



Queen Isabella

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Description: Isabella was cast out of a world ruled by men who were really monsters, then crashed on a planet filled with monsters who adored her and made her their queen!

Isabella grew up in a world full of bigots on the brink of collapse. Betrayed by her government, Isa finds herself on the UFV Manifest along with other outspoken and disposable women. The one-way maiden voyage is headed for the planet that hopefully will be the next Earth. Not surprisingly, things don't go exactly as planned. Bellator, the alpha soldier, Artifex, the alpha worker, and Phara, the alpha consort accept that their mountain hive, along with all Vorto planetwide, are dying out. Generations ago, the Blight killed all the queens, and none have emerged since the terrible plague. One day, there is a fiery meteor shower. Miraculously, one of the meteors is an egg containing a precious queen. Instinct takes hold, and the Vorto immediately claim her as their own.

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Chapter 1

Malfunction

Isabella

“Evacuate! Evacuate!” the automated ship message blared.

Groggily Isa blinked, frowning as she tried to remember where she was. She wasn’t napping in her cell bunk, that was for sure. Shell-shocked, she panned the sterile white surface less than a foot from her face and instantly remembered. She was aboard the UFV Manifest, a colonizing vessel on its way to Tellus twenty-nine b.

“Evacuate?!” she rasped, her mouth feeling like it was filled with cotton after being in stasis.

The ship is malfunctioning, the answer instantly occurred to her. Isa’s eyes widened in panic. What happened?! How long had she been asleep?

Her gaze was riveted to the window in the stasis pod, but all she could see was the row of pods above hers and the reflection of the flashing alarm. Her first instinct was to get out, and she frantically pressed on the lid. Except, her arms were still weak from the extended sleep and did little more than slow-motion shadowbox with the slick lid. Her hands dropped the instant she remembered the damn space coffins were also life pods.

I knew this was going to happen!

The human race was on a collision course with total destruction. The population on Earth was out of control, and the environment was rebelling because of it. Soon, very soon, mother nature would snuff them out entirely. When her grandma was a little girl in the late twenty-first century, the various governments dissolved, forming the Unified Federation. Sadly, even the new government couldn't rein in the rampant decline. Now Earth was pressed to establish an off-world colony, in fact, it was overdue.

The mission to Tellus was a shit show from the start, and that was the public consensus, not just her own opinion. The technology to reach the habitable planet was still new, and this hundred-year trip was the Manifest's maiden voyage. They hadn't even kicked the proverbial tires on the ship with a tour around the solar system first. Then again, why bother testing the ship when you plan to fill it with convicts?

When the government announced they'd be sending felons on this maiden mission, she assumed they meant lifers. She recalled having that exact conversation with her family. She was making breakfast with her mom, while her father and brother watched the update on the news. Going to Tellus versus spending the rest of their life in a jail cell seemed preferable. That's the only way someone would make such a horrific choice, since everyone knew it was a one-way mission. Her brother even agreed, and Saul never agreed with her on anything. She never imagined the UF was targeting people like her.

"Ha!" Isa barked out a hysterical laugh that was drowned out by the alarms. "I'm not a convict. I'm an archaeologist!"

Though in the eyes of her government, she was a criminal. Her thoughts flashed back to that horrible day. They were leaving the dig site of an old tavern on the edge of Flagstaff.

"Jen!" Harvey barked as he brought a load of digging equipment to the hover van.

Isa's wide-eyed gaze met Jen's and she cringed at her friend and fellow coworker. Jen was also Harvey's wife—pregnant wife.

Harvey was not one of those men or bosses who usually yelled. In fact, Harvey was one of the few men who was tolerable. Isa liked men, their bodies that is. It just seemed that when most men opened their mouths, they ruined it. It was easier not to bother with them, besides, her career was far more fulfilling. From what she'd observed, though, Harvey was a catch. He was still paternalistic, but at least he didn't think women were simply meant to stay home making babies. That was good for her, since he'd hired her for his archaeological crew. The clincher was that he hired her as a companion for his wife, and with Jen pregnant her job might be coming to an end.

"If you are going to be disobedient, I'll call your mother and have her stay at home with you." Harvey pointed to the chair in the shade of a nearby tree.

"I was only helping load the artifacts. The bags are hardly heavy." Jen eyed her perturbed husband.

"I was only bending over while nine months pregnant with my center of gravity all askew," Harvey countered, his tone teetering on condescending.

Isa warily watched Harvey, unsure if he was sincerely angry. He wasn't usually this irritable, but he'd been acting strange all day. Perhaps he was nervous about the baby coming.

"Fine, but I'm gonna sit in the conditioned van," Jen huffed and waddled toward the other vehicle.

Isa smirked at Harvey, trying to gauge where he was mood wise, now that Jen was going to sit down.

“Last night she tried reorganizing the nursery for a third time.” Harvey incredulously shook his head.

“I heard women do that when it gets closer,” Isa chuckled, relieved he seemed better.

“Ooh, ooh,” Jen declared.

Her gaze swiveled and discovered Jen standing in a puddle of water that hadn’t been there a minute ago.

“My water broke.” Jen grimaced over her shoulder.

Panic transformed Harvey’s face and he raced to his wife. As he helped Jen in the van he cast a worried glance at the dig site.

“Go to the hospital. I can get the rest of this packed and to the museum,” Isa urged.

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Since Jen was nearing her delivery date, they had taken the local job, so the hospital wasn't far, and neither was the museum that housed their lab.

Isa wished them well, waving as the pair drove off. She had to load the rest of the equipment by herself, since the rest of their crew was on the Yucatan job. That's where she would be if Jen wasn't pregnant. Isa was jealous of the men and wished she could be there when they opened the crypt. Sadly, there was no way she would've received a travel permit to work with the all-male crew, even if her father signed off on it. The government had its rules and asinine or not she had to adhere to them.

Maybe next season, she sighed as she loaded the last of the unearthed artifacts into the van.

Her mind spun as she flew the van back to the museum. It was only an assumption that there'd be a next season. It was quite possible there wouldn't be, at least not for her. Jen might retire to take care of the baby. That's what was expected of mothers. Then Harvey would no longer have a use for her. It didn't really matter how good of an archaeologist she was, she was still a woman, and somehow that automatically made her a second-class citizen. It pissed her off that that's the kind of world she lived in.

Isa's eyes widened when the flashing lights in the rear viewscreen captured her attention.

"Dammit. What did I do?" Isa frowned as she found a stretch of road that wasn't filled with pedestrians and set the van down.

She quickly located her documents, lowered the window, shut the hover van off, and put her hands on the dash as required.

“Do you know you failed to signal as you went around that high rise?” the officer said as he approached.

He saw her and his eyes narrowed.

“No. Sorry, sir. I thought I had it on autopilot.” Isa glanced at the console, but the vehicle was already off so there was no way to tell at the moment.

The officer peered into the van. He then looked at the museum logo on the side of the vehicle.

“My sponsor’s wife went into labor, otherwise they’d be right in front of me,” she quickly provided as the officer eyed her critically. She had a permit, so it wasn’t illegal for her to drive without her sponsor, but it was still frowned upon. “Here are my documents.” She started to reach for them in her lap.

“Don’t move!” the officer barked.

She slapped her hands back on the dash. The officer yanked the door open, and roughly snatched her documents off her lap. The surly man briefly glanced at her government ID and work permit, then tossed them on the dash.

“Another uppity working woman!” he murmured as he went to the side door. “What are you hauling?” He tugged the van open.

Her stomach knotted at his comment. She’d heard snide remarks about working women, but not from an officer, probably because she’d never been pulled over before.

“Uh, digging tools and artifacts.” Isa frowned as she looked back at him. “I’m coming from a dig site and heading straight to the Metropolis Museum.”

To her surprise the officer opened one of the totes and dumped the cataloged bags onto the van floor.

“Whoa, wait a minute! Those are organized by location and some of those artifacts are very fragile. They’re hundreds of years old!” she objected.

“Don’t you dare speak to me that way! One more word and I’ll teach you the manners your father obviously didn’t,” the officer snapped.

Isa quickly faced forward, fear coursing up her spine. She had no doubt the officer would make good on the threat. She’d heard horror stories. Isa bit her tongue as the officer destroyed priceless history with his rough search. He was carelessly rummaging through the third crate when he abruptly stopped.

“I need back up! We have a projectile weapon!” the officer barked into his comm as he spun and pointed his stun gun at her. “Don’t move!”

“But-but the gun is hundreds of years old. It’s rusted. It can’t possibly fire.” Isa started to panic, tears springing in her eyes.

Before she knew what was happening, she was arrested and hauled into the station.

“Sit!” The guard shoved her into the three-foot square room and pointed at the chair in front of the viewscreen.

She was still shaking from the arrest and had been waiting anxiously inside the women’s cell for the last few hours. As she sat, the screen flickered on. It was her father. He was so livid the vein in his forehead was throbbing. Behind him was her

brother, Saul, looking equally enraged.

“That you would dare to shame this family this way is the final straw,” her father hissed.

She’d been praying for an ounce of sympathy or the benefit of a doubt, but that hope instantly fled along with the air in her lungs.

“Your message arrived while Mary’s parents were at our house. If you ruined my engagement...” Saul seethed. It was the third woman he’d tried to marry. His personality was the problem.

Her father held his hand up, silencing him, then focused on her again. “You are on your own from here on. I cast you out.”

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His words were like a slap in the face. Her father was seriously disowning her. There were only two places for outcasts, workhouses and institutions for the mentally unstable.

“But it was an antique weapon that we dug up today,” she stammered, hoping he’d see reason.

“You’re a jezebel!” Saul shouted at the viewscreen.

This wasn’t the first time he’d called her that. He’d cursed her ever since she was fourteen and got caught kissing a boy at a secret after-school party. It was the same party he was at, but the rules were different for men and women. Like when Saul’s friend drunkenly stumbled into her bedroom after one of their raucous outings. At first, she thought Caleb wanted her bed, but then he took his clothes off. She should have fought off the smarmy bastard, except that would’ve awoken everyone in the house. Caleb would’ve accused her of luring him in, and her family would’ve believed him, after all, she was the jezebel who kissed a boy years earlier. There were really only two outcomes; her father would’ve forced them to get married, or had her institutionalized. Those prospects were actually far more traumatizing than Caleb’s pathetic performance. The whole incident cemented her resolve to swear off men, and her career proved to be far more satisfying.

“Enough,” her father snapped at Saul, then refocused on her. “Not only do you refuse to live a humble life, you are worldly, and sinful. You winding up in this mess was bound to happen. No more!” Her father bitterly shook his head and flicked off the viewscreen.

Isa started to hyperventilate as her world fell completely apart.

Isa didn't have to worry about living in a workhouse or an institution, though. Her trial was a sham. The public defender didn't bother to call her museum or Harvey to testify, and she was swiftly convicted of possessing a deadly weapon. Three short weeks later, she was conscripted for the voyage to Tellus and found herself standing on the tarmac outside of the Manifest. She was one of those convicts she'd heard about on the news.

"I'm Audre. What do you do?" the dark-skinned woman in front of her asked.

Isa turned her gaze away from the long, winding line of women heading into the spaceship. She swallowed the lump of fear that had been permanently lodged in her throat and focused on Audre.

"Isa, Isabella actually. Archaeologist," she replied, keeping it short and sweet, certain that she'd be sick at any moment.

This was it, her last moments on Earth. Bile rose in her throat yet again.

"Hmpf, a specialist in early civilizations, interesting." Audre carefully surveyed the crowd of fellow voyagers—fellow convicts.

The comment and the way Audre's intelligent eyes sparked had Isa forgetting some of her panic. Up until now she'd been too freaked out about this crazy turn of events, telling anyone and everyone that this had to be a mistake. But Audre seemed to know something.

"What about you?" Isa inquired, now that her curiosity was piqued.

"I'm a surgeon, surgical nurse," Audre clarified, even though it wasn't necessary

since everyone listening was female and understood.

Women couldn't be surgeons, or doctors, or hundreds of other job titles. They could do all the work, just not possess the title. Officially Isa was a dig assistant.

"That's Elizabeth, a farmer," Audre added, gesturing to the blonde in front of her.

Elizabeth, looking as scared as a bunny caught by a pack of dogs, nodded to her. Isa smiled back, feeling a swell of sympathy for the tiny woman. Elizabeth was even more afraid than she was.

"What about you?" Audre asked the woman behind Isa.

"What about me?!" The tan-skinned woman scowled.

"What's your name and what do you do?" Isa quickly provided.

"Reina. Software engineer," the woman curtly replied, clearly trying to hold it together, though it was hard to tell if the woman was going to cuss or cry.

"Why am I not surprised," Audre snorted.

Isa was waiting for Audre to elaborate when they were interrupted.

"Shut your holes, breeders. Get moving!" the guard monitoring the line barked, aggressively gesturing with his weapon.

The disgusting slur used for women always made her cringe.

"Asshole," Audre muttered as she turned and shuffled forward in the line.

Isa couldn't agree more. Her gaze narrowed on the bastard but she also complied. It's not like she was going to run for it. Even if she broke out of line, the landing strip was surrounded by even more armed guards. Security was so strict there weren't even media drones flying overhead to commemorate the momentous voyage.

'Cause it's suspicious as hell. Her eyes narrowed as she took another look around.

Isa waited until they were farther ahead before opening her mouth again.

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“So, I was arrested for transporting a rusted three-hundred-year-old projectile weapon from my dig. What about you?” she whispered to Audre.

“Murder. A patient died on my table. They were suffering severe trauma from a hover vessel malfunction,” Audre spat.

Isa’s mouth dropped open. Even with all the safety measures in hovercraft, there were still thousands of casualties every year. To blame the emergency surgeon was absurd.

“I certainly didn’t steal some sort of chemical weapon. I work with computer programs, not chemicals. Two separate kinds of engineering, two separate sectors at Intech. The morons!” Reina muttered through a clenched jaw, steam practically coming from her ears.

She didn’t need to hear what Elizabeth had done. One look at that girl’s face screamed she too was innocent of whatever charges that landed her here.

“I see.” Isa nodded, the picture becoming clearer. “This whole thing was a set-up.”

The government knew full well they weren’t going to get volunteers for this mission. The people they needed to start a sustainable colony were too smart to agree to go along with their hastily cobbled together plan. It was a guaranteed one-way trip and a definite death sentence.

“Mm hmm.” Audre scowled as she again surveyed the winding line steadily disappearing into the spaceship.

“So why do you think it’s all women?” Isa asked.

Audre raised a brow at her and smirked. Isa wasn’t a moron, she knew society and those in charge were biased against women.

“Just humor me. Tell me from your perspective,” Isa snorted. It was the first time she’d laughed in weeks.

“Well, I’d say that the UF wants there to actually be a settlement on Tellus when the special people arrive. They know we’re less prone to violence and dick measuring contests.”

“And we’re not aggressively rebelling, because we’re already used to accepting the garbage that’s been dished out by the patriarchy. God, I’m so sick of this shit,” Isa growled, not caring that she blasphemed in front of perfect strangers.

Making a run for it looked better by the moment. Even if she was killed in the process, it would be worth it to foil the bullshit government’s plan.

“Girl, I’m almost glad I’m leaving this dying rock,” Audre snorted, pointing at the desiccated trees trying to grow in the baked earth beyond the tarmac.

“Oh, we’re going to die out there, too. They may have perfected the stasis technology to put us to sleep for a hundred years, but this ship is guaranteed to have issues,” Reina interjected, like the ray of sunshine she was, though she was only voicing what they were all thinking.

And they weren’t wrong.

“Stasis pods ejecting. Stasis pods ejecting,” the automated ship message snapped Isa out of the memory.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Her eyes widened as the pods visible through the window shot out of the ship, and then she too was spinning through inky blackness. Isa scoured her mind, trying to remember what the emergency instructions had been. But in a situation like this, how was she supposed to remember the brief boring automated message given just before she was put to sleep? She was freaking out then, just like she was now. Her mind spun as her pod also continued its steady spiral through space.

“Oh god!” she gasped at the terrifying view.

Intermixed with the scores of stasis pods was mechanical debris.

Too much ship debris.

Her breath sped up, fogging the window, making it hard to see. Except, she didn't really need to see the nightmare that was going on out there. She already knew she was fucked. They were all fucked. The Manifest suffered catastrophic damage—obviously. It didn't matter if they were hundreds of lightyears from Earth or just a few days, no one would come fetch the lady convicts. Tears fell from Isa's eyes. She knew this was a death sentence, but there'd been a slim chance they might actually reach Tellus. Even after all the horrible things she heard and knew to be true about the voyage, she clung to that small glimmer of hope. She'd prayed that God would look kindly on her, after her government and her own family totally screwed her over.

“Apparently, God really does hate me.” More tears slipped down her cheeks.

Isa pulled in a shocked gasp when there was a loud whoosh and her pod suddenly veered to the right.

That's the thrusters,she recalled. The pods had the ability to navigate toward something like a ship or planet, if it wasn't too far away.

That's when she saw it—the pink sphere in a sea of darkness. Her mouth dropped open.

Tellus is pink, isn't it?She frantically tried to remember the images of the planet shown on the news feeds. Her heart beatfaster as hope again bloomed. Maybe they'd made it to the distant planet after all.

The pod continued its slow spiral and the planet drifted out of view.

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“No, no, no!” It would be just like this crappy ship and rubbish voyage to get this close only to miss.

She attempted to crane her neck to keep the planet in sight through the small window, but the foam padding around her suddenly expanded, locking her head, arms, and legs into place. It was just in time, too. The pod rattled as the planet’s gravity took hold. The capsule spun faster, the alternating view of the pink planet and black space whipping past the window faster and faster, until her pod was moving at a dizzying speed and everything was a blur. The rattling grew intense. Isa clenched her jaw to keep from shattering all her teeth as the pod rocketed toward the planet.

God help me!she sent up the prayer, as her capsule violently shuddered. There was a sudden pain in her wrist and forehead just before she passed out.

Chapter 2

Where Am I

Isabella

Isa awoke with a start. She blinked to clear her vision, yet still pitch black surrounded her. Her heart sped up along with her breathing as panic gripped her. She was in water, or maybe mud, since it was thick.

My pod is flooding!The muddy water had covered her arms and legs already. A few inches more and it would’ve totally covered her head.

She attempted to push the lid open, desperate to get out of the flooding capsule. Except, there was nothing above her besides cool air, no lid where it was supposed to be. Another wave of panic hit as Isa scrambled to feel around in the thick soupy water for the capsule—for anything at all. Beneath her was a smooth spongy surface that didn't feel too different from the padding inside the pod, except there was nothing to her left or right, no sides to the capsule.

My pod is gone. The capsule offered a sense of security, a barrier, since she couldn't see an inch in front of her face. But now it was gone. Oh god. Her heart thundered in her chest. And I'm floating in some sort of shallow pond or river. Or I could be lying in a ditch. But I have no freaking clue because I can't see. She freaked out a little before shoving it down.

Isa pushed against the bottom to sit up, and groaned as her muscles protested. Even though she'd been strapped and molded into her pod it was obvious the crash had tossed her around like a ragdoll then ejected her.

Where is it?!

Anxiously she crawled forward a few feet, feeling around in the pitch-black void. There was nothing but the creepy thick water. She crawled to her left, gingerly reaching in front of her and then to the right, her breath nervously heaving out. Again, there was nothing but the shallow mud and spongy bottom. Unable to see, she was too afraid to venture far. God only knew where she was, on the pink planet at night was obvious, but that was it. The water might get deeper. There could be a drop-off. Who knew?

“Shit, shit, shit!” Isa murmured when she didn't find her pod anywhere, and she reached the extent of her comfort zone. “Did it float away while I was unconscious?”

Isa's mind spun, her breath coming out faster as this new crazy wrinkle set in. It was

damn lucky she could breathe in this atmosphere, since she was sucking air in at a frantic pace. So, thankfully, she wasn't dependent on her life pod for that. However, the capsule would have provided a bit of shelter, along with a survival kit that she was desperately going to need in the days to come.

"Oh god!" she sobbed, her future looking grimmer by the second. She was marooned on an alien planet without a damn thing.

Isa wrapped her arms around her knees and hugged herself tight. As she felt her bare arms and legs, it suddenly registered that her pod wasn't the only thing missing.

Where are my clothes?! She tugged in a sharp, panicked breath.

At that exact moment something brushed against her shoulder. Isa screamed and scrambled a few feet away.

"Who's there!" she shouted into the darkness.

Isa had already been trembling in fear from her dire predicament. Those tremors turned into all out convulsions. Her head swiveled back and forth, not that she could see anything. She was tempted to run, but in the dark she'd surely trip.

Why the hell isn't there starlight or something to see by?

"Is someone there?" Her voice wavered as she called out.

The desire to curl into a ball was overwhelming, but if she was going to survive this alien world, she was going to have to summon every ounce of courage she possessed. Hesitantly, Isa reached into the darkness, feeling around for whatever touched her shoulder.

Please let it be a low hanging branch and not something that eats fingers.

At that horrible thought, she curled her fingers inward, letting her fist probe the darkness instead. On the news they said that Tellus didn't have sentient life. Though that didn't mean there wasn't life at all. The planet had been compared to the Pliocene epoch on Earth, which meant predatory mammals, like saber-toothed tigers.

And here I am a chicken nugget huddling in the dark.

Isa froze when something simultaneously cupped her fist and her cheek. If there'd been anything in her bladder she would've peed right then and there. Then it registered that it was a five-fingered hand, and she breathed a sigh of relief. One of her fellow colonists found her.

"Thank the heavens! Are you okay?" Isa squeezed the hand on her cheek.

There was no reply and she feared her fellow colonist had been injured. Worried, she started feeling along the woman's arm for injuries, while the woman continued to oddly hold her cheek and fist. She couldn't blame the woman for holding on for dear life. If they were going to survive, they needed to stick together. Isa reached the woman's bicep, and hadn't found any injuries, but she noticed the woman wasn't wearing a shirt, either.

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Did one of the colonists steal our clothes?

Maybe some of the women had awoken before them, while it was still daylight, and robbed them. She assumed all the women were basically innocent like herself, Audre, Reina, and Elizabeth, but maybe there were actual convicts aboard the Manifest.

As these thoughts were going through her mind, a third hand landed on her hip, while another caressed her shoulder. Then what felt like an erect penis pressed against her lower back. Isa's eyes widened in surprise. She wasn't a virgin, but she'd only felt a penis once and that was ten years ago. She had to be mistaken. It was an elbow or something. Isa reached back and wrapped her hand around the bulbous crown.

That's definitely not an elbow.

"Oh!" Isa sucked in a sharp breath and swiftly released the turgid bit of flesh.

They put men aboard the Manifest?!She hadn't seen any lined up on the tarmac, but she was obviously wrong.

Isa was so stunned and confused, she had no clue what to think as more and more hands started caressing her, gently tugging on her shoulders, easing her back down into the pool of thick liquid.

This is crazy.Her confusion doubled at what was going on. Reflexively she covered her breasts and clenched her thighs shut.

Just as she was starting to panic about being ganged up on, a rational thought

surfaced.

There's no way all these hands can be touching me at the same time.

It just wasn't physically possible for so many people to be crowded around and under her. And hands weren't the only parts touching her. There were mouths and more erect cocks bumping against her. They grazed her ribs, arms, legs, belly, and everywhere in between. The bizarre writhing mass of disembodied parts was too absurd to be real.

And then there was the other logical reason this couldn't be real. Even if her government lied and there were a ton of men aboard the Manifest, an orgy wasn't the first thing they would do after crash landing.

I'm dreaming. The damage to the Manifest and this craziness are all in my mind.

She'd been freaking out when she was sealed into the stasis pod, so it was no wonder she was having strange dreams. If everything went according to plan, she'd be asleep for more than a hundred years. God only knew how many dreams she would have on this voyage. How many freaky things had she already dreamt?

"Fine," Isa announced as she gave into the dream, letting go of her breasts and unclenching her legs.

One hand instantly palmed her left breast, massaging it until her nipple was a hard peak. Meanwhile, several pairs of hands eagerly spread her legs and began stroking her thighs, getting sinfully close to her labia. Now that she wasn't scared for her life, pleasure started sparking from this body part and that, her heart pounding in her chest for an entirely different reason.

This is turning into a very good dream. She hadn't had any of those since before she

was arrested. I haven't been touched for even longer than that, and certainly not by anyone who cared.

This was different. In this dream, she felt worshipped by the sea of men vying to touch and be close to her. No words were said, but it wasn't necessary. There was a certain desperation to the press and grind of flesh, to the caresses, kisses, and licks. Yet no one was rough, and their touch wasn't invasive. She arched toward the mass of hands with her legs spread, still they merely grazed her sensitive flesh, though she wanted more.

Sweet mother of God! Isa gasped at how erotic being fondled by dozens of hands was.

Where in the hell had her repressed mind come up with this? It certainly wasn't from a teenage kiss and a ninety-second drunken deflowering. Neither of which were highly erotic. If they called her a whore before, what would they call her if they knew about this?

Oh, I don't care.

She writhed, loving every tawdry bit of it. She was on a one-way mission to another planet that would assuredly kill her, so she wasn't about to regret a damn naughty dream.

Just as she was relaxing into the dream, several lights turned on in the cavernous room. Instantly all movement around her ceased.

"Oh!" Isa barked as she too froze.

The pale lavender glow was subtle at first then grew. It was coming from a dozen crystal columns that lined the purple and gray marble walls. The room was so absurdly large it would fit her parents' house plus the neighbors' on either side.

Besides the carvings, the walls were smooth, though the stalactites hanging from the vaulted ceiling revealed this wasn't some ornately tiled room but a cave. Shockingly, there was no one around her. She lay all alone in a shallow pool that was roughly twenty feet across and filled with a purple gelatinous liquid. It was like a version of a sensory deprivation tank.

Isa bolted upright. Her mouth opened to ask where everyone went, when she recalled this was a dream. About the same time, there was a buzzing in her mind, and a deep scary growl echoed off the stone walls. The hair on the back of Isa's neck stood on end, her panic returning. Dream or not, things had taken a freaky turn.

What in God's name?! Her gaze swung to the right, searching the massive room.

As she looked for the source of the frightening sound, she got a strong impression she needed to leave. It was almost a command shouted in the back of her mind. She was about to scramble out of the bizarre shallow pool, when the viscous fluid all around her began to ripple and writhe. Isa froze, unable to move, not even to breathe. Her eyes widened in shock when heads and hands began to emerge from the pool, forming from the purple plasm. One after another, after another of the humanoid figures climbed out of the basin. There was a legion of the creatures, though it was hard to count them all with the way they blended in with each other and the stone walls.

I don't think this is a dream. The figures and room were just too crisp, too tangible. Her dreams were never so vivid, not even when she was reliving real events. Yet how can this be reality? How?!

Isa started to hyperventilate as she focused on the amorphous mass forming right next to her, daring to take a better look at the creature. It was emerging from the last puddle of purple goo that remained in the shallow pool. Like the others, it turned into a humanoid figure with two arms, two legs, and glossy skin that matched the purple

and gray striped marble walls. The striated marks created a pattern on its oval face that reminded her of war paint. The strange entity blinked at her. The gesture was reminiscent of the way a cat blinks when showing affection, but she was too preoccupied with its unusual eyes to notice. They were overly large, all-black, sideways teardrops, with the points extending toward the creature's temples. No lashes framed its obsidian eyes, nor did it have brows or hair on its head. Above its thin-lipped broad mouth, it had just a hint of a nose. This was the thing nightmares were made of and altogether...

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Alien!her mind screamed, filling in the blank.

Unexpectedly, the alien leaned in, where the others simply left the pool without bothering her.

I shouldn't have made eye contact with it.She'd drawn its attention.

Isa stayed deathly still. Her thundering heart stuttered in her chest when the being opened its mouth, revealing its sharp teeth. They were like gleaming white needles all crowded together.

What's it doing?!She panicked as the terrifying mouth came ever closer.

Isa trembled, desperate to get away, but feared if she moved it would tear her throat out. She braced herself as its lips made contact with her shoulder.

"Please don't hurt me," she stammered, barely above a whisper.

Tears slid down her cheeks as the being's tongue peeked out, tasting her skin. Instead of instantly ripping into her, it sampled another spot a few inches over, and then again. At first, she thought he was trying to find just the right place to bite her, but it quickly became apparent that wasn't the case at all.

He's kissing me.Her eyes widened in shock.

At the same time it was tenderly kissing her, the being caressed her arm. He had the same number of fingers as her, thumb included, but his phalanges were pointed, his

claws incorporated with his fingertips. Despite how violent his fingers appeared, she didn't feel a hint of its claws. This gentle treatment was contrary to the way the entity looked, which was utterly frightening. Its genial treatment was hardly a balm to her frazzled nerves, given the surreal situation she found herself in.

What is going on?!

Shock warred with her fear as it sank in that this alien, along with its comrades, were the ones that had been touching and pleasuring her. Her gaze swung downward, landing on the alien's hard cock, sticking straight out, pointing directly at her. Although it was a familiar shape, with a crown and a shaft, there was a lot going on with it.

"Oh!"

Isa quickly looked away from the alien's penis, but she couldn't unsee it. She hadn't felt that many ridges, corded veins, and nubs in the dark, when she thought she was dreaming.

Oh god! This was more than she could handle, and that wasn't a reference to his dick. Her reality was tipping on end.

Thankfully the purple entity backed out of the shallow pool and left the cavernous room along with his dozen companions. But before she could catch her breath and make sense of what was going on, three alien men pushed past the exiting crowd. The trio were the same monstrous species, but larger, more imposing. The alien on the left was the shortest of the three, though only by a few inches. What he lacked in height, he made up for with his broad shoulders and muscular build, like a boxer. The one on the right was taller than the boxer, with a wiry physique. The alien man in the center was the tallest of the trio, reaching seven feet or more. His build fell somewhere in between his two companions. They too were naked, and though they weren't erect,

their thick, long alien cocks were still daunting, swinging between their thighs as the trio strutted toward her. Their all-black eyes were intensely focused, assessing her. The trio possessed an air of dominance, making the other aliens look downright benign. Again, she had a strong urge to flee.

God help me!

This wasn't a dream, this was a nightmare, though it was all too real. Tellus wasn't supposed to be inhabited, but clearly that was wrong—very, very wrong.

Chapter 3

The Hive

Isabella

Isa hated that she felt like a bunny trapped by wolves as she tracked the slowly approaching trio. There were dark purplish-gray markings in the middle of their chests. The alien in the center had a diamond, the boxer possessed a vee, and the wiry one had a chevron. The symbols were intermixed with the other striations on their skin, reminiscent of the stripes on a tiger. Were they natural or tattoos? She didn't dare study them for long, concentrating on their unusual intelligent eyes instead, trying to gauge their intent. The other aliens had fled from these three. That couldn't be good.

“Please, I don't know what is happening,” she blurted as they came ever closer, tears slipping down her cheeks.

Could they even hear her since they didn't appear to have ears? Not that they'd understand her if they did.

What is happening?She was desperate for answers.

One moment she's hurtling toward a planet that was supposed to be uninhabited, the next she's in the middle of a naked cuddle puddle, amidst some truly scary looking beings.

The alien in the center paused. Diamond, she would call him because of the symbol on his chest. His companions, Vee and Chevron, also halted at the edge of the shallow pool.

Oh no. I should've kept my mouth shut!Her heart hammered faster.

Diamond's head tilted and he stuck out his tongue. Her eyes widened at how absurdly long it was as he flicked it in the air like a snake. It had to be at least a foot long. The other two aliens did the same.

What are they doing?She trembled harder, terrified by the frightening expression. Was this the preamble to them attacking?

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Isa screeched when they abruptly moved, and she scrambled backward. Except they dropped to their knees and tucked their heads, their arms extended palms upward. They weren't attacking her at all.

What are they doing now? Her brow furrowed in confusion.

The trio were deathly still as they knelt. With the way their purple skin blended in, they almost looked like the stone benches lining the far wall. It was yet another creepy detail about this alien race.

Maybe this is my cue to get out of here!

Her gaze went toward the entrance, where the other aliens had fled. The light quickly faded beyond the exit, leaving a pitch-black corridor. She'd instantly be lost in the dark. Even if it wasn't dark, who knows where the passage led? The aliens would undoubtedly stop her and drag her back here.

Dammit! Isa frowned as she realized escape wasn't an option.

Not to mention the fact that if she made it out of this cave there were new challenges. She had no clue where her pod was, what the wildlife was like on this planet, or where her fellow crashed colonists were. Her chest ached at the thought of her friends. Were they alive? She hadn't known Audre, Elizabeth or Reina long, but they were the only people she knew. If this was Tellus, she'd been in stasis for over a hundred years and everyone else she'd known back home, family, friends, everyone, were long dead. The reminder gutted her.

Stop! Isa shook off the notion. There was no sense thinking about Earth. And her colonist friends, though closer, were also out of reach right now. She needed to figure out what these aliens wanted with her.

Logic kicked in, her education pushing past her confusion and fear. She'd studied cultures and ancient civilizations. Yes, these aliens looked frightening, possessing the features of a predator, and the ability to change shape, which added to their lethality. But these people obviously brought her here, when they could've killed her in her pod.

They haven't actually done anything that screams ill intent.

The aliens' mass petting party was a far cry from a traditional Earth greeting. The notion almost made her laugh. Everyone she knew back home would be mortified. Even she was stunned by it, and she was the rebellious, unmarried daughter with questionable morals. It was probably a good thing she couldn't return home, because participating in the cuddle orgy was enough to get her jailed for lewd acts.

Well, I'm not on Earth anymore and the morality police are not around!

The sad truth was that she didn't miss her father or her brother. According to them, she could never do anything right, no matter how hard she tried. As devastating as that day in jail was, in retrospect it wasn't surprising. She loved her mother and sister, though, and worried about them now that she was gone. More tears fell from her eyes.

Isa rubbed her eyes and shook off her spiraling thoughts, again focusing on the nude alien men kneeling in front of her. The point was, although in her culture their reception was highly immoral, this wasn't Earth or her culture. From a certain perspective, they'd been very, very welcoming.

Okay, okay. Isa took several deep breaths, working to calm herself and let logic win over.

As she was pulling herself together, the three alien men kept casting her surreptitious glances, though they didn't move from their deferential position. Maybe they understood she was scared.

"I'm sorry. I was frightened," she nervously stated the obvious.

She needed to find a way to communicate, because this was clearly the established sentient species on this world. That meant she and her people were here at their mercy.

As Diamond looked up at her, she recalled something she'd learned about communication.

When in Rome, do as the Romans.

She was already on her knees, so she quickly bowed, mimicking their posture.

It's a leather mattress, she noted as she pressed her forehead to the bottom of the shallow pool. I think this is actually a type of bed with sides. It made sense if the aliens slept in their strange gooey plasm form.

A huff of indignation came from the men. It sounded in triplicate, so she'd apparently offended all of them.

Dang it. Isa cringed. Maybe the aliens had exacting customs for bowing that she'd somehow screwed up. I hope I didn't make some unforgivable faux pas.

Isa glanced up to see how her posture compared to theirs.

“Oh!” Her eyes widened.

Diamond was now a few inches away, inside the unusual bed, reaching for her. Vee and Chevron had joined him. They’d been so quiet, she hadn’t heard them approach. Isa gasped when Diamond’s hand plunged beneath her chest. Despite his claw-tipped fingers, he didn’t claw her as he eased her off the mattress. Diamond remained kneeling by her side, one purple hand on her shoulder, the other gently stroking her back. His eyes were wide with shock as he gazed at her. It was the same for the other two alien men, kneeling nearby. Their eyes were already oversized, so this only added to their dramatic expressions.

“Did I do something wrong?” Isa grimaced. It was more of a rhetorical question. She’d obviously done something wrong.

Shit! I’m already offending a new bunch of people. She seemed to be good at that. Always the black sheep. Her shoulders slumped and she hung her head.

Diamond released her shoulder and gently eased her chin up. He brushed the hair back from her face as he urged her to look at him. She was reticent, but didn’t resist. As close as the alien man was, she could see his eyes weren’t all-black, like she previously thought. The sclera and iris were deep purple and only his pupil was actually black. She followed his gaze. He was studying her forehead.

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Someone brushed her left hand and she glanced over to find it was Chevron. He lifted her hand and examined her wrist, slowly flexing it, while Diamond gently prodded her forehead. The memory of her hand flying loose in the poorly designed stasis capsule as it careened toward the planet returned. She'd whacked herself in the forehead just before passing out.

"You healed me," she murmured, studying her wrist. It wasn't even slightly swollen.

Not only had the aliens not killed her when they found her, they'd healed her.

"Thank you," she sobbed, a new flood of tears falling from her eyes.

Gratitude for their help, the trauma of what she'd been through getting to the planet, and the uncertainty surrounding her future all bubbled to the surface at once, overwhelming her.

Diamond pulled her against him, one large hand spanning her back, the other cupping her cheek. His brow furrowed as he wiped the tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. His muscular chest rumbled, vibrating beneath her palms. The texture of his skin reminded her of a dolphin, but she was more distracted by the way he was growling at her. Except there was no malice in Diamond's eyes. Even though he was alien, she knew malice when she saw it. She'd been looked at with hatred and disdain her whole life, since simply being born a woman was a sin. On the contrary, his eyes reflected concern, and his gentle touch was comforting. So, what was that sound?

He's purring! It dawned on her.

She pulled in a relieved breath, grateful he wasn't angry. Diamond smelled like vanilla; sweet, creamy and slightly woody, with a hint of something masculine. That too was surprising and pleasant.

Vee began stroking her hair, while Chevron rubbed her shoulders and back, both also purring.

They were trying to soothe her, and she deeply appreciated it, yet it only made her more despondent. The fact that the kind, affectionate treatment was coming from aliens, absolute strangers, had her sobbing even harder. She pressed her head against Diamond's chest and clutched his shoulders as the tears streamed from her eyes. Her own people hadn't been half as kind, throwing her away. Her flesh and blood had sneered at her. Her father disowned her. It was overwhelming to be comforted when it had been absent for so long.

Who knows how long it took, but their gentle caresses and rhythmic purring eventually calmed her.

I'm okay. I made it this far, not just on this voyage, but also in life. I am strong and have dealt with adversity before. I will survive!

Diamond eased her away from his chest and tilted his head quizzically. Embarrassed, Isa wiped her tears off his firm chest, praying it was only her tears and no snot or slobber. He patted her hand, wordlessly conveying not to worry about it.

"Thank you." She sheepishly smiled at him in appreciation.

When she turned to smile at Vee and Chevron, there were surprisingly five more aliens. They'd come in while she was distracted with her breakdown and were sitting patiently on the rim of the unusual bed. Their dark eyes reflected a similar expression as the original trio, which she was interpreting as concern, but was probably pity.

“Hi,” she murmured, feeling doubly embarrassed.

One of the new aliens held a large bowl, another had a pitcher and cup, and three held purple glass bottles. It was these last three that intrigued her. They had matching patterns on their chests and faces. Though she was new to differentiating members of this race, they had to be triplets.

Chevron took the cup from the alien holding the pitcher and offered it to her.

“Thank you.” She accepted the drink and readily took a sip. It was cold water with just a hint of something fruity, and very refreshing.

Isa finished her sip and Chevron took the cup from her. Diamond shifted behind her, his legs flanking her. He reached around and put pressure on her shoulders, gently urging her to lean back against him.

“Wow, um, okay.” She hesitantly gave in, briefly bracing her hand on his thick muscular thigh, then instantly removing it.

This was supremely awkward since they were all naked. She could no longer delude herself this was a dream. Clearly these people had no trouble with what she considered intimate contact. And though they didn’t seem to mean her any harm, it was very disconcerting considering she was the only woman in the room.

Well at least he doesn’t have a hard-on. She allowed herself to relax against Diamond’s chest.

Isa awkwardly smiled at the eight aliens seated around her, making her the center of attention.

I’m obviously a novelty. She attempted to imagine what would happen if an alien

landed in her back yard.

Vee pulled her from the musing when he took her left hand. His hands were oily as he began massaging her palm. The heady vanilla scent wafted toward her. It was pleasant and soothing. His hands were rougher than Diamond's. The callouses hinted that the large alien man was used to doing labor. But despite his robust size, he was surprisingly gentle, and the attentive way he stared at her was unexpected.

“Oh!”

She startled when one of the triplets took her left foot and urged her to uncross her legs. He rubbed her calf while gently palming her foot. One of the others straightened her right leg and began to do the same. The third triplet poured the oil out of the flask into his palms then started to massage her right hand. The fragrant purple oil felt luxurious as it slid over, then sank into her skin, except this situation was odd. Even Diamond at her back began gently rubbing her shoulders with his giant hands. Utterly befuddled, she didn't resist, smiling awkwardly as she panned from one alien man to the next. She'd never been given a massage by one man, let alone five naked men at once.

Maybe this is some sort of welcoming custom or a part of some traditional medicine. Her people believed massages were sinful, but during her studies she'd read where it was once used to treat strained muscles.

As Isa was processing that the aliens were massaging her, what looked like a blue strawberry appeared in front of her face. Isa blinked in surprise. She followed the hand with the piece of fruit to find Chevron holding the large bowl which happened to be full of tasty alien morsels. They were kindly sharing their food with her. Her eyes misted as appreciation again swelled inside her. They didn't have to do any of this, and yet they were.

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Isa attempted to pull her hand away from Vee to take the morsel, but he didn't release her hand.

"Um." Her brow furrowed when she attempted again, yet still, the robust alien man didn't relent. He was built like a boxer so there was no way she could force him to, either.

Chevron appeared amused as he lightly tapped her bottom lip with the berry, urging her to open her mouth.

Oh! They're actually going to feed me, too. Her mouth opened mostly out of shock.

The alien man eased the berry into her mouth. The way he stared at her lips as he fed her the fruit somehow felt naughty, but it was quickly forgotten as she tasted the treat.

"Mmm," Isa moaned as she chewed.

The fruit tasted like a raspberry and it was the best thing she'd ever eaten. That may have been an exaggeration. She was definitely hungry, though, and this was her first bit of food after being in stasis for a hundred years

Chevron held up the cup of water, offering her another sip.

"Yes." She nodded.

He must've understood because he brought the cup to her lips and expertly tipped it up, pouring just the right amount into her mouth.

Diamond resumed rubbing her shoulders and she couldn't help the sigh that came out as she relaxed further. This was the definition of decadence, a bevy of naked muscular men massaging her with fragrant oils while hand feeding her.

"You guys take your welcomes very seriously," she practically moaned.

Being pampered was the last thing she expected when she was hurtling toward the planet in a glorified coffin.

Chapter 4

The Three Alphas of the Tumulus Hive

Earlier that Day

Bellator - Legionnaire Alpha

My legionnaires will need to help the servitors clean this up. Bellator surveyed the rocks covering the path leading into the valley. It must have happened last night. We did have a lot of rain.

He was picking his way over the rocky debris to continue his morning check, when movement in the sky caught his attention.

"Whoa!" He gaped at the fiery rain.

The meteor shower was unlike anything he'd ever seen. Scores of white-hot orbs strafed across the sky. They skimmed so close overhead that he cringed from the terrible rumble and vibration. They were striking in the west, kicking up massive amounts of dirt and debris.

“Oh,” he grunted in surprise when one of the meteors struck the valley, followed by a dirt plume. It was so close it must’ve landed in their territory.

As legionnaire alpha, it was his duty to protect his hive. Any other time, he would’ve sent one of his betas to check it out, but this was so unusual his instincts kicked in.

Bellator shifted form and took off running to inspect the strange anomaly. It would be faster if he flew, but with the fiery debris raining through the sky, that didn’t seem wise. Instead, he’d taken his four-legged form. Theferowere limber mountain predators, and much better equipped to cover the distance than his bipedal form. Despite his form, with all the adrenaline pumping through him, he ran faster than he had in a long time. It wasn’t every day that fire fell from the firmament.

Bellator made it into the valley, was crossing the prairie, and nearing their border when he heard the commotion before he saw them. The legionnaire deltas and omegas assigned to patrol the area had already arrived. They were lined up along the rocky border, just inside the neutral zone, all staring into the Nemus Hive’s territory. As he approached, it was hard to discern what they’d found from all the excited bellowing and the line of bodies obscuring his view, but it was obviously the fiery orb he’d seen.

“You found the meteor,” he commented as he neared the row of his brethren. “I knew it landed close.”

Proel, legionnaire gamma and the sector captain, glanced back at him wearing an odd expression. “It’s an egg.”

An egg?!

Bellator stepped past the row of his brethren and his eyes widened. There was a giant gash in the earth. The meteor had struck the ground in their territory, skidded across

the plain, over the border, and came to a halt several paces inside Nemus territory. Laying in the muddy rut was a white, oblong sphere that looked just like an egg. Except that's not what stunned him or why everyone was riled. The egg had cracked open, and inside it lay a tiny humanoid.

“Quiet!” Bellator barked, and everyone grew silent.

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The humanoid appeared to be Vorto, but also unlike any of his people. The being's eyes were closed, but he could still see how small they were. Then again, the person was small, perhaps a youth. The little humanoid had a full mane of long, dark curly hair on their head. Most Vorto only had hair when in their animal forms. His brow furrowed. He couldn't quite picture what animal they were mimicking that possessed such a long mane. Nor did he understand how they fell from the sky. He wasn't a fool, the egg was mechanical, and not an actual egg. That still didn't answer where it came from. He'd never heard of any sky hives.

As Bellator studied the unconscious being the wind shifted, and he smelled the most delicious aroma. Before he could place the compelling perfume, he also scented blood. There was a reason the being was unconscious. Its descent from the firmament had been traumatic. What's worse, the river was too close. Water was seeping into the rut and steadily rising.

Blight! That is not good.

Bellator surveyed the muddy terrain. He didn't spot any of the Nemus Hive coming to check on the crash. More of the meteors fell in their neighbor's territory and lands farther west, so that probably had the Nemus preoccupied. Unfortunately, the injured being needed help now.

"Stay here," he ordered as he crossed the border.

None of his subordinates questioned him, but they all were grim. There were very strict rules for entering another hive's territory. Under the circumstances, he felt it would be forgiven.

Bellator hustled to the cracked egg. He froze when he got a better whiff of the scent radiating off the being. He'd never smelled the heady sweet perfume, but the concentration of it made his sex instantly harden, which was shocking and new.

It's a female,his instincts screamed.A queen!

Bellator gaped at the tiny female, struck dumb by the realization. He couldn't have been any more shocked if he'd been struck by one of the meteors itself. This hardly seemed possible. There hadn't been a queen among the Vorto in generations. He was the fifth generation after the Blight that killed all the queens. Not a single generation since the awful plague had seen a queen emerge, not even a weak or ailing one. The Tumulus hive was not unique, all of the Vorto hives had suffered this blight. Things were becoming desperate. His hive's chrysalis chamber held two, maybe three more generations at best, and all the other hives were the same.

His shock and awe instantly turned to panic. The queen, the first queen to appear in a long time, was injured. The red splatters were actually blood, not her natural coloring. It covered her tan face and soaked her pale blue coverings. He had to get the queen help now. Bellator shifted to his humanoid form. Very carefully he used a claw to slice through the straps holding his queen in the mechanical egg. It was a relief to feel her heart beating.

She's alive!

"Be strong, my little queen," he pleaded as he gently tucked her bloodied wayward limbs across her chest, then picked her up.

His chest clenched feeling just how light and delicate the queen was. It was a wonder she survived the terrible plummet from the sky at all. As Bellator carried her back into his own territory, he studied her injuries. There was a gash on her forehead. The blood wasn't coming out fast, yet still, it worried him since she was so small. His

gaze went to her arm. It was also covered in blood, but he didn't see any actively bleeding wounds.

"She's a queen!" he announced as he reached the border. "Proel, hold her." Bellator reluctantly passed the injured queen to the gamma. "Everyone fuse with me. She is injured and it will be faster if we fly."

The omegas and deltas surrounded him and fluxed, collapsing into an amorphous mass, then fused with him. Bellator didn't wait for them to completely merge before he shifted into his screw form. The raptors were common to the mountain territory where his hive resided and they were swift fliers. The only difference between him and an actual screw was that he was larger, massive once merged with his brethren.

As carefully as possible, with Proel's help, he clasped the queen in his overly large talons. They formed a cage around the queen's tiny curled up form. It wasn't ideal, but it was the best and fastest option. Pushing off with his empty foot, he leapt into the air, and streaked toward the mountain hive, flying as fast as he possibly could. As the alpha of the legionnaires, it was his job to maintain concentration so they all stayed fused and didn't come apart mid-flight. They'd practiced this many times, but this was the ultimate test. Thankfully, everyone understood what was at stake. He could feel just how focused his brethren were as they skimmed over the treetops covering the mountainside. He'd never been so relieved to land safely on the veranda of their hive.

"What did you find?" Phara, the hive's consort alpha, rushed toward them.

"Our queen!"

Artifex – Servitor Alpha

"Bellator has found our queen!" Phara rushed into the supply room.

“Hmpf.” Artifex dubiously glanced over his shoulder before focusing on the inventory again.

He couldn’t believe Phara and Bellator were attempting this prank again. Did the alphas think after ten orbits he’d forgotten their antics? The pair just wanted him to make another feast. That’s what happened last time. He and his caste of servitors stopped what they were doing and began frantic preparations for the mythical queen. He and his workers toiled all day over a lavish feast, cleaning, and other preparations. In the end he and his fellow workers were left disappointed and tired. The only consolation was that it was an exceptional meal.

“I don’t have time for your pranks. We need to know what supplies we can spare if any of the neighboring hives are damaged by this meteor shower,” Artifex indignantly replied. “That entire shelf can be given away. Put it on the list, Diligen,” he instructed the servitor gamma helping him.

“This is not a prank! You are needed in the infirmary now!” Phara roared.

Artifex spun, shocked by his fellow alpha’s behavior. Phara didn’t even explain himself. The male simply rushed out of the store room. Worriedly, Artifex followed.

There were stories about past generations of consorts becoming imbalanced. The consorts were especially prone to the condition. It had to do with high levels of mating hormones but having no queen. Phara definitely had bouts of sorrow in the past, but they all did as the seasons passed. The time for waking the next generation marched closer. Artifex tried to not think about the fact that the Vorto were nearing extinction. He instead tried to look forward to taking care of and raising his hatchling brethren. That honor, and his everyday tasks kept him preoccupied. Sadly, Phara and the other consorts didn’t have those things to concentrate on.

Hopefully that’s not what was going on here.

As Artifex reached the nearby infirmary, the scent radiating from the room halted him in his tracks. Having been on many hunts he knew the scent of blood. Except this wasn't simply the scent of blood. There was something intoxicating and sweet that also drew him into the room.

Queen! Queen! his instincts screamed as he tasted the air.

"Please, Artifex, help her," Bellator pleaded, pain distorting his face.

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Utterly shocked, Artifex stared at the tiny being cradled in the legionnaire alpha's arms. Where had Bellator found a queen? He'd live his entire life and no females had emerged. As Artifex was questioning how this was possible, he noticed the blood.

Focus! Your queen needs help!

The tiny queen had blood on her face, extending down her chest and on one arm. Panic rose inside him. Vorto were rarely injured like this. The Vorto would flux into their amorphous form before injuries could occur. This injury was more similar to what happened with the fauna.

"Please, before we lose our queen," Phara added, the torment in his voice palpable.

That's not helping.

"I was assessing her. How did this happen?!" Artifex countered, trying to stay calm, which was easier said than done. Never before had his ability to serve his purpose mattered so much. The pressure was enough to make him sick.

"I found her at the edge of our territory. She was in a damaged egg that was part of the meteor shower," Bellator relayed.

"Even if she fluxed, falling from that great of a height would still have injured her." Artifex had treated many Vorto who'd accidentally fluxed while flying in theirscreoform. The fall to earth, even in that amorphous form, was sometimes fatal. The fact that the little queen was respirating steadily was a very good sign, though.

“Lay her on the resting pad,” Artifex instructed, and Bellator gently placed the limp queen on the leather mattress. “We need to remove her coverings to see the extent of her injuries.”

Operar, one of Artifex’s betas, joined him by the bed. It was a relief to see the male. There hadn’t been time to call for assistance from his caste. Word was obviously traveling through the hive.

“Phara, Bellator, I know you want to help, but I need you to let us work.” Artifex nudged Bellator aside. Thankfully the pair of alphas stepped back and let him and his beta get to work.

Artifex extended a claw and began slicing off the queen’s blue coverings which went from her delicate neck to her petite feet. The slick blue fabric was unusual and unlike anything he’d seen. It wasn’t made of plant fibers, but that was the least of his concerns at the moment. He removed the bloody sleeve, yet found no open wounds on her arm to explain the blood. He gently prodded the bones in the queen’s forearm. He wasn’t exactly sure what he was feeling for. The queen wasn’t Vorto, at least not any hive he’d encountered. Thankfully he’d learned a trick treating the occasional wild creature they found in their territory. Artifex reached over and felt her other arm, comparing the two.

“This isn’t good.” He cringed when he felt the damage to the bones near her wrist.

“What is wrong?” Phara anxiously asked from the edge of the room.

A picture started to form and it explained why the tiny queen was still unconscious. It also made him fear what injury might have occurred to her head beyond the visible gash above her furry brow.

“I believe her arm struck her head with such force that it shattered the bones,” he

relayed as he felt her forehead.

“What do we do?!” Bellator demanded.

What do we do? Artifex’s worry spiked as he studied the unconscious queen. These weren’t injuries where he could simply set the bones and wrap them. The damage was too extensive in her wrist, and he had no idea what was going on with her head. He had a poultice that would seal the wound, but that did nothing for potential internal damage. In the case of fauna he’d encountered with these kinds of injuries, they would’ve put the poor creature down.

Blight! he cursed. They needed to do something. This is a queen! Suddenly it came to him. The refectio!

The previous servitor alpha showed him the precious equipment. Along with the lesson on how to use the machine was a lecture about how it was only to be used in dire situations, since no one was making or even repairing the special equipment any longer. If ever there was an occasion to use the healing machine, this was it.

“We’ll use the refectio!” he announced.

As Artifex went to the sealed room holding the equipment, countless things ran through his mind. The overriding thought was that the future of the hive depended on him in this moment. He’d taken care of the hive for thirty orbits. In that time, he’d become experienced in growing, hunting, building, cooking, cleaning, and directing his servitors with the many tasks that keep the hive running.

But none of that matters if I can’t heal our queen. That was his true test.

Phara – Consort Alpha

Phara let out the breath he was holding when the beam coming from the miraculous healing machine shut off. Therefection had cleaned away the blood, healing the queen's scratches and contusion, but the precious female remained unconscious. Phara anxiously looked at Artifex, silently questioning what was happening.

Artifex examined the queen's head while Operar felt her wrist. The pair traded looks.

"Did it work?!" Phara anxiously demanded, unable to stand the suspense.

"It did!" Artifex nodded, also deeply relieved. "She's still exhausted by the fall, so she will probably sleep for a while."

"Thank you!" Phara hugged the servitor alpha.

"Whoa!" Artifex pulled away from him and pointedly stared at his sex.

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“I know it’s hard!” Phara growled, frustrated with his vexing anatomy.

The instant Bellator arrived with their queen, Phara’s shaft grew hard. It was the first time his sex had responded in his thirty orbits of existence. Her feminine scent awoke something inside him. Now it felt like a wild animal was prowling beneath his skin and it was hungry. He was tempted to shift into hisferoform and go for a run, maybe hunt something, but he couldn’t separate himself from their queen.

“It wasn’t like that a moment ago,” Bellator commented.

“Our queen was terribly injured. I was afraid. Now I’m not,” he informed the chief guard of the hive.

One glance at Bellator screamed that the male was also affected by their queen, although the legionnaire alpha’s shaft wasn’t standing at attention like his was.

“At least we know your body recognizes its purpose,” Artifex teased, now that much of the tension in the room had waned. “Would you like to carry her to her chambers? The servitors should have finished cleaning it already.”

Phara desperately wanted to hold the queen. Her skin was an unusual tannish-beige. She certainly didn’t blend into the purplerock of the mountain like the rest of the hive, but it looked soft with all of its curves. His fingers itched to test how pliant those curves were, especially the two mounds on her chest. His tongue rolled around his mouth, the urge to taste the berries on her chest mounds riding him hard. Her long, wavy brown mane was unique. He wanted to comb his fingers through the silky tendrils. She also had a bit of fluff on her sex that taunted him. She definitely did not

have a shaft. His sex jumped at the thought of spreading her legs to see exactly what she did have.

“Phara?” Artifex pressed.

“I better not. I-I don’t trust myself,” he nervously replied.

“I will hold her.” Bellator eagerly picked their queen up and they started walking through the winding stone corridors of their hive.

The hive was quiet as they passed, but he could feel their excitement vibrating in the air. Many eyes expectantly turned to him.

“So, what’s your plan for when our queen wakes up?” Artifex asked, voicing what everyone was thinking.

He was the consort alpha, breeding his queen was his only purpose. Before today, he’d effectively had no purpose. The day he never expected to come was finally here and he was starting to feel the full weight of it. He couldn’t disappoint his brethren. He especially couldn’t disappoint their queen.

“I don’t know.” Phara started to panic.

Sadly, he had no one to teach him what to do with a female. He’d never known a queen. His own queen mother had passed four generations ago, long before he’d crawled out of his amnio sac. When the Blight hit and the queens died, all Vorto hives halted the emergence of hatchlings, extending one generation into half a dozen. So, he was four generations removed from the existence of females. As far as he was concerned queens were a myth. The consort alpha that preceded him wasn’t well and didn’t share anything but despair about the future before passing. And though the archives held a lot, frustratingly, it lacked information their ancestors thought should

be obvious.

“All I’ve seen are the fauna mating,” Phara added, his anxiety building even as his hormones spun out of control.

If it wasn’t for the animals, he wouldn’t have known that he was supposed to put his organ inside the queen.

Except our queen isn’t a horned capo that eats grass and leaps around the mountainside! He was out of his depths here.

“I am sure you will figure it out. I have some ideas.” Bellator stroked their queen’s cheek as he lay her in the bed in her chamber.

Phara stared at the queen lying in the bed. She was so unusual, yet so stunning. He ached to climb in and lie right beside her. He ached for more than that.

“I’m having a lot of ideas, too, and as small as she is, I’m pretty sure all of them will break her!” Phara countered, his fists clenching by his sides.

He’d crush their queen simply mounting her. After being injured, would she want him biting her shoulder to hold her in place? Would his sex even fit inside her tiny body?

“We need to keep her warm as she rests and recovers,” Artifex mentioned. That usually meant fluxing and piling into the same bed.

Phara glanced down at his shaft. As much as he wanted to lie beside their queen, he didn’t trust himself. He needed to wrangle his hormones and his emotions. The omegas didn’t have the hormone levels the alphas and betas possessed. Right now, they were a better option to watch over their queen.

“Consort omegas,” Phara called to the males who had followed them into the queen’s chamber. “Flux and keep our queen warm as she rests.”

Enviously he watched as a score of omegas climbed into the bed and fluxed, filling in around their sleeping queen. He sighed as he stared longingly at her.

“Come, let’s go to your chamber next door. We’ll be close if she awakens and we can make plans from there.” Artifex took his hand and tugged him toward the door.

Phara growled and resisted. Instinct demanded he stay by his queen’s side. But then he relented as it occurred to him, he might be able to think straight if he couldn’t see or smell their queen. Right now he felt dizzy, like he drank too much fermented nectar. He needed to clear his head or he’d make a fool of himself with the queen.

Chapter 5

Queen Isabella

Artifex

Artifex let out a relieved sigh as the queen accepted another drink, shaking off the harrowing events of the morning. He knew finding their queen would be a monumental event, but nothing prepared him for this.

“I should’ve wrangled my hormones and stayed with our queen.” Phara frowned. “She is so tiny, but her pull is very strong.” Phara gazed down at their queen in awe and disbelief as he rubbed her shoulders. “I didn’t think my omegas would be as affected as they were. They had no self-control at all, and like a pack of eager cubs, they woke and scared our queen.”

That was an accurate summary of what Artifex saw when they turned on the light. He would’ve done the same thing in Phara’s place. But as they were swiftly learning, hormones were complicated, and none of them had ever been exposed to a queen.

Artifex shuddered recalling their queen’s fear as the omegas exited the bed. The acrid scent of her dismay overtook her sweet perfume. Terror sparked in her otherwise gorgeous brown eyes. But the worst was when rain miraculously fell from her eyes. The beautiful yet sad sight twisted him in knots and nearly broke him. He wanted to hold and shelter her, except they were the ones scaring her. Nothing they said seemed to reach the queen and she was so disoriented that she even attempted to bow to them.

“But she is calm now,” Artifex replied, talking to himself as much as he was to the others. He smiled encouragingly at their queen then at Phara.

“She is much calmer,” Gregis, one of the consort betas rubbing her feet, agreed.

“Our plan is working. She has accepted our food and our touch,” Bellator purred as he massaged their queen’s hand, working out the tension.

They hadn’t formulated a complicated plan. They couldn’t, they didn’t really know what to do to woo a queen. Phara didn’t even know how to mate with her. But they assumed she’d be thirsty and hungry. They also decided a proper massage would be a good way to ease any lingering stress from the crash while getting her used to their touch. Though the eager mauling by the omegas nearly foiled that simple strategy. Thankfully they recovered, and the queen didn’t totally reject them.

“She is accepting us, isn’t she?” Phara finally smiled, then nuzzled the queen’s luxurious head fur.

She is. It was a miracle. She was a miracle.

Artifex stared in awe at the little queen as she opened her mouth and accepted another berry. It was followed by an adorable twittering sound that he equated with her being happy. A giddy thrill coursed through him. Her lips were as pink as the fruit and looked just as sweet.

Artifex’s gaze roved down the length of their queen, now that he could focus on her and her alone, instead of healing injuries or stressed brethren. She had two mounds on her chest that were tipped with berries that looked as pink and delicious as her lips. She had a soft round belly and full hips. He imagined squeezing them as he pulled their queen against his body. He couldn’t see what was between her thighs, beneath that teasing bit of fur on her mound, but he desperately wanted to. His shaft jerked in agreement. He wasn’t a consort, but he definitely wanted to do more than serve their queen.

Phara is right, our queen has a very strong pull.

Isabella

A cube of something that tasted like cheese touched Isa's lips. She'd been surprisingly hungry and thirsty, yet wasn't able to eat that much. Probably a side effect of being in stasis for so long.

"Last one," she murmured, though it was doubtful they understood her words.

She opened wider and the alien she called Chevron slid the morsel into her mouth. He blinked and nodded at her as she chewed, so she returned the gestures, hoping they conveyed appreciation. Gestures and facial expressions were the extent of their communication so far, but it was progress, so she didn't begrudge it.

Her gaze shifted to Chevron holding her cup. She knew that he'd offer it after she'd finished the bite, since that had been the routine. She shook her head and he understood, pulling his hand back. She smiled in appreciation and so did he. Though the facial expression still looked creepy with all his sharp teeth exposed, it didn't bother her like it did before.

"Thank you," she blissfully sighed.

Never in her life had she been pampered like this. It truly had her boneless after everything she'd been through. Of course this would've been considered depraved back home, even if she'd been clothed. Just the fact that she was being spoiled like this would've been frowned on. Not that she would've had the time for such pampering between working and her obligations at home.

Isa's brow furrowed as a lesson from her ancient studies course suddenly popped to mind, particularly the part about ritual sacrifice. There were many cultures that would pamper their human sacrifices before 'gifting' them to the gods. Was this the preamble to being tossed into a volcano?

That's what you get for acting like a whore!She could almost hear her brother sneer.

If Saul were here, he'd convince the aliens to sacrifice her in the most painful way possible, the way he encouraged their father to disown her.

Well screw that!She huffed, hating how pessimistic her thoughts had turned.

If this was the preparation for being sacrificed, fine, so be it. The fact she survived this long was a miracle anyway. She was going to enjoy being pampered. And if she died, she'd die fed and relaxed. Isa pulled in a deep breath, loving the heady scent of vanilla as Diamond massaged her back and neck, Vee worked her left shoulder, and the triplets rubbed her other arm and legs.

"Oh!" She squeaked and jumped when one of the trio shifted higher on her leg, his fingers grazing her inner thigh.

The alien men had been slowly working up her limbs, so she should've expected it, yet still she was startled. Despite her earlier bravado and resolve to enjoy being pampered, she was out of her depth.

Of course I'm out of my depth. Five alien men are touching me, while another hand feeds me.

Everyone had paused when she jumped. The triplet with his hand wrapped around her thigh stared questioningly at her. She smiled awkwardly and nodded. He continued massaging her thigh, and the other men also resumed kneading her flesh with their slick strong hands.

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It quickly became apparent that she wasn't going to be able to relax like before. She had ignored that the alien men were naked, attempting to be mature. Not all cultures wore clothes. Except, the closer they got to her breasts and vagina, the more anxious she became. A part of her wanted them to touch her there, and a part of her whispered it was wrong. This wasn't a dream where she could hide away her taboo desires.

Isa wasn't sure what she should do. As the debate waged in her mind, the triplets' firm hands worked higher, and she spread her thighs, letting them. At the same time Vee's large hand neared her breast. Her nipples ached, screaming for attention, and inadvertently she shifted toward his touch. When she caught herself doing this, it started her morality debate all over again.

Despite her conflicted thoughts, Isa was relieved when Vee's hand slid over her left breast. He studied her face as he kneaded her breast. With his stocky build and the wild pattern of stripes on his skin, Vee looked especially savage, except his touch was the opposite of rough. Her nipple hardened further, grazing his calloused palm. He noticed the effect he had on her and smiled. His fingers found her hard nipple and she gasped as he pinched them lightly.

Suddenly it registered that Diamond's mouth had found her neck. He kissed, licked, and lightly nibbled the sensitive path running from the crook of her shoulder to her earlobe. Pleasure zinged to other erogenous zones and she tilted her head, encouraging him. At the same time, Diamond reached around and toyed with her right breast. Her breath sped up as the pleasure magnified. She could no longer ignore his cock pressed against her lower back. It had grown stiffer since they'd started massaging her.

I should object. Right? I should try to get away and establish some sort of diplomatic communication. Yet she didn't. This was all so unexpected and it made it impossible to think. Plus, she'd never been touched like this before.

Isa gasped when someone grazed her labia. Her gaze flew downward as one of the triplets stroked her labia again, adding more pressure, making them part. The triplet quickly looked up, his large eyes wide, shock evident on his face. Her cheeks heated, knowing he'd discovered how wet she was. The way his gaze darted to the others, it was apparent he was conveying his shock.

Again, the alien men paused. Her embarrassment turned to mortification, feeling the tension double. She couldn't help how her body responded, yet she still felt guilty about it.

Diamond's cock jerked at her back and he growled. The deep vibrating sound moved through her, making her shudder. She couldn't decide if the shiver and goosebumps on her skin were from excitement or worry.

Unexpectedly Diamond eased her upright, off his chest. Vee also released her breast.

Oh. Isa grimaced in disappointment as they abandoned her. She'd grossed them out.

Unexpectedly, Vee took the spot at her back, his thick legs flanking her. Once in position, he put pressure on her upper chest urging her to relax against him. She leaned back, but she could hardly relax as he resumed toying with her stiff nipples while kissing her neck.

It also didn't help that Diamond was up to something. Every neuron in her body was starting to pop off as he crawled toward her feet looking as predatory as a wildcat. He continued making growling sounds, adding to the impression.

Unexpectedly the two triplets pulled her knees up to her belly then splayed her legs wide, baring her pussy for Diamond. Maybe it was the surprise at being so effectively exposed, or maybe it was Diamond's dominant demeanor as he knelt at her bottom, but she didn't pull away.

Phara

Phara panted, overwhelmed by the queen's scent as he crawled down her body. He almost snapped at Gregis, but the beta wisely got out of his way.

He'd done a valiant job maintaining control, but the longer Phara rubbed their queen's shoulders, the more he needed to touch her soft, pliant skin. The more he nuzzled her mane, kissed her neck, and toyed with her compelling chest mounds, the more his control slipped. Even her seductive gasps and shivers were becoming addictive.

What he found between her spread thighs would feature in his dreams from now until the day he died. Their queen had a flower with blushing petals and a swollen bud at the top. Rego and Galis pushed her legs wider and her inner petals parted, revealing a pink center. The entrance to her channel was quivering and leaking nectar that slid down to the puckered rosette of her rear. His sex jerked and suddenly he knew what he'd been made for.

"Mine," Phara growled and reached for his queen.

Isabella

Diamond palmed Isa's inner thighs, and ran a thumb through her slick folds. She shivered at the deep rolling growl that vibrated from his rugged chest as he skimmed her weeping entrance. It sounded like he approved of what he found, though she was still embarrassed. She hadn't been this exposed the onetime she had sex or even

during her medical scans. Isa jumped when he touched her throbbing clit, a spasm of desire jolting through her.

Diamond's gaze went from her clit to her slit. He didn't miss the fresh flood of moisture spilling from her pussy. He homed in on her clit and started rubbing it. The sudden burst of pleasure was too much, and she reflexively attempted to close her legs. The pair of triplets didn't allow it, though, affectionately kissing her knees, hips, thighs and belly as they held her open for Diamond.

Mercilessly Diamond continued rubbing her clit, watching her gasp and pant harder as the orgasm chased her down. Never had anyone studied her pussy and tormented her clit the way he did. And never had she experienced such a rapid onslaught of pleasure, not even when she dared to touch herself in the privacy of her room.

His ridiculously long tongue shot out, swiping at her vagina, and Isa's eyes widened in shock. She'd heard tales of men sampling women, but all the men she'd known would've considered it immoral, one of the many double standards that incensed her. The sensation was so unexpected, so new, Isa started spasming. Diamond snarled and buried his face in her cleft, the entire length of his tongue shoving into her pussy. He tongue fucked her, the appendage writhing inside her, while he rapidly stroked her pulsing clit. The mouth that had frightened her with its sharp teeth and nightmarishly long tongue was indeed cruel with the way it wrung the ecstasy out of her.

"Oh god!" she warbled as violent convulsions moved through her. Isa gripped any bit of flesh she could get her hands on in a desperate attempt to hold on to her sanity.

Hands and mouths were everywhere. Chevron and one of the triplets were sucking her nipples. Vee's mouth was latched onto her earlobe while he caressed her neck and massaged her scalp. She arched into their touch while at the same time jerking away. This was too much stimulus.

Another orgasm struck when the tip of Diamond's tongue worried a spot on the roof of her vagina. She knew the pleasure her clit could bring, because she was a sinner and touched the 'devil's doorbell,' but she'd never orgasmed from being penetrated. Her eyes rolled back in her head, as the climax washed over her.

Still in the midst of the insane euphoria, Isabella found herself being flipped over, the concert of hands working in unison. She was on her knees with Diamond gripping her hips, her hands planted on Vee's thighs. His legs were like small tree trunks, his muscles just as firm. Except, that's not what had her attention. Isa blinked at the erect cock literally in her face.

She tried to ignore their anatomy up to now, but at this point it was a little hard—correction, a lot hard. Vee's cock was definitely alien, not that she was an expert on dicks. He had no balls, although there was a slight bulge underneath his shaft that might be his testes. His exotic manhood was as thick as her wrist, but appeared to be a manageable length, though any length was daunting with her limited experience. Two corded veins ran the length of his shaft, winding along either side. The top of his shaft was ribbed, each rib the width of her finger. On the bottom, a line of large knots ran from root to tip. The knot closest to the tip made the broad crown on his head even more daunting. The engorged beast seemed to pulse as she gawked at it, pink fluid coming out of his slitted tip.

She was still blinking in shock at the sight when Diamond's penis slid over her slick labia, reminding her he was kneeling behind her.

Oh! This is really happening. Anxiously she looked back.

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As surprisingly erotic as everything had been, they were about to cross a line there was no coming back from. Except, these scary alien men had given her more orgasms than human men ever had, and she couldn't bring herself to say no.

Isa nervously bit her lip as Diamond's crown found her entrance. When he pressed forward, her vagina resisted, despite how slick she was. She lost her balance and tipped forward, Vee's thick pulsing cock hit her in the face and slid along her cheek, the tip tangling in her hair.

Mortified, she started to apologize. "I'mmm..." she moaned instead, unable to complete the sentence.

Diamond was working his cock into her nearly virgin pussy, goading her sensitive opening to stretch and let him in. Meanwhile, the others were rubbing her clit, and playing with her breasts.

Isa moaned against Vee's pelvis. She thought having her face in someone's crotch would be a turn-off. Maybe that was because the men she'd known were a turn-off. Vee smelled masculine and creamy sweet. His heady scent added to her arousal.

She shook all over, desperately trying to hold off another orgasm from the constant thrumming on her clit, balanced against the stretching slow penetration of her pussy. It had her walking the knife's edge. She looked pleadingly up at Vee, but the lust burning in his dark eyes screamed that he was no help. The big man growled, cupping her cheek while fisting his cock. His raw nature pulled her in, making her desire spike. She couldn't believe it when she boldly gripped Vee's hand, helping him stroke his arousal, while kissing and licking his hip. She also didn't stop.

Behind her, Diamond let out a hungry growl and thrust, his broad crown finally breaching the entrance of her stretched vagina.

“Fate!” she keened into Vee’s hip.

When she reached back, she found he was only buried halfway.

Shit! Her pussy was in trouble.

Phara

Instinct held Phara in its grip as he placed his throbbing crown at the queen’s entrance. He huffed through a clenched jaw, trying to hold himself steady while he pressed into her pink, wet quivering slit. The feeling was indescribable. He wanted to thrust, burying himself instantly in their queen’s welcoming heat, but resisted. The gorgeous creature was small, he didn’t dare hurt her. And yet the sight of her slit straining to envelop the head of his shaft was the most erotic thing he’d ever seen. He was almost in. Could she take a little more? He didn’t know.

Then Phara looked up and saw the queen’s face pressed into Bellator’s crotch. The queen was truly accepting them. It pushed him over the edge and he thrust, burying his tip into the queen’s tight writhing channel.

The queen cried out and he froze, but staying still was easier said than done with her wondrous body spasming around his crown. Phara trembled at the sensations inundating him. He never could’ve fathomed the tortured pleasure he was made for, but he was most assuredly made for this. It was like soaring and falling all at once.

When the queen reached back and felt his arousal, another frisson of pleasure coursed through him that she didn’t pull him out. She hadn’t rejected him.

I won't disappoint you.

He'd do anything for his queen, to his queen, just to guarantee she experienced the euphoria she was treating him to now.

Phara gripped the queen's hips and pressed deeper, snarling as he forced himself to remain in control. Although, with their seductive queen, that was a losing battle.

Isabella

Diamond pressed ever deeper, the ridges, knots and veins on his cock lighting up her nerve endings. She panted, trying to rectify the immense pressure. In between gasps she placed frantic kisses on Vee's smooth, purple skin. She needed a distraction from the unbelievable things being done to her. Wantonly she turned her head and licked Vee's shaft, catching a bit of the arousal leaking from his tip. Surprisingly, he tasted as sweet as the vanilla he smelled like. She quickly found herself licking and stroking Vee's cock, while he gripped her hair. Something wicked inside her liked the way Vee trembled beneath her.

Being taken from behind was the way animals fucked. Yet another taboo she was partaking in. But with the savage pleasure gripping her, she felt like an animal, wild and free. Bent over, the knot underneath Diamond's crown was positioned just right, and Isa gasped when it slid over that spot on the roof of her vagina, the erogenous zone she didn't know existed before today, her G-spot. How could she possibly feel more ecstasy? Shock reverberated through her along with the euphoric sensation. This was nothing like the pathetic experience with Caleb, nothing at all.

Diamond pulled out, then thrust back in, going deeper than before. A moaning gasp burst out of Isa when he again hit all the right spots. He repeated it over and over, impaling her faster, deeper and harder. Soon she was screaming from a mix of pleasure and pain as his hips slapped against her ass, though it was muffled since her

lips were stretched around Vee's cock. Desperately she sucked his arousal, not caring if she gagged. For some instinctual reason she needed him in her mouth.

In the middle of the drawn-out orgasm, a long, wet tongue pressed into her puckered rear. Isa's eyes widened and she gasped around Vee's cock as the wet wriggling appendage started fucking her ass. This was so unbelievably taboo, and yet the pleasure sent her rocketing to the next level. She started convulsing from the ecstasy. Vee's cock swelled unexpectedly then he erupted with a bellow, his sweet release shooting down her throat.

"My queen!" Diamond snarled.

He tugged her upright, clutching her against his chest as he rammed into her hard and fast. Something along both sides of his cock fluttered, the ridges flared, and the knots swelled. The growing pressure overwhelmed her already inundated G-spot along with all the other spots she was discovering in her pussy. The swelling forced his thrusts to slow and finally halt. Diamond bit down at the base of her neck, like a lion staking its claim, then his entire cock jerked and he sprayed her insides with his hot seed.

The twinge of pain, the ecstasy, his inescapable possession, and the warmth of his release ripped through her, whipping her climax out of control. It felt like she was on fire, the electric pleasure coursing along every synapse. This was true pleasure, true release. Where had this been her whole life? Isa arched her back, her limbs frozen while her pussy convulsed. Diamond held her against him, his engorged cock locked firmly in place. The flared ridges continued throbbing, kicking off more spasms in her pussy, which only made him continue pulsing. It was a vicious cycle.

Eventually euphoria released its choke-hold on them, and some of the swelling waned in Diamond's cock. He eased out of her as they collapsed atop Vee, though Diamond rolled to the side so he wouldn't crush her. Vee pulled her boneless twitching body further onto his chest, and surprisingly she found it easy to relax on the exotic big

man. This whole situation was crazy, absolutely insane, except she was too busy trying to catch her breath and rein in her heartbeat to care.

Isa smelled something fruity and opened her eyes to find Chevron kindly holding a drink. He tipped the cup up and she gratefully took a big gulp.

“Thank you.” She smiled in appreciation when he pulled back the cup, bliss evident in her smile and her voice.

“It is my honor.” Chevron blinked at her.

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His sweet gesture was overshadowed when something wet touched her rear. Isa's eyes widened and she jumped. She just had more orgasms in the last hour than was humanly possible, and not a single one she'd given herself! She had crossed a lot of lines. Sex and pleasure had been utterly redefined. She was still reeling from it all.

"No more," Isa panted as she looked back to find Diamond gently cleaning her up. "Oh." Her cheeks heated in embarrassment at her mistake. How presumptuous of her. It was also super embarrassing, yet also super sweet that he was cleaning her off.

Diamond gazed affectionately at her. "Rest, my queen." He leaned in and kissed her rear, right in the middle of her left cheek.

After all they'd done, that small act shouldn't have shocked her, yet the tenderness of it did.

"Sleep, precious." Vee gently stroked her back, urging her to rest her head on his stocky chest again.

Isa's eyes widened farther as she realized a few things. One; she just understood what they'd said. Two; the aliens didn't open or move their mouths when they spoke, and she'd heard them in her mind. Three; Diamond called her his queen.

Ooh, what have I done?!She planted her face in Vee's chest, suddenly feeling the need to hide.

Chapter 6

Forming the Bond

Bellator

Bellator clutched their queen as she pressed her face into him. Hopefully the way his chest still heaved from the pleasure she'd given him didn't disturb her. He completely sympathized with Phara collapsing after cleaning their queen. It felt like he'd run around the entire mountain. Bellator closed his eyes and attempted to get himself under control, except that only heightened the lingering jolts of pleasure, the sensation of her warm, soft skin against his, and the scent of her desire permeating the air.

He'd seen pecus stags mount mares in their territory, but never witnessed what the queen had done to him among the fauna. She wrapped her lips around his sex and took his seed into her body. There were no words to describe the sheer ecstasy of it. He nearly changed form, fluxing, when he peaked. His sex jerked, threatening to grow hard again at the mere memory. She had honored him by consuming his essence, and he'd never felt more complete or happy in his life. Bellator hugged their queen tight as hope for the future overwhelmed him.

"Our queen accepts us!" Artifex whispered reverently as he stroked their queen's silky dark mane. His voice was a mix of happiness and awe.

Phara made some incoherent comment, but it sounded like he agreed. Their consort alpha was clearly still reeling. The three alphas and handful of betas grinned. For some it was unrestrained, and others it was a thoughtful smile, but everyone was happy. It was understandable they would all react differently. This was a sudden yet wondrous change that affected their whole hive.

Bellator felt the same as his brethren. Unadulterated joy filled him as he looked at the queen resting on his chest. Though in the back of his mind, a new kind of weight

descended on his shoulders. It was an immense responsibility caring for a queen so delicate that she had no camouflage, no claws, and blunt herbivore teeth. But she was utterly adorable with her silky mane, soft skin, and lush curves. All these things and more incited his instinct to protect her, and it didn't feel like a burden at all.

It is my honor, my queen. Pride filled him to bursting.

Phara

Phara's mind was still swirling in a sea of euphoria as he lay utterly spent beside Bellator, one hand draped over their new queen. He hardly had the wherewithal to clean their queen before collapsing. His seed had left him in such powerful surges, he was certain it took his life force with it. Artifex was right. They'd done it! The queen had accepted and bonded with him. Overwhelmed with pride, Phara attempted to agree as he panted.

"We found our queen and she accepted us!" Galis, one of his consort betas, exuberantly declared.

Their queen startled, shuddering on Bellator's chest. Phara cringed, his hand pausing mid-stroke on her dark mane. In their excitement they'd awoken their queen. Their stunning queen lifted her head from Bellator's chest and slowly looked around. She surveyed Bellator, Artifex, and the betas, before landing on Phara. Her expression wasn't a happy one. He'd witnessed and memorized her happy smile when they'd shared food with her. She wasn't afraid, either. He'd scented her fear when they first arrived. He tasted the air just to confirm there was no hint of fear. If anything, she appeared lost.

She is lost, imbecile! She fell from the sky in a mechanical egg. He didn't know how queens traveled, but he had a feeling fiery meteor showers weren't standard.

“You are safe,” he reiterated, resuming his gentle caress and making the vibrato that soothed her before.

Her round brown eyes flared wider. He was learning her expressions and that wasn't a good one. Phara's worry doubled.

Blight, he cursed and instantly stopped purring. Please don't change your mind about accepting our hive.

“That is you speaking to me, right?” their queen asked him in her twittering voice.

Shock reverberated through Phara that he suddenly understood their queen. Her question wasn't what he expected, though. He honestly thought she might reject him. Phara glanced at his brethren. From their expressions they noticed the change, too.

He focused on their queen again. “Yes. That was me. I like your vocalizations. They remind me of the little birds.”

The queen blinked at him and he realized his compliment was superfluous. Except he didn't regret saying it; the twittering sounds she made were adorable.

“How? You're not moving your mouth or making noise, but I hear you in my head.” The queen's eyes grew even rounder as she panned all of them.

Phara considered the question for a moment.

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That is curious. Not the way he communicated; speaking telepathically was the Vorto way. How can I communicate with our queen now? he wondered, equally intrigued.

He'd been so overwhelmed by her intoxicating scent and the need to mount her, he hadn't even questioned why he didn't understand her. He'd never known a queen, perhaps females had their own language. They certainly had their own intoxicating scent and luscious form.

"We are already bonding as a hive," Bellator chimed in with an explanation.

"That must be the reason," Phara agreed with his fellow alpha. Bonding with their queen was monumental. There was an exchange of hormones, emotions, and bodily fluid. That had to be the reason they understood each other now. "I do feel changed, my queen."

"Oooh, there's that word again." Their queen rolled off Bellator and warily panned them again, her breath coming out faster.

Clearly their explanation for why they could now understand each other didn't sit well with her. He wished he had a better answer, but his people had forgotten a great deal about the queens since the Blight.

"What word?" Artifex helped her sit up.

"Queen! As in royalty, leader of all the people?!" she panted. "I'm no queen. I'm anything but."

It was such an odd thing to say. She very plainly was a queen. He scented the proof and still tasted it on his tongue. He'd even buried himself in her channel.

Suddenly it occurred to Phara, she wasn't speaking about her physiology. She was talking about her new life as part of their hive. He'd never considered how a queen might feel, because he never expected to find one.

Well, it's time to think about your queen!he admonished himself.

In the few tales that had been passed down through the generations, he knew his queen mother had emerged in the Nemus Hive. It was why the Nemus were their allies. As the stories told, a queen must leave her hive. She could not bear the hatchlings of her brethren; the young didn't form right. Leaving all that she knew had to be hard, though. He'd lived his whole life in the mountains and couldn't imagine living elsewhere. As hard as that must have been, he doubted his mother had the traumatic voyage his queen had in getting here.

Besides violently leaving her hive, she was also transitioning into a bonded queen, the same as he had gone from a single to a bonded consort alpha. This had to be very overwhelming and frightening for her.

"All will be well." Phara smiled encouragingly at the anxious female. "I know this is new for you. It is new for us, too. We haven't had a queen in four generations." He gestured to the other two alphas.

Their queen still looked confused, blinking her brown and white eyes at him.

"We found your damaged egg. We know there was an accident as you traveled with your hive. You never need to fear that again. I will trade my life to assure your safety." Bellator bowed down as he made the vow.

“And I will care for your every need. You will never want for anything,” Artifex solemnly added.

“And I will hold you close, so you won’t miss your old hive as much,” Phara promised, taking her tiny hands in his.

Despite their oath, rain began falling from their queen’s eyes, tearing him up inside.

“Please, my queen,” Phara begged as he pulled her into his arms. “All will be well. You are safe.” He didn’t know what else to say.

“I can’t believe all this,” their little queen sobbed. “You found me, healed me, fed me, and now you want to protect and care for me.” She buried her face against his chest as the rain continued to fall from her eyes.

His queen was hurting. Often over the years he’d suffered deeply as he questioned his purpose in the hive, so he understood that deep pain that had nothing to do with physical injuries. The only thing that had gotten him through was his hive, so he did as he promised and held their queen close.

“All will be well, precious one,” he crooned as he rubbed her back.

Artifex

Artifex worriedly looked on as their queen sobbed against Phara’s chest. Her strident sounds made him ache.

“I thought we said the right things.” Artifex looked toward Bellator who was equally distressed.

Their queen pulled away from Phara and turned to them. “You said the right things. It

just hurts because no one back home ever said those things. No one except my mother and my sister even cared. When bad things happened to me, my brother and father were certain it was my fault. If I wasn't already cast out, they would have locked me up for what we just did," she said the last part softly then visibly shuddered.

Anger overwhelmed Artifex. "The males of your hive abused you?!" He couldn't fathom such a thing.

"No one will do anything to you for becoming our queen!" Bellator relayed with a growl.

"You are ours now." Phara's arms tightened around her.

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“What does that mean?!” Her lyrical voice became strident. “Thank you for helping me, but I don’t understand what is going on. I’m not a queen.” Their queen spoke faster as she panicked.

“You are female, a queen,” Phara explained.

Phara cast them a pleading gaze, but they couldn’t help the consort alpha. There was no way to simplify the information any further. Artifex grimaced, wondering if therefection had completely healed her head.

“So, because I’m female, I’m a queen?” she questioned slowly as her gaze dubiously panned them.

“Yes,” Artifex confirmed, while eyeing her as critically as she was studying them.

Maybe the queen needs another treatment with the machine.

“And because you found me and brought me here, I’m part of your hive now?” She looked between them.

Artifex considered the question. She had good cause to question that logic. If they found a Vorto male from another hive wandering their territory, they would instantly assume the male was either a messenger or a habitual rule breaker. And it was highly unlikely they’d take in an outcast.

“Yes,” Bellator answered as Artifex was still thinking about the question.

The legionnaire alpha was probably right. Queens were rare even before the Blight, so they would've taken her in without questions.

“What about, um, what about th-the sex?” Their queen's cheeks darkened as she scrutinized them, particularly Phara and Bellator, the males who'd pierced her with their sex.

“Did no one teach you about sex, either?” Galis bluntly asked their queen, his head cocking to one side.

Artifex rubbed his face in agitation. Of the three consort betas, Galis was the most impetuous, saying whatever was on his mind. There were gentler ways to ask the question.

A sudden noise burst out of their queen that sounded like the bark of aferocub. It was a shocking sound, so it had to be a sound of surprise.

He could understand why she might be shocked. The consort alpha that raised Phara and the other consorts had lost hope. He never taught them about sex and bonding. Phara had to figure it out watching the fauna, and shared it with the rest of the hive. But perhaps their queen didn't know at all how males and females fit together. If that was the case their bonding would've been doubly shocking.

Or maybe our queen does know the proper bonding customs and we fouled it up. Artifex groaned, feeling like that was probably the answer.

The servitor alpha that taught him had done a better job than Phara's, so at least he knew there needed to be a Bonding Feast, which was in progress. Sadly, though, that was the extent of his instruction pertaining to queens. He couldn't blame the former chief servitor, there hadn't been a queen in generations, but there was a lot that went into keeping the hive running. Artifex's days were very busy with lessons in building,

cooking, farming and the like. But clearly more information on queens should have been passed down.

Worriedly Artifex looked at his fellow alphas as their queen continued to make the barking sound.

“My queen?” Phara stroked her back, hoping to console her.

“I’m sorry,” their queen snorted as she stopped shaking.

“No need to apologize. Are you well?” Artifex asked, his gaze again going to her head where the injury had been.

“I’m okay,” she made the snorting sound again. “I guess you don’t laugh when something is funny.”

“We do.” Bellator gestured from himself to Phara. “Artifex doesn’t.” The legionnaire alpha waved at him.

Surprised by the comment, Phara hissed in amusement. It ended up being the perfect demonstration, albeit at his expense. It wasn’t that he didn’t laugh. His sense of humor was different, a little more scathing.

“You make a breathy hissing sound.” Their queen’s mouth curved into a smile, showing off her adorable blunt teeth.

He loved the expression she made when she was happy, and now that he knew what her laughter sounded like, he could definitely get addicted to that, too.

“I guess we do,” Phara replied. “What about the sex question made you laugh?”

“Did Phara’s sex performance amuse you?” Artifex had to interject.

Phara’s head whipped toward him, his mouth hanging open in shock.

“You must forgive Phara, he has no clue what he’s doing,” Bellator piled on, turning the tables on the consort alpha.

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Phara spun toward Bellator and glared. They were going to hear about this later.

“No!” their queen declared and started laughing again as she made the happy face.

Pride filled Artifex that they succeeded in making their queen laugh again. She'd been stunned by what happened today, they all were, but instead of rejecting them she was laughing. The sense of satisfaction coursing through him was better than when he unblocked the hive's subterranean canal, repaired the light grid, and finished his first hunt all combined. Artifex smiled. For once, everything felt right.

Chapter 7

Very Nice to Meet You

Isabella

Isa relaxed as she laughed along with the alien men joking about sex. She had let herself get worked up over this new and wholly unexpected situation. When meeting a foreign culture, she needed to stay calm and objective. The aliens had accepted her into their hive, which she assumed was similar to a clan or a tribe, if she was understanding this strange telepathic language correctly.

Being accepted is a good thing. She nodded to herself. Well, in most cases it is, she amended.

She didn't know the aliens' laws, and prayed they weren't as harsh as her own culture. Her people would've institutionalized her for the free love fest that just

happened. Although, she had a feeling that wasn't the case here. The aliens got upset by the suggestion that harm would come to her. In fact, they said such caring sweet things, they were hard to believe. They were willing to protect and care for her, but they didn't even know her. A part of her was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Isa blinked as it occurred to her she'd heard them say their names.

"Oh my gosh." She choked and covered her mouth. They had sex and they hadn't even shared names. Her mother would be truly mortified.

"Was I that bad?" Diamond's brow furrowed, looking hurt and horrified as he sank backward.

His lack of confidence was shocking. The men of Earth were always cocky about their performance, finding every reason to brag, when it was taboo for women to do the same. Caleb used to talk about how good at sex he was when he came over to hang out with her brother. That man had no reason to brag, though she verbally stroked his ego, fearing he'd tell her family what happened between them. It made her sick every single time she was forced to play hostess to the bastard.

"No!" She quickly grabbed Diamond's large hands, halting his retreat. "You were very good. The best ever." She couldn't believe she was saying this. It was the god's honest truth, though, and she refused to let him think otherwise, no matter how insanely improper the encounter was.

Diamond sat up straighter and smiled.

"I just realized I don't know your names. That would've been very wrong where I'm from, but I'm not on Earth anymore," she reminded herself as voices from her past tried to make her feel ashamed. "My name is Isabella, but I prefer Isa," she added.

“Queen Isabella,” Diamond brought both of her hands to his mouth.

Oh, Queen Isabella. She liked the sound of that and couldn't help but sit up straighter, letting a hint of pride course through her.

“I am Phara, Consort Alpha of the Tumulus Hive.” He kissed her knuckles, his long tongue doing a serpentine flick across the back of her hands.

Phara wasn't human, he looked animalistic with his striped purple skin, large angled eyes and broad mouth full of sharp teeth. The alien man definitely had sex like a wild beast, pounding her from behind until she forgot anything else existed. Her pussy spasmed at the bold way he kissed her hands and the sensation of his talented tongue snaking across her skin. Phara's voice was deep and majestic as he said his name and title. He didn't say he was king, but he did say he was alpha of his hive, so that meant he held a position of influence. She then caught the part about him being a consort. Where she was from that term was only used for women, and it wasn't flattering.

Did I just have sex with some sort of alien prostitute? Her cheeks heated. No. They were just saying Phara didn't know what he was doing. I am jumping to conclusions again.

The thoughts quickly filtered through her mind and then she remembered her manners. She was about to reply to Phara when the gladiator, the one she called Vee, captured her hands, effectively stealing her attention from Phara.

“Queen Isa, I am Bellator, Legionnaire Alpha of the Tumulus Hive.” He smiled as he too kissed her hands.

Bellator had a gentle touch for being a soldier as legionnaire implied.

He is definitely a teddy bear, she decided.

Although, she'd never sucked her teddy bear off. Actually, Bellator had been her first blow job, despite all the men who had propositioned her in the past.

As she opened her mouth to speak, Chevron cupped her cheek, turning her focus on him.

"I am Artifex, Servitor Alpha of the Tumulus Hive, my queen." He was the wiry one, but like his companions had abs for days.

Isa grinned at the way the men interacted, each trying to steal her attention. She wondered if that was because they all had alpha in their title and were actually competing. Again, she opened her mouth to say nice to meet you.

The triplets who'd massaged her leaned into the circle, cutting her off. "And we are Gregis, Rego, and Galis, Consort Betas of the Tumulus Hive," Rego spoke for the trio.

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Her smile broadened when yet another face popped into view. It was one of the men who held the bowl of fruit and cheese. “I am Operar, Servitor Beta of the Tumulus Hive.”

Isa glanced around, but that was all who were in the room. “It’s very nice to meet you,” she finally managed to say. “Phara, Bellator, Artifex, Gregis, Rego, Galis, and Operar.”

She looked at each one, attempting to memorize the differences in their builds and the striped patterns on their faces. The symbol on their chests was the easiest for her to quickly use to differentiate between them, though. She wanted to ask about the marking, but she had so many questions all fighting for dominance.

“We are honored that you have accepted our hive.” Phara bowed and the others followed.

“Thank you for healing me.” She studied her wrist, which showed no signs that it had ever been injured, and a more pressing issue popped into her mind. “You said you found my egg. Were there others?” Her anxiety rose as she asked about her fellow colonists, her friends. She’d been hurt, and they probably were, too.

“Your egg was the only one nearby,” Bellator replied, and her stomach dropped. “There was a great deal of debris raining down in the sky, landing in the western territories. Are you saying there are more eggs?”

“Yes.” She nodded, her eyes burning as tears threatened.

Phara swiftly wrapped his arms around her, pulling her onto his lap. "Please, Queen Isa, we will do anything for you. Do not make the rain. Do not be sad."

It was odd how she heard his voice in her mind, but also heard him purring to soothe her. Surprisingly, his vibrating purr was soothing.

She took a deep breath and blew it out. "I am worried my friends are hurt or dead and that I won't see them again," she explained.

Abruptly, Bellator lifted his chin and howled. The sound resonated through the stone chamber, making her jump in Phara's lap.

"Crass!" Phara glared at him, covering her ears. "Sorry, my queen."

She grinned at Phara's reaction on her behalf. It was sweet. It was also cute the way Bellator grimaced in regret.

In ran another alien with a vee-shaped marking on his chest similar to Bellator's mark.

"Invicta, send runners to the western territories. Let them know that the meteor shower contained mechanical eggs holding people who may be injured," Bellator instructed, confirming he was in charge of the aliens with the markings like his.

"Have the runners take whatever you think is appropriate from the storeroom as gifts. You know the custom when crossing another hive's territory," Artifex interjected.

"Understood," Invicta replied.

"Do not mention we found our queen in one of the eggs. I do not wish to be overrun," Bellator added.

Isa's brow furrowed at the odd comment. "All the eggs have women in them, females, queens I guess you call them."

Everyone in the room turned to look at her, their mouths dropping open.

"What do you mean all the eggs contain queens?" Bellator asked, his head tilted in confusion. Again, it was strange to hear him speak, because his mouth was still agape.

"I don't understand how to explain it any differently. The eggs, the pods, they all have women like me in them." She shrugged, not sure how to simplify that.

"Invicta, go. Still, don't mention we found our queen, and do a thorough search of our territory, too," Bellator instructed, without taking his eyes off her, his hairless brows furrowed as he tried to make sense of what she said.

"Your hive had more than one queen emerge?" Artifex asked.

Isa blinked in confusion at the odd question. By emerge she assumed he meant born. She then recalled them saying something about their hive not having a queen for four generations. Several things fell into place and more questions arose.

"Wait." Isa waved her hands dramatically. "Earlier you said your hive hasn't had a queen for generations. That means no women, I mean females?"

"Yes. We are the fifth generation since the Blight that killed all the queens in all the Vorto hives," Phara confirmed.

She made note of what they called themselves as she processed what he said.

"I'm so sorry." She frowned as she hugged Phara. The death of all their women

must've devastated their society. It was no wonder the Vorto were shocked that a bunch of women had crashed on their planet. It also explained why she'd been fucked so thoroughly. Except something didn't add up right. "But how could you have so many generations without a female?"

"Ah. You are a smart queen." Artifex pointed at her and smiled approvingly.

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For a moment she was thrown by the compliment he so easily gave out that she almost missed the explanation.

“They are not true generations,” Artifex continued. “Our queen mother passed before we emerged from our amnio sacs.” He gestured at everyone in the room. “The chrysalis chambercaretakers stopped tending all of our amnio sacs, so only some of us emerged.” He made a hand motion, like he was rubbing a ball, and she imagined an alien massaging a sac with a fetus in it. “We’re calling that the first generation. Toward the end of their life, they only allowed a percentage of hatchlings to emerge, and that’s how it continued, until you get to us. We really are all the same generation, just stretched over time.”

Amnio sac. Chrysalis chamber. Hive?! It sounded like the aliens were similar to bees or butterflies. The fact that they somehow slowed their unusual birth was strange and shocking. It also sounded like they were all siblings. Then again, the Vorto could turn to goo, so this new information wasn’t really any stranger than that.

“You look distressed again, my queen.” Bellator gripped her hand.

“I’m trying to understand everything.” Isa nodded, agreeing with his assessment. No doubt she looked confused as hell. “You probably noticed, I’m not like you.”

“We know.” Phara leaned down and kissed her shoulder. “Your features are very different, but attractive. Our queen mother was from the Nemus Hive, our neighbors. They are different. They blend in with the trees of their territory, instead of the mountains the way we do.”

The easy acceptance in Phara's voice and the way he tenderly kissed her shoulder nearly brought tears to her eyes. The Vorto truly had accepted her into their tribe. It emboldened her to share more, even though spelling it out might change their minds about her.

"I don't come from a distant territory on this planet. I come from a world far, far away," she admitted, then held her breath, bracing for their reaction.

"You come from one of the moons?" Bellator looked at her in awe.

"No." She shook her head. "Farther, much farther. Where I am from, there are a lot of females, one for every male."

"You are teasing us." Phara gave her a little squeeze.

"I'm not kidding you." She shook her head.

"There is only one queen per hive," Artifex said in disbelief.

"Not on my planet. They don't think females are so precious. In fact, they weren't kind to the planet, either. My world has too many people and they're wearing out the resources of the plant."

The aliens' eyes widened, but she continued. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"So, the people in charge, rather than fixing our planet, decided to find a new one. They built a ship, put us in it, and sent us traveling in space to your world. They said this planet was uninhabited, but their research was as flawed as the ship they built," she growled. "Something damaged our ship just above your planet, and we fell in the mechanical eggs, along with a bunch of other bits of our ship, I imagine." She pantomimed falling to the ground with her hands, though she only remembered part

of it.

“This ship was like a sky hive full of queens?” Bellator tried to understand what she was explaining.

She was as foreign to them as they were to her, and both sides were trying to find common ground with their culture and physiology.

“Long voyages are always dangerous. I can’t imagine a voyage among the stars. I am relieved you made it this far. You must have been very afraid as you fell.” Artifex took her hand and gently squeezed it.

She nodded. It was a miracle the ship made it this far.

“I hate that you are shaking. You are safe now.” Phara held her tighter, kissing the top of her head.

She didn’t realize she was shaking, but she was practically vibrating. Just talking about this made her mad, and sad, and betrayed, and many more emotions she couldn’t name.

“You said you were cast out,” Phara recalled as he held her close. “You did not choose to join the hive ship, did you?” He placed another gentle kiss on her head.

“No.” She breathed faster as she recalled how it all transpired. She refused to cry, though, she already cried so many times during this emotional roller coaster, and the poor Vorto didn’t need to be subjected to it yet again. “On my world, I study ancient people. I dug up a very old weapon. I was taking it and other really old things like cups and bottles to a place where people could study them.”

“You are part of the servitor caste?!” Artifex excitedly asked, a hint of pride in his

voice.

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “I’m not really sure what that is.”

“The legionnaire caste guards, fights, keeps the rules, and deals with aggressive creatures.” Bellator rubbed the symbol on his chest. She was right about the marks and his occupation.

“The servitor caste is the largest because we are the caretakers of everything the hive needs. We grow, hunt and forage food, cook, build, heal, and many other skills,” Artifex explained.

Based on his description, she would be considered part of his caste.

“And then there are the consorts, like us.” Phara gestured from himself to the triplets. “It is our privilege to breed the next generation with the queen.” Phara buried his face in her hair and took a deep breath.

Isabella stilled at his comment.

I'm such a moron. I'm their new baby maker.

She'd been trying so hard to understand Vorto society, the obvious went right over her head. Isa stiffened further as the weight of what she overlooked landed. Women on Earth were defined by sex and their ability to make babies, both praised and ridiculed for it in the same breath. After being slut shamed for kissing a boy, the incident with Caleb, and a barrage of other slights, she'd chosen a career over a family. It was a decision her parents hated because it meant they'd failed, though they sure enjoyed the extra income she brought home. By the skin of her teeth she'd avoided being pigeonholed back home. Then she was forced off her world, traveled to a whole new one, only to discover that yet again her value lay in making babies.

At least the sex was good. Really good. She couldn't believe the naughty little voice that popped up unbidden.

Suddenly, Isa was painfully aware that she was sitting on Phara's lap. His cock was trapped between her lower back and his abs. It wasn't erect, but it was stiff. Isa bit her lip as a frisson of electricity shot through her, making her nipples pucker.

Would it be so awful to be Phara's queen?

The Vorto had been very good to her. She would've had a family back home if she'd been treated decently. Here, the Vorto made her feel truly desired in less than a day, when she felt like nothing but a burden back home. And how often was someone given the chance to save a race of people?

Just as Isa was getting comfortable with the situation she found herself in, reality intruded. A cruel little voice in the back of her mind screamed they might not be compatible.

And then what good would I be?She frowned.

“My queen, you were telling us why you were sent here.” Bellator rubbed her knee.

“Yes. Sorry.” Isa shook off the thoughts. “My people said I broke the law by having the ancient weapon, even though it would never work again. I was sentenced to join the one-way mission here, along with other women like me. They decided we were disposable, while secretly believing we might succeed in building a colony if we actually made it here.” Her stomach twisted with anger at the betrayal.

“Isabella,” Phara said softly and slowly, using her name rather than the daunting title. “You are not disposable.” He angled her face and placed a kiss on her cheek. The sincerity and sorrow in his voice made a lump form in her throat. She didn’t understand how someone could be so sweet, yet he was.

“I do not like the alphas of your hive,” Bellator angrily hissed. “Do you think they perished in the crash? If not, I would very much like to hunt them down.”

The sneer on Bellator’s face with his big dark eyes, sharp teeth, and camouflaging stripes was scary as hell, and yet she smiled. He wanted to seek vengeance for her. She’d never had anyone want to do that. It made her feel better.

“No. The alphas stayed on my home planet. They were pretty sure we were going to die.” She reached over and rubbed his knee. “Thank you, though. That’s really sweet.”

“It is my honor to guard and protect you. If they come, I will teach them how to

respect my queen,” he assured her.

“We are your hive.” Phara growled possessively and squeezed her tight.

Isa’s eyes widened, suddenly feeling a different kind of pressure. “Um, I need to empty my bladder.” She prayed the Vorto went to the bathroom, otherwise this was going to be an awkward discussion.

“Phara, release the queen so I can show her the cascade,” Artifex insisted as he stood, reaching down to help her up.

“Of course.” Phara gripped her hips and helped her up as he stood. “My apologies, we didn’t think to ask earlier.”

To her surprise, all the men stood. She smiled at them. They were such gentlemen, in the truest old-fashioned sense of the word. As Artifex took her hand and led her out of the chamber, she couldn’t help but look fondly back at them. The Vorto were growing on her.

They’re not so scary.

Maybe being cast out was the best thing that could’ve happened to her.

Chapter 8

What’s Cooking

Artifex

“It’s a little dim,” Queen Isabella commented as they exited her chamber.

Artifex glanced down the passage lined with the consorts' chambers. He could plainly see, but their queen had different physiology. He'd swiftly grown comfortable with their new queen, and it was easy to forget she was from far away and unfamiliar with everything in their hive. He double-checked nothing was on the floor as he carefully led her into the queen's private cascade.

"Let me show you how to illuminate the columns." He placed her hand on the rolling sphere embedded in the wall just inside the entrance.

"Oh, it's nothing like a light switch. Geez I'm short," Isa commented, though her mouth didn't move. "Thank you," she added in her lyrical voice.

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“No need to thank me, my queen. Simply turn the sphere until the columns are as bright as you wish. The spheres will be in a similar location when you enter a chamber,” he explained.

Isa turned the sphere until he was squinting at how bright she made the room.

“Oh sorry. Is that too bright?” She cringed. “Be considerate, Isa, their eyes are larger. They probably are more affected by the light.” Again, she didn’t vocalize as she reached for the adjustment sphere a second time.

Artifex smiled, amused that they’d had similar observations about each other.

“My queen, no need to adjust it.” He grabbed her hand to halt her before she adjusted the sphere again. “I believe my eyes do take in more light than yours while in the dark interior of the hive. We do go outside regularly, though, and I can adjust to very bright sunshine.”

Queen Isabella’s mouth dropped open as he spoke. It was her shocked expression. It then occurred to him, when their queen’s mouth was closed, she’d been unintentionally projecting her private thoughts.

“I have already surprised you,” he grimaced, “so I might as well add that you are not too short. I find your diminutive size adorable, and perhaps I am overly tall,” he chuckled.

“You heard what I was thinking!” She gaped at him.

“You project your internal thoughts much the way we regularly communicate.”

“I guess I should’ve expected that. Crap, that’s embarrassing. I hope I haven’t said anything unkind.” Queen Isa’s brow furrowed and she cringed, baring her blunt teeth.

Artifex thought on it. “No,” he replied, not recalling anything that offended him in any of their conversations. Even if she had conveyed something unkind, he would’ve kept it to himself. “It just occurred to me you weren’t doing it intentionally.”

“Oh good.” Isa’s shoulders eased. “I’ve been shell shocked.”

“I understand, my queen, truly, I do.” He gently squeezed her shoulder. “Let me show you the cascade, since I’m certain it is different than what you are familiar with, or maybe it’s not.” Artifex tipped his head toward the angled trough with a ledge seat at the lower end. “Similar to the light, roll this sphere to open the water valve. You relieve yourself in the lower section,” he pointed, “and clean your hands here in the upper section of the cascade.”

“Okay. Do you bathe in here, too?” The queen looked around.

“No. We have a separate space for that.”

“Ah.”

The queen went to the lower end of the cascade, then her furry brows drew together. He immediately saw what was wrong as she stood next to the carved stone ledge. Despite what he said earlier about her being the perfect size, their queen was a bit short for the cascade.

“I will have our craftsmen make a step for you.” He gripped his queen’s hips and lifted her up, setting her on the ledge.

“Thanks,” she said as she scooted her delicious curvy rump to the edge of the channel containing the flowing water. She then pointedly stared at him, her eyes widening.

“Now you simply make water or whatever. It will be washed away. I assure you it doesn’t mix with our drinking or bathing water,” he encouraged her.

“I got the idea, thank you. Um, could you maybe wait outside, please?” Her cheeks reddened slightly as she made the request.

Ah, my queen requires privacy.

“Of course, my queen. Call to me if you need assistance.” Artifex strode out of the cascade room. There was no door so he leaned against the arched entrance to wait and keep anyone else from disturbing their queen’s private time.

Phara, the consort betas, and Bellator were still in the queen’s chamber. However, the hallway was filling with consort gammas, deltas, and omegas who’d exited their chambers to catch a glimpse of their queen.

If she feels embarrassed by handling her necessities, she probably wouldn’t appreciate an audience waiting outside. Artifex smirked as he waved them back into their chambers.

“Talking telepathically is going to take time to get used to,” Isa said, pulling his attention away from the disappointed consorts retreating into their quarters. “Do you have private thoughts at all?”

“We do. I’m just more experienced at shielding them,” he replied in amusement. “We also have a vocal language, but it’s very simple. We make the vibrato when we’re happy or attempting to console someone. We may snarl like the fauna if angered or yip in excitement. It’s more common among hatchlings until their cognitive functions

mature,” he tried to explain.

“Vibrato, that’s the purring vibrating hum, right?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“Wow. I have so much to learn.” She sounded daunted.

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“Do not fear, my beautiful queen, we have time. There is no rush. I think we both have much to learn about each other, and even about ourselves. I’m looking forward to it.” He resisted the urge to look over his shoulder at the stunning female who had changed their world in an instant.

“Awe, he’s the sensitive, sexy, intellectual type,” Queen Isa said.

He perked up at the comment. “Ah, so you already have me figured out,” he teased his queen.

“Dammit!” the queen barked. “You heard that!?”

Artifex’s eyes widened. “Yes,” he hesitantly replied, realizing her complimentary assessment had also been private. “I can pretend to forget it?” he offered.

“Ha! I am learning more about you every minute,” she said out loud, making her cute, breathy laughing sound.

Warmth filled Artifex’s chest, loving his queen’s temperament.

Behind him there was a slight thud as the queen hopped down, then the pitter patter of her tiny feet on the stone floor, followed by splashing water as she washed.

“Amazing. All this in a cave,” she commented as she exited and joined him. “How do you pump the water, create the blowing air, and power the lights?”

Artifex grinned, loving how inquisitive the queen was about how things worked. She

was definitely a member of the servitor caste.

“There’s a spiral in a vertical passage that raises the water.” He patted the nearby wall concealing the shaft. “Down below, in the underground canal there’s a paddle. The rushing water moves the paddle and turns the spiral,” he attempted to explain.

“The spiral sounds like an Archimedes screw,” Isa said thoughtfully.

“I am not familiar with this Archimedes.” He curiously tilted his head.

“He was a man of science on my planet. They named the spiral that raises water after him.”

“Ah. I like that both of our worlds have this innovation. It is very simple, yet extremely useful.” He smiled. “The blowing air and lighting grid are a little more complicated, but also involve shafts throughout the hive, reflected sunlight and natural air currents.”

“Hmm.” She nodded in appreciation.

Not only was his new queen a stunning, sexy, little female, he was discovering they had a great deal in common. He didn’t know what to expect when a queen entered his life. He assumed hatchlings would be involved, but Isa was fascinating, and he could foresee many enjoyable discussions in their future. Artifex glanced toward her chamber where the others waited and an impish notion occurred to him.

“How would you like to come with me? The Bonding Feast is being prepared and I’d like to find out which of our foods you enjoy. I would also like to continue this discussion.” He took her hand and gently urged her in the opposite direction.

“Oh, okay.” Queen Isa smiled and followed.

He grinned, pleased that she agreed to join him and tickled he was able to abscond with their queen.

“That was the queen’s branch. It contains your and the consorts’ chambers,” he explained as he held the door exiting the area.

Queen Isa admired everything from the floor to the ceiling, her hand gliding over the polished stone wall, as they headed down the passage.

“The Vorto prefer to integrate their hives into their territory and nature,” he commented as she studied her surroundings. “Our hive was carved out of the mountain, extending the natural passages over scores of generations before the Blight struck. That was when we had more advancements, but wisely the ancestors used simple innovations as much as possible. It makes it easier for us to maintain now.”

“That Blight sounds terrible, and it obviously had a devastating effect on your people.” Isa frowned. “It reminds me of the plagues my people suffered. Did anyone else get sick besides the females?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I am lucky that I survived to emerge. From what I was told, many amnio sacs shriveled before maturing. Not even therefectiowas able to heal those struck by the Blight. But that was over a hundred orbits ago.”

“Refectio?” Queen Isa cocked her head.

“It is one of our highly prized pieces of old technology. It healed your arm and head,” he explained as they walked toward the gathering areas.

“That sounds very advanced.” Her eyes widened in surprise.

Her shock was understandable. Therefectiowas advanced, considering the simple

machinery they were working with in this era.

“I’m lucky you had it,” Isa added, squeezing him with the very hand that had been seriously injured. Her sincere expression then shifted to worry. “Do the other hives have these machines if my friends need them?”

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“Some do, yes,” he answered honestly. As much as he wanted to say every one of the queens would be fine, he wouldn’t lie to his queen.

Her hive sent her here to die. Artifex ground his teeth as he clenched his jaw. He couldn’t fathom what kind of people would send their queens to die among the stars or on a harsh new world.

Seeing the fear swimming in Isa’s unusual brown eyes, Artifex suppressed the need to growl. His queen didn’t need his anger, she needed reassurance.

Artifex wrapped his arm around her back and pulled her close. “Our messengers have gone out. We will find out about the other queens from your hive. We won’t let them suffer,” he promised, while combing his fingers through her lovely mane. Hopefully it was a promise he could keep.

“Thank you,” she sighed. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that. I didn’t have time to meet all the women, but...” The queen’s words slowed when she noticed the Vorto working in the dining commons.

Her expression grew uncomfortable as the servitor omegas started to approach them. She hunched her shoulders, practically curling in on herself while huddling close to him. His brow furrowed, unsure of what was bothering her. Was she afraid of them? They were the first new people she’d encountered since leaving her chambers. The omegas weren’t a danger to their queen, but she may not know that given how she’d been treated. Protectively he hugged her close, wrapping both arms around her.

“They are all right,” he assured her. “Please continue with your tasks. You will meet

our new queen later,” Artifex urged the workers to return to cleaning and preparing for the feast. “This is our dining and meeting area,” he said, though Isa couldn’t really see since she was still using him as a barrier between her and the workers in the dining commons.

He smiled sympathetically as he gently picked her up, cradling her in his arms as he continued on. Hopefully after she got to meet everyone at the feast, she’d be less afraid.

“Thank you,” Isa whispered. “I just...well...” She frowned as she glanced down at herself.

His brow furrowed at the uncomfortable expression that twisted her face.

Artifex stopped again and focused on her. “Please explain.”

“I’m not used to walking around naked.” She awkwardly bared her teeth in a grimace.

The pale blue outfit he had to cut off of her surged to mind.

“You had coverings on!” Artifex wanted to kick himself. He felt so foolish. “I am so sorry. Are you cold?” She didn’t feel cool, but he hugged her closer to his chest anyway as he continued walking.

Flux! How could I be so remiss?!

“Well, no, I’m not cold.” Isa shook her head. “But, well, walking around naked in front of everyone wasn’t done in my old hive, so I’m not used to it.”

Artifex frowned. “This is natural. The Vorto do not emerge from their amnio sacs with coverings, do yours?” The question was slightly flippant and teasing.

“We don’t either.” She made her adorable twittering laugh as she adamantly shook her head.

“Vorto don’t usually wear coverings unless going outside in certain weather. Unfortunately, we damaged your coverings when we treated your injuries. I will have them repaired. Would you like something else in the meantime?”

“Deep down, I think you’re right. We aren’t born with clothes, so being naked is natural. I really don’t like that I was taught to be ashamed of my body, and yet it still makes me uncomfortable,” she admitted as they neared the food preparatory.

The more he learned about Isabella’s old hive, the more he despised it. It broke his heart that she was made to feel shame.

“You are a stunning queen. Your scent drives me wild. Your curves make my hands grabby with the urge to squeeze you,” his arms tightened around her, “and I am deeply enjoying our conversation. All parts of you are exceptional. It would be a shame to cover your beauty, but I will arrange for anything you desire.” He gazed into her eyes, desperate to convey how precious she truly was.

Queen Isa’s soft brown eyes widened and her cheeks got red again. “Um, thank you.” She quickly looked away, attempting to hide her face.

Artifex groaned when her heady feminine perfume spiked. She was embarrassed but also aroused. He really wanted to sample the queen’s flesh again, and if she’d permit, he’d bury himself in her luscious body. He wasn’t a consort, yet his hunger for their queen was wildly intense.

“Let’s sample some food,” he swiftly urged, before he acted on his instinct in the middle of the corridor.

Isabella

Artifex's bold appraisal made Isa blush. He sounded and looked sincere, but she wasn't used to taking compliments. The exotic man was very nice to look at, too. She couldn't help but rub his muscular chest as he confidently carried her. Back home, the men she knew would be quaking, their arms ready to give out, not that she was ever carried, though. But Artifex made her feel downright petite. Then there was the fact that he was intelligent. Hunky nerds were her weakness. She'd wanted to pet him as he explained the technology of their hive. All of that combined was enough to make her swoon, so both of them being naked only added to the sexual tension she felt.

Yet again another emotion intruded. It wasn't shame over being naked, though that still lingered. This black cloud felt a bit like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Right now, she was novel and new to the Vorto, but that wouldn't always be the case. How would they treat her after the newness wore off? And what if they discovered she wasn't compatible with them?

Isa shook her head, distracting herself by changing the conversation as she forcibly studied her surroundings. The hive reminded her of Carlsbad Cavern with its absurdly large spaces and winding passages all hidden beneath ground. There was something daunting about being surrounded by so much rock. Thank goodness it was lovely to look at.

"This stone is gorgeous. Your building technique reminds me of gothic architecture back home." She pointed at the upcoming ornate arched doorway. The Vorto had carved meandering ivy detail into the purple marble. Isa ran her finger over the design. "But you also leave the natural beauty." She admired a nearby dripstone column that was a feature created by the cave and time.

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“Thank you. We have some very talented masons. I know one of my gammas still enjoys adding details here and there, though most of his time is spent making objects like cups or bowls since his skill is admired,” Artifex explained, opening a red wooden door.

“I can imagine.” Isa nodded, recalling the lovely cup she drank from earlier.

The delicious scent of food cooking hit her as they passed through the archway into another palatial room. The five blazing fire pits on the far side of the room instantly caught her attention. From here, it looked like whole cows were being spit roasted on two of the fires, and a dozen fat turkeys were spinning over the third. The last two fires were rigged with a complex assembly of stacked baking dishes. Between here and there were a line of ten butcher block tables, laden with baskets and bowls of foreign produce. Artifex wasn’t joking when he said they were making a feast.

The dozen or more Vorto who were busily washing, chopping, mixing, and cooking all stopped to look at her.

Oh. She’d never been so shy, but she’d never been the center of attention while naked, either.

“Hi,” she said barely above a whisper, giving everyone a slight wave.

Just like when they passed the dining commons, the men started toward her. The way some of them turned into the unusual ooze and scuttled across the floor was disconcerting. She found herself curling toward Artifex, but then forced herself to stop.

“I’m sorry. Besides the nudity I am also getting used to your ability to change forms. It’s actually pretty impressive. My people can’t do it,” she sheepishly explained.

She felt bad when the alien ooze halted and their humanoid form emerged from the purple puddles. They’d obviously heard her.

“Is it something you think you could get used to?” Artifex studied her, concern reflected in his large dark eyes.

“Yes. It’s just new.” She nodded.

“Good. Hatchlings emerge from their amnio sacs in this amorphous flux form. The young don’t learn to retain their bipedal form for three to four lunars.”

Her eyes widened as she tried to imagine her potential babies oozing around in her arms.

But I may not be able to have babies at all. What then?She anxiously nibbled her lip.

“A moment.” Artifex held his hand out, halting the approaching men. He then focused on her. “I know you aren’t intentionally projecting your private thoughts, so I will try to let you have privacy, however I am catching snippets of your worry. I wish I could help allay your fears, but I think you need to communicate with Phara. He has struggled with questions about fulfilling his purpose. Please understand that no matter what happens, you have given us hope.” Artifex caressed her cheek.

Isa pulled a surprised breath. Yet again he’d heard her thoughts. She’d grown practiced at keeping her thoughts to herself. She was the black sheep of her family, and her mouth was the biggest cause of that. She didn’t need her wayward thoughts causing her trouble here. She needed to figure out the trick so she wasn’t projecting her internal monologue. Then again, maybe it was a good thing Artifex had

overheard.

No matter what happens, you have given us hope. She took another breath as she repeated his calming words.

“Okay. I’ll try to stop worrying.” She nodded earnestly.

“Good.” He kissed the top of her head.

She smiled, feeling lucky to have found such caring people. It was really starting to put her own people in perspective. Her eyes widened when Artifex unexpectedly set her on the nearby table with her legs dangling over the edge.

He then focused on the cooks. “Bring a selection of what we’re making for our queen to sample.” The cooks then went rushing off to collect the dishes.

This is the reason I should wear clothes. My lady bits on this prep table is the definition of unsanitary. She cringed as she fidgeted on the smooth wood surface.

Artifex turned back toward her, looked at where she was sitting then at her. “I’ll happily clean you off once we’re done.” His long tongue flicked out suggestively.

Isa snorted at the rowdy comment and blushed. Did he actually think she was worried about her fanny getting dirty? No. It was more likely he was just looking for a reason to lick her. Incurable!

Artifex’s grin broadened at her assessment. Not only was it clear he was trouble, it was also clear she might as well say everything she was thinking since it was being heard anyway.

Isa shook her head at the randy man, turning her attention to the bowls and platters

being set next to her. “Oh my, this looks great and smells even better. Thank you.” She nodded in appreciation to the alien man who just set another dish down.

“My queen.” The cook bowed low, his head nearly touching his knees before stepping back.

Isa’s smile turned awkward and she shuddered. It was going to take a long time to get used to hearing that moniker. It still felt like a farce. She ignored it and focused on the bowl he left instead.

“These remind me of blueberries.” She reached for a piece of the fruit.

Artifex grabbed her hand before she got to the bowl. “Ah, my queen, it is my job to care for you.” He set her hand on her lap, then tapped it while pointedly looking at her, implying it needed to stay put.

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“Okay, okay,” she chuckled with an incredulous shake of her head.

Artifex examined the bowl of fruit, carefully picked a berry then brought it to her lips. “These are fiberberries.”

She opened her mouth and accepted the berry. “Mmm,” she moaned, chewing the juicy sweet treat that was more reminiscent of a peach than a berry.

“You like it?” Artifex asked, but his smile indicated he already knew the answer.

Isa nodded as she swallowed, while trying to remember the name of the berry for later.

Artifex popped one in his mouth. “Ah yes, nice and ripe,” he purred.

Artifex was talking about the berry, and yet the way he intensely stared at her made her question if that was truly the case, or was he talking about her?

“Would you like another or would you like to try...something else?” he asked, the pause catching her attention.

A thrill coursed through her. Was that also a suggestive question? Surely, she was just imagining that. She had sex on the brain after the wild escapade they’d just participated in. Not everything was a tawdry innuendo. Was it?

With a nervous laugh, Isa pulled her gaze from Artifex and looked at the selection available. One of the dishes reminded her of fresh cooked green beans.

“How about we try these?” She grabbed one of the green pods.

“My queen!” Artifex reprimanded her as he captured her hand and took the bean.

“Oh!” Her eyes widened. He really was serious about being the one to feed her. “I’m just not used to this.” She nibbled her lip.

Back home, she and her mother waited on her father and brother. They didn’t hand feed the men like they were babies, but damn close as far as she was concerned. Her sister Ruth did the same for her own family, and so did every other woman she knew. She was raised to think that was normal, that men were helpless when it came to domestic duties. Except, that was just crap. Her eyes were opened when she was young and her mother got a nasty case of ziktheria. It put her in the hospital for days and left her bedridden for nearly a month. Yet still the men in her family couldn’t lift a finger. Her mom nearly killed herself trying to overdo it too early and the men were oblivious. She was only seven and she saw the toll it was taking. The whole incident added to her decision to swear off men. Though, since single women couldn’t own property or even lease without a male cosigner, that left her living at home. Isa always consoled herself by saying she was helping relieve her mother’s burden, but she lived for the out-of-town archaeology digs that gave her a chance to get away. Regardless, this kind of treatment made her feel guilty, since she was more than capable.

Artifex tapped the bean against her lip, pulling Isa out of her thoughts. She opened her mouth.

“This is haricot,” he said as he popped it into her mouth.

Isa nodded while chewing, tilting her head as she tried to identify the flavors.

“Tastes like zucchini with some sort of dressing,” she decided.

Artifex popped his finger into his mouth. “Ah, amucetglaze. It’s very light. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes. Of course.” Isa nodded. “I am not a picky eater. I believe that unless something makes a person sick, you eat what’s in front of you and value the effort of the cook. There’s nothing worse than someone being rude after you’ve worked hard on a meal.” She’d witnessed that nonsense a million times and it annoyed her to no end. She made hundreds of meals, occasionally the meat was going to be a little overdone. Whenever Saul complained, it was an instant guarantee his next meal was overcooked. “Thank you, I appreciate all of your effort and the haricot is very good.” She smiled genuinely at the cooks who were gathered around and gave them a little bow, or at least the best bow she could while seated on the table.

There were numerous gasps and the cooks’ mouths opened in shock.

What did I say wrong? Her gaze swung to Artifex.

“You said nothing wrong,” he chuckled. “It was the bow that stunned them. It’s not right for a queen to bow, though you can do whatever you wish, beautiful.” He smiled at her. “And thank you for your kind words. You don’t know how deeply your gratitude is appreciated.” Artifex bowed to her.

“Oh,” she said in understanding, recalling how Bellator, Artifex, and Phara reacted poorly when she bowed to them in the bed chamber. She hadn’t done it wrong; she wasn’t supposed to do it at all. That made sense now.

“It is my honor,” the group of cooks said at once as they bowed low.

It was so strange to hear the concert of voices in her head without a single mouth moving. Some of the cooks were also purring which meant they were happy. That made her smile. Their language was truly fascinating with its two layers, the audible

and the telepathic, three layers if you added expressions and gestures. It felt like she'd been plucked out of her life and dropped into one of the ancient civilizations books she'd read. This was exciting and daunting all in the same breath.

Artifex turned to the group. "Thank you all, but if we don't get back to work, there won't be a Bonding Feast later."

Artifex was congenial as he reminded them, and the cooks returned to work. They all had chevron patterns on their chests with the inset circle, similar to Artifex. If she understood the hierarchy right, that meant they were all members of the servitor caste and answered to him, the way the soldiers answered to Bellator, and the consorts to Phara. Although the Vorto answered to their alphas, there didn't seem to be an uncomfortable balance of power. Too often the leaders back home lorded their power over the people instead of serving them.

As she was considering the Vorto social structure, a tiny bonbon appeared in front of her.

"Thanks." Isa opened her mouth.

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“This is araphanus.” Artifex popped the bonbon in.

She started to chew and realized it was nothing like chocolate as the salty fishiness spread through her mouth. In the most unladylike move ever, she spat the fish ball into her hand, then grabbed the cup next to her.

“My queen, wait!” Artifex said, his eyes wide with surprise, as she dumped the contents of the cup into her mouth.

Not water! It tasted something like concentrated lemon juice, the kind that was so sour it stung the mouth and made it pucker. The salty fish ball was surprising and very gross, but now she’d made it worse. The foul flavors mixed like a perfect storm in her mouth.

Isa instantly spat, covering Artifex’s chest with the fishy sour liquid.

“I thorry,” she slurred, her mouth coated with grossness, but also utterly mortified by what she’d done.

Isa stared in horror at Artifex and the mess she’d made. She’d just finished extolling the virtues of appreciating the hardwork of cooks, and then she did this. Normally she would’ve swallowed the nasty fish ball and politely declined seconds, but the surprise of it not being chocolate kicked off a terrible chain of events.

Why in god’s name did I think it would be chocolate? It was absurd to think that on a foreign world, but it was an instantaneous thought and she didn’t brace herself for anything else.

Instead of shouting at her for spitting on him, Artifex swiftly handed her a different cup.

“I am sorry, my queen, so very sorry. Are you all right? Do we need to go to the infirmary?” he worriedly asked as she guzzled down the water.

She shook her head no, while he poured her another cup of water. Relief filled her as she drank it down, diluting more of the sour fish bile lining her mouth. It was also a relief Artifex hadn’t exploded.

“Noraphanusfor the queen,” Artifex loudly announced to everyone in the kitchen, who had gathered around, panic etched on their faces.

Artifex used a towel to clean her chin and the hand that held the half-chewed fish ball. He then wiped his own chest. She suddenly felt like she was a toddler again and just had a temper tantrum.

“Sorry I spat on you. Theraphanuswasn’t what I was expecting, and that liquid was not water.” She cringed as she shook her head.

“No, it was not water. I am glad you spat thequasauce out. That much would’ve made you sick.” Artifex grabbed her hands, his brow furrowed. “Queen Isabella, you must let me take care of you. There are things on my world you aren’t familiar with that could hurt you.”

“I, well...” She grimaced instead of finishing what she was going to say. “You’re right.”

This new world, from its food to its people, was going to take a lot of getting used to.

Chapter 9

Taste Testing

Isabella

“What must I do to get you to trust me?” Artifex’s brow was furrowed as he stared at her.

Isa cringed. He was right. If she didn’t start thinking before she acted, she could get hurt worse.

Artifex’s gaze landed on the table nearby where a goose or some other plucked bird was being prepped for cooking. Something impish sparked in his dark eyes. He went to the table, but she didn’t see what he grabbed. Isa turned her head, curious as Artifex walked behind her. She was about to turn around atop the table except he grabbed one of her arms. Her mouth dropped open when he started wrapping rope around it, then grabbed her other arm and started securing it.

“What-what are you doing?” she asked when she found her voice, though the answer was obvious to any idiot.

“My queen, I am teaching you to let me care for you,” Artifex informed her as he continued binding her arms behind her back.

She blinked in shock. Artifex was seriously tying her up. She’d heard worrisome stories about men doing things like this, except Artifex still had that teasing look in his dark eyes, his lips curving up. And he wasn’t rough with her, in fact he was very gentle. He finished and sauntered back around the table, stopping in front of her. His gaze raked slowly up her body. Isa fidgeted as he stared. She wasn’t any more naked than before, and yet that’s the way she felt. Being tied up while the cooks watched was seriously pushing her boundaries. Apparently that was the theme for the day.

“I like how that position pushes your teats out.” Artifex ran his index finger across her upper chest, just above the swell of her breasts.

Her cheeks heated at his blatant appraisal.

“Um, I call them breasts,” she replied, at a loss for what else to say.

“Breasts,” Artifex repeated the word. “I like your breasts.”

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His unabashed honesty was disarming and she blushed more. These alien men were good at making her feel nervous yet excited, brave yet imminently in danger. The part of her that was starting to accept this wild new reality, in cahoots with the part that often got her into trouble, decided to pipe up.

“They are nice, aren’t they?” She stuck her chest out farther and gave it a little shimmy, making her breasts jiggle.

Artifex’s eyes widened, then narrowed again, and he bared his teeth in a wicked grin. When he looked away, she bit her lip, wondering what he’d been thinking, though she had a nervous feeling she was about to find out.

Artifex grabbed the cup she’d mistaken for water. “Quais a sauce. It takes just a drizzle.” He poured a line of the remaining lemony sauce across her chest, following the path his finger had taken.

“I understand that—now.” Isa nodded.

“I imagine you do.” He picked up a square red piece of fruit that reminded her of sliced melon. Artifex swiped it through the sauce on her chest. “This istapo.”

Artifex brought the morsel to her mouth. It was strange tasting something that was just on her body, yet the anticipation in Artifex’s eyes goaded her on. The reddish orange cube was a little too big, so she gingerly bit it in half. He didn’t miss the opportunity to run his finger across her lower lip before she pulled back.

“Mmm.” She quizzically tipped her head, not expecting what she tasted. Tapowasn’t a

fruit at all, but starchy, like a potato. With the lemony sauce it tasted like a dish from Greece she once had.

Artifex popped the other half of the potato into his mouth.

“Do you like it?” he easily asked while chewing, since he communicated telepathically.

“Yes, it’s good,” she thought without opening her mouth.

“Very good, my queen.” Artifex gently squeezed her knee in encouragement.

Warmth suffused her. It was disturbing how nice the praise was.

There was a tickling sensation on her chest, and she looked to find the remnant of sauce sliding down her breasts. Artifex’s tongue shot out and lapped up the dripping line.

“Oh.” Isa pulled in a sharp breath.

“Quaalso tastes good on other things.” The salacious alien man held her gaze as his tongue trailed ever closer to her right nipple.

“This is definitely a sin.” Her breath sped up, her heart beating faster as desire rippled through her.

“I don’t know what a sin is.” Artifex leaned in close, until she could feel his breath on her areola. “But I do know that I like your breasts, my queen. Especially the berries at the tips.” His lips wrapped around her nipple.

Artifex’s inhumanly long tongue coiled around her breast, rolling over her nipple as

he sucked it deep into his hot mouth. Isa tipped her head back when the pleasure shot down to her clit. Her eyes widened when she caught sight of the dozen cooks watching. Desire filled their gazes, their cocks at varying stages of arousal. Having so many wanton eyes on her should've bothered her, yet it was having the opposite effect.

Yes, this is definitely a sin. Isa stared at the ceiling and soaked in the pleasure as Artifex moved to her other breast, sucking it clean of the lemony sauce.

He stepped closer, nudging her knees apart to make room for him. She jumped when his fingers combed through the strip of hair on her mound.

"What is this?" He found her clit and began rolling it.

"My clit," she panted out loud.

She jerked each time a spark of pleasure jolted through her, moisture squeezing from her vagina. The swollen bead of flesh was so sensitive. She squirmed, tugging at the bonds securing her arms behind her back. She attempted to close her legs to get away from the spiraling pleasure, but Artifex was in the way.

Abruptly, Artifex released her nipple and clit. In one deft move he spun her around and gently laid her face down on the table.

"Artifex!" she gasped when he started tying more thick cord around her left ankle.

The brazen alien man paused, leaned in, and a puff of warm air ghosted over her bare behind. "You will let me tend to your pleasure," his deep, sultry voice whispered in her mind, and then his tongue ran along the crack of her ass, teasing the edges of her labia without dipping in.

Oh heaven, I am going to hell! She shifted beneath the ticklish sensation that sparked her nerves and made her quiver.

“Mmm,” Artifex hungrily groaned and her insides melted.

“So, this is where you two are!” Phara declared. Although it was only in her mind, his voice seemed to echo in the kitchen, the reprimand evident in his tone.

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Instantly, she stopped squirming. Isa lifted her gaze from the table to find Phara leaning against the kitchen door. She started to panic. Clearly, she was doing something wrong. Isa desperately wanted to hide, but all tied up there was no way of getting out of this compromising position. The three alphas had touched her, so she thought this was all right. Except that was while they were all together. Maybe she misunderstood how things worked among the Vorto. Artifex was the alpha caretaker, but Phara was the alpha consort, so maybe only Phara was allowed to intimately touch her. The worried thoughts zipped through her mind.

“You thought you’d secret our queen away and keep her all to yourself?” Phara demanded, his narrow gaze focused on Artifex.

This wasn’t good. There was definitely going to be a fight. Phara was taller with a broader chest and more muscle mass. Artifex was slightly smaller, but the wiry ones tended to be scrappers. Isa braced for the worst. Things were about to get ugly.

“Yes, but you found us,” Artifex replied, sounding not the least bit concerned. “Come. Our queen needs to be taught to trust us. She nearly made herself sick drinkingqua.”

“We can’t have that,” Phara’s tone abruptly shifted, sounding like liquid velvet as he pushed away from the door and walked toward them.

Isa’s mouth dropped open. This hadn’t gone the way she feared, which was good, but it was taking a very unexpected turn.

Together, the two alien men made quick work of tying her legs, while Isa was utterly

flabbergasted. Her knees were bent so that her heels practically touched her butt. Her legs weren't tied together. The ropes were somehow attached to the ones wrapped around her waist and arms, so she couldn't close her thighs. Her pussy was entirely exposed. If that wasn't enough, they hooked the end of the rope to a rack hanging overhead. Before she realized it, she was all trussed up like a Christmas goose.

Or like the birds on the other table! Isa gaped, understanding where Artifex got the crazy idea.

"Very nice." Phara admiringly ran a hand along her hip then cupped her hanging breast as he stopped by her side.

"Are you comfortable, my queen?" Artifex was standing behind her with a perfect view of her bare vagina. He ran his hand along her inner thigh, testing the bonds as he asked the question.

The cord was soft, and though it tugged, it wasn't biting into her skin as she dangled several inches over the table. Her mental state was another thing entirely. She was so far out of her element with this whole scenario. Alarm bells were going off in her head and her heart was beating staccato, and yet she couldn't bring herself to tell them to stop. Some twisted part of her wanted to see what happened next.

Isa craned her head to look Phara in the eye as she debated how to answer the men. Instead, she caught his cock standing at attention right in front of her. The thick erect beast was practically resting on the table, like a dish ready to be served to her. Its flared crown, the knots on the underside of the shaft, and all the ridges on top were fully engorged. Even the large veins running down either side of the shaft were pulsing. She instantly recalled how it felt pushing into her body. The sight added to the frisson of nervous energy coursing through her. Isa started to fidget but was instantly reminded she couldn't move.

“Would you untie me if I said no?” she asked, completely flustered.

“Yes,” Artifex replied.

But then he buried his face between her legs and started lapping at her cleft, and she gasped. His tongue slid across her labia, flicked her clit then sank into her vagina.

“You taste incredible,” Artifex growled, his mouth vibrating her pussy, making her gush more desire. “She calls the bead of flesh between her thighs her clit,” he communicated even though his mouth was occupied.

“The sensitive one hidden in her folds?” Phara clarified as he reached beneath her and found her clit, while Artifex tongue fucked her.

“Yes,” Isa gasped when Phara started teasing the slick bead the same way he was tormenting her nipple, making them both throb. It was an answer to Phara’s question as much as it was an exclamation.

Isa moaned, arched, and squirmed in her bonds as the pleasure inundated her. This was insane. She thought the orgy earlier was a wild fluke. Yet here she was again being toyed with by more than one man, while a dozen others watched, and this time she was tied up.

She shuddered as Artifex’s tongue uncoiled from her pussy, sliding over every nerve lining her sensitive walls as it retreated. She’d been on the cusp of orgasming and was slightly disappointed, but took the opportunity to take a few calming breaths to rein in her heartbeat. A second later, something cool dripped along her crack, running down her cleft. She gasped, her heart rate spiking again. The slow dripping sensation was so odd.

“Oh, bacasyrup, that’s a good choice,” Phara commented.

“Let our queen sample some.” Artifex passed the small bowl to Phara.

Artifex crammed his face in her pussy again, lapping at the sauce mixed with her own juices. Isa’s eyes widened when his long, agile tongue speared into her puckered rear.

“Artifex!” she squealed in shock. What possessed him to go there?

“Mmm,” he growled, probing deeper, while he took over rubbing her slick swollen clit.

She didn’t know what to make of the sensation in her rear. He was teasing nerve endings that were never touched. It mixed with the pleasure of her clit being rubbed, ratcheting everything to the next level.

“Taste?” Phara offered.

Her gaze landed on Phara’s arousal before shifting to his sauce-covered fingertip. He must’ve seen, because a knowing, hungry smile curved Phara’s mouth.

“Tell us what you want, my queen,” he goaded her while slowly pouring a line of pale green sauce on his erect cock.

“Phara,” she moaned, wanting him.

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Phara groaned at the way she said his name, cupping her head to hold her steady as he aimed his cock. She opened her mouth, eager to taste him. The skin on his broad crown was smooth as it slid across her lips. Then the sweet strawberry flavor from the sauce burst in her mouth. It mixed with his natural masculine scent and flavor that was so much like vanilla. She pulled a deep breath in through her nose then she sucked him deep into her mouth. This was the second time her lips had been wrapped around a man, an alien man, and this time she wasn't so shy.

“My queen!” Phara snarled, his hips bucking, as she circled his pulsing crown.

Emboldened, she traced the knots underneath his shaft as she sucked him to the back of her mouth again. She loved the groan he made and the way his hands shook as his fingers tangled in her hair.

Her pleasure continued churning, not only from sucking Phara off, but also what Artifex was doing. He pinched her clit and she detonated. Her pussy, ass, and even her clit spasmed. She gagged on Phara's cock, but swiftly resumed sucking him as she convulsed from the ecstasy. Phara's grip on her tightened, but not painfully, as he fucked her mouth.

As she was overcome by the climax, Artifex's tongue disappeared from her ass. Something thicker and harder pressed at the ring of muscle. It was Artifex's cock. She released Phara's cock and whimpered when the stretching burn grew painful, but Artifex was already retreating, recognizing he wouldn't fit. She took a deep, relieved breath when Artifex placed his cock at the mouth of her vagina instead.

She opened her mouth to continue sucking Phara's gorgeous exotic manhood, but he

stepped back. With her hands tied behind her back she couldn't reach for him. As she was about to look up at Phara and give him her best pout, Artifex's cock thrust into her quivering pussy. She instantly swung forward, even though Artifex had a solid grip on her hips. If she'd been sucking Phara, he would've definitely choked her.

"Crumble the mountain!" Artifex snarled the Vorto version of a curse.

"Oh yes, Artifex likes that," Phara commented as he started stroking his cock while watching her. "I know how he feels. You, my queen, are exquisite."

Phara masturbated as Artifex pounded out his lust, swinging her onto his cock faster and harder with each thrust. Being watched as she was fucked and seeing how much it turned Phara on added to her spiraling pleasure. Artifex's crown and textured shaft lit up her sensitive walls and she swiftly climaxed, her body shuddering. Artifex shouted something incoherent in her mind, while howling so loud it shook the walls. He tugged her upright against his chest, then locked onto the crook of her right shoulder, marking her with his sharp teeth, like Phara had. Artifex's cock pulsed as it swelled. He chaotically rammed into her a few more times until his swollen shaft made it impossible, and he violently erupted, bathing her pussy with his desire. Her ecstatic cries echoed in the kitchen. She never expected to enjoy being bitten, but the dominant display made her climax harder.

She was still panting with euphoria, and Artifex's cock had barely subsided, when he pulled free, leaving her feeling empty. But Phara stepped around the table and slammed into her wet, still spasming channel. He wasted no time thrusting fast and hard, giving her no reprieve to come down from nirvana.

"Oh god!" she keened, her voice hoarse, as Phara quickly forced another brutal orgasm out of her. Every muscle in her body spasmed and flexed, straining against the ropes binding her.

“My queen!” Phara bellowed.

His cock swelled and vibrated as he sprayed her insides with his release. Isabella shook, tears squeezing from her eyes as the climax swept her into an abyss of euphoria unlike anything she could’ve imagined. This taste testing trip to the alien kitchen turned out to be more of an adventure than she could’ve ever expected.

Chapter 10

What a Big Burden You Have

Phara

Still reeling from the unbelievable pleasure, Phara held their exhausted queen while Artifex carefully untied her.

“Mmm.” Isa stretched once the last knot was undone, then snuggled against his chest. The blissful smile on her face relaxed as she drifted off again.

“I’m concerned,” Artifex said as he brushed the queen’s dark mane out of her face and tucked it behind her cute little ear flap.

“About?” Phara tilted his head.

“Our queen was very mistreated by her hive,” Artifex began, keeping his tone gentle so he didn’t rouse their queen.

“I know, she was cast out.” Phara recalled her disturbing story, and it made his chest hurt.

“She was taught to dislike her form and is uncomfortable without coverings.” Artifex

frowned as he affectionately ran a finger over Isa's arm.

A growl threatened, but Phara shoved it down so he didn't disturb Isa. Their queen was gorgeous, and it angered him she was taught otherwise. The pain in his chest doubled.

"We can get her coverings if that makes her comfortable." Phara snuggled his queen close as he continued toward the door. He didn't believe anything should hide Isa's beauty, but he'd do anything to assure she was happy.

"That is only part of it." Artifex put a hand on his shoulder, halting him.

Phara's eyes widened, a knot forming in his throat at the grim expression on Artifex's face. What more could there be? Their queen was cast out of her hive, but that wasn't enough, so she was sent to a new planet to die. All this after being raised to hate her form. What other savagery could her former hive heap upon the precious creature?

"When I said our form, her form, was natural, she readily agreed and is attempting to try our way."

"Ah." Phara smiled affectionately at their sleeping queen, loving that she was willing to try.

"No. It's not good." Artifex's grip tightened on his shoulder. "I fear that she is trying to appease us. I heard her private thoughts. She worries she may be unable to bear our hatchlings. I think she fears we'll cast her out, too."

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“Never!” Phara felt like he’d be struck in the gut.

“I know that, but she doesn’t.” Artifex grimaced.

“We will just have to show her this is her hive.” Phara sighed, sad that he couldn’t instantly alleviate her fear. “I will take her to bathe before the feast.”

“A good idea.” Artifex nodded. “I need to stay here and make sure the feast is coming along. I will send Diligen. He can quickly fashion coverings to fit her.”

“Good.” Phara smiled as he exited the preparatory, glad that they could do something to ease their queen’s discomfort.

He should watch where he was going, but Phara’s gaze was focused on the sleeping queen in his arms. Everything changed from the moment she arrived. Isa fit a niche in their hive that had long been void. It wasn’t simply their need to produce another generation and prolong the species, though. It wasn’t the gnawing desire to mount her, either. This growing feeling was something different, something profound, and when he figured out exactly what it was, he’d tell Queen Isa.

Phara bypassed the dining commons and took the descending tunnel into the queen’s branch of passages.

“Found our queen.” Phara poked his head into the beta’s suite, located just before Isa’s chamber. “It’s bath time. Come.”

Gregis, Rego, and Galis instantly stopped their game of shofti, jumped up, and

followed.

They crossed the queen's chamber and descended into her private bath.

"I've heated the water as you requested before you disappeared," Masculum, one of his gammas, reported as they entered.

"Yes. We were delayed," Phara chuckled.

Galis' tongue shot out and tasted the air then he grinned. "I can smell what delayed you."

"Guilty." Phara grinned back.

With amused smiles and happy chuckles, Gregis, Rego, and Galis waded down the steps into the bath. Phara was about to join them but hesitated. The fire next to the water channel feeding the bath was roaring, and steam wafted off the pool. The betas' brows furrowed as they questioningly looked at him.

"I don't know if it will be too hot for her." Phara grimaced as he dipped his foot into the water. It felt fine to him, but he had more than himself to think about now.

"I think you'll have to wake Queen Isabella to have her test it," Rego suggested.

"Agreed." Phara sat down on the nearby ledge and looked fondly down at Isa. She was breathing peacefully, making a cute little wheezing noise, and murmurs that almost sounded likesomething. "I don't want to. Come and look. She's making her adorable twitters even in her sleep."

The three betas waded to the edge and peered at the sleeping queen cradled in his arms.

“She is very vocal,” Gregis commented as he listened carefully and watched Isa’s rosy lips move.

Phara held his breath, worried what else the beta might say. Gregis was the opposite of Galis, and wasn’t known for having the most pleasant demeanor.

“I never realized how quiet the hive was,” Gregis continued. “I like her twitters.” The male stared fondly at Isa.

Phara let out his breath, slightly shocked, but very happy that even Gregis was moved by their queen’s arrival. Gregis’ observation was also surprising. Their hive had been quiet. He hadn’t really noticed until Gregis pointed it out. Not only was Isa’s bubbly voice filling their quiet caverns, there was a happy buzz permeating the hive. When he went to find their new queen, everyone he passed radiated this zeal. Isa truly was bringing change to their hive.

“I like the fringe on her eyes. I like when it flutters as she looks at us,” Galis interjected.

That was Galis, perpetually happy and a bit special. Though, he did agree with Galis’ observation.

“Greetings, my queen,” Rego said.

At the comment Phara looked away from Galis in time to see Isa sleepily smile. Her gaze panned from Rego to him, and her smile widened, her eyes brightening.

“Greetings, my lovely queen.” Phara beamed at her.

“Why, Phara, what big teeth you have,” Isa giggled, then yawned and stretched.

Phara's grip tightened so she didn't roll into the hot bath, glad the betas were also there to prevent it. Her amusing sleepy observation made him laugh.

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“I guess they are,” he conceded with a chuckle, then sobered. “Does that bother you?” he asked, hoping his teeth didn’t scare her since they were so different from her blunt ones.

Isabella’s eyes widened. “Sorry. No, it doesn’t bother me, not now that I am familiar with you.” She squirmed to sit up and he helped her. “It’s a line from a very old children’s story. It popped into my head when I saw all four of you leaning over, smiling at me,” she added.

“You must tell us this story,” Galis interjected, before Phara could express that he was glad.

Isa looked at the pool then back at him, noticing they were no longer in the preparatory. “What did I miss?”

“Nothing. You haven’t been asleep long,” Phara assured her. “We left Artifex to prepare the feast. I thought you might like a bath before we eat and introduce you to the hive.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.” Isa smiled. She then swiftly dropped a foot off his lap toward the bath.

Phara panicked, but was unable to catch her leg. Rego’s hand shot out, landing under her heel before it hit the hot water.

“Queen Isa! Now I understand Artifex’s worry. The water is hot. Test it slowly, please,” Phara relayed as his heart pounded in his chest. It was no wonder Artifex

decided to tie their impetuous little queen up.

“Ah, okay, thank you.” Isa smiled at Rego.

“Careful.” The beta released her foot and she gingerly dipped her toe, then her whole foot.

“Oooh, very nice,” she cooed, obviously not bothered by the heat.

Very nice, Phara repeated, noting the temperature for future baths.

He nodded to Rego who gripped Isa’s hips and slowly lowered her into the bath. The waterline kept rising higher on her chest and it was apparent she wouldn’t reach the bottom. Rego cast him a worried look and Phara nodded toward the underwater bench instead of setting her on the bottom. A look of relief replaced the beta’s worry as he stood her on the seat.

“Thanks.” Isa nodded to the beta.

“That bench lines this entire wall,” Gregis informed her, since it wasn’t readily obvious.

“There are steps over there.” Galis pointed to the middle of the oblong pool, to the clearly visible steps.

May Inana help me. Phara wiped a hand over his face in disbelief at Galis.

“Avoid the other wall,” Phara added, quickly moving on. “It is hot at that end and there’s a drain at that other end that may catch your foot and drag you under. Do you know how to swim?” Phara’s heart picked up another beat as it occurred to him she might not know how to swim. “How about you stay here?”

Worriedly he tugged Isa onto his lap as he sat on the bench. Even though she was on his lap, the water still came up to her neck. He made a note to have a higher bench made for her.

“Phara?” Isa turned sideways on his lap, her brow furrowed as she studied him. “Is everything all right? Are you mad that I went with Artifex?” Worry reflected in her dark eyes.

“No!” His eyes widened, surprised by her question. “I wondered where you two went, but I am not mad. Never at you, my queen.”

“So, it was okay that Artifex and I were playing?” Isa nibbled her lip.

Phara glanced at his betas in confusion. Didn’t he just say it was acceptable that she went with Artifex?

“I don’t understand what you are asking.” Phara searched her face. Obviously, he was missing something.

“I think I’m the one who doesn’t understand.” Isa showed off her teeth in that awkward smile he was learning meant she was uncomfortable.

“You may tour the hive with anyone you choose.” He tried again.

Isa’s face dropped into the water and she started blowing bubbles. It felt very similar to frustrated gestures he’d made when dealing with Galis.

Suddenly it dawned on him. Phara lifted Isa’s chin and mopped off her face. “I think I understand what this is about.”

He was reticent to talk about certain subjects, some things were intensely private, but

Isabella's happiness mattered to him above anything else.

Isabella

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Isa sighed in relief when Phara finally understood what she was asking.

“Artifex said you were worried you may not be able to have hatchlings.” Phara caressed her back as she sat on his lap.

Her shoulders sank. That wasn’t what was troubling her at the moment at all, but it was now—again. Her anxiety shifted gears from the question of if she was committing the sin of adultery ‘alien style’ to the fertility fear. Anxiously, she gripped Phara’s arm wrapped around her waist.

“Even if I can have your babies, I’m not able to give birth to dozens of them,” she worriedly explained. From what she understood, the whole hive was a bunch of brothers. She’d met, or at least seen, forty different people so far, and she had a feeling there were more from the size of the feast being cooked. “I don’t know how your queen mother did it, but it’s just not possible with my kind!” Maybe the Vorto were more like insects than she realized.

Phara cupped her cheeks so she was focusing on him and him alone. “Isa, as the alpha consort my purpose is to create a newgeneration of Vorto above all others. Can you imagine what kind of burden that is when there is no queen?”

“Yes!” She nodded emphatically, feeling a similar dilemma.

“One rotation I found myself at the edge of a cliff, debating...” Phara smiled morosely.

Isa’s eyes widened as she realized what he was saying, then her breath sped up and

her eyes began to sting.

“No!” Rego declared, pain evident in his voice.

The surprise and hurt on the triplets’ faces screamed they didn’t know about this.

“I didn’t do it.” Phara squeezed Rego’s shoulder. “Ascreotook flight from a nearby ledge and startled me. I lost my balance and fell backward on my rump.” Phara cringed in embarrassment.

Isa let out a relieved whoosh of air. Despite knowing Phara was safe now, she could easily put herself in his shoes. She understood the depression that led him to that ledge to begin with.

“In that moment, I realized I wanted to live, that I wasn’t done yet. Although, I had no clue why.” Phara caressed her back and shoulders. “Then I caught sight of the samescreogliding on the current. It wasn’t hunting or fleeing, just soaring, making idle circles in the sunshine. The answer I was looking for somehow lay in what I was seeing.”

It was a familiar profound feeling. Occasionally one witnessed the meaning of life distilled into some simple moment and it was always hard to describe to someone who wasn’t there in that moment. She’d felt something similar when she held an ancient piece of pottery, and gazed at the artist’s fingerprint captured in time. Isa rubbed Phara’s chest, feeling similarly connected to him in this moment. It had to be hard to open up like he did.

“What was the answer?” Galis interjected.

Isa’s eyes widened at the question. It was becoming apparent Galis was a bit of a himbo.

“I’m still figuring that out,” Phara replied honestly.

“Isn’t that the truth.” Isa smiled, loving the wisdom in the simple reply.

“I can say that my life offers more joy and purpose than just my biological imperative.” Phara stared into her eyes as he spoke, and the message was received loud and clear. “I don’t relish it, but I’ve accepted that perhaps the sun is setting on the Vorto. And if that is the case or not, it is out of my hands. What I can do is find things that make me feel fulfilled in the time I’m allotted. And if I’m lucky I can help my hive with the same.”

Isa stared in awe at Phara. Never had she heard any man speak so insightfully or eloquently, especially not with her.

“You have the soul of a poet.” She smiled wistfully as she continued caressing Phara’s firm chest.

Phara questioningly tilted his head, and she realized the word poet probably didn’t translate.

“You have a beautiful perspective,” she amended.

“Do you understand that you don’t need to worry about hatchlings? If it happens, it happens. You are my queen and this is your hive. Already you have brightened these caverns.” Phara ran his thumb across her bottom lip as he gently caressed her face.

Tears slipped from Isa’s eyes as she nodded and kissed Phara’s palm. He’d lifted an immense weight from her shoulders. Phara would understand if they weren’t compatible. Not only that, he wouldn’t make her feel like she was flawed or somehow at fault. He understood there was more to life. The Vorto were truly different from everything she was used to, and she was rapidly falling for these

wonderful exotic men.

“Can we still practice making hatchlings if you are unable to have them?” Galis asked, his question effectively bursting the sentimental bubble.

“Galis!” Phara telepathically barked, while growling at the same time.

“Oh my god!” Isa couldn’t help but laugh as she rubbed her eyes, dispelling her tears.

“We will see what the future holds. We are new,” Phara informed Galis. The alpha’s serious expression then turned impish. “Although, I’m rather certain our queen will want to share sex with me again, where you may never get your chance,” he teased Galis.

Galis’ mouth dropped open, his eyes widening.

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“Phara!” She swatted the alpha’s chest, making him laugh. “You never know. Galis was brave enough to say what was on his mind, and he gives very nice foot massages.”

“I do!” Galis grinned.

“I really wish you wouldn’t encourage him, my queen,” Gregis requested with a grimace.

Isa grinned. With every moment that passed, she was learning more about the hive, her hive. They’d taken her in and were sharing more than simply their food and shelter with her. They were sharing a part of themselves, and she felt closer to these alien men than she did anyone back home.

“Can I ask another question?” Galis pulled her from her thoughts.

“Sure.” She smiled at him.

“What about the story of Phara’s big teeth?”

Isa burst out laughing again. Galis was right, they never circled back around to the story of the Big Bad Wolf.

Chapter 11

Queen’s New Clothes

Isabella

“Wait a moment.” Phara held up his hand, and Isa paused her story before it even started. “You can tell us the tale as we wash. You are so petite, it will probably be easier over here.” Phara scooped her up and waded across the pool-sized bath to the stairs cut into the natural rock.

He stretched out on the steps and positioned her so she was reclining on him, like he was a piece of pool furniture.

“That can’t be comfortable.” She tried to get up, but Phara’s arm banded around her middle.

“I am comfortable. Tell us the story of the big teeth,” Phara urged.

“It is called Little Red Riding Hood...” she began with an amused chuckle.

As Isa told the story, the trio of consort betas grabbed some cloths that were on the nearby ledge. She held out her hand, and rather than putting a cloth in it, Rego started washing her with the naturally sudsing washcloth. Gregis did the same to her other hand, while Galis happily took her feet.

“Oh,” she peeped when Phara slid a bubbly cloth across her midriff, the back of his hand grazing the underside of her breasts.

Since the Vorto wanted to do everything else for her, their desire to wash her shouldn’t have been a shock, yet it was. Surprisingly, though, as she continued with an abbreviated version of the fairy tale, everyone was more fascinated with it than anything tawdry. That was a relief, since she’d had more sex today than she ever had—and it was good sex. It was also easier to relax now that much of the weight on her shoulders had been lifted. Soon, she lay peacefully in the hot water. Except, now

she felt guilty about the way they were pampering her.

Isa paused the story and looked over her shoulder at Phara. “Are you sure you’re not uncomfortable?” she frowned as she asked again. He had to be fibbing before.

“I am fine.” Phara bopped the tip of her nose with the soapy cloth.

“Fine,” she laughed at the bubbles that clung to her nose.

Phara chuckled and wiped the floral smelling suds off. “Continue your story.”

“Yes, the red queen just asked about the wolf’s ears,” Rego encouraged as he worked up a nice lather on her arm.

Rego, Galis, and even serious Gregis stared at her in anticipation, leaning in to hear what happened next.

“Okay,” she snorted, tickled they were so fascinated. “So, Red said, ‘Grandma, what big ears you have.’ The wolf then replied, ‘All the better to hear you with, my dear.’”

“I still don’t understand how the red queen thought the furry predator was her queen mother,” Galis skeptically interjected.

“Because the devious predator was wearing coverings that mimicked the queen mother. We already explained this!” Gregis nudged the other triplet, aggravation apparent on his face.

“Are you going to let our queen finish the tale?” Rego smirked at Galis.

“They weren’t very good coverings if the red queen noticed how big his ears were,” Galis muttered.

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Isa snorted at their banter. She didn't expect the story to be this much fun, but their commentary was the best. She muffled her laugh and attempted to look serious again.

"So, then Red says, 'Grandma, what big eyes you have.'" She widened her eyes as she panned them. "And the wolf said, 'The better to see you with, my dear.'"

"I don't like where this is going," Galis declared.

"Galis!" everyone barked in unison.

Isa burst out laughing, the petulant grimace on Galis' face making it even harder to contain herself. But eventually she got herself under control and adopted a serious face again.

"Then Red said, 'Grandma, what big teeth you have.'"

"That's my part!" Phara leaned around her, showing off his big sharp teeth.

Isa grinned. "And the wolf declared, 'The better to eat you with!' He leapt out of the bed and gobbled Red up whole."

"Ow." Phara cringed and slumped back against the steps with a splash.

"I knew it was going to be bad!" Galis pointed at his brothers.

She giggled at Phara's dramatic reaction and Galis' expression of vindication.

“That is not how the tale ends, is it?” Rego asked with a grimace.

“No.” She shook her head. “Now that the wolf was full, he promptly fell asleep. He snored so loudly that a passing hunter heard. ‘That doesn’t sound like grandma!’ the hunter stopped, suddenly worried.”

“He should be worried. A predator just ate two queens!” Gregis interjected incredulously.

Galis pointedly glared at Gregis, and she could tell he was wordlessly reprimanding his brother for interrupting this time.

“So, the hunter killed the wolf, cut it open and saved Red Riding Hood and her grandma. The end,” Isa summarized while chuckling.

“Hmm. Good.” Phara nodded in approval of the ending as he squeezed her middle. “Thank you for sharing your tale.”

“I couldn’t leave you wondering after my comment earlier about big teeth.” She smiled at them.

It grew quiet as the men continued to leisurely wash her. She stared up at the vaulted stone ceiling as she relaxed, still giggling inside at their reaction to the story. The natural rock formations really were lovely. Caves had always fascinated her. They were an entire world underground, wonderful and mysterious. Many first people used them as homes, and the Vorto had taken that to the next level.

“I don’t like that story,” Galis announced, after a few minutes, boisterously breaking the silence. His hand paused with the washcloth on the back of her knee.

“Galis!” Phara said in admonishment.

“No. It’s okay,” Isa chuckled, wondering what was rolling around in Galis’ head. “Please share what you think. I grew up having to censor everything I said and it’s tiring,” she encouraged them.

“Your hive really told hatchlings that a predator would eat them?” Rego spoke up instead, clearly aghast.

“Agreed. I didn’t like that, either,” Galis concurred, pointing at Rego.

“And the predator was dressed up as the queen mother,” Gregis incredulously chimed in.

“That was a disturbing element,” Phara acknowledged. “I understand the need to warn hatchlings about dangerous fauna, but this tale seems like a particularly frightening way to do it.”

“You aren’t wrong,” Isa laughed, amused that all four of them found her story unsettling. She was so used to it, she forgot how creepy it truly was. “I think the point is that sometimes bad people could pretend to be good people, and to watch out for them.”

“Do you mean repetitive rule breakers?” Phara asked.

“Yes.” She nodded.

“That is an important lesson, young should avoid rule breakers, but that is still very disturbing to tell a hatchling,” Rego decided.

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“Agreed,” Phara concurred, but then he stilled. “I don’t know how I feel about being compared to the nasty rule breaker.”

“Oh.” Her brow furrowed. She didn’t want Phara to think she thought badly of him when she made the sleepy comment, because she intended the exact opposite.

Isa pulled away from the triplets, and rolled over atop Phara. She propped herself on Phara’s muscular chest and looked into his eyes. She wasn’t practiced at flirting, but she found herself gearing up to do exactly that.

“I wasn’t comparing you to a rule breaker. I was comparing you to a sexy beast that wants to devour me,” she brazenly informed him with an impish smile and a bat of her eyes.

Phara’s eyes widened, and she instantly, nervously questioned her bold streak. Then his eyes sparked with lust.

“Aye,” Phara growled as he gripped her thighs, tugging her legs so she was straddling his sculpted abs. “I think there’s a spot we missed washing.” His fingers delved between her labia as his tongue shot out, suggesting a tongue bath was in her future.

Isa made a sound that was part gasp, part squeak when Phara’s fingers teased her entrance and his arousal prodded at her rear. Maybe she shouldn’t have teased the alpha. The look in Phara’s eyes screamed he truly was about to make a meal of her. The alien man was proving why he was the consort alpha. She really should be worn out, but it was like a dam had been uncorked and she found herself eager for more.

“My queen.” A new Vorto man approached the pool, interrupting them. “Artifex sent me to prepare coverings for you.” The chevron on his chest said he was a servitor gamma.

“Oh!” Isa was surprised at first by his sudden arrival, then smiled at the new man and Artifex’s sweet gesture.

“I have just enough time to prepare something before the feast, which is nearly ready,” the Vorto man relayed.

“Ah, yes. Thank you, Diligen,” Phara said, then turned his gaze back to her. “We must feed you, my queen, and then later,” he leaned closer, “I’ll eat you.” Phara’s wicked tongue darted out and traced her neckline.

“Phara!” she squeaked when he lifted her over his head and out of the pool. The strength and dexterity that took was stunning, since she was a hearty girl. But then his crazy long tongue darted out, swiping at her pussy on her way over his head. “Phara!” she squealed again in surprise as she gaped incredulously at the rotten man.

She was quickly answered with a grin as Phara and the triplets chuckled. All four of them were incorrigible.

Diligen took her hand, assuring she had her footing on the stone floor. Surprisingly, she didn’t feel as awkward meeting another man while naked. Maybe she was finally getting used to the nudity thing.

“I was also sent to rescue you,” Diligen added, with a nod toward the rowdy consorts in the heated bath.

“We heard that!” one of the triplets laughed as they too climbed out of the pool.

“Sympathies, my queen.” Diligen cast her an amused look that conveyed he was being sarcastic.

She laughed, getting the impression the three Vorto castes had a healthy rivalry and teased each other regularly.

Diligen’s smile broadened as he wrapped a big, soft, plush towel around her. She tugged the edges up and snuggled into it.

“Mmm.” It smelled a lot like lavender. She was discovering that even though the Vorto were minimalist, what they did have were always works of art. Isa looked up from admiring the towel to the alien man. “Thank you, Diligen.”

“It’s my honor,” he said, while wrapping her wet hair in a smaller towel. “Come see the selection of material I brought.”

Diligen led the way up a short tunnel into the back of a familiar large room. It was reminiscent of the sanctuary of Notre Dame, immense, with lots of gorgeous stone and columns, but purple. She’d been asleep when Phara brought her to the bathing cavern, and she was hardly familiar with the hive layout yet. Her gaze landed on the unusual round bed and recognized where she was.

“This is really my room?” She looked from Diligen back to the consorts who were following them.

“It is, my queen.” Rego nodded to her.

Isa looked around, truly taking in her new bedroom. It was the kind of huge that made her feel positively insignificant. In the middle of the cavernous room was the pool-like bed that she first awoke in. Lining the walls were the columns illuminated with a peaceful amethyst light. The walls were carved with the vining flowers she’d seen

elsewhere on her brief tour, but they'd left the natural beauty of the cave ceiling which extended two to three stories up. Two rooms branched off the main room, similar to a transept. Throughout, there were benches with contrasting yellow cushions, tables, and platforms reminiscent of day beds. Many pieces were made of red wood, but many were made from the same purple marble as the cave. She couldn't imagine what it would take to move the absurdly heavy pieces, but the Vorto were ridiculously strong so it was probably nothing to them. There were also shelves peppered around the room holding a variety of things, like blankets near the bed, cups near a bubbling water fountain, towels by the passage to the bathing cavern, and so on.

"It's just so huge. You could play a ballgame in here. I mean it's gorgeous, but I don't know that I need this much space." She shook her head in disbelief.

If she was truly a queen, the palatial room fit the title, but she didn't really feel like a queen. She was just plain old Isabella as far as she was concerned.

"It is the most secure chamber," Bellator said as he came sauntering in. His eyes brightened as they landed on her.

"Hello, Bellator." Her heart leapt and she grinned, happy to see the giant teddy bear.

He gave her a hug and she happily snuggled into his big strong arms, loving the way he nuzzled her hair when he kissed the top of her head.

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As she pulled away from Bellator, she remembered Phara was watching and tempered her smile. She attempted to have a conversation about the relationship dynamic when they were bathing, but it got totally derailed, and she still wasn't clear on anything. Except, she need not worry because Phara was equally happy to see Bellator. The happiness on Phara's face was open and honest. There was truly no jealousy between the three alphas. It was nice and refreshing, since she'd witnessed nothing but jealousy back home when men competed for one woman. It was also confusing. She understood jealousy, but she had no clue what this relationship was. The only thing she was sure of was that the alphas were sweet, and loving, and each of them sparked different interests she had.

"Here is the selection." Diligen pulled her from her thoughts, as he pointed to the material draped over a table along the wall. Also on the table were her tennis shoes. Although the floors were a little cool, they were so smooth she hadn't missed her shoes, but definitely appreciated they were salvaged from the crash.

"Thank you, Diligen. Bellator, help me pick some clothes and tell me what you were up to," she encouraged Bellator.

"Clothes?" Bellator asked with a tilt of his head.

"Coverings," she amended, using their word, as she went over to the table. "Oh, these are lovely." She admired the array of colorful fabrics. "How do you dye them?" she asked as she felt how silky the gorgeous saffron yellow bundle was.

"Mainly with plants from our territory. That material is also made from different flora," Diligen replied.

“Like linen or cotton.” She nodded in understanding, running her fingers over the brocade texture of the floral pattern.

“Why do you wish to wear coverings inside the hive?” Bellator asked, his hand following hers, feeling the fine material.

“Yes, why?” Galis seconded.

“If our queen prefers to wear coverings, we will honor her desire,” Phara interceded.

She smiled at him. He was trying to advocate for her, and apparently Artifex was, too, since he must’ve told Phara about their clothing conversation. Her heart swelled in her chest at how sweet that was. The way he came to her rescue was also pretty damn sexy.

“I was going to try to do things your way. I need to be okay with being naked,” she admitted. “But I’m also a girl and there are some things clothes help, like my breasts sometimes jostle around too much and can get sore.”

That was the easier example to give. When she expressed concern about her lady bits sullyng the kitchen table, Artifex offered to lick her clean. She was sure this crowd would give a similar randy response so she didn’t bother rehashing that detail.

“We want you to be comfortable.” Phara hugged her against his side before taking a seat next to Bellator.

Isa’s eyes stung, threatening to tear up at the acceptance and affection she’d felt in that hug. The Vorto were too damn sweet and her heart really didn’t know how to take it.

“Thank you.” She quickly turned back toward the fabric, forcing herself to rein in her

emotions.

The yellow fabric again caught her eye. It wasn't something she would've chosen back home, but its bright sunny tone created a lovely contrast to the purple cavern. It screamed pick me!

"This doesn't stand out too much, does it?" She held the fabric up.

"Very nice." Bellator nodded approvingly.

"I personally prefer it," Diligen said. "Sobel would be honored if you chose it. I think he spent several months weaving that pattern."

"Oh wow. Thank you so much." Isa then grimaced. "What happens if I accidentally get something on it?"

"I can clean anything. Do not fear." Diligen took the bundle from her and unfurled it, revealing it was three long pieces instead of just one. "Please stand here, if you don't mind."

"All right." She stood in front of Diligen, her hands resting at her sides. It felt odd as he unwrapped her towel and scrutinized her. She'd never been dressed by anyone, at least not since she was a toddler. She focused on Bellator, not sure Diligen needed her gawking back at him as he worked. "What were you busy with?" she asked the legionnaire alpha.

"I was checking in with my ranks and going over assignments. They haven't located any mechanical eggs in our territory, but their search isn't complete and I have runners going to the west," Bellator reported.

"Oh, okay. Thank you." She appreciated him looking for her friends.

“As I was doing a check of the hive perimeter, I thought you might like to take a walk outside tomorrow, since you weren’t awake when I brought you to the mountain,” the big teddy bear added.

“We could take the eastern path,” Phara suggested.

“There are some nice views on that route,” Bellator agreed.

Isa looked at Diligen, who was nearly done fashioning a wrap-skirt and tying a knot at her hip. “Want to join us?”

“I would be honored. Thank you, my queen.” Diligen gave her a deep bow, before grabbing the next swath of yellow fabric. “Please hold your arms up a little.”

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Isa held her arms out and Diligen began creating some sort of top, by simply wrapping the fabric around her the way he had the skirt.

“Everyone here may join us. We can invite Artifex, too,” Phara announced with an excited smile.

“Sounds good.” She nodded, looking forward to it, since she hadn’t seen daylight or the planet’s surface.

“What did you and Artifex do while I was out?” Bellator inquired.

Isa blushed and her gaze darted to Phara.

“I found Artifex in the preparatory trussing our queen up like acapohe hunted in the forest,” Phara declared.

Oh my gawd!She wasn’t sure why she thought he’d have some polite response. The Vorto were proving they didn’t possess a filter and didn’t sugar coat a single thing, either.

“What?!” Bellator growled, looking toward the door like he might hunt Artifex down.

Isa startled at his angry response. “Whoa!” She held up her hands, then glared at Phara. “You better tell him you helped Artifex with that.”

“I did.” Phara grinned, undisturbed by Bellator’s outburst. “Our queen needs to learn to let us take care of her. She tried to drink a bowl ofqua.”

Bellator grimaced, and his accusatory gaze turned on her.

Her mouth dropped open and she pointed at Phara. “You tell him the rest!”

“That you sampled some of our food?” Phara cocked his head, feigning ignorance.

Phara was seriously going to play dumb about the naughty kitchen escapades. He and Artifex were both rotten instigators. Isa rolled her eyes to the ceiling, and Phara started laughing.

“My queen, I think this is the best I can do for this rotation,” Diligen announced, effectively changing the subject. He then unwrapped her hair, running his fingers through it before stepping back.

Isa looked down and smiled at the bright skirt and the crisscross halter top, which was reminiscent of beach wear. The way he wrapped the skirt, her poochie belly was hardly noticeable, and she grinned. Isa did a little bounce and her boobs stayed in the makeshift fabric cups crossing over them. Many of her bras weren’t capable of that feat.

“You’re a genius, Diligen!” she declared.

“My queen!” Diligen gasped, dropped to the floor, and turned into a puddle of goo.

Oh no! What did I say? Her mouth dropped open, her gaze darting to Phara and Bellator.

“He’s overwhelmed by your praise,” Bellator chuckled.

“The feast is ready,” Artifex announced, then stopped and looked down at Diligen, still a puddle of plasm at her feet.

“Isa told him she liked her coverings,” Phara summarized for him.

“Ah. Yes, very nice.” Artifex’s gaze slid up her body. “For some reason the coverings make me more interested in seeing what’s beneath them even though I’ve seen it.”

“Agreed. I want to tear them off of her.” Bellator released a lusty growl.

“I think lifting up the wrap around her hips would be sufficient,” Phara added with a rakish grin.

The triplets nodded in agreement. The whole lot of them were nothing but hormones.

“I heard something about a feast.” She laughed and incredulously rolled her eyes as she sauntered past Artifex toward the exit.

She didn’t have to turn around to know that all eyes were on her. She could feel them, from the way the hair on the back of her neck stood up and her nipples stiffened. She may have acted put-out, but there was something very satisfying about capturing their interest. People back home would’ve called it vanity, but there was nothing wrong with feeling good about yourself, about feeling desired. The clamor of footsteps behind her made her grin widen.

“My queen, let me escort you.” Phara came up on her right side and looped his arm around her waist.

“I organized the Bonding Feast so I believe it should be my honor.” Artifex hooked his arm through her left one.

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“What about you, big boy?” she said over her shoulder to Bellator, then instantly couldn’t believe herself. The men were clearly rubbing off on her.

“I am content with this view.” Bellator’s gaze darted to her ass.

Isa chuckled as they headed out of her overgrown bedroom. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of the Vorto, but she liked them—a lot. More than a lot.

Chapter 12

All Hail the Queen

Isabella

The cacophony of voices overwhelmed Isa’s mind as they approached the dining commons. Her entourage stopped at the central entrance between two of the six ornately carved columns that separated the commons from the passage bedside it. Her mouth gaped at what she saw, her cheeky mood fleeing. On the earlier tour she hadn’t noticed how large this room truly was, she’d only seen the top row. This cavern made her new bedroom seem small. The room was bowl-shaped, looking more like a Greek amphitheater than a dining hall, and was the size of a stadium. The broad rows were laden with colorful cushions descending to a stage. The place wasn’t filled to capacity. There were probably only a few hundred Vorto, but it felt like it was packed full. Everyone’s head swiveled to look at her, then they instantly quieted and stood. It was disconcerting having so many people staring and rising at once, especially when she was still getting used to being the odd man out. If she had a shovel, she would’ve dug a hole and climbed in.

Phara's large hand enveloped hers, their fingers interlacing. It pulled her attention away from the daunting crowd.

"Oh, thanks," she said, as he started helping her down the stairs along with Artifex on her other side.

She was dressed, so this wasn't as awkward as it could be. She was also feeling cute. The way Phara, Artifex and Bellator looked at her added to that feeling. It was nice, wonderful really, warming her insides in a way she didn't experience much before today. The same adoring look was also on the faces of the men filling the commons, turning the nice feeling into overwhelming. She couldn't possibly live up to whatever preconceived notions they had about her.

I'll be okay. She smiled at Phara and Artifex, focusing on the wonderful things they had said. Just relax. Everyone is overly excited, we're all new to each other, and it will calm down.

"Hello. Hello." She nodded to her left and right. "How many people are here?"

"Including you, my queen, there are two-hundred and sixty," Artifex replied while helping her down the steps that were just a tad too tall.

That's a lot. Although not as many as it could be. It looked like the amphitheater could hold over a thousand, and probably did before the terrible Blight struck the Vorto. She continued nodding hello, while thanking God she wasn't a total introvert.

They reached the circular stone stage at the bottom where a large leather chaise lounge was the centerpiece. The three alphas mounted the dais with her and turned around.

"Oh," Isa declared in surprise as Phara gripped her hips and lifted her up.

“I present to you, Queen Isabella of the Tumulus Hive!”

Isa startled and cringed as a loud vibrating roar reverberated through the arena. With all the noise they were lucky one of the stalactites didn't come crashing down.

No. This isn't awkward at all.

She tried smiling at the crowd of alien men, but it came out a grimace. To say she'd never been the center of attention for a crowd this big was an understatement. She'd presented research for classes while getting her education, but they were a fraction of this size and she knew the people. She also wasn't held aloft to do her presentations.

Isa released her death grip on Phara's arm and waved to everyone, trying to remember how excited they were. “Hello,” she said, not that she was heard.

“Let the Bonding Feast commence!” Artifex's voice resonated loudly in her mind, as he yipped, reining in the noisy crowd.

Phara lowered her, setting her in the middle of the leather chaise. The seat was large enough that Phara was able to sit behind her, with Bellator and Artifex on either side, while Gregis, Rego and Galis sat at her feet.

There was a flurry of action as servers descended the stairs with dozens of large platters piled high with meat, vegetables, and other dishes. The platters and pitchers were set on the edge of the stage, like it was a massive buffet.

“Wow. You guys outdid yourselves!” she said in awe as she squeezed Artifex's hand. “Thank you!” she said to him and the servers setting everything out, though she wasn't sure they heard her over the excited din.

Operar, one of the servitor betas, approached with a tray of cups. Artifex took two,

bringing one to her lips.

“Be cautious, this is fermented juice for special occasions,” Artifex warned while he gingerly tipped the cup.

Isa’s eyes widened when she tasted the wine. “Mmm.” She nodded emphatically. “This is good, very good,” she declared after swallowing.

“Wonderful.” Artifex grinned at her, looking proud.

“Did you make this?” She tapped the cup.

“We did.”

“That’s amazing. Wine making is an art form where I’m from. I know the process is very complicated. Impressive.” She squeezed his arm.

“My queen, you keep flattering me and I’ll bend you over this seat before you have a chance to eat.” Artifex’s deep husky voice echoed in her mind while also making a lusty growl.

Her mouth dropped open, her cheeks heating.

“If that’s the case, I’ll gladly feed our queen,” Bellator suggestively chimed in with an impish laugh.

Her gaze darted toward him. Bellator gave his hips a little wiggle, jostling his semi-erect cock. Her jaw dropped farther. Bellator grinned. He was supposed to be her teddy bear, but he was just as much of a randy beast as Artifex ganging up on her.

“You might want to close this. You’re just encouraging them,” Phara chuckled as he placed a finger under her chin and physically closed her mouth.

Artifex was laughing and was about to set her cup on the tray beside him, when she grabbed it. Today had been the definition of a roller coaster, and from the alphas’ rambunctious mood it looked like the wild ride wasn’t over; she was going to need a few drinks.

“Oh, no, sir! Halt right there. I know you like to serve me, but tonight I’m in charge

of my cup, and keep it flowing.” She lightly swatted Artifex’s hand.

“Very well,” Artifex relented with a chuckle.

Isa grinned as she took the cup, surprised that actually worked.

“Cheers.” She raised her beverage.

“What is cheers?” Phara asked from behind her.

“We say it before drinking special beverages on special occasions. It means that you are wishing each other good fortune, good health, just good things in general.”

“Ah, yes, cheers.” Phara raised his cup.

She grinned as she tapped her cup to his.

“Cheers!” the other alphas and betas echoed, and they all took a sip.

The Vorto surrounding the stage followed suit, declaring cheers and clinking their cups. It made her smile but reminded her she was the center of attention.

Plates piled with food were brought to them and the men took turns feeding her. The members of the hive happily conversed in groups as they too ate and lounged. It took some of the pressure off her, but they were clearly still watching and following her conversation with the men on stage. She took a drink anytime it threatened to make her feel awkward. Thankfully, after her first cup of alien wine she was feeling more at ease.

Halfway through the meal, Bellator turned to her. “Do you mind if we start introductions?”

“Um, sure, but I may have trouble remembering everyone’s names.” Isa cringed. She’d always had trouble with that.

“It’s all right. Everyone understands it will take time.” Phara gave her a reassuring squeeze.

She nodded in appreciation.

“Maybe we just introduce the castes and ranks,” Artifex suggested.

Bellator stood and the room quieted. “This dawn, when the meteor shower began, I never could’ve imagined we’d be ending the rotation with a Bonding Feast,” Bellator began, pantomiming the debris shooting through the sky and the room rumbled in agreement. From the looks on their faces, all the ship debris raining down must have been quite a sight. “By the blessings ofInanawe found Queen Isabella.”

“What isInana?” she whispered to Artifex.

“It’s the thread that connects all things,” he replied.

“Oh.” She nodded. It sounded similar to the concept of God, though not quite. Back home they would call the Vorto pagans, but she’d never held much stock in organized religion, not after watching the way its followers often treated their fellow man.

“Legionnaire omegas and deltas, please stand,” Bellator continued, and a group of robust men sitting on the upper ring toward the back stood. “These are the males that guard and patrol our territory. Proel located you and your cracked egg.” One of the men stepped forward.

They looked like soldiers from their broad muscular physique to the way they stood at attention. Even the way they positioned themselves close to the entrance, it was

clear they were guarding the rest of the hive. These were the men who found her and got her help, like her very own special forces. She nodded in appreciation to each of the men, truly grateful for what they'd done, though a simple nod hardly felt like enough.

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“Our queen was terribly injured and unconscious from the fall from the ether,” Bellator continued. “These are the males who fused with me so we could swiftly fly our queen back to the hive,” he explained for everyone present.

Fuse? Fly? Isa cocked her head in confusion, but the roaring approval from the crowd made asking difficult. Plus, she found she wanted to say something to her rescuers, more than she needed the answer. Before she lost her nerve, Isa rose on her knees on the chaise. The crowd quieted and all eyes were on her.

“This morning, I awoke to discover I was crashing on your world and was probably going to die. It was unbelievably scary, but I expected it after the last month I’d been through. As I’ve shared with the alphas, my hive wasn’t very kind to me. They abandoned me and I’ve been afraid, alone, and without hope. Not only did you welcome me, you rescued me, healed me, have said such complimentary, insightful things, made me amazing food, and beautiful coverings.” Her hand smoothed down herskirt. “In the span of a day, you have changed my life more than I can explain. So, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you doesn’t feel like enough for welcoming me into your hive, but it’s all I have.” Her chin trembled as her eyes blurred.

“No, my queen, it’s not all you have.” Phara pulled her back into his arms. “You now have us.” He nuzzled her hair.

Bellator and Artifex also closed in, one taking her hand, the other kissing her shoulder. Through blurry eyes she was humbled as all the Vorto bowed to her.

The alphas continued holding her as the rest of the hive was introduced. The

legionnaires were the guards, diplomats between territories, and aided in hunts. Their quarters were closest to the entrances of the hive for security reasons, though threats to the hive were apparently rare. The servitors had the most hive members but they did everything from farming, to art, to building, to medicine, and everything in between. Then there were the consorts. And though their purpose was to make babies and raise the young, the consensus of the hive was that Phara and his caste were the cheerleaders of the hive, handled internal disputes, and were willing to assist with any of the tasks that kept the hive running. She wouldn't remember everything, but as she listened, she got a better picture of how the hive worked. She also saw how they were a true community.

"So, are your markings natural or artificial?" Isa finally got around to asking as she touched the middle of Bellator's chest.

"What do you mean artificial?" Bellator quizzically tilted his head.

"I think she means something drawn on with pigments," Artifex commented, then extended a pitcher of wine toward her.

"I've had my limit." Isa covered her glass. She wasn't slurring her words, but she was definitely all warm and toasty. "Yes, that's what I meant. Is it drawn on somehow?"

"Understood. No, it's natural. All hatchlings, once they can maintain their bipedal form, have the same mark." Bellator traced the vee and circle on his chest.

"As we age and grow it becomes more defined. Although, with some hatchlings we can tell what their caste and rank will be before the mark becomes distinguished," Phara explained.

"As changes occur in the hive the mark may change, too. I am certain it is hormone related," Artifex added.

It sounded similar to the ornate markings on a butterfly.

“Wow, that’s fascinating.” She rubbed both Bellator and Artifex’s chest, while snuggling back against Phara’s chest.

Bellator abruptly snatched her from Phara, and she found herself straddling his lap. Her surprised squeal ended in a giggle.

“No, you fascinate me, my queen,” the big teddy bear insisted as he pet her hair, hugging her against his massive muscular chest.

Bellator was the definition of rough on the outside, marshmallow on the inside. She’d had personal time with Artifex and Phara, but not Bellator. Unable to resist the sweetheart another moment, she leaned forward and planted her lips on his thin, broad mouth.

“Mmm,” Bellator purred, and his leg started shaking like a dog getting a really good scratch. “Why have we not done this before?” His voice caressed her mind as his grip tightened around her.

He was right. She’d been kissed by the alphas everywhere but on the mouth.

“I don’t know,” Isa moaned. She loved Bellator’s cute reaction, how he tasted like fruit while still smelling masculine and delicious.

She gripped his muscular shoulders as she fell deeper into the kiss. Her tongue explored his mouth while he did the same. Bellator worked her skirt up so he could knead her rear. She didn’t object, though a part of her knew there were hundreds of people watching. Perversely, that made her burn hotter.

She didn’t jump when Artifex and Phara began kissing her shoulder and hand, their

warm lips and hot tongues roving her body. Maybe it was the wine, or maybe she was getting addicted to experiencing unadulterated pleasure.

Isa gasped when Bellator's thick crown found her slick opening. Her pussy quivered as the large bulbous head started pushing into her.

"My queen," he groaned, his massive hands gripping her hips tighter, preventing her from sliding farther on his cock. "So wet and tight. I don't think I have the restraint."

"Our queen can handle it," Artifex whispered seductively, like the devil on Bellator's shoulder. Then the imp shoved his hand between them, found her clit and furiously started rubbing the slick bead.

Isa gasped at the added stimulus, her pussy quaking as more pleasure wrapped around her. Bellator let out a guttural growl and thrust his fat cock into her needy body. She keened from the invasion, her back arching as he rammed in to the hilt.

"My queen!" Fear shifted in Bellator's eyes as he froze.

"Fuck me!" she cried out the demand.

His worry turned into predatory hunger, he gripped her hips and started slamming her down on his cock. He was thicker than her other lovers, and the crown, ridges, and knots on his cock mercilessly rubbed her slick walls. Bellator didn't strike as deep as Phara or Artifex, but she loved the differences. The way he stretched her teetered on the edge of being painful. It only served to ratchet her pleasure higher as he fucked her faster and harder, his hips hammering against her jiggling ass.

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“I love that sight,” Artifex snarled, pinching her clit and making her cry out at the twisted spike of ecstasy.

“Yes,” Phara groaned while stroking his cock.

“Bellator, I’m about to...” she shouted as she started to stiffen up.

He growled and tugged her against his chest, his sharp teeth clamping down on her left shoulder. The bite was opposite of where Artifex nipped her, finishing off the trio of claiming marks. The pain shoved her over the edge and she started spasming wildly.

“Mine,” Bellator roared, thrusting faster.

The knots and ridges on his cock swelled, sending her deeper into the chasm of ecstasy. She convulsed as his climax bathed her spasming pussy. Isa practically melted into Bellator’s chest, barely lucid when his cock slid free.

“My stunning queen,” her big teddy bear kissed the shoulder he marked.

“So gorgeous.” Phara slid her onto his own chest and stroked her back as she recovered from the orgasm.

“So blessed.” Artifex joined in, kissing her shoulder while he caressed her bottom.

She closed her eyes and reveled in their touch. Soon more hands joined in and then more mouths, kissing and sucking her exposed bits of flesh. When they began

stripping her out of her outfit, she opened her eyes. Isa gasped seeing that the stage and large chaise were now buried by a sea of purple plasm. Her alphas and the rest of the hive had fluxed. There wasn't a single humanoid figure in the amphitheater.

The hands rolled her so she was floating on her back as they unwound the clothing the rest of the way. The hands then melted into the pool, to be replaced by others stroking and caressing her. Mouths and faces formed, smiling and looking at her adoringly as they kissed and licked her. They faded and were replaced by someone else. It was the same for the countless aroused cocks that formed and rubbed against her. The pool writhed and churned, the purple waves enveloping and lapping at her from the tip of her toes to her neck.

Her legs were splayed and tentacles of plasm slid between her folds and into her vagina, turning into fingers then back into plasm, before retreating. Her nipples were sucked and tweaked in a similar way. Isa's heart sped up at how strange this was. It was like when she first awoke yet more intense. This was turning into an orgy in the truest sense of the word. She swallowed hard when the plasm undulating inside her slick pussy took form, turning into a thick cock, before sliding free. The movement became frantic, moving faster, the plasm working into her puckered rear. She tried to calm herself but this was still so new, intense, and confusing.

"Phara," she worriedly called to him.

"Hmm?" His face rose out of the pool next to her and he gazed affectionately at her.

"I need to see you." She panted, needing to anchor herself to someone as she tried to assimilate what was going on.

Phara looked at the pool then nodded in understanding. "Yes, my queen." He solidified beneath her. "You are safe." He caressed her as he purred. "You are adored."

The melee calmed, picking up on her distress, the caresses and kisses gentling.

“I don’t understand. I thought I was your mate, or mated to the three alphas.” She touched the mark Bellator just placed on her left shoulder.

“Aye, you are bonded to me,” Bellator’s voice echoed in her mind.

“Most assuredly you are, my precious queen,” Artifex whispered. His smiling face appeared beside her hip and gave it a kiss.

“But...but they’re all here?” She looked at the sea of Vorto in their flux form who’d swarmed the stage, all jockeying to touch and fuck her.

“They are your mates. You are queen of the hive,” Phara replied as if it were obvious.

“All?!” she gasped.

“Yes. We are all yours, my queen.” Phara bent and kissed her mouth which was gaped in shock.

Isa started to panic. Not only was she supposed to have their babies; somehow, she was expected to be married to not just three alien men, which was enough of a challenge, but the whole hive. Was her heart big enough to return the love that they all deserved? As much as she wanted to, she wasn’t raised this way. She was raised to shun affection and pleasure. She had to build a wall around her heart just to protect it.

“Oh, my queen. I hear and feel all of your worries. Just close your eyes and let us worship you,” Phara urged, his voice soothing as he peppered kisses on her lips and cheeks.

She shuddered, trying not to sob, but nodded and allowed her eyes to close. Isa took

calming breaths, bringing her thundering heartbeat under control. As she calmed, she started to hear the hive. It wasn't one voice in particular, but a host of murmurs that caressed her mind, the way the Vorto caressed her body. She was no longer in a place where she had to worry about judgment or cruel intentions. Here in this hive, her hive, there was only affection and love.

Isa let out a long, deep sigh as she let the whispered words of affection replace the barbs of her past.

Slowly the swarm of bodies grew in intensity. Mouths sucking, fingers exploring every hole, cocks breaching her vagina and giving it a few thrusts at a time. No one stayed for very long, and she panted and writhed from the pleasure, while perpetually teetering on the edge of a cataclysmic orgasm.

Strong hands rolled her, and Isa found herself laid out on Gregis' chest. She smiled, happy to see him. She was growing accustomed to their flux form, but she loved being able to see their faces and their bodies, especially their stunning bodies.

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“Greetings, my gorgeous queen,” Gregis panted with desire.

Her smile turned into a gasp when Gregis’ cock slid into her sopping wet pussy.

“Oh, my queen,” he groaned, his eyes closing in ecstasy as he sank in to the hilt.

“Don’t take it out until I say. You can thrust, but don’t take it out.” She couldn’t believe she made the brazen demand. Then she had the audacity of bouncing on his cock, fucking him rather than waiting. Who was she turning into? Someone who enjoyed pleasure, that’s who.

Gregis’ cock jerked inside her. “Yes, my queen!” he growled, his long tongue lashing out to lick her left nipple, since Artifex was already sucking the right one.

Suddenly a cock pressed against her rear. Galis gripped her hips and thrust. Isa cried out at the invasion, the puckered ring of muscles stretching beyond capacity. She was covered in so much slick desire inside and out that her poor anus put up little resistance and he popped all the way in. The crest on his broad crown blazed the way as he burrowed deeper into the virgin hole. Her mouth gaped at the erotic agony of having her ass and pussy filled at the same time.

“Galis!” Phara barked, and both Galis and Gregis froze.

She couldn’t have that. She was so close. Right on the edge.

“More!” Isa cried out. Both alien men jerked at her command, their cocks pulsing inside her. “Fuck me!”

Gregis' eyes widened, but he complied, pulling back, while Galis slammed the rest of the way into her ass. The ridges on his shaft set off every nerve ending in the taboo hole. She instantly snapped, screaming as the orgasm kicked off.

“More!” her mind wailed as her voice broke.

Galis retreated and Gregis hammered back into her violently spasming pussy. The orgasm spiraled deeper and darker as the men fucked her in tandem. The wet sounds of slapping bodies, their snarls, and salacious compliments about her body added to the euphoria.

The head of a cock found her lips and she opened wide for Rego. She began sucking him deep into her mouth, the prolonged orgasm making her greedy.

“Oh, my queen,” Rego declared, staggering from the sudden intense pleasure.

Bellator and Phara chuckled, knowing what he was experiencing. Rego was a virgin, like all the rest of the Vorto, so he had never experienced anything like this. The knowledge fueled her own desire. Her arm coiled around Rego, so he couldn't get away. She sucked and tongued the man while the other two betas railed her. She was going to come again. She wanted Rego to come, too, in her mouth. Unsure of what possessed her, she slid a digit into Rego's ass and fingered him deep.

“My...” Rego's garbled, ecstatic thought reached her as he bucked, gagging her while he shot his vanilla-flavored load down her throat.

Isa stiffened between the two firm bodies. Gregis and Galis both thrust hard, pushing into her straining pussy and ass. She started convulsing as she reached the next crescendo. Her betas roared, their ridges and knots swelling while they erupted, their release spurting, coating her insides. She shook as she cried from the intensity before euphoria finally claimed her.

Chapter 13

Great Day for a Walk

Isabella

Isa smiled at Bellator's broad back as he took the lead. She noticed that he or one of his betas was always nearby, guarding her. It had been that way since she woke up this morning in a literal cuddle puddle made up of the alphas, consorts, and several other members of the hive. Her smile broadened at the memory. There was no need for blankets to keep her warm at night with all the snuggle buddies.

Phara and Artifex held her hands while they moved through the corridors, showing off the rest of the hive. The triplets, Diligen, Masculum, and several others joined the tour. Their happy smiles made her grin. She wondered how much of that was due to the festivities last night? Her smile broadened into an all-out grin as she shook her head incredulously.

Hey, Dad, remember how you wanted me to get married? Well, I did. Meet all two-hundred and fifty-nine of my husbands. The mental image of her father's shocked expression made her snort. Sadly, no matter what she did her father still wouldn't approve. Frankly, she no longer cared.

Phara heard her little snort. He smiled, blinking as he gave her hand a squeeze. She never thought it was possible to fall in love in the span of a day, but her hive, especially her alphas, were making her a believer. The idea of being married to all of them still freaked her out, mainly because she wasn't sure she could do them justice; but they were the best thing to ever happen to her, and she was going to do her damndest to give them all the love they deserved. Isa gazed affectionately up at Phara, slowly blinking the way they did. His eyes flared, a lusty growl vibrating in his throat.

“Do we need a break?” Artifex eagerly asked.

“No!” Isa giggled and shook her head.

“Aw,” Bellator pouted as he looked back at them.

She chuckled as they entered another cavernous room. It wasn’t as big as the five-story room that held the bulk of the hive’s apartments, complete with balconies and a courtyard with potted plants. This was more shopping warehouse impressive.

“Wow!” Isa admired the array of goods stored in cubbies carved into the purple rock.

The whole left side of the room looked like the shelves at a home goods store, just like the food storage rooms near the kitchen resembled a grocery store. Considering how big the hive was, it made sense to have all these things for replacements and trade, yet it was still stunning to see everything. Her archaeology background lent to her excitement. Even though she studied ancient peoples, it was really their stuff that she’d studied, since the people were long dead. This was right up her alley.

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Isa was drawn to a nearby bank of shelves. She picked up one of the particularly lovely ceramic cups to examine the colorful floral pattern.

A blue copper-based glaze, she noted the primary color used on the handleless vessel, and recalled seeing similar on some ancient Egyptian pieces.

The cup sat amidst a variety of colorful ceramic plates, jugs, and tableware. There were also carved wooden goods for the kitchen or dining table in this section of the cavern. Her gaze panned down the wall of shelves, noting all manner of things from blankets to tools. On the other side of the room were a dozen evenly spaced work benches, each with a variety of tools. Not all the benches were the same, or had the same equipment. Obviously, they were geared toward the different trades that it took to make the goods on the shelves.

“So, this is the craft and storage room,” she commented to Artifex as she set the cup down.

“It is. We are also able to bake clay goods and form metal in the forges through there.” Artifex pointed to a room branching off. “We generally only fire up the forge in the cold season.”

“Because of the cold?” Isa tilted her head in confusion. That shouldn’t be the reason, since caves tend to stay temperate all year round.

“Our craftsmen are usually performing agricultural duties and taking advantage of the warm season,” Artifex explained.

“The forges do warm the legionnaire quarters which are near the surface and can get cold at that time of orbit,” Bellator added.

“Ah.” She nodded.

They continued onward through the hive and Isa’s head was on a swivel taking everything in. The Vorto were a fascinating culture. They were like humans during the iron age, somewhat primitive, yet they had technology like therefectio, which was more advanced than the healing equipment her people had on Earth when she left. It was totally captivating. She was having fun looking for combinations of advanced and primitive features as she toured with her men.

“What do you think of the hive?” Phara asked as they continued to another section.

“It’s amazing.” She leaned her head against Phara’s arm. “The talent and ingenuity that it took to create all of this is astounding. I’m very glad this isn’t a plain old cave, that you have running water, lighting, and heat when it’s needed,” she admitted with an emphatic nod.

“Yes, those things are nice,” Artifex chuckled.

“Here we are at the chrysalis chamber.” Bellator stopped at a pair of doors.

“We’re going to show you the chamber, but it’s best to not go inside.” Phara cringed.

Her brow furrowed at his expression.

“We don’t know if your hormones will force the amnio sacs to mature. We think it’s best if the next generation doesn’t emerge yet,” Artifex hesitantly explained.

She instantly understood. The alphas didn’t know what the future held, if she was

compatible with them or not. They still needed to hold off on waking the future generations as if nothing had changed.

“No, I get it.” She squeezed Artifex and Phara’s hands sympathetically. “Let’s not disturb anything.”

“We can open the port a bit. That should be fine.” Artifex cracked the door.

Isa peered inside the cavern and her mouth dropped open as her gaze rose up, up, up, then panned way down again. Ten stories of honeycomb compartments were connected by a spiral staircase in the towering room. Out of the thousands of cubbies in the chamber, only a few hundred niches directly in front of her contained the purple sacks which reminded her of basketball-sized butterfly cocoons.

Those are amnio sacs. She recalled them being mentioned but had no concept of what they were.

She gaped in awe at the spheres that held Vorto fetuses in them. Maybe she was right about the Vorto being similar to insects. In fact, caterpillars turned into goo inside their cocoons before transforming into butterflies, the way the Vorto could shift from their humanoid shape into the flux or plasm form.

Isa pulled back. “So, what happens when the babies are born, I mean emerge from those sacks? I’m picturing the little guys plopping out of the cubicles and falling over the balconies,” she worriedly asked.

The alphas and several of the other Vorto laughed.

“That happens,” Artifex chuckled.

“Usually, it’s the sign of a hatchling legionnaire,” Bellator snorted.

“That’s awful!” She gaped at them. “That’s a several story drop.”

“Don’t let them tease you.” Phara rubbed her shoulder.

“Hatchlings are in their flux form when they emerge,” Gregis reminded her.

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“They can fall several levels and bounce,” Galis added.

Her eyes widened imagining the gooey baby balls falling and bouncing. It wasn’t any more comforting.

“Some of us bounced more than others,” Gregis teased Galis.

Everyone laughed when Galis made a face at him.

“We always have someone tending the chamber, keeping watch for the little ones. The hatchlings get more active as they get closer to emerging. We form catching parties, so I’ve been told,” Artifex explained.

“But I thought a fall hurts you, even in your flux form?” She looked to Phara, recalling his story of standing at the cliff.

“Oh, it requires a fall from much higher up,” Phara assured her.

“It’s a lesson many of us need to learn,” Bellator explained as they continued walking down the passage.

“I understand, but I still don’t like the idea of babies falling.” Her brow furrowed. “Life is hard enough without the scary lessons starting right off the bat. And you guys didn’t like my story about Little Red Riding Hood,” she grimaced at the irony.

“I—I never thought of it that way.” Phara frowned, his gaze thoughtful as he seemed to be playing out the scenario.

All of her men went from amused to contrite. Her heart plummeted.

“I’m sorry.” Isa cringed. “I didn’t mean to be critical. I have no right to judge.” She shook her head. For all she knew this was just like the trials of baby birds getting booted from the nest.

“Do not apologize.” Artifex shook his head. “We wish to know all of your thoughts.”

“You are right, my queen. The fall must be terrifying when you’ve never known anything else about life.” Phara cupped her cheek.

“Yeah, but I bet breaking out of their sack is, too.” She considered things further. “You guys already said you have more attendants when the time comes for them to emerge. It’s not like you’re neglectfully letting it happen. I just imagined a human baby and freaked out.”

“We attempt to attend to everything, but it is always good to be aware of other ways and perspectives.” Bellator led them up a steep incline away from the unusual nursery.

“We could add bumpers to the individual chambers and ledges. That shouldn’t restrict airflow,” Artifex suggested.

“The chamber walkways need barriers before our queen goes in, too. She couldn’t withstand that fall,” Phara added, looking suddenly worried.

“Well, yeah, you’re right.” Isa nodded. “If I fell from even the second story I’d probably be hurt.”

The Vorto gasped.

“I am glad we are having this discussion!” Bellator worriedly declared. “I’m also reconsidering our tour outside.” He opened a door leading into a brightly lit foyer.

“We are blessed you survived the fall from the ether.” Artifex grimaced.

Isa was instantly fixated on the windows, ignoring the reminder of her brush with death.

Sunlight! That’s sunlight. That’s the outside.

This was the first time she’d seen the sun in over a day, actually over a hundred years, though she’d been in stasis for all that time, so it felt like just a day. For someone accustomed to regularly seeing sunlight, that was a long time to be in a cave, even a fancy one. This was also her first time seeing the alien planet.

“Ooh, let’s go.” She tugged Phara and Artifex toward the window for a peek.

“A moment,” Phara chuckled, resisting her pull.

“Would you like additional coverings?” Artifex gestured to the shelves in the walls holding clothing.

“No.” She adamantly shook her head, chomping at the bit to get outside. She hadn’t realized how eager she was to see the planet before now.

“You may find it cool.” Phara held her hand, resisting her pull toward the door.

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“They’re teasing you. They can see how eager you are to go out.” Bellator clasped her around the waist and snatched her away from the other alphas. “It’s our warm season.” He playfully hustled toward the door, evading the other two.

“Rotten!” She made a face at Phara and Artifex.

“Never!” Artifex attempted to look insulted, but laughed instead.

His laughter was echoed by several of the Vorto who’d joined them for the tour.

Bellator set her on her feet and opened the door. Isa blinked as she stepped into the bright daylight streaming into the foyer. The sun on Tellus was very much like Earth’s, one of the reasons this planet was chosen for the Manifest mission. It took a bit for her eyes to adjust. When her vision cleared, the first thing she noticed was how pink the sky was.

“Oh,” she whispered in awe, soaking in the mountainous landscape, as she stepped farther onto the stone patio.

“Don’t go too far.” Bellator pointed out that the veranda extended for twenty feet before dropping off. “I think we’ll need to add barriers here, too. Invicta, please help me remember these locations, so we can discuss it with Artifex later.” He took her hand.

“Of course, my alpha,” the Vorto man replied.

“Thank you.” Isa smiled, appreciating they were thinking of her, but at the moment

the view had her preoccupied.

Holding on to Bellator's hand, she ventured closer to the edge, while taking in the mountain range with its stunning peaks, some snow-capped. The view was as breathtaking as the Grand Canyon, with its striated rock formations, though instead of shades of red these were purple against a cloud-dotted pink sky.

Just gorgeous. Her heart sped up, excited by the wonder of it all.

The hive sat on the side of one mountain, looking out at others in a chain of peaks. There was forest growth on the side of the peaks that grew thicker near the valley.

Still clasping Bellator's hand, she stepped closer to the edge of the veranda and looked down. The drop wasn't too steep, but she certainly didn't want to fall off the ledge, either. Below, on the mountain slope, she had a better view of the plant life. The trees were filled with yellow foliage. They had spiraling red trunks, like fancy manicured topiaries, except the corkscrew was their natural shape. Between the trees in the valley, she spotted a pale violet river. Something flew from one tree to the next. When it landed, she was surprised to discover that instead of a feathered bird, it looked more like a flying lizard. Everything was entirely foreign and everywhere she looked something new enthralled her.

Isa panned to the left and was further stunned to find massive steps formed into the neighboring mountainside, where crops were being grown. They were similar to the terraces built by the Incas of Peru or cultures of Asia. The staggered fields were fed by a stream flowing down the mountain to the river below. Although it had to be a kilometer away, she could see several Vorto working on the terraces.

"Wow. Are those your fields?" she asked, unsure if they belonged to a neighboring hive or not. Either way it was impressive.

“Yes.” Artifex joined them. “They were built generations ago.”

That didn’t surprise her. The stone walls and water channels would take a long time to build, so they would be maintained and used for generations.

“We grow grains, tubers, greens, and fruits, basically everything,” Phara added as he admired the view with them.

Isa turned to tell the alphas how impressive it all was when she spotted the door they’d just exited through. Actually, it wasn’t the door itself that had her attention, rather the entire building façade carved into the face of the mountain. The edifice reminded her of the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde or Petra in Jordan. Like those monuments, this amazing building was built into the face of the natural rock. The broad arched entrance was cut into the striated purple marble. The ornately carved portico was flanked by two massive statues of an alien creature that was a mix of a bear and a cat. Between the stunning effigies stretched a second-story balcony. The façade was dotted with rose windows here and there as well as nature inspired carved designs, much like the interior.

“It’s breathtaking,” she gasped in awe.

As Isa stared at the wondrous architecture, something stabbed at the back of her mind and refused to let her fully appreciate how stunning this all was. Before she could put her finger on the thought, she caught a glimpse of a large bear-cat prowling at the edge of the patio. It looked just like the stone statues, except real. Then she spotted another and another. Somehow half a dozen wild creatures snuck up on them while they were admiring the view.

“Oh!” she declared and backed up.

“Halt!” Bellator barked. The mental shout stabbed at her mind while an actual

panicked bark emerged from his mouth. At the same time, his hand shot out and snagged her arm.

He caught her just as she was about to step backward off the edge of the deck. His arms wrapped tightly around her and he hugged her against his robust body. Horror filled his dark eyes as well as Artifex and Phara's.

"You must be careful!" Phara wrapped around her.

"We have to get the barriers built right away." Artifex joined in the group hug.

It was a relief they'd kept her from falling, and she was deeply touched by this show of affection, but there was still a big problem.

"Hey, there's dangerous animals," she murmured against Bellator's chest, sandwiched amidst the trio.

Artifex pulled back and glanced at the bear-cats. Understanding flickered in his dark eyes. "Ah. Thefero are your hive. They're in one of their animaforms."

Fero? Anima? Her brow furrowed in confusion. She would've repeated the unspoken question, but she knew the guys heard her.

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“Galis, come here,” Phara called to the consort beta.

Isa’s eyes widened as one of the beast’s heads popped up from sniffing the ground. The bear-cat trotted over. She couldn’t help but warily gape at the purple furry creature that stood as tall as her on all fours. All it would take was one swipe of its paws and its claws could easily gut her. If that didn’t finish her off, the mouth full of sharp teeth certainly would. As she was taking in the predator’s features, the bear-cat plopped down on his butt, his big purple tongue lolling out of his mouth, totally ruining the menacing vibe. The goofy expression on the beast’s face was an instant give away.

“You are Galis, aren’t you?” She tilted her head as she stared at him.

“We call taking a natural creature’s form ananimaform. This particular animal is afero. They are a mountain dwelling beast,” Phara explained as she studied Galis.

“We can take any creature’s form that we have touched, but we are most adept at the ones that inhabit our environment.” Artifex patted Galis’ head.

“This really is stunning.” Isa stroked Galis’ shoulder. His fur was coarse but felt like fur with skin underneath. The best she could tell, he’d turned into the actual creature, not just the shell of one.

The Vorto are shape shifters. Her mind spun as she considered this new revelation. It made sense since the Vorto could flux, but it still surprised her. That seemed to be the theme lately.

“You were right to be wary. An actualferowould probably view you as food. They sometimes come to us when they are injured, so it’s best to stay with one of us until the local dens are familiar with your scent,” Bellator added. From the crease in his brow it was clear he was still worried about her near accident.

She smiled up at her sweet, protective, alien husband. “I will remember.” She rubbed the big guy’s chest, hoping to soothe his anxiety. “How come you never changed inside the hive?”

“It is not proper.” Artifex shook his head.

“We do take on some of the creature’s instincts when we flux. There have been problems like tearing up coverings and raiding the food stores, so we don’t shift inside the hive,” Phara added.

“Oh.” Isa nodded, even though she wouldn’t ever truly understand since she couldn’t change into an animal.

“Hatchlings learning to takeanimaforms tend to forget the rule,” Rego laughed, his gaze shifting accusingly to Galis.

“Oh no, not you, Galis?” Isa giggled.

Galis yipped, his tongue darting out and sliding up her cheek.

“Oh my,” she squealed as she mopped slobber off her face.

“That Vorto is not fully fluxed!” Bellator declared, mocking Galis. He then plucked her off her feet and took off running across the veranda.

Isa giggled at the barks and subliminal shouts as Bellator took a trail leading into the

woods flanking the hive. He was absurdly fast and quickly left the rest of their group behind. The woods and snippets of the mountain landscape rapidly passed by.

“This was the real plot, to get me alone,” she teased when Bellator slowed.

“Galis was attacking you with his tongue. It is my duty and honor to protect you.” Bellator attempted to be serious, but a smile tugged at his mouth.

“Very gallant of you.” She grinned then nuzzled his chest, loving how he purred as she brushed her cheek against him. “I can walk,” she said when she pulled her face away. She was wearing her shoes today.

“I’d prefer if you rode me,” he replied.

“Oh?!” Her eyes widened, an impish grin spreading across her face.

The sonorous bellow that erupted from Bellator sent the lizard-birds fleeing from the nearby trees and even echoed off the peaks across the valley.

“That is not what I meant,” he conveyed when he stopped laughing. “Although, I do prefer that over what I was thinking.” Bellator grinned as he set her onto the path. “Stay right there. Don’t get startled.”

Isa nodded, noting where the drop off of the path was and moving closer to the safe side, even holding onto a small tree for extra assurance. Bellator waited until she was safe then melted into his plasm form. He was barely a puddle of goo for a moment before a pair of pointy furry ears emerged from the pool, followed by his whole head. Totally enthralled, she watched as a bear-cat formed. Bellator intently watched her, too. She stayed still so as not to worry him. Finally, he stood in front of her in all his four-legged glory.

“Magnificent,” she whispered in awe. She’d never be able to get used to this.

“Thank you, but you, my queen, are the magnificent one,” he spoke through their mental link as he dropped down to the ground. “Climb on and grab the scruff between my shoulders.”

“Okay.” She did as he instructed, glad she could still understand him even though he was in animal form.

“You won’t hurt me if you grip tighter.” He rose to his feet once she was seated.

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She held tighter to the mane of fur extending from his head and neck as they started walking again.

“This is a first,” Isa chuckled then sobered. “In fact, the last day has been full of a lot of firsts,” she added wistfully, staring out at the alien forest with its glimpses of the mountains and valley.

“I know some of what you mean. I too am experiencing many firsts, but I imagine it is magnified for you since you are so far from your hive. I would like to hear if you want to share.”

“I don’t even know where to begin.” But as soon as that came out of her mouth one big difference jumped to the forefront. “Well, for starters, no man back home would care if I had anything to share or not.”

Bellator, in his bear-cat form, snarled in objection.

She smiled as she patted his shoulder. “I’ve barely been here a day and yet I feel more treasured than I ever did back home. I worry that will somehow change.”

Bellator halted mid stride. “That will not change.” His adamant voice echoed in her mind. His big bear-cat eyes looked back at her imploringly. “The things I feel for you will never change. You are my queen!”

He didn’t give eloquent reasons for his conviction. Bellator wasn’t a poet or a scholar. But the emotion in his voice and swimming in his dark eyes said it all, speaking directly to her heart. Isa’s eyes misted. She leaned forward and wrapped her

arms around Bellator's furry neck.

"I love you, Bellator." She squeezed him tight. "I am beginning to believe you. It's very hard to reprogram how I think. I was raised to believe my only value was in having babies and keeping house. It's hard to believe you don't see me that way when you so desperately need me to help create a new generation."

A woman's worth amounted to what could be gained from between her legs or the sweat of her brow. The moment a woman showed any intelligence or bucked the norm, she was harshly silenced, sometimes violently so. Isa had rebelled against these notions her whole life, yet it was still ingrained in her brain. It would be a long time before her subconscious would trust the Vorto were different. Some scars took time to heal, and the marks never went away.

As she clung to Bellator, he shifted into his humanoid form. She slid off his back and he rolled, then scooped her up as he stood.

"Queen Isa," Bellator stroked her cheek, "I love my brethren deeply, but the love I feel for you is indescribable. It makes me want to whoop with joy and at the same time I feel like I'm bursting from the immensity of it. Yesterday, I wasn't just checking with my betas. I had to go flying, to let all of these emotions free. Yet I couldn't keep myself in form, I was so overwhelmed. I shouldn't say this, but I don't care about the next generation, I care about you!"

"You are my big teddy bear." Tears slipped down Isa's cheeks as she leaned in and kissed Bellator.

She reveled in the kiss, and the way Bellator purred as they held on to each other. How had she gotten so lucky? Bellator gripped her ass, and she wasn't the least bit ashamed to admit she liked it—a lot. Bellator deepened the kiss as he pressed her against a nearby tree.

“I told you this is what we’d find,” Phara’s laughing voice echoed in her mind.

The rest of the group had caught up with them on the path. Her heart leapt at being caught in a compromising position. Her reaction didn’t make sense since she’d had sex in front of the whole hive already. It was undoubtedly one of those taboos from back home, so it would probably always stun her. It was also titillating.

“Heh,” Isa snorted. Learning she had a voyeurism kink was yet another of those new experiences she’d been encountering since her arrival.

“I knew I should’ve run farther,” Bellator groaned as his lips retreated from hers. He then cast Phara and Artifex a bemused glance.

The Vorto were vastly different from humans. Amusement along with love danced in Bellator’s eyes as he gazed at his brethren. The affection was returned by her hive which was crowded on the path, happily ogling them. As she panned everyone, her heart swelled even more. At home, she’d wished she could share her true self and love honestly without boundaries, yet never saw it happening. Now she would get to spend her days loving and making connections with these beautiful, caring men. Isa’s eyes burned as tears began to form again.

“I get your necklace,” Phara said to Artifex, reaching for the beaded jewelry.

“I’m not giving you my favorite necklace. We weren’t wagering.” Artifex swatted Phara’s hand away. “I agreed with you. I knew what Bellator was up to.” Artifex made a face at Phara. He then focused on her and grinned as he added, “because that is what I’d be doing with our stunning queen.”

She barked out a laugh at their teasing banter and Artifex’s unapologetic flirting, her tears instantly halting.

Phara huffed in disappointment, but as he passed her on the path, he cast her a sly grin, making her laugh harder. He was apparently only tormenting Artifex.

“Come on. At this rate we’ll finish the loop past dark,” Phara teased, urging them forward.

“I don’t have a problem with that,” Bellator chuckled and followed, still happily cradling her in his strong arms.

“So, you said you can shift into many different animals. Can I see?” Isa asked.

“This was my favorite game as a hatchling,” Galis called out from behind Artifex, farther back in the entourage.

As she was glancing over Bellator’s shoulder at him, Galis morphed into a hawk and shot into the air. He perched on a branch several feet ahead.

“I’m ascreo!” his chipper voice rang in her mind.

“I see.” She grinned as she studied the raptor. “I notice theferoandscreoyou mimic are still shades of violet,” she commented.

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“Aye. They are adapted to blend in with the mountain range, same as we are,” Artifex answered.

“Oh.” She nodded.

“This is acapo.” Phara dropped forward, shifting mid fall, his hands becoming hooves before they hit the rocky path, and antlers sprouting from his head.

“Oh, that looks a bit like a deer mixed with a mountain goat on my world.”

“We don’t mimic thecapooften since we hunt them,” Bellator explained.

“Oh.” Her eyes widened, seeing how that might be bad.

“We stick to creatures that have a similar mass. We can’t reduce our size.” Artifex gestured to an insect that zipped across the path as an example.

“That makes sense, but have you become a big insect before?” she asked, admiring the flower the bug landed on as they passed.

“I have,” Masculum called out.

Her eyes widened at the absurdly loud buzzing sound behind her, then a giant dragonfly zipped overhead. Masculum showed-up Galis by doing a loop in the air.

“I thinkscreeoatanoxu.” Galis, still in hawk form, shot off his perch, flying after Masculum.

Isa laughed at their antics. Her cute men entertained her by shifting into an array of animals as they hiked the mountain trail. Galis was right, it was a fun game, and she was learning the names of many creatures.

“This is so wild.” She grinned as one of the men came swooping toward them in his hawk form.

Thescreomorphed as he landed in the middle of the path. “We found another egg!”

Chapter 14

All Hail Another Queen

Bellator

“Another egg! Where?” Bellator asked the scout which was one of his legionnaire betas.

“In the valley, near the river bank. An omega saw something odd sticking up from the mud,” Militus reported.

“Did you get the queen out?” Artifex anxiously asked.

“No.” Militus shook his head. “The omegas were still unearthing it when I left, but it appeared to be intact.”

Worry was etched on everyone’s face. It had been a full rotation since the meteor shower, and if this queen was injured like Isa had been, that didn’t bode well for the female.

“Go! I will take our queen back to the hive.” Phara reached for Isa.

“No. I’m going to help,” Queen Isa insisted as Bellator started to hand her over. “You guys will be strangers and alien to her. If this woman is awake, I bet she’s already freaking out. Seeing you might make her have a heart attack. Remember, we thought this planet was uninhabited.”

Bellator looked at his fellow alphas. They worried about their queen’s safety but she was right. This new queen was from her hive, from a planet far away. If she was injured, Isa would know best how to help and keep her calm until they could get the female back to the hive for treatment. Artifex and Phara nodded, coming to the same unspoken conclusion.

“Let’s go for a ride. Same as before, hold on tight,” Bellator instructed their queen as he set her down and swiftly fluxed into hisferoform.

“Got it.” Isa leapt onto his back. Instead of holding onto his scruff, she wrapped her arms around his neck as she leaned completely forward, her knees squeezing his flanks.

“Good. Militus, lead the way,” Bellator relayed with an added yip for urgency.

Militus shifted into his four-legged form and they all continued down the path. Bellator was slow at first, worried about Isa, but quickly found he could go faster. It helped that Phara and Artifex ran by his side, in case their queen slipped. With another queen’s life on the line, this wasn’t as fun as the earlier trot through the woods, but he would definitely see if Isa wanted to go for runs in the future.

“Oh, wow,” Queen Isa gasped when they broke through the treelined path.

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Bellator slowed, worried she was slipping, though it didn't feel like it.

"That bridge is huge," she added with awe in her voice.

Bellator sighed and continued running, glad nothing was wrong; she was simply impressed by the sight. The stone arch spanning over the waterfall tumbling down the mountainside was picturesque. The mist from the churning water, along with the sun striking the glossy stone added to its beauty. As urgent as the situation was, his heart swelled, happy he could experience this with his queen. That was one of the joys he was discovering, seeing things all over again through Isa's perspective.

"How common are these bridges, buildings like the hive, and the farming terraces on your planet?" Isa asked as they crossed the bridge, her voice suddenly somber.

Bellator's brow furrowed at her change of tone. She was curious, but also worried. It was unfortunate this emergency had ruined her first tour of her new world.

"Somewhat common, though construction materials and methods are different in different territories," Artifex replied.

"Hmm." Isa nodded.

After that, their queen was grimly quiet, and so was everyone else in the group as they followed Militus. They were all worried about the new queen. The legionnaire beta exited the main path taking the route leading into the valley. When they finally reached the bottom of the mountain path, Bellator spotted the omegas pulling the egg out of a muddy hole just up the riverbank.

“We got lucky it didn’t take out this bridge,” Artifex declared as they hustled across the bridge spanning the river.

From the skid mark crossing the river, if the egg landed any farther downstream it would’ve struck the bridge. That would’ve been very bad for the poor queen inside.

“Truth,” Bellator agreed as he went off the main path and headed up the riverbank.

The Vorto surrounding the egg parted for him and the other alphas.

“It started beeping as we got it out of the muddy hole,” one of the omegas reported.

Bellator frowned. He was no expert but this egg looked skinnier and longer than the one Queen Isa had been in. Something didn’t feel right.

Isabella

“That’s not a stasis pod!” Isa stared in horror at the missile.

The strange sinking suspicion she had since seeing the farming terraces and bridges coalesced in her brain. Anger and shame instantly flooded her, bile rising in her throat. There was no way the probes her people sent scoured the planet and concluded it was unoccupied. The Unified Federation knew Tellus was inhabited by a sentient race.

That’s why they needed me, a specialist in cultures. Her breath heaved out faster, the conversation with Audre on the tarmac coming back to her. The government needed people skilled enough to repurpose what was here after they killed off the native inhabitants. Why stop at stealing a planet when you can steal its cities and infrastructure, too?! Bastards! she angrily cursed her people.

The beeping on the missile tugged her out of the downward spiral.

“Oh god!” She scrambled off Bellator’s back. “Don’t touch anything! Get back!” she screamed as she ran toward the missile.

“My queen, what is wrong?” Bellator followed her along with Phara and Artifex.

She ignored them as she panned the missile then ran to the other side. There it was, the display with the blinking countdown.

“Oh god. Fifty-four minutes,” she murmured. The omegas must’ve hit something to trigger the countdown when they were unearthing it. “It’s counting down. We don’t have long.”

“We will find a way to get the queen out.” Phara wrapped an arm around her.

Her eyes widened at his response. “There’s no queen in here. It’s a weapon. It explodes,” she informed him while studying the display.

“Explode?!” Phara barked, instantly tugging her off her feet and leaping backward.

“Take her and go!” Bellator roared.

“No!” Isa shouted before Phara could take off running with her dangling in his arms.

“We have to get you to safety,” Artifex insisted.

“We have some time before it goes off,” she countered.

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“My queen, we cannot lose you,” Phara implored, desperation swimming in his eyes.

“I know, but please let me try.” She had no clue about missiles and was still reeling from its mere presence here, but she was going to do her damndest.

Phara hesitantly walked back to the missile, despite Bellator’s objectionable growl, and reluctantly set her on her feet. Again, she looked at the display panel with the very disturbing countdown. Was it simply a display?

Please God, she sent up a prayer as she reached out and touched the lower left corner, the way she would’ve engaged the touchscreen on her PA at home. Isa nearly had a heart attack when the countdown disappeared.

“Did you fix it?” Bellator asked over her right shoulder.

“No. It’s still beeping.” As she was shaking her head no, the symbol requesting a fingerprint appeared. “But it didn’t blow up.” She grimaced at him.

The big teddy bear did not smile back at her. He was not amused. She couldn’t blame him. Isa turned back to the display screen and pressed her index finger to the symbol.

“Isabella Marie Laurent, one hundred and thirty-fourth crewman of the United Federation vessel Manifest, what are your instructions?” the computer droned.

Isa let out the breath she was holding, her shoulders slumping in relief.

“It’s making the same twitters as our queen,” Artifex commented as he watched over

her left shoulder.

“But I don’t understand any of it.” Phara shook his head, also hovering nearby, making her beyond nervous.

“Shh please. It’s asking me what to do.” She waved at them to hush.

“I did not understand. Please repeat your instructions,” the computer stated, responding to the wrong conversation.

“Halt launch,” she quickly said.

“Unable to comply.”

“Stop the countdown,” she tried.

“Unable to comply.”

“Why?” she demanded.

“You are not authorized to halt the sequence,” the computer informed her with its disturbingly pleasant voice, considering the dire circumstances.

“Well, what the fuck can I do?” Isa tossed her hands up in frustration. Why the hell was she even programmed into the damn thing?

“In an emergency, you are authorized to delay the sequence,” the computer stated.

Two buttons appeared on the missile display; delay and resume. Swiftly she hit ‘delay countdown.’

“Initiating an emergency delay,” the computer declared, as Isa stared hopefully at it. The countdown flickered. “One hour until detonation.” The large numbers reappeared on display.

They’d gained a whopping ten minutes. What the hell good was that going to do them?

“Fuck!” she screamed, then her head dropped forward and her shoulders slumped.

“You tried. Please let us take you back to the hive,” Phara urged.

“I only delayed it,” she explained.

“It is more time to get you to safety.” Artifex tried to put a positive spin on her inability to help.

“We probably wouldn’t make it back to the hive in that time,” she informed the alphas, since they had no clue how short an hour was.

Phara paled, Bellator clenched his jaw, and Artifex rubbed a worried hand over his face.

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Isa studied the missile, desperate for a solution. She didn't have all the hazard symbols memorized but she knew the red concentric circles painted on the side of the weapon meant it was nasty. Then something Reina said before they boarded the Manifest flashed like a beacon in her mind.

Chemical weapon! Reina was accused of stealing awful chemicals from Intech even though she was a programmer. Intech was one of those technology companies the government used, known for their less than ethical business practices. Whether Reina realized it or not, she probably saw something about the poison while at work and the government sent her to Tellus to get rid of her.

Even if this wasn't related to what Reina said, the missile had to be some sort of chemical agent. The hazard symbol wasn't the radiation or explosive symbol. As stupid as she believed her people were, it didn't make sense to blow up or irradiate their future home. Chemical or viral weapons could be targeted to just kill the Vorto and not ruin the environment.

"The Blight!" Isa gasped as something else occurred to her. If her people were trying to kill the Vorto now, maybe they'd done it before. Maybe the probes that found this planet weren't just probes. "Oh god!"

Artifex

Artifex couldn't fathom what sort of weapon had the destructive power to reach all the way back to the hive. The Vorto possessed no such thing, blades, bows, and javelins, yes, but nothing that could level a mountain. And yet, there was something familiar about the weapon. He just couldn't place it. His brow furrowed as he stared

at the terrible object.

Queen Isa's declaration instantly jogged his memory.

The Blight! That was it!

"I thought I recognized this weapon from somewhere." Artifex pointed accusingly at the elongated cylinder. "In the archives about the Blight, there are images of things like this. They showed up at the same time as the horrible plague."

Isa looked at him with horror and he stopped explaining. She leapt to her feet and ran, pushing through the omegas. The instant she cleared everyone, she bent and started gagging, spewing fluid on the ground.

"My queen!" he raced to her side, and was swiftly joined by the others.

"They really did it!" Isa choked, dispelling more fluid, while rain fell from her eyes.

Horror filled Artifex at how sick she was, and he wrapped an arm around her. It was true! This terrible weapon carried the Blight, and their queen was getting ill already.

"Please Inana," he begged, his world folding in on him.

"What is happening?" Bellator demanded, confusion and devastation etched on his face.

"Why is Queen Isa ill?" Fear swam in Phara's eyes.

"The weapon gave her the Blight." Artifex's mind stuttered as he conveyed the terrible news.

“No!” Phara dropped to his knees.

Seeing his brethren collapse hurt nearly as much as seeing their queen getting sick.

“What?!” Isa looked up at them. “No! I don’t have the Blight.” She used the back of her hand to wipe her mouth.

“You said Blight, and I thought...” Artifex grimaced, hating he’d jumped to conclusions.

“I put off the detonation, so it’s not spreading anything yet. But I do think the missile is carrying the Blight. I got sick because I can’t believe my people would do this, and I don’t know how to permanently stop it.” More rain fell from her eyes as she angrily shook her head.

Artifex pulled their queen into his arms. Phara stood and joined them, along with Bellator.

“They murdered your people and I think they’re trying to finish the job,” Isa sobbed as they hugged her. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry.”

The way his queen trembled in his arms, murmuring how sorry she was gutted him. She was not at fault for this, her hive was. Except there wasn’t time for anger at her hive. They needed to find a way to stop this weapon or lose everything.

“Theignivo!” The thought burst forth in Artifex’s mind.

The stories passed down over the generations said that the Tumulus Hive gained status during the Blight because their territory held the means of destroying anything. The archives supported the tales. He’d even visited theignivomore than once. It could take care of this weapon.

“Except, it takes a rotation just to fly there, and Isa said we won’t even make it back to the hive before the weapon erupts,” Bellator reminded him with a grimace, and Artifex’s hopes instantly sank.

“What are you talking about?” Queen Isa looked up at them.

“Theignivo. We were told that is where these Blight weapons were disposed of. But we’d never make it there in time,” Artifex explained. “The same as generations ago,” he added with a morose sigh.

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The queen's eyes widened. "Not if I am able to keep resetting the timer." She anxiously bit her lip.

Hope surged in Artifex at the brilliant idea.

"Do you think you can do that?" Phara asked, his expression equally hopeful.

"I can try. I think it's our only option." She smiled tentatively at them.

"Then we must make haste!" Artifex declared and Bellator nodded.

Phara

I don't like this! Phara reluctantly lifted their queen over the basket wall into the produce carrier.

Isa crawled across the large basket meant for hauling grain and vegetables from their growing fields to the hive. He cringed as she sat next to the weapon that was strapped down, hating that she'd be riding the whole trip with the blasted thing.

They'd settled on this method since they needed to fly to theignivoto get there in a decent amount of time. The produce carrier was large enough to hold the weapon and was conveniently stored nearby at the terraces rather than all the way back at the hive. They could've fused together to make one largerscreoto carry the missile, but then their queen couldn't easily access the weapon every span. Also, carrying their queen in their talons was not an ideal way to travel. That left them riding in a basket with his queen sitting next to the cursedweapon. It was far from perfect, but nothing about

this horrible situation was.

“Are we ready?” Queen Isa asked as Phara dropped some rope and other supplies into the basket.

“Yes.” He nodded then climbed in since he was taking the first shift sitting with their queen.

She grew quiet again, her gaze glued to the changing display, the way it had been for the last span. She was watching for the weapon display to reach a particular symbol then she’d reset it. That moment was drawing near again. Ideally, they’d already be in the air, but they’d eaten up time making plans and fetching the carrier. He understood the logic yet still he was anxious to get going, like everyone here.

He’d been trying to not abhor Queen Isa’s former hive because they had created the queen he treasured. This new revelation about the Blight had him seeing red. He didn’t want to believe people he never met from worlds away would do the Vorto harm. It was unfathomable. Except, the proof was right in front of him.

A dozen Vorto fluxed, changing into theirscreoform. They grabbed the ropes connected to the carrier with their talons and lifted off. He sat behind Queen Isa, in case anything happened with the basket. They had more Vorto carrying ropes than was necessary as a failsafe. Also, worst case scenario, he could change into hisscreoform and grip Isa with his talons. He’d gouge her arms with his claws, but she wouldn’t be mortally wounded from a fall. Thankfully they were flying just over the river for much of their journey east along the valley, which would be a softer emergency landing than the hard ground.

Queen Isa’s hand tightened on his knee as the Vorto took off.

“How are you doing?” He squeezed her hand.

Isa ignored him, and his stomach sank. Discovering how cruel her former hive was had deeply affected their queen. He understood, yet it hurt that she was shutting him out. But then she reached over and started tapping on the symbol display of the weapon. The weapon twittered and the display flickered as Isa went through the routine to reset it. He instantly felt like a fool for thinking she was ignoring him. Obviously, everyone was on edge.

“Oh, thank god.” Isa sank back against him. “I was a little worried it might not let me do it again.” She frowned.

“That would be a problem.” He grimaced as he wrapped his arms around her.

“I should have mentioned that. I’m so very sorry.” Queen Isa looked mournfully up at him.

“My precious queen, we don’t blame you for what your hive did.” His arms tightened around her.

“Really, because I blame me. I didn’t know that my people planned this and yet I feel utterly to blame. It was so obvious. Why would they need to send a specialist in cultures to a planet without people? Because there are people! Duh.” She smacked her forehead.

“Hey, no!” Horrified, Phara grabbed her hands to stop her from hitting herself.

“We killed your people. We’re trying to steal your world. I know how cruel my people can be. I should’ve warned you sooner.” She sucked in a gasping breath. “Oh god! What if there are more of these weapons?” Isa pulled her hands away from him and covered her mouth.

As she tugged in several gasping breaths, he was sure she’d be sick again.

“Isa, please. We sent additional runners to the other hives so they can look for these weapons.” Phara tried rubbing her back to soothe her.

“But I won’t be there to stop the countdown,” she sobbed.

His queen was spiraling and he wasn’t sure how to help. This situation was terrifying. Then again, he’d always lived in a world on the verge of collapse, so he wasn’t panicking.

“Isa, we can only do what is within our power here and now.” Phara caressed her cheek. “And what I want is to enjoy our time together, whether it’s a single rotation or another fifty orbits.”

“How can you not hate me?” She hid her face against his chest.

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“Because you brightened my world from the moment you entered it.” He kissed the top of her head and held her close.

Chapter 15

The Ignivo

Isabella

“My queen.” Bellator roused Isa with a gentle nudge.

“I’m sorry!” Isa bolted upright. She couldn’t believe she dozed off, not with all that was at stake. Panic coursed through her as she spun toward the missile. Her hand froze in midair when she saw the display. “We have thirty minutes left still,” she sighed in relief. Isa looked over her shoulder at Bellator. “Sorry. I’m awake now.” She grimaced, feeling horrible for nodding off, even if she hadn’t overslept.

Resetting the timer every hour didn’t sound that bad, but it was proving more difficult than she imagined. They’d found the missile a little after noon yesterday, and it was some time after noon again. Her fear for the Vorto and anger at her people had kept her awake for most of that time. But with all the intense emotions, she’d burned herself out physically, and it was starting to show. Add the monotony of watching the countdown and listening to it beep was hypnotizing, lulling her to sleep.

“My beautiful queen, you have done so well.” Bellator brushed the hair out of her face.

As she stared into his understanding eyes, she couldn't believe how blessed she was. Her own people would've blamed and imprisoned her already if the roles were reversed. Bellator, Artifex, and Phara hadn't even changed how they looked at her. Her love doubled for her hive, and her eyes misted. Yet again the tenderness was swiftly followed by anger at her people for what they'd done to the Vorto. It was like a demented emotional merry-go-round.

Bellator gently nudged her face to the left. "We are here."

Her mounting anger instantly fled as she took in the smoking mountain up ahead.

"Theignivois a volcano." Her eyes widened when she caught a flash of fire and spewing cinders.

"It is a fiery pit." Bellator nodded.

When all the plans were being made, she failed to ask what theignivowas, mainly because they had no other options. A part of her thought they might be traveling to an old Vorto facility from an era when their technology was more advanced, like the healing machine they used on her.

This works, too. Hope bloomed in her chest. The magma would easily destroy the chemicals in the missile. She'd even heard that nuclear based weapons were no match for a volcano.

"Brace yourselves. We will be landing soon." Phara's voice came from one of the screoflying nearby.

Phara was one of the two dozen Vorto taking turns carrying the ropes that lifted the wagon-sized produce basket. Although, he and the alphas were also doing double duty taking turns inside the basket keeping her from dozing off.

“Thank you,” Bellator replied. “We’re heading up there.” He pointed at a ledge near the summit.

“Good.” Isa couldn’t wait to get there and be done with this nightmare.

They headed up the mountainside, skimming over the treetops until the vegetation stopped altogether, replaced by dark, undulating rock formations.

“Is that rock from the last eruption?” She turned to Bellator, nestled behind her in the basket.

“Probably. Don’t fear. We’ve not had any massive eruptions in my lifetime. Theignivotends to bubble and ooze rather than explode,” he explained.

“Ah.” She nodded, again looking at the countdown on the missile before turning back to watch their progress.

Up, up, up, they went. After another few minutes of the steady ascent, her ears popped. She opened her mouth and rubbed her ears to equalize the pressure. Still, they continued upward.

A wispy cloud drifted in front of the basket, obscuring her view of their destination.

“Ew.” Isa wrinkled her nose at the rotten egg smell. It was smoke from the volcano not an actual cloud, though they were certainly high enough it could’ve been one.

“Here. Breathe through this.” Bellator handed her a swath of fabric.

“Thank you.” She covered her mouth and nose. “What about you?”

“I will be fine.” Bellator squeezed her knee.

She frowned behind the makeshift mask, not liking his answer.

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“Brace!” several people declared.

Bellator extended his leg between her and the missile, in case the weapon shifted despite being strapped down. The smoke cleared, abruptly revealing they were right in front of the rock wall. Isa flinched, thinking they were about to bang into the side of the volcano. Then there was a jostling bump as the basket touched down on the hundred-foot-wide plateau.

The instant they settled, there was a flurry of motion as the Vorto in their party landed then shifted into humanoid form. Bellator scooped her up and immediately hopped out of the basket. They were as eager as she was to be done with this terrible business.

“Carefully, let’s get this weapon out of the produce carrier and tie the ropes on,” Artifex instructed, pointing to the extra ropes they’d brought along.

It took six Vorto just to unload the missile and get the ropes attached.

“What’s happening again?” Isa asked while Artifex and Bellator double checked the knots.

“Similar to how we carried it here, we fly the weapon over the mouth of the ignivora and let go on Bellator’s call. The moment the weapon is released the carriers will get out of there,” Phara explained, also reminding the others.

Her eyes widened as she gaped at the summit still several hundred feet up. Where they were standing was steamy and uncomfortable, so she could only imagine how

hot it was up there with the volatile gasses and spitting magma. The ropes they were using to carry the missile were long, but whoever was flying the weapon up would still be directly in harm's way.

"Okay," Isa hesitantly said with a grimace. She didn't like this, except it was the only viable plan to get the missile into the volcano. It's not like carrying it up the steep side of the mountain and pushing it over the molten hot rim was a better option. "I—um—I should reset the missile before you lift off." Isa shoved aside her reticence and made herself useful. She knelt beside the weapon and went through the whole routine. "One last time," she murmured as she hit the buttons, ready to bring this horrific ordeal to an end.

"Good." Phara nodded once she was done. He cast a grim look at Rego. "Get our queen out of here."

"May Inana be with you." Rego bowed low to Phara then picked her up.

Bellator, Artifex, Phara, Galis, Militus and Diligen grabbed the ropes attached to the missile. Isa's heart sped up and panic set in when she realized they were the ones who'd be carrying the missile. Somehow she'd missed that detail.

"Wait!" Isa reached out for them.

Even though she was mated to the whole hive, she'd grown attached to certain members, especially her three alphas. Isa was about to ask why they had to put themselves in danger, but she immediately knew the answer. Phara, Bellator and Artifex were true alphas, true leaders. Back home, the supposed leaders were the ones who barked the loudest, bullied the best, and walked over the people they were supposed to care for and lead. Her alphas were literally about to go through fire and brimstone to protect their hive.

The men paused and turned to look at her. Despite understanding what needed to be done, she desperately wanted to tell them not to go. Instead, she swallowed the lump in her throat.

“You can’t go without giving me a hug first,” she said while trying not to lose her composure.

“Definitely.” Phara nodded emphatically, whole heartedly agreeing with her request.

She found herself quickly surrounded. “I can’t believe you were going to go without giving me hugs.” Her chin quivered.

“We’re fools.” Artifex kissed the top of her head as he caressed her cheek.

She pressed her face against his chest and stroked his arms.

“I didn’t want to lose my courage.” Galis pulled her into a hug.

Bellator nodded in agreement as she turned to him. He lifted her up and squeezed her tight. “This is not farewell, my queen.” He panned his brethren who had joined the group hug, so they understood he was speaking to them, too.

“You’re right.” Isa nodded resolutely, smiled, and kissed his cheek.

Bellator passed her to Phara, who cradled her in his arms as he walked to the large produce basket.

“We will see you very soon.” Phara’s lips descended on hers. His kiss wasn’t aggressive or desperate, just gentle and sweet, and she felt it to the depths of her soul. Isa clasped his shoulders as she kissed him back. “Oh, Isa.” Phara reluctantly pulled away and set her into the basket.

“I love you.” She squeezed his hand then peered around him at the others. “I love all of you. Be safe.” She forced a smile and willed her eyes to stay dry.

“I love you, my queen.” Phara smiled and stepped back.

“I love you, beautiful one.” Artifex bowed.

“I love you, too.” Bellator bowed.

The rest of her hive chimed in trading the sentiment. She felt truly loved. There was no comparison.

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Phara nodded to Rego, who joined her in the basket. She sat with Rego and clasped his arms as he hugged her close. Bellator, Artifex, Phara, Galis, Militus and Diligen shifted into their screoform and gripped the ropes attached to the missile. Gregis, Invicta, Operar, and Proel also changed form, then lifted the basket off the ledge.

“They will be all right.” Rego rested his forehead against her head. His somber tone and the way he trembled ever so slightly betrayed his worry.

“They will.” She rubbed his arms.

Her gaze was riveted to her men as they tugged the missile into the air and started the steady ascent to the summit. With the basket carrying her farther and farther away, she couldn’t see every nuance as they traveled. Were they managing the missile okay? The damn weapon wasn’t light. Was the smoke choking anyone? Were the spitting cinders getting close enough to singe their feathers? Anxiously Isa held her breath, trying to gauge how things were going.

Isa pulled in a deep breath when her hive made it past the top of the volcano without incident, then held it, knowing the worst was yet to come. They wisely rose higher than the mouth of the caldera, before changing directions and heading out over the fiery pit. Their progress was slower, much slower. She covered her mouth when it looked like a few of them were having trouble staying aloft and keeping their ropes taut. Someone dipped just as a plume of smoke obscured her view.

“Oh!” Her stomach leapt into her throat.

The smoke drifted and she sighed in relief seeing he was still aloft, steadily flapping.

He wasn't the only one struggling, the farther they went over the caldera. She couldn't watch, and yet she couldn't look away, either.

There was a subtle screech of a hawk. She wasn't sure if it was Bellator giving the signal or another raptor in the area until the missile started falling. Her men began exiting the area, flapping their wings as fast as they could.

"Now get out of there," Rego murmured as the missile disappeared into the crater.

Isa nodded in agreement.

Abruptly there was a burst of smoke that shot hundreds of feet into the air, burning ash and magma accompanying it.

"Oh god!" she cried. The missile must have had an explosive charge meant to disperse the chemical toxin.

"Flux!" Rego cursed.

The screo carrying the produce basket faltered, the whole thing dipping, as they cried out in shock, though they swiftly recovered.

"Please, please, please," she prayed, clutching Rego tight as she stared into the smoke billowing over the volcano.

One screo emerged from the toxic cloud after an agonizingly long moment, followed by a second, and then a third flying toward them.

Is that all who made it? It was only half of the brave Vorto who had undertaken the task. She was still missing three of her guys. Isa started to hyperventilate.

Hope flared when two morescreoflew around the column of smoke.

“Brace for more passengers!” Rego shouted as the first of her men neared.

On Rego’s command the members of their party who were flying nearby swooped in and grabbed the spare ropes attached to the carrier, preparing for the extra weight.

Isa’s attention was divided between watching the men coming in, and looking for the one still absent, lost somewhere amidst the smoke. She didn’t recognize her men in their animal forms yet, so she wasn’t certain who the first screo was as they touched down in the basket.

“My queen.” Artifex blinked his bird-eyes at her.

“Oh, Artifex,” she declared and crawled over to him. Her vision blurred when she saw how singed his feathers were and the way he’d gone from purple to gray from all the ash. “Are you injured?” She reached out to touch him, but her hand froze midair, not wanting to hurt him.

“I’ll be all right.” Artifex nuzzled her hand before shifting. Even in his humanoid form, he had dark discolored patches where he’d been burned. Thankfully they didn’t look too extensive.

“We did it!” Diligen landed next, drawing her attention. Relief and exhaustion were evident in his voice.

“Yes, you did!” She smiled at him, although the way he coughed had her worried.

“Success.” Phara followed, instantly shifting into his humanoid form when he landed. “I’m almost certain the Blight weapon sank into the lava before the eruption happened.” He pulled her into his arms.

“I hope that’s the end of it,” Isa prayed as she kissed his chest and gently hugged him, careful for his burns.

“I do, too.” Artifex caressed her back.

“Galis went down.” Militus landed.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 5:00 am

“I lost him in the smoke,” Bellator violently coughed as he touched down in the basket, completely covered in ash.

“Oh, no!” Isa’s panicked gaze swung toward the volcano.

“Galis!” Rego bellowed.

His agony was echoed by a cry overhead from Gregis, followed by more cries from the other Vorto flying above.

“Galis?!” Phara gasped, just learning the news himself, and he spun to look at the volcano.

Except, no amount of watching made Galis appear.

“I’m so sorry,” Isa sobbed as she hugged Phara and Rego. Without her people’s evil scheming, none of this would’ve happened.

“I’m sorry, I tried to go after him, but the smoke was too much,” Bellator lamented as he joined in the hug.

“You did your best.” She latched onto the big teddy bear.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. They’d lost their goofy Galis.

Rego fluxed, changing into ascreo, and shot out of the basket, streaking toward the volcano. Her heart shattered, her tears flowing faster at his refusal to accept Galis was

gone. She squeezed Phara's hand, hating how forlornly he stared as Rego disappeared into the smoke billowing out of the volcano. She could tell he would go help if he was in any shape to.

Isa's eyes widened when two hawks emerged from the hazy cloud hanging over the mountain.

"He found him!" Phara whooped in joy.

Everyone in the basket crowded around the edge, staring out at the miraculous sight. Their excited shouts were echoed by two-dozen bird cries.

"Oh, Galis!" Isa cried tears of relief, her hands anxiously fluttering as she tracked their progress back.

When they neared, she noticed the hawk in the rear had a hold on the other's tail feathers, while they flew in tandem.

"The smoke blinded him. He got turned around," Rego explained. "Clear a path." He aimed for the carrier.

Bellator pulled her into his arms and tugged her to one side.

"I've got you." Phara grabbed Galis the moment the pair cleared the edge of the giant basket.

Galis' singed and soot-covered wings instantly wrapped around Phara, then turned into arms that hugged the alpha tight.

"I thought I lost you." Phara's voice was tremulous and filled with emotion.

Her silly Galis was back. Miraculously, they destroyed the chemical weapon and everyone made it out of danger. Maybe God, Inana, or whatever hand of fate that was directing things didn't hate her after all.

“Thank you! Thank you!” Isa sobbed in relief.

Chapter 16

Welcome Home?

Isabella

Isa was grateful to be back as the produce carrier landed at the base of the mountainside planting fields. They'd flown all night and most of the day again, and were finally back. Actually, they still had a hike up the mountain to the hive, but they were home. The farmers from her hive who were tending the alien cauliflower stopped what they were doing and came running to help and welcome them back.

“Thank you.” She nodded to Rego as he picked her up and handed her to Invicta outside the basket. She smiled appreciatively at the legionnaire beta as he set her on the ground.

“It is such a relief to see you have returned safely, my queen,” one of the omega farmers said to her, as they surrounded the landing party.

“It really is a relief to be home.” She took the omega's hand and pulled him in for a hug.

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It truly felt like she'd come home as she watched her hive embrace. She'd only been on this planet and with her hive for four days, so it seemed too soon to be so attached to them, but she was. She felt welcomed, loved, appreciated, and a horde of other sentiments that made her question how she ever managed back home. It was like her heart was blooming, opening up to all the affection. This was her home.

Isa found her six heroes in the crowd. Another litany of thank yous trailed through her mind. She was so grateful they all survived this harrowing journey. She critically eyed them for the millionth time since they emerged from the volcano, assessing how they were doing. Everyone had cleaned off the ash during one of their bathroom breaks. Operar had checked the men, and she helped gently clean their burns. Operar assured her everyone would be fine, including poor Galis. Even with his assurance she still feared some of the chemicals escaped from the weapon along with the volcanic burst. Thankfully, the six heroes appeared to be healing, they weren't coughing today, and after some rest, their jovial moods were returning. No other surprising symptoms had popped up, either. They were far from perfect, though. Isa cringed as she took in their burns. The dark purple damaged skin had sloughed off, leaving bright purple patches behind. She was assured that was normal, and the men weren't complaining, but it had to hurt and feel absolutely raw.

"Are you all okay to walk?" Isa fretted as Phara joined her.

"We are." Phara wrapped his arms around her and plucked her off the ground.

"I am so glad to be back. So glad all of us are." She leaned her head against Phara's strong chest as he cradled her close.

“Me, too, my queen. Me, too.” Phara kissed her head and joined the others on the path that led up the mountain.

Bellator

“How are you?” Invicta asked as they led their hive up the path.

“Absurdly happy we were successful, tired, worried there are more weapons, sore, angry and confused by our queen's former hive,” Bellator rattled off the list, keeping his tone low so Queen Isa didn't hear. She was already devastated enough by all that happened.

Unfortunately, the entire incident couldn't be swept aside. Protecting his hive and territory was a task by itself. The responsibility grew when his queen arrived, although that was more of a joy. He didn't have nearly enough time to appreciate that wondrous burden before it ballooned again. Now the duty of protecting his whole planet weighed heavy on his shoulders.

“I understand. Although, I didn't do as much as you or the other alphas.” Invicta nodded, commiserating with him.

“You protected our queen. You took double shifts flying back so we could rest. And I know you would protect the hive if I didn't return.” Bellator clapped a hand on Invicta's shoulder. Among his four legionnaire betas, there was no guarantee Invicta would ascend into the alpha if he died, but there were signs.

“Thank you.” Invicta bowed his head. “I am relieved our queen was able to prolong the weapon's activation,” the beta whispered with a widening of his eyes.

“I don't wish to think about it.” Bellator grimaced.

When they sent runners to warn other hives about the Blight weapon, they made sure to warn them not to touch the control panel. They were beyond lucky their queen had emergency access to the weapon's controls, but she couldn't be everywhere.

Bellator glanced back at their queen curled up in Phara's arms. It was a good thing they were almost to the hive, because she had to be exhausted. She stayed awake on the way to theignivo, resetting the weapon every span, and instead of sleeping on the return ride, she'd worried about them. She was truly a wondrous creature.

"It is stunning how the best and worst thing to happen in my life has happened in the last few rotations," Bellator ruminated. He'd bonded with his queen, but also learned her hive wanted to kill the Vorto and nearly succeeded.

Invicta's tongue shot out and tasted the air as his gaze swung toward the trees lining the path. Instinctually Bellator did the same, except the volcanic ash and smoke had dulled his senses. Something was there, that was for certain.

With loud crashing branches and angry whoops, a score ofsimiocame barreling out of the woods, blocking the path in front of them. The hairy bipeds blended into the foliage with their red and yellow fur, so he didn't see the troop until they were practically on top of them. Recent events had his hive distracted, but Bellator and his legionnaires swiftly recovered. They morphed into theirferoanima and surrounded their queen. Phara ducked inside the huddle, protecting Isa with his body.

It's the Nemus Hive,Bellator quickly realized. These weren't actualsimio.The Nemus Hive dares to invade our territory!

Anger coursed through Bellator. The neighboring hive broke protocol by sending an entire troop of legionnaires into his territory. What's more, they crept in in theiranimaform. Bellator snarled as he squared up with the Nemus Hive legionnaire alpha, his counterpart in the neighboring hive.

“So, it’s true. The Tumulus Hive did steal a queen from our territory,” Soleno boomed, his gaze focused on the huddle protecting Queen Isa.

Bellator clenched his jaw. He couldn’t deny the accusation, but the situation wasn’t exactly what Soleno claimed, either.

“The queen’s egg originally landed in our territory,” Bellator pointed out.

“The queen’s egg may have landed in your territory, but it skidded and came to a halt in our territory as the great Inanasaw fit,” Soleno countered, having obviously examined the crash site.

“Did you also see that the queen was gravely injured and bleeding? Your hive was not there. Should I have left her to perish?!” Bellator snarled, in no mood to fool with the disgruntled hive. Not today.

“You should have brought her to our hive for healing!” Soleno roared. The other Nemus legionnaires agreed, snarling and bristling.

Unfortunately, Soleno wasn’t wrong. That would have been the proper response. That’s not what happened, though. After one whiff of the sweet perfume their queen exuded, not even the most prudent of males would have been able to think straight. Now, wrong or not, there was no way he’d give up Queen Isa.

I’d die first.

Artifex

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“What’s happening? Why are we being attacked by gorillas?” Isa’s frightened voice was muffled with Phara protectively wrapped around her.

After everything they’d been through, their queen didn’t deserve any more stress.

“There has been a misunderstanding. It will be all right,” Phara reassured her then looked worriedly at him.

Artifex surveyed his hive and the Nemus troop. The way everyone was bristling, a fight could break out at any moment. Isa would surely be injured if that happened.

“Stand down!” Artifex bellowed. “You don’t understand how delicate our queen is. She cannot flux.”

“I know how delicate the queens are. We found one of their damaged eggs. The precious queen was—was all broken up inside,” Soleno countered with a tremor, his face twisted with anger and sadness.

The rest of the Nemus legionnaires looked equally traumatized. Sorrow filled Artifex at the news, and he shuddered, recalling Isa unconscious and bloody. This was a terrible tragedy, but at least the Nemus understood the queens were delicate.

“So, you know why we had to urgently help our queen,” Bellator replied.

“We demand you return our queen or we fight,” Soleno growled.

“Oh god!” Isa cried in dismay.

The scent of her fear suddenly filled the air, threatening to make him insane. Artifex's patience was wearing very thin.

"We have already bonded with our queen," Phara snapped, not appreciating the Nemus' threat of violence or the way they were frightening Isa.

"Then it is the Conlatusto prove which is the better hive," Soleno insisted.

"What is that?" Isa worriedly asked.

Phara and Bellator questioningly looked at him. Artifex scoured his mind. He'd read the term somewhere in the archives. It was something from the old days, before the Blight, but he couldn't recall what.

"It is a series of competitions to solve disagreements," Operar told the queen.

That's it. It was a good thing his beta was able to recall the things he couldn't.

"Okay," Isa hesitantly replied.

"Then it is agreed!" Soleno shouted. "We meet at dawn at the neutral zone."

The Nemus abruptly turned to leave.

"Wait," Bellator called to them. "Did you receive the message about the Blight weapons? You need to search your territory for them."

Bellator was right. Instead of this competition they should be making sure no other deadly weapons were in either of their territories.

Soleno paused, glancing back at them. "And spread ourselves thin so you can attack

our hive?! No. Show yourselves at dawn or we will war.” The male spun and disappeared into the forest.

Artifex snarled in anger and disgust.

“Do not insult our honor. The warning about the weapons comes from our queen. Don’t impugn her, and do not risk another Blight!” Phara bellowed, but the Nemus had already fled.

They could only pray the Nemus took this threat seriously, despite the conflict between their hives.

Phara

Phara shifted their quiet queen in his arms as they approached the hive.

“What else do you know about theConlatus? What kind of competitions?” Artifex asked Operar as the pair walked up ahead.

“I remember that it’s several rounds, but I don’t know what contests or the rules. You might recall, we’ve not had a reason to hold theConlatusin our lifetime,” Operar huffed in frustration.

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“Calm.” Artifex gripped Operar’s shoulder. He cast a nervous glance back at Isa, obviously worried about upsetting their queen again. “We’ll scour the archives,” Artifex assured his beta.

“We’ll all help,” Rego added in a subdued tone.

“I’ll start a list of our best competitors in a variety of contests,” Bellator spoke up.

There was a lot to do to prepare for tomorrow. The future of their hive depended on it. Except, all Phara could focus on was the way Isa still quaked in his arms. Or maybe he was the one shaking with all the adrenaline running through him. This ambush was unprecedented.

“You are safe now. The Nemus Hive is angry with us, not you.” He gave Isa a gentle squeeze. “They were never intent on harming you. They are not a violent people usually. Most of the time we are at peace with them. They are the hive of our queen mother.”

“Okay,” she said acceptingly as she nodded and gave him a wavering smile.

Though she conveyed reassurance, Isa still trembled. After everything they’d been through the last few days, and the way her hive violently cast her out, the Nemus ambush had to be doubly terrifying. Phara hated that their precious queen was being bombarded with one traumatizing thing after another. He had no clue what to do. So he did the only thing he could do, he snuggled her close as they descended into the safety of their hive.

“You should get some rest. We’re going to be busy all evening,” Phara said when they finally reached her chamber.

Isa refused to let him go when he attempted to deposit her in the bed. She cast him a forlorn look as she shook her head.

“I understand. I don’t want to let go of you, either.” He took her to the large table and sat with her on his lap.

“I will bring the pertinent archives here.” Operar rushed off.

The other alphas and betas joined him at the table, concern etched on their faces. Isa wasn’t the only one overwhelmed with fear. If they didn’t succeed tomorrow, they could lose their precious queen. Phara’s chest tightened, the knot in his stomach twisting painfully. In a very short time Isa had become his whole world. Her smiles, her delicate exotic beauty, her conversation, affection, and tender touch. All these things changed his life in a few insignificant rotations of the sun.

I can’t lose her. Phara’s brow furrowed and he clutched Isa tighter. We will not lose tomorrow!

Isabella

As Isa sat in Bellator’s lap, her gaze shifted from Phara, to Rego, Gregis, and Galis, to Operar, Invicta, and back around to Artifex on her left. This should have been a happy homecoming. Instead, everyone was somber as they sat at the table in her giant bedroom studying their archives. They weren’t reading books or computerized tablets, but unusual bundles of knotted cords. The best she could guess is that the different combinations of knots on the strings equated to words. Any other day and she’d be asking a million questions about the fascinating record keeping method, but not today. She couldn’t even focus on what her men were talking about. She almost

lost her men to a missile and then a volcano, and now she could lose them to some sort of war game. Were they in any shape to even compete? They hadn't recovered yet. It was all too much to handle.

Bellator huffed, his finger pausing on the cord he was reading. He stood and carried her to the round bed they allshare, then sat on the mattress with her on his lap. She got settled, wrapping her legs around his thick waist.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked, his voice soft and tentative in her mind.

Someone had brought dinner to the room, but she wasn't the least bit hungry.

Isa shook her head no and simply stared into Bellator's eyes as he gently cupped and caressed her cheeks with his trembling hands. The look of devastation on her big teddy bear's face had her eyes burning.

"I'm sorry I failed you," he rasped. The pain Bellator was feeling seemed to imbed itself in her mind, the way she was able to hear his voice telepathically.

She shook her head in denial. He didn't fail her.

"I broke the rules when I entered Nemus territory." Bellator's brow furrowed.

"But I was hurt," she countered.

"And I should've flown you to their hive, not ours." His shoulders slumped.

It killed her seeing her big strong man so utterly devastated.

"I should've noticed the Nemus were stalking us." He angrily shook his head.

“Be fair to yourself.” Isa lifted Bellator’s chin, forcing him to look her in the eyes. “We just returned from getting rid of a weapon that carried the Blight. I’m the one who should be sorry and I am sorry, more than you know,” her voice broke as she attempted to reason with him.

Her people were toxic wherever they went. Not only had her people poisoned the Vorto with their chemical weapons, but she probably just started a war between her guys and the neighboring hive. She was just as bad as the rest of her people. She said sorry, but the words sounded hollow. How did someone apologize for the magnitude of this disaster?

“No, my beautiful queen, you bear none of this burden.” Bellator ran his hand through her hair and down her back. “It is my duty to protect. I should have known the Nemus wouldn’t react well. I let myself get distracted.” His other hand trailed down her chest, circling her breast. “Even now, when I should be helping the others, I am distracted.”

Isa’s breath sped up along with her heartbeat. Was her big teddy bear apologizing or saying goodbye? The idea that she might actually have to go live with a strange hive after tomorrow’s competition hit her hard. She’d fallen in love with her big teddy bear, with her whole hive. She’d allowed them into her heart, when she’d always done such a good job holding everyone at bay. Being guarded had been so easy back home with the rampant misogyny. Her hive showed her love wasn’t some fairy tale. But then just as she started to believe, the rug was being yanked out from under her. There was no way she could go live with another hive. After everything she’d been through it would break her.

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Except, she wasn't about to violate their laws and actually start a war. Her people had done enough damage to the Vorto.

Oh god!

Isa had no clue how to process any of this, so she tugged Bellator's head down and planted her lips on his. She'd wanted to do this since they survived the volcano. As she frantically kissed him, she soaked up the warmth, vanilla scent, and sheer strength of her big sweet teddy bear. He pushed up her wrap skirt and prodded at the entrance to her vagina. Isa didn't care that she wasn't exactly ready for the big guy. She needed him while she still had the chance. With a deep moan she sank down on Bellator's thick cock, arching her hips so her clit grazed against his muscular abdomen.

"Isa," he groaned into her mouth.

His strong hands clutched her ass, slowing her descent, so she only took him one throbbing inch at a time. She never imagined being stretched this way, feeling so full she might break. But that's what her beautiful hive did, they filled her in more ways than one.

"I need you, Bellator," she insisted, desperation threading her voice, needing all of him right now.

With a rumble, Bellator tugged her off his cock. She was disappointed until he flipped her onto her stomach and came down on her back.

“And I need you, my beautiful precious distraction.”

He clapped his hand over her mouth so her cries didn't distract the others, then slammed his cock into her needy pussy, burying it to the hilt. She strained against him, loving the sweet agony of his possession as he pistoned in and out of her body. Isa orgasmed the instant Bellator slammed home, but the knots on his cock rubbing rapidly over her G-spot had her swiftly peaking again. Isa keened into Bellator's palm as she detonated, but he didn't tire, simply kept thrusting, driving her deeper into euphoria. She needed this—this feeling of oneness, since tomorrow it might all change.

Chapter 17

The Conlatus

Isabella

They left the hive before dawn to make it to the border in time. Her alphas hardly slept and were still healing, but insisted on carrying her the whole way down. She was currently Artifex's burden. They claimed it was dark and she'd trip on the rocky path, but with three moons it wasn't that dark. Her hive genuinely enjoyed carrying her. Isa had never been pampered so much in her life, probably not even as a baby. This morning, though, they'd hovered especially close. Isa gently caressed Artifex's neck as she held onto him. She didn't mind, she was feeling clingy, too.

The entourage broke through the trees at the base of the mountain and a stunning view instantly greeted them.

“Oh, that's gorgeous,” Isa wistfully sighed as she admired the sun peeking over the horizon.

The sunrise was wondrous. Every shade of the rainbow was painted across the sky. There was something about it that seemed to whisper a secret, like when Phara watched the soaring birds and chose not to end his life. It was just a shame that the anxiety about the impending contest was overshadowing the monumental sight.

“It is.” Artifex squeezed her and smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes.

She smiled back at Artifex as she rubbed his shoulder. It probably wasn’t her greatest smile, either, but she gave it her best, or at least the best she could muster at the moment. Artifex’s somber mood was understandable. He had to be tired and worried; she certainly was. She dozed in stints last night, rousing each time her ‘cuddling’ partner changed. And each time, her men were still strategizing at the table. She wasn’t complaining, though, far from it. The sex had been intense, but the quiet aftermath would stick with her the longest. Bellator kissed her shoulder as they spooned, Phara purred as she lay curled in his arms, and Artifex stroked her hair while she dozed on his chest. The whole time, even as the men slept, they whispered words of affection. The poignant sweetness of it threatened to make her cry again. It all seemed too much like a goodbye and she felt helpless, utterly useless to do anything about it. At least with the missile she’d played her part.

Nope. Nope. Nope. Isa rubbed her eyes, forcing back her tears. The last thing she wanted was her men thinking she didn’t have faith in them by acting like they’d already lost. She would put on a happy face and her men would kick ass!

Isa looked past Bellator, who was protectively walking in the lead, and focused on the prairie. There was a yellow structure about fifty yards ahead.

“Is that where we’re going?” She shaded her eyes against the sun to get a better look.

“Aye,” Phara answered, his jaw stiffening.

He wasn't the only one in their entourage whose demeanor changed at the sight of it, not that they'd been chipper on the trek here.

"And the Nemus aim to impress," Artifex huffed, his voice tinged with disgust and a smidgeon of jealousy.

On closer inspection, the building was an awning, beautifully decorated with vegetation, resembling a trellis. The canopy was made of branches from a broad-leaved tree with lemony yellow foliage. Along the rafters and down the posts supporting the ceiling were vines covered in ruby red flowers. It was gorgeous...and obviously recently built by the Nemus, the reason Artifex was aggravated.

She was about to tell Artifex that given the time to prepare, he'd come up with something much nicer, but then she noticed the Nemus standing beneath the fancy awning. The Nemus looked like her hive except their skin was an entirely different color. They had camouflage-like spots, ranging from yellow to red. Just like yesterday when the Nemus snuck up on them in the woods, their coloring let them blend in with the flowered canopy.

Artifex paused about twenty yards away. "I need to put you down, if you are all right with that."

She nodded and he set her on the ground. As Artifex joined Phara and Bellator up front, the legionnaires that made up their entourage protectively surrounded her. Invicta, Bellator's second in command, nodded to her as he glued himself to her left side, while Militus flanked her right. She smiled appreciatively at the duo and rubbed their arms. She felt safe; nearly the entire hive had come to this competition. Although, it seemed the Nemus had brought their whole hive, too, so they were equally matched.

"We have come as promised to resolve our differences in the Conlatus," Phara

addressed the Nemus as the trio approached the tent.

So it begins. Isa pulled in a deep bracing breath.

Phara

With his fellow alphas by his side, Phara approached their counterparts among the Nemus. Andren, the other hive's consort alpha, stood in the center. Lehzen, the servitor alpha, was on his right, and Soleno, the legionnaire alpha, was on the left. He knew these males. They gathered with the Nemus for the occasional harvest celebration. You wouldn't know that now, the way they squared off against each other.

"Do you mean to insult us before we even start by guarding the queen like we are a hive of rule breakers?" the Nemus' lead consort said so only they could hear.

The way Andren's brow twitched, the male was truly slighted, though he was also posturing.

Last night, they'd been stunned by the challenge. After everything they'd been through, another hurdle felt unfair. Except this competition wasn't about them, any of them. It was about their queen. And in that regard, Phara already had the advantage of knowing the sweet creature, so he couldn't let the Nemus get to him.

Phara relaxed his demeanor as he looked each of the Nemus alphas in the eye. "It is not about you, your comfort or your sensibilities. Our queen has been through much, too much."

"Then we shall leave it up to our queen if she would like to come forth," Andren countered.

The way the consort alpha said our queen as if Isa already belonged to them grated on Phara's nerves, but he shoved it down.

"My queen," Andren spoke up, "we have prepared a seat for you to comfortably observe the Conlatus."

"Um, okay, sure," Isa's voice was soft as it came out from the protective ring of legionnaires. She was nervous.

Phara cringed, hating that she was in the middle of all this.

The legionnaires surrounding Isa parted, letting her through. Instinct had them following her until he, Bellator and Artifex took the prime positions behind their stunning little female. After all, they were still her hive.

Isa stopped well out of reach in front of the Nemus alphas. The trio of males gaped at her. This was the first good look they'd had at the queen. Phara instantly knew what the Nemus were thinking. It was surprising how petite their queen was. Her exotic beauty was equally disarming. He loved her silky mane flowing down her back and her warm, inquisitive round eyes. He melted whenever she stared at him.

Phara saw the instant the Nemus' gazes shifted from surprise to desire, and he shoved down the vicious growl bubbling in his throat. It was going to be a long day.

"I am Andren, Nemus Hive Consort Alpha." Andren dropped to his knees and bowed, his head nearly touching the ground.

Isa surveyed the trio as Soleno then Lehzen introduced themselves and bowed in respect. It was unfortunate she'd become better about not projecting her thoughts, because he really wondered what she thought about the rival hive as she gave them her name in return.

With introductions done, the three Nemus alphas rose.

“Right this way.” Andren reached out to put a guiding hand on Isa’s arm and the trapped growl in Phara’s chest tried to get free. He was trying to remain calm, but it was growing more difficult by the moment.

Control yourself. Save this for the competition.

The way Bellator bristled, and Artifex subtly trembled, he knew they were also struggling with this.

“Oh, yep, I see it. Very nice.” Isa sidestepped Andren and quickly walked over to the chair.

Phara couldn’t help but grin that Andren’s attempt to touch her had been foiled as Isa climbed into the seat and got comfortable amidst the soft furs.

“Thank you.” She nodded to the Nemus.

It will take more than that to sway my queen, Phara silently gloated as he grinned at Andren.

“Let the Conlatus begin.” Andren eyed him back.

Isabella

All the Vorto were staring at Isa, making her uncomfortable. Her guys were tense, hanging on her every move, while the Nemus stared like she was some exhibit in a zoo. Andren, the Nemus’ consort tried to help her, but there was no way she was letting some strange naked guy touch her. The notion was laughable, since her whole hive was naked, but she’d grown used to them. Accustomed to it or not, a mob of

purple dicks on her left and orange dicks on her right, all crowding in close, was a tad more than she could handle at the moment.

“Let the Conlatus begin.” Andren glared at Phara.

Thank you! Isa sighed when the crowd around her started to disperse.

“The first round is the saltare,” Andren added as he stepped away, giving her some breathing room.

Source Creation Date: May 21, 2025, 5:00 am

Saltare?The word didn't translate through the unusual telepathic link. Isa kept her mouth shut rather than asking. She'd see what it was soon enough.

Last night her hive had scrambled to learn the details of this competition. The knowledge, like many other aspects of their culture, had been lost over the generations. She was an outsider,so she was no help. In fact, her people had done more than enough. It was best to just observe and stay silent. The last thing she wanted was to cause more problems or, god forbid, ruin her hives' concentration.

Phara caressed her shoulder before stepping out of the canopy. He nodded to Artifex, who took the position by her side, while Bellator continued standing protectively behind her chair. Phara entered a ring of packed earth about the size of a baseball field. He was joined by the other consorts from their hive.

Her goofy, sweet Galis waved and grinned as he took up position in the second row behind Phara. He was looking so much better today. Even his patchy skin was almost back to the same color purple. Better yet, the near-death experience didn't seem to affect his demeanor. Isa grinned and was about to wave back at him when Gregis scowled and shook his head at Galis. The pair sobered, so she followed suit. Apparently, this wasn't the place for such antics.

Her hive was on the left, while the Nemus stood on the right. Both consort alphas were up front with the other consorts standing in order of rank behind them. At least that's what she gathered from the markings on their chests.

"Oof!" one of the Nemus boomed, while beating his fist against his chest.

She jumped in her seat at the unexpected shout.

The rest of the Nemus hive and even her guys joined in, creating a beat with a series of slaps, claps, and shouts, rather than instruments. The tune was obviously familiar to both hives. Phara slapped his thighs and shouted as he stepped wide, beginning a fast-paced dance. Isa blushed at the way his tight ass shook as his pelvis thrust. There was no missing how his cock jumped with each move. Her blush deepened when she noticed Phara staring intently at her. There was something familiar and erotic about his moves and the sultry expression on his face. His dance wasn't coordinated with the rest of her hive, but they were all doing similar moves. Her triplets, Rego, Gregis and Galis, were far better than the consorts behind them, though Phara had them all beat. There was a seductive confidence about the way he moved, shaking enticingly, his hands reaching out for her, beckoning her. Her nipples hardened and she leaned forward in her seat, utterly taken in.

"Oh," Isa let out a little gasp when she realized what the primal dance reminded her of.

These were the motions Phara used when he made love to her. Although, at this frantic speed it was less love and more like raw fucking. Heat suffused her as it looked like Phara was clutching her ass while rapidly fucking her. She'd been in that exact position before, when Phara's sweet nature gave way to his animalistic side. In her studies she'd read about mating dances. The notion had been shocking. It was one of the many reasons she loved studying other cultures. But reading about such taboo dances didn't compare to seeing them in person.

Isa's gaze drifted over to the Nemus hive and it was like a bucket of cold water had been dumped on her.

"Oh." Her cheeks reddened for a very different reason.

Whatever Andren and his hive were doing was reminiscent of a chicken with its head cut off. He was trying too hard, his arms flailing in an attempt to get her attention. She didn't dare glance below their waists at whatever uncoordinated disaster was going on down there. Isa smiled, though it was more of a grimace, feeling embarrassed for them.

Her eyes widened in surprise when the a cappella beat abruptly changed and all the Vorto collapsed into puddles of plasm. Her gaze swiveled back to Phara. This was a disconcerting and fascinating magic trick that she'd never get completely used to. From the purple puddle emerged a furry head topped with a pair of pointed ears. As the purple eyes emerged, they focused on her and the shaggy brows wagged. Isa grinned. Phara was shifting into his bear-cat form.

It was impressive seeing her hive all emerging in unison as the majestic beasts. The Nemus hive emerged as gorillas. It was the same form they'd taken to ambush her hive yesterday, which was not a pleasant memory. She didn't want to be rude by openly cringing and simply nodded politely.

Isa looked back at her hive. Phara was still in hisferoform, but his hair was growing long and spiky. Each pointy tendril unfurled, forming feathers, while his snout curled over into a beak. He was shifting seamlessly into one of the large mountain hawks that inhabited their territory. She couldn't imagine the skill and self-control it took to slowly change like this. The Nemus were also shifting into what looked like bald eagles.

"Wow!" she whispered, truly impressed.

"Would you like something to eat, my queen?" Lehzen, the Nemus Hive servitor alpha asked from beside her chair.

She glanced toward him and nearly got a face full of his private bits. What was

worse, he was getting an erection. The momentary awe at the amazing transforming Vorto instantly fled. Mortification filled her and Isa recoiled, again reminded that she was surrounded by naked strangers. On top of that came the reminder that if things didn't go right today, she'd have to go with these naked strangers.

Artifex

Artifex's eyes narrowed on Lehzen. The male was responsible for this ornately decorated shelter and the broad selection of food. He shouldn't be agitated with the male for attempting to see to Queen Isa's needs, but he was.

That is my job!

"My queen, that is fermentedharicot. Given your reaction toraphanus, I am not sure you'll like it," Artifex informed her.

"Oh, the fish balls." Isa grimaced and shook her head.

Artifex cast a smug look at Lehzen before focusing on Isa again. "Here is some water, and we brought somejofiif you'd like." Artifex extended a cup, while Operar showed their queen the pouch of berries.

"Oh. Thank you. Just some water I think." Isa smiled at him.

He happily gave her a sip before pulling the cup away.

"You are welcome to share the food we brought," Lehzen kindly offered him.

"Deeply appreciated," Artifex replied. The sentiment was genuine and he followed his counterpart to the table set with a feast. "We brought things that Isa enjoys, so I'd prefer to leave those for her to eat." He perused the selection.

“Hmm. So, she likesjoiberries,” Lehzen commented thoughtfully.

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Artifex smirked, realizing he'd given the male another means of wooing their queen. Instead of replying he turned to watch the saltare. Phara and his fellow consorts seemed to be doing a good job, but what did he know?

"Do you see how our queen watches Andren's saltare with wide eyes? Her cheeks changed color," Lehzen taunted him.

Artifex cast the male a non-committal smirk before looking at Isa. Her eyes were wide, a blush on her cheeks as she watched the Nemus perform. She blushed like that a lot when she first met his hive. Her expression changed when it shifted to watch their hive in the arena. She stared intently at Phara, but her expression was guarded. What did that mean?

Is she growing interested in the Nemus Hive?

Artifex's heart beat faster in his chest. He cast a nervous glance at Bellator, who was stationed by Isa's chair. The legionnaire was no help. The male still wore the same grim expression he'd had since yesterday.

Suddenly the chanting stopped along with the dancers in the arena.

"That's the first round," Lehzen murmured somewhat ominously.

Both Phara and Andren approached Isa.

"How did you like the saltare?" the Nemus consort prodded their queen.

I guess we'll know what our queen thinks of the Nemus Hive real soon.

Chapter 18

Revelations of a Queen

Isabella

How did I like the saltare? Isa grimaced, feeling put on the spot. The way Andren stared expectantly at her didn't help.

She panned her hive and then made herself give the Nemus another look as they left the field. She needed a moment to compose her thoughts. If she said the wrong thing, she might upset the Nemus and kickoff a fight. Plus, she'd always been taught to be nice about such subjects. Afterall, she had no business judging a dance she knew nothing about. She certainly couldn't share her actual thoughts.

You gotta say something!

Isa finished surveying the crowd and noticed that more than Andren was waiting for her answer. All of the Vorto were talking, debating the merits of each hive's performance, but now all eyes were on her.

"I found the Tumulus'saltarevery compelling." Truthfully, she wanted to jump Phara's bones, but she couldn't say that. "And the Nemus'saltarewas rather enthusiastic," which was as nice as she could muster.

"Yes!" Phara crowed triumphantly.

"Wu ha!" Andren slapped his chest proudly.

She jumped when the two hives cheered, startled by their reaction. The moment it registered, she relaxed and smiled.

I'll take cheering over a brawl breaking out any day. Her shoulders eased.

"My turn!" Artifex declared. "Keep up," he taunted his counterpart in the Nemus Hive as he ran toward the field.

Isa slapped a hand over her mouth to cover her grin, tickled by his brazen attitude and the impish glint in his eyes. Distracted by his exuberance, she didn't hear who they announced as winner of the first round.

Artifex leapt into the air and turned into a creature the second his feet were off the ground. He was joined by a dozen of his servitor betas and gammas who jumped toward Artifex hovering in the air. Isa's grin turned into a shocked gasp when they melded with Artifex's body, forming one giant raptor. He was now the size of a hover van. Her mouth hung open. It was still surprising that the Vorto could transform into animals, but they could also meld together as one creature. It was too much.

Lehzen swiftly followed with a score of his people, though they didn't meld together as one big bird like her guys did.

"Wow!" Isa finally found her voice. She shook her head in amazement and disbelief at the stunning feat as the two teams flew toward the woods at the far end of the prairie. "What are they doing for this round?"

When her hive was studying their archives, she'd been too tired and frazzled to pay attention. Isa regretted that now, especially since they wanted to know her opinion for the first round.

"Each hive must show their prowess by bringing back the most game," Phara replied.

That explained why Artifex and his fellow servitors were part of this round. They were the hive's hunters.

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“It must be deposited safely inside the arena,” Andren added with a smirk directed at Phara.

Isa’s brow furrowed at the somewhat sinister comment that hinted at a strategy that wasn’t mentioned in their overly simplified explanation.

“Um, okay.” She turned her gaze back to the field.

Sports were never her thing back home. When her brother and father watched soccer, she’d been in the kitchen with her mom or studying. At least this round sounded like it would have a definitive winner. She still wasn’t sure who won the last one.

“Oh, who is that?” Isa pointed and squinted at someone flying toward the makeshift arena.

“That was fast,” Bellator commented.

“It was.” She smiled at him over her shoulder. He’d been quiet all morning, and she worried he fibbed about feeling well enough to compete.

“Oh,” Rego groaned in disappointment.

She turned back in time to see an orange and yellow eagle drop something that looked like a rabbit into the circle. She expected him to go back out hunting again, but he simply hovered overhead. Apparently, his turn was done. A minute later another of the Nemus eagles dropped another rabbit, and hovered with his teammate. Isa looked toward the woods with a frown, wondering where her hive was.

Gregis growled in frustration. “They must’ve found a nest ofculus.”

“Or the Nemus are very adept hunters,” Andren boasted, his confident gaze focused on her.

“I’m sure you are.” She politely smiled, though that wasn’t the face she wanted to make at him.

Phara burst out laughing and her gaze swung to him.

“What?!” she demanded, suddenly embarrassed. Had he read her mind about wanting to stick her tongue out at Andren?

“It would seem Artifex wants to swiftly put an end to this hunt,” Phara chuckled, pointing to the forest.

What looked like a buffalo was clutched in the talons of the oversized purple hawk. If the other Nemus eagles who were also returning caught anything, it was too small to tell at this distance.

“Oh my. That is a big creature.” Isa grinned. It was just like Artifex to do something over the top like this. Check and mate.

“They’ve got a wholepecus!” Andren declared in awe.

“We understand what is at stake,” Bellator murmured the snarky retort.

He was talking about her, and she couldn’t help but grin wider, feeling all warm inside.

A pair of Nemus eagles attacked the oversized version of Artifex as he flew over the

prairie. They were the Nemus who had already dropped their kill. The eagles swooped in and gouged Artifex's back with their sharp talons.

"Hey." She frowned.

Another Nemus reached the circle, dropped its prey, and joined in the attack. She didn't like this trend, since there were eight more eagles coming in hot.

The number of eagles haranguing Artifex quickly doubled. Her brazen alpha faltered, as a portion of him dropped away. The purple blob fell to the ground. Except it wasn't a blob. That was a person, a member of her hive who'd been injured, forced to separate, and plummeted to the ground.

"No." Isa gasped and was on the edge of her seat.

An instant later, the same purple blob turned into a hawk and shot off the ground, again melding with Artifex. She sighed, relieved he wasn't hurt, and slumped back in her seat.

"Steady! Keep a hold of thatpecus," Phara cheered on his hive, as more of the eagles tried to force Artifex to drop the beast. Phara was joined by the rest of her hive, yipping and barking.

"It's not easy staying fused like that," Rego commented to her in between excited whistles.

All the Nemus eagles had deposited their prey in the arena, and it was a small pile. If Artifex made it with the giant cow, her hive would definitely win this round.

"Come on, Artifex!" She clapped her hands, then remembered more than just Artifex made up the giant purple hawk. "Come on, servitors!" she excitedly amended.

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Phara grinned at her and whooped loudly, copying her by clapping his hands. Her hive followed suit. The Nemus also copied her, clapping for their hive. Very quickly the cheering and clapping was its own noisy competition between the hives.

Her giant purple hawk must've heard their encouragement and flapped harder. Overgrown Artifex was almost to the circular arena when out of nowhere an orange eagle the size of a minibus dove in, its talons aimed for Artifex's head. While they were distracted cheering, the Nemus eagles had sneakily joined together to make one large bird. It was a sound strategy. It really was the only way to stop the oversized Artifex, but she didn't like it. Her hive hadn't attacked the Nemus once.

"Hey!" Isa declared.

Artifex dipped, avoiding attack just in time, but that didn't make her feel any better. This competition had taken a serious turn. As crazy as it was, no one had been hurt yet, since the Vorto were so malleable, but her guys were capable of being injured.

She held her breath as Artifex swooped toward the arena, the giant eagle on his tail. Artifex dodged left, narrowly avoiding a sharp beak. The move sent him into a spin. He rolled, hitting the ground just inside the arena. The giant purple hawk burst, and a dozen balls of plasm scattered across the playing field, kicking up dirt and debris.

"Oh!" Isa gasped as she stood up from her chair.

The dust cleared to reveal Artifex standing along with the dozen other purple servitors from her hive. They were all grinning like they hadn't just eaten dirt sandwiches. She let out the breath she was holding, grateful they appeared uninjured.

“My queen!” Artifex proudly gestured to the pecus laying inside the arena.

“You did it!” She excitedly clapped.

“We won that round,” Phara confidently informed Andren.

Bellator

Bellator let out a relieved sigh when Artifex secured the last round. Except, to truly win the Conlatus, his hive had to be victorious in this final round, too. He didn't relish the violence that was about to ensue. The prospect had been bothering him the whole rotation. He had sparred with his brethren and neighboring hives for sport, but they never severed plasm during training, that was crossing a line. During the Conlatus there was no line.

Isa was smiling at Artifex and congratulating the servitors exiting the ring. Her happy twitters, her radiance, and how she affected his hive filled him with indescribable joy. He wasn't entirely sure he deserved Queen Isa with the way he stretched the rules when he found her, after all it was his duty to uphold the rules. And yet, he wanted her, needed her, desperately. After having a taste of something so wonderful, he wasn't about to let her slip through his fingers.

So, if I have to shed plasm to prove I am worthy of her, that is what I'll do.

“Invicta, Militus.” Bellator nodded to his betas and they marched toward the arena.

Isabella

“I was worried when one of you fell. I forgot how resilient you guys are.” Isa smiled at Artifex, Operar, and the other servitors as they crowded under the tent.

“We are.” Operar gently squeezed her arm before going to grab a drink.

She glanced briefly at the Nemus. They looked disappointed by the outcome. She nodded at Lehzen, Artifex’s counterpart, not sure what to say.

“Good hunt,” Artifex provided an answer.

“Yes, good hunt.” She attempted a pleasant smile, though it was hard since she was still ticked off at the way the Nemus attacked her men.

“I must admit that was a clever strategy,” Lehzen conceded.

That was an understatement, since her hive had just a night to learn everything about this competition.

Congratulations were still being passed around when Bellator marched out of the tent, followed by two of his legionnaire betas. Her teddy bear was wearing the same stoic expression he’d had all day. He was ready to be done with this competition. She couldn’t blame him. More adrenaline pumped through her with every round, bringing her closer to having to go live with strangers.

Soleno, the Nemus legionnaire, the same one that ambushed them, squared off with Bellator. Two of Soleno’s betas joined him, and stood toe to toe with Invicta and Militus. They were fifty feet away and still the tension was palpable as the trios glared at each other. She wasn’t the only one to notice, because both hives grew uncomfortably quiet, focusing on the arena. As frazzled as she was about this competition, she understood the Nemus placed all the blame on Bellator, since he was the one who’d taken her. Bellator did, too, which broke her heart.

“What’s this round?” Isa nervously asked.

“Combat,” Phara replied.

“Oh.” She sank back into her seat, her stomach plummeting.

Bellator reached out and clasped Soleno’s forearm. The two pairs of betas did the same. It was a goodwill gesture, but she wasn’t feeling the goodwill. In unison, both sides parted. Invicta and Militus stepped into Bellator. Their bodies fused with his as he shifted, turning into a bear-cat, thefero. He was three times as large as the one she rode through the forest, and infinitely more ferocious as he roared and charged. Bellator slammed into the gorilla the Nemus trio had become. The powerful thud echoed across the prairie.

“Uuh,” Isa gasped in shock, recoiling in her seat. The fight had definitely begun. Her breath and heart sped up.

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The giant orange gorilla attempted to slap Bellator away, but he bit down on the gorilla's forearm and yanked Soleno off balance, tossing him to the ground. Bellator didn't let up and continued shaking his head. Soleno roared in pain when his arm and part of his torso separated from his hairy gorilla body.

Oh god! She gasped in horror, not sure if she saw organs before the strange Vorto biology kicked in and sealed the wound. Where the wound had been, a new arm started rapidly growing, reforming a smaller gorilla. If there was a new arm, what was happening to the old one? Her gaze swung toward Bellator.

The severed arm fluxed into plasm and dangled from Bellator's jaws, slowly oozing toward the ground. He spat it out, and it instantly morphed into one of Soleno's betas.

"What the..." She blinked, perpetually stunned by the Vorto's abilities and mortified by the violence at the same time.

Soleno and his beta rolled out of striking distance and remerged. Bellator followed, slashing with his paws. Soleno kept backing away. Bellator changed tactics. While reared up on his hindlegs, he shifted into Vorto form. If she thought the Vorto were tall before, this version of Bellator mixed with Invicta and Militus was absolutely huge. His fists looked like weapons of mass destruction as he swung at the overgrown orange gorilla. She cringed, scrunching up in her seat as the pair traded kicks and punches.

"No. No. No. No," she murmured, though it was drowned out by each hive shouting advice to either Bellator or Soleno.

Bellator made a sweeping kick. As his foot made contact, Soleno's arm formed a blade, and stabbed Bellator in the chest. Militus, Invicta, and Bellator instantly separated, and Bellator lay convulsing on the ground. He was having trouble holding his humanoid form, his plasm was pouring out of his gut, staining the dirt like blood.

"No!" Isa screamed. She leapt off her seat and raced inside the circle. "Stop this!" she wailed, getting between Soleno and her teddy bear. "Stop. Someone please help Bellator." She dropped down beside him, tears flooding her eyes.

To her surprise, Soleno stepped back, his horrible giant blade turning back into an arm, as he separated from his two betas.

Her hive swarmed around Bellator, looking equally shocked.

"Please! Please help him," she pleaded with Artifex and Phara as her hands fluttered over Bellator. If he was human, she'd know what to do, put pressure on the wound, but he wasn't.

The grim expression on Artifex and Phara's faces made her tears flow faster.

"My queen, I'm sorry I failed you," Bellator rasped, his mournful voice in her mind already sounding weak.

"No! You did not fail me!" Isa adamantly shook her head. "We have to do something, now! We have to get him back to the hive. Use that machine that fixed me?"

"It is reserved for queens," Bellator murmured.

"No. Please. Use it on him!" she demanded as she caressed Bellator's trembling cheek.

“All right.” Artifex nodded.

Artifex fused with the other servitors from their hive, fluxing into a truly large purple hawk. Gently they picked Bellator up with their talons and took off for the mountain.

“Fly fast.” She blew them a kiss.

She wanted to go with them, to be by her sweet teddy bear’s side. She would have if it weren’t for this stupid competition. This horrible tragedy undoubtedly meant her hive lost the Conlatus, but at the moment all she cared about was whether Bellator would be okay.

Isa looked away from the shrinking sight of Bellator being rushed to their mountain home, to find Soleno, Andren, Lehzen and the rest of the Nemus gathered opposite of Phara and her hive. Both sides were staring expectantly at her.

What fresh hell is going to happen now? Her shoulders slumped. She knew this day was going to be terrible. She’d read about ancient war games on Earth, yet that didn’t begin to compare to seeing the violence up close. Supposedly this was better than full blown war between the hives, but it didn’t feel better. Her heart was breaking.

“Did you decide, my queen?” Andren asked her.

“Did I decide?” Isa cocked her head. Maybe the midday alien sun was cooking her brains. But that couldn’t be the case because she’d been under shelter all morning. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about. Decide what?”

The Nemus trio and even Phara looked confused.

“The winner of the Conlatus. You decide what hive you want,” Galis answered.

For a moment Isa thought Galis had oversimplified things, since he was prone to doing that. Except, the way both hives continued to stare at her, they were seriously waiting for her to answer.

It felt like she was struck by a bolt of lightning. Isa staggered from the shock.

Could it honestly be that simple?She wandered back to her seat under the leafy awning.

Everything that happened that day tumbled through her mind. TheConlatusstarted with a dance. She'd joked to herself that it was a mating dance since Phara's moves were so erotic. But maybe it actually was a mating dance, showing off the skills of the consorts from both hives.

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They asked me what I thought afterward. I complimented them both and they both cheered.

The hunt showcased the skills of the servitors, and the combat round did the same for the legionnaires.

But I didn't declare a winner for the hunt. Her brow furrowed. Except she had chosen a winner by default when she cheered for her hive. And they just stopped the fight when I demanded it.

"Are you telling me I could've stopped all of this before Bellator was hurt?" She started to hyperventilate.

Phara's grimace was the only answer she needed.

"Oh god." Isa covered her mouth. "I didn't understand."

Fresh tears streamed down her cheeks. They called her their queen and they truly meant it. Back home no one cared about her wants, feelings, needs, any of it. They certainly wouldn't have listened to her and halted a war. It was unfathomable on Earth. Except this wasn't Earth.

Isa stood and focused on the trio of Nemus alphas. "I am sorry. I am sure you are a wonderful hive, but you're just not for me."

She held her breath for a moment as disappointment swept across Andren, Lehzen and Soleno's faces, expecting them to aggressively object, but then all the Nemus

simply dropped to their knees and bowed to her.

It was over! This terrible business was truly over. There wasn't going to be a giant war, and she got to keep her hive. Suddenly Isa was lightheaded, as relief swamped her. Although she wouldn't be completely relieved until she was with Bellator and he was healed.

Isa turned to Phara. "Please take me home."

Chapter 19

Life is Changing

Isabella

Isa contentedly watched Bellator as he slept peacefully in their bed.

Artifex climbed back into bed and waded past the triplets still fast asleep. "You're going to wake him staring so intensely," he whispered, while offering her a drink.

She shook her head no to the drink.

"And I'm starting to get a little jealous." Phara kissed her shoulder and snuggled up against her back.

"Hush." Isa chuckled at her alphas.

It had been a month since she learned what it meant to be a queen among the Vorto. Phara wasted no time bringing her home. Her hive flew straight to the mountain and they arrived in time to see Bellator in the middle of treatment. Therefection was like some sort of miraculous laser, but it still took three days for her teddy bear to

recover completely. Three stress filled days! It was a privilege to be there when he opened his eyes, and it was something she never wanted to miss. Bellator had survived. They all survived!

Isa shook her head at how oblivious she'd been. If she'd only asked more questions, stood up and voiced what she wanted, the whole Conlatus could have been averted. Back on Earth, she'd been one of the bold ones who questioned her 'place,' so her people tried even harder to shove her into the little niche 'where she belonged.' She was used to that treatment. What was even worse, she expected that treatment. She never imagined the Vorto would listen to her, or value what she wanted and said. Perhaps on the surface she understood, but not deep down. It was a staggering lesson to learn.

She was learning new things every day. To be fair, she'd only been on Tellus a month, so she still had a lifetime of learning laid out in front of her. Some days the lessons were small, like new yummy or gag-inducing foods. Other days there were major lessons, like learning you are married to a whole hive and have the power to halt a war. Thankfully, there hadn't been any more of those particular lessons since the Conlatus.

"I am awake," Bellator chuckled as his eyes slid open. "Artifex is right. I do know when you're staring," he teased her.

"Aw. I didn't mean to wake you. Sorry." Isa frowned.

"Don't be." Bellator grabbed her, pulled her close, and burrowed his face into her neck. "I love waking up to the whispers of how cute I am and how much you love me."

"I didn't realize I was projecting." She grinned sheepishly, but wouldn't deny the things that went through her mind as she watched him sleep.

“I love it and I love you.” Bellator kissed her neck.

“I love you, too,” Phara chimed in.

“Agreed. All the love!” Artifex added.

Isa giggled as the triplets also shouted out their love. Her men were both silly and serious as they declared their love. This profession of affection ad nauseum had become a habit ever since the day at the volcano. It was a good thing the rest of the hive wasn't in her bedroom or this could go on for several minutes—and she wouldn't have minded in the least.

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Her heart swelled to bursting. That day she boarded the Manifest she thought her life was over. That wasn't the case at all. Here she was truly living. She was showered with infinitely more love than she would have experienced on Earth. It was more than she could have ever imagined.

Isa leaned forward and kissed Bellator, pouring all of her affection into the kiss. She moaned, loving the vanilla taste as Bellator's tongue explored her mouth. The moan turned into a gasp when Phara's cock slowly slid into her pussy from behind as he kissed her shoulder. She reveled in being sandwiched between the two strong alphas.

"I do love waking up to this." Artifex reached in and started toying with one of her nipples.

She grinned as she continued kissing Bellator. She, too, was enjoying their morning routine, which was often their afternoon and evening routine.

"Ah yes," Phara groaned as he finished burying himself to the hilt.

Bellator grabbed her leg and positioned it over his hip. Her eyes widened when she felt his cock also shove at the mouth of her pussy.

"Oh god," Isa panted as the opening of her vagina began to stretch.

In the last month, she'd been fucked in every position possible, including double penetration with one in her ass and one in her pussy. All of which would've landed her in jail on Earth. But never had her alphas attempted to cram two cocks in her vagina at once.

“You might be overly ambitious,” Rego said, sitting at their feet with a good view of her lady bits and both of the alphas attempting to impale her.

Phara groaned in agreement, also feeling the mounting pressure.

“I’ve got the oil.” Gregis appeared holding the bottle, which he proceeded to pour out.

“Oh,” Isa gasped when the cool oil spilled onto her pussy.

“Oh yes,” Bellator growled hungrily. Her sweet teddy bear then gave her an uncharacteristic rakish grin as he pressed forward.

She gasped as the head of his cock slid past the straining rim of her vagina.

“Flux, Bellator, you’re killing me,” Phara groaned.

“Killing you?!” Isa let out a plaintive moan.

The pressure continued mounting as Bellator slowly worked his way into her. It was sweet agony feeling his ridges slide against nerve endings on the top of her channel, while Phara pressed harder against the bottom half. The only consolation was knowing the two alphas were being equally tortured. Bellator’s jaw was clenched, clearly trying to maintain control.

“I think this will help.” Artifex wedged his hand between her and Bellator, and zeroed in on her clit.

Her narrow gaze shot to Artifex. He knew exactly how to tip her over the edge. He was rotten. He was clearly also corrupting Bellator. Artifex ignored her look and started rolling her slick swollen bead.

“Fuck,” she groaned, arching between Phara and Bellator as pleasure ricocheted through her.

Her quaking pussy spasmed hard, gushing more desire. Both alphas growled, their engorged cocks jerking inside her.

“I have to move,” Phara insisted.

Phara began to pull his cock out and Bellator pressed in. The knots and ridges on their cocks slid and shoved against every nerve ending in her channel, while stretching her open, since Phara didn’t pull completely out. Then Phara thrust and Bellator retreated.

Isa tossed her head back against Phara’s chest, a guttural groan bursting out as the orgasm ripped through her. Her pussy convulsed around both men who were panting and growling as they fucked her in tandem. The constant barrage on her G-spot, the spot on her cervix, and at the far recesses of her vagina sent her spiraling deeper. It was terrible and wonderous the way they filled her to the breaking point. Then Artifex pinched her clit and she shattered into a million pieces.

Artifex

“I hope you guys aren’t starving.” Their queen grimaced as they entered the dining commons.

“I hope you aren’t starving.” Artifex wrapped his arms around her breasts and her belly, giving her a squeeze before scooping her into his arms.

Their morning bonding sessions often meant they missed the first meal, and now it was midday. But he’d yet to truly miss the meal or regret the change in their schedule.

“I am hardly starving.” Isa grimaced as she poked her belly. “I’ve definitely been eating. I think I’m pudgier than before.”

“Gorgeous,” Phara corrected as he grabbed and kissed her finger.

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“Aye,” Bellator agreed as he led the way down the steps of the commons.

“Thanks.” She smiled, then changed the subject by greeting the Vorto seated nearby who were also here for midday meal.

It pained Artifex that Isa still had doubts about how stunning she was. Her curves were feminine, the exact opposite of everyone he’d been around his whole life, and they werewonderful to squeeze and thrust against. Artifex gave Isa another squeeze as he reluctantly set her on the chaise at the bottom of the dining commons.

“I hope you are hungry,” he said, after Isa finished waving to the other members of their hive.

“I am.” She nodded.

“Good.” Artifex gestured to Operar.

Operar eagerly ran over with a platter.

“Oh no. I do not want any more fish balls.” Isa pointed at the brown spheres on the plate, thinking they wereraphanus.

“No. That’s not what these are,” Operar chuckled. “We’ve been working on a new recipe.”

“Oh. Can I try?” Bellator reached for one of the morsels.

“Of course.” Operar extended the platter.

“Okay. I’m game.” Isa took one along with Bellator.

Artifex held his breath as their queen put the sphere in her mouth. He’d been working with Operar to create this treat ever since theraphanusdebacle.

“Oh!” Queen Isa’s eyes widened as she chewed. “It’s like a salted caramel truffle,” she moaned.

Her moan was very close to the one she made when they had sex. That had to mean she approved. His shaft jerked in agreement.

“So, you like it?” Operar asked.

“She does,” Galis answered for her, also recognizing the moan. “A lot!”

Isa snorted, covering her mouth to keep the treat in.

Artifex grinned, loving her reaction. “We attempted to make the thing you call a bonbon. I wanted to commemorate theraphanusincident,” he couldn’t help but add.

“Oh my god,” Isa laughed harder behind her hand. She swallowed. “You’re rotten, but it is wonderful. Quick, give me healthy food before I eat the whole platter of sweets.” She grinned.

Operar grinned back, pleased beyond words.

“Wonderful!” Artifex beamed. The success with the bonbon was better than he expected.

Midday meal was served and they all proceeded to eat. Artifex laughed when he caught their queen sneaking one of the bonbons.

“Hush.” She nudged him with a happy laugh.

I am definitely going to make more sweets, he decided, adoring her delighted smile and the happy, sexy sounds she made as she ate them.

Bellator

While they were eating, Proel, one of the legionnaire gammas, raced into the dining commons, when he was supposed to be out on patrol.

“I just escorted one of the Nemus betas here,” Proel announced from the top of the steps.

That instantly had Bellator’s attention. “What do they want?!” He leapt to his feet.

Had the Nemus returned to try and take their queen again? The archives were very clear. Once a queen decided the outcome of the Conlatus, her decision was to be respected. He hadn’t been on the field when Queen Isa made her decision, but the Nemus must have felt the loss very deeply. Even though he respected the Nemus’ persistence, there was no way he would stand for this show of disrespect toward their queen. And next time he went up against Soleno, he’d be prepared to play dirty the way the other legionnaire alpha had.

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“There is just one of them, Hasta, and he didn’t say. He just stated that he needed to speak to our queen,” Proel relayed.

Hearing there was just one of them made Bellator relax, though he was still suspicious. Before the Conlatus, such a visitor wouldn’t have been an issue. Life was changing, though. His gaze turned to their queen to ask her thoughts, but Isa’s thoughts were as plain as the anxious expression on her face.

“Is it acceptable to you to let Hasta in?” Bellator asked her.

“Yes.” She nodded. “We need to hear what he has to say.”

Proel took off, heading back toward the entrance of the hive to fetch the male.

Isa turned to him. “What do you think he wants?” She nibbled her lip.

“Whatever it is, you are safe.” Phara rubbed her back.

No one ate as they waited for Proel to return with Hasta. The moment the yellow and red male entered the commons, Isa smiled and stood. It was one of the smiles she made when she was being polite, and not entirely genuine.

“Welcome, Hasta. Can I offer you a drink or a bite to eat?” Queen Isa kindly beckoned the Nemus male to come down the steps.

“Thank you, Queen of the Tumulus Hive.” Hasta bowed before descending the steps.

The way Hasta referred to Isa appropriately, honoring her true hive, made Bellator relax a bit.

Operar gave the male a drink as he reached the dais where their queen sat. Hasta took the cup and nodded his thanks.

“I don’t mean to rush you, but you didn’t find another Blight weapon, did you?” Isa wrung her hands.

Bellator’s eyes widened. That hadn’t even occurred to him. His worry had been for Isa. No other Blight weapons had been found in their territory, and they’d sent runners to spread the information about the missiles. In the span of a lunar, he’d relaxed and let the problem drift to the back of his mind. Except that didn’t mean it was no longer a problem. Instantly the nasty dilemma came barreling to the forefront as he looked expectantly at the messenger.

Hasta sputtered and choked on his water. “No! Thank Inana!” He wiped his mouth.

“Oh good,” Artifex declared.

“Thank God!” Isa sank back in the chaise.

The relieved sigh from all the Vorto echoed in the cavernous commons.

“Our new queen wishes to meet you,” Hasta quickly relayed, before they could conjure any other terrible news.

“You have a queen?!” Queen Isa eagerly sat forward on the chaise. She wasn’t the only one pleased by the news. “Who?”

“Queen Elizabeth.” Hasta grinned.

Bellator recognized the enamored expression on the male's face. He'd possessed that same expression on many occasions. The Nemus Hive truly had found their queen.

"Congratulations!" he declared and was echoed by the hive.

Now he could relax, or at least stop worrying about the Nemus stealing his queen.

"Shy Elizabeth. I would love to see her! Tell her yes. Ooh, Artifex, Operar, can we send her some of the bonbons you made?" Isa excitedly asked, happily clapping her hands.

"Anything you wish, my queen." Artifex nodded.

Bellator grinned. Isa worried about what happened to the other queens, her friends. It was good to hear one of them survived. Hopefully they'd hear about the others soon, too. He'd worried about relations with the Nemus hive, but the friendship between the queens would mend any lingering enmity between their hives. Happiness swelled inside Bellator along with the love he felt for his queen. Life really was changing.

Phara

The jovial mood returned to the dining commons with the Nemus messenger's great news. Phara's cheeks hurt, he was smiling so hard as he watched Isa arrange the meeting with Elizabeth. Isa was vibrating with excitement. It was wonderful seeing how happy she was.

"This makes me glad." Phara rubbed Isa's back after Hasta left.

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“Me, too.” Isa emphatically nodded. “Ohh.” She grimaced, despite all the joy she professed to be feeling. “I may have eaten too many bonbons.” Isa rubbed her belly as she shifted uncomfortably on the chaise.

Phara straightened abruptly, his eyes widening. “I smell blood!”

“Blood?!” Artifex said in alarm.

“It’s Queen Isa’s blood.” Bellator instantly recognized the scent, horror transforming his face.

“Where are you bleeding?” Phara started to panic, testing the air around her to pinpoint where she was hurt, since he couldn’t see any injuries to her delicate skin.

“Oh!” Isa’s eyes widened as she looked down at her tummy. “Stomach cramps and blood. Well, it was bound to happen eventually after my body reset from being in stasis for so long.” She nodded.

Their queen didn’t look the least bit concerned that she was bleeding for some reason, which added to Phara’s distress. That was a symptom of someone who was truly unwell.

“What was bound to happen?” Artifex demanded, worry twisting his expression.

“It’s just my period. Galis, cut it out!” She swatted the beta’s tongue away as Galis tasted the air near her stomach. “I need to go to the cascade. I’ll need some disposable rags and probably a new skirt.”

“You’re bleeding beneath your skirt?!” Phara gaped in horror at his queen.

“You two did this to her.” Artifex pointed accusingly at Phara and Bellator. “You both had to cram your shafts into her tiny body!”

Dismay overwhelmed Phara at the suggestion. Was this his fault?

“No!” Isa shook her head. “It’s part of being a woman, at least a human woman. I’ll get my period and bleed every month and it’s perfectly normal,” she assured them as she got off the chaise. “Ooh.” Isa paused and cringed, gripping her stomach again. “That’s new.” She instantly sat back down. “I was lucky. My periods were never too bad, but it feels like they’re making up for lost time.” Her brow furrowed as she rubbed her belly.

“I cannot comprehend how bleeding from your channel is normal.” Bellator shook his head in disagreement.

“Women; we’re a steep learning curve,” Isa snorted then her eyes widened. “I shouldn’t have laughed.”

“Why?” Phara asked, his eyes growing even wider.

“There was just a rush. I’m leaking. I never have a heavy let down like this.” She frowned.

“Oh. There’s blood on the chaise.” Gregis pointed to the wet smear beside her thigh.

“I’m so sorry.” Isa’s cheeks reddened in embarrassment at making a mess, but that was farthest from anyone’s mind. They were all worried about her.

“Isa, let me see.” Artifex nudged her knee.

“This is beyond mortifying.” Isa lay back on the chaise and let Artifex lift her skirt.

Phara took one of her knees while Bellator took the other and spread her legs. His mouth dropped open in shock as he stared at their queen’s sex. He wasn’t the only one. Artifex and Bellator were also struck dumb.

“Okay, great, I finally managed to break you.” Isa grimaced. “I promise periods are normal.”

Isa’s channel spasmed again and what looked like an amnio sac slid the rest of the way out of her body. At least it looked like an amnio sac, though it was different from any of the ones hanging in the chrysalis chamber.

“Oh, wait a minute. That is not normal,” Queen Isa amended as she spotted the amnio sac. “Why is there a writhing ball of goo between my legs?” Panic laced her voice.

They all froze and stared in awe as the ball uncurled and stretched. A tiny hand pushed its way out of the amniotic sac followed by a foot. As unbelievable as it was to process, Queen Isa just bore a hatchling.

I must be dreaming. I have a hatchling! Phara’s world expanded, the impossible becoming possible for a second time.

Isabella

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Isa cried as she realized what she was looking at.

Her alphas were utterly stunned, and she was the first to react, swiftly scooping up her infant. There was no umbilical cord, just the amniotic sac. It was strange, but so was gestating a baby in a month. Isa cleared the membrane from her baby’s precious little mouth. Thin purple lips parted and her baby pulled in its first breath of air. She

stuck her pinky into the little toothless mouth just to make sure there was no lingering mucus. Instantly her baby latched on to her finger and started sucking, followed by the most adorable purr. Even though her infant's eyes were closed, it was obvious they were a mix of human and Vorto. Isa caressed her precious, violet-colored baby's arm, reveling in the faint pattern of stripes. She then unfurled the tiny fist and counted five pointy fingers, before moving on to inspect the pleasantly plump belly absent of a belly button. So far, all of the tiny parts were a perfect mix of human and Vorto. Isa then paused as she removed more of the membrane from a pair of cute chunky legs.

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“A little girl,” she whispered in awe, then focused on her quiet men. “Look what we made. We made a little girl.” Tears slid down her cheeks.

The Vorto didn’t cry, couldn’t cry, but they felt emotions just as deeply as she did. The raw emotion on Phara’s face was almost enough to break her. Abject wonder, sheer joy, worry and more warred for dominance, all showing on his face as his gaze darted from her to their baby. The Vorto never pressured her once by talking about babies, but she knew they hoped it would happen. She had, too.

“Our queen had a queen!” Galis’ jubilant and absurdly loud voice echoed in their minds as he leapt off the chaise and raced from the dining commons. They could hear him all the way down the hall.

Just like that, the spell was broken. The little girl in Isa’s arms was startled by the boisterous declaration and turned into a slippery ball of plasm.

“Oh. Oh.” Isa attempted to juggle her baby blob, but the slippery tyke plopped onto the chaise. “Oh my.” Isa grimaced as she tried scooping up the boneless little smidgen.

“Galis!” Phara huffed, while corralling their baby blob against her thigh with his big hands, before she wiggled and slid off the chaise.

“I’ll keep the horde from mobbing us.” Gregis rose and went to intercept the hive who were already closing in, a cacophony of excitement instantly filling the dining commons.

“I’ll assist.” Rego joined Gregis, after giving her another adoring grin.

“She’s fine. Remember we’re flexible, especially hatchlings.” Bellator tried consoling Isa, though she could feel the tension in the new daddy as he rubbed her back. Her sweet teddy bear was just as concerned.

Her baby fluxed back into humanoid form and opened her eyes. The comically big round eyes were more like hers, but with purple irises. Isa was instantly enthralled looking into them, until the tiny hairless brows furrowed, and a healthy wail came out of her mouth. Telepathically Isa didn’t hear words, but she got a pervading sense that her little girl was not pleased, and scooped her up.

“I think this one may be sired by Bellator,” Artifex teased as he grinned at the squalling infant.

“Aw, poor thing. Your daddies are gawking and teasing while you’re probably hungry.”

The expression on Artifex’s face instantly shifted to mortification. “What do we feed hybrid hatchlings?”

“I have an idea.” She smiled down at their disgruntled newborn. “You’re probably the reason my breasts have been a little sore and heavy lately, aren’t you?” she cooed.

Isa tugged one of her breasts out of the makeshift top and lifted the infant to her nipple. Instantly the baby quieted, both physically and mentally, as she latched on to her nipple.

“Amazing,” Bellator murmured.

“So, what are we naming this little wonder?” Isa beamed at her guys.

“Miracle,” Phara replied.

The name fit. The fact that something so wonderful could be created from people born on entirely different worlds, brought together by a series of unfortunate events, was nothing less than a miracle.

Epilogue

Twenty Years Later

Isabella

Isa stared wistfully at Miracle as she packed her things for her voyage.

My baby’s going to be a queen. A tear slipped down Isa’s cheek remembering the day her miracle was born. And now that miracle was heading to a new hive to become a queen herself.

“Oh Inana, Mom is crying again!” Bella declared, tossing up her hands.

Isa smirked at her third baby girl, born two months after Miracle. Bella was talented and a little dark or emo. She was most certainly Artifex’s child.

The Vorto think that only their consorts are fertile. I’m sure that’s wrong.

In times of crisis, nature had a way of switching things up. For example, baby girls were needed to resurrect the Vorto population, and she gave birth to nothing but girls, one right after another for five months in a row. Her hive thought they’d hit the baby girl lottery. She wasn’t special, though. The same thing happened with all the human queens. It had something to do with their hormones.

Eventually they figured out something for birth control. Oh my was it necessary, because shortly after the girls were born, the rest of the hive started emerging in the chrysalis chamber. They quickly had more baby Vorto than they knew what to do with. Correction, the hive was overjoyed, she was the one who was overwhelmed. In less than a year she was wife to two-hundred and fifty-nine Vorto, and surrogate mother to as many hatchlings.

“Don’t tease your mother,” Phara ruffled Bella’s purple hair.

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“Dad, she’s been crying for the last lunar,” Bella scoffed and left Miracle’s chamber with an exaggerated eye roll.

As tough as Bella acted, she was going to miss her sister a lot.

“Dad, where’s that yellow wrap I really like?” Miracle asked Diligen.

The way the girls called all of the older generation in the hive Dad made Isa smile. The amazing part was that none of the men wanted to know who actually fathered which girl. It didn’t really matter to them. The girls loved all their fathers and were cared for and doted on by every member of the hive. Because of that, the girls grew into confident queens with none of the baggage that weighed Isa down.

“I’m sure the Calabar Hive will have fabric!” Osmia teased his sister.

Miracle spun, her eyes narrowing on Osmia. “It’s no wonder no queen has chosen you and the rest of my brothers.” Miracle made a snarky face.

Family titles were a little weird in the hive, at least for this generation. Osmia wasn’t really Miracle’s brother, he was actually her uncle, like most of the hive. But because he emerged about the same time as the girls, brother was the title that stuck.

“Kyla isn’t ready to leave her hive yet,” Osmia defensively countered.

It was true. Kyla, one of the Nemus Hive daughters, had all but bonded with the next generation of this hive. Isa liked the young queen, knew her since she was a baby. It was good, since Kyla would be living in the mountain with her. It also helped that Isa

was friends with Kyla's mom, Elizabeth.

"Aren't you supposed to be guarding the primary entrance?" Bellator asked Osmia as he entered the chamber. "Remember what we discussed?"

"Of course. I was just saying good journey to my sister." Osmia swiftly hugged Miracle, whispered something that made his sister smile then ran off.

"Discuss what?" Isa's brow furrowed, wondering what could be more important than seeing Miracle off. They weren't at war with any of the hives or even having a spat. It was the warm season and no foul weather was expected. That's why Miracle was traveling to her new hive.

"The..." Bellator made a hand motion that looked like a ship crashing.

"Oh. Yeah." Isa instantly recognized the gesture they'd used over the years so as not to frighten the children.

Decades ago, they'd dealt with the weapons and wreckage from the Manifest crash. The process got all the Vorto hives communicating again, with only a few diplomatic hiccups. They'd done what they could to protect the planet, but there was always a risk Earth would still come. It sounded like the young legionnaires had been briefed on the threat.

"Mom, don't worry about me." Miracle tackled Isa in a bear hug. Miracle literally shifted into afeeroand hugged her.

"Oh my gawd, you know you're a head taller than me!" Isa staggered under the weight of her daughter.

"Easy!" Artifex plucked Miracle off of her, then planted a kiss on her furry cheek before depositing her on the floor. The girls were so spoiled, he didn't even

reprimand her for fluxing into the ferro inside the hive.

Miracle laughed as she changed back again.

“Was it your goal to break our queen, so she can’t possibly miss you?” Phara chuckled as he grabbed Miracle’s hand and they started out of the chamber.

“That sounds about right,” Isa laughed, while looping her arms through Artifex and Bellator’s arm.

“Maybe.” Miracle wagged her brows.

Isa smiled as Miracle’s other siblings joined the impromptu parade out of the hive. She still marveled at her cavernous home and especially the Vorto men who loved her. She was living a life she never could’ve imagined back home. Her gaze landed on her daughter, as she was again reminded of her life on Earth.

“You know, you don’t have to go live with the Calabar Hive. Remember what your dad said, your life is more than your biological imperative.” Isa smiled at Phara, treasuring the day he shared that wisdom with her. “Your true duty is to find fulfillment and joy in the life you were given. And you can change your mind at any time,” Isa said not just for Miracle’s benefit but for all of her daughters.

She wanted her children to know they had a choice, always, and that they were valued and respected. She couldn’t prevent them from feeling the weight of restarting the Vorto population, but she tried to ease it any way she could. There weren’t enough queens for all the hives on the planet, but there were a hell of a lot more than before. So, if any of her babies wanted to stay at home, that was perfectly okay.

“I love you, Mom,” Miracle said in a humoring tone as she smiled at her.

“I love you, too.” Isa blew her daughter a kiss.

Then everyone chimed in with the phrase, and it had Isa grinning from ear to ear.

What had been a death sentence on Earth had become her liberation. Isabella was a queen, Queen of the Tumulus Hive. More importantly she had all the love her heart could withstand, and was free to give it back in equal measure. She was richer than anyone could ever fathom.

The End