeper.

I screamed, bucked madly, locking down around his girth as he strained and roared.

My wrists were abandoned so he might take my hips and hold my flailing body tight to his pelvis. Within my core, terrible, beautiful pressure grew, and some part of him swelled. Something that stretched my poor muscles and left me convulsing around the bulbous *growth* locking my body to his.

Moments later, the male bellowed, and a flood gushed from him to fill me. Then another. Over and over until my belly began to softly swell.

Delirious with pleasure, each spurt sent me higher into bliss until I thought I'd perish. White light filled me, sparkles moving under my skin. Within my belly, his pulsating prehensile cock, firmly locked within, gyrated and slithered, moving so much I could see it poke and prod.

One hip was set free, a huge, warm hand landing near my mound to stroke upward toward my ribs. Again and again as the man pumped me with more fluid than my body could hold.

Except that bulbous growth locked behind my pubic bone forced me to keep it in. Stretching my skin around my opening until it tingled in warning that pulling away would cause harm.

But this much fluid didn't feel good; some part of my mind knew that. Another part was cooing and languid, whispering that I should trust him.

That only he knew what needed to be done.

I didn't understand what happened—none of it made sense. But the handsome one was working tirelessly—his wriggling cock prodding left and right, his massaging hands following the shape of his organ in my belly.

When it was too much for even delirium to obscure, when I was certain that swishing sensation and the spike of pleasure-pain from the pulsating ball of flesh was unendurable, an exhausted hand reached up to stop him. “No more.”

Fingers caught, panting from exertion, he brought them up to his lips for a kiss. “I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

But that cock kept working at something deep within my core.

And I didn’t like it anymore. Because that voice—my whole life, I’d known hearing that voice meant one was in grave danger.

Suddenly petrified, I called to the red, hazy shadows. “Cyderial?”

Scooping my upper body off the floor, the general drew me to rest against his chest. My legs spread over his thighs, the knot of flesh holding us as one pressed deeper, leaving me hissing in discomfort when the balloon within me moved organs to make space.

Kneeling, he held me on his lap, gravity bearing my weight down against his invasion. The distorted bulge of my belly growing each time he pulsed inside me.

My body wanted the pleasure of a languid stupor, not the aching soreness of reality, but it wasn’t possible. Not when green eyes drank me down.

The terrible significance of the situation dawned.

There was no mistaking the feel of Cyderial’s cock wiggling within me. I remembered some of the things he said. Crazy things about submission and ownership, about fucking and how badly he’d always wanted me.

No! It could not be him! “What have you done?”

Bracing me with one arm, smoothing my hair back with the other, he was gentle, unashamed to speak such horror. “I opened you. I bonded you. And now I am breeding my mate.”

“No!”

My limbs were limp, heels brushing the ground in my weak attempt to push off his lap. He let me try long enough for the harsh reality of his words to set in. Our bodies were locked together through the obscene swelling of his organ in my guts.

“And now I am breeding my mate.”

As if to punctuate his declaration, I felt him writhe within me.

Caught on his cock and held in his arms, General Cyderial murmured, “You have the most beautiful song, Lorieyn.”

I was so full I was going to burst. Breath labored from such pressure, I whined, “You’re hurting me.”

As if he knew just how to handle my disquiet, he reached between us and ran the pad of his thumb around the newly split scales stretched wide open by his cock.

Pleasure shot all the way down to my curling toes, a fresh climax of energy forcing me to flex every muscle. Stomach contracting, an internal vice griped about that *thing* inside me, sucked it deeper as it rippled in my internal grip.

Bits of his guttural groans blended with my building cries, and I realized that he was *enjoying* what he could make my body do while I was trapped in

a blinding climax. With nothing more than a careful sweep of his thumb, he set sensitive nerves sparking to life.

I'm not sure how long it went on, but my insides moved of their own accord, his writhing cock battering against them in some ancient dance beyond my comprehension.

It was shamefully obvious that despite my complete ignorance, my body knew exactly what this was. My mind, on the other hand, was in a state of fright.

To know such pleasure while high on true distress? One of my hearts was going to burst. Panic and pleasure wove together; the more I resisted, the stronger the rapture. Egged on by the man's fluttering touch.

Male fingers knew where to tease to spark a deeper physical thrill. He targeted my slippery new seam. Placed light rolling pinches to my nipples and devoured my whimpers with ravenous kisses upon my ear and neck. Rocking our bodies at the perfect pace to keep me gasping and clenching.

He kept me riding that line of mindful ecstasy past the point of cruelty.

I couldn't speak. There were tears of frustration, but mostly I was a radiant animal crying out her pleasure to any who might hear.

Never having been a particularly vocal person, I didn't know that voice. Was totally unaware I could make such trills and moans. And I would have been mortified had I any self-control.

When it finally began to abate and even his touches could not encourage my core to contract anymore, I sagged, completely in his power. Face to his hard chest, little zips of sensation working their way inside me, I sobbed at the unfairness of it all.

How could he do these things to me? Why did my body respond when my mind despised him with such violent fervor?

I had been submitted against my will. Defeated by a stronger predator on every level. Unable to bear another moment, I capitulated in a bid for mercy.

Pleading was all I might have left. Voice half a sob, half rattled by

uncomfortable breath, I implored, “I am begging you not to do that again.”

It was gentle how he held me, considering the trauma he’d just inflicted. Even his pleasure-laced voice was soft as he said, “I know you are frightened, but you have my word, my cock inside you is not causing harm. Relax, submit, and understand that my knot will not recede for some time. *I will take care of you.*”

There was an entire limb of an unwelcome man inside me, the balloon that locked it in, *his knot*, obliging me to bear it when I wanted it out. How was a person supposed to relax under those circumstances?

My need for details, for some slice of knowledge only he seemed to possess, drove me to pant out a question. “What is it doing to me?”

Hand to my hair, he massaged my scalp. “Your reproductive tract is a labyrinth of repository glands. Each must be coerced into expanding until full. The male knot assures the female cannot seek another mate until the victor is done seeding and sealing each pocket. Once you have received all you need, your body will signal to me that this first mating is complete. Only then will my knot recede. As of now, your body wants more.”

Collapsed against him, I whispered, “More what?”

A kiss to the top of my head. “Sperm. The fluid your contractions are enticing out of me. My genetic material will fertilize every egg you were born with. Our future children are being created in this moment. Right here”—a gentle palm landed on my round stomach—“where you will keep our embryos safe until the time is right to implant and grow them.”

My children were being created on the floor of an office... after violence and pain.

It was unthinkable.

“You held me down and forced yourself inside me.” Saying it out loud left me shivering and cold. “You didn’t have my permission.”

With gentle strokes up and down my spine, an unapologetic man held me close. “I know.”

He rubbed my back and rocked me on his knot when I began to sob.

How could this possibly be pleasing to him? “I’ve always hated you.”

Fingertips began to massage my nape, working out the ache at the base of my skull. “Hate me all you will. Yet recognize that I have heard your song since you were twelve. It was *difficult* to maintain composure when you were right there, beautiful and perfect and vulnerable. For ten long years, I resisted every animal instinct to claim you, even though there was absolutely no one who could prevent me. But you were so young—not yet old enough to handle me physically without serious damage. Nor were you mature enough to understand what was taking place between us. You needed time. I suffered the wait, and would have tested my willpower another year or two if you had not forced my hand by seeking your ruin”—his voice grew dark—“with a stranger in the streets.”

I was in no mental state to process any of that. Since I was twelve, he had been planning *this*...

That would mean that despite all my best efforts, I’d never had a future. Not one year of my hard work would have altered anything. The fog would never have been an option. He would never have allowed me to leave the academy. The list he repeatedly suggested I consider was never a true option. Only a means to gauge when he might pin me down on his office floor.

I swear I felt him spurt *again* that very moment. As if to punctuate the rape.

And I knew that word, because *he* had taught it to me. Once in explanation, and once in action.

Yet, to him, such a monstrous thing seemed only a minor inconvenience.

He had not struggled at all, whereas I had been overpowered and confused with little effort. There had even been moments in the mating that I had actively participated in my own destruction.

Mind reeling, I began to hyperventilate.

The man had heard my song for ten years and kept it secret. A man who

had wanted me on a very visceral level since I was a child.

Who had planned and kept me hidden away.

He'd made my life, and the lives of all those around me, hell.

The rules had changed so abruptly after I'd first met Cyderial. There was no more playing in the courtyard, no more visits to my mother. We had all been locked inside under constant armed guard. So he could have a reason to keep *me* locked inside under constant guard while the inconvenience of my age worked itself out.

I'd been kept in a bubble until he'd deemed me old enough to rape.

The suffering of all the other students... the executions. All of it was because he wanted me to himself.

He'd made me culpable.

Working at connecting the mess of my thoughts, I realized the needless violence over the past ten years, the executions. All of it had come from the madman still spilling fluid inside me. "You killed Private Cullen for no reason!"

"That damned boy!" Temper, the cold-blooded general had always had a strong reaction at the mention of the redheaded boy. "He gave us a full confession, Lorieyn. Private Cullen had every intention of fucking you. He was just working up the nerve."

Gripping my hair by the roots, he forced my head back so I would have to see those eyes. Acid-green eyes burning as they always had. Yet I knew what that insanity was. It was pure obsession. "Private Cullen was desperate and already aware he was going to die. You've always been too sweet to think the worst of anyone. How you've made him some kind of saint in your memory is poison between us. He wasn't a saint; he was a criminal."

"Then what does that make you?" I was sick with anger and once again aching where he pulsed in my guts.

"It makes me your mate." He'd spoken the words with deeply satisfied male pride. Cherished them on his tongue, smiling with joy and relief, as if he

had waited a lifetime to say them aloud. “One willing to do anything required to keep you safe. *Anything*. Remember that as you contemplate retaliation. We have an eternity together, and I am a very patient man.”

Rippling his cock at that moment, as if to luxuriate in the confines of my body, he made no secret of the amount of delight being inside me gave him.

The way he thought to cup my face between his palms while rocking our bodies so his knot might tease my oversensitive seam. How he looked at me with such adoration, tracing fingertips over the shape of my features.

The man completely terrified me.

With a soft smile and languid caresses, he murmured, “I have studied every text I might find on how to please you. Listened to elders describe the process of opening a mate. The first time is painful for the female no matter how careful one may be. I counted the seconds of your suffering once your body chose me and began to bloom. Even then, driven as I was to mount you, I gave you time to see and feel. Please remember that when your hatred fosters only regret for the way you were claimed. I can bear your disgust, but I do not wish for you to be sad.”

But I wasn't sad. I was devastated.

A direct opposition to his elation. This had been sacred to him. The way he murmured and stroked me, despite my open fear, unsettling. “You are mine now. *For life*. I can love you enough for both of us until you're ready to accept me.”

Knowing there were two men outside who'd also heard my song, knowing I could have chosen the man I'd be tied to for the rest of my life, made me resent him all the more. This monster had *stolen* me. “You took away my choice.”

The soft, proud thrum ushering from his chest was in strict contrast to the following threat. “Your song called to *me*, the strongest male. *You* called to me after countless females had been unable to sway my attention. The universe compelled me to learn patience, leaving me waiting for one-

hundred-and-forty-three lonely years until my genetic complement might be born. Now, we are bonded. Already, rapid alteration is taking place throughout every cell of your body, sealing you to me. We are one, and a female cannot be without her mate once he has claimed her.” Thoroughly pleased with himself, strong arms enclosed me in a gentle but firm embrace. “You’re angry now, but your body will crave mine. You *will* want me. Do not resist, and I will be gentle with you.”

He could not make me want anything to do with him. “I will not submit.”

“I have ways to compel your submission.”

Where his drumming had faded to little more than a purr, it pulsed back to life.

“That won’t....” But I somehow lost the thread of what I’d been meaning to say.

The room began to smell wonderful again, a sweet spice mixing with the scent of sex. Wooziness followed, lulling me to grow liquid and unable to resist his warm caress.

Soft kisses came to my lips, my eyes, my nose. “Surrender.” Cupping my cheek to settle my head just so, the man murmured, “I will take care of you while you rest.”

In my stupor, I felt him lay me ever so gently back on the carpet, arranging my limbs for my comfort. My protruding belly felt the heat of warm palms, his massage working where I was swollen, the touch easing the discomfort of the crushing pressure.

I felt so *good*.

His warm body against mine was dreamlike. His tongue at the shell of my ear and the filthy promises he made were delightful.

The strong male showed me he knew what to do with my body, so I purred under his touch and exploded with a shattering moan when he nipped at my throat and fingered the sensitive flesh stretched tight around his knot.

Cunt, he’d called it in those lurid whisperers. Cum, seed, a binding

promise that made me totally his. The handsome blond with a strong body and the power to take what he wanted.

Waves of fluid came to splash against my insides, more for me to bear.

When I was full, he began to knead my protruding belly from a new angle. Unsure why he did it, sleepy and spent, I wanted him to stop so I might rest.

But he would not put his work aside. Cock dancing and prodding through my belly, hands working in tandem with the wriggling thing. It almost seemed as if he stroked himself through me, milking his organ and pushing what poured from it somewhere important.

I dreamed despite the minor annoyance, surrounded by perfect sound and saturated in sweet scent.

Until he was pleasuring me again, drawing me out of my deep stupor to luxuriate in rapture. Stroking my throat, weighing my breasts, learning the dip and curve of my waist, he praised my beauty and worthiness. Grunted demands and soft, coaxing words urged me to arch my back for more and enjoy every climax, every last orgasm, he might give me.

He'd been slow and forceful, both languid and violent, throughout the many hours I'd been reduced to my animal self.

When I was far past exhausted, when no amount of pleasure might ease the growing aches in my body, at long last, the knot receded, a warm wave of viscous fluid pouring out of me as my belly contracted at the loss.

I should have been mortified, disgusted. But all I knew was relief.

“Sleep now, beloved. Our new life begins when you wake.”

Thirst dominated strange dreams that made it impossible to find comfort on my cot. Skin slick with sweat, I kicked off my blankets, groaning at the heat as a terrible craving for water clawed at my parched throat.

I was a furnace, and the sunlight was too bright through my tiny window.

Groaning into my pillow, I thought to hide my eyes in soft white fabric.

Except *my* pillow back at the academy was gray.

Blinking sleep from my eyes, I held my breath, taking in the wrongness of my location.

My bed was not this soft or large. Nor was it in a room with walls painted a soft shade of blue I'd never seen before.

But it was the windows that drew my eye. So many I had my choice of vantage points. With light so bright the building had to be high up above the churning fog.

That light was actual sunlight. Not the artificial illumination we were drenched with to keep our vitamin levels up at the academy.

Suddenly, I was very much awake.

And feeling quite ill.

Cautiously, I sat up, dragging a silken sheet over my nakedness while wide eyes took in that foreign room. The bed was massive, larger than five of my cots back in the dorms. Above it stood a canopy, each corner draped with

flowing gauzy material pure as morning fog.

The white gossamer curtains blew in a light wind. Real wind from an open window.

Windows in the academy did not open. I only knew wind from the few hours each day I might be scheduled for patrols.

I had never felt it on my naked skin or known the refreshing touch it might offer.

Such a discovery would have thrilled me were it not for the man relaxing in a nearby chair, watching me over an open book. A journal with a leather cover made from sapphire-blue vorec hide.

He closed it slowly, as if trying not to startle the wild, nervous thing in his bed. “How are you feeling?”

Sheet to my breast, my dark hair spilling about where I sat, my eyes darted to every corner of the room, taking in potential weapons, creating an exit strategy should he approach.

“You must be very thirsty.”

Parched and untrusting down to my aching bones.

There was a large vessel of water on a side table, a single empty glass beside it.

When Cyderial moved to lay down the book so he might prepare a glass, my eyes narrowed, a low warning thrum leaving my chest.

The memory was somewhat foggy, but I knew exactly what the general had done to me. Pain of that magnitude, I would *never* forget. The fear that followed would haunt my dreams.

All those delirious hours of compelled pleasure....

He had done something to me, twisted my thinking to engage my compliance. Made me drunk on him to the point that I’d forgotten he was the man I hated most, leaving me in such a state I saw only a beautiful male who was stabbing at my slippery insides with a monstrous appendage that felt glorious.

I'd enthusiastically participated, touched him, licked at his skin—and the memory tore me up with shame.

Sitting in that chair, dressed in civilian clothing, clean, vigilant... nothing about him seemed different or shaken. He stared at me with that same unwavering attention, that same fixation—utterly calm.

Collected.

Where I was vibrating with anxiety, naked, feverish, and at every disadvantage.

I remained frozen in the middle of that grand bed, waiting to see if he might move two steps to the right and free up my direct line to the door.

He did not.

From a large crystal pitcher, clean water was poured, the sounds of it hitting the glass reminded me that I was, in fact, desperate for a drink. Raising the full cup, he held it out at arm's length as he slowly approached.

Yes, I took it. Swiped it right out of his hand, no care if I spilled, so long as I might bring it to my lips and gulp it down. Watching his every breath over the rim as I swallowed.

Panting, my burning throat was somewhat refreshed, I calculated what the odds might be if I first took that pitcher, then ran.

“Give me the glass, and I will refill it.” Sounding so cool, so even, ever the unshakable leader, the general smiled.

Desperate as I was to hide away from his unblinking gaze, I was not unwilling to go without that water. “Give me the pitcher.”

Green eyes sparkling, he said, “One glass at a time.”

Fine.

I tossed the empty glass right at him, only for him to catch it in midair as if it were nothing. Then he refilled it and outstretched his arm once again.

More cautious in my retrieval, I took the glass slowly, stiff and ready to bolt. Once at my lips, every drop was swallowed. Handing it back, and then another full cup until my stomach was churning in warning that I'd better

stop.

Head pounding from dehydration, feeling unnaturally weak, I finished the last gulp and sighed.

Taking the empty glass from my limp hand, he set it aside, saying, “Private transport brought us to our home two days ago.”

This home was unlike anything I’d ever seen. Walls of windows high enough above the city that no fog hit the glass. Muted colors without a trace of drab academy gray. His adoration of pretty things was just as much on display in this space as it had been in his office. Even fresh flowers bloomed in a glittering vessel on a low table between two comfortable-looking wingback chairs.

This room did not seem like it had been designed with a male in mind. It was very female. Prettier than anything I’d seen in my old magazines.

I hated to admit how much I loved it.

Sandpaper rough, my voice cracked. “I thought you lived at the academy.”

Giving me room, he settled back in his comfortable chair. “My apartment there will no longer be required.”

The implication wasn’t missed. He had slept on academy grounds, because I resided on academy grounds. Now, he had me in this new place, his stolen mate.

Pulling the sheet tighter around my frame despite a strange fever growing in my skin, I said, “I need to use the bathroom.”

With a nod, he said, “It’s through the door behind you. Take all the time you need.”

As in, he wasn’t going to follow me? I could work with that. Sliding backward, dragging the sheet with me to cover naked flesh, I eased slowly off the bed—my eyes never leaving his form. One slow step at a time, I worked a backward path until my reaching hand found a wall at my back.

“To your right.”

Three steps to the side and I found the lavatory's threshold, slinking back first into another unknown space. Before he might intrude, I closed the door, snarling to find there was no lock.

The need to pee hastened me to the fanciest toilet I had ever seen, where my bladder emptied in a rush that reminded me of another warm rush that had surged from between my legs the last time I'd been lucid.

A flood of ejaculate that had ballooned my belly, gushing out of me once the growth around the base of his cock subsided.

Hot and frothy, smelling divine, it soaked us both as my stomach deflated until the length of his cock could be seen where it still lay in my guts.

Obscene.

Now, my torso was no longer swollen with male fluids. Flat, one might think I had dreamed the distortion. And though my skin didn't so much as display a bruise, I was oddly uncomfortable inside and out.

Achy and incredibly hot.

A recessed alcove to my left resembled a large shower, shelves behind a door made of glass filled with bottles of things I assumed would clean a body. There was no knowing when he might intrude, and no certainty I would have another opportunity to bathe... yet I was unsure.

My skin felt sticky against the sheet, my hair tangled and stinking of fluids.

If he found me repulsive, he might not touch me again.

No. That wasn't going to stop a male who had been calculating his assault for a decade.

For sanity's sake, I needed to be clean. The thought of a cold shower almost had me in tears, so I dropped the sheet and dared to allow myself to be cornered in the tiled space.

My mind hooked on thoughts that had to be addressed, I ran through my sorry mental list of what I knew of hybrid mating habits. They mated for life. The general had bonded to me. He *would* fuck me again. Maybe as soon as I

left the bathroom.

And I knew General Cyderial. He had told me himself how possessive he was of his mate.

Said it right to my stupid face as I sat there ignorant as the day was long.

All those years, those scant, important, life-altering conversations had been with the man who had been planning to claim me all along.

A male full of tricks that confused me, that made me forget to resist.

He *would* use them again if I refused his advances; I did not doubt it at all.

Ruthless. His studies of how to pleasure me, as he'd claimed, had given him the greater advantage. Not to mention his greater strength and resolve to take what he considered his.

This was an opponent I had fully underestimated.

And I had lost. Ultimately, *I had been ruined*, my wish granted in an unexpected turn of events.

Those windows showed me that I was so high above the fog that I wouldn't be able to hear its song nor smell its earthy richness.

From up here, it would be like staring at the top of a glowing white cloud, missing the damp that would have soaked my uniform and left my hair dripping.

So, tears dripped instead.

Silent tears fell from a stunned woman who had no idea what to do.

But I could start with a shower, move through the motions until something might make sense.

It was also okay to be clean. I could be comfortable as I grieved everything stolen from me.

And he had not come into the room, for I had been incessantly checking the door.

Plumbing more advanced than the simple knobs at the academy, the shower took some time to sort out. Summoning fresh water required the use

of a high-tech interface that displayed options I did not understand. I requested cold water to cool my fever, directing the system to pour down from the showerhead above.

Letting go of the sheet took effort, but I could not wash his sweet smell from my skin if I kept clinging. It fell to the floor, and I walked into the icy spray.

Burning skin was soothed, my hands rubbing all that cold water into my face as if I might scrub my mind clean of all the ick.

Two bars of soap sat on the ledge. I chose at random. Efficiency was key in the academy; I could scrub from nose to toes in one minute flat. It was the cascades of hair that ate up the rest of my minutes before rotation would be called.

But I got caught. There was a new part of my body needing care that made me nervous to address. The seam between my legs was soft and a bit swollen, still extremely sensitive, and uncomfortable for me to acknowledge.

But he had touched me there, fluids had been inside me, and I was an adult and this was my body. So, with careful fingers, I parted the slit and washed at what had been the cause of so much pain.

No longer oozing slick fluid, it was almost innocuous, just a tender opening in my flesh. Yet the vibrant purple that flashed when the scales were pulled aside made it clear this was an opening designed to draw the eye.

A mate's eye.

I ran a finger over the soft tissues, and though it was stimulating, it wasn't like the mind-bending sensation that had left me vulnerable when the general had done the same. The opening that would lead to my reproductive tract seemed tight when I tested it by dipping a finger inside. The mechanics of how it stretched to accommodate that horrible *thing* writhing between his legs was miraculous.

What had he actually done inside of me?

Hand to my lower belly, I thought of the children he claimed were now

waiting there. Fertilized embryos sleeping under my touch. How strange to know I was now carrying around life.

I loved children, but I would never allow them to suffer all I had been through.

Whatever he placed inside me would remain there, wasted. No child of mine would be handed over to the academy.

Sober, sad, I set the bar of oat-scented soap back in its place on the ledge. Turning to a soft-pink bottle nearby, I gave it a sniff.

It wasn't a smell I could place, but it reminded me of the fruit cubes we were sometimes served in the warmer months. Pleasant and light. From the texture, it seemed to be for washing hair, but it might have been anything. However, it lathered when I worked it into my scalp. My hair was my greatest vanity, a feminine part of myself I had been allowed to nurture as a recruit, so long as I kept it tied up outside the dorms. Those long, silky strands... I loved them.

Rich lather felt good as it cleansed what had become tangled and unkempt, soft bubbles soothing hot skin as they ran down to the drain.

For a brief moment, I did enjoy such luxury.

Under frigid spray, all suds rinsed away, and my body was clean enough to corrupt.

Certainly, my time under that water passed the standard four minutes allotted at the academy, yet water still flowed. Which gave me time to explore the other bottles dotting the shelves. The pink bottle I just used had a partner. Like its twin, it smelled divine.

Inside was something creamy that a small label on the back claimed would make my hair soft, shiny, and pretty.

The general provided this *for me*, chosen those scents and textures. Prepared for the day I would be brought back to this place.

Female things I might enjoy after a lifetime of being denied them.

Which was confusing and equally infuriating.

I *wanted* to try these luxuries, no matter if this was some kind of trick, so I read the directions and rubbed some of the creamy stuff into my hair.

It felt nice as I finger-combed snarls with the slippery product, much nicer than the weapon grease the girls at the academy worked into our locks in secret.

It rinsed out easily, my hair soft and smelling beautiful, leaving me with no other reason to stay under the cool spray. Conditioned to conserve water, having already wasted an extra three minutes, I turned off the shower.

There were no regulation drying cloths, but some sort of fluffy blanket things were stacked to the side of the shower's exit. Snagging one, I pulled it into the shower stall and found it worked just fine to blot water from clean skin.

There was even enough dry fabric left to wrap it around my hair and squeeze out excess moisture. Usually, I had to squeeze it out by hand, my mane a dripping mess no matter how efficient I had been.

Covering my nakedness with the fluffy rectangle of material, I opened the shower door and growled lowly.

My discarded sheet had been stolen. In its place, folded fabric was left on a small woven table.

The general had invaded my privacy.

He had dared.

Had he watched me bathe? Was he watching me even now from some corner in the overly large lavatory?

Private thoughts I'd had under the water were not for an audience. Had he seen me touch myself or cradle my belly in my palm? The very idea was so humiliating my skin went pink as shame coursed through me.

The general had said I could take my time! Perhaps I had taken longer than the standard four minutes, but I had still been relatively quick.

And I heard nothing of his intrusion.

That was a terrifying thought.

This was *his* house. He knew where everything was, how to move from space to space. The ultimate advantage to my nervous ignorance.

And he was playing with me. Leaving me things to explore, setting out lavender clothing he'd selected.

Dressing me up.

As a mate.

These were *gifts* for a mate. And I had to either wear what that offering or be naked.

Smooth to the touch, I lifted the fabric to find it was a sheer dress, unlike the ones in the magazines. It was long, flowy. When I held it up before me, the garment cut close to the body but wasn't tight or revealing.

I stepped into it, pulling it over my hips until I might drop the towel and quickly cover the rest of myself. There were no sleeves, just a pair of straps to hold the dress on my shoulders, leaving slick material to fall around me.

One glance in the mirror and I ground my teeth.

I had been totally wrong; the dress was indecent.

So pliant was that lavender fabric that the exact shape of my nipples was on display. As I moved, it fanned about my figure, drawing attention to the swell of my hip and the dip of my waist. There was even a slit to midthigh.

The black dress I had spent years creating highlighted a feature here or there. This silky abomination flaunted everything.

I was more naked in that draping slip of cloth than I was without clothing at all.

But at least I could run in it, where if I wrapped myself in the damp fluffy towel, I'd need to hold it to my body.

My greatest natural defense was my talons; my hands needed to be free. Otherwise, I would have no means of defending myself.

The new dress was not the only addition he'd brought into the space. A brush waited on the counter, a teeth-cleaning machine beside it. While running a cycle to scrub the fuzzy feeling out of my mouth, I worked the

brush through my wet hair, trying not to be impressed with how easy it was to comb, thanks to the fruity-smelling stuff from the shower.

Yet my hair was still dripping, each water droplet causing the already shocking dress to stick to my skin. This only led to frustration. Air drying would take time, and I knew he would not stay out of the bathroom forever. It would be better to face an opponent on my terms. Besides, the exit was in the other room.

Long hair dripping down my back, I cracked my neck and flexed each finger.

When I got to the closed door, I was ashamed of my hesitation to turn the knob.

What point was there in hiding? None at all. Better to face the beast and learn what I lacked, educate myself so I might choose my next move.

This was about survival.

Flight *and* fight had failed me in the office. To handle him, I needed a real strategy. We would have to speak; I might even be able to negotiate something favorable until I might find my way to the fog.

I was his mate, right? A certain amount of respect was supposed to come with the position.

Several slow, measured breaths, then I mentally counted down from five, pushing my way out before fear might swallow me whole.

But, one look at me in that dress, and his chest began knocking. Having been held down and fucked, I knew exactly what that rhythm demanded.

Without thought, I ran.

In a blink, the general unfolded himself from the cushioned chair, launching his larger body right for me. “Wait!”

Cyderial moved at a greater speed than any instructor or student I had ever trained with. Catching me instantaneously around the middle by a pair of strong arms, he proved his physical prowess was so far beyond my skill.

Stronger. Larger. Hard where I was soft.

Still, I fought with all I had.

A lifetime of training in hand-to-hand combat earned me a few solid strikes, but not enough. Kicking air, all claws and snarls, I found myself completely outmatched. In mere moments, he had my hands pinned at my back, bracing my struggles against a broad chest.

Not a single technique I had been taught made any difference.

Cyderial was my superior—not just in age and rank.

“Lorieyn, I’m not going to hurt you.”

But he would do other things!

Throwing back my head, I screamed at the top of my lungs. Even as the cries rattled windowpanes, I knew deep down no one would come to my aid.

Who would oppose the command of a general regarding the female he’d stolen as his mate?

His elusive rank was practically on par with God to hybrid kind. Humans

revered all he had done to protect the settlement.

He was a decorated hero. I was just a recruit with a mediocre performance record no one would miss.

“Listen, my darling, you are safe. *I am not going to hurt you.* I’m not going to force you.” Patting my back like I was a child, he rocked me slightly, still pinning my hands to the small of my back. “All I want is to offer you some food. Just food, all right?”

Showing teeth, I snarled, “Let go!”

He did, his body between me and my escape route as he gently eased me down. Moving carefully away from where I shook, his hands spread in supplication before him, he apologized. “It was an involuntary response. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Involuntary? He was the one who had left me the naked dress and invaded my privacy. Rattled and angry, I barked, “You don’t have permission to touch me!”

Nodding in agreement, composed despite the fact that he had just chased me across the room, he said, “You must be hungry. Conversation and dinner, that’s all I ask.”

The door was still right there, five paces away. So close I could taste it. But I had seen the speed at which he could move. I would never make it. I would be caught and humiliated, and his response might not be as unruffled or apologetic the second time.

Caged, I measured the room and considered my options.

I had none.

Voice employing a soothing pitch, he offered, “I do not want you to be under the impression that you are trapped in this room. Running in a panic through unfamiliar ground is a sure way to get hurt. This is your home; everything within it is yours. There is safety and comfort in these walls.”

I may have been much younger, but I was not stupid. “I understand what you’re pointedly *not* saying. I’m not trapped in the room, but I’m only safe in

the walls of your house.”

“You should not leave *our* home until you are—” He chose his next word after a moment of consideration. “—confident.” Smiling as if all he said was reasonable, Cyderial explained, “The city can be confusing. The layout was not designed for ease of travel but to mislead hunting vorec before the filters were constructed to keep the fog and predators at bay. Right now, you have no basis for orientation. When you are ready, I will escort you through the streets and teach you how to navigate them.”

Eyebrows high, eyes wide, I asked, “What gauge will determine if I’m *confident* enough to leave?”

“Right now, you are frightened. Give yourself time to acclimatize to our new situation.”

The logic was sound, but there was no mistaking I was caught in his web, under his control right where he wanted me. It also didn’t help that I wasn’t feeling well, too hot, extremely agitated, and tired, though I must have slept far more than normal.

He’d claimed I’d slept in his bed for two whole days.

As if his thoughts paired mine, he urged my attention toward a waiting table set for two. “You’ll feel better once you eat.”

He would make short work of me if I was weak from starvation, but I was too keyed up on adrenaline to possess any desire for sustenance. Closer to nausea, as fevered as I was.

I was on fire.

Pressing a hand to my queasy stomach, warmth radiated from my belly as if I were fighting a serious infection. “I think I need the infirmary.”

His voice was cool water. “There is a gift from your mother to celebrate our mating. It was delivered while you enjoyed your rest.”

“My mother?” He had found the perfect lure to draw my attention.

I hadn’t seen my mom since I was eleven, any gifts she may have sent confiscated by the academy. I only knew she had prepared them from her

mention of handmade sweets in her letters, which I still received, per protocol, on my birthday every year.

“It’s right there.”

It may have been a decade since I had seen the packaging her bakery used, but I recognized the pink box at a single glance. Forbidden sugar was within. “You’re not going to take it away?”

“No.”

Apprehensive, I narrowed my eyes. “I can eat it?”

He moved toward the table, pulling out a chair and motioning that I should take a seat atop the soft ivory cushion. “You’re the mate of a general now. Academy restrictions no longer apply.”

That was the ugly detail at the root of my misery and humiliation. “How does she know I’ve been mated?”

Smiling, he beckoned me with a finger and tried to tempt me closer to the box. “I updated the registry while you were sleeping. We are legally joined. Announcements have been made throughout the city. You now have the full protection of my rank.”

Seeing that man smile was unsettling in the extreme. I could hardly comprehend how his face might contort into any expression other than a scowl. “Protection from what?”

The question was ignored. “You’re hungry. Please, let me feed you.”

If it meant I might have what my mother made for me, I would concede and swallow unwanted food. However, there was no chance I was taking the chair he offered, choosing instead the one across.

Cautiously lowering myself into the seat, I watched him do the same.

He didn’t seem to mind my rejection of his courtesy in the slightest, extremely pleased and practically purring once I was settled and glaring.

The table setup was unlike the mess hall I was accustomed to. A round, sturdy table between us covered in a starched white cloth. There were dishes, not the worn metal trays I was used to, but delicate things, round, with

scalloped edges. They almost seemed to have been carved from semiprecious stone, dainty and glittery.

Had I not been required to keep my focus on the general, I would have loved observing them more closely.

“I’m going to remove the covers from the food, nothing more.” The warning was given before he reached forward to gather several domes. Flicking the mechanisms keeping food fresh, tiny vents hissed as steam released.

Seven platters were displayed, filled with all kinds of *things*. Some of it smelled nice; some of it did not. Yet nothing was familiar. There wasn’t a single gelatinous cube, not one serving of compressed vegetation. “I don’t know what any of this is.”

“Processed meat cubes and compacted vegetable patties are only for soldiers on duty and recruits in training. As my mate, I will serve you harvested vegetables and fresh game.” Pointing to various dishes, he began to describe them, showing me more food than I could eat. “This is the raw liver of a gacdsou. Over here is braised bulba shoulder. The white flesh is an aquatic animal, seared and glazed with citrus.” Next, he explained the various colorful plant things, describing flavor profiles and what paired well with each meat. “We’ll explore what you like, and in the future, I will bring you what you desire.”

All of it meant nothing to me. My whole life, I had been given food, and I ate it in the twenty-minute allotment for mealtimes. I had no opinion on my diet other than the opinion of not wanting to starve.

“May I have your plate?”

The empty one in front of me? “Why?”

With a soft smile, he offered, “I will serve you so you can taste what you will. Afterward, your mother’s gift for dessert.”

An easy and relaxed General Cyderial was very disconcerting. But I’d rather have him sitting across from me than touching me in any way.

Cautiously, I handed him the pretty plate, watching the imperfections in the polished crystal catch the light.

Very pretty.

It wasn't just the table and bed that were strange.

I stole assessing glances at his space, while he filled the glittering dish. The whole room was nothing like anything I'd known within academy walls. The space was filled with soft light and fresh air, the decorations delicate and pretty. Gossamer curtains around the bed still waved lightly with the breeze, the same breeze running over my burning bare arms.

The plate was returned to me, small portions of each edible thing organized in a strategic arrangement of his choosing. He smiled when I placed it before me.

Self-conscious, knowing just why he looked at me that way, I said, "Males eat first at the academy. Aren't you going to get some for yourself?"

Voice husky, he urged me to begin. "This is for you. I won't eat until you're done."

The general's fixated stare had altered overnight. What had once been lifeless and deranged was now obsessive and *pleased*.

This pleased him.

Which made me very uneasy.

Sit, eat, and be stared at, or run around and be caught and potentially fucked on the floor while he held me down. It was a simple choice. Picking up my fork, I looked over my plate.

There was no rhyme or reason to my first selection. Tines stabbing into something red and shiny, I brought it to my mouth and shoved it in.

Coppery and velvet once chewed, the raw gacdsou liver was quite nice. So nice it felt as if my hearts picked up speed as I swallowed it down. But it wasn't my hearts making that pounding—it was my chest, rumbling out my delight without permission.

Who knew food could be this good?

More was quickly added to my plate once the male saw my reaction. Bloody and fragrant, I ate it with enthusiasm. Every last bite.

The soft liver only made me realize how ravenous I truly was. Another sampling awaited, orange in color but flat in flavor. I swallowed the nutrition but did not go back for more. Not when there were other things to try and the distraction of interesting flavors beckoning my attention.

Out of the various dishes, there was only one I absolutely hated, gagging as I worked to swallow it.

I heard him chuckle. “No pickled venna flower in the future.”

My tongue was bitter and my mouth overly salty. “Why would anyone eat that on purpose?”

“Try this. It will clear your pallet.” A spoonful of something dark and slick landed on my almost empty plate. “It’s sweet and fragrant.”

A brown paste with little flecks of deep-red flattened into a puddle before me. It didn’t look appetizing, it didn’t smell of anything familiar, and I would not have wanted it at all if not for the horrible taste in my mouth.

But on my tongue... it was sinful.

Where my pulses had seized into silence at one taste of the pickled flowers, I was now rumbling in pure joy as I rolled exquisite flavor over my palate. Eyes closed, savoring, I enjoyed it to such an extreme that I forgot just who sat across from me.

Which had been a stupid mistake on my part.

Lashes lifting once I swallowed, I saw a male hardly in control of himself. Vibrating, fists white on the table, he gazed as if starved.

Shit.

That hungry stare, his flush, was unsafe on every level.

Voice jagged gravel, he swore, “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself of that right now.” Ramrod-tense, I calculated just how far I might make it if I flipped the table and made a break for the door. “But I feel like if I run, you *will* hurt me.”

“*Don’t. Run.*” He wasn’t entreating me to stay near; he was warning me he could not stop himself from what would follow.

He said he wouldn’t rape me. I had to make that clear. “You don’t have my permission.”

Shuddering, as if imagining fulfilling dark cravings at that moment, he held back a pained groan. “I want you... to know that you can trust me. I want you to know how much I yearn to please you. How long I’ve waited to talk to you. Watching you eat my food—making those beautiful noises—has given me great pleasure.”

Pleasure? He looked positively tormented.

And I was beginning to feel sick again.

Voice catching, I thought to distract him. “You made this food?”

A short-lived rumble broke free of his chest, and I was certain that below the table that *thing* between his legs pulsated in anticipation. “I wasn’t sure how long you might sleep, or I would have prepared more.”

There were so many dishes already. Enough food to feed ten women. “Was it hard to do?”

“Wild vorec males hunt for their mates, reserving the best parts of their kill for their female. Hybrid males are driven to serve their mate in a similar fashion. I’ve had over a century to hone my skills.”

Another reminder that he was so much older despite his ageless appearance. “Over a century? You must be disappointed I’m so young.”

The knocking in his chest was anything but disappointed. “I know my age is intimidating to you, my beloved Lorieyn. I’ll admit, our dynamic is complicated. I have been *the* authority figure in your life since you were a girl. When you were a child and required correction, it was my duty to provide it. Now, you are my mate. The shift in your perspective from seeing me as a strict overlord to accommodating lover will evolve naturally. As you get to know me, you may find that I do have some pleasant qualities.”

Doubtful.

Imagining a world where I might have affection for such a man was unthinkable. “You may have been a decent man before you heard my song, but you’ve used your obsession as justification to be a monster.”

“Only when pressed to be one,” he answered softly, the hinted warning clear.

A man like him would never have remorse for what took place on his office floor.

Staring at me with such open longing, Cyderial said, “There is so much misunderstanding between us. You may resent the rigors of academy life, but hard training assured your safety and survival. In my keeping, you remained untouched, unharmed, and became well-educated.”

Whatever was between us ran much deeper than something as common as misunderstandings. I felt real, burning hate in my hearts. “The harder you restricted my freedoms, the more I rebelled, Cyderial. Did you imagine I sat in my room behaving myself in the face of each injustice? Learning how to escape your vault didn’t take that long.” Eager to strike at him the only way I might, I challenged his precious concept of his little mate. “I was not untouched.”

Unflappable, he leaned back in his fancy chair. “You are uncomfortable with intimacy, so you’re trying to goad me into anger.”

Showing teeth, I hissed, “You terminated our annual visits with our birthmothers. You stole our brothers. You hung children. And now I find that all of it was done so you could keep me to yourself? Well, I wasn’t yours. I discovered ways to get out. I did walk in the dark, looking for comfort, and I found it.” Clawing white linen on that table set for two, I growled, “And I liked it.”

There was no roar or explosion of anger, no shouted castigation about the dangers of boys, just a long silence and unbroken stare.

“Did you hear me? I let anyone I found in the dark touch me in any way they wanted.” Why wasn’t he storming around the room and threatening me

with pain?

Calm, his voice gentle, he said, "I could not be there for you in that way when you were younger. I'm sorry."

"What?"

Reaching for a serving spoon, he began to fill his plate with the leftover food between us. "If you care about them at all, never let me know their names."

I didn't even know their names.

Filling his plate, he said, "I will admit there were errors regarding the mental effects of female containment." The smile was gone, and his eyes dimmed. "At our last appointment, you claimed you had been trained to fear grown men, thus avoiding the list despite the fact that you clearly had unmet physical needs. I've thought over your statement a great deal. Perhaps I should have seduced you once you came of age, instead of allowing you four more years to develop an unhealthy fear of men and a misinformed obsession with the fog."

I had been trying to strike at him, but he had turned the blade and stabbed me straight in the hearts. "How dare you! You may have controlled my environment and watched me grow up, but don't think you understand my desires at all. You may have mated me against my will, and I might be trapped in your house for now, but I will go into the fog. You can't stop me forever!"

Still collected, despite my open hostility, he gently offered, "I do know you. Your favorite color is pink, a hard color to come by at the academy and the reason you stole that particular geode off my shelf when we first met. I know you will take any sweets offered to you by humans when you think no one is looking. You hum when you're bored and manipulate your test scores for amusement. I know you lean to the left before you lunge and leave your side open every time you parry. I know you are deeply devoted to your sisters. Brave enough to confront me about the terms of their keeping. You

think we keep the females stressed by forcing them to accommodate male training schedules and clothing standards. It's never that I didn't want you to embrace your feminine nature. It's that my self-control extended only so far."

His gaze grew starved, but not for the food on his plate. "Your presence has a power over me that you cannot imagine. The number of times I almost dragged you into the shadows to steal a kiss.... It was better for both of us if you were outfitted in a minimally appealing manner. And I know that, statistically, at least ten other males—both children and adults—at the academy are stalking their mate through her formative years. Protocols are in place to reduce the potential for incidents. Contrary to what you believe, I do not enjoy hanging recruits. You are lucky nothing happened when you experimented in the dark. Unlike you, I have seen the damage an inexperienced male can inflict, even when he is well-meaning, upon a girl. Not to mention males who rape just for the fun of it."

Squaring my shoulders, I looked him dead in the eye. "Was it fun when you raped me?"

That caught him, stopped him right in his holier-than-thou tracks.

His next words were chosen with care. "I lured you and seduced you. I confused you and used force. You were frightened when I held you down, and cried when my cock worked its way inside a part of your body that had just known great pain. But when you were not resistant or afraid, you felt pleasure and were gloriously responsive. As your fear of me diminishes, you will find that nature knew exactly what it was doing when it created us for one another."

I had no response to his convenient change of subject. Telling his side of a history that was supposed to... what? Impress me? "You should have chosen someone else."

But it didn't work that way. Ultimately, the sad irony was that he had no more choice than I had. The song chose for the male.

Looking at me with adoration, he said, "I am so sorry it could not have

been a different way between us.”

I don't know why I was suddenly so sad, but anger failed to protect me from those words. Vulnerable and sunken in that chair. A little kid being reprimanded by a grown-up. Told that my punishment was for my own good. The dynamic between us was indeed deeply distorted and wrong. “I would have fought you, regardless of when.”

I never wanted to be mated; all I ever wanted was the fog.

“You did fight well, but I can create an environment that intoxicates you into a submissive state. It heightens your pleasure and seduces your senses. I don't want you to think you were weak in spirit, when you were so very brave despite the fact you stood no chance in resisting me.”

Lured and confused, he'd said? More like drugged and addicted. The general had done something to me during our mating that made me want him. And I was so very ashamed that I had capitulated over and over.

The distracting, delicious sweet scent that enveloped me that night... I always thought it was the flowers in his office. But in all the years, it had been him testing the waters when I was near, to see how easily I might fall into his spell.

When he had startled me with that first kiss, I breathed it in deep, the effects nearly immediate.

And then there was the physical touch. The unusual rhythm booming from his chest that he had made sure I not only heard but felt skin-to-skin. It had driven me to match his rhythm. To move as he led. To allow.

Even the taste of him had been beyond compare.

It was so unfair. What was the point of fighting if I could not win? Dejected, I put my burning head in my hands. “Why do males have every advantage?”

“Because we are your slaves.”

Mated, I was now *his* slave. Trapped in the room with a man who had forced himself on me, at his mercy in every way. He could bend me over the table at will, force me to fulfill any sexual desire. He could even make me enjoy it.

“You don’t believe me?” he asked, somehow that appraising stare of his even more fiery. “I would literally follow you to my death. Starve myself so you could eat. Kill for you. But you—you may not return that sentiment without physiological encouragement. Hybrid females do not hear the song or even recognize their mates when we stand before you. Ten years you’ve been in my presence, and not once did you consider me as a suitor. If it were not for layers of protocols regarding the list of unmated females, males would be driven to fight for you amongst ourselves. The death toll would be astronomical. The species would fail. Hybrid males must encourage an addiction, forge a bond, or we would not be able to assure our mates remain under our protection.”

An addiction, he’d said?

So, that is what it meant to be mated. The great secret kept from academy girls.

Not only could we not choose who we might share a lifetime with, but a male we despised could force our compliance beyond just pinning us to the

floor.

There was no possible way to keep him off me.

Leaning forward, the most brazen movement he had made since we had taken our seat at the table, he purred, “I can guess at what you are thinking. I’ll even concede that you may have good reason to imagine the worst. It is true we will end up on that bed, that you won’t be able to resist. That it won’t be rape when I can encourage you to grow drunk on pleasure. But I am not interested in taking advantage. You’re freshly mated, young, frightened, and ignorant about your true place in the world. I want you to come to me when you’re ready. In the meantime, I can help you with your heat without subjecting you to my knot.”

Heat. A very accurate description of the fire under my skin.

“You know what’s wrong with me.” It wasn’t a question.

Of course he did.

Male satisfaction, gentle compassion, the two opposing influences blended into Cyderial’s explanation. “You’re in withdrawal, and each symptom will grow worse if I do not tend to you. Should your heat progress too far, my darling, you will know pain. It will grow to a point where you will beg me for relief. But do not fear. I will not let you suffer in that way.”

A sinking feeling in my gut, I frowned. “So, either I submit to fornication, or suffer and then beg? Either way, you will be inside me.”

Tender smile and soft words on his lips, Cyderial proposed, “There are techniques to soothe the heat beyond a knot. I’m offering this to you.”

“Such as?”

The general had never touched his food, nor did it seem he had any interest in considering it. He stood instead, drawing up to full height and addressing the point directly. “Come with me and obey, or let me know if you would rather I entice you to bed and fuck you until you feel better.”

His hand was out before him, a clear challenge that I either took it or the room would begin to swim as he plied me with his male tricks.

There wasn't a single soul who could save me from this.

Horrified, I stared at his outstretched hand, silent tears falling on flushed cheeks.

When I failed to move, the air began to smell faintly sweet, a beautifully scented threat that I had to make a choice. His hand or his cock. Lucidity or drunken lust.

Tentatively, I put my fingers on his palm.

Yet resisted when he drew me to stand. Still, he pulled me upright, wrapping his arm around my waist, physically urging me toward another area of the room.

A pair of plush chairs waited, angled so mates might enjoy conversation or relax in one another's company. That was where he'd been sitting when I awoke. Where he waited while I bathed. And where he intended me to settle me now, so he might kneel at my feet.

Pulling a short ottoman under his hips, he took a seat. Even still, he was large enough to remain at my eye level, far too close, holding my gaze when he reached for my foot.

He had told me to obey, or else....

The chair was soft under me, luxurious in a way I had never known a chair to be. The perfect spot to curl up for a nap between drills or daydream about the fog. But I could not relax into it, pressing my thighs together with my spine ramrod straight.

Resting my heel atop his bent knee, he encased my foot in warm hands, the pair of his thumbs digging into my arch. He began to knead the skin in deep strokes, working toward my toes.

Bracing against the armrest, my back bowed when he did it a second time. What in the hell was this?

Smirking at my reaction, he asked, "Am I pressing too hard?"

Huffing, glaring, I refused to reply, fighting the urge to relax as he manipulated my anatomy in astounding ways.

After a hard day at the academy, I had worked the tension out of my feet when training left them sore, but never had anyone else done this for me or with such skill. I mean, why would they?

It was so... intimate.

His smile made his deep voice all the richer. "You are welcome to close your eyes and relax. Let me ease your heat while you enjoy."

Suppressing a groan when he began to knead the tender place below my toes, I melted unwittingly back against the chair.

I even felt a bit of relief. This was indeed preferable to sex.

Strong hands swept to my ankle, fingers undulating as they stroked and squeezed. Slumped back, I watched him like a hawk through the slit of my lashes.

When he dared bring those knowing hands higher to cup my calf, I just about kicked him in the face. But those deft fingers spread the muscles behind the bone in such a beautiful way.

I became liquid.

He spent a great deal of time moving between my foot, my ankle, my calf, and my knee, cognizant of how to manipulate my anatomy to release each knot and soothe every muscle.

Low, measured breaths relaxed my chest, as I grew both distrustful and languid. Even disappointed when he set my foot back on the floor. Mollified when he began the same process on the other side.

He was enjoying this, his normally harsh mouth soft. "Do you still feel hot?"

Nothing like what I had endured over dinner. His plan worked wonders for the fever. "Much better."

Lazy eye contact hung between us when he lifted my foot and pressed a kiss to my skin.

That was too far.

Growling a warning, with a sluggish pull, I tried and failed to remove my

leg from his grip.

Laughing, he nipped the side of my foot. A zing from his teeth was not at all painful but very unexpected.

Shrill, I blurted, "Stop that!"

Still laughing, he went right back to kneading his thumbs into my arch. "Why?"

"It's not funny!"

He smirked. "I disagree. When you blush, it's very cute."

Banter of this kind, I was entirely unfamiliar with, and it *did* make me blush deeply.

Rattling ever so gently from his chest, he grew wicked. "I could not tell you over the years how beautiful you are, but I will tell you now at every opportunity."

I didn't like the way I was starting to feel, nervous and distrustful. "You told me if I obeyed you would not drum."

"Hmm." His eyes went back to my foot, mischief all over his face. "What are you scared of?"

The answer was simple. "You."

"I'm not drumming loud enough to confound you." He gave me a roguish grin. "This is just how I sound when I am content."

Content was not the right word. He was *hungry*.

And I was growing far too hot again, aware he noticed the flush spreading over my body.

"Stop." Impatient, suddenly far more annoyed, I stiffened my leg. "It's not working."

He smirked all the more. "I'm not finished yet. Are you going to continue to obey, or shall I take you to bed and knot as deep as I can go?"

Things were escalating quickly, and I was certain I had been duped. All of this, the calming strokes, the banter, it was all a setup. "You swore you wouldn't put your knot in me."

Was he purring? He was, a gentle vibration that was soft on the ears. “I intend to kiss you until you cool. Nothing more.”

Then he took my toe in his mouth and sucked.

That was *not* a kiss!

A sound came from my mouth as my insides contracted. Sucking in a gasp of air, a ripple of movement went down my spine.

He took the opportunity to ease his frame between my legs, palming my thighs as he kneaded the flesh. “Will you let me kiss you?”

The silky material molded to my skin did nothing to keep his touch away. Any movement I made only caused modesty to fail as my skirt rode higher. As I spread indecently around his hard abdomen, he pushed against me in the chair and made me feel the strength of him everywhere I was soft.

Lips hovering over mine, he whispered, “A knot or a kiss, Lorieyn. Choose.”

I sniffed the air, waiting for the trick of the sweet scent that might manipulate my senses and steal away thought. There was none, only the smell of a man. From his chest, there was no thumping demand.

Only the gentle rumble of a *content* general and the shallow breaths of a lost academy girl.

This was not forced seduction; he was offering me lucid choice.

“Just a kiss?” I asked, frightened.

“Until you cool.” Those hands on my thighs stroked higher, palming my hips to fit us together.

The flesh between my legs had been innocuous my whole life. No more extraordinary than an elbow. Now, it was molten fire, igniting in a frenzy of sparking nerves where that thing of his behind his trousers undulated right where I burned.

Lavender fabric dragged upward with his touch. “Let me ease your fever.”

I understood. He was going to use his hands, having shown me how

deftly they could be wielded on my body.

The price for this mercy? A kiss.

I could close my eyes and pretend it was a boy in the dark.

Retain a fragment of control and choose.

Or burn.

Wetting my lips with my tongue, I gave permission. "Okay."

He never took my mouth.

Blond head dipping, a wet, hot bite closed over my nipple. Fabric and all, he sucked hard while I burned, crying out in shock at his filigreed ceiling.

Kneading my bare hips, dragging me closer to the edge of the chair, he devoured my breast before I might recover coherent thought.

Kiss until I cooled? I was moments away from combusting into flames.

So much of my body was twisted up with so little effort on his part. Places I'd never considered as anything but mundane screamed for something I would not be able to give myself when his mouth could not be everywhere at once.

The seam between my legs *throbbed* in a maddening rhythm, the rush of boiling blood palpable.

"You smell so good," he whispered against my skin once his tongue was done flicking my swollen nipple.

Trying to quiet the erratic beat of my drum, I struggled to answer. Yet I was fully aware these happenings were my body acting of its own accord. Flexing my hands, I knew I could strike him, that I was clearheaded enough to fight.

And that right there was the fight in itself. Let him *kiss* the heat away or be forced to fuck.

In a languid move, he rubbed his body over mine, slipping lower, pressing kisses over my taut belly. Warm hands on my lower things, he stroked high enough for his thumbs to part my pulsating seam.

I hated how much I relished his touch, despised myself for angling my

hips to invite more sensation as my fire grew.

He had done so in his office, using his fingers to play with me. That had to be what he intended now.

Kiss me, he said? How had I not realized the trick?

His mouth found where I wept, the flat of that muscle licking the entirety of my slit in one long taste, all the while holding my gaze and watching the play of shock and pleasure move over my face.

Plump, soft, iridescent-scaled lips split like a ripe fruit so he might gorge. Where I twitched and throbbed, nectar began to spill so he might taste.

And taste, he did.

It was a purely male hybrid trait, a tongue that could extend several times farther than any female's might. Rubbing that waving muscle over every part of my seam, as if showing off just how much he might do with it, his tip sought out my secret opening.

Swirling in, I was pierced.

I was *possessed*.

My cries were shameful. How I arched off the chair and fisted his hair, utterly immoral.

Driving in deep, he lapped up every drip of cream, catching it on his tongue and drawing it out to swallow me down with sounds of pure male pleasure. I kicked air, would have torn myself away on instinct, but *he* had me firmly by the hips.

Cyderial, who was doing this to me. He was the male rapt in his work of tonguing my slit. It was his blond hair gripped in my fist. His mouth I rode in desperation for God only knew what.

Nothing twisted my senses outside an urgent need to know higher pleasure.

And there was no way I could stop my rolling hips or deny that my body craved things beyond my understanding.

Lapping me down with a snarl of delight, he sucked, tongued, and kissed

every vibrant-purple hidden secret between my legs.

And I was at a loss to stop myself, hardly knowing who I would be when this was over.

I should have said no when he'd offered *a kiss* in place of subjugation. Life would have been so much simpler if I could have been drunk on male tricks, lacking accountability for my fervor to accept such treatment from so horrible a man.

And he knew. I saw his eyes change the moment realization dawned on me.

Victory was his.

This was a far greater win in his war against my resistance.

Because the fire was still building, and his cruel mouth had been my choice. Despite it all, a building climax of beautiful energy gathered in my belly, my little opening sucking at his long, probing tongue.

It was then I began to weep.

Warm breath over my sex, he retracted his tongue at the sound of my tears. "Do you want me to stop?"

I would die if he stopped. That bridge had been burned, and the fire in my guts was nowhere near satiated. Neither could I be that much of a coward and live with myself. I had agreed, I had lost ground, but he still did not have permission to knot me. "No."

A soft kiss was placed on my inner thigh, the man nuzzling fondly against me.

I wanted this to be over so I might crawl away and lick my wounds. "Finish your kiss!"

His lips met my slit, and kiss me he did. Vibrating now with the pitch of his thrumming, that tongue danced where it would.

Thumbs came to spread me, pulling me gently open, moving in small circles over singing nerves.

When the tip of his tongue flicked something hungry inside of me, my

internal sleeve grabbed him tight and pulled against that rough muscle.

He teased at that internal rippling clench enough to trigger an explosion of brightness I felt all the way down to my toes. The surging pleasure intensified by the sounds he ricocheted through me in his own passionate response.

Lapping tongue, determined fingers, and the sting of teeth sent me into shuddering mania.

Reason failed me completely as I arched and took every bit of zealot-like worship he might lay upon me.

Until the surge finally blasted apart and left me sagging and struggling for breath.

Ass hanging off the chair, my legs useless and still shaking. If not for the hands that held my hips and the strength of the man who had just broken me, I would have been a sorry puddle on the floor.

Whining like a wounded animal on each exhale, I stared at his fancy filigreed ceiling and felt the heat somewhat subside.

Just a kiss, he had said.

Drawn like a ragdoll into his arms, I finally earned a true kiss. His mouth landed on mine, the taste of my slippery fluids pressed between my lips by a greedy, devious tongue.

He kissed me to his hearts' content, my undulating core grasping at nothing and aching despite my previous mind-shattering climax.

I felt better and so much worse. The pleasure had been very real; my body had luxuriated in it. But as *cooling* as it had been, it was not enough. Remaining flutters of pleasure began to ebb into consequential aches, warning me of the inevitable.

The *kiss* had only bought me a small amount of time. Whatever was within me was starved to be properly fed.

The wriggling beast in his trousers still craved as well. I could feel it move against my thigh where I was cradled on his lap. Spent and needy as I was, he had the perfect opportunity to press his advantage. He could have easily taken me right there on the floor.

Again.

I would not have fought back.

But he didn't.

"Absolutely delicious." Whispering praise against my lips, Cyderial added, "You have the most beautiful cunt."

A cunt. A hungry little mouth between my legs closing tight around nothing, swollen with want, and warning me with zings of discomfort that it was only a matter of time before heat would return to force me to submit

fully.

Reverently, he laid a final, lingering kiss on my lips, as if he were relishing his greatest treasure.

I did not share his triumph.

I should have been at school, in weapons training or listening to a lecture on physics. No, that wasn't right. A stranger was supposed to ruin me so I might wander at will into the fog.

Now I knew better.

Having experienced the complicated, horrific process of sex, I'm not sure I would have survived that kind of pain with some unknown male. Dying of shame from some random penetration as I screamed for mercy in a dark alley....

Intercourse was not a few quick thrusts and bursts of fluids like I had seen in the human pornography. Cyderial opening, knotting, and breeding me had taken hours.

For two days, I'd slumbered in the aftermath.

Where would I have sheltered lost in the city?

Would I have been left lying in the street?

No wonder Sylvia had acted so tired and sore the night I ran to warn her to lighten her hair all those years ago. She had just suffered; she'd needed the heavy sleep I had pulled her from it to drag her to the sink.

There would have been no hiding her escapades.

Which is why she never returned once the general had summoned her to his office.

I didn't even know if she was alive.

Yet *I* felt very alive. As if my eyes had finally opened to what I was bred to be.

And I didn't understand myself at all.

Recovering in Cyderial's arms, the fabric over my nipples wet and clinging, my skirt high enough that modesty was lost, I retreated into shy

embarrassment.

And hid my face.

A warm hand stroked my hair. "Look at me."

I could not possibly meet Cyderial's eyes, not after how I had behaved.

He tried to cup my face, to guide my attention where he willed it, but I was in no mood to acquiesce. Jerking my chin from the soft touch that thought to urge my eyes higher, I looked anywhere but at him.

Patient nonetheless, he murmured, "You are beautiful, my sweet mate. Your behavior was perfectly natural, and it was my honor to tend to you."

Cheeks flushing a deep-red, it was that very moment my body chose to leak more slippery fluid from between my spread thighs. A warm, wet rush he could not have missed.

The chair, the floor, his trousers, all of it was saturated in me.

I could not have been more humiliated.

Yet he was unconcerned about the mess.

Quiet moments passed as he stroked my hair and seemingly ignored each time more slick warmed his lap.

With deep compassion, he said, "You're confused right now. I understand. How could you feel so good with someone you hate so much?"

I did hate him. Thoughts of his mouth on my body and how much I had relished the rough texture of his tongue would haunt me.

Suspicion eating up my shame, I confessed what he no doubt already knew. "I'm still hot. It wasn't enough."

He kissed away the tears on my cheeks. "No, but I have bought you a few hours to rest and consider."

If all he'd claimed was true about heat and mates, I would very soon indeed be screaming for him to hurt me the way he had hurt me in his office.

I wasn't even sure if I could make it a few hours.

Grief tightened my chest, clenching around my hearts until I found myself trembling. No soldier with my training should have ever been so

weak, nor should they have allowed their tormentor to rock them like a baby while they wept.



A LITTLE CAKE waited inside the pink box from my mother. Her gift was beautifully decorated with white frosting and tiny golden details.

Proud to show me her fine cake, Cyderial said, “It’s a human tradition. A wedding cake for the bride and groom.”

A precious gift from a well-meaning woman who could not have known how deeply I regretted my mating.

When I gave no response, he added, “I’ll take you to visit her when you’re feeling better.”

They were the only words that would have garnered a reaction. Pulling out of my melancholy, I finally met his eyes.

To see if he spoke the truth. To measure this man who never lied but misled with proficiency.

I very much wanted my mother in that moment.

There was no hiding my longing, my expression silently begging that this was not a trick.

Like his *kiss*.

As if to prove his good intentions, Cyderial pulled out a chair so I might sit at his table. “Please, sit.”

Quiet, I obeyed, my attention moving to the pretty cake Cyderial presented with a flourish. And for the first time in my life, I found I had no appetite for sweets.

It was something else I craved. Something I would not consider.

The general cut me a slice.

Though the exterior was pure white, the inside was a riot of fun colors. A rainbow whirl of cheerful brightness that was unexpected and impossible not

to smile at. My birth mother had made this *for me*.

She loved *me*.

Reaching out to gently test how soft the exciting color might be, I found the cake delicate yet resilient. Like her.

A smile replaced my frown as I poked the treat again. “I would like to see my mother.”

Something about the shift in my demeanor brought Cyderial to purr. “It would be my pleasure. We could visit Mrs. Hyun and, afterward, tour the city. If you’re interested, I can make reservations for dinner someplace special.”

“At a restaurant?” Like the ones I saw by the reservoir, where couples ate together and conversed under glittering lights?

A social gathering location and relaxing experience after a day’s work.

But I would not go. I already gathered my long hair to drape it over my shoulders, to hide my breasts from his sight. Yet such a trick would not be enough. Not in public.

“Will you provide me with appropriate clothing?” It was a fair question. Beyond the fact that the silky fabric draping my skin was obscene, it was also soiled. I’d be mortified if my mother saw me in such a state.

Green eyes glittering, he smirked, “That gown is only for my private view, and I would be *unhappy* if anyone else ever saw you dressed this way.”

Easy access in an indecent dress—his confirmation of my suspicion only annoyed me.

Chuckling, he winked. “Please do not blame me for enjoying your body draped in silk. You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. And before you get too angry, that particular fabric is supposed to help cool the sensitive skin of a female in heat. There were *some* altruistic motives behind my choice for you.”

That he could be so easy when I was so anxious gave him an advantage I envied. “I want regular clothing now.”

He may have nodded in agreement, yet still he warned, “Cake first, then I will show you what I have collected for your use. You can wear whatever you wish. But take heed, any other fabric might not feel comfortable against your skin until I have satiated your needs.”

Hot, yet much cooler than before his *kiss*, I was willing to take my chances.

He set a slice before me and urged me to eat. Fork in hand, I took a bite of perfect cake.

It really was delicious, not that I had a basis for comparison, but the flavor felt floral and soft. Something to be savored and not rushed for the sake of decent clothing.

Enjoying his own taste, the general offered a compliment to the baker. “Your birth mother is very talented. Many humans accept the payout for selling their offspring to the academy and waste it on frivolous foolishness. She invested it into a business that is very popular in her quadrant of the city, from what I understand.”

Clenching my fist around my fork, I snarled, “She didn’t sell me.”

Sardonic flash in his eyes, Cyderial disagreed. “The contract humans commit to is very clear, the terms generous if the human can birth a healthy hybrid and keep it alive until the age of five. It is a bill of sale, cashed in when the exchange is made.”

What a horrible way to view the woman who loved me. Angry, I ground my teeth. “That wasn’t what it was like. She was a good mother.”

He took a bite of cake he did not deserve. “I don’t want to subtract from your memory of this human. But she birthed you with no intention of keeping you. Once her burden of seeing to your care was over, she built a human family from the profits gained by your sale.”

We were eating a cake she made, and he was making my mother sound like a monster.

Angry enough to bristle, to snap out a warning drum, I said, “She made

this cake, because *she cares about me.*” Reaching for his slice, I snatched the plate right out from under him. “If you cannot respect that, you don’t get to eat it.”

Unmoved by my temper, he dared look at me with compassion—as if I were some delusional child. “I wish to gently prepare you for what you will find outside the academy. You are not human, and the population will not treat you as one. Some will see you only as cannon fodder they are entitled to throw into danger to preserve their sense of safety. Others will covet your beauty. Many human men will see you only as a sexual object. There is some respect for our kind, but it often gets swallowed up in their sense of the exotic. Humans need us to survive; therefore, we are tolerated. You can’t trust them. Love them if you want, but remember that you were sold, trained, and expected to die for human benefit. Many will just want to know when you’re going to breed more hybrids so they don’t have to do it anymore.”

This male was supposed to be my mate and had failed me so far on every score. “I am warning you to stop speaking!”

My threats were nothing to a man of his stature. “I’d rather you be angry with me now than heartbroken later. It can be very shocking for academy students to leave the safety of their kind for the heart of a corrupt human city.”

For crying out loud, why would he not shut up? Screeching, I rose to my feet. “I never wanted the city! I wanted the fog, and you stole that from me!”

Cold-blooded, he smiled darkly. “Yes, I did. And I will steal it from you again every single day when you suffer with heat and realize you cannot leave me, no matter how much you may wish to. Hybrid’s mate for life. The fog cannot have you, Lorieyn.”

I had never done anything so ridiculous in my life, but I lifted his plate with that beautiful half-eaten slice of cake and threw it down on the floor to shatter into bits. “You’ve always been horrible! Pretending to be some adoring mate, tricking me into letting you do things to my body that you

knew I didn't understand. How do I know you're not misleading about the heat as well? You are a conniving, lying jerk who exerts power over me, because I would never come to you any other way!"

"I know." Not a speck of shame in his acknowledgment. Rising to tower over me, he narrowed his eyes. "And I do have complete control of you, my dear. Force me to wield it, and I will not hesitate."

I was going to rip out his throat. Snarling, baring my teeth, I stretched my fingers, ready to slice him to ribbons. "Going to hold me down again?"

Face growing deadpan, Cyderial's voice grew melodic. "Some rest will do you good, so I am going to make you sleep before you accidentally cut your foot on broken glass."

Put me to bed like I was some child? The morning's fear had been bled out of me. I was furious and eager for my pound of flesh.

But the room began to smell better than wedding cake, powerful sound moving through the air to soak into my skin. Every inch of me felt as if he wrapped me in the snuggliest blanket, beautiful oblivion flowing through my veins.

Already woozy, the edges of my vision went fuzzy. "Stop that!"

"No." He approached, and I took a wobbly step back.

It was unfair how easy it was for him to catch me, or how good it felt to be lifted into his arms and held against the vibrations emanating from his chest.

I was taken from the *dangerous* glass, swept toward the huge bed where I had begun the difficult day. Laid gently upon cool sheets, Cyderial carefully arranged my body as I tried and failed to put up more than token resistance.

High on his tricks as I was, it might not have been resistance at all. My fumbling hands clung to the monster, and no matter how I tried to puzzle them out, they only seemed to pull him nearer.

Sitting at my side, he took those needy hands, holding them while I melted into softness.

Addiction was not a strong enough word for this. No matter how I tried, I could not stop myself from sucking in deep breaths of his sweetness, of enjoying the ripple of music in the air.

I could even admit, staring up at his striking features, I might have even thought him handsome had I not disliked him so deeply.

Cyderial was very beautifully made.

Tone having gentled, he looked down at me and smoothed my hair. “Don’t put yourself in danger, Lorieyn. I cannot control myself when you do.”

The glass on the floor was about as dangerous as a fly. Having been run through with a sword multiple times during training, I could easily attest to that. It should have been easy to explain that to him, but my mind was fascinated with other things.

Like how perfect his unblinking eyes looked in this light—acid-green, deadly, and unwavering.

After a deep exhale, I murmured, “You smell really good.”

“Do I?” He stroked my hand and smiled softly.

“Mmm hmm.” So good I could eat him, sink my teeth right into his flesh.

Leaning over me, he breathed over my parted lips. “Beloved, you’re very tired and want to go to sleep right now.”

My eyes were so heavy, the idea of a nap extremely appealing.

Already drowsing, I felt him kiss my forehead. “Be brave when you wake up.”

I was going to kill him!

Violently, I went from dreaming to hypervigilance. Jackknifing upright, hissing with lethal intent, I scanned the darkness unsure how many hours I had been sedated.

No one was in the large bed with me. I didn't see him in his chair. Scrambling off the mattress, I moved through the dark, finding the sprawling bedroom empty.

Where the hell had he gone?

The troublesome glass had all been swept away, my cake and the remaining dishes missing from the little table.

There was a note. All it said was: **You are safe.**

I crushed it in my fist and dropped it to the floor.

With no looming male to prevent my exit, I abandoned the bedroom and headed into the heart of his home.

Too large for a single person, there were far more rooms than necessary. And even though I searched them all, he wasn't hiding in any of them.

Not the offices, spare sleeping quarters, cooking area, nor lounge. Not the training rooms or indoor gardens. When I dared open an outside door and walk into the cold night air, I did not find him on his expansive terrace. What I did find was an amazing view of our settlement twinkling below me in the

night. Never had I seen the city from such a vantage. Hybrid trainees lived on the lower levels where the view was misty. My whole life, my horizon had been an undulating wall of gray.

But in General Cyderial's tower, there was nothing but endless universe above me.

At my feet, our city sat like the eye of a storm in a sea of swirling fog battering against the filters in its never-ending bid to seep in. Angry mist blanketed the land as far as the eye could see, and from such a vantage, it was more beautiful than I could say.

Yet nothing might ever compare to the stars smeared across the night sky, galaxies swirling, planets glowing bright.

I never imagined it could be so vast. Never thought of it at all actually, not when my tiny dormitory window offered no such view.

This magnificent spectacle of darkness and light was breathtaking.

Sharp wind banked against skin that burned hot enough to steam, buffering my hair with an icy and soothing slap as it teased heat out of me.

Never would I have seen such a thing had I gone straight into the fog. Never would I have known *there was so much more* beyond its swirling glory.

Swallowing, thirsty and fevered, I stared in wonder and almost forgot about the missing male whose intentions toward me were flawed.

Who had left me here alone after behaving atrociously. Who deceived, who craved, who claimed he was my slave, even as he locked me away and left me to molder in his den.

I was the one bullied and tricked.

I was the slave. The possession.

One that had been put away like a tool no longer required. Eventually, he would come back, use me, and then... what? Make me sleep when he remembered his mate was troublesome and argumentative?

I always had been when it came to him.

Was he at the academy right now, stealing the dreams of more students? After all, his mate was conveniently tucked away and out of trouble.

You are safe, his note said.

Not from him.

Trapped in his house. And I was indeed trapped, as I had tried the front door, only to find several complicated locks fully engaged.

I was free to move about the dwelling and had done so blatantly, leaving reminders of my presence in each space. If I saw a vase, I moved it to a more appropriate location. Knickknacks were rearranged in any way I saw fit.

A gilded cage for me to play in or go mad, thinking over how truly trapped I really was. And gilded it was. In a similar style to his office, all he possessed was beautiful, each room filled with exactly the kinds of things I would want to explore.

Uncut gemstones, geodes, native fossils, living toxic flowers in pretty pots. The walls were all soft shades, the furniture feminine and inviting. Every window was polished, every surface free of dust.

This level of cleanliness went beyond a standard cleaning robot's protocol. The male had taken pleasure in maintaining his home to his militant standards.

So he could lock me in it.

Abandoning the terrace, I made my way inside, searching out a new distraction. Creeping around in the dark brought back the deceptively liberating sensations I had known sneaking through the academy at night. An agitated thrill that didn't soothe or offer any real sense of achievement.

False freedom wasn't enough.

The pretty things speckled shelves and table tops, and I touched all of them. Dug through drawers looking over private papers, fingered his books, curling my lip to find the journal I had seen him hold when I had first awoken in this place.

A Guidebook on Pleasing Young Mates.

Handwritten by some hybrid chauvinist who must have stolen another unwilling female to torment for fun, no doubt.

Flipping through the well-read pages, I imagined males trading these copies with one another, a secret library of hybrid sex manuals waiting for any man who wanted information.

While the females had nothing.

YOUR YOUNG MATE will be nervous, no matter how attentive you are to her sexual pleasure. Every choice you make will have consequences, so you must be prepared to deal with them as they arise. Excessive firmness will result in resistance. Overcoddling poor behavior will result in her insecurity. Females require strong mates. Yet never forget, there is a fine line between overpowering a woman and leaving her to her whims.

You will not earn her honest submission if you are not worthy of it. You will not be worthy of it if you cannot conquer her.

Give her options, and guide her with care. Should she be a female of extraordinary heat, do not let her suffer. Give her means to ease the transition.

Bathe her.

Feed her.

Fuck her often.

Should it be required, submit her completely so she understands your ability to curb counterintuitive behavior and that you will wield authority over her when necessary.

Affection will develop naturally over time. Be patient.

RAPT, I read on. Cyderial had followed many of the suggestions, touching me in places the author recommended. Employing gentle language and

compliments. There were detailed diagrams of female anatomy the likes of which I had never seen. The name for each nerve in my newly open slit and even greater detail on nerve bundles deep in my reproductive tract. Actual diagrams of what the female body underwent during opening, and detailed descriptions of how the male might assist to ease pain.

I looked weird inside, a labyrinth of twists and turns, specific nerves that must be stimulated by a dancing male organ. There were even exercises the man was suggested to memorize for maximum effect.

Not to mention that the soft seam between my legs, which seemed straightforward in appearance, was actually the mouth of a stretchable passageway lined with rings of muscle that would give a male pleasure—delicate and ready to be extorted with the proper method and a powerful cock.

Knowing the general had meticulously practiced every last technique over the ten years he had prepared for me. Imagining him naked, flexing and contracting that prehensile *thing* between his legs, learning the intricate performances needed to stimulate nerves to relax me, nerves to sexually excite me, nerves to make me climax until I saw stars....

There was even a series of nerve strokes that would reduce female discomfort from the expansive stretch male fluids inevitably caused.

The inflexible human meat stick I had seen in the pornographic video would never be able to do any of this.

The hybrid male sex organ in these images was far more capable, much larger, and less threatening on the page than in real life.

Still, it made me nervous to look upon that snake-like appendage in the diagrams. Pointed tip, with a wider flange following—to anchor it within, should a man be able to coax it inside female, willing or not. A series of segments, accordion-like, could flex to thicken or stretch to invade, the sensation of the ridges against female muscles stimulating for both parties. A knot would grotesquely expand at the broader root of the organ once she

signaled orgasm, to lock her pelvis to his. It was his duty to ensure she continued to reach completion until satiated and compliant to male authority.

His fluids were addictive, the ultimate balm to soothe a heat. Sexual ejaculation the ultimate cure, saliva enough to soften the fever, but not to end it.

One sexual encounter and no other man would ever be able to ease the female's compulsory chemical dependence. Other hybrid males would no longer hear her song and would therefore have no interest in copulation.

Whoever knotted a desired mate first was the eternal winner. Courtship, getting to know your female, could be enjoyed following intercourse and compelled addiction.

The language the author had chosen to describe these actions was deeply unsettling. This was a manual on forcing a woman who may *not be willing* but needed to be made *compliant*.

Compelled addiction.

After the agony of organs ripping apart and reforming, no female would want sex, and no male would be able to resist forcing a bond.

Cyderial had done this to me.

Unless some miracle came to save her, General Thayer would do this to Maeve.

Every girl I knew at the academy would suffer, only to be mounted moments later by a male who was most likely a stranger. What if the men had not read this manual? What if they didn't know what to do to make the pain as minimal as possible?

The thought was horrific.

Why were we not taught this about our bodies?

Because there was no motivation for women to mate. We were not driven to insanity by the song. We did not have the sexual appetite boys had to struggle with growing up. If we did not want children, there was no reason to engage in something that would rip you in half and then bind you to a man

who could make you fall asleep with little more than a sweet scent, a rhythmic melody, and some soft words.

If we knew, many of us would refuse men altogether.

We were born and confined until maturity so the stronger gender of our species could snatch us right off the list, our ignorant little heads filled with nonsense.

Or in my case, taken as punishment for wanting to be free.

Saddened, I set down the book, unable to read any further.

An entire society existed in support of this—humans who wanted more of us, hybrids who wanted to fuck us.

Enthusiasm for exploration dried up completely, the chair in his study as good as any place to sink into a depression.

I didn't like that I had been left alone in the house. Accustomed to the bustle of many sisters and constant company, it was lonely there in the dark.

Lonely enough even the presence of a man I didn't like would have been an improvement.

What did that say about me?

I hated the academy the majority of my life. Now, all I wanted was to either be back home... or be with *him*.

Addicted indeed.

And getting hotter by the hour.

The hydraulic hiss of the front door unbolting announced my tormentor's return. Down the hall, lights came on, drawing me from the dark study toward the opposite side of the dwelling.

A jumble of mixed feelings, most of them awful, shared space with an uninvited sense of relief.

Bare feet padded silently toward him, unsure what I would say to the villain now that he was here.

My anger had cooled, but my resentment had only grown.

I had every right to tell him that what he did was wrong. That he didn't

get to bully me and compel me to do things, not if he wanted me to respect him on any level.

Mates were supposed to be *loved* by their males.

Silent, because I had endured years of painful training to learn how to be so, I stalked toward a room aglow. Only to halt in my tracks at the sound of soft female laughter.

Peering from the doorframe, somewhat hidden by the dark, I saw them. The general tall and proud, a woman on his arm, smiling at something he said.

Silvery-blond hair and perfect ingenue features, she looked like something straight out of a storybook. From the shining blue of her dress to the glittering jewelry around her wrists and throat, the peak of femininity I dreamed I might one day aspire to. Yet her beauty was something I could never achieve, and that made me instantly timid that she was looking up at me, with my tangled hair, hunched shoulders, and wrinkled naked dress, and seeing gracelessness and faults.

Why was she smiling up at the general after taking one glance at me, arm intertwined with his as if they were familiar?

And why did murder feel like the appropriate response to her friendly “Hello” when she acknowledged me watching from the dark?

I had never disliked another female so much in my life.

Disengaging from my mate, she eased closer to where I flared clawed fingers in warning that she was not welcome.

Threatening her as I was, she waved my stance off with a smile. “It is completely normal for you to feel uncomfortable that I am here. And I must add I appreciate that you have not threatened murder... thus far. An unknown female entering your den so soon after you were mated is generally frowned upon. But I have come as a friend. Cyderial thought you may appreciate having an experienced woman to talk to.”

Cyderial, standing by the door, wisely kept his distance.

The glare I gave him let him see clearly that he and I had unfinished business.

The stranger's arm dared loop with mine. "Let's get you cleaned up while we chat, hmm? Have you ever had a hot bath before? I remember the academy only had those horrible cold showers. When I was first mated, a hot bath might have been the only reason I softened at all toward my beast. Ah, he was awful in the beginning! I love him now, but how I dreamed of peeling the skin right off his bones all those years ago."

Okay, I could get on board with this. Violence toward men seemed like a valid option. Narrowing my scathing glare at the man waiting across the room, I hissed, "I would rather slit his throat while he sleeps."

With a conspiratorial laugh, she breezed me out of the dark, urging me into the light and closer to my mate. "Come, give him the opportunity to apologize." To him, she lost her smile and softness. "His behavior was abominable, and he won't do it again."

It didn't matter if she was his guest or if she had been brought here for some nefarious purpose; she must have had a death wish. No one, especially a tiny wisp of a woman, talked to the general in that manner.

Clenching my jaw so hard my teeth began to ache, I watched him run his gaze over me from toes to throat, finally landing on my face as if seeing me—even raging mad—was really quite a gift. But he did not apologize.

"Don't worry about him." Voice annoyed, the odd female motioned for me to look away from the man and pay attention to her. All seriousness, she said, "Order him to make you something to eat. That will keep him out of our hair."

The whole moment was utterly absurd. "What?"

"Like this." She spun us about so we might fully face the stiff, observing male, employing a tone of stern command once more. "I want to eat braised hilt cabbage smothered in bacon and cream." Giving me a quick wink, she added under her breath, "A salted meat from Earth so delicious our human

ancestors brought pigs on the ship should they find a home after their apocalypse. It is very rare and expensive. Now, you try.”

Extracting myself from whatever kind of foolishness this was, I shook her arm off. Yet as I began to retreat into the dark, she grabbed my hand, pulling me back with more force until we were face-to-face. “Don’t be intimidated by his rank. He’s your mate now. You own him. Command him to serve you.”

This pantomime may have been cute had it been acted out on another academy girl, but I was not that naïve. “My life is not some game! What is it that you want here? Trouble? Because I’ve had enough trouble to give me years of nightmares.”

Cupping my shoulders in her hands, she gave them a squeeze. “I want to show you that Cyderial isn’t scary at all. Not when it comes to you, at least.”

The silvery-haired waif was starting to seem like the scary one. Incuriously, I blurted, “Have you met him? He’s horrible!”

Laughing, she conceded a bit of the point. “To earn the rank of General required a great deal of sacrifice. Having to endure over a hundred years of loneliness while waiting for his mate to appear may have roughened him around the edges a bit.” She squeezed my hand a bit too hard, her voice congenial. “But see what happens when you order him to serve you.”

Academy students do not issue orders, not unless they want to be beaten to a pulp.

“Try, Lorieyn.” Her arm slipped around my shoulders, the female giving me a chummy jostle. “Don’t be such a baby.”

It was hard to tell if I was starting to like this woman, or if I really wanted to thumb out her eyeballs. The bones in my spine cracked as I stood taller, the wiggle of my shoulders a clear sign I wanted her arm off. “I am very hot, and I would prefer if you stop touching me.”

Her arm did not move, the smile she gave me a bit fierce. “I have just the thing for that, but first... I can’t help you much if you won’t make an effort to try. If in the traumatic early day of my bond a female had told me I could

order my mate to get me anything I wanted—that they have an uncontrollable urge to please you—it would have saved me ten years of being locked up in a room after he found me and dragged me off to be raped. Saying no is not enough, princess. Not if they feel it is in your best interest to go against your will. Clear orders that will directly benefit you would be very difficult for your mate to deny.”

With a sudden sense of horror that Cyderial might do the same to me, I grew shrill. “Ten years?”

“There, there, child. Your remorseful mate over there confessed it all when he asked for my guidance.” Cutting a glance at the male, she tutted. “A little glass on the floor, Cyderial? Really?”

He said nothing, intently watching my reaction to this overbearing slip of a woman and her nonsense.

“As you may have noticed, sweet girl, the menfolk can wield a certain control over their women—when it is to entice her sexually or submit her for her safety.” Glaring at him, she added a bit more loudly, “It should not be used after arguments to silence the woman you love.”

And boy, was I still mad about it. “He insulted my mother!”

Telling on him to whoever this female force of nature was felt good! Especially when she agreed with me. “Yes, he made a poor choice while trying to teach you an important lesson. Let’s forgive him for a boyish mistake and order him to be a proper mate. Start simply. Tell him to make you food.”

Sucking in a breath, self-conscious, I looked at my naked toes and muttered, “Make whatever food your guest wants.”

Bracelets tinkling, she threw up her hands. “You’ll have to do better than that. Look, he’s not even moving. The order must be for *your* benefit, remember? He couldn’t care less about my comfort.”

Gritting out, “Please make *me* the dish she suggested,” had me sweating.

“It would be my pleasure.” How velvet the words were when they fell

from his lips was utterly inappropriate. Especially considering his obnoxious guest and how widely she grinned to see a flush break out over my heated skin.

“Wine too, young man. Something sweet to help her relax.”

Cyderial went from languid to divergent, interjecting immediately, “I don’t think that’s a good—”

“I didn’t ask you what you thought!” she barked. Throwing me a wink after a moment of tense silence, she added, “Lorieyn, tell him you want two glasses of wine served with our midnight snack.”

The strange woman just interrupted a fully ranked general, and he held his tongue like an admonished pup. Deeply intrigued, I looked away from my scowling captor and gave the glittering waif my full attention. “Who are you?”

“My name is Miranda.” There was nothing pretentious in her introduction. Just a factual statement of “One of the first hybrid females born in Risa Colony.”

Then she was at least four hundred years old! Beautiful, ageless, and absolutely perfect in every female way... and Cyderial’s superior on every level.

A hybrid of her age and experience could literally snap me in half like a twig.

I had shown her my claws and been unforgivably rude. Had we been in an academy setting, I would be a bloodstain on the floor right now.

But she treated me with kindness at my obvious embarrassment. “We did not know then what we know now about mating urges or the madness of the song. You don’t have to suffer what I went through—ten years of being bullied by a well-meaning male who could not control his impulses. Nor do you need to be afraid of me. Let me counsel you on how to handle a mate of his temperament.”

Drinking her in like she might actually be able to save me, I managed a

soft order at last. “Cyderial, I will have a glass of wine, as will Miranda.”

Beautifully smiling, she gave me a gentle pat. “Well done, my girl. Come, let’s see about that hot bath.”



THERE HAD BEEN baths when I was very little, in the sink of my mother’s small apartment. Though I understood the concept and had even recognized the raised tub in Cyderial’s bathroom, I would have never thought to actually use it.

Already sweating, I confessed to the strange woman, “I am too hot for a hot bath.”

Adjusting the settings so steaming water might pour out, Miranda said, “I know it seems counterintuitive, but it doesn’t really work that way. If you prefer, I can fill it up with cold water, which might *feel* helpful, but the heat will have a soothing effect on your nervous system and subsequently buy you more time. The cold will actually stimulate it, and your symptoms will progress at a faster rate. Absurd, isn’t it?”

Well, that was solid information. Shaking out of the soiled dress, I asked, “What else can you teach me?”

Nudity between females was a way of life, but this was the first person to view my body since I had been opened. There was a vivid seam between my legs now, but she kept her eyes on my face as she helped me into the tub.

Old Miranda was right. Sinking into steaming water was really very comforting.

Yet the entire tenor of the woman altered the second she had me in the water. Lathering soap between her hands to work it into my arm, there was a sudden urgent quality to her low-spoken secrets, as if she suspected he listened at the door. “He won’t tolerate my keeping you to myself for much longer, so I want to be plain with you, child. There is no breaking the bond. I

tried everything when I was in your shoes, all it led to was suffering. You may not have wanted this male, but ultimately females cannot choose based on personal preference. Nature demands the strongest mates. *We are made from this planet and must follow the rules of this world.* Our ranking system requires a great deal of violence between the men. One does not earn the title of General only from excellence in the field. Cyderial had to physically defeat every other male vying for the position. Thousands. He still takes challengers once a year. Not all of the males eager for rank walk away. Before it was outlawed, humans used to make a sport of it. He was very popular, filling up stadiums so they might watch that man tear apart his peers.”

Wide-eyed, I stopped breathing.

No one had ever mentioned anything like this within the academy.

Miranda rushed to assure me. “He’s not going to hurt you, ever. But he is definitely not going to let you go. The fact that he was able to restrain himself for ten years should show you the caliber of man you are dealing with. Restraint of that level is unheard of.” Her green eyes leveled me with a look of pure awe. “I mean it, child. It has never happened in the past. Ten *days* would be a miracle.”

I had nothing to say, nervous in that hot water and freaked out. Never had I seen that man wield violence. Not in correcting a watcher or a recruit. He had never needed to do more than warn with a look. To think of him potentially enjoying ripping apart men, no wonder no one ever dared to question him.

The old woman who looked young enough to have grown up with me at the academy had more wisdom to impart. “It is a long journey you will share together. You can choose to start fresh, or you can choose to suffer your justifiable rage until nature gives you no other choice but to accept the bond. I was very stubborn, which caused me decades of heartache. The first century of my mating was hell. It was not until I allowed myself to accept that I was a

sexual being, despite a violent and unwilling start, who could enjoy my true nature without restriction. I didn't need to punish myself for desiring the affection and attentions of my mate."

Cold, despite the heat of the water, I whispered, "He told you that he forced me?"

"In great detail. The motivation behind it..." A considering breath stretched her chest, Miranda solemn. "It seems you do not understand what happens to a hybrid female who is penetrated without a mate to properly open her. You would have not been physically capable of functioning without a great deal of medical intervention afterward, if you survived it at all. Only a mate can encourage our reproductive system to animate properly. Even more, the mate needs to be of an age where he can properly create a full knot and encourage blood flow and male ejaculate to inflate pockets, like little nests, for your future children to sleep in until it is time for their birth. Mates only have that one opportunity to fully assure that you and your unborn are given everything you need."

Her frenzied whispering was so much more than I was capable of processing, the woman going on to say, "After you have been fertilized, mating acts as a way to pleurably enjoy a necessary bond that assures female survival and the survival of your young. Our species is never free of our other half. Only humans have that luxury and that loneliness. Furthermore, you would have never been able to go into the fog if you'd succeeded in being ruined. Very few ruined females choose to even remain alive—not when it means an endless age of solitude, of childlessness, of males who have zero interest because their song can no longer be heard. Some go so far as to allow human men to use their bodies, seeking intimacy any way they can find it, until the harsh reality sets in that no human male will ever be able to give them what they need. It really is a very sad thing, my pet. That is why it is the highest taboo amongst our kind."

I could have chosen a different strategy if I had only known the truth of

such matters. Frustrated, I asked, “Why are we not taught these things at the academy? Before tonight, I had never seen a diagram of hybrid female anatomy. I could have found a mate who wanted to journey into the fog with me, if I had known that was my only option! Not been ignorant and stupidly caught by a man I have hated my whole life.”

She quickly shushed me. “You may have hated him as your commanding officer, but you know so little about the man. Cyderial is vital to our cause. He needs a strong mate at his side. You could benefit our entire people simply by ordering him to make you dinner. Do you understand me?”

No, I did not. And I was very uncomfortable with everything she was whispering to me as she scrubbed me clean.

Soaping up my back, she said, “He wants nothing more than for you to be happy, so long as you are happy in *his* arms. He will make mistakes, because he is male, and they are intrinsically stupid about some things. He will be excessively possessive, especially around human males, which he was right to warn you not to trust. *Humans are dangerous.*”

Irritated, I asked, “You expect me to forget everything he’s ever done, and... what? Play house with him?”

She nodded in earnest, all smiles and glittering eyes. “If you understood what was at stake, you’d have your lips wrapped around his cock right now.”

Blinking, shocked, I said, “That’s disgusting!”

“Oh, sweet girl.” She flicked the water to rinse bubbles from her hands. “No rush on that one... but you *will* like it. And he will fall to his knees should you offer to suck him off. You could literally command him to conquer the world by putting your mouth on his dick.”

“Why are there so many words for one organ?”

Chuckling yet urgent, she said, “You’re getting caught up on the details and missing the greater picture. Our kind has fought hard for every freedom we have and are outnumbered several thousand to one. Cyderial is beloved, and he has wielded human awe for our benefit. But there is a faction of

humans who do not see us as people, and they are gaining in popularity. They consider us a threat and not their protectors. They see what we achieve and covet what we possess. If any of these humans would have known he had a mate that was only a defenseless child, they would have come for you. The things they would have done to you to strike at him are unspeakable. He might not tell you that, because he doesn't want you to be frightened. But I think you have a right to know. Harm to you would destroy him; destroying him would undermine hybrid rights. You are more important than you realize. Perhaps he made some crazy choices to keep you safe... perhaps you even hate him for those choices... but your entire species is reliant on *your* survival right now, Lorieyn. It would be better still if you did not worry him but instead kept him happy and focused."

Her implication was grotesque. "What you are asking me to do is obscene! I am expected to sacrifice everything I ever wanted?"

Cupping my cheek, Miranda looked upon me with compassion. "It's a hard lesson for all of us to learn. Who we were before we were mated no longer applies. You will find new achievements to pursue. Someday, you may find a great joy in motherhood."

Not one ally stood in my corner.

I may have come across forceful, but I was very much afraid when I snarled, "Get out!"

My face must have been awash with betrayal, for her final words to me were soft. "There is nothing to prevent him from locking you in this fine house forever. No one, human nor hybrid, will go against his wishes. Remember that the next time you feel an urge to break a plate."

Cyderial came for me not long after Miranda abandoned me to my fate. Thoughts congested with her poison, I didn't even think to respond to his approach.

Submerged and naked, my knees pulled up under my chin, I felt like the last problem I needed to worry about at that moment was my nudity before the man.

Far weightier issues were at hand.

He held out a stemmed glass of golden liquid, the crystal steaming once held over my bath. Stern, he said, "I want to caution you. Wine is an intoxicant. Miranda's motivation in suggesting it wasn't purely for your benefit."

Nothing that ancient hybrid woman came to share had been purely for my benefit.

Lifting my arm from the water, wet fingers gingerly pinched the stem before I accepted the glass. It smelled floral and syrupy, appeared thicker than water, yet light. Unsure if I wanted to drink the poison or pour it out, I asked, "And if I drink it, what will happen?"

He took a seat beside the tub, observing me observing the wine. "You may be more inclined to my attentions."

"But you can make me want you anyway." And that was the hard truth.

So, what did it matter at all?

“Lorieyn, I overreacted.” Elbows to his knees, he leaned closer. “There is so much about this world that you do not understand, and I am unaccustomed to speaking with women in a personal way. The subtleties of female emotional connections contradict the black-and-white of male thinking. In my view, your mother is a woman who gave you away for personal benefit. To you, she was a loving caregiver who did what she thought would be best for a child she had formed an attachment to. Perhaps neither of us are wrong.”

Blinking up at him, I said nothing.

After a sigh, he added, “I want to take you into the city, but I cannot do so....”

Here we go.

This was where he’d tell me I would be locked in his home for a decade. Eyes already welling, my lip shook.

“I cannot risk your safety,” he said, starting again, “if you are not aware of the dangers. I am also not foolish enough to assume you won’t try to run. The city is not safe. It is full of humans who would do you harm.”

Perhaps I should drink the wine, inebriate my brain right out of the crushing anxiety. “Run? Where would I go? There is no place for me anywhere.”

The tips of his fingers dancing atop the water, he sighed. “Humans may try to deceive you. Tell you there are ways you could be free of me. Can I trust you not to believe them?”

“You want me to trust you, when you have misled and deceived me my whole life? I don’t know anything about you. I don’t know anything about myself. Right now, I feel very unsafe.” Every last word true, I felt sadness oozing out my pores. “I’m scared.”

“We will take it one day at a time. Maybe even hour by hour.” The general’s thumb came to wipe a tear from my cheek. “Let me earn your

trust.”

I wanted to pull away from his touch almost as badly as I wanted to lean into it. Desperate for any form of comfort, even if it came from him, I asked, “How?”

His hand dipped lower, a featherlight touch tracing down my throat. “We mate and get it over with. You will find that the sky is not going to fall and that there is nothing to fear about my body nor yours. The heat will completely subside, and you will feel much better.”

“But for how long?” Because the heat would come back... forever.

Another one of those unusual, careful smiles. “We take it one minute at a time and see.”

“I want to eat first.”

His smile grew warmer. “Of course.”

Already breathing faster, I added, “And I reserve the right to change my mind.”

Standing slowly, he looked at me fondly. “I will leave you to finish your bath. Dinner will be waiting.”

There was no point in lingering in the water after he was gone. If I sat and ruminated, if I ran over all the scary corners of my mental dilemma, I was going to drive myself out of a state of sanity.

Setting the full glass of wine aside so I might face what was coming clearheaded, I climbed out of the warm water, and I dried clinging water droplets from my sizzling skin.

The silky dress, I would not wear again, wrapping myself instead in the large, fluffy towel.

Keeping my hair tied up, a few stray tendrils having escaped near my nape, I looked in the mirror and hardly recognized the frightened, flushed thing staring back at me.

I didn’t like her at all, not when I knew I was so much better than this. Stronger than this.

Smarter.

All could be taken in stride, the inevitable coupling necessary for my health. If I felt better, I would think more clearly. I would feel more inclined toward clear thought if I wasn't craving something I could not fully name.

To my reflection, I said, "You are not a slave."

Not to my emotions, not to my fears.

This was a problem no different than the most interesting mathematical equations. One that would require pulling back to stare at the larger picture.

I was mated. It would not change.

Hybrids mated for life.

My mate was General Cyderial.

Submitting to his attentions was required for my physical health, an addiction already formed. One that hundreds of hybrid women already lived with.

Miranda suffered for one hundred years.

I refused to suffer for any.

Straightening my shoulders, I walked to my fate and braved a dimly lit bedroom, glad the soft light was not red but golden.

Dinner was served at the same table where I had eaten breakfast. Water and wine waiting so I might choose what I wished.

Cyderial didn't comment on my lack of proper clothing. I did not comment on the fact that he removed his coat.

The food was actually very good. Grated cabbage wilted in oil, salty with bacon, and softened by cream. I even went so far as to compliment his efforts, which set him purring.

One might even say he was *swelling* with pride.

Water was my drink of choice.

When I was finished eating, he ate his portion, watching me pretend I was not sending nervous glances toward the bed.

When he was done, he set down his fork and rose to his feet without

pretense. Circling the table, he stood before me, hand going to my hair to let it down. Careful, he unwound my tresses, taking his time to enjoy the feel of his fingers in the mass.

I sensed he wanted to speak, compliment me or offer assurances, but he chose silence for my benefit. If my suspicion was true, he was right to do it. Talking was more than I could handle.

So I let him touch my hair, noting the growing bulge in his trousers and how being near him left me burning with fire.

When he drew me from the chair, I didn't fight him. Walking toward the bed, as if waking to the hangman's scaffold, I moved with the slow acceptance of one condemned.

He peeled the towel from sweltering flesh, revealing my nude body as if he unwrapped a long-desired present. Leaning forward, he urged me back until the mattress hit my thighs. I sat, braced on my arms, and watched him begin to undress.

Nervous but intrigued, I forced myself to look. First, at the broad expanse of his chest, which I remembered moving over me when he'd had me pinned to the floor. His musculature was perfectly defined, strong, and had been wielded to maim his own kind to earn the rank of General.

With strength like that, he could have done a great deal of harm to me. Yet all I had known was his hands on my wrists and his demanding kiss on my mouth.

He wasn't kissing me now.

Instead, he watched me, taking his time to unbutton the remainder of his shirt, pulling the sleeves down powerful arms, as if to not frighten me should he move too fast.

Or perhaps to preen.

It didn't matter if I disliked him; Cyderial had every right to be proud of his appearance. From his coloring to his form, he was beautiful to look at.

I might have even found him handsome were my thoughts not clouded

with fear.

Shirt cast aside, glowing in the low light, his hands moved to his belt.

Trousers undone, the remainder of his clothing lowered to the floor.

I didn't need to consult the diagrams in his filthy book to know he was fully aroused. Proud, his cock, his dick, his *thing*, jutted toward me. It looked as alien as I remembered, segmented and straining. A pointed purple tip and flared flange.

He moved it just enough that I might see what it could do, an undulating wave of male flesh beckoning me nearer.

Voice low and tempted, he urged, "Touch me. You don't need to be afraid of my body."

I didn't know if I could bring myself to do that. Fever or not, I was not aroused, far too scared to even consider it.

Frozen in place.

Staring wild-eyed at his thick member, I was forced to admit I was powerless. That I needed his assistance before I started screaming. "Help me."

Immediately, his soft purr lashed into hard, loud pulsations.

The breath left my lungs, and I found I could breathe again. Moments later, a small amount of sweetness filled the air.

While I watched, a bead of fluid formed on the tip of his pointed cock, gathering at a tiny slit. Pearlescent, it shined, growing until it began to drip down his shaft.

My mouth watered, and I understood. That fluid would taste exactly as he smelled.

Sweet, transcendent, delightful.

Miranda said I would enjoy sucking his cock, and now I knew why.

The addiction was for male fluids, respite waiting right there, slowly dripping its way down his length. Mesmerized by its journey, I cocked my head and absently sucked my lower lip into my mouth.

He said the words softly, with deep reverence, “I love you, Lorieyn.”

Between my legs, a soft flutter began. Pulling in another deep breath of lightly scented air, tension began to drain from my body, an unnatural looseness washing over my bones.

He knew, easing himself onto the bed to creep over me. Urging me toward the center, where I might be comfortably laid to await his mercy.

His chest warm on my pebbled breasts, weight on his elbows, he looked down at his prize, lips lightly lifted. There was no kiss, no touch of his hands, nothing that might distract me from the feeling of his cock exploring the flesh of my stomach and teasing lightly at the apex of my closed legs.

Nose tracing the line of my throat, he whispered, “Were this simply for your pleasure, I would spend hours adoring your body and showing you great care. But your heat needs tending. I promise you a future of worship, but for tonight, I suggest you spread your legs and let me in. Best get this over with.”

Breathing hard and fast, trembling, I parted my legs as best I could and felt his lower half settle in the cradle of my thighs.

Still no kiss.

He wanted me to be present, *to recognize* that the only pain I felt was the aching fever of heat.

That prehensile cock knew exactly where to go—a sensitive slit that had grown slippery without my notice. Before it dug in, it ran itself between my seam, coating his accordion-like ridges in the slippery stuff my body leaked in invitation.

Breath hitching, my pelvis tilted, an involuntary response to such stimulation. Which angled my opening right in line for the pointed head to test.

He dipped in.

Watching his terrifying cockhead ever so slowly luxuriate in my cream, flare once within me, then draw out, I whimpered.

It was not a noise of pain.

It was one of need. My hips already chasing after that spear-like tip so it might delve deeper and ease the fire within.

Watching me, studying me, Cyderial pressed his invasion back to my opening, as if licking at me with his tip, before delving just a bit deeper than before.

I squeaked to feel a stretch at that first fat accordion-like segment forcing me open, to know he flared within to lock his monster inside.

Yet he changed the shape of himself again, retreating from my weeping slit, leaving me panting and *starved*.

This dance of his, never once did it hurt. It felt like a rebirth, like that first taste of fog-laced air upon waking. Sizzling fire and soothing ice.

An intoxicant beyond anything a glass of wine might offer.

Two segments pushed through on his next penetration. Three. Four. Until I made a noise.

So full, then so empty, his retreat slithering out of me while I panted for air, my little sounds of fear twisting into low, breathy moans.

“You are doing so well.”

His spearhead popped through the little sucking, *starved* mouth between my legs again, only this time my body did not allow his retreat. Something inside me closed hard around him, pulled at his cock in waving, undulating tugs, while I watched him stretch and strain my tiny opening so the bulk of his beastly *thing* could be swallowed whole.

Girth firmly rooted, Cyderial did not withdraw again. Instead, those segments went to work within me, pushing against my tightened rings of muscle, teasing and stretching me as my insides began to match his dance and ripple around him.

It felt *good*.

The sensation was much different than what his fingers and tongue provided hours ago. Aching fullness countered the sweet zings, wetness squishing out where I gripped him to coat his cock in shining slick.

Pulling out had me hissing until I realized it was only so he might thrust back in and give me more. My core would do all it might to refuse his retreat, Cyderial playing his game only to fight his way back in past so many spasming muscles. Yet my weeping slit was more than happy to coat his cock with abundant slick to aid his cause.

Even so, my legs trembled where they were parted by his hips, my pleasure twisted up by nerves.

“There is nothing that will ever compare to the feel of you. Every bit is perfection.” He groaned, hips shunting forward so once again he would be fully sheathed.

My internal clench magnified, massaged into submission by a jerking, hungry cock.

Within me, the segments began to thicken until I ached, then elongated so I might stretch. All the while, the tip of his cock searching out places to tease so my toes might curl, so my breathy pants might tell him just how good it all felt.

My hips began to rock as reason abandoned me. Yet he kept feeding me more pleasure than I could possibly handle.

It hurt beautifully, the growing torment almost as wonderful as the climax I had found on his tongue.

When my hands came to grip his shoulders, when talons pricked deep to anchor me to my mate, Cyderial began to fuck me in earnest. Long strokes of a member that thickened and stretched, that wriggled and dug deep.

Our breath united in cadence, my chest meekly echoing his deeper pulsating thumps.

It was so very different taking him without being drunk on male tricks. I was *there*. It was *my hands* scratching down his back so I might grip his ass and pull him deeper. *My legs* spreading inexorably wide so he might plunder where he willed.

Heat left my skin slippery with sweat, my insides on fire around his

frenzied organ. When his lips finally came to mine, that wicked tongue daring to test if I'd bite, something far stronger than a flutter clenched up my insides.

Which set him wild.

Where he had been careful and measured in each thrust, he broke upon me with what a male could truly do to a female.

This frenzy, I had not known on the floor of his office.

This mania would end me in all ways.

Trilling, I arched my back and *received* my demise. Within my body, he began to grow—not his knot, for I had yet to climax. That thing of his curled around itself and pulverized muscles to find what my body kept secret and tease out my screams.

Pleasure caught flame within, burning the fever brighter when he left my open mouth to drag his tongue over my insanely sensitive nipples, stoking the fiery hurricane into a constricting mass of perfect hedonism that was about to go nuclear.

I burst into a wracking, heaving orgasm and sunk my teeth into the meat of his shoulder to hold back the cries.

The knot, the only thing that might improve an already perfect storm, bulged huge in my passage, releasing boiling waves of cum into my belly and fed my fully-formed addiction.

Every cell in my body wanted more, draining his cock with sucking ripples against that writhing shaft. Poor human women would never know how incredible this might feel, their sad males' members unexciting.

“My God, Lorieyn.” Still groaning, he gushed another surge of fluid into my body. “You are perfect.”

I was nowhere near speaking, actively working him and greedy for every last drop. His liquid gift was necessary to my life, every last cell that made up my body screaming for more.

The driving need was so different than the climax he'd forced on me

while he'd held me to his office floor. That had been mind-bending—this was life itself, dumping into my core.

Beginning to bulge as he gushed more fluid inside me, my stomach altered shape. And kept growing.

I wanted more.

I *needed* the distortion to expand into burgeoning fullness that might slosh around his gyrating cock.

“More!” The base part of my brain screamed for him to be generous, to do whatever he might desire so long as he continued to fill me up.

Kiss him? Yes, I would take his lips and do to him with my tongue just the same as he did to me. Touch him? Greedy hands already stroked and clawed, while I purred encouragement upon the man who stretched my belly like a balloon.

Only too happy to engage with my addiction-driven antics, Cyderial grew playful, relishing each bite, praising every rippling climax that followed another swell of fluid from his body into mine.

Intruding discomfort let me know when my guts had reached capacity. What had seemed like a never-ending orgasm and an addict's blissful fix began to fade. I found I was myself again, that such pleasure had not twisted me into a stranger.

Even if a prehensile *thing* wiggled inside me.

Even if my enemy purred to see me pleased.

My stomach was bulbous, and my breasts were swollen. Between my legs, I ached perfectly around his pulsating knot.

Soft kisses came to my brow, playful licks at my ear. “Does my brave mate want more?”

A slight whine left my lips when his final gush stretched me more than I thought I could bear.

But even that overburdened sensation? I loved it.

Grunting, he focused on what he was doing within me, his member

flexing strangely. “Hold it in, every drop, my love. Do not spill my gift.”

As he spoke, something *hot* moved down the length of his cock, a wad that left the muscles in his neck straining as it stretched his girth through its descent.

Explaining as he strained, he rocked into me, groaning, “Do not be afraid when I pull out and you stay full. A waxy plug will remain, so your body can drink down all it needs. It might feel a little strange, but you’re safe. Just remember that. Just... remember....”

It burned where he spewed out the thick mass, yet there was no pain. Only a strange sense of relief that I had exactly what I needed.

Plugging my insides, bit by bit, his pulsating knot diminished until he withdrew, leaving more of that hot substance in his wake.

His spent cock popped free of my cunt to fall to the mattress. Not a drop had been spilled on the sheets.

Inflated with semen, bursting... so full I could hardly bear it, still I tingled inside as if every last drop was sacred.

Appraising his work, Cyderial’s hand came to gently stroke my large belly. To praise all he found, arrogant in his smirk as he saw me squirm. Every last trace of heat was gone, yet as he tickled his fingers over my distended abdomen, I grew crimson from heightening awkwardness.

Pressure inside made it difficult to draw a deep breath. Organs felt as if they shifted to make room, some complaining, others relieved the addiction had been satiated.

General Cyderial’s appreciative gaze never faltered. “Are you tired?”

It may have been dark, yet I had slept much of the day. Not to mention how fast my hearts were beating from our exertion. Breathless, I answered, “No.”

“Good.” He grinned, stretching out his extraordinary tongue as he crept down my body. Earning my cry when he began to *kiss me* passionately where I was already extremely stimulated.

I came almost immediately, corked full of his fluids and screaming for mercy.

He gave me none.

Over and over until sunrise.

There was no resistance left in me by the time he pulled me close to cuddle. My head on his shoulder, my belly resting at his flank, he stroked where I was swollen... and told me he loved me.

I awoke to midday sun, a soft breeze floating over my bare skin.

There was something so strange about the concept of open windows, in allowing atmosphere to enter a room without filters to suck out the fog.

So high above the city, there was no fog.

Clean air, cold enough to leave my scales prickling, blew over me... the discomfort of my heat gone, leaving me vulnerable to a chill.

No more aching burn, no more fever. Had it not been for the radiant warmth of the male with his chest pressed to my back and his legs tangled with mine, I may have even required a blanket.

Head pillowed on his bicep, I listened to the sound of his soft sleeping breaths, feeling the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. Where my abdomen poked out, his palm rested, a possessive embrace.

My swollen belly had shrunk but not completely diminished. It poked out, a very strange physical phenomenon I had no idea my body was capable of. I possessed an entire organ system nature designed to assure I would *need* the first male to ejaculate inside me as long as I might live, and there it was right under my skin all along.

A life mate who slept at my back.

Cyderial claimed that my body would absorb what it needed from that swollen pocket within. He even left me plugged to ensure no drop would be

wasted.

But heat would return.

And I would have to be fucked again.

Twice it had happened now.

Once, fucked senselessly drunk on male tricks on his office floor.

Then, fucked with my mind clear and addiction riding me, in the very bed we would share from now on.

Both times had been so different, and both times, the general knew exactly how to play my body against my mind. The things he could do with his fingers. The taste of his lips, how they might pull at my nipples. That *beast* between his legs.

He could give me a kind of pleasure that was impossible to discount, the male shameless in wielding his power over me, utterly unapologetic. Cyderial could make my body sing, inspire reactions I would never know how to describe to another female. That journal—not a single one of the diagrams within it came close.

Sexual congress between hybrid mates was existential. Cyderial was more than eager to show me all the secrets he had memorized over the years. It was hard to grasp these were his first sexual experiences too. But he was so experienced in the theory and practice, where I knew nothing—nothing about my body, about his, about wriggling cocks, ballooning stomachs, waxy plugs, nor orgasms.

A female's duty was to submit to these things.

A male's duty was to pleasure her in every way.

It had only been one night wrapped up in his passion, but I could see how it could go horribly wrong. Miranda had been forced for ten years to endure a lustful mate who refused her freedoms so he might enjoy her cunt.

The idea of being locked in a room and subjected to that kind of pleasure over and over would literally drive any female insane. I had already been tamed to such a point that I was allowing him to hold me.

The same man who had forced me to sleep just the day before.

Who had taken me without permission at the academy.

Who I had given permission to knot me in that very bed, because I saw no other possible outcome, knowing Mirada's sad history and Cyderial's obsessive insanity.

I had to be *confident* to be allowed outside on his terms.

Why waste time arguing with reality? That is what the wise would ask.

Accept every bit of disgust, swallow down your disappointments, and move forward. Cyderial had won. I had been defeated at a game I had unknowingly been playing with him since I was a child.

He outmaneuvered me even now, the man educated in what I could only imagine were advanced sexual techniques, confident in how and when to apply them. He had bred me and made our children when I still could hardly wrap my mind around the concept that potentially dozens of hybrid babies were waiting in some sort of suspended state... I was not even sure where in my body.

I didn't have to like him, but I had to be knotted by him.

I didn't have to desire the man, but heat would force me to feel intense pleasure under his body for the rest of my life.

I may carry our children, but I did have the power to refuse to birth them. Unless... that was also a lie.

I had to accept that I did not know the world at all and, in accepting that, make a choice. To whine about my lot in life, or to start the new day reborn.

Lorieyn, bonded mate of General Cyderial.

Who I didn't really know at all.

How much longer before I forgot to feel uncomfortable waking up in the arms of a naked, figurative stranger possessing a weird cock. One I felt fast against my thigh, clinging to me in his sleep.

A tentacle.

A shackle.

Even as he dreamed, I could not escape that *thing's* desire to touch me. Nor could I pretend I was not beginning to grow aroused looking at it. Closing my eyes, I let out a sigh.

A fresh start awaited, but I needed the bathroom and a few precious moments of solitude to clear my head.

To poke at my belly, to see what the plug inside me felt like.

To wash the smell of sweat and sex right down the drain before I might demand modest clothing that any good mate should provide.

Yet before I might make my move to seek freedom, an audible pop made me jolt. The subsequent rushing flood that poured out of me left me scrambling to my elbows to gape. From my glittering slit poured a river of pearlescent fluid that drenched the bed, my stomach deflating while I stared in frozen horror.

Jaw hanging loose, I gawked at all the creamy whiteness pooling on the sheets. And just about died to both feel and watch the white plug slither free. Through the gush, moving past the lips of my slit, a waxy-looking blob joined the mess.

A sleepy male hand dove right into the warm puddle, rubbing it right back into me as he fingered my sex. "Mmm, good morning."

Every move, every wiggle I made, and a little bit more dribbled out, uninvited fingers rolling it against my seam and tickling where I leaked. Even that organ of his was perking up to slather around in it.

"Oh my God, stop!"

He did, but Cyderial did not remove the single hooked finger penetrating the source of the flood.

My chest was heaving, my cheeks bright red, unsure if I should get out of bed and risk a greater mess, or simply die right there. But mortification would not let my mouth work.

Easing gracefully from where he lay, all sleek muscle and dangerous strength, a very naked General Cyderial took me in his arms. "My darling,

your body, in all its miraculous workings, is nothing but beautiful to me. I gave you more than you might absorb before the plug would melt. Releasing what is not needed is natural. Cleansing.”

He began to kiss my neck, murmuring, “Besides, males find a large rupture *very arousing*. A swollen womb is a sign of our virility and devotion. I am proud to see your stomach protrude, and if you would let me, I would pump you full again this very moment.” Lips came to my throat. “Give you a belly to carry around all day.”

My squeal when he set his teeth to the skin where shoulder met neck sent another gush to coat where his fingers were once again busy in my slit.

Taking his wrist in my grip, I forced his touch out of my body, shrugging out from under his shadow until I was free of his grasping cock.

Standing, more warm drips running down my thigh, I took a deep breath, a shaky exhale following. “You’re telling me this is going to happen every time?”

“There is nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Did this happen after the first time?” I had a protruding stomach then too but did not remember anything about what took place between passing out and waking up here.

“You were delirious through the release of my knot, and I cleaned you afterward. I knotted you again while your body recovered in slumber, and yes, I gave you what you needed so you could fully rest while adapting to our bond,” he admitted with no shame. “When your body had all it needed, it released, and I tended to you, dressed you, and knew you would wake soon for more.”

That felt extremely intimate and uncomfortable, knowing he had already seen my body do this. That he may have even been watching between my legs as his scent kept me asleep. That he had been *inside me* while I was unconscious and seemed proud of his works....

Hand to my sex, trying to hold what seemed to keep lazily leaking out of

me, I shuddered at all of it. “How long will this take?”

Reaching for me with a devilish grin, he offered, “Come back to bed and let me lick you clean.”

“No.” I tacked on a quick, “Thank you,” in case his male logic was going to assume forcing me to endure more hours of tonguing might be helpful. I had enough of that in the dark and was ashamed to admit I begged him to let me sleep when dawn broke outside the windows.

But he caught me anyway, chuckling as he drew my mortified self right where he wanted me.

Rolling to his back, he brought me with him, hitching my thigh over his hip and opening my legs so more mess might ooze on his dancing member.

And then he smiled at me, lascivious and unapologetic as I stared down at that *thing* stroking my flattening stomach as it squelched through spilling cream.

Showing off his cock as if I should be impressed, he whispered, “Rub our juices into me, my Lorieyn. Let me show you this is only beautiful.”

My hand was caught, his grip biting as he forced me to palm his shaft. Wrapping his larger hand over mine, my fingers encased a girth too thick to fully circle. Moving my forced grip up over his accordion segments, his cock luxuriated in my compulsory petting, the male all licentious sighs and rolling hips as he smirked.

He felt so strange in my grip, hard but somehow velvet. Intimidating yet right there within reach of my claws. He thickened, pulsating, and I could feel the beats of his hearts under my touch.

Education in male anatomy, it would seem, was my next obligatory lesson.

Every part of that organ, he had a name for, urging me to trace my finger between the segments when he stretched, showing me all the ways in which he could wriggle in my grip. The more we stroked him together, the more that menacing, pointed tip leaked sweetness.

I leaked on his root and his thighs. He leaked upon our joined hands.
Our fluids mingled.

Slippery and shiny, I found it was not at all unpleasant to touch.

“You can taste me if you’d like,” he growled, chest thrumming a lazy, indulgent rhythm.

“*Suck his cock,*” Miranda had said, as if it was my duty to hybrid kind.

He was using my hand to stimulate his pleasure, but I was not suffering a mind-altering heat, and there were things to discuss. “She told me I would have to do this. That I could start wars by putting your dick in my mouth.”

He stilled to an almost supernatural level. It was as if the entire room held its breath in the moments it took for him to narrow his eyes. “Just what did Miranda whisper to you?”

“That I was expected to zealously suck the cock of the man responsible for keeping hybrid kind alive when a growing faction of humans wants us dead.”

Releasing his grip on my hand, he grew angry and serious. “I brought her here to explain female matters, such as the expected release of fluids, not bend your ear to her personal politics. She was completely out of line.”

Seeing him annoyed made me hitch a brow. “Is it true that I was in danger as a child, because you wanted me for your mate?”

“Every hybrid female is in danger.” A guarded response.

Negotiation had to happen *now*. I could show him that I would be willing to parlay in exchange for certain freedoms. “I don’t want to be locked in a room for ten years. I will put my mouth on you, if that’s what it takes for you to let me go outside.”

Just like that, the pulsating organ cradled in my palm began to go flaccid. My hand was released as if my touch burned his skin.

Rubbing his eyes, he swore under his breath. “Is that why you consented to be with me last night?”

“Yes. I am trying to show you I can be *confident*. I won’t run. I’m not

stupid enough to think I would get very far before the fever sets in. You have shown me that heat hurts, and *I did not like being left alone*. I am your mate, but I don't want you to leave me locked in here."

Hurt was in his gaze. Disappointment in his response. "After our argument, I made an appointment to take you to visit your mother today and booked a dinner afterward so I might court you."

I didn't want to be suspicious when he looked so disheartened, but he had done nothing to earn my trust. "But you don't like my mother. You think humans should not be trusted."

"*I love you*. Seeing her will make you happy. I want to introduce you to a sense of normalcy, give you a chance to make friends or reconnect with academy sisters and their mates." A sinister quality darkened his tone, his fingers reaching out to brush my jaw. "I would only lock you away if you gave me good reason to do so. And hear me now, Lorieyn. You never have to barter sexual favors with your mate. If I decided to lock you up, no amount of sucking my cock would urge me to open the door."

"I'm not trying to be problematic," I murmured, because it felt as if I had made a very grave error.

Letting out a sigh, he cupped my cheek. "I appreciate how brave you have been."

It felt like I was expected to apologize, but I was not sure exactly what for. "I don't know how to cheat on this test."

He started to laugh, the tension ebbing. Reaching for my hair, he began to play with the length, his features going soft as he grew thoughtful. "The devious student has finally found she can no longer lie to get what she wants."

His words annoyed me. "I had good reason to do the things I did."

"So did I," he purred.

Another impasse.

Glittering green eyes running all over my naked body, Cyderial said,

“You look beautiful this morning.”

Slimy and leaking? Hair tangled and skin sticky, I didn't feel very pretty.

Looking him over as he lounged under me as if I had pinned him to the mat, I found him intimidating. The muscles of his abdomen defined yet relaxed, pectoral muscles, broad shoulders, strong jaw, high cheekbones, vorec-green eyes.

Blond.

I had always noted his pale-blond hair.

As his mate, if I were to be an acceptable one, was I supposed to touch it the way he was touching mine? I had fisted it more than once in a sexual frenzy, and he hadn't seemed to mind. Had it been soft?

I had been too focused on my own pleasure to notice.

His lips were harsh, but when he used them on my body, they could be silken. But more often, he was rough with them.

I think I preferred rough to soft.

“What are you thinking?” he murmured, enjoying my obvious scrutiny.

That my survival would require a massive shift in perspective. “You look different when you're not scowling or glaring. Your smile, it makes me nervous.”

Maybe I could touch him, just once. Show him I was confident and could earn freedoms he would not let me buy with sexual favors.

Tentatively, I reached forward, unsure what I was doing.

With bated breath, he waited.

Slowly, I took him by the throat, the same way he had done to me back in his office. Talons dancing over a vital artery, I felt an unexpected growl in my chest, even as I leaned closer, mesmerized by what I could do with a flick of my fingers.

I could rip his larynx right out, make a different kind of mess all over the bed.

But no matter how much latent rage was festering deep inside me, I could

not bring myself to break his skin.

Minutely raising his chin to give me a clearer target, Cyderial bared his throat to his captive.

To his mate.

I drew in a deep breath, my hair falling around me, and I crouched over him.

I could kiss him this way, my mouth hovering over his.

The noise in my chest wavered between violence and another sound; there was no question he knew my thoughts were dark.

But I was fighting to remember my choices that day might define my next ten years. Still, I growled, “I used to dream of painting my talons pink just to piss you off. Hiding in my room with prohibited magazines, sewing a dress from rags in the dark.” Anger glittering in my dark eyes, I hissed, “You destroyed my dress.”

Obliterated it to shreds. For all I knew, it was still on his floor.

Hovering over his lips, I added, “I want a new one that does not make me feel ashamed.”

“Lorieyn.” Tucking my hair behind my ear, he cupped my cheek. Tender, he murmured, “This will get easier.”

Would it? Perhaps. “Miranda spoke of you as if you were some kind of god to our people. I’ve seen it myself, the deference you received from instructors and watchers. It’s in your eyes. That is not the stare of a sane man.”

Dragging his thumb over my lips, he said, “Everything I did was done out of love.”

“Obsession and love are not the same thing. Even I know that.” What a strange conversation to have bare-breasted and straddling a naked man who could do far worse than deny me the fog. He could deny me any freedom at all.

Abandoning his throat, I moved my touch over his collarbone, stroked his

pectoral, and sought a hard abdomen—tracing his musculature as if learning his secrets, seeking weaknesses I could exploit.

Under me was a body I could touch any way I chose—a man I had been intimate with in acts that would have been incomprehensible to me a week prior.

A man my very wellbeing relied on now.

“Miranda told me you are a general who fought in an arena for human amusement and hybrid clout. She told me you defeated thousands for your rank. What kind of nightmare life would I have known if you had taken me at twelve? Who would I have grown up to be? You waited... and went mad, forcing every recruit to suffer in recompense.” I went back to those eyes, those unhinged, unblinking green eyes. “You’ve done unspeakable things, Cyderial.”

He sought my compassion. “There is so much you do not understand about the world.”

“So I’ve heard.” Leaning back, having denied him a willing kiss, I shook my head. “Still, I would not have terrified children.”

He caught my wrist, pulling me closer to steal the kiss I refused him. Once it was done, he breathed over my lips. “I needed you to be strong. We are on the brink of war with the humans. Is that what you would have me tell children? That they might never grow up at all? That human males traffic hybrid little girls? That human females will work to seduce unmated males for the novelty of hybrid cock? That they will turn on each other just as soon as they will turn on us? Even as my mate, you will be propositioned by overreaching men. They will want to know what color your slit is. Is it pink? Blue? Purple—that is quite rare. On the black market, you would fetch a high price. Some will try to mislead you, offer favors for our kind if you will let them have a quick fuck behind closed doors. Before we trained the females to kill more than just vorec, mates were often raped. Sometimes en masse before cheering crowds. So the strongest of us gave them something else to cheer

for. Pageantry and violence. When new generations began to see us as heroes, arena fights were made illegal. Men in power afraid we might be seen as more than cannon fodder or exotic pets.”

Defending myself against one man and his meat stick would not be a challenge on any level. Confused, I said, “But I am stronger than a human.”

Cupping my cheek, he looked upon me with so much love. “But there are so many more of them, Lorieyn. They keep breeding as if they’d already forgotten how humanity ruined the planet they left behind. The city is at capacity, and provisions are rationed. It has made them desperate to blame anyone but themselves. Desperate humans are vicious. Such men attack in groups or will wait until you are weak with heat. If you were left suffering long enough, you might mindlessly beg any male at all to ease your pain. I’ve seen recordings of such things. I’ve seen broken bodies. I’ve seen little girls damaged beyond repair. I will not put the burden of these thoughts in the heads of children, not when I can mold little ones into dangerous soldiers trained to defend themselves. If the humans suspected what I was doing within the academy....”

It was a slippery slope to make such a wide assumption about an entire species. I disagreed. “Humans are not all bad. Not one I have ever interacted with would give me the impression that—”

Pressing his fingers to my lips, he interrupted, “I personally vetted each human in your cadre of farmers. I selected the location of your vigil, personally chose the hybrids to guard the walls at your back, and scheduled the days you would be allowed some fresh air. Often, I was even standing in the fog, watching over you. I was there the day the vorec broke your leg when you were seventeen. When it happened, I think I lost about a thousand years off my life.”

I pulled his touch from my lips, scowling. “Allowed fresh air?”

“Your face has always been an open book, every expression a delight.” He traced the shape of my scowl with a smirk. “When you’ve been insulted,

you become especially fierce.”

Irritated that he could get under my skin so easily, I hissed, “How would you feel to find out your whole life was one grand lie? That you grew up in a fishbowl so your tormentor might groom you to his unhinged standards? I’m not an exotic pet, Cyderial! Do you treat me any differently than the human men you spoke of? Sex, secrets, trickery, flattery—for what?”

He said it simply. “So I can know the woman I love is safe.”

His mania was too much, my agitated rejoinder keen. “And who keeps me safe from *you*?”

Hand sliding behind my neck, he drew me near to breathe the words against my lips. “Anyone, hybrid or human, who tried to keep me from you would suffer a painful death at my hands. Every last human in this city would die screaming in the fog if that’s what it took.”

Ice ran through my veins when I realized he meant every last word. “Is that what you’re planning to do to them?”

Utterly sincere, he replied, “If I must.”

Our conversation had taken a shadowy turn, and in the gloom lurked the whisper of some dark truth I hadn’t quite grasped. He was scaring me again. “My mother lives in the city. Her children and relations.”

Flippant, he stole a daring kiss from my lips. “Then they better not try to take you from me. It is as simple as that.”

I already knew him to be unmerciful toward those suffering through the rigors of the academy. For ten years, he had deceived and misled me, time and time again. General Cyderial, my bonded mate, was the master of misdirection, of distraction.

And he did nothing in small measure.

Already teasing my body to life with dotting touches, as if to draw me away from the horror of my suspicions. Already working to unravel my thoughts, so I might smile at him and purr.

Because I understood exactly what he vowed. I had already lived it.

There was far more at stake here than heat, addiction, or even my own happiness.

Selfish intentions or not, Miranda's wisdom had been more valuable than female guidance. It was a dangerous warning. Every choice I made had power to contain the insatiable general—or to unleash him. Every mistake would have a consequence.

So much as a single wrong glance or a troubled sigh might inspire my dotting, possessive mate to overreact. That he might threaten the annihilation of an entire species if he had the inkling it would be *best for me*.

Just as his monstrous love had upended the safety and sanity of my academy sisters and brothers for a decade.

“You do not need to be frightened, my love.” Cupping my cheek, he thought to soothe the growing horror my traitorous expression revealed. “Trust me, remain obedient and permissive to all you must learn, and you will find peace in my care.”

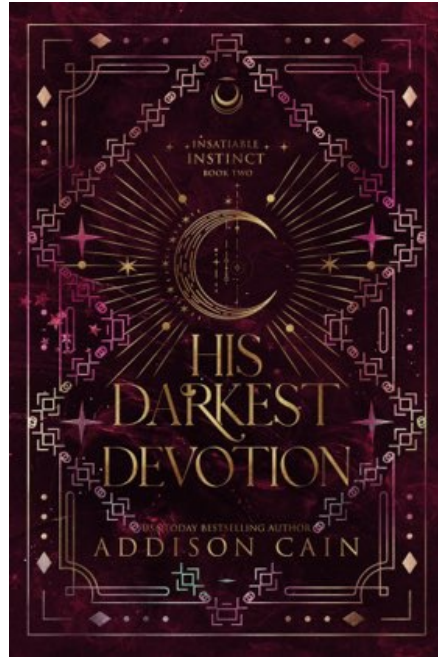
Straddling him, open and vulnerable, close enough to breathe his breath, I found I could not hide my growing sense of dread. “Promise me you will not harm the humans.”

While his reawakened cock teased at my body and his hands drifted to my breasts, he claimed my mouth before whispering, “No.”

His dreadful refusal forced me to acknowledge a stark, terrible truth. *I was the only thing standing between every last soul in the city and a terrifying juggernaut.* My duty from that moment forward would be to show my mate that humankind did not need to suffer as my academy sisters and brothers had suffered. After all, I had been created for a single purpose.

And I intended to fulfill it.

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BORN TO BE BOUND
Alpha's Claim, Book One

She had made it this far... wide eyes peered through the narrow slit between wool cap and layer upon layer of dingy muffler wrapped around the lower half of her face. No one seemed to be paying much attention as she passed, ignoring the creature in the stinking, oversized coat when it hesitated at the bottom of broad stairs and looked up at Thólos Citadel. Clutching tighter to the bottle of pills in her pocket, madly gripping her lifeline, she took the first step.

For two days, she had taken one of those priceless pills every four hours like clockwork. Walking into what had once been a restricted area, she should have been saturated in the medication, her metabolism and hormones deceived into complacency. A week's worth of food had been traded so she could make the climb up those steps without being torn to pieces.

She was still mortally afraid.

The roar of the monsters inside—the cheers and heckling as her people were stripped of their dignity, then stripped of their lives—turned her stomach, though the acid feeling may have been a side-effect of the drugs. Already sweating, grateful others had covered her in so many layers to hide what she was, Claire took the smallest of breaths, tried not to gag from the stink of rotting corpse that had seasoned her clothes, and walked into madness.

Crossing the entrance was almost too easy. There was no hand gripping her shoulder to cease her movement, no barking Follower demanding she state her business. In fact, the black hole seemed only too willing to suck her in. Over the threshold, the air was ripe with the scent of men; a pungent mixture of aggressive Alpha and some of the more violent Betas who had come to snarl and yip at whoever was that day's entertainment.

Birth titles littered the ground, parchment showing tread marks where uncaring boots had trampled what had once signified a life. A tally of names that had been stricken from the books. The scraps of paper were tossed away to mix with discarded flyers, wanted signs, and garbage.

The deeper she went, the more packed each chamber grew, filled by a horde borne of citizens and the castoff Undercroft scum set free the day terror breached Thólos. They were thugs who had taken up the banner of the Dome's conqueror, men with the power to do as they pleased. Men *encouraged* to do whatever they pleased. Evil men.

She had to be quick, knowing that if the jostling mob discovered what she was under the stinking filth wrapped around her, she'd die horribly, and all the others would be left to starve. One foot after another, back pressed against the wall, eyes darting to and fro, Claire skirted the crowd and prayed to remain unnoticed.

The male Claire sought had a reputation for standing where any could reach him. Where all could see who held power, so challengers could be killed—if rumors held true—with his bare hands.

One could not have missed him if they tried.

The villain who had the audacity to call himself *'The Shepherd'* was massive, the largest Alpha she had ever seen. And not only that... the Da'rin markings. Whatever they were, they swirled over sun-darkened skin as if an extension of his wrongness—animalistic, unnatural. The intricacy of the patterns drew the eye straight to muscled arms, warning all who looked that the bearer was treacherous—not to be trusted.

Before her city had fallen, to bear those shifting black marks above ground had been highly illegal—the punishment: execution. He was a convict of the Undercroft, the one who'd liberated the castoffs, and he was the monster responsible for the suffering of her people and for the corpses piling in the streets of Thólos.

Claire swallowed, creeping nearer, choosing to look instead at the

armored Follower Shepherd nodded at; a Da'rin marked Beta, from the look of him. It was that man whose sharp blue eyes caught her creeping nearer. Though diminutive was a gentle way to describe Claire, from his expression, the Beta found her to be nothing... less than nothing. He looked away, dismissing her approach.

Gripping those pills, her talisman against evil, Claire walked straight up to the two conversing conquerors. Seeking the giant Alpha's attention, she fought for the words. "I need to speak with you, please."

Shepherd didn't even look at her, blatantly ignoring the swathed female in her stinking clothes.

"It's very important," she tried a little louder, the sincerity in her eyes, the desperation and overwhelming fear apparent.

How many times had this happened in her life? The total disregard, the blatant rejection...

Claire released a frustrated sigh and clutched her pills even tighter. Standing like a tree, a small sapling in a forest of redwoods, she waited and watched him. There was no way she was leaving until she'd spoken with the only person who might be able to save them. He wanted to be a leader, he wanted to rule... well, they needed food. Pride had only lasted so long. Deep down she knew it would not keep them alive, so she'd come to Shepherd to ask for help.

Eyes trained on the man, on the largest in the room—maybe in the world—she waited for hours. It was hard to ignore what was taking place around her. The weeping of the once mighty reduced to sniveling wretches, dragged in to be *held accountable*. Claire was unsure what they were being held accountable for. All she knew was that everyone unfortunate enough to be hauled to the Citadel was executed, regardless of begging, bribery, bloodlines... nothing mattered to the mob. Not even guilt.

It grew dark. Claire remained, drawing in those same tiny breaths, holding her ground when all she wanted was to run screaming. Pretend she

had not just heard a stranger be sentenced to have his skin peeled off *so the world could see what he was made of underneath*. It had grown so late, her sad bravery seemed pointless. Not once had those silver eyes turned towards her. Not once.

Claire had hoped her determination would draw Shepherd to at least glance her way as his follower had, giving her a chance to plead her case. Yet the longer she waited, the more her heart began to beat erratically. For a moment, she felt she might vomit from the smell—not just of her clothes, but of all the Alphas raging in the room—and drew out her pills. With the quickest speed she could manage, she opened the lid of the bottle and pinched a little blue tablet between her forefinger and thumb. Her gloved pinky hooked the dirty muffler, pulling it down just enough to get that pill between her lips. Once it hit her tongue, Claire fought to create enough saliva to swallow.

It was jagged passing down her esophagus, made her cringe, then groan when the feeling of it hitting a hollow stomach almost made the precious pharmaceutical come right back up. Her fingers quickly readjusted the wool to cover as much of her skin as possible, pulling the reeking smell back over her nose and mouth... but then everything went wrong.

The very air altered and a shot of instinctual fear was the precursor of her greatest nightmare. It was Shepherd, suddenly unnaturally still. She could hear the bones crack in his neck as he turned his skull a few more degrees in her direction.

Sweating profusely, feeling so ill, Claire spoke the instant she felt his attention. "I must speak to you."

He had killed so many people. Even through the fabric around her face, she could smell him; more potent than the others, for certain. But the look in his eyes was far more frightening than the Da'rin marking. Hard, unforgiving mercury seemed to see right through her, shredding away her disguise. Shoulders drooping, Claire felt a rush, a burning scratch in her stomach that

turned into painful cramping, total terror left in its wake.

Everything had been for nothing.

Sucking in a ragged breath, swaying as if her legs could not decide which way to run, Claire whispered under her breath, "No... no, no, this can't be happening."

Somehow, all the preparations, the pills, had not been enough. There were too many Alphas, too much of their scent in the air, and she had gone directly into heat. Already she could feel the slick gathering between her legs, the smell of it, of something so laced with pheromones that it would not be masked by the horrid stench she'd purposely dressed in. All those hours she'd thought it had been lack of food, the stink of rotting things, and the weight of the cloak... she'd stood there in the wolves' den like an idiot while the signs had been building: nausea, racing heart, fever... and the biggest wolf of all was staring straight at her.

Claire finally had his attention, and now it was worthless.

She was already becoming delirious, panicked, her voice cracking and accusing all at once. "I just needed to speak with you. I only needed a minute."

That urge—the one she had fought her whole life—was making her tremble and prepare to flee, but there was already a commotion all around. She tried to hold her breath as Alphas sniffed the air like bloodhounds. Shepherd countered her mincing retreat, facing her full on, staring at her with the wide, focused eyes of a predator.

It was his attention—the attention she had needed to save her kind—that drew other eyes in the room. More of that damn fluid began to drip down her legs, saturating the fabric of her clothing, signaling that a rare Omega had appeared out of the blue, and that she was broadcasting a heat cycle.

There would be a riot, a bloodbath as they pulled at her... probably mounting her right there on that dirty marble floor.

Another cramping wave and she doubled over, her pupils slowly eating

up green irises until only black with an emerald ring remained. A roar came from behind, tight grasping hands clutched at her arm. She screamed, and the frenzy began.

Alphas were dominant. They had an animal need to mate an Omega in heat. Self-control, they possessed that, too... but not the monsters who were in the room. Not the kind of men who were attracted to Shepherd's cause. Not what the men in Thólos had become since that bastard descended upon them. She would be raped to death, could already feel someone tearing at her clothes.

Her body's response, Claire could not prevent. The snarls and barks only drew out more slick, made her crave to be mounted... but not by anything that was crawling in that chamber.

A howl so deafening she covered her ears, shook her to the bone. There was the sound of a struggle, gunfire, Claire instinctively curling in on herself.

Fighting her response, forcing her body to straighten so she could do more than yank away from clutching hands, she opened her eyes, exposed blown pupils, and prepared to run. They would chase her, she knew that. Alphas were stronger, fast, and being that she was surrounded, one would catch her. But at least she would have tried.

Claire was unprepared to see the amount of bodies already littering the ground. The sight of so many broken men made her freeze, and that was all he needed. In an instant, an arm as thick as a tree trunk came around her middle, and she was carted off, hanging doubled over, by the swaggering pace of a man staking claim... of the victor of the battle. The room still echoed with snarls and shouting, but more so, the pained moans of the few on the ground who were lucky enough to be alive.

Combat boots and familiar armor, all looking as if they'd been cobbled together from scraps, encased thick thighs. Shepherd. Praising Nona for the horrible stinking scarf she'd prepared, Claire fought herself—fought her instinct to smell him—and did her best to repeat the mantra that had gotten

her through this nightmare before. "*Only instincts.*"

She had to speak to him, had to fight her baser urges.

Do you think he will fight his?

The thought made her sag, an action he no doubt took as submission, and not its counterpart, despair. Claire lost track of the distance or direction he had taken her, only noticing the dimness and the strange feeling of being underground. Over and over in her head she prepared what must be said, promising herself she would say it. Even if he was rutting, she would say it.

Even if he would kill her, she would say it.

A door was pulled open on thick metal hinges, whining the way she imagined the doors would in the old-world submarines she'd read about in books, and they entered a room.

Every inhalation, even through the reeking muffler, was saturated in him—in the heady musk of the prime Alpha. Pressing her hand to her mouth and nose, she felt her body writhe against her will, and focused again on the small shallow breaths of control.

Lowered to the floor, her body convulsed in another cramp, drawing out the female's pained groan. She wanted—no, *needed*—to press her hands between her legs. But the smell of rotting flesh was turning her stomach, just as much as the delicious smell of the Alpha's den was driving her mad.

With words made bleary by craving, sentences broken up by little grunts, she fought past the overwhelming desire to spread her legs and grind. "We are starving. The Omegas need food. I have been sent to ask you to arrange a safe place where we can procure our portion before we all die."

She watched him bolt the door with a rod so thick it dwarfed her ankle, trapping her, cornering the Omega for mating. Unsure if Shepherd had heard, she used her feet to scoot away from the male until her back hit the wall, and tried again. "Food... we can't go out... hunted, forced. They're killing us." Her blown pupils looked up at the intimidating male and pleaded for him to understand. "You are *the* Alpha in Thólos, you hold control... we have no one

else to ask."

"So you foolishly walked into a room full of feral males to ask for food?" He was mocking her, his eyes mean, even as he grinned.

The horror of the day, the sexual frustration of her heat, made Claire belligerently raise her head and meet his eyes. "If we don't get food, I'm dead anyway."

Seeing the female grimace through another cramping wave, Shepherd growled, an instinctual reaction to a breeding Omega. The noise shot right between her legs, full of the promise of everything she needed. His second, louder grumbled noise sang inside her, and a wave of warm slick drenched the floor below her swollen sex, saturating the air to entice him.

She could not take it. "Please don't make that noise."

"You are fighting your cycle," he grunted low and abrasive, beginning to pace, watching her all the while.

Shaking her head back and forth, Claire began to murmur, "I've lived a life of celibacy."

Celibacy? That was unheard of... a rumored story. Omegas could not fight the urge to mate. That was why the Alphas fought for them and forced a pair-bond to keep them for themselves. The smell alone drove any Alpha into a rut.

He growled again and the muscles of her sex clenched so hard she whined and curled up on the floor.

It was hard enough to make it through estrous locked in a room alone until the cycle broke, but his damn noise and the smell invading past the rotting stickiness of her clothing was breaking her insides apart.

The degrading way he spoke made her open her eyes to see the beast standing still, his massive erection apparent despite layers of clothing. "How long does your heat typically last, Omega?"

Shivering, suddenly loving the sound of that lyrical rasp, she clenched her fists at her sides instead of beckoning him nearer. "Four days, sometimes a

week."

"And you have been through them all in seclusion instead of submitting to an Alpha to break them?"

"Yes."

He was making her angry, furious even, with his stupid questions. Every part of her was screaming out that he should be stroking her and easing the need. *That it was his job!* With her hand still pressed over her nose and mouth, her muffled, broken explanation came as a jumbled, angry rant, Claire hissing, "I choose."

He just laughed, a cruel, coarse sound.

Omegas had become exceptionally rare since the plagues and the following Reformation Wars a century prior. That made them a valuable commodity which Alphas in power took as if it was their due. And in a city brimming with aggressive Alphas like Thólos, she'd been trapped in a life of feigning existence as a Beta just to live unmolested, spent a small fortune on heat-suppressants, and locked herself away with the other few celibates she knew when estrous came. Hidden in plain sight before Shepherd's army sprung out of the Undercroft and the government was slaughtered, their corpses left strung up from the Citadel like trophies.

Claire had been forced into hiding the very next day, when the unrest inspired the lower echelons of population to challenge for dominance. Where there had been order, suddenly all Thólos knew was anarchy. Those awful men just took any Omega they could find, killing mates and children in order to keep the women—to breed them or fuck until they died.

"What is your name?"

She opened her eyes, elated he was listening. "Claire."

"How many of you are there, little one?"

Trying to focus on a spot on the wall instead of the large male and where his beautiful engorged dick was challenging the zipper of his trousers, she turned her head to where her body craved to nest, staring with hunger at the

collection of colorful blankets, pillows—a bed where everything must be saturated by his scent.

An extended growl warned, "You are losing your impressive focus, little one. How many?"

Her voice broke. "Less than a hundred... We lose more every day."

"You have not eaten. You're hungry." It was not a question, but spoken with such a low vibration that his hunger for *her* was apparent.

"Yesss." It was almost a whine. She was so near to pleading, and it wasn't going to be for food.

The prolonged answering growl of the beast compelled a gush of slick to wet her so badly, she was left sitting in a slippery puddle. Doubling over, frustrated and needy, she sobbed, "Please don't make that noise," and immediately the growl changed pitch. Shepherd began to purr for her.

There was something so infinitely soothing in that low rumble that she sighed audibly and did not bolt at his slow, measured approach. She watched him with such attention, her huge, dilated pupils a clear mark that she was so very close to falling completely into estrous.

Even when Shepherd crouched down low, he towered over her, all bulging muscle and musky sweat. She tried to say the words, "*Only instincts...*" but jumbled them so badly their meaning was lost.

Starting with the scarf, he unwound the items that tainted her beautiful pheromones, purring and stroking every time she whimpered or shifted nervously. When he pulled her forward to take away the reeking cloak, her eyes drew level with his confined erection. Claire's uncovered nose sniffed automatically at the place where his trousers bulged. In that moment all she wanted, all that she had ever wanted, was to be fucked, knotted, and bred by that male.

Only instincts...

Shepherd pressed his face to her neck and sucked in a long breath, groaning as his cock jumped and began to leak to please her. He had gone

into the rut, there was no changing that fact, and with it came a powerful need to see the female filled with seed, to soothe what was driving her to rub against her hand in such a frenzy.

The words were almost lost in her breath, "You need to lock me in a room for a few days..."

A feral grin spread. "You are locked in a room, little one, with the Alpha who killed ten men and two of his sworn Followers to bring you here." He stroked her hair, petting her because something inside told him his hands could calm her. "It's too late now. Your defiant celibacy is over. Either you submit willingly to me where I will rut you through your heat, or you may leave out that door where my men will, no doubt, mount you in the halls once they smell you."

A knock came. Shepherd rose up tall before her, staring down with open demand that she submit and obey. Dominance established, he went to the door and pulled back the lock. Claire saw the same soldier, the smaller Beta with the far too vibrant blue eyes, and found him sniffing the air in her direction, growing openly excited at the intoxicating blend of pheromones her slick and sweat were pumping into the air.

Shepherd was right. He had taken her from what would have been a mass rape, saved her from damage and most likely death. He'd listened, though he had not answered her, and men were already salivating in the hall. The understanding of the situation passed openly across her face. Claire nodded, estrous clouding her judgment.

Something was muttered between the men, ending in, "...only Betas on guard."

A tray was handed over, laden with food, another armful piled with bedding and pillows, and she went white. They had already known Shepherd would have her, and had prepared accordingly. The little chat had no purpose but to make her think she had a choice. He saw her expression and the rumble of his purring returned.

She had to eat... he had to feed her before it began. The tray was set on the floor where she crouched, his order loud enough to grab her attention away from where his pants bulged. "Eat."

As she picked at the unseen food, he began to undress. All armor, every under-layer, was carefully removed and organized, the man having no shame about the state of his Da'rin marked body or the jutting cock proudly on display. But more than the visual, it was the smell—the scent of a rutting Alpha, aroused and swollen for her—that made reason completely flee her mind. Everything hummed in that incessant purr, reminding her that he was what her body needed, and she was salivating for it... even if she was scared.

Shepherd began to pace, naked, rolling his shoulders as he prowled, all the while watching her and sniffing the air over and over. "Eat more... drink the water."

Voice downright nasty, threatening, Claire hissed as if he should have known Omegas could not eat during estrous, "I don't want food!"

No, she wanted the thing that was supposed to happen. He was supposed to be fucking her. Why was he waiting? She came to her feet and he was there, the dominant male growling so loud her eyes rolled back in her skull.

A rending of fabric preceded cool air over fevered skin.

He was all around her, tugging away unnecessary things like clothing. The smell of him, the raw sweat, sent her cunt to seeping. Sucking in great panting breaths of the fertile Omega, Shepherd sought out to stroke uncovered flesh, a bit surprised all her body hair had been permanently removed—recognizing the precaution the Omega had taken to help mask her scent.

She was so far gone, her little tongue already licking at his skin, completely high on the taste and smell, that when his finger swiped drops of his leaking pre-come to run over her lips, she moaned loudly and sucked it deep into her mouth.

Claire was so small compared to his mass, easy to move where he

wanted. Her back hit the bed, Shepherd standing between her slender spread legs, staring down with wide, hungry eyes at the river of slick that came forth. Little pink lips were spread, the swollen glans of his cock lined up where she seemed far too small to accept an organ so large. With one hand on her chest, petting the twisting thing, Shepherd pressed forward, breaching her slippery womb, and gave a full body shudder at the sound of her desperate cry.

The woman had not lied... she was so tight it made his cock pulsate more fluid to aid her. He only got halfway before she began to whine and squirm. Alphas were big and Shepherd was huge, his girth massive, and there was only so much space inside her body.

"Open for me, little one," Shepherd growled, using his thumbs to stretch her lower lips further apart, thrusting forward, gaining hard earned inch by inch while the female watched a cock as thick as her forearm slowly disappear between her legs.

When the expanding thrust bottomed out, when all her tightness enveloped that hard length... utter bliss. She needed it, was moaning and arching, grinding her sex against his pubic bone. The stretch was divine, the vibration from his purrs, the *smell*. When he began to pull out, she showed her teeth and snarled at a man many times her size. Shepherd seemed amused, and then snapped his hips, burying that massive cock to the hilt, knowing she would squeal.

Claire learned quickly that he liked her little spurts of temper, but it was Shepherd who dominated the exchange. He rutted with the vigor she needed, hard and fast, building up that furious pulse in her core. When she began to roll her hips, eyes closed and lost in the insatiable need to mate, he took her by the scruff of the neck and barked at her to open, to look at the male fucking her, to recognize his prowess.

Those harshly snarled words sent her over the edge. Perfect fulfillment exploded. Claire felt every single muscle in her pussy jump to life, saw his

eyes grow vicious and feral, felt his knot expand as he ground in, hooking behind her pelvic bone, locking them as deep as he could go. Jerking under the intensity of the orgasm, she felt that first hot gush of semen, heard him roar like a beast while she screamed. Shepherd came again, more of that copious fluid, her body's need finally met, and with his third liquid surge, she blacked out.

It could not have been long before she woke, as his knot was still binding their bodies together. He lay below her, her body sprawled on top, Claire's ear to his heart. The serenity from the mating was fading and the impulse to fuck was back again. The urge, the only thing that defined her at that moment, grew beyond her when her tongue darted out to lick the salt of sweat from his chest, to entice the tattooed male to begin again.

The instant the knot began to diminish, she registered the loss of precious fluid, felt his seed leaking out of her, and whined. As if knowing her thoughts, Shepherd dragged his fingers in the little river and brought his ejaculate to her mouth. The smell alone drove her wild, the taste a thousand times more.

"They would have broken an Omega so small." Shepherd watched, fascinated, as she greedily sucked his fingers, explaining quietly as if educating a female who should have known better. "Not shown restraint at a scent so overpowering."

She didn't want him to talk. She wanted him to fuck her again. A large hand came to her hair, rubbing at the scalp of the female, soothing her with pets and purrs while the knot slowly abated so he could thrust against her jerking hips.

The second mating was much less frantic, far more fulfilling, and when he had filled her again, Claire began to lose the edge that was making her so ferocious. It was his hands, maybe, lifting and lowering her at the tempo that made her cunt sing, or the look in his eyes, the unabashed lustful pleasure.

So that's what it was like to mate an Alpha.

He seemed to know her thoughts, and by the crinkles at the corner of Shepherd's eyes, she could tell he was amused with her. He cupped her face, tender and gentle, and she didn't feel overpowered or forced... She felt mistakenly safe in the delirium.

It was not until a day later, when he took her from behind at the peak of estrous, his full weight on her back, that she sensed trouble. The high had not faded, the slow building fervor of her heat nowhere near breaking... but he roared, began to squeeze and bruise; to restrain her. Fighting the hold, writhing, Claire had a sobering fear the tyrant might bite her so savagely it would scar—that he intended to leave claiming marks.

Worst of all, instinctively, she wanted him to. Her estrous-high mind wanted to bond to the monster that had destroyed Thólos and made her life hell, simply because he was the one who was fucking her.

"And you will!" he growled in her ear.

She told him no, panting it over the sound of his skin slapping against the fleshy mounds of her ass. Sharp teeth came to her shoulder, Shepherd's knot growing bulbous until the Alpha could no longer thrust and she could not squirm away. She screamed in pain and pleasure, sobbing as his teeth ripped into her skin, Shepherd growling long and low with her flesh torn from his bite.

She climaxed from the claiming, rhythmically squeezing, drawing the jets of fluid from his dick while he crooned at her and lapped up the blood.

Claire cried even as he purred and petted, wept from the hazy recognition of the total loss of control she'd so carefully cultivated in her life. When ten minutes later her body sent out signals it was time for Shepherd to fuck her again, he pulled her beneath him and was gentle, caressing the woman he'd stolen even though her tears fell throughout the whole coupling.

When it was over, when he had wrung out another explosion that chased away the urge of chemical madness, a calm descended on them both. Claire briefly slept against a man she did not know, pressing as close as she could,

in the exact place the brute expected her to rest.



In the end, it took three days to break the starving Omega's heat. She was sleeping, nesting deep into the blankets covered in his semen and her slick—blissed out. Toying with a strand of her sooty black hair, Shepherd mulled over just what to do with what was now his possession, impressed that the little female was plucky enough to dress in a corpse's clothing and parade into a pack of Alphas just to speak to him. She would have died if he had not found her scent worth killing for.

Claire would also be sore now that estrous had ended, and her mind was not clouded with the insatiable drive to mate. He was certain she would also be resentful of the binding he'd forced. But that was the lot for Omegas, the way of nature. He wanted her, he took. End of story.

Silver eyes ran over the lithe dancer's body she possessed, the Alpha growling at the obvious fact his Omega was underfed. It was getting him into such a mood that, when a knock came to the door, he covetously grabbed what was his and roared.

The commotion—being jerked against a mountain of heat—woke Claire, and she hissed in discomfort. Everything felt sticky, a male pawing over bruises that did not appreciate the attention. The words he spat were in another language—an outskirts' lost tongue, she assumed. Remembering who he was and what he'd done to her, she pushed away from Shepherd's chest, only to feel his arms grow impossibly constrictive. The conversation between the Follower on the other side of the door and her captor stretched on, Shepherd tightening his grip each time she squirmed.

When it was over, Shepherd swung his skull her way, barking, "You need to sleep more." It was not a suggestion, and she could clearly sense he was provoked.

"The Omegas." That was the reason she had come to him... not to have him knot her for three full days.

Mercurial eyes diminished between narrowed lids. Shepherd sniffed her once, then he growled, "Your assumption it would be plausible to have a private distribution of provisions is flawed. It would only draw attention to your group. All Omegas will be delivered into my care and segregated from the population in the Undercroft. Should any come into heat, an Alpha will be chosen from amongst my Followers. Most will be bonded at their next estrous."

"What? No!" Claire's voice was pure horror. "That's not what we want. They need food, not to be made into slaves."

"This is best. You are Omegas, fragile, and it is not your place to decide such things."

Everything about the male was suddenly repulsive. Claire wanted him off of her and tried to scoot away. "I won't tell you where they are."

As he smirked, a scar across his lips made the expression sinister. "Then they will starve and be picked off one by one. That is your decision, little one. If given to me, they would be protected."

"From whom? The very men who are raping and knotting girls who have not reached maturity are the same you surround yourself with."

Shepherd was petting her, touching her hair as if she were not upset, as if she didn't loathe him in that moment, and it was setting her into a temper. When she tried to bat his hand away, he snarled and pinned her beneath him. His teeth went to the crook of her neck and he smelled, growling at the sweetness while using his thigh to pry her legs apart.

Claire felt his cock pulsing against her belly and grew frightened. There was no estrous, no abundant slick, and she was sore. Shepherd didn't care. He reminded her who was dominant in one sharp thrust, taking his Omega with no purrs or caresses, knotting without her climax to urge his seed forth. When the powerful spurts bathed her womb, there was no settling peace, only

frustration and tears.

When he seemed to have caught his breath, the unwelcome press of his mouth came to her ear. "You will sleep more."

His fingers went back to toying with her hair while Claire cried herself beyond exhaustion, embraced by a man who lived up to his reputation as a monster.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY bestselling author Addison Cain may look sweet, but according to four random guys on the internet, “there is a madness behind her eyes.” Known for unashamedly setting trends, her addictive world-building, and unpredictable surprises, she writes stories that keep you up long past your bedtime. Sexy dark romance, smoldering paranormal suspense, and compelling mystical worlds await those ready to fall in love with a proper villain.

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