



Bonded By Savages

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Description: I dreamt of being saved by noble Aurelian warriors. Instead, I was abducted by savages. They come through the portal in a fury of blood and violence, destroying my captors without mercy. They will have none for me, either. Aurelians demand total obedience. The brands mark my rescuers as Fanatics who serve the Old Ways. And when they find their Mate, they possess her body and soul. I've traded one captivity for another, pulled from serving a cruel lord to living in a mansion on a planet ruled by warriors, priests, and a vengeful alien War-God. The Aurelian warriors won me through blood and bravery. Now, by their laws, I am theirs. When they walk me through the city, everyone knows I belong only to them, bowing in respect to the men who are like kings on this planet. And as each day passes in their savage embrace... I crave the total control of the alien species. And yearn to make the broken warriors whole.

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Prologue

She stands, fragile, vulnerable, aching to be conquered. She stares at us with awe, still not believing we're here. We're a trillion miles away, but in this moment, we're next to her. I don't know how. All I know is that she is our mate.

My triad stands, stock-still, staring at the most beautiful creature in the universe.

The wind blows towards us, and I breathe in, my nostrils flaring. She's scared. But there's something else to her aura. A tendril of need.

She knows she belongs to us instinctively. It's written on her body. It's written in her soul.

Her body aches to surrender to my warrior triad.

I know it, already, in the first moments of seeing her, that her legs ache to spread, that we can take her innocence and fill her with our seed, her belly swelling and her breasts growing huge with milk for our Aurelian sons.

I growl, and step forward to claim her.

She's here, on our planet with us, and trapped in the hall of a cruel Toad Lord, her body thin and malnourished. Whatever evil man did this to her will pay.

We will rescue her. We will find her, wherever she is. We'll scour galaxies. We'll crush armies. We'll fight anyone who stands in our way, because she will be in our

arms, panting and begging for our dominance. I can feel her aura burning in my mind, and my eyes widen in shock, tasting the pure goodness of her being. She's brave. She's intelligent, and she's strong, strong enough to endure until we can save her...

And make her ours.

I'll put a collar around my Fated Mate's neck. I'll kiss her so deep she forgets her own name, and I'll make her beg and whimper for my might.

Nothing matters anymore. Nothing but her.

We will claim her.

We will breed her.

She will bear my triad's sons.

I step towards, reaching out to touch her holy being.

1

Athena

I cling to hope that the three noble, powerful Aurelian soldiers will rescue me. Those seven-foot-tall Greek gods of men are my only hope, and I'll take whatever harsh punishments and discipline the species requires of their women if it means surviving. I'd even serve the powerful warriors.

I'd give them everything to save me.

I haven't told a soul about the vision, the vision so much more real than my bleak

existence as a prisoner in the Toad Lord's palace. Three months ago it filled my mind and I dream of the triad every night.

I was pouring wine for the Toad Lord Bladdard when it happened. He was leaning back in his golden throne, laughing so loud his warty, wet belly lifted his fine silk shirt, showing his huge, pale green gut. His yellowy green eyes were fixated on the pale white fish in front of him, and his huge tongue lolled out of his mouth, running up and down the fish as he tasted it before eating. While the Toad was near my height, he must have outweighed me fourfold, his huge, powerful legs as wide across as my waist. This one didn't like to move, but when needed, he could leap near thirty feet to slap around anyone who disrespected his court...

Though he prefers to sit back and let his huge Bullfrog warriors deal with any problems.

That night was a celebration, the banquet table packed full of merchants and minor nobles, Toads who count themselves lucky to be invited to Lord Bladdard's table to stuff their guts before discussing business.

The vision rippled through me, power and energy that made me lose sight of the banquet hall and transported me to another world.

I was on another planet, under the sun, standing in the tall grass. It tickled my bare feet, lush and fertile. It was like a dream, but more real than my waking moments.

They stood in front of me.

A triad of powerful, fierce, dominant alien warriors. We were only a stone's throw away, and they could have run towards me, their powerful legs eating up the distance in seconds to take me. The size of them would have terrified me if I couldn't sense the honor in their beings.

If I was directly in front of them, I'd be barely taller than their waists, especially when they wear combat boots that plant their feet firmly in the grass.

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I've heard of the Aurelian Empire. Everyone has – from humans lying that they could beat one in combat, to women gossiping about joining their harems, or speaking in low, hushed tones of their fabled Mating Rages. The alien species is designed for two things. Fighting...

And finding their Mate to breed her. Only one woman in the universe can sire their sons. That fact can drive some of the Aurelians to madness, going rogue or, Gods forbid, joining the brutal ranks of the Fanatics. Those bastards follow the Old Ways, seeking to claim women as their own.

These three are honorable. I can sense it. Their being washes over me, each one different than the last.

The gnawing in my belly from my insistent hunger disappeared in front of them. The leader was well over seven feet tall, his marble skin gleaming in the light of the sun. Gods—I hadn't seen the sun in over a year, and now it glowed over his muscled body, his biceps straining against the grey armor of the Aurelian Empire. He had short, cropped black hair, and a nobility to him, patrician's eyes as he stared at me like I was a priceless piece of art. His aura, his being was protective, possessive, and it surged up with deep, endless lust as he let his eyes graze up and down my body.

To the left of the leader was an alien with the purest marble skin, high cheekbones, and a haughty arrogance to him. His aura was clever and quick, his mind dancing, and I marveled at how right it felt to have the three men in my mind.

To his right was a huge beast of a man. Even taller, with a broad, wide torso. I couldn't wrap my arms around him. He was built like a tree trunk, with a barrel chest

straining against his reinforced armor. He had a square jaw and hot grey eyes that burned for me, and me alone. His black hair was in a long warrior's braid, and his eyes widened as he stared at me. I could hear the growl, low in his throat, as he strode towards, needing to claim me. This one was an animal of a man, a beast clinging to his honor by a thread, and I knew that if we were in a room alone together...

He would take my innocence.

That's when the fear grabbed me. The knowledge that even the most honorable of the Aurelian species were walking the fine line, their brutal, beastly lusts threatening to overwhelm them at any second. I'd thought of the Aurelians as noble protectors.

Now I could see they want more than to keep me safe...

They want to own me. Take me. Control me.

If they can save me from the cruel Toad, I'd give myself to them a thousand times over.

The three of them raced towards me, their lust growing, and my heart pounded as their need flowed over me...

Then the vision disappeared.

I was back in the Toad's Hall, the flies buzzing, condensation dripping from the ceilings and wetting the floor, and the wine was overflowing from his gilded goblet. It dripped onto the wooden table and pooled in his golden plate, staining his white fish red.

My hand snapped back, stopping the flow of wine from the silver jug, too late. The Toad Lord Bladdard's gurgling laugh chilled, and the members of the feast slowly

turned their heads toward him.

He made me lick up every drop, in front of the crowd, who laughed raucously as I leaned over the wooden table, slurping up fine red wine. He made me drink from his plate. My head was swimming. I tried to detach myself from reality, willing my body to move while my mind escaped, but the jeers and laughs cut through.

When I was done, he licked his lips, grabbed the silver jug and poured it onto the floor. Toads paused from stuffing themselves to creep in closer, laughing as I was forced to lick wine from the disgusting, slimy ground.

It had been two days since my last ration. I was drunk, barely able to stand straight, when Bladdard ordered his jug of wine refilled. Jola, another servant, with gorgeous black hair despite the humidity and intelligent brown eyes, lowered her head and grabbed the jug, darting off to the kitchen.

That's when the Toad Lord grabbed my wrist, his warty skin wet against mine. I never realized how strong Toads were until this moment. I prayed I got off light, that this would be the end of my torment. He could have taken my hand for the offense.

His eyes were milky, yellowy green, and his tongue rolled out, running over my wrist and slurping up the last drop of spilled wine. I stood, petrified, trying desperately not to move as the room seemed to spin around me. "You spill one more drop, I'm taking your tongue and eating it for a snack," he promised, his eyes lighting up with cruelty.

His four Bullfrog guards laughed deep behind him, their big bellies swelling up against their armor.

Those four are even more terrifying than Bladdard. They don't move much, standing silently behind him, towering buildings of men who stare out at the banquet tables, watching his guests. They're near ten feet tall. Where Bladdard is fat and bones, the

Bullfrogs are beasts, with huge, bulging muscles protected by thick, green skin covered in huge warts. Their faces are round like dinner plates, with awful, enormous mouths that can near dislocate as they open them to yell or eat. Row after row of dull, yellowed teeth fill their mouths.

The last servant who broke a vase as she dusted was fed to them.

I cried two weeks in my dorm bed, before one of the older servants handed me a clean sock, telling me to stuff it in my mouth before we got in trouble for the noise. The late woman was the only servant I made friends with—and now I can't remember the lines of her smile, the way her eyes seemed to gleam.

I learned my lesson. I didn't make any more friends.

I've been here a year and some months now. The twenty-five years of life before I was captured by slavers might as well never have existed.

All that time spent in the hallways by the pitch-black workers' quarter, staying up late to read through charts, manuals and scanning reports under the blinking, florescent light, sneaking in silently a few hours before my shift started to catch a little sleep, gone. All that time studying holographic images of asteroids to be able to tell which ones might be filled with valuable minerals requiring a scan and which could be discarded.

All that time working away, saving up pennies to buy what education I could, all the worry as I prepared for my interview with one of the only reputable mining companies in the sector. That moment of joy when I got the job as a junior beam-operator on the mining ship Tartar 23.

They told us we were mining an asteroid field in Wild Space. Growing up on a space station far out of the protection of the Aurelian Empire or the Human Federated

planets, I was used to knowing every day we could be attacked, but the space station's big guns and armored plating deterred outlaws. My friends told me not to go—that Rogue Aurelians and worst, Fanatics, were getting bolder and bolder in their search for their Fated Mate, picking off even transport ships on routes that used to be considered safe. They told me of the increase in Scorp, of how the batteries of the space station rang out more times in the last month than they did in the previous year, cutting down Org-Ships before they could latch onto our armored plating and burrow into our station to wreak havoc.

Tartar Mining walked me through the specs of their twenty-third mining ship, telling us we had enough beams and armor that no one would bother attacking us. They told me they hadn't lost a ship in two years, and the one before that had a malfunctioning engine, and all on board survived when they sent out an SOS signal that their team picked up.

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I remember sitting in the cramped control room next to three gruff, burly men who had been operating beams near as long as I'd lived, men who at first treated me coldly then grew to respect when I sniped a few spinning rocks as we approached the main field. The beams were strong enough to cut through asteroids, and I knew that with concentrated fire, they could even blast through an Aurelian Reaver's shields if some brave, brutish Fanatic decided to prey on us.

I couldn't believe when the green dots appeared on my view pane. I woke up the napping miner next to me, and his face went cold as he grabbed his targeting reticules and aimed in.

Toads. The greedy, skittish creature wouldn't dare attack a mining ship of this size. So why did they have five attack ships and a mid-size transport diving in towards us?

I locked onto the first one, charging my beam to full power, and let out a warning shot.

Nothing happened.

The other three miners smashed their hands against firing buttons, but nothing came from our beams.

Sabotaged.

They landed in our own bay, the shields shut off. I watched two technicians, beefy men with big bellies, laughing and joking with the Toads who entered the ship while we stared at them with hatred in our eyes. A few miners tried to stand up to the

Toads. They were cut down mercilessly, and sometimes I wonder if they had the better fate.

The two technicians laughed until the leader of the Toads jabbed a spear in one of their chests. The other pleaded and begged as he realized he was betrayed, and his words turned to screams as the Toad kicked the dying man off his spear with his powerful webbed foot and killed the next with equal ease.

The Toads gave the two of them the credits first. They wanted to see the two men's eyes light up in greed, so they thought they were rich before they cut them down.

Toads are like that. Sadistic. They like to play with humans like cats would play with a mouse. They love to mess with you physically and psychologically, with an almost bored cruelty, doing it for no reason at all.

We were clad in irons. We were stuffed into the cargo hold, a dim, wet room where we got barely enough rations to survive. We were brought down to a Toad world, and I saw only a brief flash of light, the sun trying to fight its way through the black pollution that shrouded the planet, before I was forced into the auction house.

The auction house was a grubby little stage in front of a half ring of seats. In attendance were Toads in silk robes, their finery clinging to their huge, distended bodies, and a triad of Fanatics.

To my eyes the Aurelian Fanatics were even more disgusting than the pale, green flesh of the Toads. They stood at the back of the auction house, their black robes open to bare the left side of their muscled chests. They have a strength to them, with strong, powerful features, and if it wasn't for the disgusting brand on their chest, they'd almost be handsome.

The twin half-circles seared above their hearts marked them as the worst creatures in

existence, the Aurelians who instead of protecting humanity honorably chose a life of subjugating and dominating.

The men were sold off to mines and factories. Some of them got bought by ravenous Bullfrogs, and they screamed as they were taken away. I knew they wouldn't survive the night. The triad of Aurelians bought two women.

I was acquired by the Toad Lord Bladdard. I was still healthy and curvy when I was bought, and the Toad found a sick fascination in turning me to a skeleton. I can tell he enjoys gorging himself at his feasts all the more while I am starving next to him, forced to pour goblets of wine with weaker and weaker arms, my body wasting away each day.

The vision was perhaps three months ago. Three months where I didn't make another mistake. I couldn't afford it. Not one drop spilled, not one crumb unnoticed, not one speck of dust to mar his goblet.

I was losing hope. Then the vision gave me a way out. A chance.

It wasn't just a dream. It wasn't just a dream.

I tell myself that when it becomes near unbearable. When I felt like giving up and slitting open my wrists, I dreamed of the three powerful men of my vision.

Aurelians. Saviors. Noble warriors of the Empire with honor.

If I had been lucky enough to be born on an Aurelian protected planet and not in a forsaken space station in Wild Space, I'd be living in peace now, guarded by their strength.

I stand at the side of the Toad Lord in his humid banquet hall as he belches, the stink

of rotted meat assaulting my nose. He washes down meat with a goblet of red wine, and I refill his glass, my hand steady. He darts his tongue out, snapping it against my wrist with a crack as I pour, trying to make me spill.

If I drop the pitcher, he'll take my hand.

I keep my head up. I stare at the glass, pouring it to the brim, and take a step back, fighting for control over my aching muscles.

I yearn for my noble triad.

They are out there.

They must be thinking of me, as I think of them.

And one day, they will save me from this nightmare.

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Damian

Thick black bars separate me and my battle-brother from the Arena of Blood. I have watched men earn their brands in this arena. I have watched triads who earned their black tattoos get the chance at their Mate, leaping into the unknown of the Orb-Gate to find their Mate.

I have watched the enemies of Obsidian cut down. The black sands thirst for blood. Tarak stands to my left. His aura used to be quick and calculating. Now it matches mine, a fiery ember as we imagine falling through the rift of reality. That's the one thing that scares me.

To my right is nothing.

Raython stood there for hundreds of years, joining me in wild battle. Now he's gone. He had no fear in his life, no fear until the very end. Put him in front of an enemy and he'd charge into battle. The way he went...

I push the old grief out of my mind. Our Mate suffers. She is thin as a wisp. Malnourished. Held prisoner by a cruel Toad Lord.

No man may keep her but I.

I'll put my Orb-Blade through his warty chest. I'll rip him in half, and all his guards, too.

We were on the lush planet Talag 6, dropped off by the Aurelian Empire warship Hurricanewhen the Bond-Thrum rippled over every man on the fields. Our eyes opened to our Mate. We felt her as real as the metal bars in front of me. It was like a wave of energy, letting us see our Mate, and even more precious, letting us feel her aura, her being, for a split second that felt like it lasted for eternity.

This wave of energy radiated from a violent ritual from the Priests. They spilled blood, in a temple far away, and that blood let us feel her.

The Priests gave me a taste of my Mate. For that, I'd kill.

To protect my Mate, I would do more than just kill. I would trade my life for hers...

But she was too far away.

My General called us back onto the warship. He spoke of a cursed, damned ritual. He told us that the Priests drove a knife into a holy, Bonded woman, and from her lifeblood, they allowed us to sense our Mate. He told us that we would lose more than just our honor if we abandoned the Aurelian Empire to search for her.

Our General told us that any man who deserted would be placed on the Kill List and cut down. He told us there was an order of fresh-made Bond-Disrupter rings being brought to us, that we must put on, to cut us from any further contact with our Mate. That we needed to be strong. Work together. Keep all humanity safe, and not just the few lucky enough to be able to sire our sons. He spoke of glory, and honor, and duty.

None of those things matter when your Mate is starving to death under a disgusting creature.

We had one chance to get her back. Join the Fanatics, as we called them, Aurelians so vile we cursed them, Aurelians so honorless we delighted in cutting them down at

any chance we got. I'd driven my Orb-Blade through the branded chest of Obsidian's followers on more than one occasion.

I told my General of our Mate's plight. I begged him to give me command of Reavers to go into the Toad Empire to find her. I told him I'd risk Orb-Shifting and the pull of the void. He looked at me with empty grey eyes and shook his head.

He told me that even if we survived the coin-flip of the Orb-Shifting without being ripped to shreds in that dark place between reality, that we would have no chance of finding her. The Toad Kingdom has many thousands of planets, and while we saw our Mate clearer than the bars in front of us, we only had a vague sense of her direction. It would take a thousand Orb-Shifts and a thousand years to find her, and each time, we could be ripped to shreds by the void.

That stopped us. Not the fear of the void, or of miscalculating and ending up in the middle of a black hole.

It was the impossibility of finding her. The endless planets, each one with billions of people, and one of them our Mate. If you gave us one chance in a hundred, we would have taken it in a heartbeat.

The vision haunted us each day, as it haunted our fellow warriors. The morale of the crew turned distant as each triad was driven mad by the thought of their Fated Mate, out there. Before the Bondthrum, she was an abstraction. Now each of us felt her being to the core.

It lead my battle-brother Raython to madness. He became reckless. He threw himself into Scorp nests without thought, without waiting for backup, fighting with a ferocious savagery that overwhelmed his mind, as if killing his enemies could bring her to us. The burden of knowing our Mate was living a bleak, tortured existence and we were too weak to protect her made him crave the release of death.

The whispers grew as the shipment of Bond-Disrupter rings came closer.

That the Priests weren't just responsible for letting every one of our species feel our Mate...

That they had a way to make bring their most loyal warriors straight to her.

That they could open portals through the void, directly near our Mate, and that the most honored warriors could bring her back.

Rumors. Whispers. They infected us.

My triad was born to serve the Aurelian Empire on Colossus, not born of a woman, but of the Cryo-Bays. One Aurelian at the end of his life goes into the Cryo-Bay, and his heir is born, a direct copy of him aged roughly ten in human years, ready to enter the academy to forge his life as a warrior.

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But each copy is weaker than the last. The ancient histories speak of Aurelians nine or ten feet tall, giants compared to our current forms. Only the Bond can give a stronger heir. Only the one woman in the universe that can bear our biological sons can restore the strength to our species.

Not only that, many Aurelians die in explosions as missiles break through their Reaver shields. Others are ripped to shreds by Scorp, not enough left of them to be recreated in the Cryo-Bays. Our species was dying out...

Until the Queen Jasmine ushered in a new era of Bonding, two centuries ago. We were in our final year of Academy when I watched her triad crush the General Asmod in the Arena of the Gods and take the throne, stamping down the Old Ways for hundreds of years.

When our century of service in the army was finished, we rejoined for another campaign. We believed the Priests that a Mate could only be earned by warfare. Instead of growing fat by the pools of the manor given to all triads who complete the hundreds years, we fought. Instead of building a harem of willing women, sitting by the pools and drinking wine while they served us, we dove into battles.

Human women flock to Colossus for the protection of our species. Only Aurelians can withstand the chaos of the universe. We could not sit idly.

We were killing machines. We worked without thought, aching for the idea of our Mate, never truly believing we would be one of the few triads blessed to find her. We cleared Scorp nests. We landed on ruined planets, killing brutal beasts. We executed slavers and freed women. We waged war against the Fanatics, cutting down fierce

Aurelians with the hated brand of Obsidian, those cursed beings who threw away their honor to follow the Old Ways.

When we tasted the aura of our Mate, honor became bitter.

As leader, I made the hard choice.

As the shipment of Bond-Disruptor rings arrived, I chose for my triad, and I bear the cost.

We ran. We were in our Reaver when men we had fought beside, men we had bled for, men I would have died for, opened fire on us. Our shields were battered by las-cannon fire as I piloted away from the warship Hurricane. I veered right, avoiding a barrage of las-cannon fire that seared our shields, and caught the flak from the missile exploding near an asteroid. Our cockpit crumpled inwards, caving in, and I knew we had one chance to escape.

Orb-Shift. Face the void itself.

I initiated the shift, and the Reaver dissolved around me as we fell into a darkness deeper than the emptiness of space, and when we came back, I could barely feel my battle-brother Raython.

He was always fearless when he charged into battle.

Then, his aura turned horrified as he looked down at his melting skin. Blood dripped from his open mouth as he flashed in and out of reality, his aura disappearing and reappearing. Tarak tried to run to him, but his steps grew slow, as if he was running in quicksand, the metal melting around us as the Orb-Shift failed.

“Go... to... her...” His last words echoed in my mind, then he screamed. I never

heard him yell. The most brutal, powerful warrior I had ever known disappeared in front of me, as warning lights flashed and alarms rang out. His chair at his gunnery station disappeared as well, the metal of our Reaver contorting and bending as reality seemed to scream out with him, trying to fill the void where he once was.

His aura winked out of my mind. The man I had felt in my being since academy was gone, and only the two of us remained.

I tried to keep control, but we veered downwards onto a planet, crashing, and we were picked up by Fanatics who we pledged allegiance to.

They brought us to Obsidious, the home planet of the Fanatics, and there, we served new masters.

I am the leader of what was once my triad. We were three. Now we are two.

On Obsidious we earned our brand by pledging loyalty to the prophecies of the War-God. The twin half-circles on our chests were still red when we earned the first tattoo for bringing the heads of three Aurelian Elites directly to the Priests.

They gave us talons, that we may bid for women, as a reward for our service. We ignored them.

The second tattoo, and the promise of our Mate, was granted after a space battle with Empire Reavers where we turned the tide, flying in fearlessly and risking death to cut down a squad of Reavers alone.

I used to fight for the Aurelian Empire. I believed it was my only chance at a Mate.

Now I fight for the Priests and my promised reward...

And revenge against the Aurelian Empire that took my battle-brother from me.

The tattoos were agony, in a cursed ink that lets you feel the pain of Obsidian, for a few hours, the pain that the prophecies say the War-God endures every waking moment of his existence. I didn't truly believe in the War-God, but I believed in the chance to find my Mate.

"Is he real?" Tarak is weary. He doesn't bother to telepath the words, stating them outright. Behind us, Aurelians growl. Some of them have the second brand on their foreheads, smaller, matching the ones on all of our chests.

True believers, and questioning the existence of the War-God is blasphemy. I let my fingers dance towards the hilt of my Orb-Blade in case one of the triads tries something. I've cut down Empire Aurelians I called my brothers, and I'll kill the followers of the Priests if they stand in the way of my Fated Mate.

I prayed for Obsidian's return. I drank the black waters and learned the rites. I spent my days in a daze, fighting, then returning to the temples, visions of my dead battle-brother torturing my mind. I took every assignment, volunteering for warfare that we had one chance in a hundred of coming back from, and these risks got me the twin tattoos on my chest that earned me the shot at my Mate.

My nights were spent tossing and turning, planning ways to earn the tattoos that now adorn my chest. I begged for missions into the Toad Empire, but the Priests shook their heads, saying they were not our true enemy.

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I grip the huge bars of the Arena of Blood. I'm nearly salivating in anticipation.

The Coliseum is a half-circle like our brands, and on the curved side are three portcullis gates. While the Arena of the Gods on Colossus is built of pure white stone, this one seems like a nightmare version of it, constructed with huge blocks of black granite pulled by the might of warriors and stacked on top of each other to the heavens. Seen from a bird's-eye view, the Arena of Blood would look like the brands of our chests, with one of the semi-circles filled with sand, the other the empty palace of the War-God, built for his prophesized return.

Now the day is on us. He has come. The War-God himself will bless us with his presence and lead us into the heart of the Aurelian Empire.

The stands are packed full. Not one of the Aurelians has a woman with him, leaving them behind in their homes to save space. Aurelians in black robes are pressed in shoulder to shoulder. They all wear the same black togas, opened to show their brands.

Many of those brands are still red and irritated. The legions of Obsidian grow every day with new blood, throwing aside everything for the chance to earn their Mate.

The three portcullis gates of the curved half-circle are across from the huge main gates, which lead to a tunnel to Obsidian's palace. In that tunnel is the thing I bled for, the thing I got all these scars on my chest for. The Orb-Gate. I've watched triads dive in. As of yet, none have returned, but each had a chance to find his Mate. For that, we'd risk the same horrible death of our battle-brother Raython.

Above the main gates is a huge tower. Halfway up it is an alcove, where High Priests stand, some with the assistance of bone-thin canes, others with triads of guardian Fanatics ready to catch them if their ancient bodies should fail. One triad sits on simple wooden chairs, wanting no ornamentation. All of their guards have the second brand on their foreheads marking them as true believers. If the Priests pointed, they would dive from the tower and shatter on the ground below.

At the top of the tower is a raised dais with a black throne. That throne has been empty since we joined the Old Ways. It waits for our War-God. Only a few triads of High Priests dare to even stand in front of that throne to address the crowds from the highest heights, and none would dream of sitting on the throne itself.

High Priest Tan is one of those who prefers to address the crowd from the zenith of the tower. It was his ship that returned this morning from his voyage to find the War-God. That man puts a foul taste in my mouth. Few Priests take women, most of them too busy studying ancient tomes and prophecies to think of matters of the flesh.

Tan has three women, chained to his wrist, wearing the iron collars of owned women. He earned them, and according to all the laws of the Old Ways, they belong to him—but I've seen the fear in their eyes that remind me of my own Mate. I have to bite my tongue when I listen to him, soaking up the knowledge as I learn the truths of the universe that will lead me to my Mate, but sometimes I imagine putting my sword through his chest.

I cannot. The Fanatics with branded foreheads would rip me to shreds before I could even draw.

There is a nervous, tense buzz in the stands, Aurelians whispering to each other. All eyes are on the empty black throne.

Even the Priests are having trouble keeping their composure. Some lick their

desiccated lips, and the three ancient Priests sitting on the wooden chairs pull themselves slowly to their feet, aided by Fanatics.

“He is coming,” I growl, and I need the words to be true. “The Shadow-Wolf will rise.”

I need the last months of bloodshed to be worth something.

I need the memory of my battle-brother Raython dissolving in front of my eyes, screaming out in horror, I need that death to mean something.

The huge black doors at the highest stage are thrown open, and he walks out. My eyes widen. It’s hard to believe what I am seeing as the beast of a man ignores the throne, waking to the railings, and staring down at us.

Obsidian.

He is an Aurelian, like us, but different. He is like the ones of the old stories, before we degraded. He would tower over my seven-foot-tall frame.

His skin gleams as marble-white as mine, but every vein in his body is filled with blackness, as if his heart pumps oil. He wears a belt with the long hilt of a mace dangling, a mace I’ve seen before.

It was in the hands of General Asmod when he was cut down in the Arena of the Gods on Colossus by the triad of the human woman who would become queen.

Asmod’s seed.

Obsidian has a mass of tangled black hair to his shoulders. Even from here, I can see the darkness of his eyes, so unlike the slate-grey of our species. It’s like staring into

black holes. They drink up the light of the sun. He wears the black toga of our species, open to bare the left side of the chest where we all have brands.

He has a birthmark, the twin half-circles we replicate.

“Obsidian,” I whisper, my heart pounding.

It was true. All of it.

The universe will bleed. It will be cast into fire, and what comes out will be forged strong enough to resist the waves of chaos.

We will have our Mate.

Two huge creatures follow Obsidian. They look like Aurelians, if Aurelians were inverted demons. Gasps fill the crowd, but I clench my jaw tight, my eyes following their movements. The triad behind us pushes in to get a closer look, and I give them a warning growl, but it’s no use. They need to see that the prophecies are true, lost in a religious state as they view the War-God himself.

I was expecting one man. A titan of an Aurelian, but alone. He has two beasts at his right and left, beasts that look like Aurelians, but tall enough to tower over us. They do not have the pure, marble skin of our species. Instead, they are chiseled from black granite. When I stare at them, they look hard as rock, but when my eyes drift from them, the edges of their being seems to dissipate.

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His triad seems to be created from black clouds from a torched city, from the smoke of a blasted Reaver falling to the ground. They tower over the railing, standing in battle stance, nude and comfortable. They seem to expect violence even here, in the heart of his empire.

Shadows. That's what they're like, darker than the night sky. The fiery sun casts a strange glow against their skin, the smoky depths of their being drinking up the light.

I'm drunk. Deeper than drunk. Religious exultation pulses over me as I witness our savior.

All the pain makes sense. My life was leading up to this moment. Waking up from a cryo-bay without ever going to sleep, a boy standing on Colossus with an Orb-Blade pressed into my hands after taking my first steps. Being told my ancestors were a long line of brilliant warriors, and wanting to live up to them.

Boxing in academy. Fighting Scorp and slavers. Risking death. Returning to battles and war when we could have lazed by the pools, idle sophisticates.

Every day, fighting for our honor and the empire.

Honor that ended up worthless.

My forefathers were honorable men, but each lived and died never finding their Mate, cloning themselves in the cryo-bays to give the next generation a chance. They followed the Empire. They acted with honor.

And they never found the one woman in the universe who could make them whole.

My Mate is alive. The only woman who can sire my sons is suffering. Every moment for her is pain. I could see the bones of her ribs pressed against her thin dress, the gaunt pull of her cheeks against the bones.

The Toad Lord who keeps her tortures her every day. It's his pleasure. A disgusting creature like him cannot ever have beauty but can only corrupt and control it. Weak, pathetic men can only lash out at perfection in the universe, degrade it.

I will save her.

I will make her mine.

"I am Obsidian."

The words roll over the arena, echoing outwards through the city for those who did not earn their place in the Arena. Drones flutter above, broadcasting the scene to the universe. Now that our God has shown his face, the Aurelian Empire will crumble. Already a third deserted to join the Old Ways for just the promise of Obsidian and their Mate.

Now we have proof.

"I have tasted my Mate. I have Bonded her, and she was taken from me by Queen Jasmine and the Emperor Raegan. You follow me because you all felt your Mate, and I have one promise to you. Join me in war, and you will earn her. Join me in war, and you will see her. Follow me, and the universe is ours!"

He raises a hand, and the scream of rage rips from my mouth before I can think. I yell out all the agony of losing my battle-brother. My fist clenches the metal bar and my

muscles bulge as I cling to reality by a thread. The image of my Mate floods my mind, almost as intense as the first time. Her thin, tiny little wrists, that I could encircle with two fingers. She's lived perhaps twenty-five years, and she wears a thin wisp of a dress that clings to her bones. Her eyes, Gods, her eyes, they are brilliant and green, and only they are untouched by the torture the Toad Lord inflicts on her.

I felt her being. I felt her pure spirit, pulsing through my mind when the Bond thrummed. She has a goodness to her, a goodness that must be protected from the brutalities of the universe.

For that goodness, I became a monster.

Obsidian's hand forms a fist. Every man in the crowd silences at the same time, our mouths clamping shut as we listen for his next words.

"There is one who must enter the Arena of Blood. High Priest Tan."

I grit my teeth in anger. I will follow Obsidian into battle, but I am going to have to become even more of a monster to protect my mate. I'll have to throw away every shred of my honor if he is going to give accolades to that cruel High Priest. I growl, low in my throat, hating him as his lips curl back and show his pure white teeth. The High Priest turns, pulling his women roughly, and they have to rush to keep up with his long steps. His two triad members pause, less eager, turning and following him. They knuckle their branded foreheads as they disappear into the tower to take the winding stairs down.

The portcullis of the main gate creaks open across from us. Tan has his head up high, barely able to hold back a grin. It is unseemly to show emotion, but he is practically dripping in pride, ready to be honored, his terrified trio of women struggling in the deep sand behind him, racing to catch up. He gets to the middle of the arena, his triad behind, and slowly looks out at the crowd, then turns to crane his head towards

Obsidian.

“So he honors the High Priest. Is he a true God? Can he see in that space between time and reality, and lead us to our Mate?” Tarak thinks out loud. Behind me, there’s a grumble.

“You watch your mouth, soldier. Don’t question Obsidian.” I turn. There’s a triad, three strong, their eyes so wide I can see the whites on the tops and bottoms. Young. If they served the Aurelian Empire, they might not be a decade into their service. On their foreheads are the brands of Obsidian, filled in with black ink. In their young lives, they’ve done much to honor Obsidian, and they owe their allegiance to the Priests and their Gods with a fanatical devotion. Their hands are close to their blades, ready to cut us down for blaspheming Obsidian.

I lick my lips. “We are promised our Mate by the Old Ways themselves. Do you dare break that sacred link?” I snarl out the words, and the three Fanatics lower their heads, shamed.

“Careful, Tarak. We’re so close. Do not provoke them.”

“I’ll say what I see,” his voice comes back, too tired to have fear. We’ve waded through blood to get this far. We’ll cut down a young triad without a second thought if that is what gets us to our Mate.

“High Priest Tan.” The words come from above as Obsidian stares down imperiously at the Arena where the High Priest struts and preens.

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The crowd screams and cheers. I hear yells from behind me, but I clench my jaw shut. The Priest is one of the ugly realities of the universe, but he's powerful. I'll deal with ugliness and rot if it gets me to my Mate.

"The woman in blue. What is her name?" Obsidian's voice rings out, his eyes black and staring down with an insane focus that chills me. Somehow, from so far away, I'm able to see thousands, no, trillions of brilliant white and blue stars in his eyes, then they disappear, and I'm left wondering if I imagined it.

I can't see Tan's expression as he looks up, but I can imagine it. "I stripped her of her name when I took her as mine. My Lord."

My head pounds as I grit my teeth in anger. My hand roams downwards towards my blade. I want to cut down the iron bars and kill this bastard myself. A drone slowly lowers itself over the High Priest.

"Woman, what is your name?"

One of the women leashed to his arm, with a dull collar around his neck, is wearing a blue dress. "My name is...Emma," she gasps out, sobbing in terror. Her words are enhanced by the drone.

"Raise your right arm."

She can barely do it. Her hand is shaking like a leaf in the wind. The thin dress falls back, showing the hot red welt on her arm. It's not the torture my Mate endures, but it makes me angry, my lips pulling backwards.

“Tan, did you do this to her?”

“Yes. She was a hard one to break in, but now she’s obedient,” he proclaims, then laughs, sickly. His arrogance is total.

“Did you force yourself on her?” Obsidian states the words without emotion.

“I took what was mine. As the Old Ways promise, my God.” He puffs up his chest.

Obsidian points to Tan. I can see the High Priest swelling up with pride like he might explode, but his triad is silent, waiting and watching.

The two shadowy Aurelians by Obsidian’s side run forward, leaping over the edge of the railing. I take a harsh gasp in. They’ll shatter on the ground...

But they seem to morph in mid-air. At first I think my eyes have betrayed me. The huge black forms of his Shadows grow fur, their bones pressing outwards, huge fangs sprouting from their mouths as they turn into massive wolves in front of me.

The shadow wolf will bathe the universe in blood. The dark king rises.

I heard those words from High Priest Tan’s own mouth.

Now the gaping maws of wolves twice my size, huge, powerful creatures, open wide. The screams of the three women ring out in the arena, then the drone magnifies the sound of crunching bone as the two wolves rip Tan apart. He doesn’t have time to yell. His hand falls to the ground, detached from his body, the three chains leading to the women hits the ground.

The woman in the blue dress, Emma, faints in fear, the black sand welcoming her in an almost gentle embrace.

The wolves must be twice my size. Behind me, Fanatics murmur to themselves, watching a man they served cut down in front of them. The High Priest commanded absolute power over Obsidious and the legions of Fanatics. That one was near two thousand years old. He grew up under the last Bonded Emperor of a dying age. He practiced his dark religion in the temples on Colossus, under the watchful eyes of the human queen who stood against everything he believed.

He was one of the men who led the rift, bringing with him a third of the soldiers on Colossus to join the Old Ways, men so devoted they risked Orb-Shifting to escape the Empire. Many died.

Now he's joined them, nothing more than meat and bone on the hungry sands of Colossus as the huge shadow wolves pace the sand, licking their lips. Even their teeth are black, as long as my forearm, sabre-teeth that look like they could rip through metal.

The tension is near unbearable. The Fanatics are confused, looking left and right, not understanding why their God cut down his highest emissary.

Obsidian speaks.

"The Old Ways mean that we own those we save the lives of. This is right and just. I was born of a Cursed Bond. My veins are filled with agony." I watch the vein of his neck flex from above. He runs his hand over the mace at his belt, and I know he must be filled with righteous anger against his father.

A Cursed Bond. I'd heard tell of it, but never believed that there was a way to sire a son without the Bond. Some said that Scorp-Blooded tribes live far out of the reach of the Aurelian Empire, mating women and breeding them. But a child can only come of a Mating where the woman surrenders herself completely.

General Asmod was a hard man. A cruel man. He hated the Bond, laughed at it, believed that Aurelians were meant to own hundreds of human women apiece.

Of that cursed mating came Obsidian. I never heard that one of his woman had escaped. That beast of a General died when I was still in Academy, and with him, the Old Ways went dormant.

“No more will be born of this. Any man who forces himself on a woman is dead. No one is safe. Will you avenge your battle-brother?” He asks the question down to the two remaining high Priests of the late Tan’s triad. They stand with bowed heads.

“No,” comes a dry whisper from one of them. I know the pain that losing a battle-brother causes. But these Priests have waited millennia for their God to come down to earth, and they would kill even themselves if he ordered them.

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They slink away, pulling their robes around them. A triad runs out of the portcullis gates and lifts the three women, taking them away.

I let my eyes flow upwards to the priests. They were obeyed without question—and yesterday, they were seen as the highest echelon.

Now, they can be killed in a moment on the whim of the War-God. Thousands upon thousands of years of study and rites, taken away by the crushing bite of the Shadow Wolves.

Obsidian raises his hands. “You will follow me. You will earn your Mate through acts of war. But no one will foster a cursed Bond like mine. No one will condemn a child to a life of agony. I can feel this—I can feel it like an open wound, and if I see any man take a woman by force, I will go through the gates themselves and I will rip you open.”

His eyes glow as he speaks, and I’m sucked in, seeing the trillions of twinkling stars for a moment before they wink out, and I believe it.

This man can see through space and time.

No, not a man.

A God. A God who will bring me the only thing I crave more than revenge against the Aurelian Empire.

My Mate.

“You follow me because you felt the Bond thrum and you knew this was your chance at finding your Mate. I can see the sands of time. I can see the perilous path through the ether. Bring in the Orb-Gate.”

The two huge wolves turn to face the main portcullis gates, where two triads pull a massive mirror on sleds. They grunt and groan as they pull, their muscles bulging with exertion. I lick my lips. I watched three triads rush through the gates, gaining the ultimate honor of finding their mates.

It's beautiful. It's terrifying. It's too reflective, as if the world we are in is but a shadow of reality. The mirror surface shimmers and glows. It is set in a black metal holder ringed with Orbs the size of my head. A single one of those Orbs could power an attack Reaver. Together, they can open the rift through reality and let triads go through.

Obsidian raises his hands. Without a creak, the black iron bars in front of me rise. I walk in with Tarak at my side. We adjust to the sand under our combat boots, looking left and right as the other two portcullis gates open. Other triads enter. Two triads come through each gate, but not all are filled. I count ten more warriors. The three behind us are Fanatics.

I can't wait a second longer. I take long strides. I'll kill all ten of them to be the first to go through.

“Stop,” he says, and I stand in front of the gate, staring at my reflection. Gods, but when did I become so different? My slate-grey eyes stare back at me. My face is lined by the weight of the worlds on my being. My eyes are narrow and stressed. My chest is bared, and the two half-circles of my brand are filled in by black ink as dark as the liquid that fills my God's veins. I'm covered in scars. I barely registered the pain as Orb-Blades raked my chest as I was killing Elites and bringing their Orb-Armor and heads back to the Priests to gain my reward. I've never met a man I

couldn't kill, until now, but the pacing, massive shadowy wolves don't put fear into me. I know instinctively they are on my side.

All this bloodshed. All this killing. All this pain. It led up to this moment.

“Three triads have already gone through this Gate. None returned. I saw them. Their bodies are floating in the vacuum of space. They gulped for air and never tasted their Mate.”

My head shoots up to lock in on Obsidian. I watched with deep envy as those warrior triads leapt into the Orb-Gate to earn their reward. Each of them had the twin half-circles on their chest filled in with ink, the mark of great deeds that earn them the chance at their Mate.

I have a tinge of sorrow for them. The horror they must have felt, thinking they would go through to find their Mate, and tasting nothingness as their eyes exploded from the pressure of the vacuum of space, their lungs inverting.

Gasps come from the crowd. Even the hardest among us are shook to the core. We trusted the Priests.

Now we see they are nothing compared to the War-God.

“I alone can see the sands of time. I alone can navigate the perils of shifting through space itself.” Each word rings out like a hammer against an anvil.

His hand moves faster than I've seen anyone's before, and I'm usually the one standing over the bloody body of an enemy who can't believe my speed. He activates the mace of his father and throws it high in the air, and he leaps over the edge, shifting in mid-air, turning into a huge, shadowy wolf. He lands in the sand, rolls, and transforms back into his Aurelian form, raising his hand and grabbing the mace a

second before it splits his skull.

It seems to hiss in anger as he strides towards us, naked, his manhood swinging between his legs. He's even bigger up close. Only one out of a thousand Aurelians are taller than me, but Obsidian is a giant.

"You saw your Mate." He speaks to me. My God speaks to me. My heart pounds faster, as I let my religious fervor grow to a crescendo.

"Yes, my God." I stare straight at him.

He places a massive hand on my shoulder, looking into my eyes, and I stare into a blackness deeper than death. Stars go from tiny points to huge balls of fire, galaxies twirl and move through billions of years, and I fall deeper and deeper into space, the Arena of Blood disappearing. I can sense the wonder from Tarak. He's falling alongside me as we rush towards a green planet.

I snap back to reality as he blinks.

"She is in a Toad Lord's harem, his toy. There are four Bullfrogs. I will open the portal again in twenty minutes. There are many of them. You may not live."

"God, grant me the chance to find my Mate," I ask. My Orb-Blade is in my hand, the hilt warming against my grip as the Orb aches for Bullfrog blood. I activate it, salivating as I stare at the mirror in front of me.

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Obsidian puts his hand against the mirror surface. It ripples like he's touching a flat pond. For a second it opens to the palace that I saw in the vision when the Bond thrummed, then it almost blinks, then I see darkness, then a city.

I don't hesitate. I dive forward, hearing screams, and run in with Tarak.

My feet hit the ground and the portal closes behind me. I check my smartwatch for a blink, noting the time, and look for the palace.

It stands before us, on a hill. It has walls twenty feet tall, but the gate is open, with two huge Bullfrog guards protecting it. They hear the screams and turn to us, and the yells come out.

We have no time. We sprint, knowing we're up against bad odds, not caring.

We will save her.

3

Athena

The ornate wooden banquet hall doors burst open, shouldered hard by two Bullfrogs with their Orb-Axes activated in their meaty grips. They croak in the Toad language. When I first worked here, it sounded like incompressible animal grunts and warbles. Being immersed in a language made me learn it quick. I can make out two words of three, though I wish I could unhear the crude jokes.

“Go through ... gate!” yells the first Bullfrog who doesn’t halt his advance, stomping in, his huge wet feet slapping against the stone floor. Lord Bladdard makes a sound I once heard when a Toad got in the way of a Bullfrog in the halls, moments before he got his arm ripped off by the huge maw of the monster. His four personal guards shove in closer to him, and I’m pushed aside by one of them. He doesn’t know his strength, or he doesn’t care, because I tumble to the side, skinning my legs as I hit the ground hard. My head swims with dizziness. I crawl away until I’m at the wall, trying to disappear when I see the naked fear on the Toad Lord’s eyes.

“How!” He yells out the word, terrified, mucus dripping down his forehead. He moves his smartwatch to his hand and speaks too quickly for me to understand, his voice echoing through the loudspeakers of the mansion. His body is distended and bulging, but his wrists are so thin, his fingers too long, held together by a translucent web of green flesh. He always looked so solid and menacing. Now, seeing the ridges of his bony knuckles makes him look like he could be snapped in half by a hard breeze. His left hand darts under the table, and from my position on the ground, I see a small button on the bottom of the wooden banquet table. He presses it.

Lord Bladdard had his banquet room set up with a raised table near the back of his room, where different minor lords and rich merchants who fall under his favor are invited to sit. It forms a T shape with the longer, thinner table, which runs down the middle of the room almost to the huge banquet doors—towering things made of real wood and flecked with gold leaf. The doors are propped open now, the outside of them black and ugly, while the inside is painted light brown.

The Toads who thought themselves lucky to be invited to such a prominent lord’s feast sit petrified at the table. It’s the first time in over a year and a half I’ve seen Toads at the table not reaching out and stuffing themselves. They warble in high-pitched squeals as the six Bullfrogs position themselves along the long table, gripping the wood in their powerful hands. Some of the Toads realize what is about to happen, jumping back, but another is slammed to the side as the Bullfrogs lift the table up

with a ferocious grunt and drag it against the front doors. The doors slam closed behind it, and they step back, Orb-Axes activated.

Toads are five or six feet tall, wide as they are tall, with bloated bellies. They can jump over ten feet when they want to, and swim with powerful strokes, but the ones who succeeded in materializing their greed into their lives prefer to sit around, sometimes too lazy to even dart their tongue out to grab a fat fly.

Bullfrogs tower over them. Their flesh is a darker green than Toads, covered in thick, warty skin. They have muscled guts covered in layers of fat and hide. You can't put a knife through them. Their faces are broad and wide, and when they open their mouths, you can glimpse row after row of razor-sharp teeth, like looking into the mouth of a shark. Most stand well over eight feet tall, with the hugest of the species topping in at around ten. I feared Lord Bladdard. But the four shadows that towered behind him terrified me. I caught them looking at me the same way they looked at the banquet meal. They're always hungry, and when the last Toad clears out, and the tables are covered in leftovers, they muscle their way forward. They devour the mounds of leftovers in minutes, chomping down with wet, greedy sounds. I've watched porcelain plates crack under their teeth like eggshells, gulped down their throats as they lose themselves in ravenous hunger.

Now they stand, huge, webbed feet planted against the slick wet floor. Condensation drips from the ceiling. A fat drop slides down my back from the wall, and I push myself to my feet, looking left and right for an escape route I know doesn't exist. The Toads have stopped their whimpering, and now the only sound in the silence is the hum of the Bullfrog Orb-Axes, like the sound of hornets descending in a cloud.

Only an Aurelian can truly tame an Orb. I don't know if the Bullfrogs sourced their weapons from black market Aurelian smiths, who face the Kill List for selling their secrets, or if they forged them themselves. Orbs thirst for blood. As long as their purposes align with their wielder, they'll let themselves activate into weapons. Each

battle-axe is similar. A long, black handle, and from the edges come the metal and energy that merge. I can only look at them for a moment before my eyes hurt. They're both bright like staring at the sun and dark as if they are pulling in the light of the room. Sparks of blue lightning spit from the weapons.

Lord Bladdard is gasping in huge breaths, his throat bulging out obscenely, his hand on his steak knife as if it could protect him when the twin doors glow with heat. They smoke as two Orb-Blades rip through them, and the Toads that were petrified in fear rush to the back wall, cowering as far as they can from the battle.

A boom rings out in the room like a gunshot. The doors crack as they're kicked open. They slam against the banquet table, opening just enough that I catch a glimpse of the warriors.

My heart floods with hope. I recognize them. In the brief instant before the doors slammed back shut, I saw their faces.

They are the two from my dreams. The nobility of the leader, with hard, commanding features, fills me with certainty. They're up against six Bullfrogs, but I know they can win. The other spins, his blade arcing out, hacking off more of the thick doors, and my heart pounds as I see his refined, perfect features, though even from here they look more strained.

Where is the third?

He was the one who scared me the most. The barbaric savage. Long black hair in a braid like a steppe warrior from the histories of Old-Earth, a fierce, masculine, yet handsome face.

There's a thunder as the doors are kicked open again, and the two Aurelians jump forward, leaping over the banquet table. I watch in horror as they land on the slippery

ground, but they adjust their bodies, sliding as if they're on ice and moving like dancers, twisting and rolling under the sweeps of battle-axes and gutting Bullfrogs as they spin.

There's a yelp from the middle of the room, where a Toad who was crushed by the table is picking himself up. He reaches into his belt, drawing a pistol, and fires six shots without aiming. His bullet lodges into the back of a Bullfrog's neck, who reaches up with his hand to feel it before his head is taken off by the Orb-Blade of the fine-featured Aurelian. A jet of hot reddish blood spurts upwards, marred by the acidic green of the Bullfrog's blood.

The six guards are twitching, dying messes as the Aurelians stride forward.

My knees shake. I press my hand against the back wall, wishing my eyes deceived me.

These aren't the Aurelians of my dreams. Their features match. The cold, imperial lines of the leader's face, the perfection a born commander. The other is haughty and aloof, with high cheekbones and gleaming marble skin, and he walks like a jaguar towards me.

Their eyes are harder, colder, the lines of their cheeks more taut, as if the last year and a half they didn't sleep.

It's not their faces that shock me.

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They aren't wearing the reinforced battle armor of the Aurelian Empire.

They aren't noble saviors. They are the most vile, hated creatures in the universe. They wear black togas, spread open to reveal the horrible brand on their chest, the twin half-circles of the alien War-God Obsidian. The black tattoos mar the perfect marble glow of their skin. Their muscles ripple as they approach me, ignoring the heaps of the remaining quivering, begging Toads who push themselves away, crawling on the floor.

In my vision, the leader had a small scar above his left eye. Now his body has long rends on it, the marble skin turned to a dull, shiny white where blades and bullets bit him. The haughty Aurelian has a red line running down his neck, a scar that should have taken his head off. The leader clenches his teeth as his black robes hiss against the acidic blood of Bullfrogs, and he rips off a huge chunk of his robes, wiping his chest and throwing it aside.

The men I saw as clear as the walls around me are gone.

In their place are brutal conquerors.

Their eyes are on me, as if nothing else in the room exists, the hissing blood steaming into the stone floor, the stink of dying Toads, the sticky heat, none of it exists to them. Their eyes are slate-grey and cold. I was told Aurelians show no emotion. These two are blank-faced, but their eyes seem to pulse with need. They're hypnotized by my being.

A wounded Bullfrog pulls himself up. I scream and point, and the leader twists,

turning in a snapping motion and driving his blade into the warrior's heart. The Bullfrog grabs at the Orb-Blade and his hands slice open before he falls with a hard thud to the floor.

Bladdard is pressing back against his ornate gold throne. Mucusy sweat drips down his warty forehead. His sallow cheeks are slimy with fear.

"Please, I have gifts for Obsidian," he warbles out in the common tongue.

The leader of the Aurelians' hand seems to flick, nothing more, and his Orb-Blade spins in the air. It drives through Bladdard. He's cut in half, staring down with incomprehension at his innards as even his throne splits behind him, the thin golden leaf breaking apart and exposing the cheap wooden throne.

"No," he manages, in the Toad language, and keels over sideways, his blood hissing against the stone floor.

Every other Toad makes himself as small as possible, some whimpering in the fetal position. The other two servants dropped their dishes, an action that would have been punished severely an hour ago by these same cowering Toads. They are Lelita and Joel, two women who I exchanged words with on occasion, rapid conversations with our eyes darting left and right for Toads who might overhear and beat us for daring to speak.

Some of these Toads have pistols in their belts, but none of them draw. The leader of the Aurelians strides to the dead Toad Lord and grabs his Orb-Blade, deactivating it and holstering it in a smooth motion before turning his sights on me. They walk like wolves, spreading out and cornering me against the wall.

Fanatics.

These aren't noble Aurelians. And when they save a woman, they take her. Is my first time going to be in this cursed hall, fucked mercilessly and passed back and forth between the two of them?

"Where is the third?" I don't know where I find the courage to speak. The words seem to come up, unbidden.

"Dead," growls the leader in a bitter voice. He's bare-chested, the robes used to clear the acid off his broad chest, but I can see the pockmarks from Bullfrog blood above his perfect abs. It's just another reminder of his brutality on what was perfection when I first saw him.

This close, the size difference feels bigger. The two of them are well over seven feet tall, and broad, with wide bodies like swimmers. I barely go up to their navels. Up close, I can see the black stubble on the leader's strong jaw, his head shaved with a scar running from his eyebrow up to past his hairline. The second looked so handsome in my vision, but now his beauty is intense and ferocious, like a wolf that could rip you apart with a single bite.

He steps towards me, and his hands grip around my waist. I'd imagined the triad as knights of goodness, come to save me.

These two are dark as night. Dark as the tattoos that mar their flesh. I won't just feel helpless when they use me.

If they follow the Old Ways, I'll be their possession, a plaything to breed. They'll lose themselves in the drive to seed me, ignoring my whimpers as they force their too-huge cocks into me.

I struggle. It's like fighting against a giant. He breathes in, his nostrils flaring, his eyes widening with lust. I'm trapped between the hard stone wall and the beast.

He throws me over his shoulder, striding out, the leader drawing his Orb-Blade again and rushing forward to lead the way, putting himself between any threat and my body.

Fanatics are nearly as bad as being a Toad's slave...

But I'm terrified of what is going to happen to the other servants. "Quick! Run!" I yell, motioning as I am bounced with each step. We rush through the doors, and I don't know if Lelita and Joel heard me.

We race down slick hallways servants were forced to march down with food and drink, watching out for vicious tadpoles in the muddy waters that could take a toe from you if you weren't careful.

My head swims as I bounce over his shoulder. He put me over his right shoulder, which is covered by the black robe of the Fanatics. I get a tiny sense of relief when I see Lelita and Joel running down the hallway to catch up. I don't know how the Aurelians got a spaceship behind Toad lines, but if they did, it's the only chance for me and anyone else on this planet. Being the possession of a Fanatic is a step up from living in the late Bladdard's mansion, and without the Toad Lord to enforce order, the servants could be devoured by ravenous Bullfrogs with nothing to lose.

"Wait! Please, there's others. Eight more servants," I gasp out, and bite my tongue as he runs forward, bouncing me. I ignore the pain.

"We can't save everyone," comes the cold voice of the leader.

"Please. The quarters are just here," I say, waving to my right, knowing he can't see me. "They're right here!"

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The Aurelians stop. The one carrying me sets me down, and I shudder as my feet touch the swampy waters.

“Make it quick,” snarls the leader. I point to the wooden doors, and the second Aurelian spins and kicks it, his big combat boots slamming against the thin wood of the servants’ quarters. The wood was so thin I could sometimes hear Bullfrogs sniffing the air outside, their stomachs rumbling.

Screams greet us. The bunkbeds are stacked three high. Women are in ragged pajamas, huddling against the back wall. “Come on!” I yell. “We’re escaping!”

Six of them follow. Two hang back, older women who must have spent decades serving this manor. “Grab them,” I plead, and the leader shakes his head.

“No. I cannot guarantee safety for anyone but you, my Mate. If they come, they must keep up.” He speaks in the Common Tongue, his voice deep and rumbling.

My Mate.

I know Fanatics. Parents scare their children with stories of the brute warriors.

If he was an Aurelian Empire warrior, he would treat his mate as a Goddess, a queen to be protected and cherished. I longed for that, as I toiled in the darkness on the space station where I was born, reading through training manuals when others had fallen asleep. I had a purpose. To get enough money to go to Colossus, where I would be safe.

Where I dreamed of finding a noble triad of warriors.

These two are beasts. I'm not just his Mate now. I'm his possession. When I was growing up, we heard stories of what happens if Toad Slavers get you—you're forced into servitude, or a brothel, or in the worst case, the kitchen, and not as staff.

If Fanatic Aurelians get you...

You'll survive. But you'll barely be a human. They'll reduce you to nothing more than a breeding sow for their endless needs. And Gods help you if you're Bonded to them.

These two once served the Aurelian Empire. If they have a shred of honor left, they'll try to save more than me.

"Please," I beg, but the haughty Aurelian lifts me, throwing me over his shoulder. They stride. They were running before, but now they walk with long, steady steps, letting the eight servants who decided to come follow at a dead run, their legs needing two or three strides to match one of my captors'.

"Slow down!" I yell, but they ignore me.

"It's going to be close," says the leader in Aurelian. I learned the tongue in those late nights, knowing one day it would come in handy.

I didn't think it would be like this.

"Can he keep the nerian open long?" Nerian? That world I don't know.

"He's Obsidian. He'll keep his word."

Panic rushes up in my throat. Obsidian. The War-God himself. I thought he was no more than a myth. I don't know whether to scream and warn the servants not to follow—because Toads are bad, but if the rumors are true, their God hungers for human sacrifices.

We burst out of the front doors of the estate and onto the packed earth of the courtyard. The stink of violence fills the air. Flies are circling the corpses of the two Bullfrog guards who were at the gate. I twist my body as much as possible to get a view of where we're going, but it's hard to see past his broad, muscled shoulder.

The courtyard erupts in flames as a Toad attack ship buzzes down. It's bulbous and green, firing out las-cannon fire without precision. The wall of the mansion crumbles, and the fleeing servants scream, rushing closer to us. They're so slow, malnourished, kept in a near-starved state by the cruel Toad Lord, and the youngest servant, barely twenty years old, stumbles. Joel grabs her arm roughly, forcing her to keep going.

I look up for the brilliant white of Aurelian Reavers, the attack ships of the species, but there's nothing. The skies are filled with Toad merchant ships leaving and entering the atmosphere, with more Toad fighter ships buzzing towards us.

The Aurelians sprint. We rush past abandoned carts, where poor Toads sell their wares. I see them in the alleys, cowering. A window shuts. No one dares to look at a Fanatic with its blood up.

"We're ten seconds late, but it's still open!" yells the leader.

"Please, slow down," I beg, and the Aurelian turns to see how close the servants are.

When he turns, I see what we're running towards.

It's no spaceship to flee in.

It's something I don't understand.

There's something wrong in the middle of the street. I should see the road, stretching out. I was brought up this road, shackled, along with other servants a year and a half ago.

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There's a strange, mirrored surface that both reflects me back and shows me black sands at the same time.

I look so tiny, draped over the back of the huge Greek god of a warrior. He has red blotches on his left shoulder, from Bullfrog blood, and I know he must be hurting, but he doesn't even grunt in pain. He has a long white scar down his back.

These two have spent the last year and a half at war.

His jet-black hair contrasts against his marble flesh. His neck is thick and powerful, and he exudes dominance and strength.

All those scars, but it doesn't mar him like the perfect twin half-circles on his chest. I can remember them from when he first burst into the banquet hall, and they are etched in my memory for eternity, the moment when I knew my dreams of being saved by a force for good were naïve.

It is the mark of Obsidian.

It is the mark of the War-God and his horrible followers who view humans as their possessions.

In the mirror, I can see the women running. A Toad ship, big as an elephant and bulging out with gun turrets, fires into the street, smashing carts. Some of the women pause, others run forward towards the mirror.

"Please, please wait for them," I beg, but the Aurelian holding me turns and steps

through the portal.

It's cold, icy water, which I haven't felt since I was on a space station. Time freezes for an instant, and my body seems to grow longer and longer, like I'm a piece of dough stretched to the limit, and then I'm on the other side.

He sets me down in the black sand and screams greet me, yells of victory and triumph.

I can barely stand on my shaking legs as I walk to the side, because directly in front of me is a monster.

It's an Aurelian, maybe, if Aurelians were over eight foot tall, with oil in their blood. He doesn't have a tattoo on his chest. He has a birthmark. His black, scraggly hair goes down past his shoulders, and his eyes are pure darkness, but as I'm drawn into them, I see a trillion stars.

The Aurelian who grabbed me grips my wrist and pulls me aside, when I see the two wolves.

Wolves. These are bigger than any wolf I've seen in a holo-vid. They're bigger than warhorses, huge, hulking animals with long black fangs. I'm terrified, and despite my revulsion for the Fanatic, I pull myself against his broad body. He wraps an arm around me, pulling me tight against his waist as I stare around me, trying to make sense of my surroundings.

It's almost like the Arena of the Gods, the pure white Coliseum on Colossus.

No—it's a perversion of it, a blasphemy. It's sliced in half, a half-circle like the brands all Fanatics wear, and instead of pure white marble stone, it's built of black granite.

The stands are packed with warriors, and they bray in triumph. They watched the two Aurelians went through a portal and came back with the one thing they care about more than their evil religion...

Their promised Mate.

I used to dream of living on Colossus. I used to dream of looking up at the palace of Queen Jasmine on the hills above the city, imagining working for her. She is the reason Aurelians became more civilized, more caring towards humanity.

Then a third of the species broke off because they didn't want to protect.

They wanted to claim and conquer.

Now I am surrounded by them.

"I cannot hold it much longer," comes the deep, booming voice of Obsidian. He never takes his eyes off the portal. His hands are spread out wide. He's nude, and I look away, not wanting to see his violent manhood.

"Please, don't let me lose another brother," whispers the refined Aurelian who grabbed me. His voice splinters with pain as he speaks. His hand on my ribs is so big it covers my entire midriff, and it pulls me almost painfully towards him, pressing me against his powerful body. He's taut, stressed that his battle-brother hasn't returned.

Aurelians share a special Bond. They can feel each other's emotions, and these two must have fought together for hundreds of years. He lost one brother and became savage from it.

If he loses another, I'm terrified what he will become.

Obsidian's eyes go wider. He roars out, when a woman stumbles through the portal, two more rushing through and landing on her in a heap. I recognize Joel and Lelita.

Sweat drips down Obsidian's brow as his arms shake. On this side, I can see the portal in its true form. It is a huge square mirror ringed by blackness, with Orbs bigger than my head ensconced in wrought black metal.

The edges of the mirror grow darker, blackness seeping in, tendrils of darkness slowly spreading towards the center and closing in like a fast-approaching tunnel. A vein in Obsidian's forearm bursts, and he roars in pain, as the leader of the Aurelians jumps through, roughly grabbing two more servants with him.

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Five made it through. The mirror turns pure black, snapping shut, and there's a red, bloody gash on the leader's arm from where he brushed the edge of the portal.

The leader turns to me. "I saved what I could," he states, without emotion, the near-death experience not fazing him.

The Coliseum is a half-circle, with three small portcullis entrances, and on the flat side is a massive portcullis gate which yawns open. Triads of Aurelians run through the sands, their black robes flowing.

The servants scream as they approach. "No!" I yell.

"Healers," comes the deep voice from behind me, as the haughty Aurelian pulls me tighter against his waist. I swallow as I feel something move under his robes, but I don't dare try to struggle to get away, worrying I will excite it more.

A black ship is descending from above. It is the shadow of a Reaver, matte black instead of gleaming platinum. On the front, under the reinforced glass of the cockpit, are the twin half-circles that mark it as a Fanatic Reaver.

The leader presses his hand against his brand. "Thank you, my God," he rumbles, and Obsidian nods his head.

The Reaver hovers a foot above the ground, the side door hissing open. I don't have a choice. The Aurelian lifts me up from behind, cradling me like a baby, his biceps bulging like bowling balls as I am marched into the Reaver.

I'm in a long hallway as the doors shut behind me, and the Reaver takes off. I didn't see anyone in the front seats when it landed, and it must be traveling by autopilot.

"Put me down," I say, and regret it instantly. Now that I'm safe, the Aurelian looks down with hard eyes.

How stupid was I, to try to order around a Fanatic? My throat is dry. It's like being lifted by a statue, his muscles as hard as rocks. He has perfect balance, keeping still as the Reaver flies soundlessly upwards.

He's so much stronger than me. It forces out all thoughts of trying to pull myself from his arms and stand on my own two feet, and after the rush to escape, I don't trust my limbs to support me.

"You are weak. Starved. You will stand when you are ready," he states, in a voice that allows for no compromise. I shudder at how commanding he is.

"Okay," I whisper, my voice weak.

His eyes flare up, and I know instinctively what I need to say.

"Yes, sir," I say, and he breathes in deeply, his nostrils flaring. The leader of the Aurelians growls, low in his throat, and I look over at him.

His robes are tented outwards, by a huge steel rod of his cock. I look away, my cheeks flushing red in fear...

And something else.

Something instinctive. This need I've never felt before rushes up and down my body, a frisson down my spine.

No!

I won't be attracted to a Fanatic. These beasts deserve to be killed. I won't give them the satisfaction of knowing what they do to me...

But it's too late. He breathes in, deeply, and his eyes roll back as he tastes my lust. My cheeks flush a deeper red as I remember the rumor I heard about Aurelians.

They can smell your lust.

The Aurelian holding me pulls me tighter against his body. I can feel his hard chest muscles and the steady beat of his heart. There's still the stink of blood and bile on him from the battle, but I can smell something else, this musky, manly scent of Aurelian that should be offensive to my nose.

Should be.

They saved my life. I would have endured decades of servitude, and the moment I couldn't perform my duties, I'd have been thrown to the Bullfrogs as a snack. Over a year, living in fear of the Toad Lord, and now he's gone.

The Reaver touches down, and I can't stop a gasp from leaving my throat. The Aurelian holding me runs his hand through my hair, to calm me, and turns as the doors hiss open.

We're in the courtyard of a towering estate. Black pillars rise at the entryway, and it's at least four stories tall—Aurelian stories, designed for the big bulk of the creatures. On the left side is a long lap pool with sparkling waters, and on the right is a lush garden, with newly planted trees still leaning on supports.

The architecture is simple but royal, hard lines leading to a triangular roof. Around

me are tall walls, tall enough that not even a Bullfrog could leap over them, but they don't make me feel protected.

They make me feel trapped.

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He sets me down on soft earth, and the huge double doors swing open. Two women in simple clothes smile, greeting us.

The leader of the Aurelian duo strides forward, hand on his Orb-Blade hilt, ready to activate it at any moment. That doesn't relax me. If even he can't be at ease in his estate, how could I be?

What does he fear?

The other Aurelian takes my hand, wrapping his huge fingers around mine. My hand disappears into his. He's warm. It's strange. Looking at the stony skin of an Aurelian, I'd have expected them to be cold, but he still bleeds like I do.

"Welcome," says one of the women. "We've prepared everything as you asked," she says, and leads us inside. There is a big double staircase that leads up to a second floor with balconies. I catch a glimpse of another staircase leading down on the other side.

I'm taken to the right, and my nostrils twitch as the delicious smells of a feast waft through. I haven't smelled food that wasn't tainted by the swampy odors of Toads in years.

We enter a tall-ceilinged dining room with a window that looks out to the garden. On the big wooden table is a huge pot of soup, a roast, and fresh baked buns. Three bowls are already filled with broth. The servants disappear without a word.

I can't help myself. I haven't had a real meal in forever. My stomach roils and burns,

acidic, and I run forward and grab a bun. It's so soft in my hand. I can't even pause to butter it. It's piping hot, straight from the oven, and I moan as I bring it to my mouth.

The hand wraps around my wrist, and saliva drips from my lips, an inch away from the bun but unable to move. The leader of the Aurelians takes the bun from my hand and puts it on the table, then pulls a huge chair back.

Tears well up in my eyes. This can't be.

The Toad Lord loved to torture me, not letting me eat for days before he feasted, making my stomach burn with digestive acids as he made me watch everyone at the banquet gorge themselves when I could only watch. My stomach would burn with acid, but I had to stand straight-backed, serving him wine. If I doubled over, he'd laugh and hit me.

"You are starved. Food will hurt you. Start with broth."

He lifts me easily, like I am weightless, and sits down on the chair, putting me on his lap. I'm terribly aware of his half-hard cock throbbing underneath me. He wraps one hand around my stomach, pulling me tight against him.

Sitting on his lap makes me feel like a toy. The chair's made for an alien much broader than me, and my feet wouldn't touch the floor even if the big man wasn't under me.

He reaches out his arm. His forearm is as big as my leg. He takes a silver spoon, takes a spoonful, and brings it to my lips.

Part of me wants to protest, that I'm not a bedridden patient who can't feed herself, but saliva drips down my chin as he takes the spoon and gently brings it to my mouth. It's strange seeing how carefully he moves his arm after watching him cut down

Bullfrogs with violent, brutal swings.

I slurp, and the delicious flavors of meaty broth dance on my tongue. Tears well up in my eyes, but this time it's not from fear or sorrow. It's so good. I never thought I'd taste something like this again. Bladdard would feed us a disgusting slop made of whatever the Bullfrogs left behind, and I couldn't help but imagine their slavering mouths as I forced it down.

The second Aurelian sits down across from me.

Gods, but he's handsome. Too handsome. He has perfect, symmetrical features, a strong jaw and nose, high cheekbones and thick, short black hair that I get the urge to grab and pull. His chest is half-bared, and even with that disgusting tattoo, I can't help but stare at the slabs of muscle. I can even see the ridges of his abs.

I don't mind the brutal scars on his body. The twin circles that mark him as a Fanatic, I can't accept. I look away as the leader brings another sip to my mouth.

My cheeks flush red with embarrassment as he feeds me, like I'm his pet, and I understand the truth of my predicament.

The Toad Lord treated me like a piece of trash.

These two will treat me like the most precious art...

But I am still their possession.

I slurp the soup, too hungry to care, my head swimming.

"What is your name, my Mate?" The deep voice is felt more than heard from behind me, and when he says the word Mate, his cock twitches underneath me. I wriggle,

uncomfortably, and it throbs in response to my movements, so I freeze, staying perfectly still.

I can't give them my name. They may think they own me, but that, he can't have. "Nelly," I blurt out. It's the first word that comes to my mind.

"Nelly. I am Damian. My battle-brother is Tarak. I wish you could have met Raython. He perished when we Orb-Shifted, after we felt your existence. His last words were to go to you."

There's a deep sorrow in his voice.

When they Orb-Shifted.

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He means when they deserted.

I look at the bowl of soup greedily, and my stomach growls. He fills the spoon with broth, bringing it to my lips, and I sip, gratefully.

They might be savages—but I'll need my strength if I am going to make an escape.

Damian lowers his head above mine, nuzzling my hair, breathing in. The Toad Lord keeps—kept—us pristine, bathing us in perfumes. Damian breathes in deeply, smelling the flowers, and his cock surges harder. It presses against my ass and I try to shift forward, but his hand wraps around me, pulling me against the iron rod. He grunts as he repositions himself, and his cock surges up, standing straight up against my back. His heart is pounding faster and faster, and I'm petrified as I realize what's happening to him.

The legendary Mating Rage of the Aurelian species.

I've never been with a man. I knew I wanted to care about someone I was with before I could enjoy sex, and I saw two of my friends get pregnant and have the men who pretended to love them leave on the next flight out of the station. Plus, humans never could do it for me, not when I knew there were Aurelians on Colossus.

Aurelians to whom you would be just one more toy in their harem—but this is different.

These two think I am their Mate, the one woman in the universe who can bear their sons.

Tarak licks his lips across from me. I know he's imagining running that huge tongue over my body. I can't help but imagine it sliding over my stomach, up to my breasts...

My nipples harden, and I squeeze my legs together as heat pours between my legs. I can't let them taste my arousal. I can't. They're already right at the edge, and anything could set them off. He's so fucking big, he could lift me up and hold me down with one hand against the table while he bred me.

The leader's cock spurts pre-cum against my back. It wets the thin dress I'm clad in, and instantly, I know another rumor about the species is true.

They're so fucking big, they could never fit in a human...

But they're designed for two things, killing and fucking. Aurelians have copious amounts of pre-cum, and it numbs you to the pain as they stretch you out. It feels like a baseball bat against my back, and I'm equal parts scared and turned on in this deep, instinctive way.

He breathes in deep, smelling me, like a wolf tasting my scent.

A river of my lust goes up and down my spine, making me shiver, and I try to pull myself away, but his huge hand presses me against his body. His other hand reaches out, filling the spoon with soup, and bringing it to my lips.

I'm still starved, but I push my head sideways. "Get away from me, you savages!"

Tarak's eyes flash. "Drink. Now." His voice is a hard command. I have no choice. I slurp the soup. It warms my empty belly, but tears drip down my cheeks. I'm so helpless, and I don't trust these two monsters.

“What’s...what’s going to happen to me?”

“You will be our Mate.” The Fanatic across from me says the words with finality.

4

Tarak

There is a darkness in me I cannot quell. It is like a well filled with clear water, but dip the bucket too deep, and it comes back blacker than Obsidian’s blood.

When my battle-brother died, the darkness welled up. He was a savage man, but his savagery was put into goodness, killing slavers, Fanatics, and Rogue Aurelians with equal prowess.

When I tasted that my Mate was in danger, it overwhelmed me. I needed to kill whoever took her from me. Whoever had held her captive, torturing her while we could not save her. Every day apart from her, I felt a sickening helplessness.

Never again.

Never again will this innocent creature be put into danger. She must have only twenty-five years to her. I’ve lived over ten times her span, and I will use every lesson I learned in those long days to keep her safe and protected.

Even if I have to keep her in chains.

I used to be rational. Cold. Calculating. The voice of reason for our triad. Now I need to own this little creature so deeply she never wants to leave. She hates us—but she doesn’t understand the realities of the universe. She is as misled as we were back when we served the human Queen Jasmine.

Seeing her wriggle in my battle-brother's arms ignites me. My cock swells up, because as much as she fought against him, I could taste her naked lust. That, I crave more than anything. For her to ache for me even a fraction as I ache for her.

She's a virgin, untouched by any man, but that pales in comparison to the scent of a potential Mate. My trapezoid muscles flex, and I focus on her, ignoring everything else, wanting to rip the clothes off her frail, helpless body.

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She was thin when we first saw her in our vision. Now she's bones. It makes my rage burn me to the core and I slam my fist against the table. The soup bowls spill, and one of our servants, who was watching us from far away, takes her leave.

Those two women are good workers. Each of them tried to seduce us but stopped when they realized we had no lust for any but our promised mate. We were granted those servants when we got the first semi-circle of our brand filled in with agonizing ink, ink meant to let us experience a few hours of the pain Obsidian lives with.

I told them specifically what to put out for her, because I knew our Mate was weakened, but I didn't think she'd have suffered such starvation. I thought she could handle a small bit of meat and bread, but now it's as if I put them out to taunt her.

She is so weak, half-starved, and our brutal Matings would hurt her. She's so fragile. She could break.

More than that, my lust is chilled by the fear in her being. It's not the hate that worries me. I can taste her anger, but it's the fear, the yellow, sickly smell, that curdles any lust.

"We saved her life. Why does she hate us?" Damian telepaths the words to me, so as not to let her hear. We both suspect she can understand Aurelian.

When we Bond her, she'll be in our minds. Her being will be there, and we'll be able to taste her essence, her emotions. We'll be able to speak with her directly, without even needing words. I yearn for it, but it must wait—because if we take her now, even if we didn't snap and hurt her, it would cement her hatred for us eternally. No

amount of lust in her being can forgive us taking her when she does not wish it.

“You know why. You hated Fanatics with the same zest, long ago. She will learn.”

She looks at the spilled soup, licking her lips, and I cock my head. Damian sees the motion and fills another spoonful of soup, letting her drink. She swallows hard, frozen in fear.

“Please. The other women. The five servants. They aren’t your...Mate.” She spits out the word like a curse. “Let them go. Let them go somewhere safe.”

“They will be restored to health. Then we will decide what to do with them.” I state the words clearly, in Aurelian, and I see her blink with understanding.

So she does understand our tongue. Interesting.

“We can earn many talons by auctioning them to worthy men. Talons we can use to protect her.”

I transmit the message to Damian, feeling only a tinge of guilt. We saved their lives, and by the Old Ways, we own them—to do as we see fit. We have enough servants. Others have won talons in battles and could bid on them. It’s possible they are Mated to a triad on this very planet, and if not, they are well trained servants. Some were pretty enough to catch the fancy of an Aurelian.

I didn’t use to yearn for power. Now I need it. Without strength, we cannot deserve our Mate. Without power, she will never spread her legs and surrender fully, letting her body demand to be impregnated. Only with her yearning for a son can we make her belly swell, and have the purest joy of siring a biological heir.

Five women could be used to gain perhaps ten talons in an auction. Obsidian made it

clear that no woman can be touched without consent, and though life will not be easy if they get a particularly fierce triad, it's better than what it would have been serving a Toad.

Those ten talons could be used to buy a second Orb to power our shields.

“What are you going to do to them? To me?” She's terrified. That thread of lust she had is gone, a wilted flower, and mine and my battle-brother's disappears with it as the stink of sickly terror makes our stomachs roil.

We saved her life, but she's still scared of us.

“We will decide,” says Damian. “You must rest now. When you wake and gain your strength, we will speak.” He stands, lifting her gently, and I hate how frail her body looks. She should have healthy curves to her body. He cradles her in his arms, and her eyes move to the bowl of soup. As scared as she is, she's still starving. He lifts her out of the dining room and up the stairwell, to take her to the top floor where we have our main bedroom.

I take the bowl of soup, pour a third of it back in the cauldron, not wanting to upset her stomach if she eats too much, and follow them up.

The room looks too big for her. There is a long skylight, light streaming down into the room, and I look at her in the white sheets where Damian placed her. She pulls blankets over her body, hiding herself from us. Only the copper of her hair peeks out from the blankets.

I want to go in, but her fear has quelled, and I can't be the reason her terror spikes again. I can't. My Mate is so fragile, but her spirit is strong, under all the abuse. When the Bondthrummed and we felt our Mate, I felt her goodness rushing through me.

Even as we made our escape, she thought of the other servants. She's good.

In this universe, good gets you killed.

My cock surges as I imagine lying in bed with her, spooning her, my arms wrapped around her femininity, but I force the lust to ground. I will not claim her.

Not until she is begging for it...

And she will beg.

I place the bowl of soup down gently and close the door.

Damian steps away, and I follow him back to the stairs. We walk down, deep in thought. Both of our auras are stormy.

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The servants are nowhere to be seen, sensing our moods. It should be a day of elation. This is what we dreamed of since we were nothing but lads in Academy, boasting to others how many sons we would sire when we finally found our Mate.

Now that we have her, she's more than I ever imagined...

But I don't have her. Not yet. Not until all that hate turns to respect, then comfort, then love. When she understands we'd never hurt her, that we'd die to protect her, she will lose that hatred for us. When she understands the true callousness of the Aurelian Empire, she will realize that only the Old Ways can protect humanity.

The universe is drowning.

Only strength can pull the victims up and let them breathe.

Damian's aura spikes. He's always had good instincts, and something is wrong.

"What is it?"

He cocks his ear, and I hear the knock like a battering ram.

5

Damian

Someone is at our domain.

It would not have bothered me a day ago.

Now I have the most precious thing in the world to protect. I clench my fist and rush down the stairs, through the front doors, to see who is at our gate.

The walls are over thirty feet tall, but they are only a pretense of safety. Any Aurelian with a Reaver can enter. The gates match the black stone of the walls, wrought iron that could stand only a second before an Aurelian with an Orb-Blade could break through.

At the gates is the last thing I want to see, other than a horde of Empire Aurelians. I'd prefer Scorp to what awaits me.

Three tall, thin Priests, ones I have seen in the temples, staring at ancient parchments as wrinkled as their skin. Behind them are Fanatics, burly boys, with shaved heads and bulging biceps. Each of them has the second brand on their foreheads, half-filled in the case of the bodyguards. They'd do anything to earn that second tattoo and the chance at their Mate.

"Open," I command, and the gates creak open. I raise my hand as the Priests try to enter, pressing forward, so they're forced to step back or draw weapons. I've already made a note of their arsenal. One of the triads has a brutal mix of maces and hatchets, weapons suited to close combat battles, while the other three guardians have the classic Orb-Swords. They dangle at the belts that clasp their black robes closed.

The three Priests have hilts of Orb-Blades at their belts, but I am sure they haven't been activated this century. Those Orbs must thirst for blood, angry at having to be at the waist of religious leaders.

"Damian. Tarak. You served us well, and you earned your Mate." The dry rasp of the leader of the Priests makes me want to dive into my pool.

All of them look straight at my eyes. I know exactly why. “We served. We did our duty and got our reward.” I state it plainly. It was a bargain, and we paid the price, in so much blood. We paid the price in the scars that cover our chests.

“The second triad came back through the gates with their Mate. They bred her in front of the arena. Many will...” He coughs, his slate-grey eyes flicking to the left.

“...Come to serve us, after seeing the spectacle,” finishes his battle-brother, completing the sentence for him.

“She is recovering.”

“When she is recovered, we ask that you bring her to the Arena of Blood. Let all who come see your eyes change colors as you Bond your Mate.”

My fingers twitch. This ancient Priest seeks to use us as a symbol. My Mate is not a symbol. She is mine.

“You saw what happened to the High Priest Tan,” I say, the threat barely veiled. “We will Mate her when the time is right.”

The three Priests look uncomfortable, just for a second, before their faces return to the blank, emotionless slates that befit Aurelians. The two triads of brutes can’t keep their composure. Their feet move ever so slightly, their legs widening, taking a battle stance. They serve the High Priest above all else but Obsidian, and they don’t like seeing one of the Highest of their order, that they worshiped as a demi-god, cut down.

“An unfortunate...event,” whispers the lead Priest. He wanted to say mistake, but the word died on his tongue. “The War-God Obsidian is infallible, but he has much to learn. He grew up on a savage planet, raised by wolves, and we will teach him the Old Ways.” He coughs, dry and raspy, before continuing. “We broadcasted you going

through the portal to the universe, and all saw you come back with your Mate. Each Bonded triad will bring thousands of Aurelians to our side, defecting from the Empire...and when you impregnate her, your sons will..."

"...show Aurelian warriors that the Old Ways are just," finishes the other Priest.

"Leave now." I should defer to them. It's dangerous. A day ago, I would have spoken to them in awe.

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That was before I witnessed Obsidian himself. The battle-God is so much more than these Priests with their prophecies, and I care nothing for the universe if my Mate is in danger.

They think they have some ownership over my Mate. The thought of them watching as I see my fragile woman fills me with rage.

Raython's aura blinked out of my mind when he was lost to the void, but his hot, fiery anger seems to fill me. He was always quick to rage, challenging other triads for perceived slights, and we had to back up his words with the blades of our swords more than once.

"Watch your tongue. You speak to the Priest Rataro!" The leader of one of the brute triads steps forward, the vein in his forehead bulging with anger.

They could try to kill us. We are not holy yet, not until we Bond our Mate. When we do, we are untouchable. Once she is linked to us, we are elevated, the few warriors who can bring more strong sons to life to battle for Obsidian.

Tarak senses I'm on the edge, and steps forward, raising his hands to motion towards the walls. "These walls were earned by our faithful service. They are our sanctuary. Give us the peace we earned," he says, not quite ordering them, his tone just deferential enough to calm the situation, but he too has a hot, boiling rage threatening to burn over.

If they don't back down, it will be us against the nine of them. The Priests are ancient, but even they are dangerous, in their own way, and those two triads of brutes

are aching for a fight, aching to earn their own stripes so that they too may go through the portal.

They stand, for long moments, then take a small step back.

The Priest, Rataro, he was called, nods. “The five women you rescued. Two are virgins. The other three...are good enough. They are recovering in the hospital. When they are hail, give them to us, that we may reward our loyal warriors, as you were rewarded for your service. Do not forget, Damian and Tarak...” He coughs, raising his hand to his mouth, and red blood speckles the back of his hand when he brings it down. “Do not forget, you earned your Mate serving us.”

“The five women are ours, as per the Old Ways,” I state, staring them down. The Priest gets a thin, cold smile that doesn’t touch his icy eyes.

“Very well. The Old Ways give...but they also take. Think deeply, young warriors.”

I’m ready to draw my blade when he raises his bony hand. As one, all nine of them turn, to make the trek down the long path. Their jet-black Reaver is perhaps thirty feet away.

I watch them walk away, load up in the Reaver, and take off back to the city. That Reaver makes me uncomfortable. I look left and right. The closest two estates on each side are empty, but three rows of huge mansions down, another black Reaver descends.

The tattoo of the bottom circle is earned following the Priest, and whatever triad lives three rows down only earned their estate through service. I have no illusions about who they would serve if the Priests sent them against us.

Even if we were holy, Bonded, a triad would go mad at the thought of gaining their

own Mate and try to cut us down.

“They didn’t land in our estate. That is good,” states Tarak, motioning to the faraway dot of the Reaver as it disappears behind the city walls.

“Aye. But if they claim us treasonous, they can cut us down in the arena.”

“They would not,” he answers, but I feel his worry.

“Maybe not both. A pregnant Mate is worth more than us. But one of us could lose his head.” I turn to face my battle-brother. “The High Priest Tan was one of their most powerful leaders. Obsidian’s wolves ripped him to shreds. Those Priests serve Obsidian...but for their purposes, not his.”

We spent long hours in the temples, lit by black fire, listening to Priests speak to masses of Fanatics. We were asked to get the brand on our foreheads, but we did not commit.

Tarak used to be a mind like no other, a brilliant strategist. Nine times out of ten, he beat me at chess. Since the death of our battle-brother, he’s been too angry to think clearly. He licks his lips, his tongue red against the pale of his flesh, and he knows I’m right.

The Priests give the promise of a Mate to all who will follow them, but that is not the reason they wanted us to wait for Obsidian, and to serve him when he came. Some of them are thousands of years old, practicing their religion on Colossus despite the human Queen discouraging the ancient cult of the War-God. She viewed it as nothing more than superstition.

She provoked the Priests. She gave legal rights to planets under the Aurelian Empire protection to declare Independence. She could not have predicted the masses of

Scorp, the blood toll of trillions of humans who died. And yet, she did not understand that the only way to protect humanity was to rule over them with an iron fist.

It is not the fate of humans that concerns the Priests, but the universe itself.

They claimed a dark prince would rise. Obsidian. The Shadow Wolf who would devour the universe and drown it with blood, forging all men who followed him into a pure weapon.

A weapon that would stop something more evil from destroying all sentient life.

“How much of the prophecies are truth, and how much lies?” Tarak whispers. “The Priests want power. Obsidian threatens them.”

I could hear the pain in the War-God’s voice when he spoke of his Mate taken from him, snatched by the human Queen and her blaspheming triad.

The Priests need us to follow Obsidian—but once he conquers the Empire for them, will they betray him and take the throne? Or do they truly believe something is out there, lurking beyond the boundaries of reality?

It makes my stomach churn. I spent every waking moment of my life yearning for my Mate. Fighting for her. Leaving my honor behind to find her.

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Now that I have her in my estate, everything's become so much more complicated.

"We give them up," I state. "It's five women. They would have been eaten by Bullfrogs if we didn't save them. We're outnumbered here."

I thought of the warriors on this planet as my brothers, fighting towards a singular cause. We all wanted revenge on the Aurelian Empire. We all wanted to find the one woman in the universe who could bear our sons.

Now, I know they would turn on me at the order of the Priests. Only a direct order from Obsidian could save us, and he is only one man.

Tarak growls. "I don't like it. She won't like it."

"It's not up to her. I bear the burden. They won't be mistreated, not with Obsidian's decrees and threats. They'll serve in harems, if they're willing, or as servants otherwise, but they'll have hot food and a place to sleep, and they won't fear slavers or Scorp." I lick my lips. "It is our only choice."

I turn and walk back into our estates, waving my hand for the doors to close. The shreds of the dark robes are itchy against me. I need to change out of these damnable things and into something that can protect me against a bullet, or shrapnel from a Reaver's missile fire.

My armor can stop bullets...

But against the blades of Fanatics, it will be like tissue paper.

Athena

My stomach growls, and I lick the empty bowl, cleaning it of the last residue of the broth.

I'm in the main bedroom of the duo, and there is a huge window without glass. I stand at it, peeking around the side, so I can look out without being seen. I heard voices, and my instincts told me to check out what was happening.

I watched the two Aurelians go to the front gate, where they met with two triads of those awful Fanatics with the brands on their foreheads, and even worse, three Priests. Those brands on their heads are even more disgusting than the ones on my captors' chests.

The Priests look more like they have parchment for skin than marble, bony skeletons with protruding bones. One of them glances up, and I dart back.

My stomach growls again.

My mouth waters as I imagine the meat and bread on the table. Just one bun...surely they wouldn't notice. I'm so hungry, and the soup, while I could feel it working its medicine, didn't sate me.

For once, in years, I want to feel full.

I got good at moving silently as a servant. I didn't risk it, much—Bladdard had us watch a servant who was caught trying to steal food from the kitchen whipped in front of us.

Once, though, two Bullfrogs fought in the hallways when one bumped into the other while carrying a roast of some huge, horned goat it must have hunted. I risked peering out through the doors, opening them slightly, even though other servants begged me to close them and hide.

They drew their Orb-Axes, smashing them against each other, fighting to get the upper hand. At the same time, both of them darted their blades forward, cutting each other's throat. They fell, and tadpoles darted to the bodies, feasting before other Bullfrogs came to cannibalize them.

As they fell, I saw a chunk of red, rare meat fall, lodged in a crack in the wall. That night, I snuck out, creeping, a sleeping Toad guard not noticing me as I snatched the morsel, placed in my mouth, and came back. Every other servant was sleeping. It wasn't much more than a mouthful, but it was more protein that I got in the past week.

I creep softly out of the bedroom. My bare feet are soundless against the stone floor. Aurelians have better hearing than humans, but if they're still outside, speaking with those cursed Priests, I have a window.

The two servants, in plain brown clothes, are speaking with each other in low voices down the hallway, and they don't notice me creeping down.

I make it to the dining room and I nearly cry with the emotions that flood me.

Oh Gods.

It's still untouched. Bread. Fresh, warm bread, with a plate of soft butter. I haven't had butter since before I was captured, and that was nothing compared to what I see in front of me. It was measly, gruelly stuff, made by an organic synthesizer. Only the richest on the space station got the real stuff.

I race and grab a bun. I should bring it back up to my room, but I can't resist. I grab butter between my thumb and finger, smearing it on the bun, and take a bite.

It is heaven. I open my mouth wide to stuff the rest in.

“Stop!”

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The yell from behind makes me freeze. I didn't think there was a force in the world that could stop me from devouring the rest of the bun, but the deep, hard voice is so commanding, my body responds before I process the word.

I turn, guilty, and the huge warrior leader Damian is staring at me with hot, fierce eyes.

He's changed. He's out of the disgusting robes of the Priests, instead wearing reinforced, thick grey pants that look like they could stop a knife. He's in a black T-shirt that strains under his muscles. He's ferocious, but I can't help but stare at the big bicep vein, the broadness of his chest, the power in his being. Why do I find him so attractive?

"Please," I say, my mouth watering, and he's on me in a second. The world spins as he throws me over his lap, fierce yet strangely gentle, as if he's on the verge of losing control.

I struggle, but I'm a third of his size. He pulls up my dress, and I freeze.

I've heard all the stories of Aurelians. We spoke about them, late at night, in the servants quarters, our voices hushed whispers so as not to attract attention. My friends back on the station used to tease me that I never dated boys, telling me I was saving myself to be a harem wench.

Even the noble ones that serve the Empire have a roughness to them.

They love to mete out discipline to the women in their harems. Women flock to

Colossus for their protection. Some of them accept the punishments through gritted teeth...

And others crave it, traveling across galaxies to get it.

When I imagined being on Colossus, I always had a foolish dream of being Bonded to a noble triad who would treat me like their queen. But even with their adoration, I knew they would punish me.

In my most shameful, heated moments, touching my body as if it was inflamed, fever running through my veins, I pictured being over the lap of a dominant Aurelian while his battle-brothers watched me disciplined until I wept. Then the three of them would take me hard and fast, and when they were done, they would pull my shaking body tight, hugging me and protecting me.

I knew that even if I went to Colossus, I couldn't join a harem. I didn't want to be just a plaything for a triad. It would break my heart to be with the noble beasts if I wasn't the one woman in the universe who was their Mate, and I knew the odds were against me—even if I could, by some stroke of luck, make it there.

Now I'm over the lap of an alien who thinks I am his Mate...

And it's all wrong.

My body responds, craving the power of the beast, but the cruel mark of Obsidian on his chest stops me from submitting to him. In my fantasies I gave myself to the aliens. Now he's going to take me.

His hand comes down fast, the air hissing with it, but instead of a hard, red surge of pain, his huge palm comes down gently against my right buttock.

He's scared to hurt me. I thought I'd hear the crack of flesh on flesh, but instead, I hear his hot, heavy breathing.

"You will obey, Nelly," he growls. He wants to punish me. His cock surges up hard against his reinforced combat pants. He aches to spank me like a disobedient brat for disobeying him, but he can't, not when I'm so weak. My stomach aches with pain, and I groan.

He holds me over his lap, and the pain recedes, overwhelmed by something else.

I'm flooded by wetness. I know he's staring at my ass, and my little panties must be soaking. It's like something's coming over me. Feeling helpless against him turns me on, but it's his restraint that sends me over the edge. I thought Fanatics were barbarians, but he's got this protective urge that's more powerful even than his Mating Rage.

He raises his arm again, and his battle-brother is there. Tarak grabs his arm. "She doesn't understand." I'm lifted off Damian's lap. I can't help but peek.

His cock is running straight down his right leg. I can see it pressing against his combat pants. I look away as lust floods me. My stomach roils again, and I stand, stepping away from the two men.

Tarak looks over at the bun I dropped, then back at me. "How much did the Toad feed you?"

I'm dizzy. "Once every two days...slop. I ate yesterday."

He nods. "Good. Then you're not in mortal danger. You'll drink soup, and only soup, for the next two days while you recover. Eating too much can kill you after being on a starvation diet. Can you walk?" His voice sounds strange, growly, and his hand

clenches into a fist.

Seeing me over the lap of his battle-brother did something to him. He licks his lips, as Damian turns, standing to his full height. I barely make it to his belly button, and I'm at head level with something I don't want to think about right now.

I can't help but picture it. It throbs with every beat of his heart, and I'm flooded with wetness.

"Go back to your room," growls Damian. He fights to get the words out. "Go...sleep," he snarls, and his cock rips through his combat pants, rearing up like an iron rod.

Holy fuck. He's huge. His dick curves upwards, a long, thick vein on the top of it, and I'm petrified by it, half in fear, half lust. Pre-cum spurts from the tip, dripping on the floor, and I ache for it in my mouth.

In the throes of the Mating Rage, he's fighting to hold back...

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And losing. He takes a step forward, his fists clenching. I don't understand. Fanaticstake. They breed mercilessly. He shouldn't be fighting his base urges, instead throwing me onto the table and forcing my legs open.

Tarak stares at me, drool dripping down his lips. He grabs the wooden table, clenching so hard it creaks and dents. His bicep bulges under his thin grey T-shirt, and I see sweat stains under his armpits. Sweat drips down his brow as he fights desperately not to take me. There's a rip as his cock rears up, tearing the material of his pants. He's got two huge, full, hanging balls, and a thick cock with a downward curve that would break me apart like his combat pants.

Aneep comes out of my mouth and I step back.

Damian snarls. "I owe you a spanking, my Mate. You'll get it when you're healthy. You will obey."

I back away, and stumble, almost falling, dizzy from the lust and adrenaline, my body so weak and tired from the escape and the weight of all the events happening at once. "Servants! Take her!" he yells.

The two women in brown clothes dart in, their eyes downwards, but I see them steal glances at the two men's manhood, and the strangest surge of jealousy fills me.

Are these two in their harem? Do they fuck them like toys?

They help me up the stairs. "I can walk," I say, when we get up the first flight, my head clearing. I use the guardrails and walk up the three more flights to the top floor.

I go into the bedroom, and they follow me in. I sit down heavy on the bed, panting from the exertion.

And something else.

Need.

Deep, insistent need, to give myself to the alien warriors who saved me..

Or captured me.

“Do you need anything, my lady?” One of the servants has a plain face, quite lean, maybe thirty, while the other is chubby, well-fed and healthy, perhaps in her late thirties or early forties.

I bite my lip. “Those two. What are they like?”

“They’re fierce warriors, my lady. They never once touched us. They have eyes only for you,” says the first servant, in a soft voice, like she’s scared I’ll break.

I swallow hard. “I...I’d like to be alone for now. I need to sleep. Please, more broth when I wake,” I say. Then I feel embarrassed. “Never mind, I’ll come to get it myself,” I say, not wanting to order them around.

“Of course not. I’ll bring it up. Rest, recover. We’re here for you. I’m Laura,” says the plump woman. “And this is Matil.”

Matil smiles.

“Do they treat you well?” I ask, looking for a shred of humanity in the beastly men who believe they own me.

Laura grins. “Oh yes. Better than where I was before here, that’s the truth of the Gods,” she says, and turns to leave. They close the door behind them, and I’m alone.

My stomach protests, but the pain of hunger is soothing.

And it’s nothing compared to the new sensations taking control.

Lust. Pure, instinctive lust.

“You will obey.”

Damian’s dark, powerful voice echoes in my mind. Fuck. It’s too much to handle right now. I can’t help but imagine being over the alien’s lap, and this time, he doesn’t hold back. There would be a shameful, helpless lust in kicking and struggling while he spansks me over and over, turning my ass red and marking me as his.

I pull off the dress that the Toad Lord gave me, hating it, throwing it aside. My nipples are hard little buds, too sensitive against the sheets that are so soft they feel like they are caressing me, and I toss and turn, insistent heat between my legs.

He barely held back this time.

When I’m over his lap again, nothing will stop him. He’ll lose himself to the Mating Rage. I don’t know if it’s my frail condition or my terror, but something is stopping them from snapping...

And I’m starting to get less scared and more turned on by the warrior beasts.

I grit my teeth.

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No.

I will not let myself be attracted to Fanatics. They were at the gates, negotiating with foul Priests.

But no matter how much my mind tries to force me to hate them, my body betrays me.

So far, some of the rumors of the Aurelians have been true, and others, false. I thought a follower of Obsidian would claim me despite my terror. On the other hand...the lewd rumors that their alien cocks leak pre-cum like a faucet were very, very true.

I heard once, when a friend was giggling and drunk, that Aurelians can sense your emotions by your scent.

My cheeks flush red in humiliation. I had a tendril of insistent lust when they manhandled me.

Did they taste it? Did they feel my body begging for their might?

Even as I cursed them as savages, they would have known that deep down, I ache for them.

This is all wrong. I wanted, one day, to find a triad of proud, noble warriors. I knew it was nothing more than a fantasy, a foolish dream of a woman who grew up in a dingy space station and studied every night to improve her situation. Who hasn't dreamed

of being the queen to a mighty triad, of being their most cherished connection for eternity?

Who doesn't dream of the thousand-year lifespan the Bond gives you by their side, siring their perfect, powerful sons?

I gulp. These two stand for everything I hate.

The universe is growing more and more perilous. I heard reports of whole planets swallowed up by Scorp before I was captured, and I knew I was running out of time to get to safety when I was captured.

Some of the strong protect the weak. That is what the Aurelian Empire stands for.

The Fanatic followers of Obsidian use their strength to take humans.

I need to find a way to escape...

Once I've secured safety for the five servants I yelled at to come with me. I'm indebted to them. I save their lives, and I have a responsibility for them. If it wasn't for me, they'd be back on the Toad planet, not trapped on Obsidious, surrounded by brutal beasts.

They've been gentle enough—when I obey. The two of them made it painfully clear that the five servants are theirs to do with as they see fit, once they are healthy enough.

I feel disgusting and sweaty, and I'm aching for a shower, but I'm exhausted to the bone. I can barely keep my eyes open. The bed has a hard mattress, but the pillows are soft as a dream, pulling me towards sleep.

I try to pull myself up, to take a shower, and I get the water on before I realize the shower is spitting out fresh butter and I'm a newly baked bun, and I lose myself to the dream, not fighting anymore.

7

Damian

The thick wooden table is dented and bruised from where we hit it, trying to fight back our shameful lust.

There is nothing wrong with wanting your Mate. It is the most natural urge in the universe. But to have nearly snapped, to have that fragile creature over my lap and have to force myself not to spank her, is a personal failing.

"She's so fragile," I growl.

I need her to follow my orders without question. We are on a planet surrounded by men I can no longer trust.

I followed the Priests without thought. Once we left the Aurelian Empire, we were committed. We were put on the Kill List. There's no going back. We lost our honor, our purpose, everything that had seemed so important when we were fighting in the dark caves of Scorp nests and dodging las-cannon fire battling pirates.

On the Orb-Shift out, we lost Raython, and the void needed to be filled with revenge. That's what happens with a vacuum. Nature demands it be filled, like the weak leaders of the Aurelian Empire demand revolution.

I earned the two tattoos with mindless killing, going where they pointed without question. Now I've earned my Mate, and I cannot afford the luxury of thoughtless

action.

I press my half-hard cock down my pant leg, marveling at the rip in the front. I was so hard it was painful.

“She’ll be back to health soon,” answers Tarak, but his aura has a strange coldness to it.

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“What is it?” I used to have more patience for his cryptic ways.

“When we rescued her. I had imagined her running to us, her eyes alight with hope. When she saw our brands, she felt revulsion.”

I wave my hand, dismissive. It’s a useless thought. “She will understand. We will make her understand.” I stride out of the dining room, needing action. My legs carry me upwards towards her, and I have to grab the railing and pull myself away, every instinct in my body urging me towards her.

My cock swells up again, and I growl in frustration. I’ve never been so out of control. I’ve had the Mating Rage triggered before, usually by women we saved in our service, but unlike the others of our unit, we held back. Raython would succumb to the lust on occasion. We’d hear the moans from the other room, and he’d always come back with an icy cold aura and deep regret.

“I thought she might be our Mate,” he would say, and he took the pain for us, the pain of entering a woman and finding no link, no connection, just two bodies gyrating together like animals.

Rage fills me. That my battle-brother, so brave, will never get to taste his Mate. He’ll never get to feel that perfect woman so small and helpless over his lap. He’ll never be able to nuzzle his nose in her hair and smell her, the essence of woman under all the distracting scents of flowers poured on her scalp.

He’ll never taste her lust, feel her heart beat, see her eyes roll back in pleasure as she gives herself utterly to me...

I pull myself away from the winding stairwell, going to the other side, where a rock staircase leads down to the cellars. I crack my knuckles, feeling the weight of my Orb-Blade hilt bouncing at my belt as I walk downwards into the entrance hall to our lower level. There are three doors. One leads to our full gym. The second leads to a padded room filled with self-repairing robots. Artificial intelligence is still too weak to be truly ferocious, but they can still give me a good workout. Humanity managed to create Sentinels, robot guardians that protected the richest, but even those were slow compared to an Aurelian.

They might not be smart, but they can move with blinding speed, parrying our blows mechanically.

I clench my fist. When I am Bonded to my Mate, I'll be turned into the perfect killing machine I am destined to be. I'll have the power to avenge my battle-brother.

I need the strength of the Bond to protect her. When a Mate is first taken, the eyes of the Aurelian change colors, turning from the slate-grey of the rest of our species to a unique hue. It's not the cosmetic changes I crave. Your body swells up with power, your muscles stronger, your instincts honed. Reaction time is quicker. Every detail is brighter.

I press open the door to the weight room, ripping off my ruined clothes and changing into shorts. I spin and kick the heavy bag, remembering how I kicked down the door of the Toad Lord to claim my Mate.

Now I'm not imagining the Toads as I punch the bag.

I'm imagining the Priests who dared come to my gates.

Athena

I wake up, blinking, and rub my eyes of sleep.

I'm not on a tiny, hard cot. The sun is rising above the horizon, small but fierce, a raging ball of fire that casts a red glow over the architecture of the city.

I've got energy, for the first time in over a year. I pull myself out of bed, filled with a strange wonder. I thought my life was over.

I can remember acing the mining beam technician's exam, all those long nights of study paying off. How I aimed it at the Toad attack ships, and the beams fizzled out, sabotaged from within. Being shipped in a damp coffin, pressed in with terrified men and women. The sharp terror of the Toad auction, then the jumpy anxiety of working under the cruel thumb of Lord Bladdard.

Now I'm on a planet controlled by Fanatical religious zealots, who serve the God who opened the portal to save me. Obsidian was a myth, a superstition, and now I've seen him with my own eyes, along with the two wolves, bigger than horses, that serve him.

I walk to the window. It would be up to the waist of the Aurelians. To me, my chin barely goes over it, and I stand on my tippy toes to look out. Aurelians have advanced technologies, but the window has no glass, with big wooden shutters of stained black wood opened to the fresh dawn air.

I'm on the top floor of their estate. What they did to earn it, and those terrible tattoos on their chests, I don't want to know. The estate has its own somber beauty, and the black stone pillars at the front look like they belong. At the bottom there is a long pool, with the clearest water I've ever seen, so clear I can see the mosaic of patterns on the black tile underneath it.

They certainly love the color black, these Fanatics. It's religious to them, matching the veins of their leader. I don't care much for the color, but I love the huge walls that surround the estate, and the big gates at the front. It could slow down a triad of Aurelians, and while it wouldn't stop a Reaver from flying over the walls, they give me a sense of security.

There are other estates, just like ours, going off to the left and the right, row after row of mansions like the ones I dreamed of on Colossus. A long pathway leads from our gate down the rolling hills to the capital city. There, the buildings are not ugly, but built with brutish strength, huge blocks of stone without ornament.

Snow-covered mountains jut up to the west. In front of the mountains is a deep wound in the ground that looks like an ant hive, buzzing with activity as Aurelians cut huge squares of black marble and bring them up with hoists. Four triads of Aurelians, little dots from this distance, are pulling long ropes that connect to a sled. On top of it is a massive stone slab. I can imagine their grunts of exertion.

They could move the stone with Reavers or cranes, but they do things by hand. It's strange, this cult of Obsidian. What do they want? I heard horrible rumors of Fanatics eating humans alive, but living under the control of the Toads, I see where the true evil is in the universe.

These Fanatics, these Followers of Obsidian...they are mysteries to me. They aren't what I thought. I expected their homes to be places of fear, with servants running around with eyes to the ground, women forced to serve their monstrous masters whenever their Mating Rage inflamed.

It was my foolish dream since I was a young girl to be the bride of a triad of noble, powerful Aurelians.

When I felt those three in my mind, a vision more crisp and real than the muggy

manor of the Toads, that hope buoyed me. In my darkest moments, I imagined their bravery, their honor, their loyalty.

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Did losing the third of their triad drive them mad?

Or was it me? Did I change them? Is it my fault they left the noble Aurelian to join the Fanatics?

I peer out at the city of darkness, my hands on the sill, overwhelmed, and turn away quickly, rushing through the doors to the bathroom.

It's huge. There's a big stone tub, but I can't imagine the Aurelians bathing in it. In the corner is a shower without a door. Instead, it has a rectangle of black stone up to my knees to keep the water in. It's big enough to fit a football team, with high ceilings. Instead of a nozzle, the ceiling has a hundred tiny little holes that must drip down water.

The toilet is big enough I will have to be careful not to fall in. I quickly pee, flush, then jolt upwards as a warm jet of water splashes me. A littleeeepcomes out of my mouth.

"Everything okay?" There's a knock at the door. One of the servants must have been waiting for me to wake, and I remember with guilt I asked for broth when I woke. The poor woman must have been waiting, ear pressed to the door.

"Yeah! One second!" I say, looking at the toilet with suspicion. Of all the technologies the Aurelians had, I didn't expect a cleansing jet of water in their damn toilets. There's a million buttons on it. I grab a towel, wrapping it around myself, wishing I had a shower first, because I am still dirty from the Toad palace. I wash my hands and go to the door, opening it.

Laura's on the other side, and my stomach grumbles as I see the bowl of broth. I grab it with both, my stomach growling, and take a noisy sip as the spoon clatters to the ground.

"Slow, slow!" she says, and I lower it from my mouth, licking my lips, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry...I..."

"Don't be sorry. But if any harm comes to you, it's my hide. And I rather like my hide. I never got your name!"

I look away. I already lied to the Aurelians, and it's not fair to put her in a position to hold my secrets. "Nelly," I answer.

"Sit down, Nelly, enjoy. Don't worry, I'll have fresh sheets for you before tonight," she says, and I sit down on the bed and take another sip. Gods, but it's good. Vegetables and meaty broth, with a salty flavor that must be full of minerals.

She walks into the bathroom, putting down a bag. "There's everything you could need in here—fresh towels, toothpaste, a human-sized toothbrush—those are hard to find on Obsidious, you know! And some shampoo. I found you some clothes, but you're skin and bones, they'll be big on you."

I take another sip and find that the bowl is empty. "This soup is so good," I say.

She beams. "My special recipe. The Aurelians want you on a liquid diet, but I'll smuggle you up half a bun later, if you think your stomach can handle it. What—" She shuts up.

"No, you can ask."

“What happened to you?” Her voice is full of sorrow.

“Bad past. Toads.”

She can tell I don’t want to talk about it, and she excuses herself gently. I put the bowl down on the bedside table to take a shower. At one edge of the shower, there is a ridge you can sit on. I have to jump up, my legs dangling. Everything is built to the specifications of the over seven-foot-tall aliens, and I feel tiny. I pull the towel off, throwing it onto the bathtub.

“Warm water, please,” I say to the AI. I feel vaguely ridiculous for saying please, especially when nothing happens. “Oh, of course.” I repeat the words in Aurelian, and warm water jets down from the sky. It caresses my body, and I lean back.

I’m trapped on an alien planet...

But as alien planets go, this one isn’t so bad. My belly is full. I’m warm and comfortable after a deep rest, and the Aurelians aren’t what I expected from Fanatics.

I tap my fingers against the stone ledge as steam fills the bathroom.

Fanatics. I thought they would grab their Mate. I thought they’d grab me, push my legs open, and breed me rough in front of the crowd.

I bite my lip as my nipples harden. I can’t help it. Those twodosomething to me.

The lust is drowned by a wave of grief. I felt all three Aurelians in my mind. The savage power of the third of their triad is gone, and his rage seems to have infected the other two. When I first sensed them, the leader was filled with a noble, imperial power, the other haughty Aurelian blessed with a quick mind and a dancing wit. I could feel his intelligence.

Now the two of them are shadows of their old selves, lost in anger and rage. Can I pull them back from their pain, or is it too late for them?

I put my chin up. There's no saving them. I cannot trust men with the brands on their chests.

Aurelians bargain. I'm responsible for the lives of those five women I managed to beg Damian to save, and a tear goes down my cheeks for the others that couldn't make it through.

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Damian said the five women were recovering in the hospital. But what if they've already been sold off at an auction to fanatical followers?

It's a better life than being stuck on a Toad planet, but still, I need to protect them. If I'm the Mate of the two Aurelians, I have some shred of power.

I bite my lip.

I've got only one thing to bargain with.

Myself.

9

Tarak

"Who can we trust?" I ask again, tapping my fingers against the coffee table in front of us.

The question that kept us up all last night. We didn't need the pots of strong black coffee to stay awake. Laura brought them up to the library on the top floor of our estate, though we didn't choose the location because of the masses of ancient tomes or the comfortable leather seats we're reclining in.

We chose it because we're not thirty feet away from our Mate. The smells of Laura's warm broth wafts upwards, making my stomach rumble. She doesn't complain once about the long hours, giving us cheerful smiles when she brought up a new pot of

coffee and delicious sandwiches of fresh bread and rare meat.

The fire crackles. I grab another stick of wood from the metal bucket next to me, tossing it into the flames.

“No one,” growls Damian, his aura like the fire in front of us.

I suppress a grunt of anger. I’ve got back the coldness that defined me through my centuries. It’s not a detachment, but an aloofness that let me charge into Scorp nests knowing full well that I could be embedded with a barb and die screaming, that I could be rent in half. Raython had a brutal fire to him that propelled him onwards, but it was always my faculties that helped my triad.

I cannot waste time with empty rage anymore. I need to be quick and calculating to get us through this—with our mate—alive.

I search my memories for anything I can use. The fire crackles and spits under the new log, keeping the huge room pleasantly warm.

“There must be others like us. Others who saw joining the legions of Obsidian as the only way to find their Mate.” I state the words slowly, grabbing the silver handle of the ornate pot and pouring myself another cup into the pewter mug. Each time we return from war, there is something new in the home.

I want to see what our Mate brings. The little touches that make this her home.

But can it ever be a home for her, surrounded by Fanatics?

I stare into the fire, searching through my thoughts for a shred of information that can help us. When we stood in front of the huge mirror, next to the War-God, all I could think of was saving my Mate’s life. I knew we would have to cut through a dozen

Bullfrog guards to do it, and I faced those odds without fear.

The stands were packed with soldiers who ached to be in our place. A sea of faces...

One I knew.

“General Ra’al.”

“What of him?”

I take a sip of coffee, making sure I’m right before I speak again. “He was in the stands.”

“Your eyes deceive you. That man bled honor. He would never leave the Aurelian Empire.”

“He earned his stripes on Abascus. That’s when he gained his rank of General. He was there with his triad. They cleared it.”

Cleared it. A euphemism.

“Gods, that was a disaster. What was the final count?” Damian spits out the words bitterly, hating the losses of innocent lives.

“Eight. Nine. Billion. Dead to the Scorp.” I shake my head, forcing down the useless anger. “It was not a democratic planet. The rich who threw off the Empire’s protection probably got away in ships, leaving the rest to die.” I lean back in the thick leather chair and cock my head to the side, hearing the door to Nelly’s room open. There are low voices chatting.

Good. Laura must have brought her hot broth. A few moments later, the shower turns

on. I imagine the water cascading down her body, streaming down her breasts, her curly copper hair matted to her gorgeous, elegant face. She's so thin, so weak, but through it all, she's got an endless strength. You need to be strong to survive as a servant to Toads. They like to play with your mind, torturing your body and your soul, pathetic, ugly creatures that can never be beautiful and so seek to own it instead.

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“That would drive a man to madness.” Damian’s voice is a low growl as he pictures it, his aura clouded. We never had to clear a Scorp-ravaged planet. We never had to see bodies distended, filled with eggs of the violent creatures, humans begging for death, but we’ve seen warriors touched by the venom of the Scorp.

Even the strongest Aurelian turns to an animal when that venom hits. We experienced a taste of it, when we got our tattoos filled in. They say it hurts near as much, mimicking the constant agony of our War-God.

“Or to action. His battle-brothers were there as well. Kriz and Orr. Strong men, with principles. They would not follow the Priests blindly. They would take the course of action to protect the most men and women possible. That’s their honor.”

We served with men in the Aurelian Army who defected to the Priests, but many of the old faces I used to know have the same blank, religious fervor in their eyes. Men I used to drink and joke with now have the brand of Obsidian on their head, serving the Priests with fanatical devotion.

We can’t trust them. They’d betray us in an instant—even if we were holy, even if our eyes were colored with the War-God’s favor.

Even if our Mate’s belly was swollen with our son.

They’d do anything to earn the same tattoos on our chests and the chance at owning their own Mate.

Damian doesn’t hesitate. He brings his smartwatch close to his mouth. “Send

message to General Ra'al. Start. It is I, Damian, and my battle-brother Tarak. We fought with you eighty years ago on Malroon, and again, in the battle above Sigma-4. You had honor. You wanted to protect. There are five women in the general hospital who came from a Toad Lord's manor. If you would check up on them, and make sure they are still there and safe, we would be in your debt. End."

Abascus was a disaster, but the tragedies are piling up. The ones in Wild Space were unavoidable. The ones that were previously under Aurelian Empire protection make me ache to drive my Orb-Blade through the Emperor's chest.

So many planets threw off the protection of the Aurelian Empire. They were allowed to under the policies of Queen Jasmine, the human queen. Without paying the massive taxes for protection, those planets prospered and grew, some for near a century.

No one is declaring Independence now. Not with the waves of Scorp a thousand times worse than anything in recorded history.

Recorded history. Though everything before the great war seems so...nebulous.

"What's caused the Scorp to come in such numbers?" I ponder it, but it's a useless question, as useless as wondering about the past. We don't have time for useless questions anymore.

Damian shrugs and finishes his cup of coffee. We're alert without it, but the black brew warms the tongue. Our library's back wall is filled with books, ancient texts and tomes hand-copied by acolytes. They filled the libraries before we earned our estate.

I've studied them, just as we studied the Priests and their prophecies, but it's too much cryptic musing, not enough hard fact. If I hadn't seen Obsidian with my own two eyes, I would have thought the shadow wolf who would bathe the universe in

blood was nothing more than superstition. It was only feeling the Bond thrum through our being and knowing it was done by a High Priest that made us take the risk of joining them.

The tomes are filled with riddle, omens and destiny. That faith helped give me purpose, but truly, what carried me after my battle-brother's death was the chance for vengeance against the Aurelian Empire.

I needed faith until I saw the War-God in the flesh. Now I have no need for ancient words.

I turn my head to face Damian. "He gave us our Mate. Can we trust Obsidian?"

Damian shakes his head. "You heard him. Queen Jasmine took his woman. He'll be mad with bloodlust to claim her. We've been fighting closer and closer to the borders of the Empire, and it's only a matter of time before we pierce the boundary and all hell breaks loose. We're tools to him. Weapons."

"We've got more problems than Obsidian. The five women...even if General Ra'al checks on them and they're safe and sound, the Priests are only waiting for them to be hale to auction them off to loyal soldiers. They just lost their High Priest, cut down like a dog, and every man in the arena saw five un-owned women saved. If the Priests don't get their way, they look weak."

"They've lived thousands of years, those bastards, and they survived under Queen Jasmine's reign. They're wily. The safest thing is to give them up," he says, the words curdling on his lips. He doesn't like it. Neither do I. But on this planet of darkness, it's dangerous to have enemies in the shadows.

"Refuse, and we'll be surrounded by enemies. Agree...and five women go under the control of brute men."

“They won’t lay a hand on them. They saw their God proclaim an unwilling woman off-limits.”

“Even then...they may not wish to serve men like that. You saw Nelly’s fear of our brands. Imagine if we had them on our foreheads, too?”

“If they’re safe...and we’re safe...damn this all,” snarls Damian.

My nostrils flare, unbidden, as if some deep part of me sensed her. I taste her feminine odor, the unmistakable scent of her.

I turn in my chair to face the door behind us. We left the double doors open, to be able to hear her if she left her chambers, but she moves as quiet as a mouse.

Nelly. She’s standing at the entrance to the library, her copper hair wet and framing her elegant face, her lips full and begging to be kissed.

She’s wearing nothing but my bathrobe. It’s so big it drapes over her body and trails behind her like a wedding dress. She’s so slim, I fear the weight of it could crush her.

“May I enter?” she asks, her voice polite and submissive. It drives me wild.

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I clear my throat. “Yes, Nelly, come in.”

She shakes her head as she enters. The two of us resist the urge to stand, to grab her, to kiss her deep, pressing her against the wall, feeling her little body against us. Her slim beauty is so different from our brutal forms, our muscles bulging obscenely compared to her grace.

She stops on the other side of the coffee table, standing in front of the fire. “I lied to you. If you must add to my punishment, I accept it,” she says, holding her chin up. There’s bravery in her as she looks us in the eyes, first staring into Damian’s, then mine.

There’s nervousness in her aura, but no fear.

Any other woman would be terrified. She was snatched up by creatures she has been told a thousand terrible rumors about. I remember the way I hated Fanatics before I joined them, when I still thought the Aurelian Empire was a force for good. She’s near trembling, but there’s none of the sickly, yellow terror in her aura that let us hold back before.

There’s only a thick robe between us and her perfect body. Damian and I changed after ripping through the last set of clothes, and we’re wearing sweatpants that give us increased mobility. Armor won’t do anything against an Orb-Blade, and if Fanatics come, we’ll need to pivot and turn in the hallways of the manor. We each have a thick black belt that holds the hilts of our Orb-Blades, and we’re both wearing grey T-shirts.

I can tell she appreciates that the tattoos on our chests are covered. Of all my scars and wounds, only that one seems distasteful to her.

“What lie?” Damian can’t keep his voice gentle. He barks it out like a command, like we’re descending on a war-torn planet in our Reaver, Orb-Blades in hand, ready to charge into combat.

“My name. I...my real name is Athena. I was told that Fanatics take. I thought I could keep that one thing, as my own.” She trembles as she says it, and I want to go to her, hug her tight against my chest, and comfort her.

Fanatics.

I always hated that word, but when it comes to the War-God, he gave me my Mate. I would follow him like a Fanatic. I can offer her no comfort when she sees me as a brutal conqueror and nothing else. My touch would make her tremble more.

“Athena,” I say, tasting the name on my lips. It tastes all the sweeter for having been given to me. It suits her. She’s a goddess, perfection incarnate, made only for me and my battle-brother.

“You’re healthier,” states Damian, his voice flat, but a surge of relief in his mind. I know he was running through different lies she may have told, wondering if she put herself in worse danger.

His hand clenches, and he puts down the pewter cup too hard. It chips at the bottom, a flake falling to the stone ground. He’s fighting off his lust, same as I, because seeing her here, without terror, is everything we needed. My cock surges up against my sweatpants, pressing against the material, and I want her to mount me on this chair, to lean back and have her ride me like a banshee, finally giving in to the lust that fills her being.

Her lip trembles. “Please. I...I beg of you, please don’t let those five women get auctioned off to Priests.”

Damian growls.

“How much do we tell her?” I telepath to him. I want to make her understand it’s not so easy as snapping our fingers and keeping them as servants, protected in our home. By all the laws of the Old Ways, it should be so...

But the Priests have shown they care more about power than their own laws.

Even their prophecies will serve them.

Damian licks his lips.

His aura has an uncertainty to it I’m not used to. He makes split-second decisions, and they’re always the right ones—or good enough that when followed through with intense violence, we make them the right ones.

Now, facing a near-naked woman, he’s shook to the core.

10

Damian

She came to us, submissive and begging, needing our protection. We did not go to her room and drag her here. She stands on her own will, nearly naked, offering herself to me.

When I felt my Mate for the first time, when the Bondthrummed and I knew she was more than a fool’s hope, it was not her resilience and intellect that drew me to her.

No, it was her goodness, this purity to her that made me all the more furious that she was not yet mine. Athena cares deeply for others.

That goodness was punished and tortured by the cruel Toad Lord. He sought to stamp it out. I don't know how she kept it.

When I lost my battle-brother Raython, the anger was so great I lost every shred of honor I had.

She is stronger than me, in her own way, despite being less than half my size, despite being as fragile as the mug I broke through my carelessness.

“Everything,” I telepath back.

“The Priests demanded those five women to reward their most loyal warriors. We’re in perilous waters, my Mate. I do not tell you to scare you needlessly, but because you have the right to know.” I watch her carefully, seeing her reaction. She’s getting more nervous, but she’s holding strong, keeping eye contact, so I continue. “Obsidian decreed that no Aurelian may take a woman unwilling. They will abide by their War-God. They follow the Priests, aye, but they follow him above all else.”

She shakes her head. “Please, Damian, you can’t—I beg of you, please don’t let them be sold off to the Priests, or those...those creatures with branded foreheads.” Her voice shakes, but she gets the words out.

She takes a step forward. I know how much it costs her. The light of the fire makes her copper hair glow, and I ache to run my hands through her curls, to pull her close to my kiss. I cherish this moment, seeing her come to me, her green eyes bright with courage as she stands up to what must be giants to her.

“You own me, by the laws of your species.” Her voice cracks, and the thin edge of fear rises up, that fear that fills me with sorrow.

“You are our Mate, Athena,” I say, loving the sound of her name on my lips. She gave it me. It is mine to use, but I don’t want to hear it from the mouth of any other man. I’d want to rip their heads off, gouge their eyes out for even looking at her. “We own you. But you own us in return. You are everything, Athena, all we fought for. We will keep you safe.”

She nods, nervous, and takes a huge breath in, unclasping the robe.

It falls to the ground, and she stands before us, presenting her body to us. She's still damp from the shower. Her pale skin glistens, a bead of sweat from the warmth of the fire coming down from her neck all the way between her breasts. My breath catches as I stare at the magnificent lines of her body, her pert little nipples that harden under my gaze.

She has a trail of hair above her mound, the same color as her hair, and I lick my lips, aching to devour her. It is not just the sight of her body that maddens me. It is the tendrils of lust growing to a torrent that emanates from her being, the scent of her need glistening from between her legs. I need to taste her.

I need to claim her.

My cock surges up, uncomfortably hard, harder than even before. I'm an iron rod and I feel my body is pulsing for her. My balls seem to move on their own accord, as if they are sending a signal to my body to fill them with more seed.

I'm on fire for her.

"Damian, Tarak, I will give you everything I have. All of me. Just please, keep them safe. Find a solution, any solution, and I'll accept it, as long as they are not given to the Priests."

I grit my teeth at the memories of their dark temples. Ancient husks of men, telling their Fanatic followers that if we served them, we'd earn our Mate. That she'd be ours, completely, but now I know the lie.

Some things cannot be taken.

They must be given.

My nostrils flare as I taste her lust, exulting in the perfection of her being. She's still scared, but deep down, she craves us.

"The Priests will crucify us,"Tarak telepaths, but he barely cares. He sends me an image. Of me, in shackles, held back by Fanatics while he is put on his knees and beheaded in the Arena of Blood.

I snarl, hateful anger filling me, and Athena takes a step back, scared. She doesn't know my thoughts.

She doesn't know the horrible truth. Tarak's right. The Priests view a Bonded triad as holy, as symbols of what any man who deserts and comes to join them can gain.

But three is as good as two, and two is as good as one. They only need one of us alive to impregnate our Mate.

They'd take off one of our heads in a heartbeat, to reclaim their power, to show the world that they still have might.

Athena takes another step back, sensing the darkness in our moods. We can only Bond her to us by mating her, but even that is not everything. A seed can only take root if she craves it.

We will never get that surrender unless we can show her we are worthy to be her men. Unless we can keep those five women safe, that barrier will always be between us.

"You do not know what you ask, Athena," I say, my voice rasping and rough. "A High Priest took a woman by force. Before we stepped through the portal to save you,

he was ripped to shreds by Obsidian's wolves in the arena. The Priests will not take this humiliation lightly. They are in danger of losing control, of all their Fanatic followers ignoring them to serve the War-God directly." My throat is dry, too dry, and the terror comes back in her aura.

It's this yellow, sour scent, and I hate it more than the pain I felt when an Elite stabbed me with his Orb-Blade, nearly ripping me in half.

Tarak nods. "Every Aurelian in the universe saw us come back with five women. If the Priests auction them off, they show they are in control. If my judgment is correct, they've already promised them to loyal triads."

She looks down.

We told her everything. There are already so many barriers between us, and I will not have lies taint our relationship.

She looks down, fighting to control her fear. "I...you two saved my life. I can't make demands. I can only beg of you," she says, her voice soft, scared.

11

Athena

The two huge warriors sit back in their well-made, red leather chairs. Everything in this library smells of old wealth, though I know it was just constructed, from the wooden bookshelves filled with mighty tomes to the beautiful silver coffee carafe.

There is a small table that separates us. It's a barrier only in my mind. They could be on me in a second. I saw how fast these two move when they need to, the violence their bodies are capable of.

They're holding back. I know how they lust for me. I've heard all the tales of the overwhelming Mating Rages of the species, and I know they hold back only by a massive force of will. I'm standing, naked in front of them, giving myself to them, but they keep as still as statues, the only show of their struggle the way their hands grip the sides of their chairs...

And the huge, throbbing outlines of their manhoods. They're wearing sweatpants. They might as well be naked in the light grey material, the lines of their manhoods clearly visible. I've seen them naked. The lines of their bodies are ingrained in my mind, and if they take me with those weapons, they'll imprint themselves into me forever.

I would be ruined for any other man.

Their muscles strain against their tight T-shirts, and their slate eyes stare me down.

They barely blink, drinking up my being.

I get on my knees.

There's a thick rug in front of the fire, and it tickles my skin as I offer myself to them.

"Anything you want to do to me, you can," I whisper, and my mouth waters at the thought of forcing my lips as wide open as they can go, taking the huge head of one of their cocks into my mouth.

I'm scared of them...

But deep down, I know there is some good to them. They are not like those bastards with the brands on their foreheads. They have some shred of honor left, some shred of the protective instincts I yearned for when I thought of the Aurelian species.

Damian growls. His muscles flex, tensing, his shirt nearly bursting under him as his cockspurts. A huge wet spot appears halfway down his thigh. I gulp, my nipples hardening more, aching for their touch. I want them gentle, I want them rough, I want them with every fiber of my being.

"I will find a solution. They will not be given to the Priests. I promise you this, Athena." Damian growls out the words, but his voice has changed. It's deeper, more growly, as if he's losing the ability to speak.

I look down, so shy, knowing what this means.

They accepted my offer.

Now they will take me.

A tear drips down my cheeks. I'm scared. I'm scared of what these two are going to do to me, when they lose themselves in the rage.

He told me he was going to punish me. I imagine myself over his lap, helpless as he spans me, until he loses himself fully to the animal need and breeds me in front of the fire. I'd be a shaking, helpless mess, and when he's done with me...

The second would take his turn.

Aurelians are insatiable. It might not end there.

The chair scrapes against the stone floor as Damian stands. He steps over the coffee table, and soon he's in front of me, towering like a building above me.

Standing, I'm barely at his belly button. Now he might as well be a giant, a titan above me. He reaches down, and his huge hand circles my wrist easily.

He lifts me like I'm weightless, pulling me up to my shaking legs. His other hand strokes my cheek, gently wiping the tear. I'm trembling as Tarak stands, the two huge bodies blocking me in against the fire. There's nowhere to run.

Damian's thick fingers gently run under my chin. He's gasping for air, breathing deeply, his huge, powerful chest pressing against his soft grey T-shirt. I love the stony hue to his skin. He just looks so sturdy, so stable, so powerful.

He forces my chin up with a light push of a finger, forcing me to meet his alien gaze. He hangs there for a moment, the tension rising, then leans down.

His lips find mine.

Oh Gods, but his lips find mine, and I melt under his touch. His power, his

dominance, washes over me, and I can only imagine how intense it will be when I can feel his being in my mind.

I yearn to give myself to him, fully, but I'm so scared. He pulls me closer to his body, and the huge iron rod of his cock presses against my stomach. I try not to think of how deep he would be if he thrust that thing inside me.

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I can't quite let go. I can't quite give myself to the beast of a man. I want to pull his shirt from him, to see his muscled body, his perfect abs, but I know those twin tattoos will stare back at me.

He breaks off the kiss, gasping. "Not like this. Not like this. Go, enjoy the grounds, but go!" He barks out the words, but as he says them, his hand grips tighter around my wrist, and he pulls me closer to his body. He licks his lips, his huge tongue red against the pale marble of his flesh, and I want that tongue all over my body, running up and down my being.

He breathes in, his nostrils flaring, and I know he tastes my lust. My right hand shakes as I reach forward to feel his manhood, while my left hand pulls away, unable to break free.

With every effort in his body, the vein on his neck twitching, he lets go, pushing me to the side.

"Go, Athena," he snarls, his voice animalistic, on the knife's edge of losing control.

I run. My bare feet slap against the ground, because if I'm here a second longer, he's going to snap.

He'd never forgive himself.

He doesn't want it to be like this. He doesn't want me to give myself to him in return for something, I know.

He wants me fully willing, begging for his touch, crawling to him with a smile on my face.

I rush into my room. A plain pair of pants and a loose brown tunic, the clothes the two servants wear, are neatly folded on my bed. I slam the door shut behind me, hyperventilating at how close it came.

Oh Gods.

I could be on all fours in the library right now, one of the huge beasts taking me from behind, pressing through my innocence with his alien strength. My body is on fire, fever in my veins, wanting to run back to them, to give myself to them, when I remember that awful brand on their chests, and gulp.

I pull the clothes on in a rush. They hang from my body, a little less than they would have yesterday, now that I have a few meals in my belly.

Heavy footsteps leave the library.

They stop at my door.

I freeze. I can't even breathe.

All that separates me from the two alien warriors is a wooden door they could kick open...

And their honor, I still am not sure I believe in.

Do I want them to hold back?

Or do I want them to break down the door and take me?

Damian

Tarak grabs my arm in a strong grip. Any other man and I would have taken off his hand for the affront, drawing and activating my Orb-Blade in a swift, practiced motion.

He shakes his head as I reach to open the door. “Strength,” he telepaths, and I growl, turning roughly and stomping away.

He’s got back a shred of his old self. I’ve noticed it. Our Mate centers him. Restores what used to be him...

And he’s the one who is coming up with the ideas. I need to prove myself once more.

I am a leader, and I will lead.

I wanted her, more than life itself—but she’s so thin, so helpless, and most of all, she’s still scared. Part of her doesn’t want to give in...

Yet.

I will learn my Mate. I ache to fill out her frame, restore the curvy femininity of her being, fill her with my seed and watch her breasts swell up, full of milk for my son. He will be a warrior. He will have my strength, and if the Gods shine on us, her goodness.

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The pregnancy will take a month longer than a human birth, her body changing and morphing, as the power of the Bond prepares her for a huge Aurelian son.

It takes every ounce of my strength to not ravage her. Not to kick down her door and take her, Bonding her to me for eternity. The Priests would say these base urges are the most natural in the world, that it is a holy thing to claim your Mate. That because I saved her life, I can use her in any way I wish.

I don't want her like that. I need her to give herself to me. Fully.

Tarak's feet stomp as he runs down the lower staircase to the gym, where I know he will pound the heavy bag until his muscles ache.

Physical exhaustion won't be enough to quench my need for Athena. I stop a floor down and walk down the hallway as if my body is beyond my control, stopping before the set of black doors. I kick off my boots. They seem unsuited for this place. I press open the doors roughly and they open silently. I step inside the room I have never been in before, the room I knew was here but never explored.

The doors close silently behind me.

The floor is cool beneath my feet, not wet, yet slick and smooth, and ripples come out from where my feet touch the ground as if I am walking on water. There is no light above, yet the walls glow, casting a strange, ethereal light over the room.

The pleasure room is linked to my mind. With a thought, I command vines to whip out from the walls, curling, black ropes that form small loops at the ends.

Loops the perfect size for Athena's wrists.

I imagine the vines tightening around her wrists, two more grabbing her ankles, bringing her up into the air, level with my mouth, her legs forced open. I imagine her slick innocence presented to me.

I can almost taste her lust on my tongue. I drool, saliva dripping down my chin as I picture her there, without a shred of fear or terror in her scent, her nervousness overwhelmed by her intense, natural desire to submit to me.

What does she taste like?

I've fought off my lust so many times before. Empty Matings took a toll on my late battle-brother Raython, as if each time he slept with a woman who was not his Mate, he lost a piece of his soul. Many women begged for me. Some after I saved their lives, others simply casting glances as I strode through streets on alien planets. The Mating Rage boiled in my balls, urging me to take what was offered, but I knew, deep down, only my Mate could truly sate me.

I'm stroking my cock before I realize what I'm doing, running my hand up and down my shaft, wetted by my pre-cum. I imagine her in front of me, the vines pulling her to my lips, so that I could worship at her wetness, tasting her pure need for me.

Pre-cum drips from my cock like a faucet. It is designed for the size difference between Aurelian and human. It will mix with her desire and let me stretch her open, let me force every inch of my too-big rod into her.

I growl, deep and low, and turn, both hands pumping my cock.

My legs flex as I try not to run out of the pleasure room and into the grounds where I commanded her to be. I want to take her under the sun, our bodies melting together in

our animal need for each other.

She offered herself to me.

I remember her, nude and on her knees, and how hard it was not to drive my cock past her perfect, pouting lips and into her throat. There is a brutal need in me that I try to control.

She will give herself to me. Without condition. Without constraint. Athena will serve me, getting on her knees at the snap of my fingers, taking my cock deep down her throat before I own her little pussy. I groan at the thought of her on her knees, her throat bulging with my manhood, tears streaming down her cheeks as she struggles to take me. I dream of pressing her against the floor, pounding her into a pool of submission.

I dream of being linked to her, feeling her lust in my mind, knowing that she aches to be used by my brutality as much as I want to take her.

I stroke my cock in a frenzy, knowing if I don't find my release, and soon, I'll snap. The Mating Rage has never been so fierce.

The same urges are growing in my battle-brother as he smashes his fists against the heavy bag, deep below, trying to fight down his lust with exertion.

One day the two of us will take her together. I'll be deep in her pussy while he invades her tight little asshole, and we will press her between us as we fully own her. She will scream out our names in pleasure as she cums so hard her mind will melt.

I picture her, her legs spread open in the pleasure room, rivers of my pearly seed dripping from her stretched slit, and I can't hold back. I roar, my guttural yells echoing, and torrents of cum spew from my cock. I've never cum so much in my life,

my balls huge and swollen, urging me to fill her with my seed and impregnate her.

I draw in a rasping breath. My heart pounds, sweat dripping down my body, but there is no satisfaction. Instead of going flaccid, my cock stays half hard, ready to rear up again inside her.

I pull my sweatpants up with a grunt. The Mating Rage is not dormant, just muted, waiting to roar into existence and force me to take her.

When we are Bonded, it will overwhelm me. The Bond draws up every urge in you, magnifying your deepest desires. I want to take her. I want to own her.

I want to seed her.

I storm out of the room, letting it clean itself, and rush down to the gym to work out my rage. I force myself to stare straight forward as I run down the stairs, not daring to look out the windows into the grounds.

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I will not be sated until I claim my Mate.

Fully.

13

Athena

Birds scatter from the terrifying alien roar from inside the manor.

My heart pounds, and I shudder, because despite my inexperience with men, I know exactly what prompted that roar.

My cheeks flush red as I stand in the grounds of the manor, trying not to imagine Damian—somehow, from the timber of the roar, I know it was him—stroking his cock while he pictures me and him writhing together in agonizing pleasure.

The sun is high above, glowing red. The hot burning ball casts its glow upon my skin. I craved the sun every day I was trapped in Bladdard's manor. I was touched by it once when I was marched to the auction house, and once again when I was marched down the street to his palace, but that sun could barely penetrate the thick pollution of the Toad Planet.

This sun kisses me, caressing my body with energy and warmth, and I exult in it. The grounds on this side of the manor are fertile, with thick green grass that goes to my shin. In front of me are the main gates, and the huge alien warship, the black Reaver that Damian and Tarak fly into battles. It's as scarred as them, the black matted

exterior of the ship cut and worn from las-cannons. It has a predatory look to it, with two Orb-Beam batteries aiming out near the cockpit.

One of those Orb-Beams goes unmanned in battle. What would the two of them be like if their triad was whole? Would they be so brutal, still?

On the other side of the manor is the long lap pool. This side has new things growing. There is a row of young trees, held up by stakes, and raised garden beds. The garden beds are ringed with grey stone, a welcome change from the dull black walls that ring us and the dark construction of the imposing manor. In the three beds is tilled dirt and sprouts shooting up, pulling themselves towards the sun.

Even in the darkness of this planet, there is life.

Or perhaps the darkness is what allows the life to grow.

I shake off that strange thought, not wanting to engage in it. I grew up viewing the Aurelian Empire as noble and honorable, but it's the dark forces of the Fanatics that saved my life.

"Be careful. You're so pale," comes the calm voice from behind me. I start, turning, and see Matil. I regret my first thought that she has a plain face. I think of it now as an honest face, with its own beauty. She's wearing the same clothing as me, the plain but well-made brown slacks with a loose-fitting tunic, and she has a satchel slung over her shoulders.

I look down, a little embarrassed at how skittish I am.

"The sun's small on Obsidious, but it's a hot young sun, and it can burn you. I had to take a leave of a day when I first arrived and underestimated it. Those two men of yours were kind enough to let Laura fetch me a salve from the market, and despite it,

I was peeling for days.” She speaks in a calm, relaxed voice, as if talking to a scared horse.

Men of mine. Why do I like the sound of that?

She’s a little taller than me, and though she is lean, she’s healthy. I guess that I must be wearing her clothes, though they drape over my body. “Thanks for the advice,” I say, meaning it, but still unable to pull myself out of the glow of the sun yet. It feels so good, kissing my skin.

I shudder, trying not to imagine those two handsome beasts kissing me, their lips trailing over my body. Would they be gentle? Could they?

And what did Damian imagine, at the moment of his release?

What sent that brute beast over the edge?

I swallow. “Matil, how did you find yourself on this planet...Obsidious? Were you taken?”

She shakes her head, sitting down on a small wooden bench in the shade under the tall walls. “I didn’t have much of a choice, but I came here on my own will. I lived on a space station. Wild Space.”

“Me too.”

She nods. “I don’t know how much you’ve heard. These last months have been awful. Scorp. Masses of them. So many no one believed the rumors, until it was too late. I was lucky, I suppose. I was serving at a bar and an independent miner, a man I’d never seen shook before, he was drinking himself to oblivion. I gave him a few free drinks for his story. He told me what he saw, deep out there on a mining run...no

one believed him.”

“What was it?”

“Scorp. We were in a bad place, and there would be an attack every month or two, an Org-Ship drawn to a mining camp or trying to attach itself to the station to bore through. The miner told me there was a storm coming. Not just one or two of those fleshy egg sacks that fly through space...thousands of 'em, so thick he couldn't see the stars. I begged him to take me with him. My coworkers told me it was a scam, to get me to give him my life savings for a ride out. I'd been saving up for years to start a business, but... well that all seems so far away now. He took some convincing. He was just there to fill his holds, get drunk, and go, but I managed to get on board. It was the only trip out. It cost me everything. I took it.”

I shudder. I imagine those giant, reptilian creatures in their Org-Ships latching to the station like barnacles, and I don't need to ask what happened to the station. She and that miner would be the only survivors. I walk deeper into the garden, letting the green grass tickle my bare feet, and walk to one of the young trees. It's barely taller than me. I imagine it growing thicker, taller, until it towers over the walls around us.

“The miner. He sold you to Fanatics? I...if you don't mind me asking. If I'm being too nosy, let me know.”

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“It’s good to have another person to talk to. Laura’s a gem, but it’s nice having a fresh face around here. I’d watch yourself with that word—they don’t like it.”

“What do they call themselves?”

She shrugs. “Followers... or lately, wolves. No, the miner didn’t sell me. He told me he was beelining for the Human Federated territories, but he’d heard rumors of somewhere else. Obsidious. He could drop me off at a station where I could get another flight here, and he was... kind enough to give me enough credits to get to safety.”

I don’t ask what she had to do for those credits. I don’t want to know.

“Why here? Why didn’t you go to the humans?”

She sighs. “I don’t trust humans to protect me. Not with what’s coming. I trust Aurelians, but I was too far from their territories. I made my peace with this. These Followers...they have a strange code of honor. They let human men and women come here to work in exchange for protection, if you toil hard. And we’re off limits.”

“Why?”

She shakes her head. “Because they did not save our lives.” Matil leans back in the bench, as if she doesn’t fully understand it either. All my life I’d been told that Fanatics keep humans as helpless servants.

A strange code of honor indeed.

“What business were you going to start?”

She snorts. “I wanted to grow crops inside. UV lights. But this garden? It’s better than anything I could have imagined,” she says, waving to the raised beds. “Say. What’s your favorite color, Nelly?”

I blink in confusion for a second, then remember I lied about my name. “I’m sorry. My real name’s Athena, I just...”

“That’s a beautiful name. What’s your favorite color, Athena?”

Colors. What a luxury. “Green,” I say, looking at the lush grass that surrounds me.

“That will go with your hair and eyes. You’re going to look so beautiful,” she says, an honest smile growing on her lips.

“What do you mean?”

“Tarak’s having me go to the market, to exchange a talon for pleasure dresses.”

My mouth opens, then shuts soundlessly. I look down, embarrassed. Pleasure dresses. She knows I’m going to be wearing one of the classic dresses of the Aurelian harems.

When the Toad Lord humiliated me, I could become distant in my mind, forcing my body to act while I was somewhere else. I can’t find that distance anymore...but now, it’s not a deep humiliation. Since being near the Aurelians, every moment I live feels so much more real, and instead of being shameful, it’s titillating imagining wearing one of those beautiful, sensual dresses.

“Come on, out of the sun. If you burn, they’ll...come, sit down.”

I sit down next to her, in the shade. “Is it true? About the dresses?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never worn one. But I’ve seen women, owned by triads, wearing them. They’re so sheer you can see everything. Want me to try to get you some other clothes, too?”

I lift my head up high. “No. I made an agreement. I’ll honor it. If that’s what they want to put me in, that’s what I’ll wear...though I prefer simpler things, like these,” I say, running my hands over my well-made brown pants.

It’s so much better than being in the clothes Bladdard put us in. He alternated our garb, sometimes putting us in fine silks, other times in burlap sacks so rough you’d itch like crazy as you served him. It amused him, to not let our skin get used to the rough garments, and it amused him to put some of us in silks while others suffered so we would resent each other.

“Perhaps something black as well, my lady?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Please, just Athena. I was serving a bloody Toad just yesterday, I don’t feel like much of a lady. You make me sound noble.”

“You are. More than noble. Your broken triad is famed on Obsidious. Any woman who is their Mate...she would be a queen.”

I shiver, needing to change the subject. “Black does seem to be the favorite color of every damn Aurelian on this planet anyways. Alright. Something black as well. Tell me, Matil...do you know what pleasure dresses are made of?”

“They come from a tree far away. I never learned the name, though I wish I could grow them here. Some trees have fruits, so that birds may eat them, and pass them far away to grow. These trees have a different strategy. Their long, willowy branches

descend towards animals, and their cotton sap brushes the limbs of whatever animal is near in a pleasing, addictive manner. The animals leave when they get hungry, but they always come back, to rub themselves against the trunks. When it's made into a dress... well you've heard the rumors, I'm sure. I've never had the honor to wear one."

The honor.

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She thinks of things much differently than me.

“I’ve heard the rumors.” It’s strange to have such an open conversation about such a sensitive topic with her, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world to discuss a dress designed to keep harem women in a state of constant, teased lust, always ready for their insatiable triads. It’s said it feels like a thousand feathers, a little tongue licking your body up and down.

I gulp. It makes me nervous, but even having a conversation is a blessing. I get a surge of anxiety, looking left and right, a practiced motion from when a wrong word at the wrong time could lead to a slap from the wet hand of a Toad.

“You’re not scared to go into the city alone?” I realize I’ve been speaking in a hushed tone, and I let the words come out a little louder. Matil smiles, and I realize she noticed.

“No. Most know I serve Tarak and Damian. They are branded and tattooed with double honors. That’s practically a lordship on this planet. No one would dare lay a finger on me,” she says, looking up, proud to serve the warriors. She opens her satchel. From it, she takes out an iron circle.

She unclasps it, puts it around her neck, and tightens it, as proud as if she was wearing a necklace of precious diamonds. She points to it. “This means I’m off limits. That I work for a triad already, for anyone who hasn’t heard the names of Tarak and Damian.” There’s no shame in her tone.

I look away, not sure how I feel about it. It makes me uncomfortable that she’s

wearing the collar...

But I realize it's not because I view it as something shameful.

Some crazy, strange part of me is...

Jealous? That some other woman would wear a collar proclaiming them as the duo's property? No. It can't be.

"You said triad. Did you ever meet the third? Raython?"

Her lips purse tight. "I never knew his name. Raython. If he is half the man as the other two, he would have been a strong warrior. The loss of the third affected them. I've never seen Aurelians so tormented. They volunteered for every assignment, and I don't know if it was to earn the second tattoo... They barely stay here for more than a day or two before going back to war..." She trails off. "I shouldn't speak of my masters this way. It's not my place."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to put you in an awkward spot," I say, finding it strange how easily the wordmasters rolls off her tongue, the way she can wear a collar, without a hint of shame. It's so different from the Toad Lord's servants. He loved to humiliate them.

"Green and black dresses it is. Stay in the shade, Athena," she says, giving me a warm smile and walking away, casting loving glances to her gardens before she goes back into the mansion through the wide open side doors.

I stay in the thin strip of shade under the walls, sitting on the bench, looking out at what she has grown. She's right. This garden beats anything you could build under fake lights in a space station.

I bite my lip, imagining an iron collar around my neck.

Could I do it, without feeling shame? It doesn't bother her, and she seems proud to wear it, proud of her status working for a twice-honored triad. Those honors make my skin crawl. When I first saw them on the chests of my saviors, my dreams of being saved by an honorable triad of Empire Aurelians were dashed.

I run my hands over the wooden bench. It's brown, so I wonder if she or Laura requested it. The Aurelians seem to only like things that match the darkness of their planet. Plus, it's regular sized, the first piece of furniture that doesn't make me feel miniscule. My feet touch the ground.

They barely stay here for more than a day or two before going back to war.

Those words chill me. I wish it didn't mean what I know it does, but the two brutal warriors work for the Priests and the War-God, opposed to the noble Empire I yearned for.

How many proud warriors have the two of them murdered?

How many protectors have they slain?

I can't stay in the shadows. I jump to my feet, my heart racing, and stand under the sun, letting it warm me.

14

Tarak

I watch her from the hallway on the top floor, with a window that looks out over the garden. She runs her hand over a growing tree, and a smile comes to my face. I can't

remember if I've smiled since my battle-brother was taken from me.

We gave her this. We gave her the soft green grass under her feet, the sun on her skin. She was trapped. Abused. And we went through reality and risked everything to give her this.

Peace. Safety. Security. Those thin, young trees will grow tall and proud, just as my seed will grow in her belly and a great warrior will be born, no, a dozen of them, strong sons who I pray will have even a tenth of her goodness.

The wooden front doors whoosh open, and I turn from the window to walk down the flights of stairs until I get to the entrance hallways. Matil has a full satchel. The iron collar around her neck gave her free rein to go to the market and back, but it looks dull and out of place on her.

Instead, I imagine Athena, with the golden collar of a pregnant Mate. How proud I would be to walk with her leashed to my wrist, her belly swelling up, every man in the city jealous of what I have.

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“I got everything you asked for, my lords. It was good to stretch my legs. A beautiful day,” she says, smiling. “And I hope you don’t mind—I picked up some seeds, for winter vegetables.”

Damian walks down the stairs, freshly showered, his grey T-shirt sticking to his body. He must have thrown it on, still damp, when he heard our servant returning. “The dresses? You got them without problem?”

“Of course.” She hands him the satchel, and he opens it roughly, pulling out a long green dress. He treats it like it’s made of tissue paper, holding it up and watching the light flow through it.

The both of us are imagining Athena in it, her body on display.

I cock my head. There’s laughter from the kitchen. Damian turns, but I grab his wrist. “She’s happy. Give her a moment.”

He nods but grits his teeth. Neither of us like the constant tension and stress she has when she is with us. We want to pierce through it, but for now, we wait.

Damian looks down, his eyes narrowing. “What’s this?” He pulls a glass jar from the satchel.

“A salve. Athena has pale skin, but she couldn’t resist the sun. I’m worried she burned after being cooped up for so long. Oh. It’s honey based.”

“Honey? Why do you mention this?”

“Oh, no reason,” she says, and I don’t understand the sly look in her eyes for a moment...then I do. I can’t help but imagine working the salve into her pinkish skin, healing her...then running my tongue up and down her perfect body.

“Good job, Matil. Next time you go to the market, buy something for yourself.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re dismissed,” he orders, and the two of us stand in the entrance hall, listening to the musical laughter of Athena and Matil. The smell of warm, fresh baked bread wafts through the house, and Damian growls.

We march together into the kitchen, where Athena is sitting on a barstool at the black marble counter, looking into the huge open kitchen. A tall iron pot is on the stove, flames darting upwards from the burners. The manor is powered by a single small Orb, just enough to keep everything in working order without being able to power weapons or shields. I took a long look at the control panels and output when we first moved in. I thought it was because we were safe on Obsidious, and there was no need to waste Orbs on personal defense when the skies are protected by thousands of Reavers and Orb-Disruptors that would stop any Aurelian suicidal enough to try and shift from getting within a system of us.

Now I wonder if the Priests don’t want even their trusted men, the ones who gained at least one honor, to be safe against them.

The kitchen is on the side of the mansion next to her gardens, and the big open windows show the lush green grass and the imposing walls protecting us. I liked the open windows with wooden shutters. Now I imagine a sniper on the wall, his rifle inwards, taking us out from the hundreds of unprotected angles.

Athena’s bare feet dangle off the floor as she chews, slowly, on a piece of bread with

butter.

“How is your stomach?” I bark out, a little too brusque. It’s hard to soften my tongue when it’s my Mate’s health. Her skin has a reddish glow to it, especially the back of her neck.

“Fine, fine.” She gulps when she sees the satchel in Damian’s hands, her cheeks turning pinkish as she looks away. “Shall I go change?” Her voice is barely a whisper.

I walk behind her as she sits on the stool and run my hand gently down her neck. She winces. “You’re burnt.”

“It’s not Matil’s fault. She warned me.”

I breathe in, smelling her clean hair, and I can’t resist. I kiss her lightly on the top of her head, and she doesn’t pull back. Her scent is nervous, but I can taste the tendrils of arousal. “Go change. We’ll meet you upstairs.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, and my cock throbs. She stands and takes the satchel from Damian. Both of our eyes are locked on her body as she walks up the main stairs, and I can’t stop myself from following, as if my body is controlled by her.

15

Athena

Frissons of anticipation run up and down my spine. I dart into the main bedroom, breathing quickly, and strip off the plain brown clothes.

Then I open the satchel and pull out a green dress. It’s so smooth under my fingers,

tickling my fingertips, and I sit on the bed, transfixed by the gorgeous dress. It's a light green, like new buds in spring. I put it over my lap and run my fingers up and down it, marveling at how it feels against my skin.

I gulp, remembering how Damian had me just like this, over his lap, touching my body as if it was a wonder.

I stand and pull the dress on. It is sleeveless, going just above my knees, and it seems to ripple and hug my body with each tiny movement I make. I try to stand perfectly still, but it shimmers, like a thousand lips kissing me up and down my body.

It's sheer. I can see my body displayed in the mirror. It gently tickles my nipples, which harden under the dress. I let out a moan as I imagine the two huge warriors seeing me like this. I take a step back, and it seems to cling against my near naked pussy, gently stroking me between my legs, when there's a hard knock at the door.

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“Athena.” Damian’s voice is a rasp. He is a man not used to asking permission to enter.

“Come in,” I say, and the door opens.

The two big men enter. Damian’s shirt is clinging to his muscles. He’s still damp from a shower. He’s got black stubble on his jaw, and his eyes are wild, darting from me to my reflection as he first lets his gaze stroll up and down my back, then stares at me from the front. Tarak gasps, drawing in a huge breath, his cock surging up against his pants.

Damian’s holding the salve. “You’re burnt,” he says, walking into the room and opening the jar. He places it on his hands and gently strokes the back of my neck. The touch of his hands ripples up and down my body, and I bite my lip, holding back a moan as heat floods between my legs.

Aurelians can smell a woman’s lust. I can’t hide my need from him, and being so exposed next to the alpha is doing something to me.

I look at myself in the mirror. One huge alien warrior, towering above me, is putting the salve on the back of my neck, while the other wets his hands and gently strokes from the back of my hands up my bare arms.

“Don’t lie to me. Just tell me the truth. Are you good?” I bare myself to them, knowing they could pretend, trusting them to tell me what I need to here.

I want to be able to give myself to them. I want to let go.

“Good and evil don’t matter anymore. I will keep you safe, and others, too. Is that enough?” Damian’s voice is a dark rasp. He nuzzles his lips against my hair, kissing down to my ear, nibbling at it. I can feel his hot breath in my ear as Tarak’s hands slide up my arm.

“Yes,” I whisper, and Damian’s hands move down from my neck, sliding to the front of me, down my plunging neckline as Tarak steps back, pulling off his shirt. I gulp as I see all those rippling muscles, trying to ignore the brand on his chest, and his pants come off next. I have to look away as I see the wicked downward curve of his cock, not wanting to think about what it’s going to do to me. Tarak steps back, sitting on the bed, his cock bobbing with each surge of his heart as Damian caresses my body. His fingers ignite me as they slide against the fabric of the tingling pleasure dress and he finds my nipples.

I can’t resist. The dress and his hands are driving me wild. I press back, letting my body rub against him as he teases my nipples, gently stroking them. Lightning pleasure shoots through my body as he growls in my ear. He’s twice my size, his hands huge against me, and I know he could break me in half.

His cock surges up, an iron rod pressing against my back. “I’ve never been with a man before,” I whisper, my voice pleading.

“I know.”

“Please, be gentle. I’m scared,” I say, my eyes wide, but another moan rips from my body as his thumbs circle my breasts, not touching my nipples, teasing me. He pinches them ever so gently, rolling them between his thumb and index finger, and I grind my ass against his huge legs.

“I will be as gentle as I can, my Mate,” he growls, his nostrils flaring as he tastes my lust. His hands move down my stomach and grab my hips, and I shriek as he lifts me,

putting me down on the bed. Tarak is sitting with his back propped up by the backboard, his legs spread, and I'm placed down against his body. Tarak grips my waist, pulling me back against him, and his cock spurts pre-cum against my back. My dress clings to me, rippling and moving, fingers all over my body. It's so sheer I am displayed and I am more vulnerable than if I was naked.

It isn't the thousand little strands of the pleasure dress I want.

It's the two alien warriors I crave.

Damian stands at the edge of the bed, staring down at me, his slate-grey eyes wide and crazed, and a tremor of fear goes through my body. I'm shaking, when Tarak wraps his huge biceps around me, calming me, hugging me against his body. He kisses my ear, his breath hot. "Everything will be okay. I promise," he whispers into my ear, and my body untenses...

Until Damian pulls down his sweatpants in a single pull.

His huge cock rears upwards. It's curved wickedly, and it's so big. It slaps down against my stomach and I whimper, seeing how it goes near to my belly button, and I don't know how it's possible he's going to fit. "It's too much," I moan, pressing away from him, but I run into the huge, beefy slabs of muscle of his battle-brother.

He pulls his shirt off, and the light of the afternoon sun flows through the window, reflecting off his pure marble skin. I can see every brutal scar, ever cut of a blade where an enemy tried to strike him down.

Each one represents a body he put in the ground. He's a beast, a monster of a man, and I want him. I want him so primally, so desperately, my rational brain is shutting off in my desperate lust for the brute.

“The Bond will allow you,” he snarls, his voice warping, more animalistic as the Mating Rage takes over. His cock spurts pearly, slick pre-cum that coats my abdomen, and he presses his dick down with one hand, smearing the pearly alien lubricant over the sensitive folds of my sex. I moan again, and this time, it’s not out of fear.

I stare at the brand, the twin tattoos, and I don’t see evil anymore.

I see power.

Power that needs to protect me.

Damian presses his dick against my slick slit, while Tarak runs his hands up and down my thighs, so big behind me. His dick is an iron rod against my back, and he snarls in lust. Tarak licks the back of my ear, his huge tongue sliding down my neck.

“You will be joined to us, my Mate,” whispers Damian with religious fervor, then growls, animalistic, pressing his cock forward.

A surge of need runs through me, feverish in my veins, and I can only imagine how intense it would be when I have the Bond enhancing my desires. The savage towers over me, pressing his cock against my resistance, grunting as he tries to enter me.

His cock spurts, dripping like a hose, covering my pussy in his pearly pre-cum that mixes with my own arousal. I’m soaking wet and Tarak grabs my thighs, his huge hands so big they can wrap around my entire leg, and spreads my legs open for the alpha. I test his grip, trying to close my legs, but it’s impossible. The two of them are so much stronger than me.

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“Please, please be gentle,” I beg, as he presses forward with a growl. I’m propped up against Tarak, and I’m so shy I want to shut my eyes, but I can’t help but stare at that thick marble rod, too thick to possibly fit. My eyes go wide open and I cannot believe what I am seeing, my slit spreading open to take him, and Tarak slides his hands up my body, grabbing my breasts and squeezing as Damian enters me. He rolls my too-sensitive nipples between his fingers, and lust overwhelms me.

“Oh...oh Damian,” I gasp, as he presses in deeper, hitting something.

He’s so rock hard he splits me open, ripping something inside me, and I moan at the sudden pain as he takes my innocence as his prize.

He growls, angry at my pain, his arms flexing. His biceps bulge as he resists the animalistic urge to rut me with every inch of his manhood. I know the desires of Aurelians. He wants more than anything to thrust the entire length of his dick into me, but he’s keeping control...

Barely.

I can’t help it. My legs spread even wider, urging him deeper, even with the pain. I’m overwhelmed by the primal urge to give myself to the alpha, and it’s all me. I can’t even imagine what’s going to happen to me when the Bond is urging me onto deeper, more powerful urges.

I let him have me. He stares down at my soaking wet slit, watching as he presses himself deeper and deeper into me.

I feel like I'm being split in half. Tears wet my eyes as I'm stretched painfully open, but under the pain is this throbbing, insistent pleasure, so dark it's like I'm a thousand feet underwater. Each beat of his cock makes his too-hard cock swell bigger inside of me.

The curve of his cock makes him grind against something inside of me. "Oh," I whisper, and it's not just his cock sliding deeper and deeper into me that I feel. There's this dark, blue-black pleasure growing in the bottom of my being, and even the pain of being taken gets a strange edge of addictive pleasure. It's like scratching an itch, your body not knowing if it feels good or bad, but being unable to stop. It drives me wild, and I press my body against him, urging him deeper and deeper inside of me, urging him to make me his. My own need for him to go wild, to give in to his animal nature and claim me is enhanced, building and building, this need to submit totally to the wild beast of a man.

I feel his mind.

His aura, his being, just as I felt him when I saw the vision in the Toad Lord's manor a lifetime ago.

He's changed.

He was a proud, noble leader, a man willing to sacrifice himself for good.

Now he has an iron rage to him, iron still in the fire, red hot and malleable. He's a powerful, brutal weapon, violence incarnate, a sword...and a shield.

I know, in this moment, he would not just kill for me.

He would die for me. In a heartbeat. I was always drawn to the protective power of the warrior species.

Now I'm feeling it firsthand, growing in my mind, so much more powerful than I could ever have imagined.

Damian owns me.

He needs to protect me. His lust is so overwhelming it makes me scream as it overpowers me.

I stare up at him as he slides deeper and deeper inside of me, touching places I didn't think existed, and I look into his icy grey eyes.

They darken. The light grey of the Aurelian species intensifies, color merging up from deep within him, forming purple orbs near black, yet beautiful, that glow like amethysts in a cave lit by a single candle.

I am that candle, I know it now, I am the fire that keeps him from pure darkness. I run my hands over his body, the ridges of his abs, as he slides completely inside of me, until his huge balls are resting against my ass. I'm spread open completely for him, opening myself to the alpha.

I can feel full those huge balls of his, bigger than grapefruits, as they press against my body, and for the first time, I feel the Bondthrum.

It's a chord rushing through my body, a chord of need. Tarak pinches my nipples hard enough there's a flash of delicious, dark pain, and I whimper, half in lust, half in shame, as I press my hips up, grinding myself against Damian.

"Do not be ashamed, my Mate," growls Tarak in my ear, his voice deep and low. "You belong to us now. Give in. Completely." His voice is hypnotic, and I let myself fall into their power.

Damian is shuddering. His huge, muscled body is trembling as he lets me adjust to his throbbing cock deep inside me. I can feel in his aura he's fighting back. The Mating Rage is overpowering him, but he's being as gentle as he can be.

He promised me.

But if I can feel his aura...

Then he can feel mine.

And he already knows what I need.

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“I’m yours, Damian. Take me,” I gasp. I’ve never said words like this before, but they’re the truest words I’ve ever spoken.

The Bond rewards me with a surge of deep pleasure as Damian gives himself to the Mating Rage. He pulls his cock almost out of me, only the thick head keeping me open, then slams every inch of his dick into me. I scream out in pleasure, and Tarak wraps his arms around me, his huge biceps like bowling balls as he pulls me tight against him. I can’t move an inch. Damian grabs my thighs, spreading me open as he pounds me in hard, violent thrusts.

He's relentless. The curve of his cock keeps hitting this spot inside me, pressure building and building, a pressure I’ve never felt before. “Give in,” snarls Tarak in my ear, and I let go.

It’s so much different than the few times I played with myself, quickly rubbing my clit. It’s deeper. More insistent. The first true orgasm of my life races through my body.

I scream, feeling my pussy contracting around his huge manhood, and Damian stops pulling all the way out. He presses his dick fully into me, fucking me with shallow, hard thrusts as if he can’t bear to leave me for a moment. My pussy spasms in my orgasm, as if I am milking his dick, and he can’t hold back.

His cock seems to harden and grow even more, and I’m stretched to the limit as it pulses. Damian roars, so loud I see birds flying up through the window in fear.

His cum spurts into me, jet after jet of frothing, hot seed deposited deep into me,

painting my womb.

Damian pulls back, gasping, and steps back. With his body out of the way, I can see myself in the tall mirror.

I look so tiny, one huge alien warrior behind me, his massive arms around my body, and the other standing in front of me, his cock still semi-hard. My pussy clenches tight, my body desperate to keep his seed inside. For a second, the lips of my pussy squeeze so tight it's trapped, then it comes out in a pearly, milky stream, tinted with the blood of my innocence.

Damian takes another step back. He blinks, not quite comprehending what just happened. Aurelians spend their lives searching for their Mate, and the weight of the moment hit him in a way he didn't expect.

His aura is no longer just protective and possessive...

It's worshipful.

This is what I craved all my life. To feel this worship from the alien species, not to be used like a harem toy, but to be cherished. Now that I have it, I can barely comprehend. There is another mind inside of my head. I never realized how lonely it is to be with only your own emotions and thoughts, without true awareness of anyone else.

Consciousness is like an island. I could speak with other people, but I could never truly know them, not even my best friends. I know this alien warrior now.

Tarak snarls. Before I can process the moment, he lifts me like I am weightless, flipping me so I am on all fours, facing the mirror. My breasts hang down, and he pulls the pleasure dress off me, not wanting even the slightest thing to be between us.

He presses his dick against my freshly stretched pussy. Cum is still dripping down my legs when he positions the thick head of his dick against my slit.

His cock is curved downwards, as if he was designed to take me like this. He grips my hips, hard, his huge fingers pressing into my flesh. It's going to leave a mark, a mark that will fade, but his aura will never disappear from my mind. When he mates me, he will link me to him for eternity, just as I am linked to his battle-brother.

His eyes roll back as he presses his dick forward. My arms shake, barely keeping me upright, and I look at myself in the mirror, so tiny in front of the brute beast as he forces his dick into me.

My arms are too weak, and I fall forward, my head against the mattress as I arch my ass up to him, presenting myself to the alien as he takes me. "Oh Tarak, Tarak," I whisper, over and over, my voice weak, as he stretches me open.

"Athena," he growls, and his aura explodes in my mind.

He's good, oh Gods, he's good. He has the same molten iron rage burning through him, but deep down, he's good. His aura is light and clever, but the Mating Rage takes over. He can't hold back. He grips my hips hard, fucking me with hard, deep thrusts, my body shaking with each drive.

Tarak's eyes glow. They turn platinum and blue, metallic against his stone skin, and he's even more beautiful as he ravages me. He lets go of my hips, running his hands over my body, his huge hands sliding under my body and finding my nipples, teasing and pinching them.

My legs tremble and give in, and I fall flat on the bed as he wraps his muscled arms around me, pulls me against his chest, and takes me.

I gasp and moan as I am pounded into the bed, screaming in ecstasy as my second orgasm washes over me. Tarak roars, beastly, and seeds me. The Bond rewards me. I fall, fall, deeper and deeper into bliss, losing sight of the room around me as I melt under the protective strength of the man who is linked to me for eternity.

I don't know how long we lie there together, our bodies slick with sweat, before his cock slowly softens. He keeps it in me, plugging me full of his seed. The Bond rests in my mind, but I can feel it there, waiting to be ignited again.

The Bond has one purpose. To enhance all desires that will bring me closer to them, to sire their sons.

Tarak shifts, lying on his side and pulling me against his chest. Damian is standing in the same spot, his aura burning up as he stares at me with pride.

He grins. His white teeth gleam as he witnesses me. "Athena. Gods, you're better than I could have ever imagined."

I smile, weakly.

His deep purple eyes never leave me. "And now we are holy."

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“Holy?” I blurt out the word, confused.

“Yes. You are our Bonded Mate. All who see our eyes will know that you are linked to us. That you will bear us many sons.”

I swallow hard. I can’t imagine raising children on this planet. Though the Bond is the only way the Aurelian species can procreate, I know some things about them—things I’m not sure are true. But if it’s still active in my mind, not lying dormant, I can know I am not yet pregnant.

“The Fanatics and Priests will now know we are holy.” He repeats the word, and holy starts to sound like a curse. It hurts me, a punch to my gut.

Is that what he was thinking of when he took my virginity? When he had moments to think between the waves of lust, did he imagine gaining respect and status with his cruel peers?

It’s so practical, so unholy and evil. I pull myself from Tarak, pushing myself onto my shaking legs, and stand in front of the mirror.

I can see the prints of their hands on my pale skin. Their seed runs down my leg, tinged with the pink of my virginity, my innocence claimed. I’m linked to these men, and there’s no taking it back. I can feel the strength of their auras, but that white-hot rage is always there, that rage that wasn’t present when I first felt their beings in my vision.

What monsters have I Bonded myself to?

Damian opens the drawer next to the bedside table. He takes out an iron collar and throws it aside, reaching in again.

He pulls out a gleaming collar of silver. It's not dull iron, like the one Matil wore to the market. He unclasps it and stands behind me. The alien beast towers over me and slowly brings it to my neck.

He closes it around my neck. It snaps shut, forming a seamless circle around me. I stare at the symbol of my ownership.

It's cold. "Silver, for a holy, Bonded Mate. Gold when you are with our firstborn son."

I shudder, looking at myself, naked and collared. The brands on his chest seem nightmarish again, the black tattoos filled in for unspeakable deeds.

I thought I could accept them. When I felt their protectiveness, their adoration for me, I knew I could. Now I'm not so sure.

How much of that adoration is for me?

And how much of it is just because I am their Mate? If another woman was the one who could be linked to them, would they feel all the same emotions? Am I nothing more than a signal of status, like the twin brands filled in with black ink?

They bred me so that I would become holy.

Now they have a Bonded Mate, the greatest honor...no, the second greatest honor, inferior only to one thing.

To get their Mate pregnant and have mighty sons.

Damian

She stands, collared, the most beautiful creature in the world. I stare at her, then my eyes dart to my reflection, looking at the new color of my eyes. They are her mark on me for eternity.

I turn and go to the drawer, opening it, and take out the long silver leash and the wristband. I clasp the band against my wrist, connect the leash, and walk to her.

She does not protest as I chain her to me. She bites her lip, nervous, but I can sense the tendrils of need. Part of her craves to submit to me, fully, and this symbol of her being owned turns her on.

And yet...

Some part of her is further away than when we were in the midst of passion.

“She’s distant. Why is she distant?” I telepath my battle-brother. Tarak’s aura is strangely blank, but as leader, I was always an expert at reading the emotions of my triad.

“This was much for her. Give her time,” he states, and I hope he’s right.

Athena slowly reaches upwards, touching the collar around her neck. “You will have me wear this? In public?”

I nod. “Yes. All will see you are mine. Do you like it?”

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I can sense she's troubled, but finally, she nods. "I...I didn't think I would." She turns. "I can feel who you are, Damian...but you're different."

I go cold. Different?

She endured hardships. She is not naïve, like those who have lives of indulgence, but even as my Mate, she goes too far.

She doesn't know what the last months did to us. "I grew up with Raython. I..."

She nods. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"Tomorrow we will go to the hospital to check on the five women we rescued because of you. You haven't changed at all, my Mate. I felt that goodness, that selflessness in you the first moment."

She smiles, but it's weak. "I'd like to rest, alone, please."

I reach down, unclasping the leash from her collar, but I can't force myself to undo the clasp around her neck. I like it. I like seeing her adorned with the mark of my ownership.

My cock surges up again, and she steps away. "Very well."

Tarak's already standing. He takes a step towards her, feels her distance, and walks out. I follow him.

I close the door behind us, then look into the platinum-blue eyes of my battle-brother. I can't help but grin. They suit him. "We must prove ourselves. She doesn't feel safe yet—but we'll show her that we can keep those five women safe from the Priests, and then she will trust us."

He nods, but his aura is uneasy. "Can we? We're surrounded by Fanatics, men with brands on their foreheads..."

"We're holy now. They would not dare go against us."

He nods. "Yes. But those five women...they have no such protection."

I growl under my breath as I stomp down the stairs.

My battle-brother has regained his sharp wit and strategic mind...

And I hate that he's right.

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Athena

I can't breathe. I'm being strangled. I gasp awake and grab the collar around my neck. The silver is cool and unmovable, but when I calm myself, I realize it's not obstructing my airways.

My mind races, but it's not empty. There are two presences in it, like little bubbles of thought slightly above the place that is me. And those two presences are getting concerned at my fear.

I detach myself from my fear. Like how I used to go to a faraway place when the

Toad Lord was humiliating me, imagining being on the grassy planet with the noble triad, my body acting without thought. If I'm going to have two presences in my mind, I need to protect my thoughts.

"Are you okay? Athena?" It's Tarak's voice in my mind. My jaw clenches as I control my tension, and I take deep, long breaths, pushing the fear away.

Because it's there. Always. This force in the back of my mind, this force seeping through every moment of my life. I'm on a planet surrounded by fanatical aliens, each one a brutal killer with an Orb-Weapon. I'm in the capital city of an army that declared war on the most powerful empire in the universe.

And I'm linked to two men for the rest of my life.

"Yes, just a..." I focus on Tarak's aura, the ball of emotion at the outskirts of my mind, and try to focus my thoughts towards him. "Yes, just...dammit!" It reminds me of when I was a kid trying to learn how to whistle. I swore I was putting my lips exactly like the others, but the only sound I could make was a gust of air followed by the laughter of my friends. It took me two weeks to get it right.

I don't have the luxury of that time now.

I focus on Tarak, feeling his tension, his concern, and make him bigger in my mind. "Yes. Just a nightmare," I manage, pressing my thoughts into his mind, and cooling my stress.

I will not let them feel my terror. I will not let them know how scared I am. If I do, they'd chain me up to keep me safe.

And I might need to slip away to get a Reaver.

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“Foolish thought, Athena,” I say to myself, as I get up and stretch. I don’t know the first thing about piloting. If I get off this planet, it’ll be with the help of those two warriors.

But do they want to leave?

Or do they want to be treated like royals, one of the only triads on the entire planet with a Bonded Mate?

I yawn, my jaw cracking, and roll my neck back and forth, the constant movement reassuring. The bedroom is laid out simply enough. A huge bed big enough to fit a football team, a nightstand and desk—black wood, of course, and stone floors. The walls are the same black granite, and they open on a big window which looks out to the city. There’s a door leading into the bathroom, with black marble countertops and an open shower.

It's luxury I never thought I'd live in, back when I was on the space station of my birth.

Then I was thrust into a Toad’s mansion and pulled into an alien world.

I haven’t had control of my life since I was staying up late, reading scanning reports and learning Aurelian. My mind got me top marks on those exams, and my mind got me a position on the mining ship that got sabotaged.

My mind’s got me into a hell of a lot of bad situations, and now I need to get myself out of this.

Tarak and Damian have wounds, wounds I fear will never heal. When I first felt their presence in my mind, they were different. They were more pure. Their auras were almost golden in my mind, a noble triad of protectors.

Now they have a molten, iron rage that threatens to ignite everything that made them good.

Damian got ice cold when I mentioned they'd changed since I first felt them. I walk to the bathroom, turn the tap, and splash fresh water onto my face. I turn it as cold as it will go, enjoying the icy chill as I wake myself up.

I'm linked to these two men for the first of my life. I need to understand them. They're in my mind now, and they must have felt Raython in their minds the same way.

What would it be like, to have someone you shared every waking moment with, someone you grew up with, trained with, someone you could feel their emotions, ripped out from your mind?

No wonder they hate the Aurelian Empire. I don't know how Raython died, but he was an Aurelian soldier. It's a safe bet he didn't die peacefully in bed, surrounded by people who loved him. No, those two blame the human Queen and the Aurelian Empire for the death of their loved one, and that hurt poisons them.

You can't take back brands or tattoos.

And you can't take back the Bond.

I rub my temples, feeling the Bond deep in my being. It's like a harp, ready to be played at any moment, a thrum of pleasure and need that brings up everything I've wanted.

For better or worse, I'm linked to them—Gods, for better. Anything is better than that Toad.

I learned to live under that bastard's thumb. Terror would make my hand slip when I poured, and terror would have lost me a limb, or worse. I learned to control terror. I learned to control hate. I learned to be detached.

I'll use that now.

I used to dream of noble protectors. I trusted that vision, I kept it secret and safe in my heart, not telling a soul.

These two will protect their Mate. As for the rest of the universe? They still want their revenge. They still want to lash out and dish out pain greater than what they experienced.

Revenge is useless. There's still five lives in the hospital, and if I'm scared, they must be terrified.

"When shall we go to the hospital to check on the women?" I telepath the words to both of them at the same time, getting more used to it.

"After breakfast. Come," says Damian. Even when he's telepathing, he's bossy, but his words are tinged with anticipation.

I press out with my mind and find the parts of their being that are good. The protectiveness. The honor that's still there, just serving a different cause. The bravery. I let the good of them wash over me, because I need them to know everything's all right. There's no benefit to me being at odds with my protectors—or captors—when I'm surrounded by enemies.

I take a deep breath in and look myself in the mirror, letting happiness well up in me.

I'm not in fear of my life. I've got food in my belly. I'd forgotten what it was like not to have constant, gnawing hunger, hunger so bad I was tempted to chew leaves from plants that grew in the wet corridors of the Toad manor.

And I've got two men, who though flawed would do anything to keep me safe. I'm living in a mansion with a pool that even if I don't know how to swim in, looks beautiful, a growing garden thriving in the sun, and with a baker who makes the freshest, most delicious bread I have had in my life.

I smile to myself and let myself feel the moment, not detaching myself into the little part of my mind I hide in when things are bad.

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The plain brown servants clothes are crumpled on the bedside table. I consider them, then put them down, looking at the satchel on the ground. My heart pounds as I pick it up and open it, pulling out the black pleasure dress. I set it down on the bed, imagining how I'll look in it.

Last night I took a long shower. The strangest thing happened. As I washed the Aurelians' seed from me, I didn't feel cleaner.

I just felt empty. It wasn't the Bond. That link is not as overwhelming as the rumors said—I'm still me, no matter what men and women gossiping in bars say about losing yourself to your urges.

Deep down, I always wanted to be with a noble triad. And I imagined being linked to them, growing a family, strong, powerful sons who would have the best qualities of the Aurelian species. Boys who would grow up to protect women and save them from the poverty of Wild Space, the space stations where greedy men rule, the planets where the richest take everything from the poor.

I reach out in my mind, touching the dark waters of the Bond. Despite their strength, I have control over my mind. I learned that control under the thumb of the Toad Lord, at pain of death, and now that control will keep me, meanwhile I fight with the urges of the Bond to find what I really want.

I slip the black pleasure dress on, letting it mold itself to my body. It's quiet as the Bond, so gentle with its feathery touch, softer than any silk. It's not much more than a slip, the sheer blackness like I'm covered in shadows and nothing else. My pale skin looks strangely beautiful against it.

As beautiful as black tattoos on marble flesh.

I run my hand over the silver collar. I slept with it. There's a little clasp under it, but I don't take it off. It'll keep other Aurelians away from me. Especially those scum with brands on their foreheads.

And some part of me likes how it looks. The dress shimmers, tiny little strands massaging my body, melting away aches and pains I didn't know I had. I get why animals keep returning to that tree to rub themselves against the sap of the trunk.

I look at myself, in a pleasure dress, a collar around my neck, and I hold my head up high. I grab a brush from the bedside table and run it through my tangled curls, the movements giving me a sense of control. Those two wouldn't care if my hair was a tangled, sweaty mess after a long day's work. In fact, they are so animalistic, they might prefer it, seeing me sweaty and slick.

Could I bear their sons?

The thought is intrusive, welling up in my mind, and the Bond flutters through me, rewarding me with a surge of happiness and pleasure. Part of me always wanted to have Aurelian children, and that part of me is being pushed up and enhanced. I've seen the holo-vids of Queen Jasmine when she was pregnant with an Aurelian babe. How her belly was swollen up, her breasts huge and laden with milk to prepare for her firstborn son.

I'm ready. I leave my room, closing the door softly behind me. The top floor has the main bedroom and the huge library. I take the steps down, pausing at the landing. There's a long hallway, with black doors at the end, and I know instinctively that's where I heard Damian's roar.

Could it be what I think it is? That's too much to handle right now. I've heard the

sultry rumors, and I can't help but imagine if it is a pleasure room.

Can the room really be controlled by the owner's mind?

The owner in this case has a very...darkmind.

I could feel his desires when he had me over his lap. How only my frail state stopped him from punishing me, disciplining me. I take a deep breath in as a shudder of lust rushes up and down my body as I imagine being held up in the air by the room itself, unable to move a muscle while the two warriors approach me.

I continue down the stairs, not letting myself think about it for too long, and stop at the big balcony above the entrance hall.

I run my hands over the wrought-iron railing and blink in surprise. My legs should have at least a bit of a burn from going down the flights of stairs. Did the pleasure dress massage them? Or do I feel stronger than I used to?

I stand on one foot, testing my balance, then slowly raise my heel. I do a pose I saw in a holo-vid once, of graceful ballerinas on Old-Earth. Standing on just my toes, I raise my other foot out to the left, and I get it above my waist when I start to lose my balance and stand normally.

A giddy sensation goes through me. Not that I was a klutz or anything, but there's no way in hell I could stand on the toes of one foot so easily.

I don't pause to think. Before I can talk myself out of it, I jump up onto the railing, and let myself slide down the stairs. Tarak rushes through the doors of the kitchen when he hears my shriek, and I fly into his arms.

He smiles down at me. "I see you are enjoying your new abilities," he says, as he

holds me against his chest, pressing me tight to the powerful muscles. I don't push down the new happiness surging up in me, letting him feel it.

“My new abilities?”

He grins. His platinum-blue eyes flash. “The Bond, my Mate. It'll make you stronger...more than you could ever believe.” He looks like he's about to kiss me, but sets me down instead. The big man towers over me, and I look up at his strong jaw, his thick neck, the masculine power of his being.

I take a step back. He's wearing the black robes of the Priests, his branded chest bared, and I try to appreciate the smooth, gleaming tattoos in a new light. They fought for those tattoos. Were scarred for those tattoos. And they did it for me.

“Come. You're recovered, Athena, I can feel it. We prepared something especially for you to start the morning right.”

I raise my eyebrow. “You? You mean Laura?” I tease him, putting my guard down. There's no icy hot rage in his being. The tortured side of him is only the tiniest, dark stain on his aura, as he enjoys the thought of a day with me.

“Yes, Laura prepared it. Under my strict direction,” he says, his voice deep and formal, and only the twinkle in his eyes lets me in on the joke.

“Lead the way, sir,” I say, smiling at him. He strides into the dining room, the robes of his toga moving with his steps, and I appreciate the brutal grace the alien warrior has. I watched that brutal grace in action when he cut down an army of Bullfrogs to save my life.

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The dining room and kitchen are separated by a counter. Damian's standing in the kitchen, slicing strawberries with a knife made of folded steel. He's quick, slicing without looking. Laura's watching the oven like a hawk. The smell of fresh bread wafts through the air.

"Careful," I say to Damian, as he looks over at me, still slicing, the blade millimeters from his fingers. He twists the knife, picks up a piece of strawberry with the flat of the blade, and tosses it in a high arc. It seems to move in slow motion—or maybe my reaction time is just increasing—and I step forward, mouth open, and catch it.

"Oh my Gods," I whisper as the flavors explode on my tongue. I've never tasted anything like it.

"The fruit is to your liking?" asks Tarak, pulling back a chair at the huge table. I blush when I see the plump cushion on it, so that I'll be at an almost normal height to the huge black table. The cushion is red, and I know Matil or Laura bought it to help me.

I sit down, not daring to chew the strawberry. Instead, I let it almost melt on my tongue, nearly drooling over the intense sweetness. Finally, I chew it and swallow, looking longingly over at the bowl filled with cut strawberries.

"I...I've never had a strawberry before. Or any fresh fruit. The closest was a flavor packet I let dissolve on my tongue while I watched a holo-vid of a ripe peach in front of me. We didn't have anything like this on the station I grew up on." I lick my lips, getting one last taste of the sweetness, as Tarak sits across from me. I wiggle on the pillow—and a thought crosses my mind.

Did one of the women get it so I could sit up higher...

Or because they're worried the chair would be too hard after...

I gulp, wondering if they overheard Damian's promise to discipline me. Even if they didn't, they have to know. Aurelians are famed for their harsh touch, loving to train and mold their servants into submissive little toys.

"Where's Matil?" I say, shifting my thoughts before they can pick up on the thread of arousal building in me.

"Tending to the gardens," says Tarak.

"Would she like to join us for breakfast?"

His brows furrow. They're black, contrasted to the gorgeous marble hue of his skin, and I take a moment to appreciate his features, the high cheekbones, the etched jaw. Gods, but he's a hottie. Some Aurelians are handsome in a brutish way...

Like Raython.

I get a surge of grief that I'll never meet the man, but I distance myself from it, not wanting the Aurelians to feel it in my aura.

"She's a servant," says Tarak, confused.

I nod. "Yes. It's your home, and your rules. But I served long enough and...if it's alright with you, could we invite them to eat with us?"

Tarak looks over at Damian. He grunts. "Yes," says the leader of the triad, then looks out through the open window to the garden. "Matil! We invite you to eat with us. It is

the wish of Athena,” he yells through, and I wince. I don’t want her to feel pressure.

“Thanks, but I already ate!” yells back Matil.

Damian looks over at me. He’s stopped slicing, and he holds the knife like he was born with it in his hand. His forearm is tense, near as big as my leg. “Shall I insist?”

“No, no, not at all,” I say quickly. Matil likes it in the garden, and I don’t want to take her from her happy place. These two aliens still view their servants as just that, servants, and it’s going to take some time. I wonder if they bought them with talons, whatever those are, or if the two of them joined willingly.

Baby steps.

I glance over at Laura. She’s looking in the oven, waiting for the exact moment to pull out the bread, an artist in her own right.

“Laura, that smells so good. Do you want to eat with us?”

“Thank you, but if it’s okay, I’d like to take some food and coffee and do some reading. Matil picked me up some light novels from the market.” She tears her eyes from the oven, looking down, near Damian’s feet. “Would you permit me to have coffee in the library?”

“You may,” says Damian, and his eyes flit to me, feeling my approval to the Bond. I give him a grateful smile. I like it when he’s not ordering the two women around...

Then I bite my lip at a naughty thought.

It’s me I want him to order around, in that stern voice of his. I remember when he promised me a spanking, and I can’t help the flood of lust rushing up. The pleasure

dress tickles me, teasing my nipples, and Tarak's eyes stroll down my neck to my suddenly hard nipples.

I can't hide a thing from these two in my body.

But I can still hide some parts of my mind.

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Laura puts on cooking mitts and takes the bread out. It's a beautiful loaf, with a swirling pattern on the top. She brings it to the table and places it reverentially on a wooden slab. Then she opens the big double doors of the fridge and brings out smoked pink fish with capers. "Light food, for your healing stomach," she says to me, smiling with that warmth of hers that is contagious. There's a pitcher of red fruit juice, which she pours into three glasses. I reach to do it myself, but she shakes her head with a smile, not minding serving.

"Thank you so much."

"Anything else you need?" she asks me.

"No! Enjoy your book."

"Thank you," she says, and disappears, leaving me alone with the two warriors.

Damian sits next to me, bringing the silver bowl filled to the brim with strawberries. I reach in to grab one, and he wraps his hand around my wrist, his dark purple eyes glistening. With his other hand he takes a strawberry between his two fingers, bringing it slowly to my mouth.

I open my mouth, shudders of lust rushing through my body as I take the strawberry, letting my tongue slide against his fingers, and I can't help but imagine another part of him in my mouth.

Fuck.

I'm so turned on by these two, I can almost forget everything. Tarak tears a piece of bread off roughly, and I roll my eyes at him. "Are you going to make me eat that from your hand, too?"

He chuckles. "Maybe I will," he says, then butters the bread and slides it over on a plate. I reach out, giving a wary glance to Damian, who releases my other hand, letting me take a bite. "That's so good," I say, the two dig in.

They waited for me to eat before they started. It's strange, the little things, the mix between ownership and worship.

I am their Queen...

TheirQueen.

Damian grabs a piece of strawberry, and I can't resist. I put my hand on his wrist. I rest my fingers against the gleaming silver of his bracelet, and heat floods between my legs. I can't even wrap my hand half around his wrist. He pauses, amused, as I take the piece of strawberry from him, and bring it to his mouth. His huge tongue comes out, and he takes the piece from me, his eyes alight. "Careful, Athena."

"Or what?" I challenge, and he growls, low under his breath.

"What did you want to do, before your capture?" Tarak's question cuts the moment.

I smile. "Honestly? I wanted to work on Colossus. But it's a long road from a hopeless little station in Wild Space to there."

"What work did you do?"

"Anything that paid. I studied to be a mining beam operator every night. Got my first

job, and that's when we got captured."

Tarak's eyes narrow. "There should not be Wild Space. Only tamed land. That is what we will bring to the universe." The hot anger is rising up, and though I am sitting near them, I feel miles away.

"And you? From what I remember, Aurelians only have to serve a hundred years."

Tarak nods as Damian butters his bread, putting smoked fish on it. He slides the piece over to me, and I take a bite. Everything is so good.

"Yes. We could have retired. Collected a harem."

"Why didn't you?"

"The Priests. They told us that Mates can only be earned. That of the tens of thousands of women who flock to Colossus for protection, none were ever the Mate of a triad. We believed it."

"But that, too, was a lie," growls Damian. "A Mate must be earned. But you...when we felt you, we knew you were deep in the Toad Kingdom. The Aurelian Empire would not approve a mission into territory that has been at peace with them since the Galactic War."

Tarak shakes his head. "And even if they did, it would have amounted to nothing. We felt you, yes, but only a vague sense of direction. We were ready to risk the shift to..." He gets a dark look in his eyes.

"You would have risked shifting?"

Centuries before my birth, Orb-Shifting was the way to travel from system from

system, instantly, instead of month or even year-long journeys dormant in cryo.

It started to degrade. From what I heard, not one voyage out of two goes successfully, and it's only gotten worse. I watched footage from the escape of the Separatists, led by the Priests, from Colossus. I watched ships split in half, proud Aurelian warriors sucked into the atmosphere or gasping for air in the emptiness of space. I couldn't watch more than a second.

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“We shifted to escape. We got you in the end. But we lost him. He melted before my eyes,” says Tarak, lost in a memory, and I look down, uneasy.

So that’s how his battle-brother died.

Not cut down in combat, but against an enemy he couldn’t see.

“The void took him. Only Obsidian can guide,” snarls Damian. “And he will. The universe needs Orb-Shifting to protect humanity from the Scorp, from Toads, from slavers like the fucker who took you.” The white-hot rage boils up in him. A glass shatters in his hand, fresh red fruit juice dripping down from his wrist like blood.

“Are you okay?” I ask, but neither of them answer. Their auras are distant, remembering the moment they lost their battle-brother.

Tarak coughs. He reaches down, grabbing a cloth bag, and tosses it to me. I catch it, opening it. There are leather sandals. “Matil got these from the market for you.”

I put them on, tightening the straps. “Just my size.”

“She has an eye for these things,” he says, changing the subject.

When they speak of their dead battle-brother, I don’t know how we’re going to have a future. There’s this wound in them that can never be healed. Some part of me thinks I can fill the void. That if they had a family, maybe then they’d care about something more than vengeance.

When I feel the hot anger surging up in Damian's aura, I'm not so sure.

I take another bite of the buttered bread with smoked fish, then put it down, not full, but knowing my fragile stomach can't handle much more. I'm getting healthier, but I'm not yet recovered—and I have the Bond, making me stronger.

"This was perfect. I just worry about those five...they must be scared."

Damian's aura hardens. "We'll go to them now." I stand, and Damian grabs my wrist, pulling me onto his lap. I can feel his thick, soft member underneath me, and it twitches against my body, so I stay perfectly still. He reaches into a pocket in his robe, and pulls out a long, thin, gleaming silver chain. It's as thin as my finger.

"I would be honored to walk into the city with you bound to my wrist," he growls, his cock hardening underneath me, and my breath catches.

He's not insisting, though I don't know what will happen if I refuse.

I want to say yes. Part of me thinks it's to play the part of his perfect little toy...

The other part of me is imagining Aurelians staring at me, wanting a woman like me, a Bonded Mate. How proud I could be to be leashed to such a powerful specimen. There's goodness in him yet, even when the white-hot rage threatens to overwhelm his being.

And that goodness is getting stronger with me. When we spend time together, that goodness grows. Maybe he'll never be the man I felt in the vision again. Maybe some wounds don't heal.

But I can try.

The pleasure dress shimmers to life, teasing my body, as if it can read my thoughts. I wiggle ever so slightly, grinding my ass against his thickening cock, and he groans in need. I look up, straight into those deep purple eyes, almost defiant.

“Yes, sir,” I say, and suppress a moan as I imagine being paraded around, nearly naked, my sheer dress showing off my body to the entire city.

A body owned by my two masters.

18

Athena

He attaches the leash to his wrist, then slowly brings it to my throat. His huge fingers gently stroke my smooth skin, and Tarak is staring, his aura burning with the embers of need as he watches me. Damian slides his hand open around my throat, able to circle it easily, and my breath catches.

Then he latches it to the ring in the collar, and I’m linked to him publicly, as publicly as the color of his eyes that proclaim to the world that he has Bonded me to him.

He leans in and kisses my ear. “I haven’t forgotten your promised punishment, my Mate... and I think we’re both going to enjoy it.”

I can’t hold back the moan as I imagine him flipping me over his lap, his huge hand coming down hard, so hard I can’t detach myself anymore. He would force me to live the moment, he would smell the scent of my lust, see the glistening of my pussy begging for his harsh discipline.

The Bondthrumsin my mind, and Tarak stands. His black robes are tented outwards obscenely by the thick rod of his cock. “We have business,” he growls, fighting for

control, and Damian stands, lifting me up like a toy and placing me on trembling legs.

Damian walks, and I am forced to follow. The leash is roughly as long as my own height, so I have to keep close to the huge man at all times.

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Tarak walks behind us. I'm between the two big men, and I'm safe and protected. The huge main double doors are soundless as he pushes them open, and we look out at the grassy front lawn, with the towering Reaver resting, the twin Orb-Gunneries pointed outwards.

"Shall we fly, or walk?"

The sandals are comfortable, and my body is strong. "I'd like to walk. I feel so healthy," I say, the morning sun kissing us.

"Good. The Bond will make you stronger with each mating," says Damian, fighting down his need. The gates open in front of us, and we walk out onto the cobblestone path. The grass is near to my waist on each side of the path. We're up on the hills, and the path stretches downward between high walls of estates just like ours.

The moment we step outside, their auras change. They harden slightly, as if ready for battle, and other than the near-constant lust in their being, I can't read them.

They've had centuries of experience sharing each other's auras, and though I pride myself on my ability to be detached, these two have learned through the years how to hide their emotions.

Tarak rushes forward, putting his body in front of us, leading the way with his hand near his Orb-Blade hilt. He has a feline grace as he strides forward. I've seen that grace in deadly action. We walk downwards, passing other huge walled estates, and I glance through the black iron bars of the front gates.

“Are the owners at war?” I ask, because I don’t see a single Reaver in the grounds. The huge mansions look empty.

Damian shakes his head. “No. Not one out of ten are inhabited.”

“Whoever built these are expecting more.”

“Yes. We gain in numbers every day. More Empire soldiers defecting. Some sense the winning sides...but most come for the same reason we did.”

“To find our Mate,” finishes Tarak.

A triad of Aurelians is standing on the walls of one of the estates, looking down. They stare at us. I can see the grey coldness of their eyes even from here. They wear the same black robes, and each has the bottom half of their brand filled in with the black tattoo of a single honor. Next to them, dwarfed by their monstrous size, are three women in pleasure dresses, each linked to their collars. One of the woman sidles up to her man, running her hand up and down the side of his waist as they look down at us.

Damian steps forward, then twists his wrist, the chain going taut and pulling me towards him. My eyes go wide as I’m pulled right to his chest, and he leans down and kisses me, running his hands through my hair. His lips press hard against mine, his tongue entering my mouth as he shows the world I’m his. He breaks off the kiss, and we’re both breathless. “You’re the most gorgeous creature I’ve ever seen,” he rumbles, his voice low. My cheeks flush, my nipples hard, sensitive buds begging for his touch, and the Bondthrums.

I moan in need, and there’s a delicious, shameful edge knowing that a triad of warriors is watching Damian manhandle me. Damian flexes his arms, controlling himself, and lets the leash have some give as he continues walking.

Fuck. They know how to keep a girl on edge.

The three huge Aurelians on the ramparts knuckle their brands as we pass, bowing their heads in respect.

Holy.

That's how they view us. A holy union, and I get the sense that that triad would fight if Damian and Tarak ordered them to. They treat the two men of what should have been a full triad as kings...

And me...the way they look at me is like I am a Goddess. I can see their eyes fixated on the silver collar around my neck, the silver collar that shows them that I am what they all seek. I don't have to look back to know they stare at us as we walk away.

I clear my throat. "How long have the two of you lived?"

Damian smiles. "Three hundred thirty years. We lived under the last Emperor born of a Bond, and we saw the rise of the Queen." He spits out the last word like a curse.

I don't need to ask why he hates her. The molten anger boils up again, and I know he blames that Queen for the loss of his battle-brother.

We walk in silence through the last row of estates. A hundred feet to our right, Aurelians with brands and no tattoos are heaving a huge slab of black granite on a wooden slate without wheels. They heave in unison, their massive muscles straining. A priest sits on a simple wooden chair above. They could use Reavers to lift the rock to the city where construction is underway, but they force the young men without honors to toil. I have the feeling they will work from sunup until the sun goes down.

The Priest raises his hand, and the men stop at once, four triads sweating, their marble

bodies gleaming. They stand straight back, staring at us, and in unison, they bring their fists to their brands and bow their heads.

They stare at us with longing. With hunger. That is the need that drives them to serve the Priests and the Old Ways, the need for their Mate that drives them to scour the galaxies. Damian and Tarak raise their heads, and their auras pulse with pride.

I am their greatest achievement.

The city rises up below us, huge, towering black buildings over the massive walls. There is a tower rising above everything, and I remember looking up at that tower when I was pulled into the Arena of Blood, taken from one world to another.

“Will the two of you be staying on Obsidious for long?” I ask the question as innocently as possible, as if the thought just crossed my mind. Matil’s tongue slipped when she told me the two of them spend their lives at war, volunteering for all campaigns, and I don’t want to get her in trouble.

Tarak stalks forward, his demeanor growing more warlike as we walk towards the huge black walls of the city. He’s ready for a fight. The hilt of his blade swings as he walks, his fingers always near it. “We’ll be staying. We fought to earn you. The next time we go out will not be a sortie or skirmish. It’ll be war, into the heart of the Aurelian Empire.”

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I shudder. The weight of the situation cascades down on me, and I can't keep distant from the tension. When we were enjoying a breakfast together, flirting in the protection of our home, I could imagine a future. When he speaks of war against the brave warriors I idolized, the Empire that stands for everything good in the universe, it crushes my dreams.

“When...when will that happen?” My voice trembles.

The two men stop. Attached to Damian's wrist, I have no choice but to stand still as well. Damian turns, his near-black eyes drinking up the light as they drink up my being. He looks me up and down, staring through my soul. “Queen Jasmine has kidnaped Obsidian's pregnant Mate. We will go to war when he wills it, and the War-God will not wait long, not when she has his prize.”

My eyes widen. “But isn't he scared he'll kill her if he attacks?”

He shakes his head. “She won't kill her. That would drive the War-God to an even deeper madness. As it stands, his Mate is a tool for her. An asset in war.” He starts walking again, slowly this time. “Focus on my aura. Close your eyes and walk. Don't worry, I'll catch you if you stumble,” he says, and I close my eyes, taking slow, careful steps against the cobblestones.

I let myself touch Damian's aura. He's cooled the rage. I can sense him in front of me, almost like a shadow in my mind, then he moves to the left. I open my eyes the instant before the silver chain goes taut. He's standing in the grass that goes to his knees. “You felt it.”

“I can sense your direction. So Queen Jasmine has to keep that poor girl alive because she knows where he is?”

“Yes. She’ll have a Bond-Disrupter ring on her finger, is my guess. Pulled off only when the Queen and her royal triad need to know where he is.”

“And what if she says no?”

Damian clenches his jaw. “You don’t know this woman. She is not easy to say no to, not when the lives of her family are at stake.

I shudder. The only news I had heard from Queen Jasmine was good. That she allowed planets to become Independent if they wished, to protect themselves rather than pay for the Aurelian Empire to keep them safe. That her measures she passed gave a legal right to a full education and training for women who spent a year in an Aurelian harem, so that they could leave and find gainful employment, if they wished.

I can’t imagine her kidnapping a pregnant woman.

I can’t imagine her threatening that poor woman, who must feel so alone, forcing her to betray her man.

Tarak sense my distress. “We will never allow anything like that to happen to you. Do not fear, my Mate,” he says, misreading my sorrow for Obsidian’s mate’s situation as fear for my own life.

“Thank you,” I say, and I’m grateful for their protection. No matter what they are, they saved me from a life worse than death.

The huge city gates are open, triads walking through them on the black paved streets.

Two triads guard the front gates, standing at rapt attention. One triad has Orb-Blade hilts at their waists, the other two with long spears without tips, and I know that with a thought, they can make the edged barbs appear as they activate their weapons. Their black robes show their dull white brands.

They knuckle the empty brands as we approach, barking an order to clear out, and another triad rushes in through the gates, standing at the side to let us pass.

We walk through the city, and a chill goes through me as I walk through, past the huge walls. They are built of thick granite slabs hauled from the quarries by hand. Chatter stops as we enter, all eyes on us.

The slate-grey eyes look at me with religious devotion, staring at me as a holy symbol of their cause.

Damian and Tarak do not stop to acknowledge the guards, simply striding past. The streets are wide and built of thick paved rocks. To our left, there is a cleared square, where triads are fighting each other with steel weapons, the clang of metal on metal filling the air. I watch as one huge, burly beast of a man kicks his opponent, knocking him down, and mounts him, smashing his fist against his nose. There's a crack of breaking bone, and he jams his sword against his throat, his arm flexing as he snarls, an inch from ending his life. Then he stands, extending his arm, and the fallen man takes it, blood streaming from his nose as he takes position again.

The drillmaster barks an order, and they stop, turning to knuckle their brands at us as we pass.

To the right is a courtyard of a restaurant with black marble tables. An Aurelian with half his brand filled in leans back, his thick mane of brown hair to his shoulders as he groans in satisfaction. I gasp as a woman darts from under the table, giggling, and she wipes her mouth before jumping on his lap. The two others of his triad cock their

heads, and he turns towards us, knuckling his brand.

Oh Gods.

Would my two men do that to me?

Claim me in front of a crowd?

I imagine thousands of hungry eyes staring at me as I am lost to my lust, taken hard by Damian, and I picture myself on all fours, rutted like an animal in front of a crowd. A shiver goes up and down my spine as heat floods between my legs. Damian looks over at me, a confident smirk on his lips, and I know he can sense my arousal spiking, the black pleasure dress rubbing all over my body.

We turn right down a long street, and an Aurelian is walking, straight backed. The ground gleams with slick shininess. It takes me a moment to realize the alien is bleeding. “He’s hurt!” I yell, and Tarak gives me a warning glance.

“It’s a badge of honor to bear pain without complaint. Do not shame him.”

The Aurelian hears my shout and turns. I can’t believe what I am seeing. He’s got the broken hilt of a spear jabbed straight into his side. He stops as he hears us, and grimaces, fighting to control the pain as he raises his shaking hand to his brand, knuckling it in respect. He’s young, tall, a seven-footer, but if he was a human I would place him as twenty at the most.

He doesn’t make a sound as we pass. I see a big building in front of us with an unmistakable red cross on it.

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“What’s he doing? He’s hurt, dammit! He needs to go to the hospital!” I telepath the words, not wanting to shame the wounded creature.

“He waits for us to go first,” says Damian with pride. Damian looks over at the man and knuckles his brand back. The wounded alien can’t help but smile for a moment, before his face returns to stoic blandness.

I take a quick step forward, running my hand over Damian’s arm. “You never have to hide your pain from me,” I whisper, softly so no one can hear. He doesn’t answer. But his aura swells up again with pride.

The hospital is a big, modern building, with black stone exterior, but where the buildings of the rest of the city look like they could come from Old-Earth’s antiquity, these are state of the art. Ships with red crosses take off from a huge landing bay, and I see an Aurelian pulled on a stretcher into the emergency room far off to the right. We walk into the big automatic doors of the hospital.

I’ve seen little hospitals, grubby things on the space station that the poor could afford, but this building is huge and clean. I was expecting more darkness, but everything is lit up and white. A woman at the front is speaking urgently into her smartwatch. Another is speaking to an Aurelian in black robes. The third front desk staff has a holo-vid in front of her, competently waving her fingers in a practiced movement. Each little wiggle of her fingers makes different images appear in front of her. She’s darting through case files with speed when she sees us walking to the front desk.

“Wounded?” she asks quickly, her eyes taking inventory of us and seeing nothing apparent.

“We come to see the five women. We were the ones who freed them from the Toad Lord,” states Damian.

“Hmm. Red 3-B,” she says, without deference in her tone. Her eyes dart over my silver collar, but they don’t even widen. To her, we’re just people.

“Thank you,” says Tarak, and she just nods, already flicking her fingers through files.

She brings her smartwatch to her mouth. “We need another attendant in the burn ward, there was a Reaver fire, they’re stable but need attention.”

“On it,” comes a voice through the watch, as Damian and Tarak lead me towards a hallway.

When we’re out of earshot, I cast another quick glance back at her. “She doesn’t have a collar,” I say, surprised.

“She came of her own will,” answers Tarak.

I’ve got a lot to learn about Obsidious and the Old Ways. They have a strange code of honor indeed.

We walk through a bright white hallway. It’s empty except for a nurse checking a file that comes out in a holographic image from her smartwatch. She purses her lips and disappears into a room. Everything’s so bright and sterile, unlike the rest of the world.

“They went with a different color scheme,” I say, looking around.

“You can’t see blood as well on black,” growls Tarak, his aura getting tense. He’s seen a lot of blood in his life. I clam up, shutting my mouth, cursing myself for not

figuring it out on my own.

We walk down the hallway. At the end is a set of doors. An Aurelian is leaning into it, chatting with a big grin on his face. His toga is barely held together, opened so wide he's showing off his abs to whoever is inside, and he stands with indolent ease.

"Name and rank!" Damian barks, and the Aurelian snaps to attention, his hand darting towards his Orb-Blade before he sees the twin honors on Damian's chest. His eyes dart up from the brand to his colored eyes, and the soldier's mouth gapes, then he slams his fist against his brand and lowers his head.

"Private Brant, sir. I serve General Ra'al."

"We asked General Ra'al for guards, not lackabouts. I see you lazing again, I'll bring you into the Arena myself and drive my sword through your fucking heart," grimaces Damian, his aura white hot. His hand forms a clenched fist, and he looks like he's about to break the man's jaw.

"Yes, sir!" says the guard, standing up so straight you could use him as a ruler.

Damian and Tarak lead, and I follow them into the room. Jola's lazing back on a hospital bed, her black hair as beautiful as always, effortlessly thick and lush. It frames her face, which was beautiful when it was gaunt, but has now fleshed out a little, her lips fuller. Her cheeks are glowing, and she's smiling up at another big Aurelian guard, her hand stroking his abs. Lelita, the other servant I was closet with, is chatting with a tall, thin Aurelian who has his robes opened, showing his body down to his Adonis line of muscles. He's got a cocky grin on his face that's wiped off when he sees Damian and Tarak.

Jola slowly removes her hand from the man. The other three servants I never knew the name of are scared at first, then recognize their savior.

“Thank you,” says one. “You have no idea...thank you,” she says, and a tear streams down her cheek.

“You’re all recovering? Jola, you’re okay?” I ask, but my question is answered just looking at them. Where there were walking skeletons, now I see women, women with hope in their eyes.

“Yes we are. We’re being well taken care of by our brave guards,” says Jola, reaching out and touching the thigh of the Aurelian she was flirting with. He grits his teeth, casting a warning glance down, and to my shock, the warrior looks embarrassed in front of the twice-honored triad.

“Was there any moment there wasn’t a guard at the door?” Damian asks the question to Jola.

“Never. They’re tireless. A triad of Fanatics came by, and the six of them blocked the doorway. They couldn’t even look inside.”

Damian nods. “Very good. General Ra’al picked well,” he says, and the five alien warriors swell up with pride. He looks over at me. “Are you satisfied with their treatment?”

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“Yes,” I say. “But what happens to them next?” I don’t want to worry the women, so I telepath the comment.

“Halt!” comes the deep voice from the entrance. I turn and see the guard in battle stance, his legs wide, his hand above his blade.

“You have no right to halt me. We come under the orders of Priest Rataro himself,” comes the cold voice, and I see the triad of brutal Aurelians with brands on their foreheads.

Damian and Tarak have already moved, putting their bodies between me and the door, so that I can only see through the crack between their big bulks.

Their auras grow cold, not angry, but ready, and I feel the alien warriors prepared for war.

19

Damian

I look at the triad with hatred, because I feel the yellow, sickly fear in my Mate’s aura. No man has the right to cause fear to the woman I am honor-bound to protect.

“Let them pass,” I order, because I’m not going to let this young guard die...

And I want to have an ally behind the Priests. If it comes to battle, I have to trust these six will stand by my side.

“It’s not this triad we have to worry about,” cautions Tarak. Days ago, he would have lost himself to rage, but his aura is quick and clever, judging the situation accurately. Our Mate gave him that, and I suppress a growl, because he’s right.

We cut these three down, there’s a thousand more behind them, and men with brands on their foreheads are off-limits.

The three men walk in, arrogant, not even bringing their hands to their blades. They feel protected by the brands on their heads. “I am Adept Bejolin. I come under direct orders from Priest Rataro.”

“What orders?”

He smiles at me. “They are healthy. They are coming with us, to be given to loyal soldiers.”

I can feel the vein in my forehead pulsing as white-hot rage boils in me. I’m faster than ever before. I could cut down the three of them before they could blink, and yet they speak to me as an inferior to be ordered around.

“We earned these women. By the Old Ways. Their Fate is ours.”

Bejolin’s smile disappears.

“Please. I’m begging you. Don’t let them take them.” Athena’s voice whispers through my mind. Through her terror is her purity and goodness. If I can’t save these women...

She will never love me.

She will never be able to trust me to protect her.

I can't think. I'm breathing heavy, anger overwhelming me, when Tarak steps forward. "Yes, of course. Priest Rataro's orders."

"Good. Then step aside."

Tarak raises his hands, far from his blade. The fool. Doesn't he realize how close we are to a fight?

"Why do you think we are? We too are here on Priest Rataro's command, just ten minutes ago."

"What game is this?"

"We spoke with Priest Rataro directly. By all the laws of the Old Ways, we own them, but as a gesture of our respect the priests, we agreed they be given to worthy men. Priest Rataro himself picked these two triads to keep them."

Bejolin's lip trembles. He can't call us liars, not to our face, because not even the brand on his forehead would stop us from cutting him down, and he knows it.

Bejolin growls in frustration. He is a weak Aurelian, unable to hide his emotions. He looks over at the women, licking his lips, and I know he thought he would be rewarded with at least one. Every sense is heightened. I can hear one of the women crawling back in her bed, trying to get as far away as possible from the Fanatics.

"Priest Rataro is outside. I'll get him...to confirm that you understood his orders correctly," he says, the closest thing he can do to call us liars without me drawing my blade and cutting him down. He turns, stalking out, while his other two men stand, their eyes flicking to us and then to the two triads. They aren't at ease anymore. They're in battle stance, their hands over their blades, knowing one wrong move will lead to their death.

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The seconds pass like hours until the Priest walks down the hallway. He's tall and thin, and Bejolin has a greedy smile of triumph of his pale face.

"If we kill a Priest, it's all over. Let me do the speaking," says Tarak to me, sensing how close I am to snapping.

If we were not Bonded, I would have been fighting already. We don't just have our lives at stake.

We have Athena, and the women she wants to protect.

"The Priest is alone," warns Tarak, catching the detail I missed. Fuck! My mind is too slow with my anger. If Priest Rataro thought there could be a peaceful end, he would have brought his triad. He does not fear death, but he would not waste his battle-brothers for nothing.

"My loyal servant Adept Bejolin has told me there may be some...miscommunication," rasps the Priest. He's an ancient man. He's seen thousands of years, and he'll leave them if he needs to.

Tarak keeps his hands up, away from his blade as he speaks. "No miscommunication, your reverence. As you told us, these women are ours to do with as we see fit. We wanted to honor the power of the Priests by allowing you to reward them to these six fine warriors, to show the universe your power."

Rataro is silent. Then, finally, his eyes come to mine. He sees the deep purple in them, then glances at the silver leash that goes to my mate. I want to pierce his eyes

out for even glancing at her, and I press in closer to Tarak, our bodies forming a wall against him.

“You are a holy triad. The great War-God has blessed you. We are pleased. And we...accept these six men to be worthy soldiers. If the women are hale, they will come to the Arena of Blood tomorrow, and we will offer them to the triads...formally.”

“They’re going to let them go with the guards? There’s no relief in Athena’s aura. She doesn’t believe it’s true, not yet.

One of the guards, the man who was close to the woman called Jola, steps forward. He knuckles his brand, then bows deeply to the Priest. “We are honored you chose us as worthy. We will fight well for you, your reverence.”

Bejolin snarls. He steps forward. “No! You said that—”

The Priest raises his fist, and the man goes silent. “The Old Ways rule this universe. It is Obsidian’s decree.”

“Yes. If Obsidian decreed it. I understand. Forgive me for my tongue,” says the adept, lowering his head.

“These six are strong warriors. But they have not earned their honor. They have been brave indeed, to be worthy of these women, with many others with single honors passed over,” rasps the Priest, and his pale, milky eyes latch onto mine.

He would have preferred to give the women to men with brands on their foreheads, men who had pledged their undying loyalty to the Priests themselves.

It could look suspicious, and looks are everything in games of power. The Priests

worship the War-God, but they need to use him, as well. I'm not scared of them. But a thin line of worry grows in the back of my head. What if they whisper dark words in Obsidian's ears? What if they tell him we are a threat?

"Yes. They were brave indeed," I state.

"Then as long as the second part of our agreement is fulfilled, we are at peace."

Tarak sends me a warning feeling through my aura, and I bite off my words before I can let them out.

"The second part, your reverence?" My battle-brother keeps his tone as neutral as he can.

"Yes. You will breed your mate in the Arena of Blood tomorrow night, to show the universe what service to the Old Ways gives you." He coughs, dry, and wipes his hand across his pale lips. They come back bloody. "I don't have long on this world. My legacy..." He trails off, and I see red.

How dare he speak about my Mate like this.

How dare he order us to fuck her in front of a crowd without consulting her. My hand's on my blade before I can stop it. Bejolin draws. His Orb-Blade ignites in his hands, the black metal coated in lightning, when I feel the hand on my back.

"It is our honor," comes her light, feminine voice. "I'll do it. Please. To save them, I'll do it."

"Deactivate your blade!" snaps the priest, and Bejolin sheaths his blade. "You have dishonored me. Go to the temple. You will be punished for drawing against a holy triad."

“Your reverence,” gasps Bejolin, and stalks off, his triad of Fanatics following.

Tarak steps aside, letting Athena stand in front of the Priest. I hate the way he looks at her.

“Thank you, Priest Rataro. We look forward to this honor. I hope that their seed takes root in front of the crowd, that you could grant me a golden collar in front of the universe.”

“You are Bonded to a Goddess indeed,” whispers Rataro, and turns, his steps slow but certain as he walks away.

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I let out a huge breath.

I nearly snapped.

I nearly damned my battle-brother and my Mate with my rage.

I held on by a thread, and she's saved us all.

20

Athena

I'm trembling, and Tarak grabs my arm, holding me steady.

That was close. Too close.

One of the women is sobbing behind us. A guardian Aurelian soothes her, running his hand over her forehead tenderly.

"This is acceptable to you, my Mate?" Damian has a strange formality to his voice. Every muscle in his body is taut, his rage still deadly.

"Yes. If it's fine by them," I say, looking at the five, terrified women. Jola nods, and the rest follow.

"Thank you," says Jola. She was always smart. She knows how close we came to disaster.

“I’m setting our Reaver down outside to take us outside,” says Damian, and barks an order into his smartwatch. “Come,” orders Damian, his aura still tumultuous.

Damian is still boiling with rage as he storms out of the room, his robes swishing with his movements. The silver chain nearly goes taut before I rush to catch up, my heart pounding from the exchange. Tarak stalks behind us. His aura is wary as he guards the rear.

Damian turns abruptly down another hallway, his combat boots stomping. Two automatic doors open in front of us as we rush into a huge courtyard. There are no plants or flowers, just a square of space in the middle of the hospital where two small transport ships have touched down. They are both black and bear the mark of Obsidian under their viewports.

A shadow comes over me and I look up. The huge Reaver we left at our estate glides over the hospital building and comes down slowly in the middle of the clearing. The door hisses open before it touches the ground, the AI combat ready to make an evacuation. I wonder how many times they have run into the Reaver like this, come back from a mission and ready to return. The Aurelian warship has a violent beauty, graceful in destruction, the angled cockpit making me think of a deadly hawk swooping down.

I never saw a hawk. Only on holo-vids, but this is very real.

Damian strides into the Reaver and I rush to follow. His boots clank down on the metallic floor, and he turns, reaching out his hand. I take it, and he pulls me into the alien warship.

I’ve never been in one before, but I’ve heard all the tales of Aurelian warships swooping in to save captured women from slavers and Toads. For a split second when I was first taken, I imagined the beautiful marble warships coming in to save

me.

They never came.

These two men did.

Inside, everything is serene and white, lit up by the warm glow of artificial lights set to solar settings. Damian stomps down the hallway to a set of doors that hiss open, thick, armored doors that could slow down a boarding party. Tarak follows us into the cockpit. The Reaver is already taking off, soundlessly rising, powered by an Orb that must be the size of a bowling ball.

The cockpit has three seats. There's a captain's chair at the front, a revolving, huge white chair that looks out through the main glass viewport and shows the walls of the hospital as we rush upwards. To each side is another smaller viewport with a gunners chair where the other two members of the triad can man the Orb-Guns. I've heard of the deadly power of those weapons that can level buildings.

The walls of Obsidious couldn't stop a single Reaver. For all the imposing beauty of the capital city, unless the Separatists can stop the Aurelian Empire from breaching the atmosphere, there would be nothing to stop a massacre. Tarak takes his seat soundlessly to the left, his hands on the Orb-Beams.

Damian glances to the right to the empty second gunners chair. He pushes down the grief so quickly, I only sensed it because I was locked onto his aura, trying to get a better sense of the leader of the triad. He's gotten so good at hiding his pain. He's gotten so good at controlling emotions, even the white-hot rage that nearly made him snap.

Nearly. He held back. He stalks forward, sitting in the captain's chair, looking out at the dark city as we race towards our estate. Other Reavers are darting through the

sky. I can't read the Aurelian. His face is blank, reflected in the reinforced glass, and he stares out, lost in thought.

I stand by his left side, the leash running from my neck to his wrist, and put my hand on his bare arm. "Damian. You told me good and evil don't matter. They do. Good matters, and it needs strength to protect it. That's what you are. A shield."

He stares forward. "I should have killed them all."

I pull back as his anger surges, bringing my hand up to my collar and feeling the cold silver of the ring around my neck. It's tight, but it doesn't cut off my airflow, as if it is molding to my skin. The pleasure dress is cool and dormant against my body, the Bond calm in my mind. I run my hand over the chain until I get to his wrist. "Then I would have died. You would have cut those men down, but they would have sent more. You did perfectly. The two of you. Tarak, your ploy was masterful."

Tarak is intent on the view through his viewport, ready to fire at any moment. "I didn't know if it would work. It was a risk. And I don't like taking risks when it comes to your life."

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“A risk that kept those five women safe. They’ll be with their guards, instead of religious nuts who think of women as no more than property. That was heroic.”

Tarak grunts, not responding to my praise, but his aura swells with pride.

I’m glad to have their emotions in my mind. They’ve trained for centuries to hide everything. To be stoic and cold, like the bleeding Aurelian who refused to show pain as he walked to the hospital.

I want them to show their true selves to me.

“And Damian...your restraint was masterful as well,” I say, running my hand up his thick forearm, stroking his powerful bicep. His chest bared on the left glows under the cockpit light, the white of the brand gleaming against the blackness of his tattoo.

I let my hand gently run down his shoulder towards the brand.

I shied from it before. I need to accept these men. All of them, every part, even the ones I still don’t understand. I let my fingers stroke the raised flesh, imagining the pain when it seared against his flesh. Then I trail my fingers down gently, grazing his nipple.

I never want the beast to feel pain again. I never want him to know the cut of an Orb-Blade, the sear of a brand, the terror of a battle.

He slowly turns his head towards me. Even sitting, he towers over me. Those dark purple eyes flash as the thread of lust in his being grows. “Masterful...” he says.

Tasting the word.

I bite my lip, aching for his kiss. “Oh? You like when I call you master?”

“I do. From you, it’s an honor,” he says, and his hand darts upwards, moving so fast it’s a blur and grabbing the chain. He pulls me into his kiss, claiming me, his lips pressing hard against mine. When he breaks it off, I’m gasping, staring up at the wounded alpha.

He’s filled with so much anger, but in the moments it counts, he can hold onto himself. He can put me above his pride. I’ve never been so in awe of someone’s restraint, how he can experience such pure rage yet stop himself from cutting down his enemies.

“I want you to take me in the arena, Damian. I want you to show everyone that you own your Mate,” I whisper, the leash taut in his hand. I pull against it, and he lets it have give, so that I can kiss his broad chest and run my tongue over the raised flesh of his brand. The lust in his aura boils up, consuming him, the black robe tenting upwards as his thick cock surges straight up.

I look up at his hot purple eyes, staring into the near-black orbs that glow with their own light. “And I want you to show me you own me in the pleasure room. You promised me a punishment,” I say, knowing what he needs...

And I crave.

Damian needs to take me so hard he forgets everything. All his pain, his rage, the entirety of his being intent on me.

He growls like the savage beast he is as the Reaver descends in the front of our home. He stands, lifting me and throwing me over his left shoulder, and charges down the

hallway and out of the Reaver's side door. He's in a sprint, and I look up as I bounce on his shoulder. Tarak's behind, his platinum-blue eyes staring straight at me as he runs, his own lust burning him up.

His boots slam against the stairs as he runs me up flights until we get to the second highest floor. I can't see where we're going, but I know.

Those two black doors I didn't let myself think about. He sets me down in front of them. They are unadorned, speaking of a promise of something dark inside.

Something I need.

Oh Gods...

If I go through those doors, I might lose myself. I've never let go before. Not fully.

My triad demands complete submission. If I let them take me into the pleasure room, they'll strip away all my resistance, and lay bare all my most shameful desires.

21

Athena

The doors open without a sound, splitting as each half slides into the walls. I'm at the threshold. I see a dark, gleaming room, and my legs shake as I walk forward. I kick off my sandals and step inside.

The room is slick, gleaming blackness. It's hard to tell how big it is. The floor is cool under my feet, and I watch as it ripples under me, as if I am walking on water. It's malleable under me, and I sink ever so slightly into it with each step. There's no source of light, yet it is lit up by a black, ethereal glow.

The chain falls against my back as Damian unleashes me. I hear the thud of his boots kicked off behind me, but I'm frozen by the room, unable to turn to him, transfixed by the dark beauty of the famed pleasure room.

"Is it really controlled by your—ah!" I gasp as black vines dart from the wall. They circle my neck and waist, pulling me into the center of the room and spinning me to face Damian and Tarak. The two warriors stare at me with brutal lust. I gasp for air, and the vine tightens around my neck, then releases, the chain dangling down my body.

The vines pull back into the walls, and Damian charges forward, grabbing my wrist too tight. The Bondthrumsin my mind as I feel the true ownership of the savage beast.

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He pulls me tight against his chest, owning me, and the room molds under me, pushing me upwards to meet his kiss. I feel so small, so helpless, yet so protected against his broad muscled chest. His cock is rock hard, pressing against my body, spitting pre-cum that soaks through his robe and my pleasure dress.

Heat floods between my legs. He reaches down, groping my pussy, making me gasp and whimper as his tongue invades my mouth.

Then he pushes me. Hard. I stumble back, falling from the raised portion of the room that brought me up to meet his kiss, and vines whip out of the walls and wrap around my wrists and legs, lifting me. I'm pulled away from him, until I am trapped against the back wall, more vines wrapping around my body until I can't move an inch. The two of them are standing, staring at me, and I want them to snap. I moan as I imagine them roughly taking me against the wall, vines forcing my legs open so they can seed me hard and rough.

Tarak is panting. His hands are in balled fists, about to snap, but Damian stares at me with haughty power.

"You think I am a brutal beast. I am," he snarls. "But I am a beast on a chain, and I control the chain."

From the spot the ground raised to let me meet his kiss, a chair forms, black and slick as the room. He sits on the chair like it's a throne, staring at me. Those dark purple eyes stare straight through me. He can taste my need, smell my lust, feel my aura that's so overwhelmed with need for him I can barely think.

“I know what you need, Athena. I know all your darkest desires. You’re going to be over my lap, while I spank your ass red.” He snarls out the words, his cock spurting against his robes, and my nipples harden with lust. I’m trembling with need, feverish, rushing through my veins, and all I want is for him to come and take me.

The vines disappear. I fall on shaking legs, barely able to stand.

“I will not grab you and throw you over my lap. You will come.”

I step forward, and he snarls. “No. Strip first.”

My hands shake as I pull the dress up slowly. I’ve been nude in front of them before.

Now I’m truly naked, all my darkest desires bared to the brutes.

“On your knees. Crawl to me.” Damian’s order makes my knees buckle before I can process the words. I tremble and get on all fours.

I fight down my fear, raising my head up, looking first at Tarak, who stands behind his battle-brother, his legs planted firmly. I stare into his platinum-blue eyes and see worshipful lust.

Then I look at Damian.

His eyes are full of ownership. I crawl forward slowly, letting my hips roll. I know he’s staring at the lines of my body, letting me give myself to him. His aura is burning with lust, barely controlled, but he keeps it firmly in check through his iron will. Vines snap out from the wall, but they don’t touch me. They grab his robes, stripping him as he sits.

I stare at his muscled body, his black tattoos, the eight-pack of his chiseled abs and

the Adonis belt that leads down to his powerful cock that rears up. I stare at the wicked curve, remembering how he hit something inside me that made my mind go blank, and it's even bigger from this angle, the marble of his skin contrasted against the darkness of the room. There's a long vein running down the side, and my mouth waters as I imagine running my tongue down it, feeling it pulse with his need for me.

His balls are swollen. Bigger than grapefruits, bigger than the last time he fucked me, as if his body is telling him to produce more seed to impregnate his Fated Mate. The Bondthrumsas I imagine him unleashing inside of me, every drop of his seed shot deep inside my waiting body.

I crawl forward until I am just in front of him. I'm panting with lust. The feverish need fills my being. I want to please this brutal man, I want to give him everything he could ever want. I slowly slide my tongue out, and lean forward, when his hand comes to my neck. He wraps his huge hand around my throat, stopping me an inch from his cock. It spurts pre-cum, pearly white seed dripping down the marble shaft.

"Beg." The word is a harsh order. Saliva fills my mouth, and I don't wipe the drool that falls down my chin as I need that dick past my lips.

"I beg you, let me pleasure you with my mouth," I gasp, feeling no shame. I'm bared to him. "Master," I whisper, the word sending another thrum of pleasure up and down my spine, flooding me with heat, but it's not because of the Bond.

It's all me. I've needed the harsh protection of an Aurelian triad since before I was captured, and I need it all the more now.

"Good pet," he growls, and the Bondthrumsagain, rewarding me with pulses of pleasure as he lets me run my tongue against his huge balls, then slowly up his shaft. I flick my tongue against the huge vein as I travel up his shaft, rewarded by pulses of hardness in his already rock-hard cock as he swells up even more. I swear he's bigger

than the last time, if that's possible. I worship his cock, taking the head in my mouth, swirling my tongue instinctively and opening my jaw as much as I can to take him inside me.

His cock spurts pre-cum, salty, and it just tastes right. I crave it like I've never craved anything before. I want him to explode down my throat and fill my belly with his seed. I relax my jaw, taking more and more of his shaft, but he's too fucking big. I crave it down my throat but tears come to my eyes as I gag on his dick.

Another spurt of pre-cum shoots from the tip, and my gag reflex disappears. Damian grabs my hair, rough, and presses down on the back of my head, forcing me to take more and more of his dick. He bobs my head up and down, using me, and when I can't take it anymore, he senses me at my limit and pulls me up. I gasp for air before he roughly fists my mouth down against his too-hard shaft, sliding his dick into my throat. The Aurelian pre-cum, designed to fit huge alien dicks into too-tight human slits, lets him slide deeper than I thought possible. If he came, he would deposit ropes of thick, creamy cum directly into my stomach.

The curve of his dick presses against the back of my throat. Damian reaches down, massaging my throat, and I know he's feeling his throbbing manhood deep inside me.

Tears stream down my cheeks. I'm at my limit, and I am about to raise my hand to grab his wrist, knowing I can't stop him, when he pulls my head up. I gasp for air, then fight against his grip, needing to please him more.

He's too strong. I moan as his curved dick bobs. His fingers trail up from my throat and rest under my chin, pressing my head up and forcing me to meet his hard eyes.

"Every..." His voice comes out as an animalistic growl, fighting to spit out words. His nostrils flare, breathing in my scent, and I know he can smell my desperate arousal. "Every instinct in my body tells me to grab you and breed you. But I will

show you that I can hold back. Over my lap.” His voice becomes cold and hard as he orders me.

I stand, the taste of his pre-cum in my mouth, and pull myself over his lap. His cock is standing straight up, pressed against my side and his body as I tremble over the dominant alien’s legs. My heart pounds fast. I don’t know how much more of this I can take. It’s not pain that scares me. It’s being denied the alien’s rough, passionate mating. Every instinct in my body is telling me to ride him, to open my legs for him, to give myself to him, and his aura is burning up with controlled lust as he shows his complete mastery over himself...

And me.

“This is what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it?”

“Yes, master,” I whisper, shivering. He grabs my hair tight and raises my head so I am looking at the black wall.

It shimmers. The walls, floor and ceiling become ultra-clear mirrors, reflecting me perfectly. I can see myself small and helpless over the alpha’s lap. He presses one big hand against the small of my back, the pressure both reassuring and keeping me captive. I don’t even try to fight against it. It would be impossible to think of escaping the alpha.

I stare at myself, barely able to believe this is my life, but it’s so real. There’s no detachment from this moment. I’m present, completely helpless, yet shockingly at ease with the warrior. I know he’d never hurt me...

Unless that’s exactly what I want.

The mirrors reflect each other, so I can see myself from behind. My pussy is gleaming wet, and I can’t help but spread my legs ever so slightly, presenting my sex to the alien warriors.

Damian runs his hand over my ass, his fat fingers grazing my wet slit. I moan as he teases the sensitive folds of my sex. Then he slides one big finger past my lips and pulls it back. His marble finger gleams with my lust. He brings it to his mouth and licks my arousal from his finger, his eyes rolling back in need.

His aura is filled with desire so intense I can't believe he hasn't lost control.

If I was him, I would have grabbed me and thrown me against the floor, rutting me like an animal and leaving me gasping and stretched, seed leaking from every hole.

Tarak pulls his robe off. His cock rears up, and he snaps. He growls like a beast and rushes towards me, his eyes intent on my tight little hole. He's going to roughly take me while I'm trapped over his battle-brother's lap.

Vines whip out, wrapping around his biceps and legs, and he's pulled back when he's only a foot away, snarling as he's lifted into the air. He's a slaving beast lost to his lust, ready to claim me.

"You see, my pet? Even Tarak cannot control himself. That is why I am the leader. Because I have total control." The words ring out like steel. His nostrils flare again, and his cock spurts, streams of pre-cum landing on my naked ass and dripping between my legs.

I'm panting. "Please, please," I gasp, begging him, needing him to let go of his control and take me. I need the beast to let himself off the chain.

"I promised you a punishment." He raises his hand, and my eyes fix on it. He looks so fucking huge with me over his lap. It comes down in a hard arc, and this time, there's no gentleness to it.

"Oh!" I gasp at the sudden rush of pain and heat on my left ass cheek. His red handprint is forming already. He raises his hand again, and my body tenses involuntarily.

He smiles, a cruel, knowing smirk, as he sees my body tense up. "You will obey without hesitation. We are at war, Athena, and in war, a second's delay..." he growls.

He's fighting to speak, and a strange thread of fear pulses through his aura, overcoming all the lust and rage for a moment before he gets control. "I need to keep you safe, my Mate. I need you to listen and obey without question."

His aura swells with protectiveness, this need to shield me from the violence of the universe, and I melt against him. "Yes, sir," I say, and his hand comes down again. I gasp at the sudden pain, but I crave this. I've wanted this for years and never thought I could truly have it.

"Count. Ten spanks for bad behavior."

He brings his hand up again. I wince, but I can't pull my eyes away. He brings it down hard. "Three!" I gasp, heat flaring in my bottom.

"No. Start at one."

Tarak snarls, fighting against the vines, completely lost to the lust. Seeing him in the mirror, his cock spurting pre-cum, his eyes fixated on my pussy, makes me feel more desired than I ever have in my life.

"That's not fair," I gasp.

"I don't want to be fair with you, my sweet little pet. I want to own you. Every part of you." He brings his hand up again, and my ass clenches, then he brings it down hard on my left cheek, right on the spot where his red handprint is forming. The slap of flesh on flesh is so fucking hot.

I resist the urge to say four. "One," I whimper.

"Good pet," he says, and he brings his hand up again. I moan in pain and fear when he brings it down, but instead of spanking me, he presses his fat thumb into my slit.

I've never been so wet. He curls it, and I moan out in pleasure, pressing my body against him, needing so much more.

Then he lifts his hand and brings it down in quick succession. I can't even count. He spans me hard and fast, until tears stream down my cheeks and I go limp. All the pain has a dark edge of pleasure to it, the Bond converting it into deep need.

The heat on my bottom is nothing compared to the heat between my legs. Tarak fight against the vines, pulling them hard enough he can stroke his huge dick, staring straight at my sopping wetness as he grips his cock tight.

I can't speak.

I can't count. I'm a trembling pool of a submission, and I can only hope the alpha has mercy.

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“You want me to snap. Say it,” he snarls.

“I want you to let yourself free of your chain,” I whimper, and vines shoot out from the walls. They throw me into the air, wrapping around my thighs and presenting my wetness to him. Damian stands, his biceps clenching as he rubs his cock against me.

“You want to bear my son.” His words ring out, and I bite my lip, scared by how true they are.

“Get me pregnant, Damian,” I beg, and that makes him snap.

He shoves his dick into me in one violent thrust, his hands grabbing my waist, pulling me to meet his thrust as he impales me. It hurts so good, stretching me open, claiming the deepest parts of me, the Bond and his alien pre-cum letting him thrust all the way into me.

His curved dick rubs that spot inside me, and I clench down against his shaft instinctively, tightening as he takes me. He loses control, his purple eyes staring into mine as he ruts me like an animal.

He was built for this. His thighs flex, his muscled buttocks power his cock deep inside me, his body created to fuck me hard and fast. Again and again he slams his too big cock into me, the slap of flesh against flesh mixing with my own desperate moans.

His eyes glow as he transmits images into my mind. It’s me, but I’m changed. My breasts are swollen up beyond belief, my areolas three times as wide, dripping with

milk as my belly is obscenely huge with his son. My mouth goes wide as I see it as clearly as if I am there, then I snap back to reality.

I cum almost instantly, as if he forced the orgasm to well up in my body, screaming out as my pussy clenches tighter, miking the alpha, and he can't hold back. His dick hardens even more, splitting me open as he seeds me. The Bond rewards me as I cum again, giving a deep, dark edge of pleasure to my orgasm as it washes over my mind. He leans forward, kissing me, his tongue invading my mouth as he shoots jets of cum deep into me.

In the moment of his release, he loses all control of the room. The vines disappear, and I fall.

I'm caught by Tarak. He grabs me, pulling me from his battle-brother and seed drips from my pussy as he rams me against the back wall. My breath catches in my throat as he fucks me hard and fast, snarling and growling until he finds his own release. The Bond thrums, and I go limp against him, letting him claim me completely.

I'm a panting mess when he pulls his still half-hard cock from me.

He takes me in his arms, cradling me, bringing me out of the pleasure room and up the stairs to the shower. I'm still trembling as the two huge beasts turn the shower on, each standing on either side of me, squeezing me between them.

I know, deep down, they didn't get me pregnant, because the Bond is still there, dormant for now, but never truly sated.

They wash me, stroke my muscles, massaging me, and clean my hair with fragrant shampoo. I can barely stand on my own, but they support me. Damian kisses the back of my neck, his aura pulsing with protective possessiveness.

“I’m so lucky to have a Mate like you,” he says, whispering in my ear, and I smile, shakily.

“I’m lucky to be protected by you two,” I say back, meaning it. Fuck. That was the hottest experience of my life, and we’re just getting started.

The Bond enhances a human lifespan, letting them live as long as the near-ageless aliens, who grow old slowly, centuries turning into millennia. I still can barely believe that this is my life. I’d nearly given up before I sensed the alien triad in my mind. I thought about ending it a hundred times, and it was only knowing that they might come save me, that the vision was real and I didn’t go crazy in my sorrow, that kept me going.

Now I’m with them, and it’s more than I could have ever imagined.

The shower cuts off, and Damian grabs a huge white towel. He wraps it around me and lifts me into the big bed.

The two warriors lie on either side of me. I’m the safest woman in the universe. I smile at Damian, running my hands over his chest.

I smile at him. “You said good and evil don’t matter, but I know you’re good,” I say, gently stroking his muscles, my hands touching his myriad scars.

“I’m whatever I need to be to keep you safe,” he says, and kisses me, softly, his hands running through my hair. Tarak nuzzles my neck from behind, then massages the back of my neck, his hands certain.

Damian pulls back. “Thank you, Athena.”

“For what?”

“Since Raython died, I lost control. I wasn’t fit to lead a triad. All I cared about was revenge...and you. You gave me back my strength.”

“You had it in you,” I say, biting my lip. It’s strange to have a fierce warrior speaking like this.

“And you brought it back. I love you, Athena.”

My eyes widen as his aura pulses with affection. Tarak kisses the back of my head. “I love you,” he says, his voice in my mind.

“I love you both,” I say. It’s soon, but it’s true, the threads of adoration changing to something deeper. I can accept these two.

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I know they can give me a true life, away from fear, and that together, we can bring out the best in each other.

I press myself against his strong chest, and he wraps his arm around me. Sleep comes easy. I let myself press against the certainty of my two protectors, and I fall into calmness.

22

Damian

I look down at my Mate.

She loves me.

And that love is only going to grow. We will have thousands of years together. I imagine when she finally births my first son. I imagine bringing him to the yard, giving him a wooden sword, and letting him watch me and Tarak fight each other.

Gods. If only Raython were there to teach him grappling and wrestling. A little wave of grief pulses up, but it's nothing compared to the joy I feel at having my Mate, safe and sound, against me.

I drift in and out of sleep as darkness falls over the planet. Athena's breathing is safe and secure. Moonlight streams through the window when there is a knock on our gates like a battering ram.

She wakes up, panicked. “Who is it? What’s happening?”

I control my alarm, presenting certainty to her through my aura. I will not let her be scared. I pull her from me as Tarak slowly rises. He wants to jump to his feet and grab his Orb-Blade from the table, but he controls his movements so as not to scare her.

I walk to the window and look out at our front gate. I see a man I’ve fought with before. The man I sent the message to, trusting him to protect those five women. His Reaver is sitting outside of our gates.

“General Ra’al.”

“Are we in danger?” asks Athena.

“No. He is the only who sent those two triads to protect the women. He is good.”

His slate-grey eyes move up to the window. They stare up at me, his battle-brothers standing war-ready at his sides, and I quickly pull on a set of robes, throwing on a belt and letting my Orb-Blade dangle. Athena’s eyes dart to my dormant blade.

“I always wear it. It doesn’t mean we’re in danger,” I say to her, and she accepts it, nodding. She pulls herself up from the bed, walking to the window, her head peeking over. General Ra’al lowers his head in respect, not wanting to aggravate us by looking at our Mate.

“Let’s see what he wants,” says Tarak.

“Aye,” I answer, and we walk down the stairs together and go to the front gates. They open soundlessly, but his triad doesn’t step in. General Ra’al is a huge man, well over seven feet tall, and broad as an ox. He is wearing combat pants but no robes, his chest

bare, and he has double honors, yet no mate.

Yet.

He hasn't shaved. When we fought for him, he always had a bare jaw, but now he has grizzled black and grey stubble. His black hair is cut short. To his right stands a hulking beast, with a thick beard and shaved head. He's not lean like me, his body broad and powerful, slabs of muscle with a line of fat. He looks more like Raython, a huge brawler without fear. The third is royal and haughty, his cold grey eyes staring at our brands first, then the color of our irises, without even a flash of respect or jealousy.

"General Ra'al."

"Damian. Tarak. You know my battle-brothers, Orr and Kriz." Orr, the big one, nods when he hears his name.

The moonlight glows against their marble skin. I can sense the fear in Athena's aura. "Your men protected the five women well. We thank you."

"Yes. They were given to them tonight. A good reward for loyal service. They chose each other," says Ra'al.

"It's late," says Tarak.

Kriz raises his hands. "Forgive us for the disturbance. At the ceremony, Obsidian was there. He showed us ours."

"Your Mate? Why don't you go to her?"

"Because her planet is about to be swallowed by Scorp. They descend on her like a

horde of locusts,” snarls Orr, his hand flicking unconsciously to the hilt of his Orb-Axe. My eyes dart to him, warning him, and he grunts, removing his hand.

“We move out in a week. Trebulous is our first goal,” says Kriz.

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Tarak's aura spikes. "That's on the border of the Aurelian Empire."

"Aye. And they lost their protection. They're all going to die because of their heartless Queen. Only we can save them."

I look at General Ra'al, to try to get a read on him. He is staring at me, but there's a strange look in his eyes, as if he is thinking of something else. "You here?"

"Watch your tongue," growls Orr. "Don't question us."

Showing emotion is weakness. Even anger. It's beaten out of us at a young age in Academy. If you're the weakest link, you let down your squad, but even emotion would be better than the blankness in General Ra'al's eyes. He doesn't register that I spoke to him directly, his slate-grey eyes distant.

I gamble. I need to confide in him to get to the heart of why he's here. I look into his eyes. "My first decade serving the Empire. I was gunning for a couple of Toad raiders that hit an Empire-protected mining camp. Commander called us back. I pretended not to hear. We were lured into a trap. Took three solid hits, pierced our armor, I made a hard landing on the planet below. Hit into a rock wall. A jagged piece smashed through the window and hit me on the skull. That's how I got this scar," I say, touching the familiar pale patch on my forehead. I do it when I need to remind myself I'm on borrowed time.

"I lost time. Nothing felt real the next three years. Ra'al, are you here?"

Orr steps forward, his hands balled fists. "I said, don't question—"

Ra'al raises his hand. "I'm not here. I'm with her. We're at the wrong place, the wrong time right now. I'm with her." His eyes focus in on me. "I need warriors like you and Tarak. My mate is on Trebulous, in the path of a thousand Scorp Org-Ships. I will not lie. Many will die. You found your Mate, and I don't expect you to come—but we leave in one week, once Obsidian has recovered and can guide us through the rift."

"How many jumps?" I ask.

"Two. But that is not all. There will be more. This is why I came to you. I know you lost a strong man because of the Empire. The wave of Scorp will be on the Aurelian Empire soon. They will be divided. They cannot protect themselves. We strike. Into their heart. Fast, swift vengeance. Obsidian will be placed on the throne of Colossus and you can avenge your battle-brother."

Tarak loses his quick-witted mind, his aura pulsing up with anger as he imagines cutting down Aurelian Empire soldiers.

Kriz stares at my eyes. "Be careful. You Bonded your Mate. You might not come back to her."

"Careful with your tongue, now," I warn him, and he nods, stepping back so as not to provoke me.

Ra'al cocks his head. "I come to you because you are strong warriors who may help me earn my mate. But that is not all I come for. We will lead the charge into the Aurelian Empire. I do not care for glory anymore. I do not care for honor. All I know is that billions will die to put Obsidian on the throne, and trillions will be saved through his strength. We're going into a sea of red blood."

A stab of grief hits me. I can see it, as clear as when it happened.

Raython raising his hand, watching himself disappearing, terror obliterating him as he faced an enemy he could not see. The void took him. It was too cruel. He felt his Mate, for a brief, beautiful moment, but because of the Aurelian Empire, he never held her like I did.

He never felt her love.

Rage boils up in me, but it's controlled. She gave me that back. I'll use it to stab my sword into the heart of the Empire. I'll level their cities. I'll liberate their worlds and put them under the protection of men strong enough to withstand the coming storm.

We'll save lives...

And avenge Raython.

"He guided us through the void to find our Mate," says Tarak. "If he can guide ships, that's the only way to keep the universe safe."

Ra'al nods. "This is why I serve Obsidian. Not only for my Mate, but for the fate of the universe. Small teams could react to Scorp. The Aurelian Empire cannot do this, and even when shifting was safe, they did not reclaim Wild Space.

I nod. "Our Mate was born in unclaimed territory, and she was captured by slavers because of it."

Orr grabs the hilt of his Orb-Axe, growling. "We will unite Wild Space under Obsidian's banner. Tell me, do you fight by our side in this holy war?"

Ra'al's eyes are far-off again, but they snap to me. "We go in one week. Obsidian must regain his strength. Would you join us?"

My hand clenches on the hilt of my Orb-Blade as I remember my battle-brother melting before my eyes. The warship we left was ordered to cut us down like dogs as we fled, ordered by Queen Jasmine and her cruel triad.

Emperor Raegan. Karan. Baldur. The three men who allowed this weakness to happen, who let planets overthrow their protection and billions die to the Scorp. Those three men who ordered that all deserters be shot down without remorse, that all of us be placed on the Kill List.

“They have to pay for what they did.” I state the words like cold iron. It is not rage that boils up and makes the decision. I am of sound mind.

I will get my vengeance.

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“We leave in one week. Prepare yourself.” Orr and Kriz turn, but Ra’al stays, his eyes drifting upwards. He doesn’t look at the window at my mate, instead staring off into the distance of space. He blinks in recognition as he sees me again.

“Damian. Tarak,” he says, as if greeting us once more, but then he turns, entering his Reaver.

It takes off into the night like a ghost. I feel Tarak’s aura. There’s no more pain. No more rage. He’s a mirror of me, a sheet of glacial ice. We will be cold like this until we break the Aurelian Empire under our fists.

We are war machines. And we will be until Raython is avenged and the universe is tamed.

We walk back up the stairs. Athena has her hands on the window sill, staring out, watching the Reaver disappear into the night sky. She turns, goosebumps over her pale, naked flesh.

“Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong, my Mate.” I state the words with iron precision.

“What did they want?”

“The war begins. We pledged our swords to Obsidian. We leave in one week.”

Her eyes widen. A surge of pain goes through her aura. If I was not a ball of steel, it

would wound me. “You’re going? You’re going to leave me here?”

I nod. “Yes. In one week. You will be safe here. No one would touch a holy triad’s Mate, gone to war. The battlefield is no place for you.”

“A triad? There’s just two of you. And if you go...what if only one comes back? Or none? I love you,” she says, her heart breaking, her eyes wet. I see the pain in her eyes, and I must be strong.

As she speaks, each word wounds me.

“I want to tell you to go. I want to tell you to get the hell out of my bedroom and let me sleep, but that’s not what I want. I don’t want you to leave me. How can you? You’d leave me alone here, terrified you’re not coming back?”

“Raython was alone when he died. We stood next to him, but he died alone.”

Tarak steps towards her, and she takes a step back. “We told you he disappeared when we Orb-Shifted. It wasn’t that clean. He evaporated in front of our eyes, his skin dissolving, a brave, noble warrior turned to nothing. He died badly, Athena. A man I fought next to for centuries. He never had fear. In those last moments...he felt a primal terror. He was terrified because he tasted you, in our vision, and he knew, in those last seconds, he would never touch you.”

I grunt. “We will go. And we will come back victors. The Aurelian Empire must fall for order to be restored in the universe.”

“You don’t care about order.”

“There’s ten billion souls on Trebulous about to be engulfed by Scorp. That is our first mission. To save that planet.”

“You’re not going to save that planet.” The grief and fear in her voice has gotten cold.

“No. We’re clearing the planet then spearheading the attack into the Aurelian Empire. Victory will be swift. They cannot Orb-Shift. With Obsidian guiding us, we can.”

She shakes her head. “So that’s it? You’re going to follow a War-God in a quest for vengeance and leave me here?”

“You don’t know what we’re up against. This Queen Jasmine is not a stupid woman. She has twelve sons. She doesn’t care about her Empire. She cares about saving their lives. She would bring out the planet killers to end this war. She’d kill anyone. And I understand it. To have a son...”

Tarak steps closer to her. This time she doesn’t step back. “We must act quickly to end the threat before it appears. Obsidian can end this war before it begins.”

Athena reaches up to her collar. She undoes the clasp and throws it to the ground. “You can take me in front of the crowd tomorrow night. You can show the universe you own your Mate, and that you leave her.”

I step forward, and she holds her head up, defiant. “Don’t speak like this, Athena. We will return.”

“Maybe you will. Maybe you won’t. I felt that good in you, Damian...Tarak...in Raython as well. That good is pure, but it’s lost.” She smiles, sadly. “I hope you’ll get me pregnant tomorrow. Not because I want to be safe, or be holy, or have these religious fanatics worship me. Because I’m alone. You’re standing there, in this room with me, but I’m alone.” She swallows hard, tears coming to her eyes. I know I’m causing her this torment. I know I have to be strong.

She smiles, the saddest smile I've ever seen. "I can't just live for myself. When I was captured by Toad, I thought about ending it all. Then I felt you three. The thought of you coming to rescue me, the four of us together...that gave me something to live for. I'm strong. I can stand being tortured, starved, I can stand it all, if there's a reason. But I can't stand the thought of living without any light, without anyone, without any purpose..." She trails off.

"I don't expect you to understand. Not yet. When we are victorious, you will." I state the words boldly, knowing them to be true. When we have crushed our opposition and brought the universe under our control, we will be given a planet—a whole sector—where we will rule as kings and queen.

"I understand. The three men I felt kept me going. When things got dark, you three kept me going. But those men died with Raython. And whether you come back victorious or die, those three men are never coming back. I have only one hope. That your son would have that goodness, and I can find a way to protect it."

23

Athena

The moonlight streams into the room, reflecting off the marble skin of the two beautiful warriors who told me they loved me. They do, in their own way, but they are alien to me. And now that love is gone. There's no place for emotion in war.

They stand in front of me, but there's nothing left of them. Not even white-hot rage that means they're alive. They're just these cold, glacial presences, like standing on a lake of ice in the darkness, stretching out so far that it seems endless, the wind whipping against your body so you know you'll never get out.

I stare out the window. The Coliseum dwarfs the city, and the huge tower of Obsidian rises up, proud and strong, the moonlight gleaming off it.

I thought I was alone before. When I felt their presence in my mind in my vision then it disappeared, I felt so alone, detaching myself as I toiled, just trying to get by another day.

"Athena. When you are with our son, you will be more than holy. You will be a savior of our species. If you accept it, then the seed will take root. We are worthy of you. We will prove it in battle. I will conquer planets. We will be kings of an entire sector, and you will be our queen. You will rule, and our sons will be princes." His voice swells up with pride, the only emotion other than coldness he's felt.

"I don't want to rule. Gods, don't you two understand? I don't even want to boss

around Laura and Matil. I...please. I felt the good in you. We can start a life. A real life. We can leave this planet. They won't come after us, right? You...you found a way to protect those five women...you can find a way to protect us..." It's my last plea, my last, heartbroken begging, before I'll learn from them and become ice cold to push down the pain.

I look at them, and I know it's not the Priests I need protection from. It's the cold need for revenge that will take them from me.

They're standing feet away from me, but their faces are blank. I feel their auras in my mind. Frozen, icy auras, and I'm more alone now than I ever was before.

"Let's sleep. We have a big day tomorrow," I say, and pull myself into bed. The two men come, silent, and I let them hold me.

"We do not have to go through with this." Damian's voice is flat.

"We do. I can't help what my body feels. But I beg of you, when you're taking me, reconsider. Think about all you have to lose. I don't want you to go to war and come back victorious. I don't want you to leave."

Silence answers me. It tells me everything I need to know.

Their bodies are warm, but even as they press their muscled bodies against me, they're distant.

I let myself cry. I let myself sob with grief for what could have been, and Tarak holds me tight against his chest, until I have no more energy, and I fall into darkness.

When I wake up, it's already mid-day. Tarak and Damian are next to me. They've been awake for some time, I can tell, but they didn't move, lying like statues so as not

to disturb my slumber.

I pull myself out of their arms in silence, and go to the bathroom, washing my face, brushing my teeth and my hair, preparing.

Tonight I will be given to them in front of the crowd. If I knew they were staying with me, it would be erotically charged, the stands packed with huge alien soldiers aching to have a mate of their own, watching me rutted in front of them.

Instead, it will be a moment of desperation. We have a week. I will not live my thousands of years of life alone. I will bear a son, and that will give me purpose, something greater than myself.

Otherwise I can barely stomach the thought of another year, let alone decades or centuries.

I walk back into the bedroom, ignoring the two men. They say nothing to me as I pull on a green pleasure dress and leave them, walking into the garden. I can smell delicious hot coffee and fresh pastries from the kitchen, but I couldn't eat. I sit on the bench, staring at the growing things, and feel so empty and distant.

Why?

Why couldn't I be enough?

Aurelians search the universe for their Fated Mate. Now they have me, and I'm not enough for them.

They're not human. They were born on Colossus. The first one hundred years of their lives, spent training in the Academy, learning war tactics, forged them into killing machines. The second century, spent in the Aurelian Empire's army, fighting and

killing. And these two went back for more.

War is all they knew. They tasted something else, and they think they can just put me on the shelf, to pick me up when they come back. Maybe they don't understand now, but they will.

When they leave, they are gone from my heart forever. If they come back, and I have their son, I'll spend the rest of my life making sure the empty iciness of their beings doesn't poison him.

"Oh Gods," I whisper to myself, because I love them. I love the men they used to be, before the void took the best parts of them away.

They're broken. I thought I could be the glue that could bind them together again, but what I pieced together became cold, icy soldiers.

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I jolt back to reality when I hear a humming, energetic buzz from inside the house. It's like I'm in a trance. I need to know what it is. I walk through the open side doors of the house. Laura is in the kitchen, with a tray of croissants, and she says something to me I don't hear as I walk to the main entrance hall of the manor.

The sound is coming from below. I walk around the main staircase, to the second set of stairs the leads below. I hear a grunt of pain, then a hiss of energy, and I walk down the stairs, stopping when I see through a glass wall.

Damian and Tarak are clad in black armor, thick and reinforced, and they have their Orb-Blades drawn. They circle each other, violent dancers, waiting for an opening. I know they can feel me here, but they ignore my presence, their icy auras focused on their training.

Damian slips, and Tarak darts forward, but it was a ploy. Damian twists, letting the blade singe his chest before slamming the hilt of his blade in the back of Tarak's neck. He falls in a heap. Damian extends his hand, pulling him up, and they begin again.

They're training with live blades, because they know they will be up against the soldiers of the Aurelian Empire. Tears stream down my cheeks. I know they can feel my pain. Perhaps they are exposing themselves to it, that when they are on the battlefield, they will more easily be able to tune me out. They've grown at least two inches taller than when I met them, and their muscles strain against the now ill-fitting armor.

They used the Bond to grow into the perfect war machines. They circle each other

with murderous grace, slamming their Orb-Blades together. Then as one, they deactivate the energy of their blades, leaving only the black metal, and throw them aside, grappling with each other. Tarak slams his fist into Damian's chin, and I feel the pain through the aura of the man, but see nothing on his face as they train, wrestling and fist-fighting.

I turn away, walking up the stairs, and stand at the bedroom window, watching the sun casting its warmth over the city. I stare at the Arena of Blood, imagining myself in front of the crowd as the two beastly men take me, hard.

Despite everything, my body reacts. My nipples harden against the pleasure dress, which strokes me with a thousand little fingers, tantalizing me. Deep down, I ache for them.

I wipe the tears from my face.

I'll face my fate. I'll be with them, and then I'll be alone, and no matter what, I'll live for the hope of a son. I ache for it, and the Bondthrums in my mind, encouraging me to take their seed, a pleasant, powerful sensation that I control. Even the Bond can't overwhelm me now.

I'm strong, and I don't need to detach myself anymore.

I'll face the braying hordes watching me in the Arena of Blood. I'll let their energy wash over me as my two warriors take me, and I'll face my future.

Alone.

I lean down, grabbing the fallen silver collar, and pick it up, staring at myself in the mirror. I put it around my neck and close it shut. The leash dangles, just waiting for Damian to lock me to him. I look beautiful. Fragile. And I'll appear so tiny when the

two beasts are taking me. How will they do it? Will they press me down against the fine black sand, spreading my legs and taking me? Will one hold me up, spreading me open for the other?

Or will they put me on my hands and knees, so I can stare out at the stands filled with triads, all of them staring at me as I am seeded by the two brutal beasts?

Heat flushes between my legs as I imagine Damian linking me to his wrist and showing the universe I belong to him. I used to believe. Now I don't belong to anything at all.

He'll attach me to his wrist, but we will not be joined. He gave up everything for war. For revenge. To crush the men who took his battle-brother, and to rule over a conquered universe. They'll bring peace. They'll protect innocents like the people on the space station I grew up on. I can't hate them. The only thing I feel is pain at what we could have had.

The two of them gave up everything.

Even me.

24

Athena

I walk with my head high through the black cobblestone streets of Obsidious. Aurelians stop in their training as we pass, a holy Bonded triad and her two warrior protectors. We could have flown. I wanted to feel the hard roads under my sandaled feet before they sink into the fine sands of the Arena of Blood.

I thought Damian would leash me to him. Instead he lets me walk with the silver

collar around my neck, the unlinked bracelet on his wrist. He won't pull me to this last, sorrowful mating. He'll let me choose my own fate.

I changed into a black pleasure dress. It felt right. The cool night air strokes my body as we walk. The street is cleared for our route, but to either side, other streets towards the Arena of Blood are filled with triads walking, some with women leashed to their side.

They're coming for one thing.

To see a Bonded Mate taken in front of the crowd. To imagine the day when they too will get their Mate.

And to see if I earn the golden collar of a seeded Mate.

Damian and Tarak follow a step behind, Damian to my right, Tarak to my left. Guards bowed heads as we passed the main gates, and even Fanatics knuckle brands, staring at us with religious fervor. Surrounded by thousands of alien warriors, not one would dare lay a hand on me.

It should have been exciting to walk past Aurelians wearing only a thin pleasure dress, my body on display yet completely safe with my two guardians. Instead I feel nothing.

We walk in silence. Even our auras are empty until the black Coliseum towers over us. A triad of soldiers lets us in the side door, which leads to the space between the half-ring of the Coliseum and Obsidian's palace, a thin hallway between two towering structures. Above, there is a bridge leading from the top of the Coliseum's tower to the highest point of his imposing, gothic palace.

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I'm told the Arena of Blood has another name. The proving grounds.

What will it prove for us? I don't know anymore. I'm hollow. This should have been one of the most thrilling moments of my life. I should have been trembling with nervousness and lust, imagining thousands of hungry eyes staring at me from the crowds while my two brutal protectors claim me publicly, showing the universe I belong to them.

They don't own me anymore. My heart, they took, but they let go. They don't own my future. I don't love the men drowned in vengeance, who plan to shift from world to world, guided by a War-God with hatred in his veins. I love the men they used to be. The men who gave me hope in my captivity, the men I thought had come back when I felt a flash of them after the pleasure room, their protectiveness overwhelming everything as they chose me—if only for a night, the most magical, blissful night, until I was woken by those fists like battering rams on the gate that shattered my future.

We stand under the bridge, and I look up, space split by black stone. On either side, trillions of stars sparkle, uncaring of my fate.

I stand there a moment, looking up, and Damian steps closer to me. "If you do not wish to go through with this, we can return to the estate," he says, his voice formal. It's the first words he's said since asking me if I wanted to fly or walk to the Coliseum.

"I will go with this," I reply, my tone cold.

My hope is that his seed takes root, him or Tarak, and that I don't have to spend the week before they go to battle mating them desperately. They won't have much time for me. They'll be at training drills and strategy meetings, leaving their Fated Mate at home. I'll have desperate, sweaty moments with them, aching for them to leave me with something when they go.

Otherwise I'll be alone. The Bond will torment me, until the two men are killed in battle or return, more distant than ever. It's not the torment of the Bond I fear. It's looking up at the stars and seeing only a baleful glare staring back at me, looking out at my huge estate and seeing only cold black walls, staring at myself in the mirror, aging slowly, so slowly, every year more purposeless than the last.

Another triad opens the gates under the Coliseum. They're branded on their foreheads as well. The Priests have their men at every strategic point near the palace of their War-God. Maybe to protect him. Maybe because they don't know what his next move will be.

Will I be safe here? What if his mad attack, leaping from planet to planet and penetrating the Aurelian Empire, fails? The Aurelian Empire may have weakened, but they're still a fierce force. Would I be safe here? Or will even Obsidious be brought into the fray?

The three Fanatics keep their heads bowed, knuckles on their foreheads, until we walk into the dim hallway under the Coliseum. At the far end are the huge portcullis gates, like the maw of a dragon, and the muted noise of the crowd streams through.

I kick my sandals off my feet and stand, digging my toes into the fine black sand. To the left of the tunnel, there is a massive black cauldron that looms over me, with three long metal poles sticking up from it. That is how new Followers of Obsidian get the marks that made my stomach churn when I first saw them on Damian's and Tarak's chests.

More wolves for the War-God's pack.

To the right is the towering, ornate mirror, ringed by black metal and gleaming black-blue Orbs. Three Aurelian Fanatics stand straight-backed next to it, protecting the ancient technology that lets triads of men go through space, facing the void under the guidance of the War-God himself.

I know I am standing under the dais where the Priests stood, and that at the top of the tower, Obsidian himself may be sitting at his throne, next to his half-men, half-wolf battle-brothers. Obsidian is terrifying, but he guided Damian and Tarak to save me.

I hope he guides the warships my men will be on safely through the void. I hope that they do not die as their battle-brother did. That death ruined my two men. If I felt their terror as they were ripped apart by the void, I fear I might lose the parts of me that are still good. If I am going to raise a son on this cold world, I need to be stronger than Damian and Tarak. I need to keep myself even if they're cut down on a foreign battlefield, or ripped to shreds by missiles.

We pass the Fanatics guarding the mirror. They knuckle their foreheads, and a war horn sounds. The portcullis gates slide open. I keep my head up, staring straight forward, and the pleasure dress swishes with my steps as I enter the arena I was pulled into through that mirror-gate what feels like a lifetime ago.

The half-circle of the Coliseum's walls rise before me. The stands are packed. Aurelian triads gleam white against the black stone, their marble skin contrasted to their black robes. All are branded. Some have the fierce half-filled-in brands that mark honored men, men who killed for the Priests and the Old Ways, men who want to earn their Mate as Damian and Tarak did.

I hope they keep her.

The cold balls of the auras of my two men follow me as I walk into the arena. Above are trillions of stars, and drones that hover, filming me to broadcast me to the universe. Every Aurelian of the Empire waiting for war will see the Followers of Obsidian rewarded with the one thing they want more than life itself, a Bonded Mate.

Those cold balls will never go from my mind, unless they die. I'll learn to push them out. I'll learn to detach myself from them, so I do not go mad when I feel them in battle, when I feel them braving the rift to travel through reality to strike the Aurelian Empire. How many planets do they have to conquer before they get to Colossus? How many times will they risk their lives, gambling for revenge?

I never wanted them to hurt again. Damian has fresh bruises on his chest from grappling. Tarak has a new cut on his wrist where his battle-brother's Orb-Blade nearly took his hand off. They are training with live weapons, preparing themselves to go up against warriors of their own species.

I push that out of my mind. I have only one purpose here. To take their seed, so that something may grow. So that all this pain and fear could be worth something.

The crowd bays, huge warriors yelling in approval as they see the silver collar around my neck that proclaims me a holy, Bonded Mate. Slate-grey eyes fixate on me.

I turn. Damian and Tarak are standing like statues, waiting. Behind them are the open gates and the flat back wall of the arena. My eyes stroll up the black granite walls, until I get to the raised dais. It's filled with priests. Even Priest Rataro is there, with a new triad of guards. They look down, some with thin smiles of approval.

Above them, at the top of the tower, the War-God stands. His two black shadows are behind him. They are in their Aurelian form, but I saw them first when they stalked in the arena, wolves bigger than horses as Obsidian kept the gate open long enough for Damian to return with five souls, five women who would have lived lives of torment

on that horrid Toad planet if it wasn't for the rescue.

Obsidian will lead these fanatical warriors, an army of wolves to crush the Aurelian Empire.

I must hope they succeed, for the sake of the two men linked to me.

The crowd cheers. Stoic Aurelian warriors raise back their heads and howl as I walk to the center of the arena.

How many men have died on these black sands?

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How many of the strong warriors in the stands will have to die before order is restored?

I bite my lips as I scan the crowds. The way they are all staring at me is addictive. The pleasure dress is sheer, and my body is on display. Some triads have women chained to their wrists, with dull, iron collars. Some are in pleasure dresses. Some are naked, their bodies exposed. The Aurelians with women hold them possessively. I see a woman stare at me, lick her lips, then pull herself closer to one of the huge alien warriors. He leans down to kiss her, groping her as his lust is inflamed by the sight of me.

The pleasure dress ignites, rushing over my body, teasing and touching me. I let myself sink into lust. I used to detach myself from my emotions, making myself distant in my own mind. Now I try desperately to fall into lust, begging the Bond to thrum and put me in heat. I need to stop thinking, stop hurting, and lose myself in the strength of the two beastly men for one of the last times.

I blink as I see Jola and Lelita in the stands, near the front. Both are on leashes, attached to the guardian triad that watched over them in the hospital. I smile as I see their empty brands, their clear foreheads, knowing that I did one good thing. I let them choose men, instead of being sold to brutes. They were taken last night, just as I will be, and hordes of men must have watched them given to the alien triad.

They meet my eyes, and Jola gives me a smile, running her hand over the chest of the leader of the triad who she is linked to by her collar.

I imagine Damian inside me, growling as he takes me, and my nipples harden into

points. My need for them is almost enough to drown my heartbreak and pain.

The crowd silences. I turn. Damian and Tarak are staring at me, lust building in their auras. I cling to it. It's so much better than ice.

Obsidian has raised a fist. His pale skin has a network of black veins, his forearm flexing as he raises it above his head. The only sound is the slight buzzing of the drones that broadcast us to the universe.

I won't just be bred in front of the crowd. Our mating will be shown to the universe, trillions able to tune in to see the reward of a loyal servant of the War-God.

"Damian and Tarak. These two men left the Aurelian Empire and earned double honors. I guided them through the gate to win their Mate. They came back with her. They saved five others. You watched them given to noble warriors last night. Now you will witness a new spectacle."

Obsidian's voice is deep and hypnotic. We're a hundred feet below him, but I swear I can see his huge black eyes and the trillions of stars in them, and I'm pulled into his gaze.

"You will witness a holy Mate taken by her men. Let her be blessed with a son on this night!" His voice growls, and I hear the undertone of rage.

His own pregnant mate was kidnapped and stolen from him by Queen Jasmine. He would trade places with my two men in an instant, letting them rule while he took his woman.

The Bond is dormant in my mind. I reach out to it, aching for it to overwhelm me with dark pleasure and need, but it waits. I thought it would drown me in bliss and lust, urging me to take their seed. Instead I have to rely on my own aching need for

them.

I look at the two proud warriors and hold back tears. Damian, with his savage strength, standing straight-backed and proud, his purple eyes gleaming. He told me I gave him back control. I pray this control will stop him from throwing away his life recklessly in battle, that he might return, not for my sake, but for his.

Tarak, noble and strong, his platinum-blue eyes gleaming with adoration for me. It cracks through the ice of his aura, golden tendrils crushed by the glacial weight of loyalty to his dead battle-brother. I don't know how he can feel that love and still go into battle. I only know he made his choice, and I've made mine.

I pull the black pleasure dress from my body, unashamed in front of thousands of eyes. Their yells of approval are so distant. I get on all fours in the fine black sand, arching my ass up for my two men.

There's a growl from behind me as Tarak's aura boils up with lust. He moves his robes aside and takes me from behind, gripping my hips and pressing the head of his cock against my slit. His cock spurts Aurelian pre-cum, mixing with my growing arousal as he slides his dick into me. There's no gentleness to him. He grabs my hips hard, fucking me with hard, powerful thrusts that make my body shake.

The crowd is staring at me, and fever rushes through my veins, my body ultra-sensitive as the cool night wind blows over me. My moans of need echo out through the empty arena, mixing with the grunts and growls of the alien warrior sating himself inside me. I can feel the orgasm welling up, each hard thrust bringing me closer to that moment of absolute surrender. I let my body respond to his might, pleasure rushing through my veins, and I'm not distant.

I crystalize the moment in my mind. Each second with these men is precious. They lost almost all of what made me love them, and when they go to war, the last shreds

of their goodness will be taken from them. I reach into his aura, a tear dripping down my cheek as I desperately cling to the golden threads that are frozen in his icy being, focusing on that alone. I scream as my orgasm rips through my body, and Tarak grunts, forcing every inch of his cock into me, and seeds me. Hot jets of cum shoot into me, and my eyes roll back with pleasure.

I wait for the rush of the Bond, the thrums of pleasure to reward me for taking his seed, but there's nothing but my own pleasure. The crowd roars as Tarak pulls his cock from me, seed dripping from my stretched slit onto the thirsting sand below.

I tense my body, ready for Damian, expecting him instantly, but instead I feel so empty, my body craving the alpha's touch for one of the last times.

I stand on shaking legs, turning, cocking my head sideways as I look at him. Damian is standing, proud and powerful, his purple eyes gleaming in desire for me, his robes tented outwards obscenely, but he stands still as a statue. Every muscle in his body is tensed to the limit.

"It's okay, Damian," I whisper, gentle. It'll be one of the last gentle things he hears before he's on the battlefield, in the dance of death against men who have trained for hundreds of years to kill him.

The crowd hushes. I walk to him and run my hand over his powerful chest, feeling cum dripping down my legs. I'm incomplete without him. I'll never be complete again.

"Lie down, Damian," I say, and I smile up at him. Tears drip down my cheeks as he undoes his robe, throwing it aside, bared to the universe, and he lies on his back in the sands. His cock stands straight upwards, bobbing with each beat of his heart, that heart I wished beat only for me.

For some moments, it will. I crouch above him, running my hands over his powerful abs, feeling the scars from Orb-Blades, gently stroking the fresh bruises.

I moan as the swollen head of his cock presses against the sensitive folds of my sex. His body is turned on, lust burning in his aura, but he's tormented. A crack forms in the glacial coldness of his aura. Golden threads of love rush through his being.

I smile at him. I don't want some of the last moments of us, his last memories to be cold and distant. He's going to war. I want him to remember me with fondness, that somehow, the memories of us could keep just a little bit of his goodness alive. As much as I know he will lose all that made me love him when he goes to war, I pray somehow they survive and keep even a hint of their old selves, that somehow, they could return to me, and we could find a future in peace. I know it cannot be. But for this moment, I let myself believe it.

My legs are strong from the Bond. I plant my feet in the fine sands of the proving grounds and impale myself on his marble rod. His eyes roll back in pleasure, his nostrils flaring, tasting my utter need for him. The crowd bays in approval, screaming, and yelling, their energy rushing through me.

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I put my hands on his hard abs and ride him ferociously, slamming myself down on his rock-hard cock, relishing in the stretching pain of taking the huge alpha. He stares upwards, towards the trillions of stars of the night sky as we're joined in the sands.

I break.

I thought I could be strong, but I shatter as he enters me fully, his huge balls presses against my ass as I grind against his body. "I love you. Don't leave me," I whisper, baring myself to him, unable to lie anymore.

I love them. All of them. The broken, icy auras of the aura, and not just for what they were. I love every tormented piece of them, all the distant, cold, honor bound strength of the avenging warriors.

They're flawed.

I don't care.

They're mine. They're mine, and I'll remember them forever. Tears stream down my cheeks as I grind against him, and his purple eyes lock into mine.

"I can't leave you," he growls. My eyes go wide as the ice of his aura melts. "I won't leave you. Ever." He promises me, his eyes flashing, and he grabs my hips, leaping to his feet while I am still inside of him, lifting me in triumph in front of the crowd.

"She is my Mate!" he roars to the crowd, gripping my hips, lifting me, and slamming me back down on his cock in a brutal movement. I stare into his eyes as he takes me,

our auras merging into one, our beings together in this perfect moment.

“Forgive us,” comes Tarak’s voice in my mind, the golden waves of love exploding in his aura as he stares at me from behind, joined with the leader.

“I forgive...ah...you,” I gasp, as Damian snarls, lifting me and impaling me again on his cock. The pain is welcome, the stretching, utter fullness of being taken by the Aurelian warrior. He slides me all the way in, his huge, fat balls pressed against me, and he kisses me, his tongue invading my mouth as his love pours over me.

Tarak is behind me. His huge body presses against me, his spent cock already hardened again as he presses it against my asshole. His Aurelian pre-cum spurts against my tight little hole, and I moan against Damian’s kiss as I realize I am about to be fucked by both men in front of the crowd.

I thought it would be a shameful moment of desecration. Instead I feel honored to have their collar around my throat, their auras in my mind, their being joined to me.

Damian breaks off the kiss, gasping, his cock throbbing inside of me as Tarak slowly slides his dick up my ass. My eyes roll back at the new, dark pleasure. Damian’s gleaming purple eyes glow as he looks straight into mine.

“You promise you’ll stay?” I can barely gasp out the words, my mind lost in the joy and lust.

“I promise,” he growls, and the Bondthrums. He forces an image in my mind. Of my belly swollen up, my breasts huge and leaking milk. The three essences of our being mix together, and I feel them as I first did, when I was living in terrified captivity and only their good kept me from ending it all.

They lost something. They gained me, and I’ve made them whole.

“Oh...fuck,” I gasp, as Tarak fully enters me. I’m stretched to the absolute limit in front of thousands of warriors, and I know the universe is watching this moment, seeing a Bonded Mate giving herself completely to her alphas. I have no shame as I surrender completely. Everything that is me, I give to them, and my arousal and need is magnified a thousand times as I cum harder than ever before. My mind goes blank, and I forget my own name, forget everything but those glowing purple eyes staring into my eyes and promising me eternity.

They fuck me like animals, snarling and growling as they pound me, their bodies in rhythmic unity as they claim me. My pussy contracts and squeezes on his dick, and the desperation to be seeded grows and grows until I need it more than air itself. I raise my head and scream in exultation to the universe, and the two warriors cum at once, roaring in pleasure as they fill me to the brim with hot jets of cum.

The Bond disappears. There’s only the tiniest, dark hint of it, but it’s completely silent as the two men hold me, their huge bodies pressing me together and protecting me.

I know what it means, and they do too, joy washing over me, a joy I could never imagine, magnified in my being and reflected back over and over against their warm, golden auras.

I am with their son.

And the two men will protect me forever.

25

Damian

She rests against my chest, the universe in my arms. I kiss her tenderly on her

forehead, run my hands through her hair, my softening cock still inside of her. “She is with my son!” I bellow the words up to the stands. There is silence for a long moment.

Then they raise their heads and howl. There have only been a few dozen Bonds resulting in pregnancies over the last thousand years, and every one of them just saw a miracle happen.

Tarak and I pull ourselves from her, and she trembles against our bodies, seed dripping from her and into the thirsting sands as a triad of Priests walk through the main gates. They carry purple pillows. Two of them have bracelets of black and gold, inlaid with Orbs, and the middle has a collar. It seems to suck up the moonlight, glowing. I keep my body between Athena and the Priests, rip off my silver bracelet, and exchange it for the gold.

Then I undo her collar and gently place the golden one around her. I smile, as she is without fear, even in the presence of Priests, knowing no one would dare touch her while I am here. The Priests leave without a word.

I couldn’t leave her. When I imagined her with my son, I threw away my past. I laid Raython to rest in my mind. That brutal warrior will never be avenged by my hand.

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But I will fulfill his last words to go to her.

This is what he wanted. And this is what we will have.

“A Bonded Mate with son!” Obsidian roars from above. His voice is deep and growling, a voice you feel as much as you hear. “Clear the stands! Damian, Tarak, Athena, come!”

I freeze up. I was planning to take Athena back to our estates, to rest and laugh together. His order sends a chill through us all.

“What does he want with us?” Athena whispers. I swear she’d attack the War-God himself if she thought he threatened our future.

“I don’t know. But we can handle it,” I answer, truthfully, and don my black robes, then the belt with the hilt of my Orb-Blade. I pray I don’t have to use it. Athena pulls the thin pleasure dress over her body. My black robes cling to my sweaty muscles as the stands empty.

I lead my triad through the huge gates we entered through. As we pass under it, I get the foreboding sensation that they are teeth waiting to snap shut. Past the mirror and the cauldron is the entrance to the winding stone staircase.

“Shall I carry you up?” I ask my mate, then see her legs are no longer shaking. She stands, her head high.

“No. I’m strong.” It’s an understatement. She was stronger than me.

We walk up the endless stairs, until we pass an open door to a cavernous room, with a simple, low bed in the middle. I wonder how many other triads and their new mates consecrated their Bond on that bed. I continue, leading the way, my hand near my Orb-Blade as we pass the entrance to the Priests' dais. The High Priests are chatting with each other in low tones, and I notice many glances cast our way.

I meet Priest Rataro's eyes directly, looking for any hint of malice. He has a new triad of guards with him. Good. So he got rid of the firebrands. Rataro nods in respect, even he's deferential to a pregnant Bond. I shiver as I remember the prophecies and part of the reason the Priests worship the War-God.

When Aurelians copy themselves in cryo-bays, cloning themselves on their last breaths, the next in their line is a near-perfect copy. Near perfect. Each generation, they become weaker, smaller, slower.

The Priests believe we need strong, Bonded sons, stronger than their forefathers, to fight against some darkness only Obsidian can prepare us for.

Two more flights, and we reach the huge doors to Obsidian's private lair. He is standing behind a holographic representation of the universe. He towers over even me, at least eight feet tall, a huge, hulking monster of a man flanked by the mirror images of him, only their skin is smoky and black where his is marble with ebony veins. Trillions of stars sparkle in front of us in the high ceilinged room. I glance to the left, seeing the balcony with his throne, and to the right, the bridge to his palace, my warrior instincts making me look for all the ways out even here.

"May we enter?"

He doesn't look at us. His twin shadows stare at the stars with him. "Yes." A single word, deep and low.

I step in first. “You can wait outside,” I say to my Mate, but Athena chooses to walk in behind me, only a slight nervousness in her aura.

I clear my throat. “Obsidian. I thank you for all that you have given me. My Mate. The future of a son.”

He doesn’t answer. His eyes are black orbs, flecked with thousands of tiny pinpoints of diamond bright light. His twin shadows raise their heads to stare at me. They look even more beastly than him, long black hair to their shoulders, and when I don’t focus on them they have a disconcerting smokiness to the edges of their being. They are made of the smoke of a burned building, the acrid fumes of a downed Reaver.

“You served well.” His voice rings out like a hammer against an anvil.

“I have no right to ask. My God, you granted me everything, and I know you call for war to reclaim your Mate. I have found mine, and she is with child. We pledged our swords to you. I ask that you release us. That you let us live our lives in peace. We can never bring our battle-brother back, but now we have something more to lose.”

“I release you.” He states the words in his deep tone, without thought. Then his eyes dart to Athena. She does not hide behind us, and his eyes fill with a deep, dark sadness. “You have served well. Three battalions have just surrendered, joining us, seconds after your mating was broadcasted. They join me for the promise of a Mate. More will come.”

I swallow, the seconds ticking by. Tarak steps forward, his hands raised. “My God, why did you call us here?”

He’s about to speak, when I hear hard boots behind us. A triad of ancient Priests enter, moving surprisingly quick for such old beings. They stop a foot inside the door. “May we enter?” they ask, and Obsidian nods. They file in, pointing at the holograph.

It zooms in past the Aurelian Empire, to the Toad Kingdom where we saved our mate.

“Obsidian. May we speak?” the leader of the Priests ask.

I grab Athena’s arm, gently pulling her closer to me, but she stands, head high facing down the Priests. She’s no longer scared of the brands on their foreheads.

“Speak.”

“The Toad-King has warned us. This triad entered his kingdom to steal away their Mate...it was a violation of their space. My God, they have planet-killers.”

I clench my teeth. Those enormous, deadly space-ships haven’t been used since the Great Galactic war, when humanity was nearly wiped out, and the Aurelian Empire expanded rapidly to protect them, gaining a primacy that lasted for thousands of years. We fought against Toads for control, and it was only when entire planets were dissolved out of being that we found an uneasy truce.

“They did not steal their Mate. They earned her.”

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“Yes, yes, I misspoke. Please, my God, if we reward the Toads with gold, they would trade women to us, and we do not have to risk war on more than one front...” His raspy, wheezing voice has an urgency to it.

Obsidian’s black eyes focus on the triad of Priests. “These men served for their Mate. It is my oath.”

“Of course, of course, but we are about to attack the Aurelian Empire.”

Obsidian growls. “There will be war on all fronts soon enough. Until the universe is tamed and I am on the throne next to my mate. Silence.” He barks the word, and the Priests mouth clamps shut before he can speak.

I watch Obsidian through the stars, casting a strange glow against his chest. He has a mark just like I do, but where mine is a brand, his is a birthmark. I wonder if the prophecies are true. That he was born of a wolf-mother. That he lived like a beast for hundreds of years.

That he will turn us to brutal predators to conquer the universe.

When I see his dark Shadows, I believe it.

As Obsidian focuses on the holograph, stars shimmer and grow until he brings a single galaxy, then a sector into focus. There’s a small planet, on the outskirts of the Aurelian Empire. It’s labelled Trebulous. It was one of the latest to declare Independence, and now it’s unprotected against what’s coming.

Thousands of white eggs. Scorp Org-ships. I've cut down many of horrendous, scything, scaled monsters before. In the last decade they've been hitting harder and harder, but I've never seen anything like this. In less than ten days, whoever is on that planet will look up, and the sky will be blotted out by the organic ships filled with their deadly cargo.

General Ra'al's Mate is on that planet.

I feel a wave of sorrow for him. Perhaps I owe it to the man to fight at his side, but I can't leave behind my Mate.

Not for anything.

"I am responsible for guiding warships through the rift to this planet. Ten billion lives, and thousands of my followers depend on my aim being true. Two jumps." He stares into my eyes. "I gave you your Mate. Let me try...to give you something else."

"What?"

His Shadows are slavering. Spittle drips down their cheeks as they stare at me, with black eyes that betray nothing.

"Your battle-brother. When I brought you to your Mate, he was watching. From the void."

I get a pain in my chest, and I double over in shock as the agony of hope washes through my being. I had just laid my battle-brother to rest. I had finally accepted that he was gone. That hole could never be filled, but I had something new, a love that made life worth living.

"Obsidian!" one of the Priests shouts in a shrill voice. "You must conserve your

powers! You need to—” Obsidian raises his fist. The Priest shuts his mouth.

“Leave. Have men bring the mirror into the Proving Grounds.” The Priests slink away, and my heart is pounding as fast as when I first felt my Mate, standing victorious with my battle-brothers over another battle won. That battle meant nothing when we felt her being rippling through us. I felt him in my mind, our most savage, violent third, ready to level planets to find her.

He would have done anything for her. In his last moments, he asked us to go to her.

We saved her.

Maybe our War-God can save him.

Obsidian looks over at Tarak, then me, then to Athena. “My Mate was taken from me. Now she’s gone. My only hope is I can regain her again. I know what it is to have an aura cut out from your mind. I must be a brutal War-God to the universe. I must be savage to lead these men into combat.” He sighs, then stares straight into my eyes. “Let me be something else, here, with you. This is what Fay would want.”

26

Athena

Ididn’t think I could feel fear as bad as when I thought my warriors were leaving me. Now my heart is pounding like crazy as I experience their fresh torment.

Obsidian has filled them with a hope they still don’t truly believe, a hope so desperate that I fear if he fails in bringing Raython back, it will destroy them forever.

I look over at my men and run my hands over each of their arms.

Even if they are shattered by this, I will be there to fix them.

No matter how broken they are, I will nurse them back to life.

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Obsidian snarls in pain. His twin Shadows tense up, their muscles flexing. A vein in Obsidian's neck throbs, and he steps back, as if he's been stabbed in the heart by an Orb-Blade.

"Just do whatever she says, do whatever she says," he says, and for the first time, I see true fear on the War-God's face, and I know he's a man, just like my two men. He's not only a cruel conqueror. He hurts, just like us.

The words escaped his mouth, and I realize he was telepathing his Mate. He could feel her. His Shadows crumple on the ground, the huge, monstrous creatures grabbing their heads. Hair sprouts out of the back of their necks, their long white teeth darkening as they transform into wolves, then it's over, and they snap back to their Aurelian form.

Obsidian grits his teeth. "Queen Jasmine removes the Bond-Disrupter ring from my Mate, to force her to reveal that I am still here. She checks on me, thinking that if I am here, she is safe. The Queen believes I will lead my warriors into battle from the frontline." He growls, and his eyes lose all their sorrow.

There is only pure hatred, and he becomes the War-God again. "I will guide my forces from here. She will never suspect. Not until her planets are crushed under the wolf fangs of my followers." His twin Shadows pace, their trap muscles taut and huge on their necks.

They are fierce, but they don't scare me. They want the same thing as all Aurelians. To be with their woman, over all else. I was always scared of the Fanatics with their brands on their chests, but my two men have shown me truth.

At the heart of even the most savage warrior, above all else, they serve their Mate.

Obsidian himself sets his sights on me. I don't shy behind the bulk of my protectors. I look into his deep black irises, and see a man, not a War-God. "I will lose much of myself as war rages. I will have to become the monster they call me. It may be too late for me. But when I save her, when I find her...there needs to be some shred of what made Fay fall in love with me. It must remain."

Fay.

His mate.

Obsidian growls, forcing down all sentiment and weakness. His face returns to a blank, stony slate. "Meet me in the center of the arena, on the sands. I cannot promise I can save him. I cannot promise that if I do, he will be the same man who was taken by the void... but I promise I will try."

"My God," says Damian, his voice filled with religious exultation, his aura swelling with hope. I grab his wrist, kiss his arm, bringing him back to the here and now.

"Whatever happens, I love you both," I say to my men.

Damian looks down at me, his purple eyes gleaming like amethysts in a moonlight pool. "You made me whole, Athena. I pray this works, that you may have all three warriors you were promised when you felt our being. That you may have three protectors for our son."

I nod, nervous but resolute, and Obsidian and his twin Shadows storm past us, leaving us in front of the holographic representation of the universe. I see the Org-Ships approaching the defenseless planet, and I hope that Obsidian is as powerful as he looks.

My two men stand, staring at the universe. The moonlight seeps in through the balcony, the black throne reflecting the light.

“Are you ready?” I ask them, taking their hands and pulling them down the stairwell. Around and around we go, until we walk through the hallway. The portcullis gates are open, the mirror standing in the center of the arena.

Obsidian stands, his Shadows on either side. The Priests are gone, but the triad of Fanatics who dragged the mirror into the center stand, their heads bowed, eager to serve their God.

Obsidian stares at the reflection. The three of us walk, standing to his side, all of us intent on the gleaming surface that turns pitch black as the War-God raises his hands.

His eyes go too wide. The black orbs seem to take up his entire face, his mouth open in a silent scream of rage as he raises his hands. I look into the mirror and I feel like I’m falling in. There’s this emptiness, deep as death, that’s grabbing me, pulling me in.

The Arena of Blood disappears and I am in dead space, total blackness, when I hear a strong, powerful heartbeat, slow and endless, like a thunderous drum. Then I hear another. It’s strong but muted, and we accelerate into nothingness, until I see an Aurelian.

He’s standing, frozen. His eyes are wide, his mouth gaping, his head cocked to the side as if he is frozen in place. He’s completely naked, as big as when I first saw him in my mind, the huge, powerful beast of a man. His barrel chest is broad and thumps with his heart. It beats ten times for every one of the drum that booms like thunder into the abyss. His hair is still in a braid, but it floats upwards, each strand crystal clear in my vision. He’s not standing in nothingness. He’s in front of something dark green, so dark it’s almost black, with a scaly hue, reflecting nothing.

Behind him, a huge eye opens. It's three times Raython's size, and it blinks with a double eyelid like a serpent. I'm snapped back to reality. I'm staring at the mirror, seeing Raython through it. Every muscle in Obsidian's body is tense and contorted, black veins bursting on his arms as he holds them up, fighting to keep control. Raython winks in and out of existence, the eye opening and closing behind him. One second I see him, the next I see us reflected back, black blood dripping from Obsidian's eyes.

He reaches into the mirror. Obsidian's twin Shadows raise their heads and howl, roaring out in defiance, and Obsidian screams in pain as he grips Raython's arm.

Then Obsidian pulls him through, and Raython falls to the ground, his body naked and shivering. He curls on the ground in fetal position, shuddering. The mirror snaps back to reflecting us, but the surface ripples like water hit with a stone.

"It's real, all of it, it's real," says Raython in a faraway voice.

"What?" asks Obsidian, his voice hard as iron.

"The world-enders...they see us...echoes when we pass through their world..." His voice trails off.

Then he looks up and see his two battle-brothers, and his terrified eyes clear. He blinks. "Where was I? Oh Gods. Obsidian is real...my God...you saved me," he says, his head moving from the powerful alien warrior to the two members of his triad. He stares into Damian's eyes and registers the purple, and gasps.

"We have..." he whispers, in awe, not yet seeing me.

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Damian reaches down, grabbing his battle-brother's arm and pulling him to shaking feet. "He's real. And so is our mate."

He turns to me. He's a huge beast of a man, with broad shoulders, a square jaw, and a hard set face. His eyes are slate-grey, and I smile at him, imagining what color they might change to. After whatever horror he just endured, I need him to see hope in me.

Obsidian blocks us. "Tell me what you saw." His voice is a rasp.

"I feel like I've woken up from a dream...it was all so clear, and now it's gone," says Raython. "My God." He goes to kneel, but Obsidian grabs his arm, keeping him on his feet.

"You endured much. Be with your Mate. I present you, loyal warrior, Athena." Obsidian steps aside, and the powerful warrior breaks down.

Tears stream down from his slate-grey eyes. I didn't know Aurelians cried. His battle-brothers hug him, and I swear I can feel Raython reflected through his battle-brothers. He's a powerful beast, and I can't wait to feel his aura in my being.

I was already complete with my two warriors.

Now I'm overjoyed.

"Hi," I say, smiling at him. I need his first moments to be positive. It's like he's been reborn. "I'm Athena, your Mate."

He strides to me, staring at me if I am the most fragile, precious thing in the world. Then he wraps his huge, powerful biceps around me and hugs me to his body, tears streaming down his cheeks, unashamed to show emotion to his Mate.

He pulls back, staring down at me, and Obsidian turns away. His pain is too much. Seeing us together reminds him of his Fated Mate, Fay, taken from him.

“Thank you, Obsidian,” I say, and he walks away without answering, disappearing in the tunnel.

We’re alone, under the stars and the moon, when I feel it. Raython growls, his cock rearing up.

“Are you strong enough?” I say to him, and he lifts me, kissing me hard, hungry.

“Is that a challenge?” He grins, then breathes in, tasting my growing need to be joined by the final member of my triad.

I know I’m going to like him already. I remember being almost scared of him when I first felt his beastly aura in my mind during my vision.

Now I ache to have that power belonging to me.

I gasp as he rips my pleasure dress from me, baring me to the world, as Damian and Tarak stand behind me, lifting me and spreading my legs for the third. He slides his dick into me in one, powerful thrust, as if we’ve been apart for centuries and are finally together.

His aura blossoms in my mind, and his eyes change in front of me, turning green and verdant, like a deep jungle where primal cats lurk.

He throws his head back, yelling in triumph as he joins me, and finally, my triad is whole.

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Epilogue: Athena

The jet-black Reaver pierces the atmosphere as we rush upwards. Raython has his arms around my neck as he stands. He hasn't let go of me in the week since we were Bonded. He pulls me against his chest, kissing the top of his head.

We're on our way up to safety. I offered a place in our new home for Laura and Matil, but they both refused politely, choosing instead to go work for Jola and Lelita's new triad. They prefer the open skies and green grass of Obsidious to a space station high above.

"That tickles," I say, as Raython's long braid touches against my neck. He grabs it, and torments me with it, tickling it against my sensitive skin as I try to fight, but I know he's far too strong to ever let me escape. I bite my lip as I see the big space station ahead of us, an orbital defense post with guns bristling. It is grey and unwelcoming, and I'm nervous at what we'll find. Black Reavers circle it diligently, but they pass aside as Damian pilots us closer to a landing bay. Big doors open, but no Reaver is inside.

"The bay is empty. They don't allow a single Aurelian on this station. Except us," says Tarak. He was the one who brokered the deal. He told me he had fought alongside a triad long ago, a triad he'd seen winning their Mate on holo-vid.

"And it's safe?"

"Safer than anywhere else. And we don't have to be around the Priests or Fanatics

anymore.”

I smile. I always feel safe with my triad, but I’ll never stop being creeped out by the Aurelians down on the planet below who wear brands on their foreheads.

It’s not that reason I asked my triad to find us another place.

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War's coming. We watched huge warships disappear into the void as we breached the atmosphere, guided by Obsidian himself. If there's a counterattack, I didn't want us to be on the planet down below. Tarak told me how safe it was, how because of the Orb-Disruptors no ship can Orb-Shift into the sector, even if they were brave enough to brave the void, but I feel better already knowing there's another triad living with a Bonded Mate above.

No one can truly understand what I'm going through. No one but another woman connected to a triad of Aurelians so intimately.

We land in the bay, and the huge doors close shut behind us. The Reaver side door opens, and we walk out together, the three of us, me in the front. I'm wearing a pink pleasure dress, so sheer I know that my triad can see every inch of my body. Maybe it's not appropriate for meeting people we're going to be living with for the first time, but I don't much care. I love the way they look at me when I'm in barely anything, the only solid part of my outfit the black and gold collar I wear around my neck.

Raython particular enjoys leashing me while he takes me, fucking me while I'm attached to his collar. He's the most dominant of the three, without any need to punish me. While Damian and Tarak both have sadistic edges to their pleasure I love, Raython is simply a beast, a powerful, monstrous man who knows I belong to him.

In front of us are double stairs leading up to a doorway that opens. Three Aurelians stride through. "Stop there! You've got three batteries of las-cannons aimed straight at you."

My triad tenses up, going into battle stance, as the three men stomp down the stairs.

The three Aurelian warriors stand across from us, their hands near their Orb-Weapons.

“This close, you’d kill us both,” snarls Damian.

The triad doesn’t answer. They stare us down. The leader is a big beast, with golden hair down past his shoulders and light blue eyes that glisten. To his left is a pretty-boy that looks like a surfer, with gold eyes, like a cat, orange and red that gleam with intelligence. And to his right is a massive warrior.

His veins are contorted and green, and I gasp as I see them. Scorp-Blood. When I was a kid, people told scary stories about the Scorp-Blooded Aurelians, aliens who had survived the near-certain death of Scorp venom and ended up even more beastly. The three of them are wearing battle-armor, reinforced, that could block a knife.

I don’t need my warriors to hide their brands anymore. They stand bare-chested, in only combat pants.

“What have you gotten us into...”I telepath to Tarak.

“Nothing we can’t handle.”Raython’s voice echoes in my mind, and I smile, feeling his strength. None of my triad are worried. They have a certainty to them that comes from the three of them reunited. They would face down a Scorp Queen without blinking.

Tarak steps forward, his hands up, away from his Orb-Blade and addresses the leader. “Ark. We fought in the battle of Acrepius 7. The three of you were fierce. This station is huge, and as we said, we can benefit by working together to protect it.”

“We can handle our space,” growls the Scorp-Blooded Aurelian.

“We ask that you grant us leave to stay here.” Damian states the words directly to their leader, looking him in his eyes, Bonded Triad to Bonded Triad, alpha to alpha.

“Drop your weapons,” says Ark, not breaking eye contact. “Slowly. Pull the Orb-Hilts out and drop them.”

Raython growls, low, but Damian grabs his. “Imagine this was us, living here with our Mate. You would do well to be suspicious as well. We’re dropping our weapons.”

“That won’t be necessary!” comes a high-pitched voice from the top of the stairs. “I’m Aria! Sorry about the welcome, or should I say, unwelcome. The boys made me agree they’d check you out before they let you on board. They’re very protective,” she says, smiling.

My jaw drops.

“Oh Gods, is this my future?” I say, looking up at her.

She enormous, that’s the only way to describe it. I’ve seen pregnant women. This is something else. Her stomach is big, but it’s her breasts that make my jaw drop. They hang, huge and swollen, her nipples pressing against her dress. I quickly lower my hand when I realize I’m touching my own smaller breasts, imagining them swelling to that size.

She laughs, then winces, her hands against her belly. “Don’t make me laugh, I’ll pee. I’ve got a bladder the size of a juice box. Yes, if that golden circle around your neck means you’re pregnant, you’re going to be a whale. I’m nine months in. This damn pregnancy lasts ten. Please! Men, step aside. She’s with a son—they would never fight us, not with that to lose.”

Her triad steps back, their hands slowly moving away from their weapons. I realize

they weren't trying to be unfriendly. They're just scared of losing their Mate, just as my triad would be.

"Thank you for letting us stay here," I say, looking up at her. "No, please don't come down!" I say, as she grabs the railing, about to brave the stairs. The Scorp-Blooded beast snaps, running up to stop her, his huge legs eating up the steps four at a time as he grabs her by the arm, the massive beast of an Aurelian looking at her with pleading eyes.

"Again, I'm sorry," says Aria. "You're our first visitor in a while. Okay, ever. Not a single Fanatic creep or a Priest is allowed up here," she says, blaspheming them easily. "Alright, I'm coming down."

"Please, you must rest," pleads the savage beast of a Scorp-Blooded Aurelian.

"I'll rest when I want to, mister," she says, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

"Come on, let's go," I say to my triad, urging them up the stairs so our way-too-pregnant hostess doesn't come down. We follow the other two of her triad up the stairs, and they lead us into a hallway.

Plants are growing from vases, vines running down the length of the hallway. I was expecting it to be sterile and warlike on the station, which is one of the many orbital defense hubs around Obsidious, but it's welcoming and alive.

"Let me give you the tour," says Aria.

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“The Priests let you have this place?” I ask, still unsure.

“Yes. The one thing those Priests care about is new Aurelians, and we made them understand there won’t be any children unless we feel safe. Not that they’d ever get their filthy hands on my son. We’re going to raise him right...and I’m so happy he’s going to have a friend.”

I smile, gently rubbing my belly, still not quite able to accept how much my body is going to change. I’d seen the holo-vids of Queen Jasmine when she was pregnant, but seeing it in real life is something else. I can hardly believe Aria can walk.

“Boys, why don’t you show our guests around? And no playing rough!” she says to her triad. I see Ark’s eyes flash, and he licks his lips. I know exactly what he’s thinking—promising her a punishment in his mind, to be given years later.

She waves her hands, and a big side door opens, and she walks into a massive living room. There are big couches across from a holo-vid screen, and another set of couches stare out at a huge viewport. I can see everything. Obsidious below, and trillions of stars.

The universe doesn’t seem so uncaring anymore. I look over at the door closing behind me, nervously. Aria sees my glance. “Don’t worry. They’ll do the usual posturing and dick measuring, I’m sure, but they’ll relax when they realize we all want the same thing. Plus, they don’t want to piss off a pregnant woman.”

Aria slowly walks towards the sofas looking out at space. “Your triad is gorgeous,” I say, smiling.

“Yours are lookers too. Gods, aren’t we the luckiest?”

I smile, huge. “For the first time in my life, I can say yes. I am the luckiest person I’ve ever met. I...I can hardly believe this is all real.”

She sits down heavily on the couch, staring out at infinity. “Oh, it’s all real. Very real. When your boobs start swelling up you’ll see what reality is.” I realize why she’s wearing a black dress. It’s slick from her breasts, already producing milk in anticipation of her huge, hungry babe. I shudder, imagining my own body changing, and deep down, I can’t wait.

I hope it isn’t rude, but I have to ask. “Doesn’t your back hurt?”

“Not at all. The Bond takes care of that. They just get...awfully full and swollen. I shouldn’t scare you, but it honestly feels like a massive pressure.”

“What do you do?”

She smiles, completely unashamed. “My men take care of me,” she says, and I don’t press further, getting this image in my head of my own swollen breasts having milk squeezed out of them by Damian and Tarak while Raython massages my aching back from behind. There’s no Bond anymore enhancing my arousal, but the pleasure dress slowly caressing me makes my lust ignite, and I shiver, forcing it down. Why is it so fucking hot imagining their oiled-up hands slowly squeezing and massaging my swollen breasts?

“He’s kicking. Pretty sure he’s going to be a soccer player.” She sees my confusion. “Some sport humans play, the rich ones with their own fields. Ugh, they say the Bond makes pregnancy painless, but I’m half convinced that’s a lie to make any human woman dumb enough to consider getting pregnant from one of those giants go through with it. Kidding. I believe it.” She sighs, leaning back deeper into the couch.

I let myself sink in deeper next to her, staring out at the beauty of space.

I bite my lip, suddenly nervous. “You’re going to raise him up here?”

She nods. “Yes. I’ll show the rest of it, later. There’s an entire massive room dedicated to a swimming pool. Aurelian soldiers used to train in it, and now I lie next to my men, and they drink wine while I relax. Ugh, I’m jealous of your pleasure dress—I can’t fit mine anymore.”

“I know a bit of needlework, I’ve got dozens they bought for me, I can put two together.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

I look down at Obsidious, growing wary. “It’s not the Priests I’m worried about, though. War’s coming. The first warships left today.”

She turns, giving me a steady glance. “I wasn’t going to tell you. But I trust you. We have a secret little project. My men have been working hard, for the last seven or so months. We can’t Orb-Shift a station this big. But we’ve been buying Orbs, as many as we can afford.”

“Orbs? My men earned many talons, and never used them...we could help. But what’s it for?”

“That’s a plan. I’ll have Callum—he’s the pretty-boy—talk to his contact to get more with whatever you can spare. We’re outfitting a Reaver. It’s already got three Orbs. There’s no way in hell I’m risking Orb-Shifting with my son in my belly, or out of it, for that matter, even if that War-God was guiding us himself. But we can escape faster than any ship in either fleet, Loyalist or Separatist. And there’s room for you, too.”

I let out a big sigh. “You’re...I...” I fight for words. “I feel like I’ve got a future.”

“You do. More than you ever believed. You’re new to being Bonded, right?”

I nod.

“Get used to it. You’ll be alive for thousands of years, and if you keep your boys out of trouble, they’ll be with you too. I heard you met the War-God himself? Is he as intimidating as they say?”

“He’s a man. He’s a man who lost his mate. I feel sorry for him.”

“Sorry for Obsidian. TheShadow wolf who will bathe the universe in blood. Well, even if you trust him, I don’t, and that’s why we’ve got the best escape vehicle in the world. With a few more Orbs, we could power our shields until only a planet killer could pierce them.”

I gulp, remembering that strange eye in the mirror, the eye I tried to get out of my memory. Raython can’t remember anything from his time in the void, and we all agreed to forget it.

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We have our own lives to take care of, and so much to live for, here and now.

Aria waves her hand at my neck. “Please, feel free to take that collar off, get comfortable.”

I smile. “You know? I think I’m going to keep it on,” I say, running my hands over the gold and black collar. I shiver as I imagine myself changed like her, my breasts huge and swollen, while I’m chained to Raython’s wrist. I shift in my seat, heat flooding between my legs, and the three auras of my triad spike with their own lust, sensing mine.

I look over at Aria’s body. “Would you do it again?” I ask, in barely more than a whisper.

She laughs. “Again? I’m going to do it again and again. And I bet you will, too. My triad has the best in them. I...I want my son to be strong, but not heartless, and those three are going to be the best dads in the world. The one thing I was worried about was my son not having any friends. There’s no children on Obsidious, and human children would grow up and die before my son was a teenager. It would be heartbreaking for him. Ugh, that reminds me though, I do have one more worry...”

“What is it?”

“Ever heard of the terrible twos?”

I scrunch my eyebrows. I’ve got a vague memory of a mother with racoon eyes who had been up for days complaining about her toddler. “Yes?”

She laughs. “With Aurelians, it lasts twenty damn years. Now, we’ve got so much to talk about. So, where were you when you first felt your men?”

I think back to the Toad palace. The emptiness in my belly, the emptiness in my mind, the emptiness in my heart.

I relax back on the couch. “If it’s the same to you, that’s a bit of a painful memory. Maybe I can tell you later?”

She grins. “Honestly, Athena—beautiful name by the way, my triad told me it when they agreed to let you four come—we’ve got plenty of time. Tell me next week. Or next decade.”

She turns her head, and I follow her gaze to the door.

Raython, Tarak and Damian are standing at the door, looking in with worship in their eyes that is matched in their auras.

Aria pulls herself up from the sofa. “I know when to leave. Enjoy yourself,” she says, with a wink, leaving me with my three men.

They’re on me in a second, and I melt under their touch, imagining thousands of years with my powerful triad protecting me.

My future spans before me, filled with hope, joy, and love, and I know I’ll never be living just for myself again as their kisses cover my body, and the biggest smile comes to my face as I let my own being melt into the auras of my triad.

* * *