



Taken By the Alien Merrow King

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: Destined to dance upon the waves together...

Astra

Astra Jakobson would rather be anywhere other than on this pristine beach, negotiating with aliens. But Sanos is humanity's last chance, and she'll do whatever's necessary to secure clean water and a place to live for her family.

What she didn't prepare for was anti-alien terrorists to start blowing up the place or to find herself in the arms and in the territory of a drop-dead gorgeous alien king. One who claims she's his mate.

Desburchù

Newly crowned King of the Merrow people, Desburchù Ulf is determined to do right by his people. He's just not sure allowing these strange humans to take up residence on his isles is in their best interest.

And then he sees her. His mate. In an instant, his fate is sealed, their futures inexorably entwined. There's no way he's letting her go.

This spicy sci-fi romance is part of the Abducted by the Ruthless Royal: Planet Sanos series and can be read as a standalone. It features one determined shifter king with the ability to manipulate water and his pragmatic human mate. Guaranteed HEA!

Total Pages (Source): 19

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ASTRA

As their capsule set down on the planet Sanos, Astra Jakobson rolled her shoulders and mentally prepared herself for what she needed to do. The fate of Earth, of humanity itself, rested on the shoulders of the seven women on board this little vessel. Their orders were to convince the planet's inhabitants to allow humans to settle there, no matter what it took. If humanity was to have any chance of long-term survival, failure was not an option.

Astra didn't want to be there. If she had her way, she'd be back on board the USS Legacy, working with her team on a natural filtration system design that could help reverse some of the damage generations of pollution and misuse had done to Earth's hydro-ecosystem. Hell, she'd be happier back in cryosleep than here on this island on a freaking alien planet, trying to convince the inhabitants to give humans a chance and a place to live. Personally, if she lived here and some people who'd already trashed their own planet showed up and wanted to move in, she'd send them on their way right quick.

But she'd do what needed to be done for the sake of her younger siblings, if for no one else. That was the deal she'd made with the higher ups to secure what remained of her family a spot on the generation ship. No matter what happened to her down on this water-covered rock in a galaxy far from Earth, her brother and sister would be safe. They'd have a future.

Whatever it takes. I've got this, she told herself, nervously cracking her knuckles as

the capsule settled onto alien soil.Maybe it won't be so bad. Maybe they'll agree to humans moving into their territory without requiring anything in return. Like, out of the kindness of their hearts.

She huffed out a laugh at her atypical burst of optimism. There was no point in sugar-coating this. Of course the aliens would have demands, and it was the duty of the seven women representing the humans of Earth to give the handful of leaders who'd agreed to meet with them whatever they wanted to make it happen.

Smoothing out the wrinkles of her form-fitting uniform, she exchanged nervous glances with her fellow crew members and followed their captain out onto the beach.

A benefit of being nearly six feet tall was that she could easily see over the heads of her fellow sacrifices... er, expedition members. And what she saw was an endless expanse of beautiful, uncontaminated water. Waves crashed and burbled as a soft sea breeze caressed her face, bringing with it the crisp, clean scent of salt, ocean, and sunshine.

Tilting her face towards the bright sun overhead, she inhaled deeply, infusing her lungs with the fresh oxygen, letting it permeate every last red blood cell.Was this what Earth's oceanside beaches once smelled like? Because it's utterly... "Magical," she breathed out, her entire body tingling in response to its first sample of unpolluted, non-recycled air.

Samantha, the team's botanist, gave Astra a nudge and tipped her chin towards the groups of aliens that had formed in a half-circle in front of them, watching their every move."Showtime," the botanist whispered as one of the massive beings escorted their captain into a large military-style tent.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach, and she swallowed hard to keep the protein bar she'd made herself eat earlier where it belonged. She wiped her damp palms over the

moisture-wicking black fabric of her pants and pasted on a fake smile as she turned her attention to the aliens.

From here, they looked similar to humans. They stood upright, had two arms, two legs, and a head. In a departure from human evolution, many of the aliens shifted into water-breathing creatures. A necessity, she supposed, considering the majority of the planet was covered in water. According to the team's extensive briefings, there were land-dwellers, but most of Sanos's population lived beneath the waves.

Interestingly and despite evolutionary variations, the sentient inhabitants shared DNA eerily similar to the human race. But what got the Legacy's scientists most excited was that the aliens appeared to be compatible in other ways as well.

Like when it comes to sex, her brain helpfully supplied. Her brow wrinkled as she pondered the idea of sleeping with one of the massive aliens prowling around on the beach. Would other bits of their anatomy match their size? What about the ones with tails or tentacles? Did they use those during sex? She bit her bottom lip, her cheeks heating as her imagination ran amok.

It was too overwhelming. She dropped her eyes and focused on the ground. The crystalline quality of the sand beneath her feet. The sprawling patches of bright pink and yellow flowers determinedly clinging to the dunes. The intriguing piles of rocks she'd never seen before.

A glimmer of something green winked up at her from a band of gravel curving around the base of some tall grasses with fluffy, waving fronds. Attention diverted, she walked over and hunched down to pick up the rock, dusting away the sand and dirt. A layer of rime covered its surface. She gave it a quick lick, the sharp tang of salt coating her tongue, and pulled a small hand lens from her pocket to get a better look at the stone's structure. It reminded her of a piece of precious jade her geology professor proudly shared with the class ages ago.

“Fascinating,” she said to herself as she admired the green rock nestled in the palm of her hand. It would make a worthy addition to her collection.

“Find something interesting there, little human?” a deep voice asked from far over her head.

Startled from her inspection of a really cool stone, she nearly dropped her treasure. She looked up. Up over long legs and powerful thighs encased in leather pants dyed a green so dark it was practically black. But her gaze got stuck on the sizeable bulge in said pants just above eye-level. “What?” she asked the bulge.

A huff of laughter drifted down to her as a large hand appeared in front of her face. “I asked what you found there.”

She blushed, her gaze shifting to his proffered hand, taking in the pale webbing between the proximal phalanx of his fingers and his thick, claw-like nails before her brain caught up to the reality of the situation. Here she was, crouched on the ground like some rock-obsessed goblin when she should have been politely greeting the aliens and making a good impression.

Oh, god. Did he see me lick that rock? she thought, her cheeks flaming. Her rock-licking, while not the smartest move on an alien planet, was instinctual, a habit she’d picked up from her grandmother, who’d harbored a rock obsession and passed it and her collection along to Astra. Sadly, she’d had to give most of the collection up when they boarded the generation ship.

Clutching her rock and hand lens in a fist, she slid her hand into his and rose to her feet. Her fascinated gaze took in the light, white shirt covering muscled abs and impressively broadshoulders to a face that made her breath catch in her throat. The alien still towering over her despite the fact she was finally standing was perhaps the most gorgeous male she’d ever laid eyes on.

How is it our species look so alike? I mean, just because our DNA is so similar doesn't mean we should look the same. Could this be panspermia in action? Astra pondered the hypothesis that life was carried through the universe via a comet or space dust as she studied him.

A small smirk played over his lips. Eyes as dark and mysterious as the depths of the ocean stared back at her. A thick fringe of black lashes brushed against his high cheekbones as his gaze traveled down her body and back up again. Wavy-curly dark green hair brushed against his neck. And the longer she stood there staring at him, the deeper his smirk became. At least he was amused by her distraction rather than annoyed.

Don't irritate the aliens, Astra, she reminded herself. "Who are you?" she blurted out.

He cocked his head, his hair sliding to the side to reveal a spray of green scales edged in gold. They traveled down his neck and disappeared beneath the collar of his shirt. "I am Merrow," he said, the honeyed lilt of his voice making her knees go a little weak. He stroked a thumb over the back of her hand.

"Merrow? That's your species, right? Not your name." Her skin tingled beneath his warm touch. She gave her hand a discrete tug, trying to free it. "My name is Astra Jakobson," she said, pointing at herself.

There hadn't been much in the briefing about the Merrow. Their ruler didn't reply to his invitation when this whole meet-and-greet-and-beg-for-a-place-to-live gathering was set up or send along any of the requested information. Any data they did have was from the other attendees.

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So, all she knew were basic facts. The Merrow were a species of merpeople. Hair and skin in varying shades of green were most common. While they preferred to live on land, they could partially shift, exchanging legs for a fish tail, and had webbing between their fingers to help them swim faster. They were renowned artists and craftspeople, and rumor had it that their singing could manipulate emotions.

Like sirens from ancient Earth myths, she thought. Does this guy sing? With a deep, melty voice like his, it would be a crying shame if he didn't.

The Merrow stepped closer, encroaching on her space, the gentle yet unbreakable grip he had on her hand making it impossible for her to put more space between them.

"I am Desburchù Ulf," he said, his tongue rolling the 'r' in a way that made her spine tingle. He bent down, the tip of his nose brushing against her neck as he took a deep breath. "You may call me Des."

Did he just smell me? She opened her mouth to tell him to back off before remembering her critical purpose here on this planet. Snapping at one of the aliens, even if he and his people weren't officially part of this meeting, wasn't a diplomatic response. After all, what if that was the Merrow way of greeting people? The brief didn't say one way or the other and, honestly, she couldn't afford to take the chance.

Besides, she kind of liked how he was so much taller than her and the way the salty-woody scent of him teased her senses.

A series of explosions near the tents shattered the intensity of the moment between

them.

Des wrapped an arm around her waist and spun her around, protecting her from harm, and barked out orders at the people standing a discrete distance from them.

She'd been so entranced by him, she hadn't noticed them or much of anything else, for that matter. She hadn't realized how far she'd drifted from the capsule, the other groups of aliens, and the rest of her team. Or how isolated and distant she was from the chaos near the tents.

A terrible thought occurred to her. "Is this you?" she asked of the male currently cradling her in his arms. God, I hope not.

He glanced down at her, his dark brows snapping together like thunderclouds. "What? No. Why would you think that?" He sounded offended, which she took as a good sign that this wasn't his doing. "The beings attacking the summit are anti-alien terrorists. Been causing trouble since you humans first made contact. They don't want you here. And they definitely don't want any of us to allow you to settle in our territories."

"We need to get over there and help them," she said, putting a hand against his chest and pushing.

He didn't budge. "You're safer here with me. Besides, if the other kings can't protect their own women, they don't deserve them."

What did he say? "What? No." She shook her head. "That's not... what?"

The weapons fire and explosions were closer now. People were shouting, gruff voices punctuated by more blasts, but her translator wasn't picking up what they were saying.

It didn't matter anyway. She needed to get to her team and help them fight off the aggressors. All of them had gone through extensive survival training alongside negotiation tactics and, while she was far from the top of her class, she could fire a gun and still have half a chance of winging her target. She wasn't about to stand here and watch as terrorists attacked their first and best chance of finding a home for her people.

With a twist of her wrist, she broke his hold, wiggled out of his embrace, and ran into the chaos.

2

DESBURCHÙ

From his position on the rolling dunes overlooking the beach, Desburchù Ulfmar, King of the Merrow Isles and the Storming Seas, watched the small capsule touch down and spit out seven humans. All female, he noted. Interesting choice on the part of the humans. More tactical than he expected. It gave him hope that this wouldn't be the complete disaster he originally envisioned.

As the humans disembarked, the other planetary leaders broke off from their huddled conversations and drifted towards them, drawn in like sharks sensing blood in the water. This should be amusing, he thought, folding his arms over his chest as he watched the show from a distance.

“Why are we here again? I thought you didn't want anything to do with these talks.” Standing seven feet tall and built like a bull seal, Gunnar was a big fan of schedules and organization and strongly disliked it when Des gave into his impulses and dragged them somewhere unplanned. He tacked on a belated “Sire” after one of his team standing behind them discretely cleared her throat.

Des huffed out a quiet laugh. Okay, yes. Technically, Gunnar shouldn't be questioning Des's decisions, especially not in front of other people. But Gunnar had been his friend long before he was his bodyguard, and Des's change in status from spare heir to king was still fresh. Neither of them were adjusting to the shift fast enough to suit decorum.

Besides, Des appreciated Gunnar's blunt ways and straight talk. He didn't want to lose that because of his fancy new title. Maybe I should just make him an advisor and be done with it, he thought. Something to consider.

"We're here because some of the strongest rulers on the planet are here, and I'm curious why they decided to treat with these humans."

"Ah," Gunnar said with a nod. "So, gathering intel then."

"Indeed. Dipping my toe into unknown waters, seeing if it's somewhere we might want to swim," he said, shading his eyes and squinting towards the pack of females still huddled together next to their spacecraft.

They were too far away for him to get a good look at the offerings, though, and he wanted to see what the humans had sent. Plus, he needed to make his presence known, greet his allies, and do a bit of politicking, even though that was one of the last things he wanted to do.

He'd been content to leave the politics, dealmaking, and glad-handing to his brother. But then the bonehead went and got himself killed while hunting down a rogue sharktopus last year, and now Des was stuck in the role instead. "Dammit, Isak. Had go to play the big hero and now look where we are," he muttered, braiding three fingers together and tapping them over his heart in Isak's memory.

Suddenly feeling confined, he unfastened the top two buttons of his shirt, rolled up

his sleeves, and drew in a deep breath of salty sea air. What he wouldn't give to have his brother back.

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But Isak was gone and Des was king. His people needed him. As their ruler, he needed to forge stronger bonds with allies, make new connections with potential trade partners, and weigh in on the benefits and liabilities of allowing humans to settle on this planet. His people deserved nothing less than his best.

Decision made, he said, "Let's go."

"Sire," Gunnar grunted and motioned to the protection detail, who fanned out as Des strode down the incline.

But he didn't get far. One female had wandered away from the pack. Something more interesting than the unfamiliar beings waiting to speak with her had caught her attention. "How intriguing," he murmured. As one who tended to swim upstream rather than following the pod himself, he was drawn towards the human who risked irritating some of the most powerful beings on a planet, beings her people desperately needed to impress if they wanted to make Sanos their new home.

He had to admit, she was a stunning specimen. Taller than her fellow beings, she was nearly the height of the average Merrow female. Her form-fitting uniform of deep cerulean blue showcased her athletic form, the gentle curve of her waist, and pleasing size of her breasts. But what really drew his eye was the straight waterfall of icy yellow hair spilling over her shoulders and down her back.

Not yellow. Humans call that color blonde when it's hair, he reminded himself, wanting to get things right. Even though he hadn't originally planned on attending this summit, he'd studied all the information about humans he could get his hands on.

From everything he'd read, humans were fascinating beings, innovative and creative. What he couldn't figure out was how in the depths they'd managed to damage their ecosystem so completely that they were now forced to beg for berth on another planet. Why hadn't they used their ingenuity to try and reverse the damage done? And how had they let it get so bad in the first place?

Those unanswered questions were another part of what changed his mind about attending. That and pure, unadulterated nosiness and curiosity about humans in general. Didn't mean he necessarily wanted them living in his territory, but he was interested.

As he strolled closer, the female crouched down, inspected a rock, and licked it.

"Did she just lick that rock?" one of his protection detail whispered before Gunnar growled at them.

"I have to meet her," Des said. The strength of the impulse surprised him, and he found himself moving in her direction before he could stop himself.

"What about the others? We're close enough that they know you're here. Protocol demands you greet them before approaching a human, Des," Gunnar said.

A throat cleared behind them.

"Sire," Gunnar added with a sigh. "This is highly indecorous."

"You're right," Des said, keeping the same trajectory. He'd deal with the repercussions later. Right now, his primary drive was to speak with the blonde human.

Gunnar merely grunted and shifted the detail to better cover Des's back.

He stood over her for a solid three waves, but she was so absorbed in her treasure, she didn't notice him. Finally, he said, "Find something interesting there, little human?"

At the sound of his voice, she startled, nearly dropping her rock as she spun in her crouch to look up at him.

He swallowed back a snicker when her gaze paused at his cock to ask what he'd said. She was even more stunning up close. His fingers itched to gather up that glorious mane of hair of hers, to bury his face in her neck and breathe her scent deep into his lungs. Instead, he offered her a hand, hoping she'd take it so at least he'd get to see if her creamy white skin was as soft as it looked.

His breath caught when she took his hand and stood, her eyes meeting his.

It was like falling into a bottomless pool, and he found himself drowning in their icy blue depths, unable and unwilling to pull himself free. Mate, the deepest part of his soul hummed. The corner of his mouth quirked up into a dopey grin before he could stop it. He'd never expected to find a mate, especially not one from a different planet. True mates amongst the Merrow were more rare and precious than emeralds.

"Who are you?" she asked abruptly.

"I am Merrow." He stroked the back of her hand, the feel of her soft skin beneath his sensitive thumb pad driving him wild.

There was a pause, two small lines appearing between her pale brows as she studied him. Then she licked her lips, introduced herself, and asked his name.

He answered as if by rote, all his attention on the delicate pink tongue that darted out to wet her plump lips. Astra, he thought, savoring it. Beautiful.

His hand tightened on hers and he stepped closer, desperate to touch her, to taste her. Leaning down, he pressed his nose to her neck, breathing her in. Beneath the aroma of acrid chemical cleanser and recycled water was a hauntingly familiar fragrance that felt like home. She smelled like the sweetest ambrosia and, now that he'd caught her scent, he was never letting her go.

Explosions shattered the perfection of the moment. With a possessive growl, he wrapped her in his arms and put himself between her and danger. "Gunnar," he barked, cursing himself for wearing his ceremonial sword rather than a more practical weapon.

The attackers were most likely part of the anti-alien faction that had been making noise ever since the humans parked that massive ship of theirs at the edge of Sanos's atmosphere and asked if they could make it their home. Seemed they'd escalated from protests to outright violence.

"On it." Gunnar drew his weapon and snapped out orders, moving to protect Des's flank.

"Was this you?" the woman in his arms asked, her eyes wide.

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“No. Why would you think that?” he said. How could she ask that of him? Did she not realize they were mates? He frowned, trying to recall if humans even recognized mates as the Merrow did.

“We need to get over there and help them,” she said, touching his chest.

He placed his hand over hers and gave her a reassuring squeeze. “You’re safer here with me.” They’d be even safer once he got her on his ship and away from here, but he was proud of her desire to protect her fellow humans. His mate was a brave one. “If the others can’t protect their own women, they don’t deserve them,” he added. He tipped his chin at Gunnar and pointed towards the tall dune their ship was parked behind.

Gunnar nodded and gave the rest of the team the ‘tighten up and let’s get the fuck out of here’ signal.

But the female in his arms wasn’t swimming in the same stream as he was. Quick as a minnow, she twisted out of his grasp and sprinted across the sands towards the fighting and explosions.

“Shit,” he growled, pulling the sword from the sheath on his back and charging after her.

“What am I doing, what am I doing, what am I doing?” Astra chanted to herself as she raced across the beach. “Do I even have a plan? Fuck no. I don’t even have a weapon.”

This was supposed to be a peaceful summit between alien races, a negotiation that most definitely was not supposed to involve explosions and anti-human terrorists shooting at them. God, but she just wanted to go home. Except that wasn’t an option.

“Female,” a cranky-sounding Des bellowed behind her. “Stop! This is not safe.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” she yelled over her shoulder, scooping up a thick piece of driftwood on the way. “But I have to help.”

She didn’t slow down as she approached the line of tents. Many of them had collapsed beneath the barrage and although they looked to be of a sturdy fabric, none of them were on fire. Interesting, she thought, then shook her head. Nope. Stay focused. Don’t let your curiosity distract you. Again.

Swinging her driftwood like a bat, she cracked it over the head of an alien with acid yellow hair pointing a weapon at one of her crewmates. A massive being — one Astra recognized from the group of aliens they were supposed to meet — scooped her teammate into his arms. He gave Astra a sharp nod as he stuck something on the woman’s face and disappeared beneath the waves with her.

Still clutching her makeshift weapon, she paused, trying to decipher the chaos of smoke and explosions, when muscular arms wrapped around her, taking her captive. With a screech, she threw her head back and rammed it against her assailant’s nose with a crunch of cartilage, fighting with all her might.

“Great fucking depths, it’s me. Stop struggling,” Des growled, his words oddly muffled.

Her body relaxed at the sound of a familiar voice. “Des. I thought you were one of those terrorist aliens.”

As if to acknowledge that her reaction wasn’t an overreaction, a nearby explosion kicked up an eruption of sand.

She flinched and twisted around in his arms to see blood dripping from his nose. “Oh, god,” she gasped, a hand going to her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

He grinned, bright red staining sharp white teeth. “Nice shot, sweetheart. Pretty sure that hard head of yours broke it.”

She tried to respond with a witty comeback, but all that emerged was a little eep of pain.

“Astra?” he said, shifting his stance so he could better see her face.

Pain radiated from her lower back, just below her ribs. “Ow,” she managed to say. She touched her side, her fingers coming away wet with blood.

“Fuck, you’re hurt,” he said, scooping her up in his arms. “Gunnar, retreat with cover fire. Shoot anyone who gets too close in the head.”

It hurt to breathe. She coughed, a spray of red staining his once-pristine white shirt. “There’s a med kit in the capsule.”

But he didn’t turn back towards her ship. In fact, he picked up speed, racing over the dunes like his life depended on it.

“Where are you going?” she asked. She wanted to tell him to turn around, to patch her up and help the others, but it was as if all the strength was draining out of her. Her

survival training told her there was a high probability that she was bleeding out. Add in her difficulty breathing, it was likely that she had a punctured lung.

Des looked down at her, his handsome face pinched with worry. For her? But he barely knew her. Probably didn't even want humans living on his planet, much less in his territory. So what was with the sudden concern?

"Hang on, my brave mate," he said, carrying her aboard a sleek little ship that looked like a fancy private jet. "I've got you. I'll take care of you."

She stared up at him, her brow crinkling. Mate? she thought. And then she passed the fuck out. It seemed the right thing to do.

DESBURCHÙ

She went limp in his arms, and his heart stopped. He'd only just found her. He couldn't lose her. "Gunnar," he shouted, desperately clutching her to his chest, willing her to live. How was it humans were so delicate? There was nothing in the information packet about how easily they were injured. How much blood could she afford to lose, anyway? She might be drawing her last breaths for all he knew.

As the other team members secured the ship and prepped to leave quickly, Gunnar pressed a button to convert two of the chairs into a couch and grabbed an orange lifesaver from a storage locker behind the co-pilot's seat. "You have to put her down, Des, so we can get a lifesaver on her."

"But she's human," he said, still grasping her tight. She was even paler than he remembered, her once-ruby red lips bloodless. "What if the lifesaver can't do its job?"

"Human biology is very similar to ours, remember?" Gunnar said in a low, soothing tone even as he gave the pilot a thumbs-up sign, signalling a go for takeoff. "Put her on the couch, Des. We can't stop the bleeding while she's in your arms."

The sleek ship shuttered as it lifted off, carrying them back to their kingdom in the north.

Des dropped to his knees and carefully lay Astra down on the cream cushions, not

caring if the bloodstains ruined them. They were replaceable. She was not.

She was so still, so pale. He peeled her out of her uniform jacket and tugged up the hem of her blood-soaked tank top, raising her torso slightly while Gunnar placed and secured the lifesaver over her wound.

The emergency medical device hummed and clicked as it ran diagnostics, and Des held his breath as the light around the edge of a square screen projecting her vitals pulsed red. He didn't let it out until the machine gave a satisfied beep, its indicator light switching to a steady green.

Gunnar placed a heavy hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "She's stable, sire. The lifesaver is doing its job."

It was. Already, her color was coming back. He sank into a chair at the head of the couch and fastened his seat belt. The tentacles of fear crushing his heart loosened their grip, and he could finally think straight again. He blew out a hard breath, scrubbed a shaky hand through his hair, and said, "Take us to Skualan."

Gunnar probed the area around Des's nose before snapping it back in place and handing him an ice pack. "Winipoi is closer," he suggested, his attempt at being practical.

It was and they had a decent medical facility there, but it wasn't good enough. Not for his mate. His people were the best, and now that she wasn't on the edge of death, he didn't want to settle. "I want her — no, I need her in my territory." Leaning over, he brushed damp strands of hair off her forehead, her skin warm beneath his touch. He looked over at his friend buckled into the seat across the narrow aisle from him. "Gunnar, this human. She's my mate."

The ship was small enough that his entire protection detail heard his claim. Everyone

except Gunnar froze at his declaration, eyes widening, jaws dropping. For him, especially as king and leader of his people, to claim a mate was nothing short of miraculous and completely unexpected. It didn't matter that she was human and not of Sanos. True mates were blessings from the Universe and something to be celebrated.

Gunnar nodded sagely, a smug smile on his face. "Knew it. Set, you owe me fifty credits."

Set grumbled in defeat and tossed a sliver chip to Gunnar, who caught it handily and tucked it away in his jacket pocket.

Des raised an eyebrow. "You were betting on me?"

"Of course we were," Gunnar said with a wink. "We're trained observers. The best of the best. There you were, all geared up to schmooze with the other planetary power players and suddenly, everything you planned to accomplish at the summit was flushed out to sea, and you're headed towards this odd human female like a barracuda after prey. You're impulsive at times, Des, but you're not foolish nor capricious. I knew there was a good reason for your actions."

"She's not odd," Des said, stroking the back of his finger over her soft cheek. She was perfect. His mate.

"The female licks rocks, sire. As unusual as they are, I cannot imagine most humans go around licking random rocks they find on a beach," Gunnar replied, the corner of his mouth kicking up. "But odd is good. We like odd."

"True." Des himself was considered a bit odd for a royal. His brother always said it was lucky he wasn't first born and destined to inherit the title, considering how much Des loathed all the trappings and fawning of the court. He was much better suited to

his now-former role as an officer in the Royal Navy. He shook his head. Strange how the Universe worked. “Tell meshe’ll be okay, Gunnar. I don’t think I can lose anyone else so soon after Isak.”

“Your mate is going to be fine. We’ll be on Skualan soon enough and get her all patched up, good as new. Hang in there, Des.”

5

ASTRA

Astra swam back to consciousness to find herself in an strange bed and lay there for a moment, staring at the pale wood beadboard of an unfamiliar ceiling. She shifted, the shushing rustle of crisp white sheets gliding over her legs. Her body ached as if she’d run too far, too fast, and she felt strangely tingling all over. But she wasn’t dead, so she’d take it as a win.

A large hand covered hers, the pebbly texture of his fingers making her skin prickle. She turned her head to see Des sitting next to her bed, a faint smile playing across his lips. He appeared worse for wear, a shadow of growth covering his jaw, dark smudges beneath his sea kelp green eyes, and hair that looked like he’d been standing in a wind tunnel. Those surface imperfections didn’t change the fact that when she saw him, her heart skipped a beat and her entire body flushed.

What’s that about? she wondered, poking at the sensation. A residual effect of whatever they did to me to fix me?

Even as she thought it, she knew that was just a story she was telling herself. The truth was, she was incredibly attracted to Des. Disconcerting. And yet, she was cognizant that she and the other women on this mission agreed to do whatever was necessary to secure refuge. They all knew that seducing the aliens, while not

explicitly required by the higher-ups, was on the table. But she didn't expect to have in-her-pants feelings for one of them. She rarely had those types of feelings for anyone. It was throwing her off her game and she'd never had much game to begin with.

"There you are, sweetheart," Des said, the rich burr in his voice caressing her senses like the glide of silk over skin.

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“Where am I?” she asked, her words crackling. “How long was I out? Is everyone safe?” She licked her dry lips and swallowed hard, wincing at the scratchiness in her throat.

His chair screeched back over the floor as he leapt to his feet to adjust the bed so she was sitting up comfortably. “You’re on Skualan, our capital and the largest of the Merrow Isles.” He slid another pillow behind her head and handed her a glass of water, smoothing a large hand over the crown of her head, as if reassuring himself she was still here. “It’s approaching sundown, a little more than twenty-four of your human hours later. We’ve been in contact with the other leaders. All the human delegates are safe. You can relax and recover without concern.”

“And the anti-alien group that attacked the summit?” she asked, almost afraid to ask what happened to them. The thing was, she could understand where they were coming from. If strangers from another galaxy showed up on Earth, she was certain there’d have been violent protests against letting them settle there, too.

He pointed towards her glass. “Drink your water, Astra, and don’t worry about the terrorists. We are handling them.”

But she couldn’t let it go. “Handling them as in...?”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. “Some are dead. As we track them down, some will resist capture and choose death over incarceration. However, others will be brought to justice and made to answer for their actions.” Noticing her still cradling the full glass in her hands, his lips flattened. He placed a finger on the base of the glass and directed it to her mouth, forcing her to drink the precious liquid or risk wasting it if it

spilled down her front.

The water tasted like salty sweetness and joy, clean and fresh beyond her wildest imaginings. Nothing like the recycled hydration liquid she'd been drinking her entire life, the one that claimed to be at least sixty percent actual water. That was all stale disappointment and crushed dreams. She took another gulp, savoring the crisp flavor as the cool liquid slid down her throat, before draining the rest of it.

Des let out a soft groan. She gave him a quizzical look over the rim of her now-empty glass. "What?"

He huffed out a laugh and shook his head as he took the glass from her and refilled it from the large pitcher sitting on a low bedside table. "It's nothing."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Just." He ran a hand through his hair, poofing it up even higher and solving the mystery of his wind tunnel hairstyle. "I've never seen anyone get such pleasure from a simple glass of water."

"You've never been to Earth," she said with a little snort, her fingers brushing against his as she accepted the drink, a light shock jolting through her when they made contact. "Water is the most precious substance on our planet. Same aboard the generation ship. This is the first taste of non-recycled water I've ever had."

She drained the glass again, filling her belly and quenching her thirst. She relished the ability to drink as much as she wanted without worrying about rations and shortages. It felt decadent and, if she thought about it and all the people still stuck on the Legacy and back on Earth without easy access to clean water, somewhat shameful. But this was why she was here. So that everyone would have the opportunity to drink clean water to their hearts' content.

“Appalling.” He shook his head. “Water is life.”

“It is.” She twirled the glass in her hand, watching the remaining beads of water slide down the side. “Humans won’t survive much longer without access to fresh water,” she said, looking at him through her eyelashes to gauge his reaction.

“Are we now entering negotiations, sweetheart?” He gave her a sly smile. “What will you give me if I let some of your humans settle in my territory?”

“Did you say ‘your territory’?” she asked, nibbling on the inside of her cheek.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” His smile widened, his right cheek dimpling. “I run things around here.”

6

ASTRA

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach at the look on his face, the pieces falling into place. Of course, he was the leader of the Merrow people. After all, who else would have his own fancy ship, a cadre of bodyguards, and the ability to stroll into a closed meeting of planetary leaders without anyone stopping him?

“See, this is what happens when little humans skip out on formal introductions to bravely run into dangerous situations woefully under armed where they wind up getting shot and nearly bleeding to death,” he said with a tsk and a disappointed shake of his head.

He thought she was brave. Delight rushed through her, warming her to her very soul. No one had ever called her brave before. Emboldened, she cocked her head and returned his mischievous grin with one of her own. “So, it’s Desburchù, the number

one decision maker, then?"

"Ooh, intelligent and stunningly beautiful," he said, capturing her hand in his and holding it to his heart. "You are truly a catch."

Her breath hitched as their gazes met and she tumbled into a sea of deep green, unable and unwilling to look away.

"King Desburchù Ulf, Ruler of these rugged Merrow Isles and the surrounding Storming Seas, at your service." He lifted her hand, his warm lips skimming over her knuckles. "Also known as the biggest fish in these seas. You may leave any offerings or bribes at the door."

"That's a fancy title you've got there, Mr. Big Fish," she said. She kept her tone light, but there was something heavy about the moment growing between them, something that felt important in a way she'd never experienced before.

She adjusted her position in the bed, crossed her legs, and eased closer, the sheet shushing as she moved. Her hand trembled as she gave into the overwhelming impulse to stroke the scruff along his jaw. It tickled her fingertips. Heat flared in her belly, toasting the nervous butterflies to ash.

"The fanciest," he said, leaning into her touch as he eased onto the bed beside her.

He tipped her head back with a finger under her chin. For a brief moment, the world froze as they stared into each other's eyes. Then his mouth crashed down on hers, and her universe shifted on its axis.

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Instinctively, she gasped beneath his touch, and he slid his tongue into her mouth. Every nerve, all of her senses ignited as his tongue danced with hers, each swirl and tug pulling on something deep inside her.

She came up onto her knees, desperate to get closer, to press her body to his and touch every hard inch of him. With a growl, he wrapped an arm around her waist and hauled her to him, her breasts crushed against his chest as she straddled his thick thigh.

“Astra,” he breathed, nipping her bottom lip and along her jaw. Her head dropped back, baring her throat. He slipped a hand under her thin t-shirt, his fingers splaying over her back, and kissed his way down to the long column to the base of her throat, his tongue teasing the dip of her clavicle. “You are so beautiful, sweetheart. I can’t wait to taste all of you.”

She gasped as he smoothed a hand over her breast and gave it a light squeeze, plumping it up. Bending his head, he pulled her shirt-covered nipple into his mouth, the dampened fabric rubbing against the sensitive peak with each stroke of his tongue.

“Des,” she said, her voice husky. She wound her fingers through his silky hair. “Oh, god. That feels so good.” She arched her back, rocking her core against his thigh as the heat in her belly built into a conflagration.

Was making out with the hot king what she was supposed to be doing right now? Most likely not. She probably should be focusing on negotiations and convincing him to let her people settle here. But holy shit, he kissed her like he couldn’t get enough,

and being with him like this felt so good.

No. Not just good, she thought. Right. Like she'd found something — someone — precious here on this alien planet, someone who, if she allowed it, would change her life forever. Her breath hitched, her heart pounding harder at the enormity of it all.

Des lifted his head from her breast, leaving behind a wet spot on her shirt from his attentions. "Tell me what you need, sweetheart," he said, skimming a hand down her back and slipping it into her panties to cup a butt cheek.

He shifted his weight, the narrow bed creaking beneath his movement, and dragged her farther up his thigh, the rasp of his pants creating the most delicious friction against her clit. She let out a shaky gasp as the hard length of his cock pressed against her thigh.

"Des," she said, unsure of how to answer him. Yes, she wanted him, wanted to strip him bare, to see exactly how different he was from her, to explore every inch of him, preferably with her tongue. She wanted to wrap her legs around his waist as he sank deep into her, his cock gliding over her most sensitive bits.

At the same time, it was too much, too fast. She thought she was mentally prepared to do whatever she needed to do to secure her people a home, but this was not it. Continuing with whatever this was right now seemed a lot more ruthless and calculating than she was comfortable with.

Not that she disapproved of anyone who chose that path. Far from it. But for her, personally, she didn't want to regret her choices or take the chance that moving too quickly without having an actual discussion with Des first might destroy the delicate, nascent connection growing between them.

"I think..." She swallowed hard, trying to figure out exactly how to say what needed

to be said without blowing everything she was supposed to be working towards or making him think she was rejecting him. Because it wasn't that. It was just that there were outside forces at work here. Things more important than her wanting to get it on with the hot alien. "I want... but I can't..."

"I understand," he said, stroking her jawline before placing a chaste kiss on her forehead.

Confused, she eased off him, her body unfulfilled and tingling. "You understand what?" she asked, tugging the long shirt down over the tops of her thighs and settling back on her heels. "Because I didn't say anything. Not really."

He reached out and tugged a long lock of hair over her shoulder. "But you did, lovely Astra. Your hesitation spoke volumes." He slid off the bed and gave her a wry grin. "And I want your full submission, willingly and enthusiastically. So, generous Merrow that I am, I will give you time. Not much, mind, and I warn you, I will be launching a full offensive to earn that submission."

Her brow wrinkled. "I still don't get it. Why would you do that?" He was king and she was a stranger here, no allies to be found. Technically, he could do whatever he wanted and no one would stop him.

He leaned over her, resting his fists on either side of her hips, his massive body making her feel delicate as he caged her. "Because, sweetheart, you are my mate. Blessed by the Universe to be together and all that good stuff."

Her jaw dropped and she goggled up at him wide-eyed.

"Huh. That was my reaction at first, too." Huffing out a quiet laugh, he gently closed her mouth and booped the tip of her nose with a large finger. "Now, go enjoy a long, hot shower and prepared to be courted to within an inch of your life, my lovely

mate,” he said, giving her a cocky wink.

7

DESBURCHÙ

Des tugged at the sleeves of his pale blue shirt and checked the mirror before pulling it off with a dissatisfied groan. “Are these my only options?” he asked, tossing the rejected item on top of the growing pile of colorful fabric on the floor.

“So what, now you’re picky about what you wear?” Gunnar asked, raising an eyebrow as he watched Des pace across the hand-braided charcoal gray carpet of Coral Cottage’s main bedroom. “Since when?”

“Since I’m trying to impress my mate,” he growled, plucking the last shirt off the fluffy white duvet. “I need to look my best.” He shrugged into the dark green shirt and scrubbed a hand through his freshly washed hair.

“You’re very pretty, sire,” Gunnar said, biting back a grin. “I’m sure she’ll be entranced. And if she’s not, you can always bring her to your castle instead of this little hideaway you love so much, show her the Royal Treasury and all the shiny things inside. Or the Grand Library. She seems like the type of female more charmed by books than jewels. Either way, impressive.”

Des harrumphed. “Are you winding me up, Gunnar?” he said as he tucked the shirt into his neatly pressed black pants and slid his feet into a pair of matching boots polished to a high sheen. “Because I could order you strung up by your toes and no one would dare question me. I am king, you know.”

“I would never be so disrespectful, sire,” Gunnar deadpanned, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the closed door.

“Of course you would,” Des said with a snort. “Which is why I like you. You keep me grounded.” He rolled his shoulders and rubbed the stubble on his jaw. He thought about shaving but remembered the way Astra stroked his scruff and decided against it. Maybe she’d do that again. He hoped so. “Speaking of, what do you think of these humans?”

“Do you want to know because you’re reconsidering letting some of the aliens take up residence on our islands?” Gunnar asked. “Or because of your mate happens to be human?”

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He tapped a fist on the intricately carved post of the enormous canopy bed, considering. “Both,” he said finally.

“Personally, I don’t have a problem with some humans living here, as long as they learn the rules and respect our culture, and most people I’ve talked to agree,” Gunnar said with a shrug. “Besides, we could use some fresh blood in these waters, considering our declining population.”

“You’re not wrong about that.” Des shrugged into a calf-length black wool coat, smoky gray fur lining the collar.

Both Des’s father and brother had attempted to address the population issue, offering housing, bonuses, and other perks to anyone who took up residency within their kingdom’s borders. Some had accepted the offer, but not nearly enough to write their listing boat.

Located to the far north, their territory was more isolated than most, bound by cold, dangerous waters. The ancient seacreatures who made the deepest fissures and caverns home patrolled the depths and tended to be hostile to intruders unless arrangements were made first. While their universities boasted some of the best science and arts programs on the planet, drawing students and experts alike to their waters, few made their stays on the Isles permanent. Adding some hardy humans into the mix might be exactly the solution they were looking for.

“And like I said, your mate seems a bit odd, so she’ll fit right in around here.”

“She will, won’t she?” A grin flashed over Des’s face as he pictured her interacting

with his people. Their people. He couldn't wait to introduce her to them and this territory that he loved.

"Where are we going?" Astra asked, her arm twined through his. She was wearing a navy blue wool overcoat with a full skirt and hand stitched embroidery along the cuffs and hem that brought out the sparkle in her icy blue eyes. Her hair fell like a sleek blonde waterfall down her back and a crisp spring wind off the northern coast brought out roses of color in her cheeks. The low heels of her black boots tapped over the town's ancient cobblestones, the sound resonating off the stonework of the houses lining the street.

Unable to stop himself, Des leaned down and kissed the top of her head, breathing in the subtle scent of heather and pine needles from her shampoo.

"And what was that for?" she said, shooting him a suspicious look.

"It's so hard to resist you, looking like a gorgeous package I can't wait to unwrap." He grinned down at her. "Why? Am I not allowed to kiss my mate?"

"I'm not the biggest fan of public displays of affection is all," she grumbled. "I don't love feeling like people are watching a private moment."

He ushered her over to an empty space next to a large bay display window filled with books and stationery supplies. "Then I apologize for my boldness," he said, facing her. "What are you comfortable with, if I may ask?"

She nibbled her bottom lip as she considered her answer. Des swallowed hard, the slight gesture making him feral. He wanted to grab her and kiss her hard, suck that lip into his mouth and taste her. Shit, he thought, his cock stiffening as his imagination ran wild. It was going to be a serious challenge to keep his hands off his mate, public or not. But he didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

“Holding hands is fine. I just...” She nibbled on that lip again, her teeth white against deep red. “I’ve never enjoyed being the center of attention. I’ve always felt too tall and awkward and out of place, no matter where I am. Because of that, any undue attention makes me unsettled. And, because you’re Mr. Big Fish around here, there will always be people watching, especially in public places like this.” She gestured at the crowd eddying around them.

To him, it was the same as every other day. Yes, people were watching, but most were at least making an attempt at being subtle about it, rather than stopping in the middle of the road and staring. For the most part, Merrow tended to mind their business even when it came to their leaders. Of course, that didn’t mean they wouldn’t meet up at the pub later and gossip like fishwives about him and everyone else they’d run across during their day.

Either way, he’d learned early on not to pay them much mind. But he could see how it might be disconcerting, especially to someone who’d never had to deal with that level of regard before.

“As much as I like your kisses, I can’t. Not in public, anyway. I mean, maybe someday I won’t mind so much, once I get to know you and your people better, but right now, I’m saying no.” She cocked her head, looking up at him through her lashes. “Okay?”

She likes my kisses, he thought, biting back a triumphant grin. And she wants to get to know me better.

Not that he was planning to let her leave, anyway. She was his mate. He’d stolen her from that meeting fair and square. Her place was at his side and it was his responsibility — no, his honor — to make certain she was happy there.

“Love, the last thing I want to do is make you uncomfortable.” He took her hand and

placed it in the crook of his arm as they resumed their walk. There were plenty of other ways he could show his affection without embarrassing her. He bent close and whispered in her ear, “I’ll save my kisses for later when it’s just the two of us. For now, anyway.”

The pink on her cheeks deepened. She cleared her throat. “So, where did you say we were going?”

As the sun sank behind the seaside town’s skyline, solar lights kicked on, casting the town in a warm glow. Skualan was the oldest of the Merrow settlements, and beneath its ancient stones lay a bright, modern society that honored its past while looking to the future. He wanted to explore every inch of it with her, to show her all his territory had to offer. He was starting with this. “Oh, you’re in for a treat,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Are you ready for a party?”

8

DESBURCHÙ

“A party?” She brightened.

“Yep,” he said. Then he caught himself and asked, “You up for it? How are you feeling?” He was a terrible mate, dragging her all over town when she was recovering. Granted, his people’s health-focused nano tech was top notch and could have a Merrow up and moving within a few hours, but she was human.

Her lips twisted. “I’m fine. Why?”

“Well, you did get shot yesterday.”

“And your fancy tech fixed me right up. Barely even a scar to remember my

heroically stupid run into danger.” She touched her side before changing the subject.
“So, tell me what we’re celebrating.”

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His people's history had always fascinated him, and this tale was particularly bloody. He frowned, wondering if maybe this wasn't the best story to tell his lady love when he was trying to seduce her.

But then he gave a mental shrug. She'd more than proved her fortitude and grit when she ran towards danger and she'd shaken off getting shot like it was nothing. She'd fit right in around here, and he wanted her to know it.

"Well, sweetheart, today is an important day in our history. It's the first day of Bright Night, a three-day festival commemorating the defeat of the Unkillable Leviathan."

A group of boisterous twenty-somethings wearing horns and tentacles ran by shouting, "Death to the Unkillable! Death to the tyrant!"

Everyone within earshot echoed the chant and cheered, waving long red tassels above their heads.

"Tell me the story," she said, nestling closer to his side as a cool spring breeze ruffled her hair. "Because now I'm intrigued. Why is everyone so eager to celebrate this guy's demise? And what's with the tentacle hats?"

"The hats are just for fun," he said with a laugh. "You ready for a story filled with death and dismemberment?"

"Bring it on."

"Okay, here goes. Generations ago, Inbhir Na Clem, otherwise known as the

Unkillable Leviathan, once ruled most of the northern seas with an iron fist,” Des said, settling into storyteller mode as he enjoyed his mate’s closeness. It was a simple pleasure, one he couldn’t get enough of. “And he despised the Merrow for their ability to shed their scales and walk on land, something he was unable to do. So dark was his hatred and jealousy that he ordered his army to hunt down any Merrow who dared set fin in water, pull them deep under the waves, and drown them.”

She cocked her head. “But how? Don’t you have the ability to breathe underwater when you do your shifting thing?”

“There are some merfolk with that ability, but not us. What we do have is a large lung capacity. We’re able to hold our breath for up to about thirty of your human minutes while swimming underwater, but then we need to surface for oxygen or we’ll drown. Now, can I get back to the story? Or would you prefer a detailed scientific breakdown of our biology instead?” he teased.

“Why not both?” she said with a husky laugh. “But the story first, please. I’m invested.”

He paused to buy her a seasoned meat skewer from one of the bustling food carts parked on every corner.

She sniffed it, deemed it acceptable, and took a big bite. She fanned her mouth between chews. “Yummy,” she said, her mouth still full. “But so hot.”

He laughed. “You’re supposed to let it cool down first,” he said as he guided her along the busy, winding street towards their destination.

“I’ll know that for the next time.” She took another big bite, repeating the process.

Shaking his head as she enthusiastically devoured the meat stick, he returned to his

story. “For too long, Inbhir whittled away at our people. Though we returned the favor, there have never been a great number of us, definitely not enough to fight back against his endless tide of troops. We were trapped. Some even became fully land-bound, no longer able to shift into their other selves.”

She made a little noise of distress. Automatically, he went to pull her close and give her a kiss before stopping himself, remembering what she’d said about disliking public affection. As much as he wanted to comfort her, to touch more than just an arm or hand, he resisted. Boundaries were important, and he wasn’t about to go pushing hers, especially not when he was working so hard to charm her. So he tucked his hands in his pockets, even though they itched to touch her.

They paused by a street vendor selling beautiful knit scarves. She stroked a fuzzy one with alternating pink and purple blue flowers and, ignoring her protests, he bought it from the rosy-cheeked young female who made it. He carefully knotted it around Astra’s neck, his fingers tingling where they accidentally brushed against the soft curve of her jaw.

“But our people are smart and sneaky,” he said, continuing his story as he handed over the credits for the other scarf Astra’s gaze had lingered on.

“That we are, sire.” The vendor gave them a cheeky wink. “We don’t let the monsters win.”

“Exactly.” They thanked the young artist, and Des guided Astra through the growing crowd along the boardwalk with a light touch on her elbow. “We did not despair. Inbhir could be defeated. We merely had to do our research, prepare, and bide our time. Tyrants and oppressors may temporarily gain the upper hand, but the fight for freedom is an ever-burning fire, stoked by passion, perseverance, and knowledge.”

“And sometimes spite,” she added, with an astute nod. “Spite is a powerful

motivator.”

“True,” he acknowledged, handing her a waxed paper packet of fried potatoes and a recyclable pint of red ale. He took a sip of his own pint before continuing. “Late one night, after months of pouring over every volume in the Royal Library, a young academic by the name of Tadu Onsson uncovered an ancient text that spoke of the leviathans who made their homes in the abyss, including how to kill them. Northern leviathans, you see, require the pressure and darkness of the deep to regenerate. Light makes them vulnerable. And Inbhir rarely came to the surface. Determined to live forever, he was.”

She sampled the potatoes. “Ooh, these are good, too. And this ale is amazing. Tastes nothing like what attempts to pass for beer in my neck of the woods. So much better.” She carefully tucked the mug in the crook of her arm and ate another potato from the packet. “So your people needed to find a way to lure him up to the surface.”

“Indeed we did.” He steered her past a rambunctious group in the process of setting the skeleton frame of a boat filled with pine boughs on fire. “See that boat?”

“The one now on fire?”

He nodded, tipping his chin at the people who raised pints and tassels in greeting as they passed by. One look from Gunnar kept them at a respectful distance. “We burn them during the first full moon of the spring migration to symbolize of our triumph over the tyrant. You see, my lovely Astra, there are those among us with the gift of song, a sound so sweet it will bring tears to the eyes of the stoic and influence monsters.

“Under the bright light of the full moon, the singers gathered on the shore and sang, luring Inbhir and his soldiers up from the depths. They dragged themselves ashore, unable to resist our song. And the Merrow got their revenge,” he said, leading her

down a wide set of stairs lit by flickering torches to a beach drenched in moonlight.

Merrow of every shape, size, and age gathered on the hard-packed sand.

“And Inbhir?”

Pausing on the bottom step, he gave her a feral grin. His heartbeat sped up when she returned it with one of her own, her eyes glinting in the torchlight. “This is where it gets violent,” he said quietly, offering her his hand. “You ready for it?”

“Sounds like he deserved everything that was coming for him,” she answered, intertwining her fingers with his.

Noticing their king had joined them, the crowd quieted. As all eyes turned to them, her hand tightened on his, but she didn’t pull away. Instead, she moved closer, her side plastered to his.

His chest puffed out, proud she was showing that backbone of hers, despite her distaste for attention. He faced the crowd with a fierce grin and, projecting his voice so everyone could hear, said, “For it was here, in this very cove, that the tyrant Inbhir met his well-deserved, bloody end.”

9

ASTRA

She jumped a little when those assembled shouted back, “Met his bloody end!”

Des threw back his shoulders, his powerful voice connecting with everyone assembled. “Full moon above, our brave Merrow went to sea.”

“Three by three by three,” the crowd intoned.

“Hooked the despot; he couldn’t get free.”

“Three by three by three,” chanted the Merrow, clapping their hands in time to the words.

Astra found herself swaying to the cadence of their voices. As the chant picked up the pace, it transformed into a song that made her feel as if she was actually out there on the beach with the brave Merrow of the past fighting for their lives against a terrible despot. It was simultaneously scary and extraordinary, yet enchanting.

“Torched the ships and lit the boughs,” Des sang, his deep voice curling around her. With those words, the boats floating in the cove caught fire with a whoosh. Shifted Merrow leapt over the flames, their gold and green fish tails glittering in the moonlight as they dove back into the sea with a splash.

“Three by three by three,” the singers belted out in response. The repeated words built on each other, power booming across the sand, rattling through Astra’s chest like the deepest bass in her favorite dance club.

“The tyrant died screaming. Never again, we forever vow.”

“Three by three by three.”

On the final ‘three’, fireworks exploded overhead, painting the sky with colorful flowers of chemical reactions and bright spirals trailing across the sky like falling stars. The band waiting patiently in the wings struck up a merry reel, and suddenly the beach and the calm water of the cove were filled with masses of laughing, spinning bodies celebrating their ancestors’ triumph against an evil tyrant.

Des leaned over and asked, “Dance with me, my lovely mate?”

She shivered as his lips grazed the shell of her ear, heat pooling in her belly. He looked at her with such hope in his eyes, what could she say but, “Yes.”

With a whoop, Des pulled her into the maelstrom.

Dancing with Des was magical. She didn’t know the steps to the dances, but he never let her falter, leading her across the sand, a strong arm wrapped around her waist, the other gripping her hand. He looked at her like she was the only person on the planet worth paying attention to, his endlessly green eyes filled with love beyond measure as he twirled her around the sandy dance floor. Within his arms, she felt protected, safe and, for perhaps the first time in her life, truly loved by someone other than blood relatives.

How that was possible, she wasn’t sure. Not the being loved part. She knew she was worthy of love. She’d just been too busy to go looking for it, more focused on survival, every moment worried about making sure her family was safe and had enough to drink and eat.

What was amazing to her was that someone she barely knew — a gorgeous alien and a king, no less — could take one look at her in what she fully admitted was not one of her finest moments, declare her his mate, and pledge eternal devotion to her. Things like that didn’t happen outside of fairy tales, especially not to her.

But she was overthinking things as usual. After all, getting on the good side of the aliens was literally the reason she and the other women were on Sanos. Learning she was the mate of a leader of a large territory, territory that contained liveable landmasses especially, would make the higher-ups ecstatic.

Speaking of, she really should make contact with them, let them know what was

going on.

But not tonight. Tonight was for celebrating the Merrow, of her drinking clean water and enjoying fresh air for the first time. It was for falling in love with someone who looked at her like she walked on water.

Which —holy shit— she literally was. She squeaked and gasped in delight as her mate spun her over gently lapping waves, the tips of her boots skimming the surface of the glittering water. “Des,” she said, laughing while she clung to him, her nails digging into the thick fabric of his coat. “Don’t you dare let me go.”

“Oh, I am never letting you go, sweetheart,” he said, smiling down at her, stars in his eyes. “Didn’t you realize that?”

“So, what, you’re going to keep me here? Forever?” Her pulse sped up, butterflies once again making their presence known in her belly. “When did you decide that?” She gave another squeak as he twirled them to where the water met damp sand and set her back on her feet. She found herself strangely disappointed to be back on solid ground.

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“It was decided the first time you placed your hand in mine.” He lifted a hand like he was going to stroke her face before lowering it again.

She found herself oddly disappointed he didn’t touch her and yet elated that he cared enough to adhere to the boundary she’d set earlier. But now that they were here, in the midst of the crowd with barely anyone except Des’s personal guards paying attention to them, she thought she might not mind it so much if he showed some of that affection he was so eager to bestow. Music and dancers swirled around them, but it felt as if they stood in a private cocoon, just the two of them.

“I knew then you were mine, that I was yours. We belong together, my lovely Astra. Blessed by the Universe, remember?”

Her breath caught in her throat. “So that’s one human you want living on the Merrow Isles,” she said slowly. “Would you be open to welcoming more?”

“Possibly. Back to negotiations, are we, love?” he asked, the corner of his lip quirking up. A dimple popped in his cheek. He gestured towards a Merrow weaving through the crowd, trays filled with pints of beer held high over her head. Des paid and handed one of the recyclable cups to Astra.

“Possibly.” Mirroring the quirk of his lip, she tapped his cup with hers. She took a healthy drink and wiped the foam mustache away with the back of her hand. “So, what do you want in exchange for opening your Isles to human refugees? Sex?”

He coughed out his drink, rearing back as if she’d slapped him. “No. No, I wouldn’t ever ask that, not of anyone. Especially not of my mate.” He scrubbed a hand through

his salt-kissed hair. “How is it you leap to the worst-case scenario first? First, you thought I was part of the group who attacked the summit, and now this.”

“Sorry. Trauma response. Please don’t take it personally.” She waved her words away and took another drink to calm her nerves. “Besides, our higher-ups basically told us to offer you all anything you wanted up to and including us. Why do you think they sent a capsule full of pretty human women when they learned all the leaders coming to the meeting were male?” She was still a bit put out about all that, but it was what it was. Desperate times, et cetera.

He snickered. “You know, you’re not a very good negotiator.”

Her eyes narrowed. “How do you mean?”

“You just told me that anything we ask for in exchange for refuge, your people will give to us up to and including their women.” He frowned, his expression darkening. “They don’t deserve you. Any of you. Another reason for me to keep you.”

“Keep me.” Huffing out a laugh, she patted his cheek. “You’re cute.”

His breath caught as her hand lingered on his face, the rasp of his scruff tickling her palm. His entire body froze when she popped up on her tip-toes and brushed her lips over his. “Astra,” he said, his eyes wide.

“On behalf of human women everywhere, I had to make an exception to the no-touching rule.” She took a step back and gave him a soft smile. “We appreciate your fierce defense. But don’t be mad at our leaders. They’re only trying to do what’s best for humanity as a whole. Besides, we agreed to it.”

“Oh? And what did you get in return?” he asked, gesturing at the runner for another round.

She pointed towards the stars above and gave her finger a twirl. “My younger brother and sister are on the generation ship up there, orbiting Sanos. The last of my family. I agreed to join the capsule crew so they’d have a chance at a better life, a home with fresh water and clean air.”

“Family.” The word carried all the weight of the world. “A worthy exchange.”

“I thought so.”

He puffed out a breath. “Astra,” he started, but she cut him off.

“You know, you’re right about me being a terrible negotiator,” she said, tipped her cup towards him. When he made a noise of disagreement, she shook her head. “Nope. I am. I’m not good at subterfuge, and I truly suck at seducing men and convincing them to do what I want. I mean, here I am, attempting to talk to you about super-serious things in the middle of a party, ruining the fun time you had planned.”

“But it is important,” he protested. “And we haven’t had much of a chance to sit down and hash things out.”

“Okay, true, but tonight’s not the night to do it.” She grabbed two fresh drinks from a passing server and thrust the cup into his hands, foam sloshing over the edge. “Let’s eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow, we negotiate. Sound good?” she said, snickering under her breath at her bastardization of an old phrase.

“Whatever makes you happy, love,” he said, tapping his cup against hers with a laugh.

She hated everything and everything hurt. Why had she let that devious male talk her into drinking so many pints of delicious Merrow beer and eating so many fried, grilled, and baked Merrow treats?

Rolling to her side and curling up into a sad little ball, she moaned into her pillow. She was old enough to know better than to drink so much. Sure, it was fun at the time, but she always paid the price the next day. And today, she was supposed to be at the negotiation table with Des, convincing him that having humans living in his territory was a positive thing when all she really wanted to do was throw up and go back to sleep.

“Good morning, my precious mate,” Des sang as he sauntered into the bedroom and dropped onto the bed next to her. “Time to get moving. Daylight’s a-wastin’.”

She let out a pained groan as the bed rocked, her stomach roiling. “Stop this ride immediately. I want to get off.”

“Are you not feeling so fine this morning, love?” he asked, brushing the hair out of her face. “Could it perhaps have something to do with the ocean of ale you put away last night?”

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“Fuck. Don’t remind me,” she said, struggling to disentangle herself from the sheets so she could pull them over her head and block out the sunlight streaming in through the ridiculously large leaded glass windows. Who decided having such stupidly gigantic windows in a bedroom was a good idea, anyway? They needed to be taken out back and shot immediately. “And how are you so god-awfully cheerful right now? You drank twice as much as I did.”

“Well, I’m bigger than you and I’ve been doing this a long time.” He rubbed soothing circles over her back.

She pulled the sheet down to her nose and cracked open an eyelid to glare at him. “Don’t tell me you’re a morning person.”

“Yep,” he said, giving her a toothy grin. “There’s almost nothing better than getting up with the sun and going for a wild swim.”

She reburied her head under the covers. “I hate you so much right now. Leave me to die in peace, would you? Fucking golden retriever morning person,” she grumbled.

“Well, I don’t know what most of that means, but it doesn’t sound like much of a compliment. Surprising, considering what happened last night,” he said, peeling the covers back with a large finger. That damned gorgeous grin of his widened.

“What happened last night?” She narrowed her eyes at him as she picked through the haze of last night’s memories. Lots of dancing — reels and jigs where she whirled from Merrow to Merrow, their faces a blur, and slow dances with Des, pressed close to his hard body — and so much delicious food and drink. She pursed her lips,

remembering some very drunken singing with a group of females. “Did you have to carry me home?” she asked.

“Indeed I did,” he said with a regal nod. “Do you remember trying to seduce me?”

“Oh, god.” She smacked a hand over her face, her cheeks flaming as the later portion of the evening swam up from the depths of her memory. She wished it had stayed in the darkness. “I did, didn’t I?”

He brought her back to this lovely cottage on a promontory and she was a drunken mess, slobbering all over him, trying to take off his shirt and pants, demanding to get a look at his scales and other bits.

“I didn’t take advantage, if that’s what you were wondering,” he said softly, his hand making lazy circles over her back.

“I know you didn’t, Des. Even if I didn’t actually remember the utter humiliation of me throwing myself at you, you’re not that kind of person. I know I tend to jump to the worst-case scenario first, but not about that. You’re kind and caring and far too good to ever take advantage of someone as incapacitated as I was last night.” She bit back a moan. It hurt to talk. Hell, it hurt to think.

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat as a faint tinge of pink shaded his cheeks. “I’m not that good. I did sleep in this bed with you last night.”

She raised an eyebrow. She remembered. The warmth of his body curved around hers. The way he nuzzled her neck. The satisfied sigh he expelled when she finally relaxed against him. She remembered all of it. But His Royal Pain-in-the-Butt Sunshine had earned himself some payback. “You what?” she asked, like it was a bad thing. Like she didn’t have the best sleep of her life wrapped in his arms. It was the waking up part that was a challenge.

“I didn’t do anything inappropriate, I swear.” He held up both his hands in surrender. “I wanted to be nearby, in case you needed me.”

“You just didn’t want to sleep on that short couch in the other room,” she said with an exaggerated sniff of disdain. “And keep rubbing my back. It’s making me feel better.” May as well take advantage while she could, right?

Instead, he jumped to his feet and grabbed something off the tall chest of drawers opposite the bed. “I have something even better.” He thrust a small glass of ominously bubbling red liquid under her nose. “Drink this.”

“Des, if I drink anything right now, I’m going to vomit,” she said, making a face. She pushed herself into a seated position with a groan and crossed her legs, wrapping the soft sheet around her like a toga.

He pushed it towards her. “This will make everything better.”

He looked so sincere, so eager to please. She took the glass with a sigh. “You promise?” At his encouraging nod, she took a deep breath, pinched her nose, and downed it, the bubbles tickling her tongue. “Blech. What was that?” Disgusted, she handed him the glass back and put a hand on her churning stomach. “Let me guess. After last night, you decided humans are more trouble than they’re worth, so you’re disposing of the most annoying one and pretending we don’t exist.”

“See, there you go with the worst-case scenario again,” he said with a disappointed tsk, the corner of his lip quirking up. “I’m going to have to start calling you Negative Narwhal instead of Astra.”

“That’s a terrible nickname,” she gasped, smacking his thigh playfully. “I’ll have you know I’m a pragmatist who believes in hoping for the best but preparing for the worst.”

His brows shot up to his hairline. “Is that so? Well, now that you’ve ingested my poison,” he rubbed his hands together and gave an evil cackle, “Why don’t you tell me how you feel?”

She opened her mouth to give him a sassy response and noticed her head no longer had someone driving nails through her temples. Come to think of it, her stomach had settled, too. She gave him a suspicious look. “What exactly was in that ‘poison’ of yours?”

“Why?” he drawled, planting his elbow on his knee and resting his chin on a fist. “Could it be because you feel one hundred percent better because you trusted me?”

“Well. Maybe not one hundred percent better,” she said with a toss of her hair. “But I’m definitely not about to keel over and die anytime soon.”

“Excellent!” He bounced off the bed, planted a kiss on her forehead, and opened the door. “Now go take a shower because you smell like you drank your weight in beer and it’s emitting from your pores.”

“Nice,” she said, throwing a pillow at him. “Here’s a helpful tip: never tell a woman she smells bad if you ever hope to kiss her again.”

He clutched a hand over his heart. “Darling, I’d never lie to you. But you do have the most glorious case of bedhead I think I’ve ever seen, outside of my own, that is.” He blew her a kiss and closed the door behind him.

“Jackass,” she called after him. I really like him. A lot. She ran a hand over her hair, an untameable smile spreading across her face. I might even be falling in love with him.

DESBURCHÙ

He closed the bedroom door, his heart so filled with joy and love, he thought it might burst. The Universe had sent him the perfect woman to be his mate. Sharp, funny even when battling a raging hangover, quirky. She challenged him, made him laugh, and could dance like no one's business, as he learned at the celebration.

And thank the depths he'd worn a longer coat last night or everyone would have known he'd sported a raging boner while she was out there on the sand, wiggling her ass, tossing her hair, and enjoying herself as she twirled through the traditional dances of his people. Just the memory of her dancing made his cock perk up.

But he wouldn't make any major moves in that direction until she was ready, he told himself firmly. Not until she was on board with being his mate and, by extension, his queen.

The woman made him want to take on leviathans just to see her smile. Or at least to stand up in front of his full council to tell them he was opening the Isles for humans to settle here. Not everyone on the council was as supportive as Gunnar, especially not the crusty old lobsters from his father's era still clinging to power and unwilling to step aside to let a new generation swim to the top.

Any objections they might have didn't matter, though. As king, he had final say. While he didn't normally wield his authority like a club, he'd do it for her, his beautiful mate.

A smile hovered on his face as he called up to the castle kitchens and ordered both of them a full breakfast — crispy fried potatoes, spicy black pudding, pan-seared fish with butter, seasoned greens, and freshly brewed seaweed tea — to be delivered to them at Coral Cottage.

Built on the edge of the Ulfmar Castle estate, the one-bedroom cottage only had a chiller and an outdoor grill, just right for after a hunt. Growing up, it had been where he'd run to escape his tutors and the judgment of his father. These days, he still used it as a getaway, though he couldn't escape his responsibilities as easily as when he was ten.

It was the perfect place to spend some time with his mate without throwing her into the political deep end. That would come soon enough. His territory wouldn't fall apart without him at the helm for a few days.

He settled into his favorite overstuffed chair placed at an angle beside a giant stone fireplace and picked up a book, content in the knowledge that his mate was in the next room taking a shower. Naked. Water dripping down her perfect breasts and over her belly, glistening in the hair at the juncture of her mouthwateringly long legs... He stared at the open book in his hand unable to absorb a word, his cock so hard it felt like a bar of iron.

"Des," Astra called from the other room. "Could you please come help me?"

Oh shit, he thought, shoving up out of his chair. The book thudded to the ground as he scrambled into the bedroom. "Astra, love, what is it? Please tell me you aren't having an allergic reaction to the hangover cure? Because I had our scientists test it and make certain it was safe for human consumption before giving it to..." He slammed open the bathroom door and skidded to a halt, his jaw dropping at the vision before him. "You."

Naked. Soaking wet. Even more jaw-droppingly beautiful than he imagined.

She held out a small cloth towards him, her lovely breasts swaying with the motion. Twin rivulets of water slid over her curves and dripped off the tips of her pink nipples. “Wash my back?” she asked, blinking up at him with those icy blue eyes, steam from the shower swirling around her. “I can’t quite reach it on my own and, as you said, I need to scrub every inch. Wouldn’t want to miss a spot and still smell like stale beer, now, would I?”

Swallowing hard, he took a step forward, his hand reaching for the cloth. “What are you doing, Astra?” Was this payback for his earlier comment? A solid attempt at seducing him? What if she really needed her back washed?

You know what? I don’t give a shit what it is because I get to see this amazing woman naked, my very favorite element pouring over her body, and, best of all, I get to touch her. Granted, he wanted to toss away the cloth, hike her up against the cool gray shower tile, bury his cock in her, and fuck her until she orgasmed around him. But he’d take washing her back, even if that’s all she offered.

She didn’t answer anyway, just pulled the cloth out of his reach with a tsk. “Wouldn’t want to get your pretty clothes all wet, would we?” she asked, wagging a scolding finger at him. “Besides, if I’m naked, you’re naked. It’s only fair.”

She didn’t have to ask him twice. He peeled his shirt over his head and tossed it out into the bedroom. In fact, it was a crying shame she had to ask even once. If he’d known she needed assistance with her shower, he would have been waiting at the door, naked and ready for her.

Wait, that sounds creepy. That’s not what I meant. Good thing I didn’t say it out loud, he thought, hopping on one foot as he tried to get his leg out of his trousers. And why did I have to wear such tight pants today? If I wasn’t trying to look my best for my

mate, I would be out of these things already and not bouncing around like a fool.

Panting from exertion, he stood proudly naked in front of her, one crucial part standing a bit more proud than the rest of him. As her gaze drifted down his body, he instinctively puffed out his chest and sucked in his stomach, willing each one of his hard-earned abs to do their job and impress her. Depths, but he hoped she was impressed.

A flush of pink crawled up her neck and painted her cheeks as she looked him over. Finally, she held out the cloth and said in a husky voice that made him want to gather her to him and kiss her senseless, “My back?”

“Of course, my precious mate. I am here to assist in any way you need.” Keeping his eyes on hers, he took the cloth from her and lathered it up with the fresh bar of artisanal soap. “Up to and including being your personal bather, a task I will relish.”

“Excellent. I’ve always wanted one of those.” She licked her lips, her nipples pebbling when his chest grazed hers as he reached over her head to put the soap back on the shower’s built-in tray. Pointing towards her back, she said, “Could you get to it? I don’t tolerate slackers around here.”

“Yes, your majesty,” he said, trailing the cloth up her arm as he moved behind her and began washing her back.

“Majesty, huh?” She tossed a flirty look over her shoulder. “Where’s my crown?”

“If it’s crowns you want, my gorgeous mate, it’s crowns you’ll get,” he said as he ran the soapy cloth over her silky skin. “A whole treasury filled with them.”

She reached a hand back to grab his arm, pulling it around her waist. “Des,” she said, her voice hesitant.

His fingers twitched against her hip. “What do you want, love? What do you need? I can leave right now. We can take it slow.” Brushing the soaking strands of her hair to the side, he dropped a kiss on the curve of her neck and whispered in her ear, “Or I can show you why water is my favorite element and make you come like you’ve never come before.”

“Oh,” she said, her breath catching, her back sliding against his front as she shifted her feet on the tile. “Well, that’s quite the offer, Mr. Big Fish. And I find myself extremely curious about this whole water thing. You can dance on the waves. What else can you do?”

He cupped her chin and angled her face towards his. “Let me show you.”

12

ASTRA

He was being so careful with her. Too damned careful. She’d hoped by calling him into her shower under the pretense of washing her back, he’d go feral. She had visions of his jaw dropping when he walked in and saw her naked. Then, unable to control himself, he’d grab her and slam her against the tile, kissing her senseless before they moved on to other things.

And here he was. Naked, yes. Which was awesome because, damn, he was even more gorgeous than she’d imagined. Like, old fashioned movie star level hot. She especially liked the green scales edged in gold that traveled down his torso and curved over his Adonis belt, her gaze following the trail directly to that mouthwateringly hard cock of his that gave her all kinds of squirmy feelings.

And oh, my god. Is his cock ribbed? Her eyes practically bugged out of her head.

But instead of putting that impressive hard-on to good use, he moved behind her and started slowly sponging her back, barely touching her, just trading quips. Not that she didn’t completely enjoy bantering with him, but holy shit, dude. Get a clue.

Realizing she needed to take the initiative or he was going to keep being a stupid gentleman until she screamed in frustration, she grabbed his arm and pulled it around her waist. “Des,” she said, her voice wavering. Shit. Being a bold, bad bitch was

harder than she expected.

“What do you want, love?” he asked, gently brushing her wet hair to the side, his lips blazing a path along her neck.

He said something about going slow and she opened her mouth to tell him he was being a fool. How did he not realize she was throwing herself at him?

Then he whispered, “Or I can show you why water is my favorite element and make you come like you’ve never come before.”

Her entire body flushed, the heat that had been slowly building in her core exploding into flames. “Oh,” she said, her knees going weak. She managed to croak out a response while her inner horny self shouted, “Hell, yes! Let’s go!” and did a happy dance.

When he kissed her, every nerve in her body sparkled.

She tried to turn around, to face him, but the arm around her waist was a steel band, holding her in place against his hard body. “Des?” she said, breathless from his kiss.

His teeth skimmed over the delicate skin of her throat, nipping at her pulse point. “Water is such a fascinating element, don’t you think?” he said. The steady beat of the shower overhead morphed into a warm stream of water that swirled around her breasts and glided between her legs. “It can change temperature...”

The soothing warmth caressing her breasts turned cold and sharp, her nipples stiffening into taut peaks as the water flowed over them. She gasped, squirming against the sensation.

“It can be gentle, like a soft rain, or as forceful as a massive wave...”

The rasp of his voice was hypnotic as he teased her with the water, warming it back up as he used it to tug at her nipples with a steady pulse. She cried out when he added suction to her clit, her knees buckling.

He didn't let her fall.

A coiling pressure was building inside her, but it wasn't enough. She writhed in his arms, rubbing her back against the hard length of his cock. It would be so much better if he were inside her. "Des, this is the worst lecture ever," she whined, her nails digging into his forearm. "Why are you torturing me?"

His chest rumbled with laughter. "You said you wanted to know what I could do," he said, wrapping the length of her wet hair around a fist. "And I will never be neglectful with your education, my queen." He tugged her head back, baring her throat, and gave it a quick nip and a lick. "Now, be a good girl and pay attention."

"Less learning, more action," she said with a wiggle of her hips.

He groaned, his hand tightening in her hair, and cleared his throat. "As I was saying, water can change forms from vapor..." Steam filled the room. "...to liquid..."

The water swirling over her clit pulled hard. She let out a low moan, her lids fluttering shut.

"...to solid." Something cold and hard pressed against her pussy.

Her eyes popped open. "What is that?"

"Patience, love. I think you'll like this," he rasped in her ear. Slipping an arm under a thigh, he spread her wide, the water skating the edge of too hot as it teased her clit and nipples. "I created this especially for you."

She dug her nails into his forearm as he slid the icy length into her heat. “Holyshitfuckmeohmygod,” she garbled, shattering beneath his ministrations, her inner muscles clenching around his frozen toy as he slowly fucked her with it.

“You take my ice so well, love.” He pulled her earlobe into his mouth and sucked on it, muttering encouragement while she rode out her orgasm. “The Universe has truly blessed me with the most perfect mate.”

As the ice melted, she slumped against him, aftershocks rippling through her. With a satisfied hum, he released control of the water and turned off the shower.

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“And thus endeth the lesson,” he said, kissing her temple.

“You make an excellent professor,” she managed to say, turning to face him. “Ever consider changing professions?”

“Not in the plans, I’m afraid,” he said, grinning down at her. He ran a hand over her hair, pulling the water from it and drying it instantly.

“Boy, that’s handy. I might have to keep you around to be my hair dryer, if nothing else.” She popped up on her toes and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. Her hand skated down his chest, enjoying the warmth of his skin beneath her fingertips.

His throat bobbed as she lingered over the gold-edged green scales across his pectorals and biceps before sliding lower. She wrapped her hand around his hard cock, her thumb stroking the ribbing that corkscrewed along its length.

With a groan, he grabbed her wrist, stilling her motion. “As much as I want to see your gorgeous red lips wrapped around my cock, I desperately need to bury myself deep in that hot pussy of yours sooner rather than later.” He slid his hands beneath her ass and scooped her up.

“Oh, thank god,” she said, wrapping her legs around his waist and nuzzling the underside of his jaw. “I thought I was going to have to do something drastic like tie you to the bed so I could finally have my way with you.”

He swallowed hard. “Promises, promises,” he rasped, practically running to the other room. His muscles flexed as he shifted her to a one-armed carry and ripped the fluffy

duvet off the bed.

She couldn't help the giggles — a mix of nerves and expectation — as he set her down and crawled in after her, caging her against the mattress with his big body.

“Laugh now, mate,” he said, kissing his way up the curve of her belly. “You’ll be crying out my name soon enough.” He licked a breast and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

Her giggles turned to moans as the barely banked heat in her belly blazed back to life. She squirmed beneath him. “I need you in me, Des. Enough with the foreplay.”

He lifted his head, brows raised. “But I read that human women both required and enjoyed extensive foreplay. Is this not the case?”

“Oh, no. You’re absolutely right.” She ran her fingers through his silky locks. “We definitely enjoy foreplay and usually need more rather than less, but do you not remember getting me off with your ice dildo in the shower mere moments ago?”

A grin split his face. “I do seem to remember you coming so hard you could barely stand.” His hand drifted down between her legs and he slipped a thick finger into her pussy. “And you’re so wet for me, love.” He rubbed his thumb over her clit.

She bucked against his hand with a cry. “So wet,” she agreed, her grip tightening on his hair. “So ready.” She pulled his mouth to hers, their tongues twining as they devoured one another. He tasted like the ocean and she wanted to drown in him.

He nudged her legs farther apart, the length of his cock gliding over her clit.

“Stop teasing me,” she whined, giving her hips a shimmy.

“You want this?” he asked, rubbing his cock against her. “Ask nicely, love.”

“Please, Des. I need you in me.”

“Anything for you, my queen,” he said, sliding the tip into her. He moved with incremental slowness, each inch of him stretching her, filling her up so nicely she thought she might scream.

It was glorious torture. She grabbed his shoulders, tugging him closer, encouraging him to move faster. Her body was aflame with desire, and she wanted him more than she ever thought possible.

Hooking an arm under one of her legs, he lifted it and with one powerful thrust, seated himself fully in her, his pelvis meeting hers.

Her nails dug into his shoulders as he began to move, each delicious stroke of his cock gliding over that sensitive spot deep within. The pressure built as he worked himself inside her, and she arched up to meet each thrust with one of her own. “Harder, Des,” she panted, her hands skating down his sweat-slicked biceps. “Faster. I’m almost there.”

Growling her name, he buried his face in her neck, his hips picking up speed, the ribbed texture of his shaft rubbing over her clit as her orgasm built to a crescendo.

Higher and higher she flew until she detonated with a cry, her pussy clenching around his hard length, fireworks of sensation sparkling through her down to the tips of her toes.

Two more hard thrusts and Des joined her, his body shaking as he shouted her name and clutched her to his chest.

For a long moment, the two of them stayed entwined, breathing in each other's scents as their heart rates returned to normal.

"Ribbed for her pleasure, indeed," she said with a satisfied sigh. She wouldn't mind doing that again, and soon.

Des propped himself up on his elbows and gave her a tender look, brushing a tangled lock off her forehead. "My remarkable mate," he said, his voice low and raspy. "Do you know how much I love you?"

"Des," she began, her voice hesitant. Her feelings for him were much more than her merely liking him, but she'd never experienced anything like this before.

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Could it be love? Yes. It was entirely possible that she was falling in love with Des. But she wasn't quite ready to admit it out loud. Love was too powerful a feeling and, if she said it aloud, that would make it solid and very, very real.

She wasn't prepared for that. Not yet. And especially because she didn't want to hurt him if she was mistaken and it turned out to be a fever-dream type reaction to a new environment, her first taste of fresh water, and the pull of a really hot alien.

He put a finger over her lips, stopping any response she may have pulled together. "My love for you is beyond all reason, beyond anything I ever expected to have in my lifetime."

Her breath caught, her heart pounding at the sincerity in his eyes and the passion in his words. He wasn't lying. He really did love her. A lump formed in her throat and she could feel tears tickling the corner of her eyes. Shit, she thought. Why am I getting all emotional? Stupid emotions.

His finger traced the bow of her top lip and slid over her cheek to play with a strand of hair. "Still, I realize that humans do not have mates in the same way many races on this planet do. I don't expect you to love me as I do you." A slow grin lit up his face. "Not yet, anyway," he added, giving her an exaggerated wink.

A laugh hiccuped out of her. She covered her eyes, trying to compose herself. "Not yet, huh?" she said. "You certainly have a lot of confidence in yourself, Mr. Big Fish."

He gently pulled her hand away from her face and brought it to his lips. "So you

know, while there are true mates among the Merrow, such a thing is as rare and as precious as the fiery emeralds expelled from Vinuvos, the underwater volcano that created the Merrow Isles. My parents were true mates, and it was a remarkable bond to behold. I want to share this wonder with you, Astra, so please tell me I have a chance to win your heart.”

Dammit. He was so hard to resist with his cheerful persistence and dogged determination. Would she even have a chance to avoid further entanglement if she wanted to? He loves me. And I’d be an absolute fool to shove away a chance at love and happiness. Taking a deep breath, she gave him a cheeky grin and said, “You can try.”

13

DESBURCHÙ

At her agreement, he leapt off the bed, snatched her up in his arms, and whirled her around the room. “Beloved mate, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the chance to win yours.” He gave her another whirl, bent her over his arm, and kissed the depths out of her. “And win, I shall. There is no other option.”

A bright grin lit her face. “Gotta love the confidence.”

He slowly danced them around the room while humming a low tune beneath his breath until she broke free with a laugh.

“What makes you think you’re going to win, anyway?” she asked, eyebrow raised. She snatched up his shirt and buttoned herself into it.

Then the cruel woman had the audacity to snicker at the look of profound disappointment on his face as she covered up her gorgeous breasts and luscious

thighs.Damn. I was really hoping she'd be up for a day of naked dancing and orgasms.

“After all, you might be completely wrong about me. I might be a hard-hearted bitch just using you to get humans a place to live.”

“Again with the worst-case scenario, my mate,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose and falling backwards onto the bed with a groan. “And please do not call yourself names. You're merely pragmatic, with a little pessimism thrown in for spice.” He propped himself up on a forearm so he could watch her. “Luckily for you, I'm more of a romantic. A dreamer, if you will.”

Rolling her eyes at him, she folded her arms over her chest and said, “Well, I mean, you don't know me all that well.” She leaned a hip against the chest of drawers. “What if the women on that capsule are all sleeper agents, sent here to take out the planet's strongest leaders? Or what if humans don't just want to find refuge on this planet, we want to own it, and my team is part the first wave of an attack?”

Des laughed at her adorable ridiculousness. “Love, you'd make the most terrible sleeper agent ever.” He walked over to her, kissed her forehead, and nudged her to the side to open a drawer. “Perhaps you should write down some of these stories. Your imagination is top-notch.” He shoved his legs into a pair of black trousers and ran a hand through his sex-tousled hair.

Her brows snapped together. “I'm being serious, Des. Maybe your anti-alien protesters aren't completely wrong about us. After all, human beings did manage to ruin one home through our own greed and hubris. What if it happens again?”

“Astra, my precious love. You're overthinking things,” he said. “Have faith in your humans and in the denizens of Sanos. I do.”

She went quiet, nibbling on her bottom lip.

“Perhaps you need some assurance, so let me provide that here and now.” He put a finger under her chin and tipped her head up, needing her to look him in the eye when he said this. “While we don’t have the biggest landmass on the planet and can’t house large numbers, we would be honored to have a contingent of humans settle here. I trust that your people can adapt to our ways and intermingle with us, that we will learn from one another and become stronger for it.”

Her mouth gaped open. She closed it with an audible click, small furrows appearing between her eyes. “Why? What do you want in exchange?” she asked, but he was already shaking his head.

“Nothing.” She was such a suspicious little thing. Was this a human trait or an Astra trait? Either way, it was completely endearing. “I already have everything I could possibly want right here in front of me.” He splayed his hand over her neck, his fingers stroking the delicate column of her throat.

Her cheeks turned a soft pink, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. “So, technically, you’re taking me in exchange.”

He bit back a chuckle. “I suppose you could look at that way,” he said, dropping a quick kiss on her lips. “Never change, my brilliant mate. I need your prudence to balance me out.”

Her blush deepened. Clearing her throat, she said, “And what about your council? The opinion of your people? Or are you the be-all, end-all of decision making?”

“Well, I am the king,” he said with a casual shrug.

“And it’s good to be king.” A grin lit her face. She grabbed his hand. “Are you being

serious about opening your land up to human settlers?”

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“Absolutely,” he said, returning her smile. He’d just had the most amazing idea, one that was sure to impress upon his mate his sincerity about welcoming her humans and prove once and for all the depths of his love for her. He leaned down and gave his mate a kiss that left them both breathless. “In fact, get dressed. I want to show my queen her castle.”

14

ASTRA

“This is not at all what I expected,” Astra said, her eyes wide as they drove over the drawbridge and past the twin stone towers, guards in uniforms of dark green and black saluting sharply as they passed by.

When Des said ‘castle’, for some reason she’d envisioned the stereotypical fantasy castles with circular towers and tall spires piercing the sky, colorful pennants snapping in the wind, marble halls, and paintings of dour-looking royals in gold-encrusted frames lining the walls. She’d expected roving packs of lords and ladies in fancy outfits fawning over their king and gossiping about who was cheating on whom while servants dressed in black moved quietly in the background.

She shouldn’t have been surprised when Castle Ulfmar and those who lived and worked there turned out to be nothing like that.

The castle itself looked more like the pictures she’d seen in a book about Scotland. Constructed out of stone hewn from the cliffs into which it was built, the castle was originally a fortress that shielded the entire population during a season of devastating

invasions by a kingdom that no longer existed. These days, its thick outer walls protected a sprawling, multi-story complex from which the entire government was run.

As Gunnar steered the fusion-powered cart around the grounds, Des played tour guide, pointing out various wings and outbuildings and their purposes. “And that’s the stables,” he said, directing her attention towards a long, pristine building with a black roof. “Spent an entire summer there mucking out stalls as punishment for accidentally flooding the treasury.”

Gunnar coughed and shot Des a look over his shoulder.

“And don’t you look at me like that, Gunnar,” Des leaned forward and nudged Gunnar’s shoulder. “You were there. Depths, you were involved.”

“Of course, sire,” Gunnar said, flashing Astra a wink. “It’s just that your memory of the event seems to be a bit faulty. The flooding wasn’t so much an accident as payback for your father taking your brother hunting and not inviting you along.”

“Aw,” Astra said, patting Des’s hand. “Did they leave you out?”

He nodded, faking a sulk, a thick wave of dark green hair slipping over his left eye.

“My poor Des. Bless your little heart.”

His head popped up, his eyes narrowing. “When you say ‘bless your heart’, it sounds like a sympathetic expression, but your inflection tells me it’s not.” He cocked his head. “Explain, please.”

“You’re so smart, you know that?” she said, her heart squeezing.

It wasn't only that he was intelligent that drew her to him like a moth to a flame. It was that he could read people. He was really good with them. Sure, he was their king, but she'd watched how people responded in town the other day and saw how he interacted with everyone at the celebration. His people didn't just respect him, they liked him.

But he ducked his head at her compliment, his dimple flashing as he pressed his lips together. It was as if he wasn't used to genuine praise. She made a mental note to compliment him often and tell him how amazing he was. If anyone deserved to know it, he did. He might be a powerful king, but he was also a caring male who wore his heart on his sleeve.

A lifetime of scarcity from a hardscrabble existence had made her pragmatic and, in him, she'd found her perfect foil. And he needed someone like her around, an impenetrable shield of caution to guard that bright positivity and idealism of his.

"My turn to give a lesson, huh?" she said, giving him a slow smile. "Well, 'bless your heart' is a colloquialism from the southern United States. Sometimes, it's used to express sympathy, but it can also be used in a snarky way, like I'm pretending to be understanding, when in reality, I'm rolling my eyes at you."

"So, you were being sniffy then," he said. "But couching it in fake sympathy."

"Sniffy?" She huffed out a laugh. "I suppose you could put it that way."

"Huh. I'll have to try that expression out on the council some day." His eyes grew distant for a moment. "Wonder how it will go over."

"It'll be fine until they figure out what you really mean," she said, playfully bumping her shoulder against his.

He gave her a gentle nudge back.

Gunnar parked the cart next to a nondescript wooden door that immediately opened and spit out a sulky-looking teenager dressed in the same uniform as the guards at the front gate.

“Sire,” he said with an abbreviated bow before hopping in the cart and driving it away.

She cocked her head, watching the teen as he turned a corner.

“What?” Des held open the door for her.

“Only... it’s not how I expected royalty to be treated, especially on the castle grounds.” she said with a shrugged.

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Gunnar snorted, the sound echoing off the stone walls of the narrow hall.

“As you may have realized, love, I’m not one for formalities,” Des said. “More like my mother in that way. All that bowing and scraping makes me itchy.” He shuddered and offered her his hand.

Without a second thought, she took it, enjoying how his much larger hand engulfed hers.

“But my father and brother were traditionalists, and you’ll soon find there are quite a few members of the court who hold fast to the old ways.” He leaned over as if telling her a secret. “But I’ll continue to wear away at them, like water over a stone, and bring them around to my way of thinking.”

She snorted. “Of course you will.”

His lips grazed the back of her hand and she lifted a brow. “What?” He looked around. “We’re not in public. It’s just Gunnar in the hall with us and he’s family.”

“I’ll allow it,” she said, inclining her head.

“I thank you for your graciousness, my beloved.” He snuck in another kiss, this time on her cheek. “Now. Are you ready?” He paused next to a hand-stitched banner of Merrow dancing on glittering waves.

“Ready for what?”

But he merely flashed her a grin and pushed on a slightly worn spot on the wall, revealing a hidden door. He squeezed her hand and tugged her along behind him.

They emerged in a large room with dark burled wood paneling, illuminated by the warm glow of deliberately placed sconces. The high ceiling was painted with a mural of an underwater scene with a treasure chest, Merrow and seals frolicking through long, waving fronds of seaweed. On the far end stood a large, high-backed chair on a platform, empty. It was the only seating in the space, forcing the suit-clad, serious-looking people populating the room to stand.

“Is this your throne room?” she whispered, her entire body flushing with heat.

But her voice carried farther than she expected and everyone turned to look at them.

She tried to duck behind Des, but he pulled her to his side and very deliberately settled her hand in the crook of his arm. “Council members,” he said, his voice booming through the space. “I would like to introduce you to my true mate and future queen of the Merrow Isles and the Storming Seas: Astra Jakobson.”

The jaws of several people dropped while others gave her low bows. The room erupted into chatter as Astra attempted to disentangle her from the blasted royal holding her fast.

“Hang on, my love,” Des whispered into her ear. “The best is yet to come.”

“What are you doing, Des?” she growled back, trying to tug free so she could run out through the secret door they came in and keep running until she made it back to the generation ship. Fleeing was an instinctual response, but at the same time, her heart felt so full, she thought it might explode with happiness. He’d declared her his mate in front of all these important people. The foolish man. He really did love her and plan to keep her. She only wished she had something better to wear for the occasion

than her freshly repaired, too-tight uniform.

“Oh, my darling, delightfully cynical mate. I’m doing this to give you rock-hard evidence of my commitment to us,” he said, before raising his voice again, calling for quiet. “One more announcement, so hold on to your tails. As your king, I officially declare that the Merrow Isles will allow a contingent of humans to settle on our land. I expect you and all our people to welcome them and treat them as our own.”

The very few cries of outrage were drowned out by loud applause.

Des held up a hand, the room falling silent. “I firmly believe that having humans live among us will be of significant benefit not only to the Isles, but to Merrowkind as a whole.”

Her hand tightened on his forearm. She was at a loss for words. He’d really gone ahead and made it official, hadn’t he? And all for her.

“Now, give me a moment with my mate,” Des said, turning his back on the shouted questions and leading her back out the secret door.

The silence of the empty hall shocked her back to reality. “You’re absolutely ridiculous, Des. You know that, don’t you?”

“You think so, do you?” He harrumphed. “Except now you know for certain your people have a home, and everyone knows you’re mine.”

“Des,” she said. She placed her hand above his heart and looked up at him. “Thank you. Thank you for your kindness and your caring. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“I am an original,” he said, puffing his chest out. “And you’re welcome. I hope you know I’d do anything for you, Astra. I love you.”

She popped up on her tip-toes and brushed her lips over his. “I love you, too, Des.”

With a wild whoop, he grabbed her around the waist and danced her down the hallway. “Do you, truly?”

Laughing at his spontaneous dance, she nodded. “How could I not? Especially after that ridiculous declaration of yours. Do you really think I’d make a good queen for your people?”

“The best. No question,” he said, dipping her low, the end of her hair sweeping the polished stone floor. “How could my mate be anything less?”

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She hooked an arm around his neck and tugged his mouth to hers, her tongue tracing the seam of his lips.

Pulling back slightly, he said, “We’re in public.”

She knew she was grinning like a fool, but she didn’t care. Just like she didn’t care that they were in public, not this time, anyway. “I’ll allow it,” she said, giving him what she hoped was a regal nod. She was going to be his queen, after all.

He grinned back at her. “I love you, Astra Jacobson.”

“And I love you, Desburchù Ulfmar. Now kiss me, you ridiculous Merrow.”

“As you wish, your majesty,” he said before tightening his arms around her and kissing her until she was breathless.

EPILOGUE: SIX MONTHS LATER

The crowd gathered in the cove was bigger than on Bright Night. A lot bigger. Adding a thousand humans to a population of just under twenty-two thousand scattered over eighteen inhabited islands would do that.

Des and Astra stood together on the bottom steps of the stairs leading to the beach, her hand resting in the crook of his arm. A warm late summer breeze swept across the cove, small waves rippling over the surface of the stormy blue-gray water.

“Remember the last time we stood here, my lovely mate?” Des asked, his voice a low

burr in her ear.

She shivered, warmth coiling in her belly. “I remember you trying to romance me with a particularly bloody tale. Lots of singing, dancing, drinking.” She wrinkled her nose. “This time, however, I plan to go a little easier on that Merrow ale.”

“Are you sure? Because I rather enjoyed your drunken attempts at seduction.”

She rolled her eyes. “If I recall, you had to put me to bed like I was a child. I’m kind of hoping for a different outcome tonight,” she said, looking up at him through her lashes.

“Really?” He stood taller. “Care to enlighten me about your plans?”

“Well, I was thinking I’m a little dirty. I might need a shower.” She discreetly traced a finger over the underside of his bare forearm. “Maybe some more experiments with temperature? I really liked your use of a frozen toy last time.”

“Mate,” he growled. “We are in public. Many eyes are watching us, including your siblings.” He tipped a chin towards two tall, blond humans standing near Gunnar, recyclable pints of ale in their hands. They raised their drinks, returning his chin-tip greeting.

“Buzzkill.”

He snickered and had to quickly compose himself as the crowd quieted and turned their attention towards their king and queen. “Tonight, we gather here to welcome new citizens to our shores.” His voice boomed out over the sand, the power of it capturing and holding everyone’s attention. “These humans have experienced hardship the likes of which would test the bravest amongst us. To survive, they boarded a generation ship and flew to the stars, not knowing when or even if they would ever find a new planet to set down roots.

“Luckily for them, when they found Sanos, they were smart enough to send a capsule filled with intelligent, resourceful women to negotiate with our planetary leaders for a safe place to call home. Included in that crew was my gorgeous mate. You may know her,” he said, placing a hand on the small of her back and nudging her forward. “Astra Jakobson.”

She gave the crowd a little wave. “Hi. Welcome to the Merrow Islands,” she said. “We’re so glad you’re here.”

“You’re getting better at the whole ‘addressing the crowd’ thing, sweetheart,” Des whispered in her ear.

“Oh, shut up and finish your speech, Mr. Big Fish,” she grumbled.

He gave her a wink before turning back to the crowd. “We’ve done the formal welcome ceremony: solemn, decorous, courtly. But tonight, we welcome you in true Merrow style. So, eat, drink, and let us dance upon the waves.”

Cheers erupted as he gestured towards the band, who struck up a spirited jig.

He held a hand out towards Astra. “Dance with me, love?”

“Always and forever.” She squeaked as he swept her into his arms and spun her across the sand and out over the water. She tightened her grip on him, the surface shimmering beneath her feet. “So, how long do you think we need to stick around?”

“Astra,” he said with a laugh. “We’re supposed to be setting a good example here. You know, since we are the king and queen. Besides, I believe your humans would be more comfortable having you around since this is all still relatively new to them.”

“Des, they’ve been here a week. We’ve wine-d them and dine-d them. Set them up in those cute little houses the Merrow built. I’m pretty sure they’re ready to let their hair

down and have a good time.” She stroked the little curls at the back of his neck. “Besides, they’ve got Gunnar. Remember him? Your former bodyguard, now an official member of the council?” She pointed towards the tall Merrow chatting up a woman with curly black hair who stood no taller than his chest. The human put her hand on Gunnar’s forearm and threw back her head with a laugh.

He swallowed hard as her fingers massaged the base of his skull. “I suppose they won’t really miss us if we leave early.”

“I mean, just look at them.” She tipped her head towards the humans intermingling with the Merrow. Everyone was hanging out, dancing and wandering from group to group, food and drink in hand as they chatted and got to know each other better. The first week with humans had come with a few hiccups, and she had no doubt there would be more but right now, they were all getting along. “They’ll never even notice.”

“You are such the temptress, my love.” He spun her through the crowd to the edge of the glow cast by the small campfires and solar lights.

“Well, I try my best.” she said, giggling as he dipped her low, his lips hovering over her neck.

“My stunning mate.” He breathed deep, inhaling her scent. “I love you. I need you. I need to fuck you until you come screaming around my cock.”

With a tsk, she put a finger over his lips. “I love you, too, and that sounds lovely, but you know the rules.”

“I do,” he said, the tip of his tongue darting out to taste her salty skin as they danced into the dark. “Which is why I waited until we were out of sight to do this.” He kissed her and, with a whoop of triumph, scooped her up into his arms and took off towards Coral Cottage, the sweet sound of Astra’s laughter ringing out over the

sands.