



# Taken By the Alien Siren King

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

**Description:** His song sings through my soul...

Emme

Earth's oceans are dying, and I've dedicated my life to preventing that same fate for humanity. The Legacy's mission to Sanos is our last chance, but no training prepared me for the Khadian king's ruthless power and silky seduction. When our diplomatic summit is attacked, I'm swept into the depths with a ruler who takes what he wants and kills without hesitation.

He swears he'll save my people, but first I have to survive his war for the throne—and give him me.

Lairos

From the moment I hear her soul song, I know the human diplomat is mine. She's fierce and full of life, making my blood sing with every defiant note. But with my own brother leading a bloody coup against me, I must secure my kingdom before I can claim my fated mate. The Knights think they can strip me of my crown, but they forget I won this throne through blood and battle. They'll soon remember I paint the waters red before I surrender what's mine. And Emme will be mine.

Taken by the Alien Siren King is a short and spicy standalone sci-fi romance in the Abducted by the Ruthless Royal: Planet Sanos series. It features an irreverent king with a deadly song, a pragmatic diplomat with no time for games, and a fated mate bond that defies both sea and space.

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

## CHAPTER ONE

### LAIROS

Waves lapped at the shoreline in a hypnotic rhythm that did nothing to soothe my growing irritation. I hid it with a final sip from my goblet and lounged back on cushions beneath the open side of the Khadian tent. Clouds drifted peacefully across the sky, at odds with the bustling activity from the little kingdoms of canvas dotting the beach.

Kaerius caught my eye and inclined his head in silent acknowledgment. Further down, Bourne proved he wasn't above personally sticking his tentacles into things. Others bickered and postured or disappeared entirely into their tents with their entourages.

Seven rulers of Sanos. Seven potential saviors for the dying human race. Seven sharks circling the same wounded prey.

The drums of protest echoed from beyond the secured perimeter of our summit. "No humans! Keep Sanos safe!" The chants had grown with the tide.

Let them howl. Their complaints wouldn't change a damn thing. The Legacy's arrival had turned our world upside down. Better to deal with this madness than risk the humans trying to settle anywhere they pleased. At least this way we had a chance at containing them.

"Thirsty, my king?"

I slowly dragged my attention up the lithe figure of a pretty servant with blue-green scales trailing down her spine. Her voice carried the musical lilt of the southern shoals. A largely safe and pampered region, with more pleasure-seekers than fighters.

“Always.” I let my fingers brush against hers as I took the fresh goblet. Her breath hitched at the touch, her pulse thumping beneath the fragile surface of her throat.

She smiled, eyes drifting down then back up with calculated shyness. “Will you need anything else?”

I traced the rim of my goblet with one finger and winked. She lingered, her scaled hip cocked in invitation. Pleasure-seeker, indeed. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

An order for all others to vacate the tent, perhaps. Or pulling her into my lap for some handsy business and uncomfortable negotiations for those on the other side of the table?

“Enjoying yourself, brother?”

The voice chilled me like deep water. I didn’t turn immediately, savoring my last moment of peace.

“Nedaris.” I finally looked up at my younger brother and eternal pain in my ass. “What a surprise.”

He wasn’t alone. Behind him filed six warriors in the distinctive obsidian armor of the Knights of the Depths. Their faces bore the ritual scars and markings of fanatics. Not my skin, not my scars, not my concern. But the fuckers had a habit of terrorizing drycaves in the name of rooting out evil or traitors.

That they kept finding poor souls who simply didn’t swim out of the way fast enough,

however, was my concern.

I rose with deliberate slowness, letting my goblet dangle carelessly from my fingers. “I don’t recall sending for you. Infact, I distinctly remember leaving you with very specific duties back home.”

Nedaris stood with that perfect posture that always made me want to slouch more. He’d shaved the back and sides of his head, and pulled the rest of his hair into the topknot worn by the rest of the Knights. He offered a shallow bow that managed to convey both respect and contempt.

“The Knights expressed concerns about the arrangements being made here.” His voice carried that familiar note of superiority that I justloved. “As your heir, I felt it prudent to witness these negotiations firsthand.”

“Prudent,” I echoed, letting my gaze drift over the Knights. One placed a hand on the hilt of his charged blade in a subtle gesture that had my own guards tensing. “And did prudence require bringing half a squadron of zealots to a diplomatic summit?”

The servant wisely melted away as I closed the distance between us. I kept my voice low, intimate, a king speaking to his brother, not a ruler addressing a subject.

“What in all the depths are you playing at?” I hissed. “Bringing the Knights here without my consent?”

“They represent the concerns of our people,” Nedaris countered, standing his ground. “Concerns you seem determined to ignore while you drink and flirt your way through the most significant threat our kingdom has ever faced.”

“Threat?” I kept eye contact and sipped my drink—fermented kelp with a punch I’d love to deliver to his throat. “It’s not like we haven’t seen this show before.

Shipwrecks. Explorers. Doesn't matter the shape or origin; they're all just wet meat with delusions of grandeur."

"They'll take and take until there's nothing left," he insisted. "Their history proves as much."

"Desperation," I grinned through gritted teeth, "is the most useful trait of all."

From the corner of my eye, I caught movement—my advisors approaching. Old men with old ideas. They clustered around Nedaris like remoras on a shark.

"With respect, Your Majesty," began Derwan, the eldest. "Prince Nedaris speaks for many. The Knights have support among our people. The council feels?—"

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“I don’t give a fuck what the council feels,” I cut him off. “I am King. I decide who attends this summit.”

My brother’s eyes—so like our father’s but lacking the gold ring around the iris—hardened to emerald chips. “As your heir, I have the right to be present for all matters of state. Unless you plan to name another successor?”

The challenge hung between us. He knew I wouldn’t—couldn’t—remove him as heir. Not without destabilizing the kingdom.

The Knights shifted behind him, a silent reminder of their growing influence.

Not for the first time, I regretted sending Nedaris to train on the frontier. The time I’d spent there had done me well—cleared my head, given me focus beyond bedding every willing body in the kingdom. I’d thought the experience would do the same for him, help him grow beyond his grief over our father’s death. But where I’d found clarity, he’d found the Knights and their rigid doctrine.

A distant boom rolled across the sky, vibrating through my bones. The capsule had entered the atmosphere. Heads poked from nearby tents like curious fish from coral, the momentary distraction diffusing some of the tension between us.

“Fine,” I spat, turning my attention back to Nedaris. “Stay. Watch. But keep your Knights in line. They start any trouble, and I’ll personally see them returned to the depths they worship so much.”

I stalked back to my cushions and reclaimed my lounging position with practiced

nonchalance. Nedaris took his place at my right as tradition demanded, his burning stare boring into the side of my face. The advisors arranged themselves in formation, while the Knights positioned themselves along the tent walls like living statues.

And then we waited. Gods below, I hated the waiting. Kings spent their entire lives waiting. Waiting for reports, waiting for councils, waiting for crises to resolve. I didn't get to see the capsule land. Didn't get to watch the humans emerge, blinking in our alien sunlight. Didn't get to observe their first reactions to our world.

Instead, I sat on my ass. Waiting.

I drummed my fingers against my goblet, counting the minutes by the crash of waves against the shore. From outside came sounds of footsteps rushing to and fro, voices calling out directions, the swell of outrage as the protestors grew bolder with each passing moment.

Then something else. A faint, strange rhythm.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

Not the drums of protest. Not drums from one of the other delegations. This was something... different. More organic. Insistent.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

It grew louder with each passing second. Not from outside, but somehow inside my own head. Like blood rushing through my ears, but with a cadence I couldn't ignore.

"The human representative approaches, Your Majesty," Derwan announced from the tent entrance.

About fucking time. I straightened, adopting the bored expression I'd perfected over years of court politics.

Two Khadian guards stepped through, followed by a human woman.

The thumping sound exploded in my ears.

“King Lairos of the Delovia Ridge,” Derwan intoned, “may I present Emme Mathis, diplomatic envoy of the USS Legacy.”

She was small by our standards, with pale skin and hair the color of bleached coral cut in a severe line at her jaw. Her form-fitting uniform hugged curves that made my mouth go dry. Gray eyes scanned the tent, assessing everything in one sweep.

Beautiful, yes, but females of all forms could be beautiful. This was something else. Something that made my gills itch beneath my skin, that made the scales along my spine shiver with awareness.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, the rest of the world fell away. There was only her. Only us.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

Her heartbeat. Her fucking heartbeat sang its soul song for me.

A mate—mymate—here, now, in human form? The universe had a twisted sense of humor. Khadians spent lifetimes searching for the one whose soul song resonated with their own. Some never found their match, but those who did formed bonds deeper than the ocean trenches. They shared every triumph, every fear, every secret thrill as if they were their own.



And mine turned out to be this alien diplomat with no gills, no scales, and half of Sanos and my own court screaming for her kind to be cast back into the stars.

She blinked, breaking the spell. Her gaze darted around the tent, confusion clear on her face. “I... I’m sorry, I thought this was meant to be a group meeting? With all the rulers?”

I forced a lazy grin, hiding my shock. Her voice. By the depths, even her voice was intoxicating. “We’ve arranged to meet you one at a time. Less chance of us killing each other that way.”

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“I see.” Her expression remained neutral, but her pulse—that godsdamn pulse I couldn’t stop hearing—quickened. “And have you all agreed to the terms we proposed?”

“We agreed not to kill each other if we decide to take any humans into our domains,” I said, leaning forward. “But the deal to accept those humans has yet to be reached.”

Her jaw tightened. Good. I liked the rage of a storm in the calm gray sea of her eyes.

“Your Majesty.” The servant appeared at my side with fresh drinks, leaning close enough that her scent would normally have distracted me.

I dismissed her with a wave, my eyes never leaving Emme. I gestured to the cushions across from me. “Please, sit. Tell me what Earth has to offer the Khadian people in exchange for sanctuary.”

Emme approached with measured steps, her gaze briefly flickering to Nedaris and the Knights before returning to me. She stiffly knelt and settled onto the cushions, her posture remaining impeccable.

“The Legacy carries scientists, engineers, and medical professionals,” she began, her voice steady despite the tension in the tent. “We bring technology and knowledge that could benefit your people.”

“I’m sure you do.” I traced the rim of my goblet with one finger, already imagining how much fun it would be to crack that no-nonsense exterior of hers for a peek inside. “I’m particularly interested in what you bring to the table, Emme Mathis.”

“I’m a marine biologist. My expertise is in oceanic ecosystems.” The words were pure business, but the soul song thrummed through my blood, making it hard to focus on anything but the way her lips formed each perfect syllable.

“Ideal for a water world.” I grinned. “Almost as if you were made for Sanos.”

“Ideal for ensuring sustainable integration,” she clarified.

An irrational spike of jealousy flared in my chest. To think of her landing on some other planet, stepping into some other king’s court... But she hadn’t gone to another world; she’d come to mine.

Shewouldbemine.

“Your expertise would be valuable to our kingdom,” I said, aware of Nedaris shifting restlessly beside me. “The question remains whether your people can adapt to our ways.”

Nedaris cleared his throat. “Your Majesty, if I may. The council has concerns about the impact of human settlement on our waters. Their history of environmental damage?—”

“Is precisely why we need Ms. Mathis’s expertise,” I finished for him. “Unless you believe we should ignore the opportunity to learn from their mistakes?”

Emme’s eyes narrowed slightly, again sweeping the room and cataloging the tension. “We’re well aware of the concerns about our presence. The protestors made that clear even before we landed.”

So, she knew about the opposition. Good. But the decision wasn’t theirs to make, it was mine. All mine, and I’d decided the moment her heart sang to mine.

“The Knights of the Depths believe these concerns are justified,” Nedaris pressed. “Human technology has proven destructive to their own world. What guarantee do we have they won’t bring that destruction here?”

“We watched our oceans die.” Emme’s words rang through the tent with brutal honesty. “We’re not here to repeat history—we’re here because we have nowhere else to go. Every human on the Legacy understands exactly what we lost and what was destroyed by our own hands. We’re not offering empty promises of technology and knowledge. We’re offering everything we have, everything we are, in exchange for a chance to do better.”

As if to mock her, specifically, the ground beneath us trembled. A distant boom rolled across the beach, followed by shouts of alarm.

“The protestors!” Someone shouted outside the tent. “The protestors have breached the perimeter!”

Another explosion, closer this time. The high-pitched whine of energy weapons filled the air as the tent’s protective field activated, shimmering blue against the canvas walls. Advisors scrambled back from the edges while the Knights shifted into defensive stances, hands on their sword hilts and looking to Nedaris.

“Protect the king!” Nedaris shouted, the Knights drawing their blades in unison. Energy fields pulsed down their lengths.

My blood burned with the need to get Emme to safety. The tent would hold against conventional weapons, but we were effectively trapped if the attackers surrounded us. I wasn’t about to let my mate die in some ill-conceived protest.

“We need to move,” I said, reaching for Emme’s arm. “Now.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Where exactly?—”

The tent shuddered as something heavy slammed against it. Through the opening, I could see smoke rising from the direction of the other rulers’ tents. Screams and weapons fire mixed with the protestors’ chants turned war cries.

A blast tore through the tent’s protective field, sending us all diving for cover. Sand and debris rained down as more explosions rocked the summit. Emme rolled away from a falling support beam, straight toward the open side of the tent and the churning water beyond.

I lunged after her, ignoring Nedaris’s shout of warning. The surf crashed against the beach with unnatural force, waves reaching further up the sand than they should. As another explosion lit up the sky, I caught her wrist and dove.

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We hit the water together, the violent current dragging us under.

### CHAPTER TWO

EMME

Water rushed into my lungs. The shock of it paralyzed me as my body fought against instinct, desperate not to inhale more. Pressure squeezed my chest from the inside out. My vision blurred, darkening at the edges.

This wasn't how I was supposed to die. Not on first contact. Not before securing a future for the thousands still asleep on the Legacy.

Strong arms locked around my waist, pulling me deeper. I thrashed against them, my oxygen-starved brain screaming to reach the surface. But the current was too powerful, the arms too strong.

Then I felt it. A vibration that started as a low rumble before expanding into something that defied description. Not quite sound, not quite touch. It pulsed through the water around me, through my skin, into my bones.

The king was... singing?

The sea itself seemed to obey him. Water pulled away from my face, creating a perfect bubble of air around my head. I gasped, coughing out seawater as precious oxygen filled my burning lungs. My vision cleared, the bubble acting like an old-school diving helmet.

“Breathe,” Lairos commanded, his voice distorted but understandable through the water barrier. “Just breathe.”

His transformation stunned me into compliance. The briefings on Khadian physiology had mentioned their aquatic adaptations, but seeing it in action—experiencing it—was something else entirely. He hovered in the water as naturally as I could stand on a mountaintop. Gills fluttered along his neck, opening and closing with each breath. Deep red-gold scales spread over his shoulders and down his back and legs, which had fused into a powerful, fringed tail.

Above us, distorted by the water’s surface, flashes of weapons fire illuminated the churning waves. One blast, then another, sliced through the water and shot past us.

“We need to move,” Lairos snarled. “Now.”

As if I had any choice. One arm hooked around my waist, and he dove deeper with sweeping strokes of that impressive tail. My bubble of air moved with me, defying every law of the natural world I knew.

The deeper we went, the darker it became. Light filtered through in wavering beams, throwing strange formations and darting sea life into temporary spotlight. I should have been terrified—and part of me was—but another part marveled at what I was seeing. Untouched coral formations. Vibrant ecosystems. Life, thriving where Earth’s oceans had died.

This was everything we’d hoped for. Everything we’d been prepared to bargain for.

A small, spiny creature glared at us from a rocky outcropping, its numerous spikes quivering with indignation at our intrusion. For some reason, I found this hilarious. A giggle escaped me, followed by another.

“Something amusing?” Lairos asked, glancing back at me with one raised eyebrow.

“That urchin,” I pointed, giggling harder. The sound of my own laughter echoed strangely in the bubble. I couldn’t stop. “He looks so... sogrumpy.”

Lairos stopped swimming abruptly, spinning to face me. His expression shifted from confusion to alarm. He cupped my face between his palms, studying me intently.

“Your air is too thin,” he said, his thumbs stroking my cheeks. “You need more.”

My brain felt fuzzy and disconnected. I recognized the symptoms of oxygen deprivation with the detached interest of someone watching it happen to someone else.

“Oh,” I managed. “That’s... not good.”

Lairos pulled me closer, his face a breath away from mine. His mouth opened slightly, and that vibration—that impossible song—intensified. I felt it against my lips, tingling and electric. Air bubbled between us, fresh and clean, flowing into my bubble.

Not quite a kiss. Definitely not a kiss. But the intimacy of it hit me harder than the oxygen. His hands still cradled my face, his eyes locked with mine as he literally breathed life into me. The gold ring around his green iris seemed to pulse with the rhythm of his song.

My head cleared with each breath, bringing with it a sharp awareness of our position. Of his body against mine. Of the strange heat building where his hands touched my skin.

“What happened?” I asked when my thoughts organized enough for words. “On the



surface. The explosions?—”

“Stop talking,” he ordered, still feeding air into my bubble. “You’re wasting what I’m giving you.”

“I need to know if my people?—”

“I don’t know what happened. I was busy saving your life.” His jaw tightened. “Now quiet. We need to keep moving.”

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The frustration in his voice wasn't directed at me, I realized. He hated not knowing. A king without information was vulnerable, and Lairos struck me as someone who never wanted to be vulnerable.

The briefings given to me and my crewmates had been thorough. Or as thorough as could reasonably be expected of suspicious kings offering information on themselves and their people. Names, brief histories, where they ruled and how many humans they'd be willing to accept.

Lairos was no exception. Neither the oldest ruler or the longest to his throne, he was still every inch a king from the fairytales of my childhood. Arrogant. Irreverent. What they hadn't mentioned was how the play of muscles beneath his skin would be so hypnotic as he swam, or how his hair would float around his face like dark flames.

I forced myself to focus on our surroundings instead. Rock formations loomed out of the gloom. Schools of fish scattered at our approach. A creature with too many eyes and not enough fins darted past, disappearing into a crevice. Minutes passed in silence broken only by the strange clicks and calls of deep-sea creatures.

The air grew stale again. I fumbled to tap Lairos's shoulder, trying not to notice how the scales there felt smooth and warm under my fingertips.

He turned immediately, taking one look at me before his expression shifted from annoyed to concerned. His tail moved in a slow, controlled pattern, keeping us suspended in the current while his hands found my face again.

His mouth hovered near mine, that strange vibration humming between us. The not-

quite-kiss lasted longer this time, his thumbs tracing small circles against my cheeks as fresh air filled my bubble. I focused on steadying my breathing, refusing to acknowledge the warmth spreading through me despite the cold depths surrounding us.

“Where are we going?” I asked when I could breathe properly again.

He made an exasperated sound. “You humans never stop talking, do you? We’re heading to the closest drycave in my kingdom.”

I tried to recall the details. Delovia Ridge was an underwater mountain range, that much I knew. That much I could see, with jagged peaks fighting for the surface in the murky distance. But distance from the summit, entrances, ease of access to breathable air and solid ground under my feet? “How far?”

“Far enough that you should stop delaying us with questions.” His voice softened slightly. “We will discuss everything when we get there, I swear.”

I wanted to argue, but he was right. Every moment spent talking was a moment not spent swimming toward safety. I nodded, and he resumed our journey.

We swam for what felt like hours, stopping periodically for my air refreshes. He knew exactly when I needed air, turning to me with fluid grace before I could signal. Swim, pause, breathe, repeat. My world narrowed to this pattern, to the gentle press of his hands against my face, to the way my pulse quickened each time he drew me close to share his breath.

Finally, a dark opening appeared in the rock face ahead. Lairos swam straight for it without hesitation. My body seized as years of cave diving accident reports and recovery statistics crowded my head. At least in open water you could swim up, assuming you survived the bends. In caves, one wrong turn meant a death wedged in

the dark.

Just when my lungs began to burn again, we broke through the surface of the water into an air-filled cavern. I gasped, inhaling real air for the first time since the attack. The drycave, as Lairos had called it, was roughly circular, with smooth walls rising to a domed ceiling. Glowing crystals embedded in the rock provided soft, amber-tinged light.

I hauled myself onto the stone ledge and collapsed onto my back. Every muscle in my body ached despite Lairos doing most of the work. The physical toll of oxygen deprivation, adrenaline, and fighting the water's resistance left me feeling like I'd run a marathon in full tactical gear. I closed my eyes for just a moment, gathering my strength.

"My communicator isn't working," I said, touching the device at my wrist. Had my crewmates made it into the water with their assigned kings? Were they trapped on the beach, or worse? "I need to contact the Legacy. Make sure they're safe. The protestors?—"

"You think this was just protestors?" Lairos's laugh held no humor as water streamed from his body, scales melting away as he got to his feet. "Those were organized attacks. Military-grade weapons. Someone wanted all of us dead—you, me, every ruler on that beach."

He offered his hand, and I shouldn't have noticed the way water traced the curves of his muscled forearm, or how it dripped from those broad shoulders where long dark red hair clung to his skin. I shouldn't have followed the rivulets down the dips and planes of his chest and abs. And I definitely shouldn't have noticed how the wet linen around his waist clung to powerful thighs before falling in heavy folds to his ankles, or how the scales along his hips caught the amber light as they slowly melted away.

I swallowed hard and tore my eyes away. “Exactly why I need to reach my ship.”

Still, I slid my hand into his and let him pull me to my feet. The motion brought us chest to chest, my palm pressed against warm, wet skin.

“And you will.” He traced my lower lip with his thumb, the gesture stealing my focus from thoughts of my missing crewmates. “When we’re safe. When I know who’s hunting us. Until then, you’re staying with me.”

“I’m not yours to command,” I snapped, taking a deliberate step back. The cold air hit my wet skin and clinging uniform like a slap, but it was better than the dangerous heat of being pressed against him.

His eyes flashed. “No? Then by all means, swim back to the surface. I’m sure whoever’s waiting there will be delighted to find one human survived.”

I bit back a retort. He was right, damn him. I had no idea what was happening above, no way to contact my crew, and no means to survive these depths without him.

“Fine,” I conceded. “Lead on, Your Majesty.”

His mouth curved in a smirk that should have infuriated me but instead sent a completely inappropriate shiver down my spine. “So, youcantake orders. Good to know.”

The scuff of a step from a shadowed tunnel shattered our standoff. Two guards emerged, both wearing the same black and silver uniforms I’d seen at the Khadian tent. Surprise flickered across their faces before their features hardened into something lethal.

“Traitor!” one shouted, lunging forward.

Everything happened too fast. One moment Lairos was shoving me behind him; the next, he'd slipped beneath the guard's arm. A blade flashed—his or the guard's, I couldn't tell—and a spray of dark liquid arced through the air.

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The guard dropped, clutching his throat as blood pulsed between his fingers.

The second guard hesitated, then thrust his spear at Lairos's chest. The king met him head-on, their bodies twisting in a deadly dance. The guard's blade caught Lairos's arm, drawing a line of red, but Lairos didn't slow. He drove his knife up under the guard's ribs, and made a savage twist.

The guard's eyes widened in shock. Lairos yanked the knife free, his expression cold and remote. Nothing remained of the playful, flirtatious king from the beach. This was a predator in his element, efficient and merciless as he kicked the bodies into the water.

Lairos turned back to me. Blood stained the stone at our feet, but he seemed unbothered as he stripped the guard of his arm sheath and claimed the still-pulsing blade as his own.

"We need to move," he said, as if he hadn't just killed two men in front of me.

I couldn't move. Couldn't think. The bodies—the blood?—

"Emme." His tone softened slightly. "Please. We need to leave before more come."

My legs shook as I backed away from the blood-slicked edge, keeping as much distance as possible between myself and the carnage.

"You killed them," I said, the words hollow in my ears.

“They were traitors,” he said, finally turning to face me. Blood splattered his chest and arms, but his expression remained calm. Almost bored. “They attacked their king. The punishment for treason is death.”

“So, you just killed them? Without a trial?” My voice rose with each word. “Where I come from, we have this thing called justice. Evidence. Innocent until proven guilty.”

“Where you come from is gone.” His voice hardened. “Here, my word is law. My judgment is final.”

A chill ran down my spine that had nothing to do with my wet clothes. “Will you do the same to me if I displease you? Slit my throat without a second thought?”

Something flickered in his eyes—surprise, maybe even hurt. “No.”

“Why not? What makes me different from them?”

He closed the distance between us in three long strides. I held my ground despite every instinct screaming to back away. He cocked his head, studying me with an intensity that made my skin prickle.

“Can you not hear it?” he asked softly.

My heart tried to pound its way out of my chest. “Hear what?”

Before he could answer, footsteps echoed from the tunnel. Another guard appeared, wearing the same black and silver uniform. He froze at the sight of us, eyes widening at the bloody stone and ripples in the water where the bodies had disappeared.

“My king,” he stammered, dropping to one knee. His hand trembled on the hilt of his sword, but he didn’t draw it.



Lairos stepped in front of me, his posture deceptively relaxed. “Explain yourself.”

“Please, my king,” the guard’s voice cracked with emotion. “By order of the Knights?—”

“What orders?” Lairos demanded.

“They’re watching all the drycaves. They’ve already taken control of the outer atolls.” His eyes darted to me, then back to Lairos. “Please understand. You need to leave now.”

The guard’s voice wavered between loyalty and terror, telling me more about the political situation than any mission briefing could have. This wasn’t just an attack on a diplomatic summit. This was a coordinated effort against Lairos himself.

“Who gave these orders?” Lairos asked, his voice dangerously soft.

“The Knights’ High Commander. He says...” The guard swallowed hard. “He says you’ve betrayed our people by bringing the humans here.”

Lairos went very still. “And my brother? Where does Prince Nedaris stand in all this?”

“I don’t know, my king. Truly.” The guard glanced nervously over his shoulder. “My daughter was just born last moon. I can’t... Please, my king. You must go.”

Lairos nodded once, then turned to me. “Back in the water. Now.”

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“But—”

“Now, Emme.”

I slid back into the water, the cold shocking after the warmth of the drycave. Lairos followed, his transformation instant and fluid compared to my graceless entry. His entire body hummed with contained violence, like the moment before lightning strikes.

Even his song felt different as he created my air bubble. Harder, more controlled.

The water churned with too many questions I couldn't voice. Who were these Knights? What did his brother have to do with any of this? But as Lairos pulled me deeper into the darkness, his jaw clenched and his eyes scanning the shadows, I realized we weren't swimming to safety anymore.

We were running for our lives.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### EMME

My head broke the surface with a gasp that tore at my lungs. Sweet, blessed air filled them as my knees scraped sand. I crawled the rest of the way, fingernails digging into wet sand as I dragged myself onto the beach. Every muscle screamed. Each movement ached. But I was alive.

Behind me, Lairos rose from the water like some ancient god of the sea. Droplets cascaded down his chest as his scales and tail melted away, transforming back into muscular legs like he was simply changing clothes. Not a hint of exhaustion showed on his face.

I, on the other hand, felt like a half-drowned rat. No—an angry, wet cat. Did they even have cats on this planet? The thought made me want to laugh, but I feared if I started, I'd never stop.

“Where the hell are we?” I demanded, pushing myself to my feet. Sand clung to my palms and knees.

The beach stretched in a perfect crescent of white sand, lapped by crystal-blue water so clear I could see schools of fish darting between the rocks. Behind us, thick green vegetation climbed toward a rocky peak that dominated the center of what appeared to be a tiny island. The sun hung low on the horizon, painting everything in gold and amber.

It was beautiful.

It was also completely isolated.

“Somewhere safe,” Lairos said, wringing water from his hair. “For now.”

I glared at him. “That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one that matters.” He nodded toward a small hut nestled at the edge of the tree line. “There are clothes inside if you wish for something dry.”

The hut looked like something from a travel brochure for an exclusive tropical getaway, rustic and charming with its thatched roof and open sides. I trudged toward

it, leaving a trail of droplets and footprints in the sand.

Inside, the space was surprisingly cozy. Colorful rugs and cushions covered the sandy floor, with a wooden trunk along one wall. A low pallet bed piled with pillows and light blankets took up most of the space. No technology in sight. No communicator. No way to contact the Legacy or my crewmates.

The trunk held stacks of linen cloth in various colors, but no actual clothing as I understood it. I pulled out a length of pale blue fabric and stared at it, trying to recall the briefing on Khadian fashion.

“Wrap and tuck,” I muttered to myself. “How hard can it be?”

Very hard, as it turned out. After three failed attempts that left me either indecently exposed or so tightly bound I could barely move, I finally managed something that resembled a dress. The fabric wrapped around my breasts and waist, secured with clever twists and tucks, before falling to my ankles in soft folds.

I wished my communicator worked. I could have pulled up the cultural briefing and saved myself the frustration of looking like an idiot in front of a king. But the device remained dead, taken before its time by twin threats of a solid dunking and hours at depths.

I stepped out of the hut to find Lairos crouched on the beach, coaxing a small fire to life. He’d wrung out his linen kilt, but the fabric still clung to his frame in ways that made my mouth water. I tried to look anywhere else, but then the scales down his spine glittered in the dying light and drew me in like a moth to flame.

He looked up as I approached, his eyes widening slightly before a slow smile spread across his face.

“You can hang your uniform to dry,” he added, nodding toward a line strung between two palms.

I did as he suggested, then sank onto the sand beside the fire, keeping a safe distance between us. The heat felt good against my skin, driving away the chill of the water.

“What is this place?” I asked. “It wasn’t on the official tour guide.”

“My private island.” His mouth quirked up at one corner. “I found it when I was a youngling, exploring the reefs. Now I come here when I need time away from court and... assassination attempts.”

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His casual mention of attempts on his life shouldn't have surprised me. Not after what I'd seen him do to those guards. "Ah, so this was just another day for the King of Delovia Ridge."

He laughed as he poked at the fire with a stick, sending sparks spiraling into the darkening sky. "You'd be surprised how many have tried. Not even my most discreet indiscretions know of this place."

He excused himself and returned to the fire wearing a fresh wrap kilt a few moments later. I watched the firelight play across his features, highlighting the sharp planes of his cheekbones and jaw. Of course he'd have lovers—indiscretions, as he called them. He was a king. Powerful. Undeniably attractive, if you were into the whole arrogant, deadly predator thing.

Which I wasn't. Obviously.

Still, there was a prick of pride knowing he'd brought me to this place he kept hidden from them. Even if it was out of necessity rather than choice. Just like the not-quite-kisses underwater had been about survival, not desire.

And if it came to it, I'd join him in that pallet bed if that was the price for the safety of the souls on the Legacy. I'd survived worse for less.

"What happened at the summit?" I asked, forcing my thoughts back to the mission. "Who attacked us?"

Lairos's expression darkened. "I don't know entirely. At first, I thought it was simply

protestors who didn't wish for humans 'invading' Sanos. But after our greeting at the drycave..."

"So not every entry requires acts of battle?" I confirmed dryly.

He glanced at me, surprise flickering across his face before he chuckled. "You have a sharp tongue, Emme Mathis. I like that."

I shrugged, and again pushed back on that grating sense of pride. "I save it for special occasions. Like coup attempts and near-death experiences."

Another chuckle lapsed into silence, the fire crackling between us. I shifted on the sand, the linen wrap pulling taut against my thighs. Lairos stared into the flames, his expression distant as if seeing something else entirely in their depths.

"They used to be nothing," he said slowly, voice barely above a murmur. "Mistake to let them grow so bold." He glanced at me, seeming to remember I had no context. "The Knights—Knights of the Depths—they call themselves. Preservers of Khadian traditions, and our personal greeters." His mouth twisted. "When I was young, they'd lurk at the edges of court and offer unwanted guidance. Irritating, but contained."

I glanced up. "What changed?"

"Time." His mouth twisted. "Or rather, I failed to be the perfect prince they wanted. My interests were... varied." The way he said it left little doubt about what kind of interests he meant. "After I was caught with a musician in my bed, my father sent me to the frontier to 'learn discipline'."

"And these Knights?"

"My father tolerated them. Encouraged them, even. By the time I returned to claim

the throne, they'd embedded themselves in every aspect of court life." He leaned back on his hands, stretching his long legs toward the fire. "They've been a thorn in my side ever since."

I stared into the fire, trying to process what this meant for the mission. For the Legacy. For the thousands of humans still in cryosleep, waiting for a home that might not exist.

I'd jumped at the chance to join the Legacy mission, eager to put my skills to use where they might actually make a difference. Earth's politicians had never listened to scientists, but maybe an alien species would. We'd been trained for every conceivable diplomatic scenario—cultural misunderstandings, resource disputes, even outright rejection. But a civil war to welcome our arrival? Not on the bingo card.

"Well, isn't this just great," I muttered, more to myself than him. "My crewmates are scattered, possibly dead. Our ship is vulnerable. And I'm stuck on some secret island with a king who might not even have a kingdom anymore."

Lairos's head snapped up, eyes flashing. "I apologize that a coup for my throne is such an inconvenience for you."

"That's not?—"

"No? Then what exactly do you expect me to do, Emme? Swim back to my palace and politely ask the Knights to stop trying to kill me long enough for me to help settle your humans?"

"I expect you to have a plan!" I snapped. "You're a king, aren't you? Don't you have allies? Resources? Something other than a pretty beach hut and your righteous indignation?"



He stood in one fluid motion, towering over me. “Of course I have allies. But I need to know who I can trust before I reach out to them. One wrong move, and we both end up dead.”

“So, what’s your plan?” I pushed to my feet and met him glare for glare.

“My plan,” he said through gritted teeth, “is to stay alive long enough to rally my loyal forces. To take back what’s mine. To find out exactly who orchestrated this attack and make them pay for their treachery.”

“And where does that leave me and my people?” I demanded. “Do we just wait around until you’ve sorted out your problems?” I began pacing, unable to contain the nervous energy coursing through me. “Maybe I’d be better off with another leader. Or even these Knights you keep railing about.”

The change in him was instant and terrifying. One moment he was merely annoyed; the next, he was predatory stillness. “You think I’d just give you up?”

The deadly edge in his voice reminded me of how easily he’d killed those guards. How little remorse he’d shown afterward.

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“I don’t think you’ll have a choice,” I said, hating the tremor in my voice. “Not if you’re dethroned. Not if your own people want you dead.”

Lairos stalked toward me, backing me against one of the palm trees. His body caged mine, not touching but close enough that I could feel the heat radiating from his skin. His fingertips traced up my arm, making my breath catch, before capturing my chin.

“No other ruler would know what to do with you,” he murmured, dipping his head close enough I could taste his words. My pulse jumped as his nose skimmed along my jaw, up to my ear. “You belong to me.”

I tried to shake my head, to deny the way my body responded to his touch, his voice, his mere presence. But his fingers still held my chin, and the simple contact sent sparks racing under my skin.

“Do you truly not feel what’s between us?” he asked, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

I meant to push him away. To tell him he was delusional. To remind him that I was a diplomat, not an indiscretion, discreet or otherwise.

Instead, I grabbed the back of his neck and yanked his mouth down to mine.

The kiss was all heat and frustrated need, nothing romantic about it. His lips were firm and demanding, tasting of salt and something wilder. He groaned, a sound that vibrated through my bones, and pressed me harder against the tree. His hands found my hips, fingers digging into the thin fabric of my makeshift dress.

I bit his lower lip, and he growled, deepening the kiss until I couldn't think, couldn't breathe. There was only sensation—the rough bark of the tree at my back, his body hard and unyielding against my softer curves, his tongue sliding against mine.

When we finally broke apart, both breathing hard, I realized with a jolt of horror that I had initiated it. I'd kissed him.

It was just stress, I told myself. Adrenaline from nearly drowning. From being hunted. From watching him kill two men. It wasn't attraction. It couldn't be.

Lairos watched me with a knowing smirk, like he could read every thought racing through my head. "Feel better?"

"That shouldn't have happened." Heat flooded my cheeks. "It was a mistake."

"Was it?" He tilted his head, studying me with those too-perceptive eyes. His smirk widened. "Or was it inevitable?"

"Yes. No." I shoved at his chest. "Let me go."

He released me, reluctantly, stepping back just enough to give me room to breathe. The cool night air rushed between us, but did nothing to calm the heat under my skin.

"Enjoy your dreams, Emme Mathis." His voice was husky and satisfied. "We leave at first light."

"Leave for where? What aren't you telling me?" I demanded, still fighting to regain my composure. "You can't keep me in the dark when my life is just as much on the line!"

"What am I not telling you?" His voice cracked like a whip. "What do you want to

know, the unfamiliar names and unfamiliar places? Words your human tongue will never be able to pronounce?”

He took a step forward, leaning close enough I could count the flecks of gold in his irises. “Should I give you all my worries that the next Khadian I trust will try to gut us both?” His hands clenched at his sides. “Or perhaps you’d like to hear how this isn’t the first time one of my own blood has tried to be rid of me?”

For a moment, the arrogant king disappeared, replaced by someone who had fought and bled and lost more than I could imagine. Every decision, every alliance, every move forward could end with a weapon in his back.

He closed his eyes briefly, gathering himself. When he opened them again, the vulnerability was gone, replaced by cool determination.

Then he began to hum.

The sound started low in his chest, a deep vibration that seemed to travel through the air and into my bones. Not quite the same as his underwater song, but similar enough that my body recognized it instantly. My limbs grew heavy. My thoughts slowed.

“Sleep, Emme,” he said, the command woven into the melody. “We have a long journey ahead.”

I tried to fight it, tried to demand answers, but my tongue felt thick in my mouth. The last thing I registered before darkness claimed me was the realization that he was using his power on me.

That manipulative, royalbastard.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## LAIROS

The sun broke over the horizon, painting the sky in streaks of crimson and gold. I watched it rise with the same restless tension that had kept me awake all night. The waves lapped at my feet, cool against my skin, but they brought no peace.

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I fingered the crown of shark teeth and shells hanging from my belt. Not proper for a king to go without his crown, but I wasn't about to risk losing it in combat. Not that it mattered much now. If Nedaris had truly sided with the Knights, my crown was the least of what I stood to lose.

Behind me, I heard Emme stir in the hut. Her heartbeat had changed rhythm—faster now, no longer deep with sleep. The sound called to me, pulling at something deep in my chest. I'd known it the moment she stepped into my tent at the summit, felt it in the thrum of her heartbeat that matched the rhythm of my own, the way her voice vibrated at a frequency that hummed in my bones.

My mate. My queen.

With the worst fucking time possible.

I ran a hand through my hair, still damp from my pre-dawn swim. The water had done nothing to clear my head or cool the heat that flared every time I thought of her pressed against that palm tree, her lips hungry on mine. She was infuriating. Fascinating. Utterly fuckable.

A rustle of fabric announced her approach. I didn't turn, letting her think she'd caught me unaware. Let her have that small victory.

"If you ever," she said, her voice hard with loathing as she stepped beside me, "under any circumstance, use your power to force me into anything again, I will find a way to hurt you that makes death seem like a kindness."

I glanced down at her. She stood a few feet away, now-dry uniform hugging curves that had haunted my dreams all night. Her gray eyes burned with fury, her jaw set in determination. The morning light caught in her blonde hair, making it shine like polished gold. I wanted to run my fingers through it, to taste the curve of her neck, to?—

I inclined my head, accepting both the threat and the boundary. It hadn't been very... kingly of me to use that power on her. Not like that. But her questions—her demands—had scraped against wounds I wasn't ready to prod.

“Good.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Now, where are we going?”

I offered my arm, a peace gesture she pointedly ignored. “Stillwater Hold. It's a frontier outpost at the edge of the Delovia Ridge where it drops into the abyss. If anyone knows what's happening in my kingdom, it's Commander Vigas.”

Emme's jaw ticked, but she didn't say anything as she stomped and kicked into the water. I followed, feeling the change ripple through my body as soon as I was submerged. Scales erupted along my spine and legs, fusing into the fringed tail that would propel us through the water.

Emme watched the transformation with undisguised fascination, though she tried to hide it behind a scowl. I swam to her, pulling her close to create the air bubble around her head. Her eyes met mine, still angry, still wary.

I hummed my song, letting the vibrations shape the water around her face. “Ready?”

She nodded, and we began our journey.

The waters around my island were clear and warm, teeming with life. Schools of brightly colored fish darted around us, curious about the strange pair invading their

territory. A ray glided beneath us, its wings undulating in graceful waves. In any other circumstance, I would have shown Emme the hidden wonders of my kingdom—the coral gardens that bloomed in impossible colors, the ancient ruins where my ancestors had first learned to shape water with song.

Instead, we swam with purpose, putting distance between us and the island that was no longer safe.

Emme remained furious every time I summoned fresh air for her. Each stop brought us face to face, my hands cupping her cheeks, my mouth a breath away from hers as I hummed the song that kept her alive. I could feel her pulse jump, see the dilation of her pupils that betrayed her body's response to my proximity. But she kept her eyes cold, her expression closed.

But there was no time for extended explanations or negotiations. We needed to reach Stillwater Hold before nightfall.

Bringing Emme carried its own risks. Vigas was as gruff and unforgiving as the frontier he patrolled, with little patience for outsiders. And if word of the coup had reached him, I couldn't be certain of his allegiance.

Nedaris. My thoughts circled back to my brother as we swam through a narrow channel between two towering rock formations. His disapproval of the summit had been expected—he'd made no secret of his disdain for my diplomatic efforts with the other rulers of Sanos. But this level of betrayal?

Surely not. Nedaris was rigid and disapproving, yes. He'd fallen in with the Knights during his own time spent on the frontier and embraced their belief in Khadian superiority. But to orchestrate an attack that could have killed not just me, but every ruler on that beach? To risk war with multiple kingdoms?



We'd been swimming for nearly an hour when I felt the first disturbance in the currents, a shift in the water's song. Something moved in the distance. A shadow, too large and too coordinated to be natural. I pulled Emme closer, changing course to avoid whatever lurked ahead.

But the shadow changed direction, too. Following us.

Shit.

I scanned our surroundings. More shadows appeared to our left. Above us, the dark shapes of ships cut across the sunlight filtering through the surface.

We were being herded.

I pulled Emme closer, refreshing her air one last time. Her eyes widened as she sensed my tension, her hands gripping my arms.

"What's happening?" she mouthed.

There was no time to explain. No time for anything but a desperate gamble.

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I crushed my mouth to hers, flooding her lungs with air. Then I shoved her toward the surface, hard enough to send her rocketing upward. Away from the raiders. Toward the ships where she at least had a chance.

Emme's betrayed expression as she spiraled away from me felt like a knife to the gut. But there was no time for regret.

I dove deep, pushing my body to its limits. Down where pressure squeezed my lungs. Down until my bones creaked in protest. Down where the darkness swallowed all light and ancient things slumbered.

I centered myself in the crushing darkness, and began to hum.

Come, I sang. This wasn't the gentle song I used to shape air bubbles or calm troubled waters. This was older, wilder, a vibration that traveled through the ocean floor itself. Come and show these fools who truly rules these seas.

The effort drained me, left me vulnerable to the raiders closing in from all sides. I didn't fight as rough hands seized me, dragging me upward. My work was done. Now I just had to stay alive long enough for it to matter.

They hauled me onto the deck of a ship, tossing me down like a landed fish. My tail melted away as I gasped in the air, scales receding until I was fully human again. Boots surrounded me, but I had eyes for only one person.

Emme.

She stood off to the side, flanked by guards. Relief at seeing her alive curdled to rage at the sight of the bruise forming on her jaw.

“Who hit her?” I demanded, my voice a deadly rasp.

No one answered. Instead, the circle of Knights parted to reveal a familiar figure. Nedaris stepped forward, resplendent in formal Khadian garments, his expression a mask of snide disapproval.

“Brother,” he said, his voice carrying across the deck. “How disappointing to find you still breathing.”

I pushed myself to my knees, fighting the weakness that threatened to drag me back down. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Nedaris’s mouth twisted. “Always so flippant. Even now, when you’ve lost everything.”

“Have I?” I glanced around the ship, counting Knights, noting positions, cataloging weapons. And beyond them, scanning the horizon for the first ripples of approach. “Seems premature to declare victory when I’m, as you said, still breathing.”

“A temporary condition.” Nedaris turned to the Knight captain at his side. “Execute all the guards in the drycave who aided his escape. And their families. We must root out all traces of disloyalty.”

Horror washed through me. “Nedaris, no. You can’t?—”

“I can’t what, brother?” He stepped closer, looming over me. “Can’t rid our kingdom of traitors? You’ve betrayed our people by bringing these humans here. You’ve made us weak.” He spat the word like poison. “I will return us to our true glory.”

“Is that what the Knights told you?” I pushed myself to my knees, ignoring the spears pointed at my throat. “Or did you come up with that bullshit on your own?”

“No, brother. They’ve opened my eyes.” Nedaris paced the deck, his movements tight with barely contained excitement. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve waited for this moment? How many years I’ve spent planning, gathering allies, biding my time while you fucked and drank your way through the kingdom?”

“And the human ship?” I asked, playing for time as I tracked the minutes in my head. The beast would come. It had to. “They come in peace.”

“Peace.” He sneered the word. “We are Khadians. We were meant to rule these seas, not share them.” His eyes gleamed with fervor. “The Knights of the Depths understand this. Together, we will restore our people to their rightful place. Beginning with ensuring this human threat never materializes.”

His gaze flicked to Emme, who stood silent and watchful. “Once we’ve dealt with this one, we’ll find the rest. And then the ship they came from.”

“The Legacy carries thousands of innocents,” Emme said, her voice steady despite the fear I could smell on her. “Children. Families.”

“Invaders,” Nedaris corrected. “And they will meet the same fate as all who threaten our waters.”

I felt the first tremor beneath the ship—a subtle shift in the current that none of the others seemed to notice. Not yet.

“You’ll start a war you can’t win,” I warned.

“Perhaps.” Nedaris shrugged. “But better to die fighting than live on our knees.”

Nedaris stepped forward and ripped the crown from my belt with enough force to tear the loops. Shark teeth gleamed in the sunlight as he placed it on his own head.

“The reign of Lairos ends today,” he declared. “Long live King Nedaris, true ruler of Delovia Ridge and all its waters.”

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The ship lurched violently, nearly knocking Nedaris off his feet. Confused shouts rang out as Knights rushed to the railings. The water around us began to churn, dark shapes moving beneath the surface.

“You might have your Knights,” I said in the dreadful calm of still waters, “but I still control these seas.”

Then it rose—a massive serpentine head breaking the waves, water cascading from scales the size of dinner plates. The sea dragon’s jaws opened in a roar that shook the very air, revealing rows of slavering fangs longer than a man’s arm.

Nedaris staggered back, his face slack with shock. I used the distraction to break free, driving my elbow into the nearest Knight’s throat before snatching his spear. Two Knights blocked my path, spears leveled at my chest.

I could kill them. Could fight my way through every Knight on this ship. One throw of the spear I gripped would end the threat he posed to my kingdom, to Emme, to everything I held dear.

But the ship lurched as the dragon’s tail crashed down, splintering the railing mere feet away. We were out of time.

I dove for Emme instead, tackling her guard and snapping the man’s neck with a single twist. I cut her bonds with his knife and pulled her to her feet.

“Jump!” I shouted over screams and splintering wood.

We plunged into the churning waters together, the shock of it stealing my breath for a moment before my transformation took hold. I pulled Emme close, creating her air bubble as the ship continued to break apart above us.

We swam until we reached a large piece of floating debris—part of the ship’s hull that had broken free. I helped Emme climb onto it, then hauled myself up beside her, my body screaming in protest at the effort. The transformation back to legs left me gasping, every muscle burning with fatigue.

The summoning had cost me more than I’d expected. Worth it, to see the look on Nedaris’s face when he realized I still had one trick he couldn’t match. Worth it, to get Emme safely away from his clutches.

But the cost... The guard with the newborn daughter. The families in the drycave. My own brother had ordered the execution of innocent families. Planned to attack the Legacy. Aligned himself with fanatics who would drag our kingdom back into darkness.

The weight of it settled on my shoulders like a physical burden. I’d failed him. Failed my people. Failed?—

Emme’s hand on my arm pulled me from my dark thoughts. “Lairos,” she said, her voice tight with alarm. “Look.”

I followed her gaze to where several fins had broken the surface, cutting through the waves with purpose as they surged toward us.

Despite everything, I felt my mouth curve into a grin. “Help has arrived.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

## LAIROS

I scrubbed a towel through my hair, watching the swirling maelstrom outside the thick glass windows of Vigas's quarters. The water churned in a perpetual spiral, a natural defense that had kept Stillwater Hold safe for generations. Any ship that tried to navigate it without proper guidance would be ripped apart and scattered across the ocean floor. Any unauthorized swimmer who attempted it would be crushed against the jagged rocks.

Perfect for a frontier outpost. Even better for hiding from a coup.

A patrol of Khadians returned through the swirling waters, their songs and movements synchronized down to the flicks of their tails. Three of them peeled off with a captured deep-sea shark between them, its massive jaws bound shut, its thrashing growing weaker as they hauled it toward the holding pens. A new tracker, if properly trained.

I tossed the towel aside and ran a hand through my damp hair. Emme had been shown to guest quarters for her own bathing and comfort, but her absence gnawed at me. The pull of her soul song was stronger now, a constant tug in my chest drawing me toward her. Being separated from her, even by a few walls, felt wrong.

The heavy metal door to Vigas's quarters creaked open, and the commander himself stepped in with arms crossed over his barrel chest. The old warrior hadn't changed much in the years since I'd seen him last, still built like a boulder with a temperament to match, his gray-streaked beard the only concession to time's passage.

I'd spent years training here under Vigas, learning to fight, to lead, to survive. Now I needed those lessons more than ever.

"The human is settled," he said without preamble, closing the door behind him.



“Seems she’s made quite an impression on my crew already. Didn’t even flinch when Kora shifted forms right in front of her.”

I fought back a grin. That sounded like Emme. “She’s... resilient.”

Vigas grunted, moving to the comm unit on his desk. “We’ve intercepted communications. Several of the humans have checked in with their rulers.” He tapped a few buttons, bringing up a map of reported locations. “Three still missing.”

“And the Legacy?” I asked, studying the map.

“Still in orbit and unharmed. For now.”

Relief loosened some of the tension in my shoulders. At least Nedaris hadn’t made his move against the human ship yet. “Send word that Emme is safe with me. I’ll inform her of the updates myself.”

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“Consider it done.” Vigas moved to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of amber liquid. “And I’ll keep an ear out for any additional news concerning the humans.”

I nodded my thanks as he poured two glasses. “I’m surprised you’re not more put out by all this. Having your peaceful outpost dragged into a coup.”

“Of all the seas on all the worlds,” he said dryly and handed me a glass, “I had to find myself in yours.”

The gruff taunt was so familiar, so normal, that for a moment I could almost forget the shitstorm we were swimming in. I’d arrived at Stillwater burning with rage at the so-called ‘lesson’ of my father’s. An exile, in pretty words and hard labor. I’d wanted to tear the whole fucking outpost down, had even fantasized about swimming back to the palace and showing them exactly what happened when you caged a prince.

But Vigas had given me somewhere to direct that fury, turning my need to prove myself into something useful. Strange how what started as punishment became the thing that saved my life, again and again.

“Admit it, old man. You missed me.” I raised my glass with a smirk and mock salute. “Most people have to pay good coin for the privilege of my company.”

“Most people haven’t seen you puke your guts out after your first battle.” He took a long swallow of his drink. “Or drag your royal ass through training when you couldn’t tell a spear from your own dick.”

“Those were the days.” I sipped my drink, letting the sharp flavor wash over my

tongue. What a spoiled prick I'd been. No doubt I'd been intended to die in some training accident. And who would make the mistake of naming Nedaris as heir, then?

"You were a real bastard back then."

"Still am." Vigas moved to the window, watching the swirling waters.

I downed the rest of my drink, letting the burn clear my head, then stepped to his side.

"What are we looking at, Vigas? How bad is it?"

"Hard to say." He watched my reflection in the glass. "Communications have been spotty since the attack. The Knights are blocking standard channels. But I've got runners in the water, carrying messages to those I trust."

"And those you don't?"

"Several of the coastal lords have already pledged to Nedaris. Others are waiting to see which way the current flows." His eyes met mine, sharp and assessing. "The Songbird Atolls declared for you immediately. Nedaris has blockaded their ports in response."

Shit. The Songbird Atolls were some of our biggest producers, their shallow reefs perfect for farming the algae that fed half my kingdom and traded to others. An extended blockade would hurt more than just them.

"What forces do I still command?"

"The frontier garrisons remain loyal to the crown. That's about two thousand fighters, spread thin across our borders." Vigas tapped his fingers against his glass. "The royal guard is split—those who weren't killed in the initial palace culling have either fled or sworn to Nedaris."

I paced the length of the room, mind racing. Two thousand fighters against whatever forces Nedaris and the Knights had mustered. Not great odds.

“You know,” I said, turning to face him, “you could make this much easier on yourself. Feed me a few lines about gathering allies, then send word to Nedaris that you’ve got me and the human. He’d reward you handsomely.”

Vigas snorted, the sound somewhere between amusement and disgust. “My blade and my song belong to the king. Until you’re dead and your successor completes the trials, that’s you.”

“Thanks for the enthusiastic endorsement.” The words dripped sarcasm, but that unwavering loyalty hit harder than any palace wine. Not that I’d doubted. Much. Vigas was probably the only person in all the seas I trusted completely.

A small, almost invisible smile cracked his weathered face. “What was the most important lesson I tried to instill in you?”

I didn’t hesitate. “The Khadian people come first.”

“Not kings. Not crowns.” Vigas pushed away from the window and set down his glass with a clink. His shoulders drew back as his hands came together at his waist in the picture of a perfect commander. “I’ve seen what the Knights do to any they consider outside of pure, Khadian tradition. I’ve heard the lust in their voices to ensure every molecule of moisture knows it serves Khadian songs.” His disgust was palpable. “I won’t serve that.”

The old seal began to twist, and the door swung open to allow Emme’s entry. The pull in my chest intensified, drawing me toward her like an invisible cord. Her soul song thrummed in perfect harmony with my own, a melody only I could hear.

Vigas cleared his throat. "I should check on things at the bridge." He nodded to Emme as he passed. "Ma'am."

The door closed behind him with a heavy thud, leaving us alone. Emme stood just inside the threshold, her blonde hair still damp from bathing, dressed in a fresh linen wrap borrowed from one of the soldiers. The bruise on her cheek had darkened to an angry purple.

I crossed the room in three long strides, cupping her face gently in my hands. Fury coiled in my gut at the sight of that bruise. at the knowledge that Nedaris or one of his Knights had dared to harm her.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, brushing my thumb over the mark. "You should never have been caught in the middle of this."

Emme arched a brow. "You mean when you abandoned me to the wolves?"

I dropped my hands and took a step back. "I wasn't abandoning you. I needed to dive deep, and you needed air."

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“So, you just... what? Decided I’d be better off alone on the surface with ships full of people trying to kill us?” Her gray eyes flashed with renewed anger. “No warning, no explanation, just shove and swim?”

“The Knights wouldn’t kill you without orders. Not when you’re valuable as a hostage.” I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated. Why did she want to fight over everything? “If I hadn’t summoned?—”

“The sea monster. Right.” She folded her arms across her chest. “And what the hell was that thing? Not that I’m ungrateful, but something like that is a story to scare children where I’m from.”

“The sea dragon is special to Khadians,” I explained, moving to pour her a drink and refresh mine. “Legend says the first Khadian king fell into the abyss after slaying the last of a hundred pretenders. Too weak to do anything but sing his final goodbye to his queen, he sank deeper and deeper until the dragon answered his call. The beast saved and granted him dominion over the waters in exchange for protection from hunters.”

I handed her the glass, our fingers brushing. Even that brief contact sent a jolt through me. “To honor our first king, each potential ruler now offers to battle any contender for the throne. Only when no more object can the potential plunge as deep as they can swim and earn the dragon’s favor. If they succeed, they can call upon it in times of great need.”

“And you can command it?” Emme’s voice held a note of awe that sent a ridiculous flare of pride through my chest.

“Not command, exactly. Request.” I took a sip of my drink. “The dragon chooses whether to answer.”

“It chose to answer you today,” she said, watching me over the rim of her glass.

I swirled the amber liquid in my glass, remembering the surge of power and exhaustion that followed. The sea dragon hadn’t just come—it had answered with fury, as if it too recognized the threat Nedaris posed. “Yes.”

Let my dear brother play at being king. Let him wear my crown and command his Knights. But he wasn’t the true king of Delovia Ridge. Not yet. Not until he faced the trials, and if I had anything to say about it, he never would.

Emme was quiet for a moment. Her voice softened, a note of something like pity threading through it. “So... your own brother?”

I sighed and poured us both another drink, buying time as I tried to sort through the tangle of emotions that came with thinking of Nedaris. Anger. Betrayal. And beneath it all, a stubborn thread of something that felt dangerously like grief.

“I don’t know when it started,” I admitted finally, staring into my glass. “We’ve always been at odds, I suppose. Driven there by our father, and then... it just continued into adulthood. He was always the perfect prince. Followed every rule, mastered every lesson, never stepped out of line. While I...” I gave a humorless laugh. “Well, you’ve seen how I am.”

Our father had pitted us against each other from the beginning. Watching. Testing. Waiting to see which of his sons would prove the stronger. I’d always assumed it was to prepare us for the inevitable challenges to the throne. Now I wondered if he’d simply enjoyed the show.

“Parental disappointment is a universal plague, it seems,” Emme said with a bitter twist to her lips.

I glanced up, curious. “What do you mean?”

She hesitated, as if weighing how much to share. “I lost my parents young. We hadn’t spoken for a few weeks, all over stupid demands for grandchildren. I wasn’t opposed to the idea, but...” She shook her head. “How could I bring a child into a world where they faced a future with no food on the table and poison for an environment?”

The pain in her voice struck a chord deep within me. I wanted to reach for her, to offer some comfort, but I kept my distance. She wasn’t ready for that yet.

“Then they died in their sleep. Carbon monoxide poisoning, faulty detector.” Her mouth twisted. “Nothing ever resolved. No apologies over tea. No closure. Just... gone.”

“I’m sorry, Emme.” I wished I had something more comforting to offer. Better words. Better actions. A better fucking world where such senseless death and heartbreak didn’t exist.

She shrugged, the gesture too casual to be genuine. “It’s part of what drew me to the Legacy mission. I want to ensure better conditions for future generations, even if I won’t see it for myself.”

The simple confession hit me harder than I expected. Here was something of herself, freely given, not extracted through emergency or duty. I wanted more, wanted to uncover everything there was to know about her, to learn what made her laugh, what brought her joy, what kept her awake at night.

The soul song between us thrummed louder, a constant reminder of what she was to



me. What we could be to each other.

“I don’t know if I could be so selfless,” I admitted, moving closer to her. “Even if I was certain Nedaris wouldn’t destroy the kingdom.”

Emme didn’t back up. Instead, she lifted her chin and met my eyes. “I saw you choose saving me over fighting your brother. Why, if you’re as selfish as you claim? I’m nothing to you or your planet.”

Nothing? Here was this incredible woman who’d crossed the stars to save her people, who’d faced death without flinching, who set every cell in my body singing for her, and she thought she was nothing?

I closed the last bit of distance, tilting her head back with a knuckle under her chin. “Do you truly not feel it?”

“Feel what?” Emme demanded. “You keep saying that, but what does it even mean?”

I took a deep breath, steadying myself. “The soul song,” I said quietly. “It’s how Khadians recognize their mates.”

Her eyes widened. “Mates?”

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“A bond deeper than simple lovers. Rarer.” I reached for her hand, half-expecting her to pull away. When she didn’t, I pressed her palm against my chest, where my heart beat in perfect rhythm with hers. “I hear it in the frequency of your voice, in your heartbeat. It’s the one person in all the seas—or apparently, all the stars—whose very being calls to our own.”

“That’s...” She swallowed hard. “That’s impossible.”

“And yet here we are.” I dipped my head closer to hers, drawn by the pulse at her throat, the scent of her skin. “You are the furthest thing from nothing to me, Emme Mathis.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### EMME

“Soul song?” I repeated, the words strange in my mouth. My heart hammered against my ribs. “Like... soulmates?”

You are the furthest thing from nothing to me.

The rational, practical part of my brain screamed that Lairos’s declaration was complete nonsense. Some desperate fantasy to justify a convenient attraction. The universe didn’t work like that—there was no cosmic force connecting two souls across galaxies.

I pulled my hand away from his chest, needing space to think. My palm tingled where

it had pressed against him, as if my body remembered the contact even as my brain tried to dismiss it.

“That’s not possible,” I said, my mind automatically rejecting what couldn’t be quantified or measured. “We’re not even the same species.”

His eyes tracked me as I paced, making me acutely aware of every movement. “The song doesn’t lie.”

“The song,” I muttered, wrapping my arms around myself to ward off the chill that had nothing to do with the temperature. “Right. The magical, mystical song only you can hear.”

Soulmates. The word itself felt childish in my mind, something from fairy tales and romance novels. Some story whispered about at teenage sleepovers or debated over in three AM dorm room diatribes. Not real life. Notmylife. I dealt in facts, in measurable quantities, in provable theories.

Not... fate.

“Look,” I said, turning to face him. “Even if this soul song thing is real?—”

Lairos prowled closer, cutting off my objections as he stopped inches from me. His hand caught my chin, tilting my face up to his. The pad of his thumb traced my lower lip, and my words died in my throat.

“You can’t hear it,” he murmured, his voice dropping to a register that vibrated through me like a plucked string. “But you can feel it, can’t you? The pull. The need.”

His thumb slipped between my lips, pressing gently against my tongue. The taste of

him—salt and citrus and delicious spice—flooded my senses. I should have bitten down. Should have pushed him away. Instead, I found myself sucking lightly, watching his pupils dilate until the forest green of his eyes was nearly swallowed by black.

“Fuck,” he growled, withdrawing his thumb to trace the moisture down my neck. “I’ve wanted to touch you since the moment you walked into my tent.”

“You don’t even know me,” I whispered, but my body betrayed me, arching into his touch as his fingers skimmed along my collarbone.

“I know your song.” His lips replaced his fingers, hot against my throat. “I know how your heart races when I’m near.”

His teeth grazed the sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder, and a shameful moan escaped me.

The sound seemed to snap something in him. His mouth crashed against mine, stealing my breath, my thoughts, my objections. Each sweep of his tongue sent sparks of pleasure straight to my core. Those slightly-too-sharp canines caught my bottom lip, and my hands fisted in his hair before I could stop myself.

Heat surged through my body, settling into a molten ache between my thighs. His hands found my waist, fingers digging into the thin linen wrapped around me. I arched into him, needing more contact, more pressure, more of everything he offered.

“Feel that?” he murmured against my lips when we finally broke apart. “That’s just the beginning.”

I forced myself to take a step back. To suck in several breaths, cool my blood, gather my scattered thoughts. Every cell in my body screamed to close the gap again, to

press my body against his. But this wasn't me. I didn't act impulsively, on instinct, without logical reasoning. Especially not in situations like these.

Lairos watched me silently, clearly giving me space to decide what would happen next. So damn confident that I couldn't resist him. Asshole.

But heaven help me, I wanted him. Wanted this. Even knowing the repercussions. Even if it meant crossing a line I could never uncross.

"What does this mean for my people?" I asked, clinging to the one anchor I had in this storm of unexpected feelings.

Lairos's laugh was low and appreciative. "Already using every tool for political advantage. Good. You'll need that skill when I crown you my queen."

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“Queen?” I nearly choked on the word. “You can’t be serious.”

“Is that not how it was done on Earth?” He cocked his head, genuinely curious, but his eyes never left my body. “Where you would share your mate’s power?”

“Yes. Well, no.” I ran a hand through my hair, trying to organize my thoughts when all I could think about was the lingering taste of him on my lips. “It depends.”

“There is no ‘depends’ in Delovia.” He moved toward me again, and I retreated a step, my body at war with my mind. “You will rule at my side.”

“I’m not here to rule anything,” I reminded him, and myself. “I’m here to secure a place for my people.”

“And what better place than under the protection of their queen?” His fingers traced the edge of my wrap where it crossed my collarbone, the light touch leaving fire in its wake. “How many of your people need settlement?”

I swallowed hard, trying to focus on the negotiation and not the way his proximity made my skin tingle. “Everyone aboard the Legacy. We can’t return to Earth.”

“And what do these people require?” he asked, moving closer. His hand slid to cup the back of my neck, thumb stroking down my throat.

The touch was so intimate, so knowing, that I had to wonder if he’d studied human anatomy or if some things were universal across species. Either way, it was working. My knees felt weak, and it took all my concentration to remember what we were

discussing.

“Space,” I managed, my voice embarrassingly breathy as his other hand found my waist again. “Clean water. Agricultural opportunities.”

His smile was predatory as his fingers traced small circles on my hip. “All things we have in abundance. And what would your people offer in return?”

“Technology. Medical knowledge.” I took another step back, needing distance to think clearly. “Cultural exchange.”

“Tempting,” he murmured, following my retreat step for step.

My back met cool glass, the vibration of the maelstrom beyond thrumming against my skin. Trapped between the churning depths and his heat.

“I haven’t agreed to anything,” I reminded him, even as my body betrayed me by leaning into his touch.

“No?” One hand slid up my side, skimming the curve of my breast through the linen. “Then let me sweeten the deal. Your people get their settlement, with full autonomy over their internal affairs. They maintain their own laws, customs, leadership.”

His thumb brushed over my nipple, and I gasped at the jolt of pleasure. “And in exchange?” I managed to ask.

“You,” he said simply, his other hand finding the knot of my wrap. “By my side. In my bed. In my life.”

The wrap loosened with a gentle tug, threatening to slip from my shoulders. “That’s quite the personal sacrifice you’re asking for.”

His laugh was dark and rich. “Is it?” His fingers slipped beneath the fabric, tracing the curve of my collarbone. “Tell me you don’t want this, Emme. Tell me you don’t feel the pull between us.”

I should have pushed him away. Should have demanded he respect my boundaries. Instead, I found myself tilting my head to give him better access as his mouth descended on my neck. His teeth grazed my pulse point and the wrap slipped further, exposing one shoulder.

“All of them,” he murmured and slid his hand up my throat, thumb tracing my jaw. “For one of you. That seems a fair trade.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I gasped, the words torn from me as his mouth found the sensitive spot below my ear.

“It is simple. Do you want me to stop?” His fingers found the slipping neckline of my linens tracing along the edge with just enough pressure to push it down a fraction of an inch. “Or do you want to tell me what you feel when I touch you here?”

“I feel...” What did I feel? Desire, certainly. A hunger that defied rational thought. But something else too—something deeper and more frightening than mere physical attraction.

I wanted this. Him. Whatever it meant tomorrow.

“I feel like I’m losing control,” I admitted, fighting to keep my voice steady as pleasure simmered through my veins. “And I never lose control.”

His eyes darkened at my confession, pupils dilating until only a thin ring of green remained. The fabric parted beneath his fingers, exposing my breast to the cool air. I shivered as his thumb circled my nipple, drawing it to a tight peak. “And here?”



“I feel...” I gasped as he replaced his thumb with his mouth, the wet heat of his tongue sending lightning through my veins. A strangled cry escaped me, my hands flying to his hair to hold him there. “Like my skin is too tight. Like every nerve ending is on fire.”

He hummed against my flesh, the vibration sending another wave of pleasure coursing through me. “And here?” His other hand slid down my back, finding the curve of my ass and squeezing.

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My hips bucked against him involuntarily. “Like I need more.”

“More what?” he asked, his voice a low growl as he pulled back to look at me. His mouth moved to my other breast, lavishing it with the same attention.

“More of you,” I admitted, my fingers finding the knot of his own wrap. “More of this.”

His smile was wicked as he stepped back, just out of reach. “Not yet. First, I want to know exactly what I do to you.” His hands found the remaining knot of my wrap and tugged, sending the fabric pooling around my feet. “Do you feel it now, Emme?”

I stood naked before him, fighting the urge to cover myself. His gaze swept over my exposed breasts, down my belly. My nipples tightened under the intensity of his attention, and my cheeks flushed despite the cool air against my skin.

He circled me slowly, his fingers trailing over my skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. When he stood behind me, his chest pressed against my back, I could feel the hard ridge of his cock through the thin fabric of his wrap. His hands slid around to cup my breasts, thumbs teasing my nipples as his mouth found the curve of my shoulder.

“Tell me,” he murmured against my skin.

“I feel...” I arched into his touch, my head falling back against his shoulder. “Like I’m melting from the inside out.”

One hand traveled lower, fingers splaying across my stomach before dipping between my thighs. I gasped as he found the slick heat there, his touch feather-light against my pussy.

“You’re drenched,” he growled, his teeth grazing my earlobe. “Is that for me?”

“Yes,” I breathed, beyond denying it. Beyond caring about anything but the need coursing through me. “Please.”

His fingers circled my clit with maddening precision, never quite giving the pressure I craved. “Tell me what you feel when I touch you here.”

“Like I’m going to explode,” I groaned, my hips moving of their own accord, seeking more friction. “Like I can’t think straight.”

“Good.” His other hand pinched my nipple, the slight pain mixing with pleasure in a heady cocktail. “I don’t want you thinking at all.”

I wanted to argue, but his fingers dipped lower, teasing my entrance. I whimpered as he thrust one finger slowly into my pussy, his thumb circling my clit. The invasion stretched me open, but my body welcomed him eagerly, already fluttering with the promise of release. His teeth scraped the junction of my neck and shoulder, then bit down harder as he added a second finger.

“What do you feel now?” he asked, his voice rough with need.

“I feel...” My hips rolled against him, chasing that perfect combination of pleasure and pain. With his free arm wrapped around me, there was nowhere to go, nothing to do except take whatever he gave me. “Like I need more than just your fingers.”

In one fluid motion, he spun me away from the window and backed me toward the

bed. The back of my knees hit the edge, and I tumbled onto the soft surface. I watched, mesmerized, as he tore at the twists and tucks holding his linen together.

His cock sprang free, thick and hard, curving slightly upward. It was similar enough to human anatomy to be familiar, yet different in subtle ways, the head slightly more tapered, the shaft adorned with faint ridges that I knew would feel incredible inside me.

“You’re staring,” he said, amusement coloring his voice.

“You’re worth staring at,” I replied, reaching for him.

He stepped between my spread thighs, his hands cradling my face as he bent to kiss me. This kiss was different from the others—slower, deeper, a promise rather than a demand.

When he pulled back, his eyes searched mine. “The song doesn’t lie, Emme. But it doesn’t force, either. We choose what to do with it.”

I reached up, fingers tracing the line of his jaw. “And what if I choose this? Just this, for now?”

He pressed closer, until I could feel the vibration of his words against my lips. “Then I’ll make sure you feel every note.”

I let my hand trail down his chest, over the ridges of his abdomen, until my fingers wrapped around his cock. He hissed in pleasure as I stroked him, learning the feel of him, the weight in my palm.

“And what do you feel,” I asked, turning the question back on him, “when I touch you here?”

His eyes snapped open, surprise and heat mingling in his gaze. “Like I’m being unmade,” he admitted with a strained laugh. “Like I’m going to embarrass myself if you keep that up.”

Power surged through me at his confession. I leaned forward to press my lips against the spot where his neck met his shoulder, mimicking what he’d done to me earlier. “And here?”

A growl rumbled through his chest. “Like I need to claim you. Now.”

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He eased me back onto the bed, covering my body with his. The weight of him pressed me into the mattress, his cock hot and hard against my inner thigh. My breath caught at the intimacy of it, being surrounded by him, his scent, his heat. No more negotiating, no more questions. Just this moment where everything else fell away except the need burning between us.

“Tell me you want this,” he demanded, his voice strained with the effort of holding back. “Tell me you feel it.”

“I want this,” I breathed against his mouth. “I want you.”

He pushed forward slowly, the stretch exquisite as he filled me inch by inch. The ridges along his length dragged against my inner walls in a way that made stars burst behind my eyelids. My hands roamed his shoulders, his back, seeking purchase, and found the ridge of scales running down his spine. They were smoother than I expected, almost silky, with the faintest hint of warmth.

Curious, I ran my fingers along them, tracing their pattern.

Lairos froze above me, a strangled sound escaping his throat. His entire body tensed, muscles coiling tight beneath my hands.

This time, his groan turned to a shudder that shook him from head to toe. His eyes met mine, incredulity mingling with raw hunger. “You don’t even know what you do to me, do you?”

Before I could respond, his hips pulled back, dragging his cock nearly all the way out,

then slammed back into me. My hips bucked, struggling to meet him, as every nerve in my body lit up at the sensation.

“Do you feel it now?” he asked, his voice rough with restraint. “Tell me what you feel with me inside you.”

My answer devolved into a keening cry as he pulled back and drove into me again. Harder. Deeper. I could feel my orgasm building, like a kettle reaching its boiling point, seconds from bursting.

“Full.” Words failed me as my fingernails dug into his shoulders. I needed something to hold onto as pleasure threatened to sweep me away. Something solid and real to anchor me against this rising tide of feeling. “So fucking full of you I can’t think straight.”

With a curse, he claimed my mouth, swallowing my cries as his strokes lengthened, deepened. Pinned beneath his weight, his cock filling me perfectly. One hand slipped between us to circle my clit, adding a new layer of sensation that had me arching off the bed.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, his voice dropping to that growl that seemed to vibrate through my very bones. “Let me hear you.”

I couldn’t have held back if I tried. Each thrust pulled sounds from me I’d never made before—desperate, needy sounds that should have embarrassed me but only seemed to drive him wild.

“Do you feel it?” he panted, his rhythm faltering slightly as his own control slipped. “Tell me, Emme. Tell me what you feel now.”

“You.” I managed the word on a ragged gasp. “Like I’m underwater, and you’re the

only air for miles.”

Something flashed across his face—triumph, tenderness, relief—before his head dropped to my throat, teeth grazing the sensitive spot where my pulse hammered against my skin. His fingers never stopped their rhythmic assault, driving me higher and higher toward a peak I could feel building at the base of my spine.

“Let go,” he growled against my neck, the vibration of his voice sending new shivers through me. “Let yourself drown.”

His mouth crashed down on mine, swallowing my cries as the pressure inside me finally broke. Pleasure raced through me in white-hot waves as my pussy clenched around his length, drawing him deeper with every stroke. Distantly, I heard him groan as his movements grew jerky, uneven. Then, with a final, hard thrust, he buried himself inside me, spilling his release into my still-shaking core.

We collapsed together, both fighting to catch our breath. Lairos pulled me against his chest, his fingers tracing idle patterns on my damp skin.

“Fuck,” he muttered, resting his forehead against mine. “Never doubt it, Emme. You are everything to me.”

His words should have terrified me. Should have sent me running from the intensity of what just happened between us. Instead, I found myself curling closer, memorizing the steady thrum of his heartbeat against my cheek. For once in my life, I didn’t need to understand everything. Didn’t need to analyze or measure or quantify.

I just needed this. Him.

And if giving myself to him meant saving everyone aboard the Legacy... well, that wasn’t really a sacrifice at all.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

EMME

Heat traced down my spine, pulling me from the depths of sleep. Warm lips pressed against my shoulder blade, moving with great deliberation down each vertebra. I stirred, not quite awake, but my body responding with a languid stretch that pressed me further into the touch.

“Mmm,” I murmured, caught in that perfect space between dreams and consciousness where everything felt heightened. “What time is it?”

“Early,” Lairos whispered against my skin. His fingers continued their journey down my spine, pressing into spots that had me gasping.

“Don’t stop,” I mumbled into the pillow, still half-asleep.

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His laugh was a low rumble against my back as he resumed tracing those lines, this time with his mouth. Each press of his lips sent little sparks of pleasure radiating outward. I shifted beneath him, suddenly very awake and very aware of how my body responded to his touch.

“I didn’t expect you to be so sensitive there,” he said with another drag of his fingertips. “Not without the scales.”

The observation came with a hint of surprise that made me smile despite myself. Even after last night, there were still discoveries to be made between us. His teeth grazed a spot just above my tailbone, and I jerked, a bolt of pleasure shooting through me.

“Very sensitive,” he amended, and I could hear the smirk in his voice.

I rolled over to face him, taking in his disheveled appearance. He’d been summoned away after a second round of spirited...negotiations. His hair was pulled back in a messy knot, a few strands escaping to frame his face. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and stubble darkened his jaw. He looked exhausted but wired, like he’d been up all night and was running on pure adrenaline.

“Have you slept at all?” I asked, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw.

He caught my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm. “No. Vigas and I have been strategizing all night.”

“And?”

Frustration flashed across his face. “And the old bastard talked me out of storming the palace.”

I sat up, pulling the sheet with me. “You were going to storm the palace? Just like that?”

“Why not?” Lairos paced to the wall of reinforced glass. Restless energy seemed coiled in his movements. “It’s my palace. My throne. My people suffering under Nedaris and his Knights.”

“And you against how many of them?” I asked, trying to keep my voice level despite the spike of fear his words triggered. “That sounds like suicide, not strategy.”

He turned back to me, a dangerous smile playing at his lips. “I’ve faced worse odds.”

“And lived to tell about it through sheer dumb luck, I’m sure,” I muttered, running a hand through my tangled hair.

His laugh surprised me, genuine amusement replacing some of that tightly-wound tension. “Vigas said almost the exact same thing.” He crossed back to the bed and caught my hand, tugging me to my feet. “Come. If I have to wait to retake my throne, I at least want to show you the domain you’ll help me rule.”

I fumbled with the linen wrap, trying to recreate the intricate folds from yesterday. The fabric refused to cooperate, slipping from my grasp as I attempted to tuck and twist it into something resembling proper attire. Lairos watched my struggle with growing amusement until finally stepping in with an exasperated sigh.

“Here,” he said, his fingers deftly arranging the cloth around my body. The brush of his knuckles against my skin made it hard to focus on learning the technique. “Like this,” he murmured, securing the final fold at my shoulder. “Though I much prefer

you without it.”

“And any would-be glancers?” I teased. “What would happen if they enjoyed the view too much?”

He hummed noncommittally as he smoothed nonexistent wrinkles from my hips, hands lingering. “Perhaps the kingdom could do without eyes.”

I snorted at the suggestion and headed for the door. He caught me before I could open it, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear. His lips pressed softly against mine, a surprisingly tender gesture that sent butterflies fluttering through my stomach.

When he pulled back, his eyes sparkled with mischief as he opened the door with an exaggerated bow. “After you, my queen.”

We moved quickly through Stillwater’s corridors, his restless energy infectious as I kept pace. Guards and personnel stepped aside with respectful nods as we passed.

“This place was my salvation,” he said as we walked, his hand never leaving mine. “When my father sent me away, I thought it was the end of everything. Turns out it was just the beginning.”

He gripped a large wheel set into the wall, spinning it with practiced ease. The heavy door swung open with a soft hiss, and we stepped into a large bay where dozens of Khadians sparred with various weapons.

“Vigas knocked me on my ass right there, daily, until I learned to fight smarter instead of harder.” The pride in Lairos’s voice was unmistakable. “Said a king who relies only on his strength is a king who’ll die young.”

I watched two warriors circle each other with tridents and nets, their movements fluid

and deadly. “They’re beautiful to watch,” I admitted. “Like a dance.”

“A dance where one wrong step means death.” His fingers tightened on mine. “Vigas made sure I understood that lesson well. These soldiers put their lives in my hands every time they enter a battle. They are owed consideration when I fight with words instead of weapons.”

I studied his profile, finally seeing why Vigas’s words had cut through his plan to storm the palace. Every move in this fight with Nedaris had to consider more than victory—Lairos had to account for the lives that would be lost reaching it.

The soldiers here weren’t just weapons to be wielded, they were his people. His responsibility.

But ever the irreverent royal, he broke the seriousness with a grin. “Took months before he admitted I might survive being king after all.”

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We moved through more sealed sections, each hatch requiring the same practiced spin of heavy wheels. Lairos nodded to off-duty soldiers in the barracks, exchanged quick words with the medical staff about supply needs, checked in with the mess about rations.

Each place came with a story and a newly revealed piece of himself. Not the practiced charm of a king entertaining a diplomat, nor the regal persona required for ceremonial occasions. Just a man who loved his home and wanted to share it with the woman he claimed as his soulmate.

Soulmates. Soul song. I rolled the unfamiliar words over in my mind, tasting the phrases as he led me deeper into his world. They sounded foolish. Romantic. And yet... I could feel the truth of them in every interaction between us. Some fundamental, inevitable thread wound between us, tying us together through time and space.

Finally, we reached a circular chamber with glass walls that looked out into the swirling maelstrom. The water folded into itself, creating pockets of calm amid violent currents. Distant flashes of light revealed fish moving in schools through the abyss, shadows lurking just beyond sight.

“This is the highest point of Stillwater Hold,” Lairos said, his voice softening. “I spent hours here, watching the currents. Learning their patterns. Understanding how something so chaotic could still have an underlying order.”

I stepped closer to the glass, mesmerized by the play of water and light on the other side. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “She is.”

I glanced over my shoulder and found him watching me, not the ocean. The softness in his expression made me forget everything beyond this room. For a moment, I could almost believe we had all the time in the world to learn each other’s quirks and histories, hopes and dreams.

But beneath the peacefulness, I felt a clock ticking down our time together. The fight for his throne wouldn’t wait forever.

“When will you go?” I asked, the question slipping out before I could reconsider.

His eyes remained fixed on the churning waters. “Soon. Vigas believes we’ll have enough support within three days.”

Three days. Just seventy-two hours before he’d face his brother in a battle that could claim his life. The thought sent an unexpected wave of panic through me.

I wanted to tell him I’d go with him, fight at his side. But the words died in my throat. What good would I be in a battle? I couldn’t even breathe in his underwater world, let alone defend myself in it. The limitation burned, made worse by knowing there was nothing I could do to change it.

“You’re thinking very loudly,” Lairos said, his voice gentle.

“I hate that I can’t help you.” My fingers curled into fists at my sides. “I don’t like knowing that I’ll have to wait here, wondering if you’re alive or dead.”

“Worried I won’t be around to honor our agreement for your fellow humans?” His teasing tone couldn’t quite mask the underlying tension. He cupped my face in his hands. “Stillwater is impregnable. You’ll be safe here. That matters more than you

know.”

But what good was my safety to the thousands still in cryosleep? To the ones counting on me to save their lives? Every second Nedaris held power was another second closer to their destruction.

I stepped back from Lairos’s touch with a weak laugh. “I’m sorry. Here I am, demanding comfort when you should be focused on preparations.”

“You are many things, Emme Mathis, but never a burden.” His lips quirked into that familiar arrogant smile. “Though I admit, selfish as I am, nothing would please me more than having you at my side when I retake my throne.”

“Let me guess,” I said with a roll of my eyes. If he wanted to shove the problems away for these precious few moments, then so could I. “Resplendent dress, enemies on their knees, allies with devotion in their eyes.”

“Pageantry is as much a weapon as a blade, and I wield both with ease.” Lairos shrugged one shoulder, every inch the careless king at play. “The court will hate having a queen who sees through their games. They’ve spent generations perfecting the art of agreeing with their king while undermining him.”

“I’m sure you’ve given them plenty of practice,” I said, fighting a smile at his obvious delight in causing chaos.

“Oh, but watching you cut through their pretenses will be spectacular.” His grin widened as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch lingering. “No one else dares question their king quite like you do.”

The quiet admiration caught me off guard. I’d grown used to his flirtation, his strength, his arrogance. But this... This felt real. This was a man who valued my



defiance, who wanted my counsel. This was a partner.

A... mate.

The maelstrom hummed around us, a constant reminder of the dangerous beauty of his world. I stepped closer, drawn to this alien king who could charm water—and me—like some siren from our old tales. His thumb brushed across my bottom lip, making it impossible to concentrate on anything but him.

His smirk told me he knew exactly what effect he had on me, but I allowed him the unspoken victory as our lips met. The kiss started slow and sensual, like we had all the time in the world. Time to explore. Time to savor.

Time to hope.

Desire thrummed between us, matching the beat of my heart, the pulse of my blood. He tilted my head back, deepening the kiss, his tongue darting past my parted lips to tease mine. Need flared brighter, burning away caution. I wrapped my arms around his neck, letting him carry me deeper into his spell.

The chamber shuddered, a deep groan reverberating through Stillwater's foundations. The reinforced glass rattled in its frame as the vibration shook through my bones. We broke apart, staring at each other as the tremor subsided.

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“What was that?” I asked, steadying myself against the glass as another spasm rocked the structure.

Movement flickered at the edge of my vision. A dark shape cut through the maelstrom, vanishing into the churning waters. Another shadow darted past, closer this time. More emerged from the depths, and my stomach dropped as I realized they weren’t moving with the currents, but against them.

Lairos saw them, too, his expression hardening. “Nothing good.”

### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### LAIROS

The deck shook again, harder this time.

Through the glass, dark shapes darted through the maelstrom’s currents. Knights. Had to be.

The bastards had found us.

The alarm klaxon wailed to life. The emergency lights flashed red, bathing Emme’s worried face in crimson. I grabbed her arm, pulling her away from the glass. “We need to move. Now.”

Guards rushed past us as we tore through the corridors toward the command center. Each shriek and flash of the alarm made my blood burn hotter. This was my

territory. Mine. Violated by traitors and thieves.

Emme kept pace with me easily, though she must have sensed the violence coiled in my muscles, ready to spring into action. Part of me relished the challenge—the chance to cut down every last betrayer responsible for ripping my throne away from me. But there was something far more important here that required defending.

My mate.

The bridge buzzed with activity when we arrived. Technicians scurried around consoles, updating the holomap displayed on the central table. Vigas stood at the central command table, barking commands that cut through the noise.

“Report,” I ordered, joining him at the table.

Stillwater Hold appeared there in vivid detail, the corridors traced in gold, critical systems outlined in blue. Red dots flashed where intruders had breached the outer defenses.

There were far, far too many red dots.

Vigas didn’t waste time with formalities. “Initial breach in the lower levels, but the containment doors held. We’ve lost contact with sectors fifteen and twelve.”

“How?” My fingers traced the breach points, searching for a pattern in the attack.

“Unknown. Possible sabotage.” Vigas’s expression hardened, a look I’d seen too often during my years training under his command. “We’re scanning for additional?—”

Another explosion rocked the outpost, this one closer. I grabbed the nearest console

to keep from falling as the lights flickered.

“Sector two breached! Sealing emergency doors now!”

Two. Fuck. Right below the observation deck, where we’d just stood watching the maelstrom. They were hunting from above and below. As trained.

I reached for Emme. Her face was pale but focused, that sharp mind of hers already calculating our situation. “We need to get you to the evacuation pods.”

She gave me a quick nod. Of course she understood, she was a scientist who’d studied ocean depths. She knew exactly how deadly this situation could become for someone without the ability to breathe underwater.

“Go,” Vigas ordered, turning back to the command table. “We’ll hold them here.”

We raced through corridors now filled with guards sealing hatches and checking pressure gauges. The fortress had withstood countless attacks over centuries, but never from within. Never with saboteurs already inside our walls.

Another explosion shuddered through the outpost. Emergency doors slammed shut behind us, cutting off our path back to the command center. Ahead, water seeped under another sealed door—signs of flooding in the adjacent sector. Our escape routes were disappearing one by one.

Three corridors from the evacuation pods, we entered a stretch of hallway that was too quiet. Water trickled in through the seams of the walls. “We need to move faster,” I urged Emme.

We turned a corner and froze. A Knight crouched at the far end of the corridor, hands working methodically on what could only be an explosive. He spun to face us, his

eyes fixing on Emme with raw hatred.

“The false king,” he spat, rising to his feet. “Nedaris will cleanse these waters of human filth.”

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My blood burned at the mention of my brother's name, at the way this traitor looked at my mate. The urge to rip his throat out surged through my muscles, but I forced myself to pause.

I slid a look to Emme and arched a brow. "May I?"

Her slight nod was all I needed. With a snarl, I launched myself at the traitor. The Knight dropped his device and ripped the charged blade from his belt. Too slow. I was already inside his guard, driving my fist toward his throat.

He twisted at the last second. Lightning-hot pain lanced through my arm as his blade sliced deep. Blood—my blood—sprayed across the corridor wall. The wound burned like acid, but I'd suffered worse. Much worse.

We crashed together, the impact sending us staggering down the corridor. The device skittered across the floor ahead of us. I stretched, reached, scrambled until my fingers brushed its casing just as the Knight grabbed my wounded arm and yanked. Fresh agony shot through me as I slammed my forehead into his face.

The satisfying crunch of his nose breaking barely registered as I spotted his free hand reaching for the device. I closed my fingers around his throat, squeezing. He thrashed, desperation giving him strength. His knee drove into my wounded arm, and stars burst across my vision.

His fingers found the detonator. Triumph flashed in his eyes as he pressed the trigger.

I snapped his neck with a single, vicious twist. The device lay near an open doorway.

One kick sent it spinning into the empty room.

Heat and pressure slammed into me. My back hit something solid and the air rushed from my lungs. For one suspended moment, I couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't breathe.

Then came the rush of water.

The outer wall had cracked, seawater seeping faster and faster through the breach as the cracks quickly spread. I rolled to my feet, disoriented but moving on pure instinct. Emme stood several yards away, her eyes wide with shock as the corridor began to flood.

Between us, the containment door began sliding closed.

"No!" I roared, diving toward her. Water splashed under my feet, then swept around my ankles, slowing my progress.

I wasn't going to make it.

My hand stretched toward hers, inches separating us as the door slammed shut with a groan. Separating me from my mate.

I slammed my fist against the metal, frustration and fear clawing at my throat. "Emme!"

Her voice came through, muffled but audible. "I'm here!"

Relief crashed through me, so intense it nearly brought me to my knees. "The evacuation pods are two levels up! Follow the red emergency lights!"

“What about you?” Her voice cracked on the question.

Even now, with death lapping at her heels, she worried about me. We’d had so little time together. Barely enough to taste what might have been. The thought of never seeing her again, never hearing her laugh or feeling her skin against mine...

No. That wasn’t an option.

“I’ll find you,” I promised, pressing my palm flat against the door. “I’ll make this right. Your people will have their sanctuary. But you need to move. Now!”

I heard her hesitate, then a quieter, “Don’t you dare die on me, Lairos.”

A harsh laugh pushed between my lips. “As my queen commands.”

The sound of Emme’s footsteps faded, replaced by the rush of water and the pounding of my own heart. I pressed my forehead against the cold metal, allowing myself one moment of weakness. One breath to steady myself.

The water had reached my knees. My arm throbbed, blood still seeping from the deep gash. But nothing, absolutely nothing, would be solved whimpering in a corner like a coward.

I turned.

Knights streamed through the far end of the corridor, weapons glinting between black and red with every flash of the emergency lights. I counted six... no, eight of the bastards. More than I could take in close quarters with an aching arm.

“We have orders to take you to King Nedaris,” the lead Knight called. Even from here, I could see his hand tightening on his weapon. “He didn’t specify what



condition you needed to arrive in.”

I raised an eyebrow at the title and command, channeling every ounce of royal disdain I could muster. “Eight of you against one wounded man? I’m flattered.”

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The Knight's fist connected with my jaw before I could blink. Pain exploded across my face as I staggered back, nearly losing my footing. I spat blood and grinned. "That the best you've got?"

Another blow drove the air from my lungs. I doubled over, gasping. Part of me itched to fight back, to tear these traitors limb from fucking limb. But I couldn't risk it. Not yet. I needed to see Nedaris. Needed him to gloat over his victory.

It was the only way I stood a chance of saving my kingdom. Of saving Emme.

So, I let them surround me. Let them land a few more blows. Just enough to look like I'd put up a fight without earning any real damage. I'd survived worse during Vigas's training. This? This was nothing.

The Knights dragged me through flooded corridors toward the training yard. With each step, I sent a silent prayer to the depths that Emme had made it to the escape pods. That she was safe. The thought of her trapped in this sinking fortress, hunted by Nedaris and his fanatics...

No. I couldn't let myself go there. She was smart. Resourceful. She'd find a way out.

She had to.

We emerged into the training yard, and my stomach turned. Bodies littered the floor—soldiers I'd trained with, fought beside. Good men and women who'd died defending their home. Their king.

And there, standing in the center of it all, was Nedaris. My crown sat askew on his head, like a child playing dress-up in clothes that didn't fit. Rage boiled in my veins, but I forced it down. Locked it away behind a mask of casual indifference.

"Welcome, brother," Nedaris said, spreading his arms wide. "Welcome to New Delovia."

"New Delovia?" I laughed. The sound bounced off the walls, harsh and mocking and far, far too brittle. "Is that what you're calling this farce?"

Nedaris's smug expression faltered. Good. Keep him off-balance.

"You stand there wearing a crown you haven't earned," I continued, injecting as much venom into my words as I could. "Tell me, brother, have you completed the trials of succession? Have you proven yourself worthy before the sea dragon? Or are we forgetting all about that in," I let off an obnoxious giggle, "New Delovia?"

Murmurs rippled through the gathered Knights. I caught snippets of confusion, of doubt. The seed was planted. Now to water it.

"Our people have followed sacred tradition for generations," I said, raising my voice to address the entire room. "We've shed blood, sweat, and tears to prove ourselves worthy of the crown. And here stands a man who thinks he can simply take it by force."

"The trials will be completed in due time." Nedaris's face flushed with anger. "I am the rightful heir?—"

"To what?" I cut him off. "A stolen throne? A broken kingdom? You haven't earned the right to rule, Nedaris. You're nothing but a pretender playing at being king."

The Knights shifted uneasily, exchanging glances. I pressed my advantage.

“In due time,” I repeated with a disappointed shake of my head. I looked around, meeting the eyes of the Knights nearest to me. “Ask yourselves this: do you truly want to follow a leader who disregards our most sacred traditions as mere formalities? Who spits in the face of everything we hold dear?”

Nedaris’s eyes darted around the room, seeing the doubt spreading among his followers. I had him cornered now. He could either accept my challenge and risk losing everything, refuse and look weak in front of his Knights, or try to execute me and break tradition entirely.

No matter what he chose, I’d win.

“You dare question my right to rule?” Nedaris snarled, taking a step toward me. “I am the one who will restore our people to greatness! I am the one who will purge the waters of human filth!”

As if summoned by his words, the far door burst open. Two Knights entered, dragging a struggling figure between them. My heart stopped.

Emme.

Our eyes met across the room, and for a moment, the rest of the world fell away. She was alive. Battered and soaked to the bone, but alive. Relief warred with fury inside me. I wanted to rush to her side, to tear apart anyone who dared lay a hand on her. But I couldn’t. Not yet.

Nedaris’s triumphant grin made my skin crawl. “Look who we found wandering the halls like a lost pet.”

“Fuck you,” Emme spat, earning her a backhanded slap from one of her captors.

The pain in my arm dulled to nothing compared to the white-hot rage roaring through me. I struggled against my captors’ grip, heedless of the sparking, charged blade now pointed at my throat. I would kill every last Knight in this room if that was what it took to save her.

Nedaris watched my struggle with undisguised delight. “Here’s what will happen, brother. You will die. She will die. That ship in the sky will never land, and those animals will slowly suffocate. But down here? I will rule over all the seas and New Delovia will shine bright once more.”

He pulled a knife from his belt and twirled it casually. “But I’m willing to make a deal. In exchange for her life, you can choose which order you want to die in. First, or second. Not very appealing choices, I know. But the offer’s limited.”

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“Enough,” I growled, my voice low and dangerous. “You want to prove you’re worthy of the crown, Nedaris? Then face me. Right here. Right now. I challenge you for the throne.”

For a moment, everyone was frozen, staring. Then the hall erupted into shouts. Cries of betrayal rang out alongside demands for justice. And above it all, I could see Emme’s terrified gaze locked on mine.

I forced myself to smile. To appear calm and in control, even as my heart pounded like a drumbeat in my ears. There was no coming back from this. Either I killed my brother, or I died trying.

“Unless,” I added, twisting the knife, “you’re afraid you can’t beat me without your loyal dogs to hold me down.”

That did it. Nedaris’s face contorted with rage.

“Very well,” he spat. “I accept your challenge.”

Relief and dread warred within me as the Knights formed a circle around us. This was what I wanted, but now that it was happening, memories of my own trials flooded back. The taste of blood in my mouth. The ache of bruised ribs. The weight of the crown as it was placed on my head.

Glimpses of my young brother between the packed bodies, head barely dusting their shoulders. I remembered thinking he’d have been better suited trying to watch from between their legs.

A Knight approached with a practice sword. The blunted steel was meant for training children. No extra power sung into the blade, no pulses of energy. Naked and true for ritual, but not a thing for combat.

My lip curled at the insult as I took it, leaning close enough to see sweat beading on the man's temple. "I'll remember your help when I retake my throne."

The man's throat bobbed as he swallowed hard before melting back into the crowd. Good. Let them all remember who the true king was and the wrath that would follow.

Nedaris handed my crown to one of his Knights and drew his own sword, testing its weight. It was a ceremonial weapon, one carried by monarchs since Old Delovia's founding. Perfectly balanced for both defense and offense. Light, flexible, and razor sharp.

And not used in combat in his entire lifetime.

"You remember the rules, brother?" I called, falling into a fighting stance. "Or do you need someone to recite them for your New Delovians?"

"Of course," he ground out, eyes narrowing as if trying to determine whether I'd offered insult or genuine question. "First to disarm. Then we fight with fists until one of us yields or dies. No siren song allowed."

I nodded. Our father had been more fond of making enemies than friends, and many houses thought their time had come for a change in power. Exhaustion had clung heavier and heavier as I faced challenger after challenger, each fight draining me further.

Now it was time to do it again.

Nedaris struck first, his blade whistling through the air. I parried, and the impact added another nick to my practice sword. Pain lanced up to my wounded shoulder, but I pushed it aside. I couldn't afford weakness now.

"All these years watching me," I taunted, circling him, "and you still lead with your shoulder."

His next attack came faster, a flurry of strikes that might have impressed the court sycophants but told me everything I needed to know. My brother fought with textbook precision and not a drop of battlefield instinct or spontaneity.

I let him drive me back, step by calculated step. Every retreat fed his confidence, every blocked strike made his eyes gleam brighter with anticipated victory. Behind him, I caught glimpses of Emme's face between the shifting bodies of the Knights. Her eyes never left me, even as she tested the grip of her captors.

Smart woman. Looking for flaws while everyone else watched the show.

Nedaris's blade whistled past my ear, too close for comfort. "Getting slow in your old age, brother?"

I grinned, tasting blood where my lip had split. "Just giving the people what they want."

His rhythm faltered at my casual tone. I seized the opening, twisting inside his guard. My shoulder slammed into his chest, sending him staggering back. The Knights parted to avoid collision with their chosen ruler.

"The problem with you, Nedaris," I said, voice pitched to carry, "is that you never understood what makes a king."



I pressed forward, no longer retreating. Each strike of my dulled weapon against his sharp blade sent vibrations up my arm. The pain sharpened my focus to a knife's edge.

“You think it's about the crown.” My sword slammed into his, forcing him back another step. “About sitting on a throne and having people bow to you.”

Nedaris snarled, abandoning technique for rage. His blade slashed wildly, leaving his right side exposed. I drove my elbow into his ribs, satisfaction surging as I heard the crack.

“It's about sacrifice,” I continued, each word punctuated by a blow. “About putting your people before yourself. Every. Single. Time.”

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Sweat dripped into my eyes. My wounded arm screamed in protest. But Nedaris was tiring faster, unused to the brutal reality of real combat. Vigas had beaten that lesson into me years ago.

I feinted left, then spun right, bringing my sword down on his wrist with all my strength. The ceremonial blade clattered to the floor.

The hall fell silent. Nedaris's eyes darted to his fallen weapon, then back to me as understanding dawned. The first stage was over.

I tossed my training sword aside and raised my fists. "Ready for the next lesson, brother?"

He attacked with a roar, all technique abandoned. His fist grazed my jaw as I twisted away, countering with a sharp jab to his throat. He gagged, stumbling back.

"You see a throne," I said, circling him. "I see responsibility."

His kick caught me in the side, sending pain lancing through my ribs. I grunted but didn't fall.

"You see subjects." I drove my fist into his stomach. "I see people who trust me with their lives."

Blood and spittle flew from his mouth as he doubled over. The Knights watched in silence, none daring to interfere with the sacred combat.

I grabbed his hair, yanking his head up to meet my eyes. For a moment, I saw the brother I'd grown up with, the boy who'd followed me through the palace corridors, who'd once looked up to me before our father's machinations turned us against each other.

"Yield, Nedaris," I hissed, low enough for his ears only. A plea. "It doesn't have to end with your death."

For a moment, I thought I saw something in his eyes. Regret, maybe, or recognition of his defeat. Then his gaze shifted past me, focusing on something beyond my shoulder.

Because that boy from my memory was gone, replaced by the man who'd ordered Stillwater destroyed to get to me.

"I will never yield to a king who beds animals," he spat.

Before I could react, he twisted free and dove for his discarded sword. But he didn't lunge for me.

He lunged for Emme.

Time slowed to a crawl. I saw the gleam of the blade as it arced toward her. Saw the shock in her eyes as death came for her. Saw my future—our future—about to be severed with one stroke.

No.

With a roar of fury, I leapt after him. My hand closed around a fallen Knight's blade. Three steps. Two. One.

The sword entered Nedaris's back with a sickening squelch, the tip erupting from his chest in a spray of crimson. His momentum carried him forward another step before his legs gave out.

I twisted the blade, ensuring the wound was mortal. No mercy. Not for this. Not for threatening my mate.

"You never understood," I whispered as he slid off my blade. "A king protects what's his."

Nedaris collapsed at Emme's feet, eyes wide with shock as his lifeblood pooled beneath him. The ceremonial sword slipped from his fingers with a dull clatter.

I met Emme's gaze over my brother's dying body. No horror in her eyes, no judgment at what I'd done to protect her. Just fierce satisfaction and a hunger that matched my own.

"Release her," I ordered, my voice sharp enough to make the Knights holding Emme flinch. They dropped their grip immediately, stepping back as she straightened her spine.

The Knight who held my crown swallowed hard and extended it with trembling hands, unable to meet my eyes.

"Commander," I called to Vigas. "Can we secure Stillwater?"

"We're retaking it sector by sector, my king." His gruff voice carried authority that had the remaining Knights shifting uneasily. "Stillwater Hold is yours."

Loyal guards shook themselves out of the grasp of stunned Knights. Only a handful resisted, but when faced with unflinching determination from warriors they'd once

trained alongside, the resistance crumbled.

“Good.” I settled the crown back where it belonged. “Begin the executions at dawn.”

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I guided Emme toward the exit, my hand pressed possessively against the small of her back.

### CHAPTER NINE

#### EMME

I tried to ignore the tremble of my hands as I smoothed nonexistent wrinkles from the gauzy linen wrapped around my body. The fabric whispered against my skin, pooling at my feet in soft folds. I'd spent thirty-two years on Earth without giving a damn about state functions, and now here I was, about to be crowned a queen on an alien world.

"Are you ready?" Lairos asked, his voice pitched low enough that only I could hear.

I took a moment to drink him in. White linen wrapped low on his hips and fell to his ankles, leaving his chest bare except for the broad gold collar that spanned his shoulders. Gold bands circled his biceps, wrists, and ankles, catching the light with every movement. His dark red hair flowed in a silky river down his back, accentuating the sharp angles of his face and the forest-green eyes that still made my stomach flip.

The crown of shark teeth and shells suited him perfectly, a reminder that this man was as much warrior as ruler, dangerous and calculating in equal measure. And somehow, impossibly, mine.

"As ready as I'll ever be to face a room full of people who probably want me dead," I

answered, taking his offered arm.

The days following Nedaris's coup had been some of the longest of my life. Lairos lived for it. Thrived, even. The Knights of the Depths had been ordered dismantled and all objections were given harsh opportunities to get in line or find themselves without heads.

Then came the endless preparations for another grand show. Practice this, stand like that, don't move a muscle here or speak there.

Take your vows, and become my queen.

Lairos chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. "They'll come around. Or they'll answer to me."

I wiggled my bare toes against the cold stone floor, feeling strangely vulnerable without shoes. The ceremony called for minimal adornment—no shoes, simple jewelry, nothing to hide behind. Just me, offering myself to a kingdom I was only beginning to understand.

A low humming started on the other side of the massive doors, the vibration so strong I could feel it through the stone floor. This was Khadian song in its purest form—not the deadly call that could manipulate water and summon sea dragons, but the collective voice of his people acknowledging their rulers.

"That's our cue," Lairos murmured, covering my hand where it rested on his arm. "Remember what I told you. Keep your chin up, your back straight, and if anyone looks at you wrong?—"

"You'll execute them at dawn?" I finished dryly.

His smile turned predatory. “Now you’re thinking like a queen.”

The massive doors swung open on the grand hall of the Khadian palace. I’d seen it before during preparations, but this was different. The coral-carved columns soared overhead, supporting a ceiling painted with scenes of underwater battles and celebrations. Lamps in conch-shell sconces cast everything in warm light that reflected off the polished stone floors. I tried to catalog every detail, but there wasn’t time.

Lairos guided me forward, and I forced my legs to move at the measured pace we’d practiced. Too fast would show eagerness; too slow, reluctance. A queen must appear confident but not arrogant, approachable but regal.

The hall was packed with Khadians in their finest attire. Nobles stood closest to the central aisle, their rank evident in the gold adorning their bodies and the richness of their linens. Behind them stood the court officials, merchants, and warriors who formed the backbone of Khadian society.

“The blue-haired one to your right,” Lairos murmured, his lips barely moving. “Lady Thalassa. She’s already planning how to use you to advance her house’s standing.”

“And the one glaring daggers at me?” I asked under my breath.

“Lord Meren. He had hopes of marrying his daughter to me before you arrived.” His hand tightened on mine. “He’ll be the first to test your resolve.”

The Khadian song grew louder, harmonizing voices weaving a melody that seemed to vibrate in my very bones. My steps faltered for a moment as the power of it washed over me.

“Easy,” Lairos murmured. “Let it carry you.”



I took a deep breath and let the music guide my feet. As we approached the dais where a Khadian priest waited, I forced myself to meet the eyes of those we passed. Some looked away. Others held my gaze, weighing and measuring. Judging whether this human was worthy of their king.

Tough shit, I thought, lifting my chin. I'm here to stay.

And there, near the front, stood my crewmates—my family, really. Each of them stood beside their own mates, every bit as regal as the Khadian nobles surrounding them. Brooke gave me a subtle thumbs-up while Lucy beamed. Seeing them all there, supporting this moment, steadied my nerves more than any amount of practice could have.

We'd done what we set out to do and found a new home.

Even now, while we gathered for primping and posturing, our fellow humans were waking and making their way to landing zones all over Sanos. There were plans for homes within established kingdoms and settlements of our own. Places to live and breathe and grow old without worrying how future generations would survive.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:11 am*

We'd given our people hope.

Lairos and I reached the dais where two identical thrones waited. Before them waited an elderly Khadian whose elaborate headdress marked him as the High Priest. His wizened face remained impassive as we approached, but I caught the flicker of assessment in his eyes as they swept over me.

The humming that had followed us down the aisle quieted, leaving a silence that pressed against my ears. Lairos gave my hand one final squeeze before mounting the steps and taking his throne.

“Who comes before us to be named Queen Consort of Delovia?” The High Priest's voice carried through the hall.

This was it. The point of no return. I could still back out, still find a way for my people to settle elsewhere. Somewhere without soul songs and sea monsters and political intrigue that made my head spin.

But then I looked at Lairos. At the man who'd risked everything to save me. Who'd given me his home, his bed, his body, and most importantly, his trust. The choice became as clear as the waters around his private sanctuary.

My voice rang through the hall. “Emme Mathis of Earth.”

“Emme Mathis of Earth,” he intoned, “do you swear to uphold the well-being of the Khadian people? To support yourking in times of peace and war? To honor the sacred waters of Sanos that gave us life?”

I straightened my spine. “I swear it.”

The priest’s weathered hands lifted a small shell. “Then receive the blessing of our people and come before us pure of heart.”

Cool liquid splashed against my forehead. The scent of saltwater filled my nose, familiar and alien all at once. Then came a second shell, this one filled with dark liquid that could only be squid ink. The priest traced patterns on my palms.

“The mark of life lost,” he intoned. “The weight every ruler must bear.”

The ink dried quickly, leaving behind a stain that would fade in days but whose meaning would remain forever: every decision I made as queen would impact lives. Some would be lost, and that blood would be on my hands. Care for the kingdom came above all.

An attendant approached holding a cushioned pillow. The priest lifted a scepter first—driftwood adorned with pearls and fragments of coral. It settled into my palm with surprising weight.

“To guide our people through calm and storm,” the priest said.

Next came a knife as long as my forearm, the hilt studded with more pearls and delicate gold filigree. The blade itself gleamed with an otherworldly sheen and tapered to a wickedly sharp point.

“Forged from the fang of the sea dragon,” the priest explained. “To defend our waters against all who would threaten them.”

Lairos stepped forward then, taking a smaller version of his own crown from another attendant. Our eyes met as he raised it above my head. No smirk now, no teasing light

in his eyes. Only fierce pride and pure adoration.

“My queen,” he said, his voice carrying to every corner of the hall as he placed the crown on my head. “My mate.”

The weight settled against my brow, surprisingly light for something made of teeth and shells. The humming crescendoed around us, vibrating through the stone floor and up into my body until I felt like I might shatter from the force of it.

Then, as one, the Khadians knelt. Even the priest. Even the attendants.

Only Lairos remained standing beside me, his hand finding mine again as he led me to the twin thrones waiting on the dais.

We burst through the doors of our chambers, our laughter echoing off the stone walls. The festivities had devolved into celebration and drunken dancing long before we decided to retire to the royal suite.

I leaned my head against Lairos’s shoulder, intoxicated more from his kisses than the wine flowing freely among our guests. After today, after everything we’d been through, nothing sounded better than crawling into bed and spending hours reaffirming our bond.

No outside forces. No threats to the kingdom or danger lurking around every corner. Just us.

Lairos’s hands found my waist, pulling me flush against him. The heat of his body seeped through the thin linen, igniting a fire in my core. His lips brushed my ear, voice low and husky. “My queen.”

A shiver ran down my spine at the possessive growl in those two simple words. I

tilted my head, offering my neck in a gesture that felt more natural with each passing day. “My king.”

His teeth grazed the sensitive skin just below my jaw, and I gasped. The crown on my head shifted, reminding me of its presence. Of everything it represented.

“Second thoughts?” Lairos murmured, pulling back just enough to meet my eyes.

I shook my head, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw. My fingertips ghosted over the sharp angles of his face, memorizing every plane and hollow. “No second thoughts. Just... processing.”

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His brow furrowed. “Processing?”

I laughed, the sound breathy and a little hysterical. “I’m queen of an alien species on a water world. Give me a minute to wrap my head around that.”

Lairos’s eyes softened. He reached up, gently removing the crown from my head and setting it aside. His own followed a moment later. “You’re not just their queen,” he said, cupping my face in his hands. “You’re my mate. My partner. The other half of my soul.”

The sincerity in his voice made my chest ache. How had I gotten so lucky? To find not just a safe haven for my people, but a home for myself?

I pushed up on my toes, pressing my lips to his. The kiss started soft, almost chaste, but quickly deepened as hours of pent-up desire and relief crashed over us. His tongue swept into my mouth, claiming and conquering. I met him stroke for stroke, my hands fisting in the linen at his waist.

Lairos growled, the sound vibrating through his chest and into mine. His hands slid down my sides, leaving trails of heat in their wake. His hands slid down my back, tracing the curve of my spine where his own scales would be. The touch sent shivers across my skin.

“Lairos,” I whispered against his mouth. “Please.”

He groaned, burying his face in the crook of my neck. “Say it again.”

I tangled my fingers in his hair, tugging until he looked up at me. “Lairos,” I repeated, putting every ounce of need and want and love into those two syllables.

That was all it took. Lairos surged forward, his mouth capturing mine in a kiss that stole my breath. His hands made quick work of the knot holding my dress closed, unwrapping the linen with practiced ease until I stood naked before him. The cool air of the chamber raised goosebumps on my skin, but they didn’t last long as Lairos pressed his body against mine, all heat and hard muscle.

He walked me backward until my legs hit the edge of our massive bed. Instead of letting me fall, he lifted me easily, hands gripping my thighs as he laid me down on the silk sheets. The material whispered against my bare skin as Lairos followed, covering my body with his.

“Do you have any idea,” he said, lips trailing down my neck, “how beautiful you looked today? Standing there in front of my people, claiming your place at my side?”

His teeth grazed my pulse point, and I arched into him, desperate for more contact. This was the predator beneath the irreverent facade. The warrior king who’d fought his way to the throne twice. And right now, all that focus, all that intensity, was directed at me.

“Show me,” I challenged.

His mouth continued its journey downward, pausing to lavish attention on my breasts. The first touch of his tongue against my nipple had me gasping, fingers tangling in his hair to hold him there. He took his time, alternating between gentle licks and firm suction until I was writhing beneath him.

“Lairos,” I moaned, tugging at his hair. “Please.”

“Please what?” he asked, lifting his head to meet my gaze. His eyes glittered with wicked intent. “Tell me what you need, my queen.”

The title sent a fresh wave of heat through me. I’d never thought of myself as someone who’d get off on power dynamics, but there was something about the way he said it—with such reverence and pride—that drove me wild.

“Your mouth,” I managed, past the tightness in my throat. “I need your mouth on me.”

He chuckled, the sound dark and promising. “As my queen commands.”

Lairos kissed his way down my stomach, lingering at the places he knew were ticklish, drawing out breathless laughter mixed with moans of anticipation. Finally, he settled between my thighs, hooking his arms under my legs to spread me wide.

“Fuck, you smell amazing,” he muttered, his breath fanning over my slick flesh.

I whined, lifting my hips in wordless encouragement. Lairos growled, then lowered his head, licking a hot stripe up my center. The first touch of his tongue nearly bucked me off the bed. Strong hands pinned my hips to the mattress as he set to work, licking and sucking with single-minded focus.

“What do you feel?” he asked, echoing the question that had become our ritual.

“Heat,” I panted, struggling to put words together as sensation overwhelmed me. “And... and pressure. Like a knot coiling tighter and tighter.”

He hummed in approval, the vibration making me gasp. “Keep going.”

“Powerful. Wanted.” I guided his hand to my breast, arching into his touch.



“Desperate.”

He slid two fingers inside me, curling them upward in the way he knew made me see stars. “Come for me, Emme. Come on my tongue and my fingers like the fucking queen you are.”

Those words combined with another swipe of his tongue sent me plummeting over the edge. Pleasure roared through me, obliterating every thought except the need for more, more, more. Lairos stayed with me the entire time, drinking in every moan, every whimper, until finally, the waves began to ebb.

He rose up, kneeling between my spread legs. His hands made quick work of his own clothing, unwrapping the linen from his hips to reveal his cock, hard and ready. The sight of him never failed to make my mouth water—all lean muscle and tan skin, the red-gold scales running down his spine catching the lamplight.

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I reached for him, fingers tracing the path from the nape of his neck down to the small of his back. He inhaled sharply, a shudder running through his powerful frame.

“Sensitive?” I teased between planting open-mouthed kisses along his shoulder. I traced a single finger down his spine. “What do you feel when I touch you here?”

“Like lightning,” he groaned, hips jerking forward to grind his cock against my hip. “Like you’re touching me everywhere at once.”

He grabbed my wrists, pinning them above my head as he leaned down to capture my mouth in a bruising kiss. The position left me open and vulnerable, his body looming over mine, but instead of fear, exhilaration flooded my system. I could take him apart. I could shatter him like glass with nothing more than a few touches.

I hooked one leg around his hip, guiding him closer. “Fuck me,” I breathed. “Please.”

He rocked his hips, sliding his cock through the wetness pooling between my legs. “I like it when you beg, my queen.”

“I’m not begging.” I lifted my chin in a defiant tilt. “I’m commanding. I need you inside me. Now.”

The last word ended on a gasp as he pushed forward, sheathing himself fully in one smooth thrust. The stretch was almost too much, but fuck if it didn’t feel incredible. He ground his pelvis against mine, hitting my clit just right, and stars burst across my vision.

“Again,” I ordered, locking my ankles behind his back to pull him deeper.

His rhythm started slow but quickly built to a pounding tempo, driving the air from my lungs. There was nothing sweet or gentle in it now, just raw animalistic need. His hips snapped against mine, and I met each thrust with equal ferocity, nails raking down his back.

“Need you,” he growled against my throat, biting down hard enough to leave a mark. “Fuck, I need you like I need the sea.”

“I’m here.” I dug my fingers into his scalp, dragging his mouth to mine in a frantic kiss. “Always. I’m yours.”

Desire coiled within me, the promise of release so close I could taste it. He gripped my thigh and hiked it up to his hip, changing the angle. The next thrust slammed against a spot deep inside me that sent me hurtling toward climax.

Lairos’s movements turned erratic, his thrusts deeper and harder as he chased his own release. Then he leaned down, his lips brushing my ear. “When you come,” he murmured, voice thick and gravelly, “I’m going to mark you. Everyone will know who you belong to.”

Another rough thrust. Another flick of his thumb against my clit. That was all it took to push me over the edge. I buried my face against his shoulder to muffle my cries as waves of pleasure crashed over me, dragging me under.

His teeth sank into my flesh at the same moment he slammed into me one final time. The sharp pain mixed with pleasure, bubbling into pure bliss that had me screaming his name. I felt him pulse inside me, filling me with his release as he marked me as his mate for all to see.

We collapsed together, his body pinning me deliciously to the sheets. His tongue lapped gently at the bite mark, soothing the sting. The tenderness in the gesture made my throat tight.

“Mine,” he murmured again, pressing a kiss to the mark. “My mate. My queen.”

“What do you feel now?” I whispered, echoing his question back to him.

His eyes met mine, all the arrogance and royal bearing stripped away to reveal the man beneath.

My Lairos. My partner. My lover. My king.

He smiled, cupping my cheek in his palm. “Complete.”

## EPILOGUE

### EMME

I shifted uncomfortably in the transport capsule, trying to find a position that didn't make my back ache or put pressure on my bladder. At eight months pregnant, comfort had become a distant memory.

“Here,” Lairos said, sliding a cushion behind my lower back. “Is that better?”

I nodded, unable to stop the small sigh of relief that escaped my lips. “Thanks.”

His hand moved to my swollen belly, fingers splayed wide as if trying to cover as much of our child as possible. The gentle pressure was followed by a swift kick against his palm. Lairos grinned, that same look of wonder crossing his face that appeared every time the baby moved.

“Strong,” he murmured. “Like her mother.”

“Or stubborn like her father,” I countered, but couldn’t stop my own smile.

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The transport capsule hummed around us, its ancient technology carrying us smoothly through the water. These vessels had ferried goods between Khadian waters and the surface for generations, but now they served a new purpose—connecting the human settlements with their Khadian allies.

Lairos shifted closer, adjusting another cushion beneath my feet. “Your ankles are swelling again.”

I rolled my eyes. “I hadn’t noticed. Thank you for that keen observation, Your Majesty.”

He chuckled, unperturbed by my sarcasm. “The healers said to keep them elevated.”

“The healers also said I should be resting in the palace, not touring settlements.” I captured his hand, squeezing it gently to soften my words. “But I’m glad we came.”

The last few months had been a whirlwind of negotiations, construction, and integration as the Legacy’s passengers found their places on Sanos. Some had chosen to settle in the drycaves below the water. Others, like the group we were visiting today, preferred to remain above the waves.

Light flooded the capsule as we buoyed to the surface. I blinked against the sudden brightness, then gasped as the atoll settlement came into view.

What had been little more than a ring of barren coral nine months ago now bustled with life. Wooden structures rose from the shallow waters, connected by floating walkways that moved gently with the waves. Solar panels glinted in the afternoon

sun, powering the water filtration systems and communication arrays. And everywhere, people moved and talked and laughed.

“It’s incredible,” I whispered, pressing my face closer to the glass. “Look at what they’ve built.”

Pride swelled in my chest, momentarily eclipsing the discomfort of pregnancy. This was why we’d come to Sanos. Not just to survive, but to thrive—to create something new from the ashes of Earth’s destruction.

The capsule docked with a gentle bump against the main platform. Lairos rose first, extending his hands to help me up.

“I can manage,” I protested, even as I accepted his support.

“Indulge me,” he replied, his voice dropping to that husky tone that still made my stomach flip. “Let me care for my mate and heir.”

Lairos helped me from the capsule despite my continued protests that I could manage. The moment my feet touched the platform, a cheer went up from the gathered crowd. Humans and Khadians stood side by side, their faces turned toward us with expressions of respect and genuine welcome.

“Your Majesties,” greeted Eliza Hermansen, the settlement’s elected representative. She bowed her head slightly, the traditional Earth gesture of respect now modified with a Khadian hand placement over the heart. “We’re honored by your visit.”

“The honor is ours,” I replied, the formal words coming more naturally now after months of diplomatic exchanges. “Your community’s progress is remarkable.”

Eliza beamed. “We’ve been fortunate in our Khadian partners. Would you like to see

what we've accomplished?"

The tour lasted longer than the healers would have approved, but I couldn't bring myself to cut it short. Every step revealed new evidence of cooperation between our species—hybrid architecture that combined Earth tech with Khadian aesthetic sensibilities; farming platforms where Earth crops grew alongside native sea vegetables; a school where children from both species learned each other's languages and customs.

"And this," Eliza said, leading us to a circular structure at the atoll's highest point, "is our newest addition. The observatory."

Inside, the domed ceiling was lined with panels that could become transparent at night, revealing Sanos's unfamiliar constellations. But it was the displays around the perimeter that caught my attention—star charts showing Earth's position relative to our new home.

"So they never forget where we came from," Eliza explained softly. "But also so they understand where we are now."

My throat tightened. I felt Lairos's hand press against the small of my back, a silent reminder of his presence.

As the sun began to set, we found ourselves on a quiet platform overlooking the western edge of the atoll. The sky blazed with colors I'd never seen on Earth—deep purples and vibrant magentas painting the clouds as the sun slipped toward the horizon.

"Are you tired?" Lairos asked, his breath warm against my ear. "We can return to the palace if you need rest."



I shook my head, leaning back against his chest. “Not yet. This is too perfect to miss.”

His arms encircled me, hands coming to rest on my belly. The baby shifted beneath his touch, as if recognizing her father’s presence.

“Reports from the other territories suggest similar successes,” he murmured. “The northern islands have established three new settlements, and even the desert tribes have accepted a small human contingent.”

“I never thought it would work this well,” I admitted. “When we left Earth, I hoped we’d find sanctuary, but this...” I gestured at the thriving community spread out below us. “This is more than survival. It’s a new beginning.”

Lairos pressed his lips to my temple. “For all of us.”

I rested my hands over his, feeling our child move between us. For years, I’d refused to consider bringing a child into a dying world. Now, watching the sunset over our domain, I felt at peace with the life growing inside me. This child would know clean water and unpolluted skies. She would grow up in a world where two species worked together to protect the seas rather than exploit them.

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“What are you thinking?” Lairos asked, his voice uncharacteristically quiet.

“That I’m glad I was wrong,” I replied. “About so many things.”

He chuckled, the sound vibrating through my back. “I should record this rare moment of admission.”

“Don’t push your luck,” I warned, but there was no heat in my words.

The setting sun turned the water to liquid gold, catching my eye as several Khadians dove through the waves beyond the atoll. I watched them swim, powerful and graceful in their natural element. No wonder they ruled these waters. The sight was beautiful in its simplicity, something I never thought I’d have the luxury to just sit and appreciate.

For once, Lairos seemed content to simply hold his mate and watch our success unfold without adding any theatrical flourishes or reminders of his role in making it happen. This quiet pride, I’d learned, was the truest measure of how much something mattered to him.

As darkness fell and the first stars appeared overhead, I felt the baby shift and settle. My hand traced slow circles over the spot where her foot had just pressed.

“Ready to go home?” Lairos asked.

Home. Not Earth. Not the Legacy. But here, with him.

“Yes,” I said simply. “I’m ready.”