



Taken By the Alien Triton King

Author: *Robin O'Connor*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: One minute, I am studying alien plants. The next, I am thrown over the shoulder of a blue-scaled king who refuses to let me go.

Samantha

Landing on planet Sanos was supposed to secure humanity's future. Instead, it became a fight for survival. One moment, I was studying alien plants—then explosions shattered our negotiations. Before I could react, a towering, scaled warrior threw me over his shoulder and carried me into the ocean's depths.

Kaerius, King of the Ondrithar, is as infuriating as he is mesmerizing. He calls me "mate" like it's already decided, like I belong to him. But I refuse to be anyone's captive. If I want to survive, I'll have to fight—whether that means escaping or standing at his side.

Kaerius

I had no use for the humans—until I saw her. From the moment I laid eyes on Samantha, instincts older than reason roared to life. She is mine. She just doesn't know it yet.

I saved her from the attack, bringing her to my kingdom, where my word is law. But Sanos is dangerous, and my enemies watch my every move. Keeping her safe means keeping her close. And if she tries to run? She'll learn nothing escapes the grasp of the Triton King.

This spicy sci-fi romance is part of the Abducted by the Ruthless Royal: Planet Sanos series and can be read as a standalone. It features one ruthless Triton king and a curious human scientist. Guaranteed HEA!

Total Pages (Source): 12

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Chapter 1

Samantha

My stomach was in knots when I followed Imogen out of the capsule and onto the sand of a beautiful, alien beach. The air was warm, and the skies were blue—a color I had not seen for so long that I had to blink a few times to assure myself it was real. When last I'd seen a sky, I'd been boarding the USS *Legacy*, and I'd been stuck in stasis for most of its journey. The sky on Earth had not looked anywhere near as pretty as this one did, but it was a silly thing to focus on when far more exciting things were about to happen.

After an impossibly long journey, we'd finally arrived at a planet capable of sustaining life—a planet rich in water, with skies that were clean and clear, unlike the ones we'd left behind. Our small group had been selected to negotiate with the planet's leadership, hoping to secure a treaty that would allow us to bring our people down to rebuild the lives we'd lost. I was dying to catch my first glimpse of both alien species and alien flora.

Craning my head, I peered around Imogen's shoulder and caught sight of Lucy's distinct brown hair streaked with gray. We were spreading out on the sands, bordered by an azure sea on one side and an exciting jungle on the other. A tent had been erected, and Brooke had bravely accepted the invitation of the tall men in front of it to step inside. I was too nervous to follow her in there and cast my eyes about to look for a distraction.

Were all the aliens inside? From the reading material we'd been given before heading

down, I knew they were all species that lived in the water. The ones I could see on the beach were called the Quxon, and they were all tall and imposing and very blue. But there were many more species living on Sanos... Had only the Quxon responded to our request to negotiate?

The other women were spreading out on the beach, but I caught hold of Imogen's wrist. "Hey, looks like things haven't started yet, so I'm going to explore, okay?" I told her. She'd been in a stasis pod next to mine, and that made me feel a certain amount of kinship—we'd been neighbors for the long journey. I'd already made up my mind that I'd go into the woods to inspect the plants, but I wanted at least one person here to know where I'd gone.

"Not without me, you don't," Imogen said, her eyes sparkling with a smile. Her long brown braid swung over her shoulder as she jerked her chin toward the treeline. "We don't know what's in there, but you're right, we should have a look. We can't assume we're safe just because they agreed to a meeting." We exchanged a dubious glance before turning our eyes to the imposing figures of the aliens and the flimsy tent Brooke had stepped into. Without another word, we strode across the soft sand and slipped behind a bush.

My fingers itched too much as I took in all the lush but foreign vegetation. Imogen was far more professional as she led me deeper beneath the trees. I stopped several times to take a sample and add it to my satchel for later study—not that I knew when or where that would be. Until we'd secured a treaty and could begin to build a settlement, I doubted I'd have access to a lab.

I was still pondering that, lost in thought, when a sudden noise rocked our world. I stumbled, then flung myself behind a tree for cover when I realized it wasn't just any noise—it was an explosion. The sounds that followed were also very distinct: phaserfire. The beach was under attack.

Imogen had taken shelter against a tree across from me, and she'd pulled out her own weapon, far more prepared for this than I was. What happened next neither of us expected. The bushes parted nearby, and out came two large and very alien shapes. They were on two legs, definitely humanoid-ish. Where one was glittering azure, the other was dark as night. They seemed as surprised to see us as we were to see them, but unlike me, they did not freeze.

The azure one was closer to me, and red crowned his head in jagged shapes. A king, I thought—one of the ones we were here to meet, perhaps. Then he had me around the waist and threw me over his shoulder like I was a sack of potatoes. The air whooshed out of me from the force, and, struggling to breathe, eyes stinging, I was hauled deeper into the woods. His arm had my legs pinned to his chest, perilously close to the curve of my ass.

My friend had also been snatched, but she was not going quietly. I could hear her screaming and cursing at her captor. Frantically, I searched for her, but her abductor had chosen a different path. Her shouting faded the farther he ran with his long-legged stride. My stomach ached, each jarring step driving that hard shoulder deeper into me, while panic caused everything to somersault with emotion.

I raised my head, intending to follow Imogen's lead and fight this disrespectful treatment. And then I saw it—the fire blazing beyond the jungle, the smoke that filled the sky. Holy crap in a handbasket... what the flying pigs was that? Who had done that? Why? This was evidence that someone on this planet did not want us humans to make a treaty—not with anyone. Had those on the beach survived? My mind flashed to Brooke, who'd gone into the tent, which surely had been the target. Emme, Lucy, and the others who had remained on the beach—what had happened to them?

I was not brave and bold like Imogen, and the will to fight faltered in the face of the disaster. What if she and I were the only survivors? I bit my lip, my eyes trailing along the broad back of the stranger who was carrying me rapidly through the jungle

on this island. His skin was vaguely humanoid but smattered with a network of azure lines. At a closer look, I realized those were scales, pressing against his flesh as if they were rising to the surface. He wore some kind of sash made of a strange, shimmery fabric around his waist, with a few pouches dangling from a black leather belt that held it all up. His outfit reminded me of the ancient Greeks and their togas, only his “toga” was much skimpier.

At least I could comfort myself with the knowledge that he was humanoid. Two legs, strong feet, muscled calves, and an ass I tried not to notice was hella sexy. My bag of specimens and supplies was still caught with its strap around my body, slapping against his arm—probably in a very uncomfortable fashion—yet he didn’t seem to notice. Then the ground changed from dirt and forest to sand, and I knew we’d reached the beach on the other side.

Oh, I’d frozen again. This was my last chance to act, and I really had to act because I had no clue whether this guy even knew I couldn’t breathe underwater like he could. “Stop!” I shouted, because my fear of drowning was strong enough, and our distance from the fire and phaser sounds was far enough. He’d already planted both feet in the water, but he jerked to a halt, waves lapping at his knees.

Twisting, I pressed my palm against his warm, broad shoulder blade for balance. Finally, I could see just enough of the back and side of his head to make out who he was—what he was. Short black hair with vibrant strands of blue and silver, a crown of coral in wild, jagged shapes: a little sharp, a little mean. His ears were round and human one moment but began to grow into tall points, fanning like the webbed fin of a fish—blue again, with silver tips. He was Ondrithar, and I knew it doubly so when I saw the trident with elegant symbols on the shaft that he clutched in one fist. It was supposedly their preferred weapon beneath the waves—for hunting and for war.

He twisted his head slowly, his gaze bright blue and inhuman as he met my eyes. A shiver shot down my spine. My belly, already sore, now twisted as if he’d punched

me in the gut. At least, I thought that was what it felt like, but I'd never been punched in the gut, so I wasn't sure. It certainly felt like the breath whooshed out of me, and now my lungs ached as they labored to draw breath again. "Stop?" he said, his voice a deep, sonorous tone that made my skin break out in goosebumps. It might have been my fear and nerves, but the flash of silver in his eyes made me feel like he was reprimanding me.

Instinctively, I wanted to curl up inside myself, to withdraw. The basic negotiator skills that had been drummed into me for this mission told me not to back down. They clashed, resulting in another frozen moment, but this time, it was while our eyes were locked. A curious thing happened then—an unfurling in my belly, the tension ebbing away like the tide. My body began to feel soft and light, sheltered by his arm around my thigh and his chest against my belly.

"Yes, stop," I said more firmly. "Who are you, and where are you taking me?" I couldn't go with him until I knew those answers, but part of me also wondered if letting myself get abducted by this king—for he clearly was one—wouldn't be helpful. The negotiations were in shambles thanks to this attack, but he was simply taking me to safety the only way he knew how: into the water. If I could work on him while I was in his company, maybe I could secure land inside his territory for the humans still left aboard the USS Legacy.

It was a plan that was so unlike my quiet, scientific mind that I struggled to consider the ramifications. He could be kidnapping me for nefarious reasons, not to save me from the phasers back at the meeting place. He could be taking me so he could murder me quietly under the water. Now, my head was filling with all kinds of horrible scenarios, and I struggled to keep my breathing even as my heart began to pound anew in fear.

"I am Kaerius," he said, as if that was supposed to mean something to me. I drew a blank for a long second, staring into his mesmerizing eyes while I fought to recall the

names of the kings on this planet. There were many factions and many different species or subspecies, all with their own ruler. Which one was he again? Right—Ondrithar. And yes, Kaerius was the name of the king of that species. I could thank my lucky stars that at least I'd always been good at cramming information into my head and recalling it under pressure.

I'd been quiet too long, and he was clearly done waiting for me. His legs began to move, wading deeper into the lapping waves, and I recalled that I hadn't warned him I couldn't breathe underwater. Opening my mouth, I again endeavored to tell him to stop. He didn't let me speak this time—his patience worn thin, or maybe even completely gone. His arms jerked me down his chest, catching me in a bridal-style grip against the front of his body. Now all I could see was his face and how big and luminous his silver-blue eyes were.

His body had already begun to transform for a swim: azure scales pressing to the surface, his ears like the fins of a fish, pupils large and wide. He was wholly alien now—nothing like the tan, humanoid male from a few moments ago. Even his wide chest was now fully covered in hard scales, while gills sat on either side of his neck—three narrow slits that flared open when I stared at them. Then cold water lapped at my bottom, and I managed to squeak out, “I can't breathe underwater! I hope you know that!?”

The smile that suddenly tilted his lush mouth at one corner made my stomach flip-flop wildly. That looked sinful, tempting, and the last thing I should be thinking of was kissing that mouth. He was a king, a captor, and ruthless by the looks of it. Nope—bad idea. I shouldn't be having such thoughts.

The water was icy despite the sunshine and the blue sky. It was up to my chest now, and if he took a few more steps, I'd be submerged. Gulping, I drew in a deep breath in preparation. My specimen kit was waterproof, but I wasn't. I wasn't even sure if I liked water or swimming. I'd never done it, never even been submerged completely.

All I'd known were rationed water showers—a rarity—and dry foam washing, which was more common on water-polluted Earth.

“Do not worry, human,” Kaerius said, and I wondered if that was a halfhearted attempt to be kind and ease my fear. It seemed to be an afterthought. It also wasn't lost on me how he'd given me his name when I asked who he was, but he hadn't bothered to ask for mine—like he didn't give a damn.

When the water closed over my head, I wasn't ready for it. It stung my eyes, and my instinct was to scream—which was a very stupid instinct. Precious air bubbled from my throat in a big gulp, and then water rushed back in, and I began to drown. That's when I started fighting, kicking and twisting in the Ondrithar King's tight grip. Yup, he was picking the “drown in the water” option. Asshole. I should have known that negotiating with barbaric water kings wasn't going to be easy. Not a walk in the park, as my ancestors would say. Not that I'd ever seen a park, which was why I was so fascinated with plants.

Thrashing as wildly as I was, panic absolute, I was only aware of the King as my captor—the tight band of his arm around my waist, the coiling of something long and powerful around my legs, pinning them tight. And then, shockingly, the grasp of his hand around my throat. Immobile, completely caught, he twisted my head until I was looking at him, at his silver eyes.

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That calm I'd felt before washed over me as suddenly as the lack of air had burned my lungs. For one peaceful moment, I could see him, take him in: the blue of the ocean as it closed over our heads, the way his short black-and-blue hair fanned in the current. His jaw was a sharp line, his expression forbidding. And then I saw it—a softening. I had to be imagining it, but it felt like there was recognition in his eyes, a connection that went beyond the differences of our origins and species, that transcended all that.

Then darkness claimed me.

Chapter 2

Kaerius

This morning, when I arrived at the designated meeting place with my guards, I felt nothing but disdain for the upcoming diplomacy. What did we need these humans for? They were a land species that wanted to live on a predominantly ocean-covered world. They were idiots, and they needed to stay in their spaceships and keep moving—to find a planet more suitable to their needs than Sanos. That was this morning—before I held a human female in my arms.

Eyeing her slight form and the way her odd clothing clung to or billowed in the water, I felt my cock stir in its pouch where it resided when I was in my waterform. That was most of the time, and the sensation was familiar, if unwelcome. This human was a tempting little morsel, but I did not need such distractions. In the back of my head, a voice that sounded a suspicious lot like my dead brother whispered that maybe she was exactly what I needed. Morven tended to get philosophical like that,

and I'd always laughed his strange musings off. Today, that was not so easy.

She was weak, I thought firmly. Look at her. She'd passed out when I'd taken the plunge into the deep, cool, calming sea. No scales protected her pale, silky-soft skin, nor did she have claws at the tips of her dainty little fingers to defend herself. I could only surmise that her toes, currently encased in heavy boots, were the same. With my thumb, I lifted her plump, pink lip and snarled in distaste when I discovered only straight, blunt teeth. She was utterly defenseless, and yet, at the touch of her lip, at the sight of her mouth, my cock swelled even more. What the krill? Why was I responding to her like this?

I had already applied the rebreather to help her gill-lacking body survive beneath the water. I had not lowered us rapidly under the weight of the water and had kept our altitude at a depth where she would not suffer damage from the water pressure. Such protections would never be required with an Ondrithar female; she'd krilling kill me if I so much as suggested she needed my help. That made this human female weak, and yet...

I flashed back to when I'd climbed onto land with the Ondrithar neighbor who hailed from the Sanos Abyss. Krak'zol, the deep-sea dweller, had not been interested in this meeting either, considering it a waste of time. We might have been pushing it with our timing just a little and had taken the safe way by coming from the other side of the island that was the designated meeting spot. We'd seen the two females before the phaser fire had started, and I hadn't been the only one fascinated by the sight of the pair of land dwellers.

My guards showed up then, Bruinen and Aenon's sleek blue bodies arrowing through the water to take up flanking positions on either side of me. From their inquisitive gazes, I knew they wanted to know what I was doing, hauling one of the delegates around in my arms. The way I was holding her was also far from impersonal—my tail coiled around her legs, fins moving just enough to keep our

position steady in the currents. My arms were around her body, and my hand was still on her delicate throat so I could look into her face.

Her name was Samantha—at least, that’s what her human friend had shouted at her as the chaos had erupted. I did not know why Krak’zol had taken the loud one, but I knew that my taking of this strange, ever-so-curious female had nothing to do with treaties and diplomacy. I had well and truly fallen on barbaric instincts at that moment of danger, and I’d stolen her purely because I wanted her. My spacefaring ancestors would ride angry waves if they knew how far their descendants had fallen. Curling my lip, I decided I did not care.

Tucking her more comfortably against my chest, I freed the strap of her heavy, bulky case and handed it to Bruinen. “Let us return home,” I said. “We’ll have a meeting of our own in our territory.” And silently, my mind added: In my bed. Great delight filled me at the thought of discovering what made this human different, what made her so tempting to all my senses. Yes, let the ancestors curse me for what I was going to do, but the human was not getting away. She was mine now.

Chapter 3

Samantha

I woke up in a panic, my heart pounding in my throat, adrenaline soaring through my system. Shooting upright, I raised my hands defensively in front of me, as if I were going to take that arrogant king on with my fists. There was nobody there—I was alone. Deflating on the spot, confusion filled me as I took in my new surroundings. Where the heck was I? Where had that Ondrithar male taken me?

The room I was in was blue—of course it was—and the walls curved softly, as if they undulated like waves. Light fixtures in the ceiling were sleek and glowed with a warm, yellow hue, like the sun. That was technology—it had to be. The bed I sat on

was large—disconcertingly large, in fact—and covered in satin-soft black sheets. This was a bedroom, and a well-appointed one at that. Trunks lined one wall with thick iron locks and hinges, as if they were booty from a pirate’s treasure. But a wardrobe and dresser, much like the fancy ones I’d see in entertainment vids, sat against another wall. Then there was the large, round pool at the center of the room, right across from the bed. Blue light emanated from it, and I had a feeling it was the only exit: there was no door.

On the upside, I wasn’t dead, and I was in a room with air. So that bastard of a king did know about my human limitations when it came to water. That did not make me feel better. Thinking about him made me feel torn in two—confused and tangled, like the knots of kelp that had washed onto the island’s shore.

Attraction for him was a primal, driving thing inside me, thrumming through my pulse and between my thighs just from conjuring up his image in my mind. Anger followed hot on its heels, furious at the way he’d treated me so far—how little interest he’d shown me as a person. And now he’d locked me in a room with no possible way to escape; I was a prisoner. I wanted to fume and say that if the big bosses up at the USS Legacy heard of this, they’d bust his ass, but the truth was, they wouldn’t dare. We needed a treaty and land too badly for them to anger any of the factions. I was on my own.

Another reason to be mad: Someone had undressed me. Granted, I was still wearing my very demure underwear consisting of boyshorts and a tanktop with a built-in bra, but it meant someone had touched me while I’d been out. That felt icky, but my stomach twisted with something that came frustratingly close to desire again. Had it been him? Had he taken off my shirt and pants?

Getting out of bed, I firmly resolved to be ready for him when he returned. Depending on how long I’d been out, that could be any minute now. I hoped so, because while I was good at sitting still in a lab, I wasn’t so good at it when I had

nothing to occupy my always-active mind. Exploring what little there was was my only option. He had locked me in here, so I was going to look in every single drawer and behind every door. What I found only upset me more.

The big wardrobe housed a harness stand with an intricate set of armor and a huge, ornate trident. The chests were all locked, and lockpicking was not one of my skills. In a discreet alcove, I discovered a bathroom-type area, and there, a dress of shimmering, pearlescent fabric hung. Considering this room and its contents made me think it belonged to a man; the dress could be meant for me, or it belonged to the jerk king's girlfriend. I only had to glance at my scantily clad self in the floor-to-ceiling mirror to make a decision.

The fabric was possibly the softest I'd ever touched in my life, and it flowed down my body like water. Then it pooled around my ankles, too long to fit me properly. While the top was far too snug to look decent around my busty chest, the bottom of the dress made me look like a child. "This thing is completely disproportionate," I muttered in frustration. At least the bottom of the dress was made of flirty panels, and I resorted to tying knots in the bottom parts to shorten their length. It struck me that this was a dress made for a woman with a tail—flirty and ethereal, it would wisp around her tail. Ah, shucks. It probably belonged to his girlfriend.

A splashing coming from the bedroom drew my attention with a swooping in my stomach. Damn it, I was not cut out for this adventuring stuff. I wanted my plant specimens and a lab, not this... whatever this was right now. Casting my eyes about, I searched for a weapon, but all I saw was another trident hanging from the wall—too big for me to carry easily. In the end, I picked up a sharp-edged seashell thing from the counter and clutched it tightly in my hand as I peered around the corner. The alcove was giving me a bit of cover, and the person who had entered via the pool hadn't seen me yet. That gave me ample opportunity to study them, which was just the way I liked it. It was a woman—tanned, statuesque, beautiful. Her hair was long and black with striking green highlights. She wore a dress just like the one I had just

pilfered, but on her, the fabric draped in lovely ways and pooled elegantly around her long legs. She was the kind of woman who made me feel like my frumpy, nerdy self and wish that I wasn't me. I was willing to bet that when she shifted into her waterform, she'd be even more stunning. Had to be the girlfriend. Or, wait—wife? Had I just stolen the dress of the Ondrithar Queen?

My horrified gasp made her lift her green gaze from the rumpled black sheets to the alcove I was hiding in. No. Get a grip. I was going to have to do better than this if I wanted to make it out alive. Show no fear; pretend you thought you had the upper hand; never let them see how much they intimidated you. I wished I didn't have such a good memory, and I really wished I hadn't memorized the diplomatic handbook I'd been given. Maybe she was a perfectly lovely woman; maybe she was simply a servant. But she still scared the shit out of me, and I couldn't even explain why. She wasn't that much taller than I was, and she was unarmed.

Raising my chin, I balled my fists around the sharp seashell behind my back, then stepped out of the alcove to confront her. When she smiled and revealed sharp, predatory fangs, I was pretty sure I'd screwed up.

Chapter 4

Kaerius

Sitting on my throne inside the glass-domed throne room, I gazed up at the ceiling and the water held back by the glass. Shapes darted left and right inside the big blue—Ondrithar males and females hurrying home from work or harvesting food and resources from the nearby cliff and reef. Normally, the sight of all that business made me happy, but today, nothing appealed. My thoughts kept straying to a certain female currently sleeping in my bed inside my private chambers.

Not even the report my head guard gave me about the shadowy enemy that had made

our harvests fail and our resources dwindle could keep my attention. For the first time, I wondered if a treaty with these humans could aid us in our problems. We had fought the Shadefins before, back when the Ondrithar had first arrived on Sanos several hundred years ago. To defeat them, the fuel inside the engines of our ship had been sacrificed; we could not do that a second time. What if the humans had more such fuel?

I jerked upright from my slouch and ignored the surprised expression on my head guard's face. "I need to attend to a more pressing matter," I snapped, then growled because I didn't need to explain myself. The female was addling my brain, and now I was acting oddly. My men were going to take note, and then they were going to gossip like old wives because soldiers loved nothing better. I hid a wince as I considered the ramifications of such news, my bare feet slapping against the metal floor as I rushed past the male without another word.

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Finding the nearest shaft of water, I dove inside it, my body shivering through the transformation, and my gills opening wide to pull water through them. With my long tail, I propelled myself through the tunnel, darting left and right along paths worn like furrows into my mind. A maze to many, I knew the tunnels, the waterways, and all the nooks and crannies of the palace, once a mighty spaceship made by my ancestors.

Then I rose from the pool inside my chambers, my senses instantly alerted me to the danger. I was not carrying any weapons, but that did not mean I was unarmed. My claws were razor sharp, as were my fangs. I caught the side of the pool with one hand, ears twitching as I quickly assessed what was going on.

Undina was right in front of me, her feet braced in a battle-ready pose, her claws out and raised in front of her. She had streaks of green scales crawling up her arms, evidence of her half-shifted form. In front of her, the human stood, one hand raised in front of her; it trembled and shook, and if I wasn't mistaken, she was holding my razor as a weapon. Clever girl. She had also found the dress I'd left for her, and it was emphasizing how lush and sexy her breasts were, clinging lovingly to her hips. I might think her shape was weak, but it was also temptingly soft, and her mind was brave and sharp. I was beginning to see more than a little of her appeal.

I also knew how dangerous this situation was, and if I hadn't arrived when I had, Undina could well have harmed or killed Samantha. Anger flowed through my veins like a tidal wave at the thought. Harm my little human? Nobody was allowed to do that—nobody but me. "Undina," I said. All the discontent from earlier and the fresh, new anger rose to the surface, echoing in my tone. "What the krill are you doing inside my chambers?"

I hauled myself out of the water, but I did not shift yet, rising tall on my coiled tail, fins spread wide to provide all the posturing and intimidation a fully grown Ondrithar male could bring. The courtesan twisted, turning her back on the human as if she did not consider her a threat. Her beautiful, aristocratic features expressed disdain in a measured fashion—polite enough, withdrawn enough to make you wonder if it was there, yet right beneath the surface if you were only willing to look.

Then her lush green mouth curled into a sultry smile that had once, when I was young and not yet king, worked on me. Wise to her manipulative ways now, I did not fall for such barbed allure. “But Kaerius, my love, I had to come see the strange curiosity you brought home! You know how boring things are ever since Morven died. All you do is work and work, no play...” She shifted her hip and struck a pose designed to draw the eye to her best features, but they held absolutely zero appeal. Instead, my eyes flicked to Samantha behind her. The human had backed up a step and crossed her arms protectively in front of her chest. Her brown eyes were wide with fear, but she was holding it together, appraising with the clever mind I could see spinning behind that soft gaze.

“As bored as you may be, these are my chambers, and I did not give you permission to visit them. Don’t let it happen again, am I clear?” She wilted, nodded sharply, and then quickly dove past me into the water with nary a splash. She was gone in a single breath, which I pulled in deeply as my body shifted to its two-legged form.

Dropping my hands to my hips, I forced myself to stay where I was instead of striding across the chamber to pull the source of all my turmoil into my arms. She’d been there before, and the desire to have her back that close against my body was intense. Then my eyes flicked to the bed behind her, and my cock surged to full mast, thickening as I contemplated what it would be like to fuck the human. And fuck her I would; I had no doubt of that.

“Samantha,” I drawled, my tone softening as I began my own seduction. I knew I’d

come here with some noble notion of negotiating, of finding out if her human ship had what we needed to defeat the Shadefin once again. All that went out the window when she gulped for air and her breasts rose and fell temptingly beneath the shimmering fabric of her dress. Ah, krill it, I was lost to her, lost at sea. I knew what this was now, what drove me, and it was going to cause war if I wasn't careful—war with the humans, maybe, war with my own people certainly. And the only war I wanted was with the Shadefin, to end them once and for all.

My thoughts were turning darker, as was the sharp arousal that gripped me. If I did not get control of it, I'd reach for her and do things I might regret later—like take her without proper seduction, without her vehement agreement. I could tempt her, convince her with my touch, but that would not be right. Then she spoke, and her trembling voice was exactly what I needed to settle my roiling emotions.

“You know my name?” she asked. I hissed, my lips curling as I realized what she was saying, what she'd been thinking: that I didn't care. Her brown eyes were wide again, but they were not fearful like they'd been when faced with a jealous Undina. Taking a slow step forward, I tested her response, and when she did not seem to mind, I took another. I could see the pulse at her throat, smell a hint of uncertainty, fear, and something else. Ah, krill. She was aroused.

“Yes,” I said, my voice rough. “I know your name, human. I know your occupation, scientist. I know you are mine, mate.” She gasped, her mouth dropping open, and, unable to contain myself, I swept in and kissed her. Back in my arms, I lifted her high, and she spread her legs and curled them around my hips without hesitation. Her taste was divine, filling my mouth, my mind, and my heart with her and nothing else. She was dangerous to my sanity and dangerous to my people. The course was set now; there was no backing down—not when I felt the heat of her core burn against my aching cock.

Samantha

I really thought I was going to die at the hands of that mermaid lady, and then Kaerius arrived, and I still thought I was going to die. He looked so fantastically good and alien at the same time—but dangerous, too. I didn't know he could rise from the water in his other shape, the one with the tail and gills, but he could. Clearly, he used that form to intimidate, and it worked. I'd never seen someone flee a scene as quickly as that Ondrithar woman.

And then he'd caught me completely by surprise by saying my name. He did know it—he hadn't asked because he already knew, not because he didn't want to know me as a person. My heart had fluttered in my chest, my pulse had begun pounding, and that dang arousal that plagued me each time he was near flooded my system. I was a goner—the secret romantic in me swooning—when he said the rest of those crazy, possessive, and impactful words.

I know you, he'd declared in so many ways. Diplomatic training? What was that? Ten years of studying my ass off to be a xeno-botanist? Forget it. I was all woman and instinct when he claimed my mouth and swept me into his arms. I never thought I'd be the kind who would let a man rule me the way he did. Passion had always been cerebral rather than physical—so much so that I had been called a cold fish by more than one ex. It was different with Kaerius. So different.

The kiss had shaken me to my core, but it was over too soon. Kaerius pulled back, his breath warm against my lips, his silver-blue eyes dark with something I couldn't name—desire? Possession? Something else entirely? I barely had time to catch my breath before he set me back on my feet, his hands lingering at my waist, strong and firm.

The silence stretched between us, thick and humming with an energy I didn't know how to handle. My body still thrummed from his touch, but my mind—oh, my

mind—was screaming at me to process what had just happened. The words he had spoken before he kissed me replayed in a loop, each time making less sense than before.

I know you, human. I know your occupation, scientist. I know you are mine. Mate.

Had he really said that? Had I misheard him? My heart pounded in my chest, and for the first time since waking up in this underwater palace, I wished for the sterile certainty of a lab where things made sense and could be studied. This... this was too much, too sudden.

Kaerius straightened, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his features before his expression hardened once more. He stepped back, giving me space—though it didn't feel like much when his presence still dominated the room. He was simply too much: large, muscular, a warrior through and through. Even when he was unarmed, I knew he was formidable. It was very confusing to have all that power contained in one man, focused on little ol' me, as if I were the special one. He was the king, for God's sake—why did he think I was his mate? I had to be mistaken. I had to misunderstand what he meant. Mate—that was a word from the animal kingdom. It was foreign to me.

“Come,” he said, his voice gruff and edged with something rough, as if he were battling fierce emotions within himself. “You will tour the palace with me.” It was a command, not a request, and my stupid body thought that was sexy instead of offensive, as it should have.

I swallowed, trying to find my footing in this strange, shifting dynamic. “Why?” My voice was steadier than I expected, but my fingers curled into the soft fabric of the dress I still wasn't convinced I should be wearing. “Are you showing me my prison?” I dared to say words past me would never have spoken, but I felt oddly empowered despite all the seesawing feelings in my chest. I couldn't wrap my head around that,

but it was true: King Kaerius made me feel like a stronger version of myself.

His gaze sharpened, and for a brief moment, I thought I saw the corner of his mouth twitch as if my defiance amused him. But just as quickly, the moment was gone. “You are not a prisoner, Samantha,” he said, my name rolling off his tongue like a promise—or a warning. “But you are mine.”

That word again. Mine. It still felt like it implied I was a prisoner somehow. I wanted to push back, to demand exactly what he meant by that. But he was already turning toward the water-filled tunnel at the edge of the chamber, the muscles in his back rippling beneath smooth, blue-scaled skin.

Doubt gnawed at the edges of my thoughts. Had he really called me his mate? Maybe I had misheard. Maybe it was some kind of translation error. Or maybe—maybe I was already in too deep.

I took a hesitant step toward the water’s edge, the surface rippling gently under the soft glow of the room’s lighting. My throat tightened. “I can’t breathe underwater, Kaerius.” Ah, damn it—was that even how I was supposed to address him? He was royalty, but at this moment, I had absolutely forgotten every single thing I knew about how to act around these people whom my people wanted a treaty with.

He didn’t turn to look at me, only inclined his head slightly. “You will be fine.” His voice was still gruff, but there was no mockery in it. No teasing. Just certainty. I believed him; there was no other option. I exhaled slowly. Trust wasn’t something I gave easily, and I wasn’t sure if he’d earned it yet. But he had brought me here, carried me through the depths of the ocean before. I hadn’t drowned then. Would I now? Why would he do that if he’d gone through all that trouble to bring me here?

Steeling myself, I slid a foot into the water. It was cooler than I expected, sending a shiver up my spine. Another step, then another. Each stair was made of textured

metal that brushed against my bare toes, designed to prevent a fatal slip—very practical. The dress clung to my legs as I waded deeper. The moment the water lapped at my thighs, Kaerius turned, reaching for me. His hands found my waist, fingers pressing firmly into my skin as he guided me further. The contact sent a hot jolt through my stomach, something warm and forbidden curling in my core.

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I gasped as my balance wavered, and before I could react, he pulled me fully into the water. My body was weightless, floating between his arms, and I instinctively clutched at his shoulders. His skin was slick—warm despite the water—the texture shifting beneath my fingertips as scales threatened to emerge.

His eyes locked onto mine, dark and unreadable. “I already gave you what you need.” Again with that growly tone, as if he were always on the verge of something huge and passionate. It twisted my abdomen with more heat, and I could see in his eyes that he knew it.

I blinked. “What?” The word bubbled from my mouth, and I realized I was already fully submerged, but this time, my lungs weren’t aching. I recalled the last time he’d taken me under, how I’d panicked and gasped. This time, I’d been so focused on him, on all the sexual tension between us, that I hadn’t noticed—not right away.

His grip on me tightened for just a fraction of a second before he exhaled, bubbles slipping between his lips. “When we first entered the ocean to travel to the Ondrithar territory, I injected you with a bio-adaptive serum. It will allow you to breathe underwater.” He explained it curtly, but they were still the most words he’d strung together into one sentence. It took me a moment to process it all.

When I did, I stiffened. “You did what?” I demanded. Inject me with bio-adaptive serum? What the flying monkeys was he talking about? But I could not deny that I was floating in his arms, my hands clutching his wide shoulders, inches beneath the surface of the water, and I had yet to surface to breathe.

His expression remained impassive, unapologetic. “You are in my world now. You

must survive in it.” Survive in it? That made it sound like he intended to keep me. I should have been furious. I should have demanded more answers, railed against the violation of my body without my consent. But as I took a deep, hesitant breath, expecting to choke, the strangest thing happened. I didn’t.

Cool water filled my lungs without pain, without suffocation. It was like breathing air, only richer, fuller, as though I was drawing in the very essence of the sea itself. I tore my gaze from him, looking down at my own hands, watching the way the water moved around me. That was incredible.

He must have seen the change in my expression because something flickered in his eyes—something softer. “Come.” He released me, and for a heartbeat, I panicked. But then he held out his hand, and I curled my fingers against his. Safety—he wouldn’t let me flounder now. I kicked, uncertain at first, then with growing confidence. He drifted backward, watching, waiting. And then we moved together.

He led me through the water with effortless grace, his body sleek and powerful as he guided me through the tunnels of the palace. I followed, swimming with a freedom I’d never known, the sheer exhilaration of it making me laugh, the sound muffled into bubbles that drifted toward the ceiling.

Kaerius turned at the sound, his lips parting slightly, and, for the first time since I’d met him, I saw it—a smile. Not a smirk. Not a sneer. A real, genuine smile. And it was beautiful.

Chapter 6

Samantha

The moment we surfaced, I gulped air greedily, lungs expanding with something close to relief. Not that breathing underwater had been difficult—if anything, it had

felt disturbingly natural after a while—but I was still human, still tied to the comfort of air filling my chest. I wasn't sure I'd ever fully adjust to the sensation of drawing water through my lungs, no matter what Kaerius said, and he said disturbingly little: “You will be fine.” I guess he was right, but I didn't feel right.

As the last traces of water slid from my skin, I blinked and realized what I wasn't seeing—the ornate hall of some ancient palace—but rather the interior of a ship. I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but a dress that felt dry even after complete submersion and a room like this one wasn't it. So the Ondrithar were as alien to this planet as I was, but how long ago had they arrived? Nothing about this was in the files the USS Legacy had on planet Sanos.

My gaze swept across the smooth, curved walls, the metal plating beneath my feet, and the intricate panels of what could only be control systems embedded into the far side of the chamber. Even the massive throne sitting at the head of the room looked more like a command chair than something a king would lounge upon. This wasn't just a palace—it was a vessel. A shiver trailed down my spine.

Kaerius was already striding forward, water dripping from his broad shoulders, utterly unconcerned with the small group of Ondrithar waiting for him. Three men dressed in elaborate robes that looked both regal and militaristic stood stiffly, their expressions unreadable. The woman beside them was similarly adorned, her eyes sharp and assessing as they flickered toward me. I straightened instinctively under her scrutiny, my heart hammering against my ribs.

But Kaerius didn't slow or acknowledge them beyond the briefest glance. If they were expecting some sort of formal greeting, they were sorely mistaken. He moved past them as though they weren't even there, his grip tightening around my wrist as he guided me toward a door at the side of the throne room.

One of the officials—an older male with streaks of silver through his dark

hair—opened his mouth to speak, but Kaerius cut him off with a single glare. “I am not to be disturbed,” he growled, pressing his palm to a panel on the wall. A soft chime sounded, and the door slid open.

I saw almost identical, resigned expressions on the faces of all the men, and a furious glare came from the woman. She had green in her hair, just like Undina. I hoped that didn’t mean they were related. She let out a huff, clearly displeased. “Kaerius—”The door shut in her face before she could finish. I tried not to feel amused, but her fish-out-of-water gasp was kind of funny.

I barely had a moment to take in my new surroundings before Kaerius released me and moved toward a console that looked far too much like something from the USS Legacy’s bridge. It only cemented my earlier realization—this place was once a ship, and in many ways, it still was.

The room itself was smaller than the throne room but still carried that same sleek, functional design. It reminded me of a ready room, a space where a captain would retreat to make decisions away from the prying eyes of their crew, or where he could hold meetings with his senior staff if he so wished. The long, ornate table with some kind of holographic map above it could easily seat a dozen.

The map made my curiosity spike, tempting me closer so I could peer at the shape of the ‘palace’—oblong and sinuous—where it lay on what appeared to be a shelf or a cliff. It was a real-time representation of what was happening outside, for I could see blips moving around, as well as hues of various corals that dotted the cliff, plunging into the inky depths on one side and spreading like lush pastures on the other. Forcing myself not to get caught up in all that was hard, but Kaerius was just as pretty to look at. I turned toward him. “You really know how to make an entrance.”

His lips twitched slightly, but the amusement didn’t reach his eyes. “They are politicians. They talk too much and say too little.” He was beginning to unwind

around me; it was only a little, but I sensed it, and it made my feelings spike with something perilously close to happiness. I shouldn't get attached. I should be asking the hard questions, not wondering if this king thought I was his mate and what that entailed.

I crossed my arms, glancing toward the sealed door. "And what does that make you?" I made myself sound stern and perched against the edge of the table so I stayed rooted in place. Kaerius looked too tempting, and now that he was on two legs, his skin was a rich honey color that made me want to lick him. Bad, bad girl. In my defense, he was only wearing a cloth-skirt-like thing around his hips in azure blue, like a mini toga. There really was an awful lot of body to ogle.

"A king," he said simply. "One who does not have time for posturing." I snorted, but the sound died quickly when he turned that piercing silver-blue gaze on me. I realized he was deadly serious and that he looked weary, as if he were carrying too much weight on his shoulders. I supposed that, being king and all, it was not a surprise. The impulse to go to him and offer my help right that instant was strong, but I curbed it. I still didn't know enough to make decisions purely based on my gut. I was a scientist; I needed a little more to go on.

"I need information about your people," he said, his voice low as if he were asking me secrets. "Specifically, about your access to a certain type of fuel." He said that as if it were almost impossible to get the words past his lips, but once they were out, his shoulders lowered and his posture became more relaxed.

I frowned. "Fuel?" What could he possibly want with fuel? Immediately, I glanced around the ready room, then back at the map where the shape of the ship sat on the sea shelf, integrated into the corals and reefs as if it had been there forever. Did he want to leave Sanos? Did he dream of flying his people back into the stars? Or home? I felt a pang of pain at the thought. Would I want to go back to Earth if that were possible? I didn't know, because Earth was a poisonous, polluted mess. It wouldn't

be safe to go back.

Kaerius tapped something on the console, and a projection flickered to life—a diagram of a glowing substance encased in some sort of crystalline structure. It pulsed with an eerie blue light, and the sight of it sent an odd jolt of familiarity through me. I had seen that before—but a very long time ago, back in college at the very least. It had nothing to do with botany, either, so I couldn't even remember the name of the chemical structure he was showing me. “This,” he said, pointing to it. “Does your ship have it?”

I shook my head slowly. “I don't know. I'm not an engineer.” My brain began turning rapidly now. This was good, though—if we did have it, we had bargaining power. Excitement filled me. Could this be the answer? Did the Ondrithar even have livable land inside their territory? My study of the maps we had indicated yes, but I wasn't sure if it was big enough to suffice.

Kaerius's expression remained unreadable, but I could feel the intensity rolling off him in waves. “But you are a scientist.” This was extremely important to him for some reason, and I was struggling to believe it had anything to do with spaceflight. Kaerius and this ship seemed pretty rooted in this world, this ocean. Who would want to leave a clean, beautiful paradise like this, anyway? My people would kill to be allowed to live here.

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I exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through my damp hair. “Yes, but not that kind of scientist. I’m a botanist. I study plants and ecosystems, not advanced propulsion systems.” My explanation was said by rote, as I’d met more than one jerk who didn’t know one kind of science from the next. The fact that I was a doctor—officially, but not a medical doctor—boggled many a mind.

He studied me for a long moment, then inclined his head. “If I give you access, can you find out?” His intense expression made me want to say yes in a heartbeat, but I hesitated. The USS Legacy’s database had a vast amount of information on the resources we carried, even beyond our primary mission parameters. If I could get access to a terminal, cross-reference the materials stored in our cargo holds... maybe.

I lifted my chin. “Why would I do that? I still don’t know why I am here or what you want of me. My people need safe harbor; we need a bit of land to live on. You offer me a deal, and I’ll try.” Whoa. Okay. Guess I had a little bit of negotiator in me after all. That was good. That was firm. And my strange but oh-so-handsome alien king wasn’t biting my head off.

Kaerius nodded once, decisive. “We can discuss this. I do not see why we can’t work together. You can use this console.” His hand waved toward the one with the floating blue crystalline particle that he was after. Then, without another word, he turned and strode out of the room, leaving me standing in the center of what I was beginning to suspect was far more than just an alien palace.

I glanced back at the console, at the softly glowing projection hovering in the air, my mind racing with possibilities. What had I just agreed to? And what would happen to me and a future treaty if I didn’t find what he was after?

Chapter 7

Kaerius

As soon as I stepped from the council chambers, the four advisors who had previously belonged to my brother's ruling council clamored for my attention. Firia was the loudest but also the quickest to give up this time. The murmuring voices of the remaining three males faded into insignificance as I strode from the chamber. They called my name, but I did not slow. My thoughts were a maelstrom, dragging me into deeper, darker waters than I cared to wade into.

Samantha was my mate. There was no denying it now, not with the way my blood had surged the moment I touched her, how her scent lingered in my lungs, how her presence burned through me like a cleansing tide. She was human. She was not Ondrithar. She was an outsider. But my instincts did not care for tradition, for politics, for the delicate balance of my rule. They only knew one truth—she belonged to me.

A snarl coiled in my throat. If I claimed her, everything would change. The advisors already knew it; I had no doubt they'd seen the signs. The Ondrithar people would know it the moment I claimed her. An outsider queen had never been considered, let alone accepted. And yet the very thought of walking away, of severing the bond before it fully took root, made my gills flare in rejection.

Diving into the water-filled tunnels, I drove my body forward with powerful motions from my tail. Racing away from her—the way she'd made my heart race earlier with her shrewd bargaining and her easy concession—I did not slow until I reached the war chamber and rose from the pool entrance into the air-filled room, my bare feet slapping against the metal floor as I shifted, my frustration echoing in each step.

The domed ceiling arched high above, panels of tempered glass allowing a view of

the ocean beyond. Pale shafts of filtered sunlight cut through the water, illuminating the chamber in shifting shades of blue and green. The holographic war table at the center of the room pulsed with light, projecting the seafloor's topography and the strategic points of our defenses. The faint hum of energy from the ancient systems vibrated beneath my feet—a reminder that this palace was once a ship, a vessel built for war and survival.

My head guard, Bruinen, was already waiting, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression grim. His deep blue scales shimmered in the dim light, his trident strapped to his back. "They struck again," he said without preamble. A hint of censure in his eyes warned me that this was what he'd wanted to warn me about in his report earlier—the one I had brushed off so I could see my human curiosity. For that's all he thought she was.

I exhaled sharply, shaking off my personal turmoil to focus. "Where?" I demanded, leaning on my fists at the edge of the table to peer at the display of the Ondrithar territory. This table was a larger version of the one in the council chambers, and I couldn't help but wonder if Samantha was currently staring at the same view I was.

"The reef along the west edge of the cliff, near the Sanos Abyss," he said. His posture was ramrod straight, but I could sense his anger and agitation in every line of his body. Bruinen had excellent self-restraint, but this attack cut deep—each one cutting worse than the last. "The Shadefin grow bolder. Our resource gatherers were attacked. Two dead, three injured."

The familiar rage surged, but I swallowed it down. I could not afford anger—I needed strategy. The Shadefin had always been a threat, lurking in the darkness of the Abyss, but they had never been so brazen. Not until recently. Not for a long time. Their last attacks as bold as this had preceded the poisoning of their nesting caves with the Atara that had once powered the star drive engines. That had been well over four hundred years ago.

I moved to the console, my webbed fingers flicking over the controls to bring up the surveillance feed. The images flickered—grainy, but clear enough to show the carnage. The reef was disturbed, once-vibrant corals shattered, the water stained with blood. The bodies had already been retrieved, but the destruction remained. “Escalation,” I muttered. We had never suffered this many dead before from a single attack. I could only imagine how many Shadefin had swarmed the poor harvesters, catching them by surprise.

Bruinen inclined his head, his tanned skin shifting with gold and green as his other form pressed up from beneath the surface. My own body was responding in the same way, blue lining my flesh as my scales itched to cover me—a protection, but also a desire to fight. My faithful head guard snarled the words when he said, “They are testing our limits.”

My jaw tightened. “Then we remind them why we are kings of these waters.” The water around the war chamber pulsed slightly, as if the very ocean itself sensed my rising fury. We had fought the Shadefin before, driving them back into their nests along the edge of the cliff at great cost. If they thought we had weakened, they would learn otherwise.

I issued swift orders—patrols were to be doubled, reinforcements sent to the gathering sites. We would not cower. But even as I planned retaliation, my thoughts drifted back to Samantha. Bruinen noticed—as always, sharp as a razor and with more than enough guts to call me out on it. “You are distracted.”

I snapped my gaze to him, my expression thunderous. “I am focused.” He might have the guts to say the words, but he was not allowed to overstep his bounds on this matter. What I planned to do with Samantha was up to me and no one else. Distracted? Maybe, but not in any way that mattered. I would always do what needed to be done to protect my people. In this case, I hoped that Samantha might be our very salvation.

At my furious glare, his brow lifted slightly, but he did not challenge me. Wise. There was a reason he and I got along as well as we did, and it wasn't because we'd grown up in the same creche and learned to use our tridents from the same weapon master.

Then, another voice chimed through the comms, urgent and tense. "My king," Aenon's voice crackled. "It's the human." My heart slammed against my ribs. A different kind of adrenaline surged through me, colder and sharper than the battle fury from before. This was primal because this was about my mate. I tolerated a threat to her even less than I did to my people.

"What of her?" I demanded, my voice already edged with impatience. I was moving before I even thought about it, already heading for the water-flooded exit tunnel so I could race back to the council chamber where I'd left her.

"She is causing trouble," Aenon said, his tone indicating that he squarely placed the blame for this ill-timed intrusion on the human. Ice flooded my veins. My mind raced with possibilities—had she tried to escape? Had someone threatened her? Had another of my people dared to touch what was mine?

I didn't ask for details—I didn't need them. Diving into the tunnel, my body cut sharply through the surface, causing only the slightest ripple along its previously tranquil expanse. My gills flared, my senses sharpening as I navigated the corridors, my body thrumming with urgency.

The ancient halls of the palace blurred past me, the bioluminescent lights casting shifting shadows along the walls. Any guard or other palace dweller I encountered hurriedly dove out of my way, coiling aside to let me pass without comment. They responded to my thunderous expression, to the danger that made the fins and spines along my body sharp and deadly.

I had only one purpose: to find Samantha and protect her at any cost.

Chapter 8

Samantha

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I took a slow breath, steeling myself as I pressed my palms against the smooth, unfamiliar material of the console. It was no use—I had been at this for too long, and I still couldn't make sense of the alien interface Kaerius had left me with. The symbols flickered in patterns that made my head ache, and though I could tell the system was waiting for some kind of input, I had no idea what it was asking for.

A sigh escaped me. If I couldn't access the USS Legacy's logs, I would have no way of confirming whether we carried the strange fuel Kaerius wanted. And if I couldn't find that, I would have no leverage. My communicator wasn't working—I had already tried—but it stubbornly refused to get a signal. I suspected the large amount of water and metal surrounding me had something to do with it.

My eyes flickered toward the door. Had he locked me in? It seemed likely, but there was only one way to find out. Rising from the console, I crossed the room, hesitating for a brief second before pressing my palm against the door's surface. I wasn't sure what I'd do if I discovered I was locked in, but it would be further evidence that Kaerius did not trust me. To my surprise, it slid open immediately, revealing the four fancily clad Ondrithar I'd seen earlier. The woman was in the lead—the one whom Kaerius had previously slammed the door on. I suspected these were some kind of officials; they sure looked pompous enough for it, and they did not look pleased.

My stomach clenched with nerves as I met their serious gazes one by one. I felt like a bug under the microscope—worse than what I imagined my plant samples would hypothetically feel like when I peered at them. Not that plants had feelings—I knew that, even if I did have a tendency to talk to them. The tallest of them, a man with deep blue streaks in his pale blond hair, narrowed his eyes at me. “You should not be here.”

I took a step back, and inside me, I felt that fight-or-flight response engage. So far, my body had picked the third option—freeze—each time. The Ondrithar king had that kind of effect on me. This guy, though, pushed my buttons the wrong way, scraping my nerves until I felt like I was rattling inside my skin. “Kaerius left me here to work on something. If you have a problem with that, take it up with him.” I sounded cool and firm, and I was extremely proud of myself for how I lifted my chin and gave him my best glare. Until I learned otherwise, I was going to assume Kaerius wanted my company and wanted my help, which made me a guest, not a prisoner. The unlocked door confirmed that line of thinking.

Another advisor scoffed—an older one, his hair long and gray. “You believe you hold his favor, human? You are nothing more than a complication.” His stare was even less tactful—forget a bug under a microscope, this guy was glaring at me with utter disdain. Suddenly, I wasn’t so sure I wanted Kaerius to mean it when he called me “mine” or “mate.” His people didn’t seem on board with that kind of thing. Come to think of it, I wasn’t sure if mine would be either—though I was certain my bosses on the USS *Legacy* would gladly let me sleep with whoever or whatever if it meant securing land.

My stomach turned at the thought, and the unwelcome glaring and posturing stung more than it should have. I lifted my chin, refusing to let them see any weakness. “If I’m a complication, then maybe you should let me get back to my work and stop wasting my time.” I wasn’t even sure what I was supposed to be doing if I couldn’t get the console behind me to work, but they didn’t need to know that. Imogen or one of the other girls would surely know, but they were not here. I was going to ask Kaerius about them the next time I saw him because I hated not knowing what had happened to any of the others.

It seemed these stuck-ups weren’t a fan of my talking back; their expressions darkened. Before any of them could speak, a noise drew all our eyes to the back of the throne room, where the entrance pool sat, surrounded by glowing blue and yellow

light. Two males were rising from the water, their bodies shifting from their waterforms of green or blue scales to tan, muscular, two-legged bodies. They had tridents strapped to their backs, their skirt-thingsies were black, and a green band sat snugly around each bicep. They looked like soldiers—oddly bare, as you’d expect soldiers to wear armor, but I supposed their scales would function as armor when they shifted.

I glanced from the pair and their dark, undecipherable expressions to the stuffy advisors. The woman looked surprised, and then she turned to frown at the gray-haired male, whispering in low tones to him, low enough that I could not understand a word she said. I hadn’t liked any of them, but I was liking these surprise visitors—and the unrest from the woman—even less. I had a sinking feeling they were here for me, and it wasn’t a social visit. Had Kaerius sent them? I only had to look at their mean expressions to come up with an implacable no. Kaerius was not one to let others do his dirty work. If he wanted something of me, he’d take it himself.

The lead guard fixed me with a firm stare. “Come with us.” I stepped back, shaking my head, and my hand went to the small of my back, fingers brushing over the sharp seashell I’d tucked into the folds of my dress. It was not the same as a knife—a little clumsy to hold—but it was the best weapon I had. If that guy tried to grab me, I was going to use it. I did not like his tone, and I really didn’t like the way he and his buddy were looking at me.

“Why?” I demanded. My worry increased when I realized that the older guy had moved the woman aside, and though she was casting worried glances at the guards, she was letting the man mollify her. Well, I wasn’t mollified. This felt like it could become a life-or-death situation in a hurry.

“The king has summoned you,” the advisor to my left said, cutting in. “You would do well to obey.” He was lying—I knew it with absolute certainty—though I couldn’t

explain how I knew. My eyes flicked from his face and the streaks in his pale hair to the panel at the side of the door. Could I close it and lock it? I wasn't sure how it worked; it was as foreign as the console with its stupid floating fuel particle had been earlier.

My instincts screamed at me that something wasn't right, but what choice did I have? If this was truly Kaerius's summons, resisting would be pointless. And if it wasn't, I had no way to fight them off. That little shell-knife thing wasn't going to do much more than piss them off. Suppressing the shudder creeping up my spine, I nodded once and followed them.

Letting these two muscle-bound guards close in on my sides, flanking me like a prisoner, was hard. Harder still was following the remaining two councilmen to the pool exit. They wanted me to go into the water with them, and every instinct in my body told me that was a death sentence. Not only was this much water still a little daunting and foreign to me, but I had mastered no more than the basics of swimming. I would be out of my element while they were in theirs.

I stopped short at the edge of the water, my dress swishing against my legs with the abrupt motion, my toes already touching the cool water. "Where is Kaerius?" I wanted to know where they were taking me. The two fancily dressed advisors ignored me, stepping into the water ahead and sliding smoothly beneath the surface and into the tunnel. The guards also didn't answer. Instead, the one closest to me reached out and grabbed my wrist. Panic surged through me. "Let go of me! Where are you taking me?"

The grip on my arm tightened as they pulled me toward the pool, the dark water gleaming like oil under the chamber's lights. I fought them, digging in my heels, but they were too strong. My feet slipped on the damp floor as they dragged me toward the inky depths.

Cold fear crashed over me. This wasn't right. This wasn't some diplomatic summons—they were trying to get rid of me. The water swallowed my feet first, then my thighs. My heart pounded against my ribs. I struggled harder, thrashing against their grip, but it was useless. They were going to drown me. That's what it felt like when the water closed over my head, and they began to drag me with them through the tunnel. That's what would have happened if not for whatever serum Kaerius had injected me with.

Unlike the earlier swim, which had seemed marvelous and bright, full of discovery and adventure, this one was dark and fast. I could not free myself from their hold on my arms, and with their tails, they rapidly propelled us through tunnel after tunnel. My lungs ached as they dragged fluid into them and somehow turned it into something I could breathe. My eyes burned as I struggled to keep them open and make sense of what we passed. And then, we were suddenly outside.

I could not put into words what it felt like to lift my head and gaze up at the endless water stretching above me. The beauty that lay in the shafts of light that petered down from the surface. Everywhere I looked, I saw Ondrithar people hurrying to and fro, their magnificent tails resplendent in every color of the rainbow, their bodies lithe and graceful as they appeared to dance through the water. Nobody paid attention to me or to the guards that held my arms. They were right there, above me, in the distance, but they might as well have been dancers on a screen for all the notice they gave me.

I forgot to struggle when the guards hauled me after the pair of advisors swimming ahead of us. The older male had stayed behind, possibly to distract or convince the woman they were doing the right thing. These two were swimming with their heads stuck close together, murmuring words as they moved. If the guards already knew where they were taking me, they did not let on, simply dragging me in the wake of their bosses.

My eyes were on the corals—bright and beautiful—and the seaweeds and other plant

life that grew everywhere I looked. It was lovely, it sparked my curiosity, but it did not outweigh my survival sense. They were dragging me to my death—I knew it—and not even the beautiful plant life down here could distract me from that certainty.

Then we were moving through what seemed like rows of hedges, only they were made of thick, red kelp. Now, I could no longer see the other Ondrithar gracefully darting through the sunlit water, and I felt utterly alone. If Kaerius knew I was in trouble, he'd come for me—I was certain of that—but how would he know? He wouldn't... not unless he'd gone looking for me and hadn't found me in the room where he'd left me. Unlikely. He was a king; he was probably super busy. Forget help—I had to figure out how to escape. But at the moment, those two guards were holding me in iron grips, as surely as if they had shackled me.

The red kelp made way for another stretch of reef; this verdant green and red display of life was perched right on the edge of the sea shelf. Beyond, dark water loomed, and they brought me right to the edge. I had a feeling they were about to throw me down there. I could feel currents pull on me, heavy and strong. If not for the pair of guys holding me in place, I was pretty sure that current would have swept me away. My stomach certainly felt like it had swept out on the tide and plunged straight into that nightmarish abyss.

I thought they might say something; the pair of advisors looked like the type that loved to hear the sound of their own voices. It wasn't the water that stopped them from talking—I knew they could talk underwater because I'd heard it. I'd had an entire conversation underwater—weird but enlightening—with Kaerius earlier today. Nobody said a word, however, as they hauled me to the edge; I was out of chances.

Craning my head left and right, I felt my stomach flip again when I saw something dark oozing over the edge nearby. That looked like tar, and the nearest coral was disappearing. Nobody was nearby who could help me—no sign of Kaerius. Twisting

suddenly in the grip of the left guard, I angled my head right and bit hard on his scale-covered arm. I doubted it hurt him; it certainly sent a shock of pain through my jaw, but it did startle him. He released my arm and hissed, but that was all the opening I needed. My hand darted to my back, yanking out the silly shell with the razor-sharp edge. I could not hesitate now, no matter how distasteful it was. I slashed at the other guard, digging my toes into the sand as I did so.

Chaos erupted. He let me go, blood curling red and vibrant through the water. Bubbles streamed from my mouth as I shouted, but the water muted it—or maybe it was just that the current grabbed me and sent me spinning. The abyss opened up beneath me as I was swept out—darkness below, sunlight above. Coldness filled me, surrounded me, as the current pushed me down. In the dark, the water was icy. This was it. I'd waited too long to attempt an escape, and now I was dead.

Just as the realization took hold, a familiar voice rang out—sharp and furious. “Stop!” I recognized that voice, knew it by heart even though I'd only known him for a short time. I could not see him, spinning and tumbling down into the darkness as I was. I imagined he looked mighty furious as he confronted the guards and his advisers, but this current... it was too late for me.

Even with such fatalistic thoughts swimming through my head, I fought against that fate, my limbs flailing as I struggled against the current, my body rapidly sapped of strength due to the cold. And then I saw a flash of something blue and silver—it plunged through the water above me, cutting it like a knife. It was him, webbed hands moving in powerful strokes, his tail propelling him in ways my human body never could. He was on me in seconds, mere moments after I'd spotted him.

It was not an embrace; there was nothing gentle about the way his body collided with mine. Iron bands around my waist, his scales rough against my skin as he spun us around and headed back up—slower this time, because he was fighting the current I had lost to. My breathing, strange as it was underwater, foreign as it felt when it was

water I inhaled, stuck in my throat now as if he'd slammed the air straight out of me. It was the force of that rapid ascent, and it made my head spin. For a moment, up was down, down was up, and I was certain there were hundreds of eyes staring up at me from the dark depths below.

Kaerius hauled us over the edge of the cliff, barreling through the pair of guards who had brought me there. His silver-blue eyes blazed with fury, his gills flaring as his gaze locked onto the ones who had dragged me here. "What do you think you're doing?" he roared. My hands shot up to cover my ears instinctively. Even in these unnatural, underwater surroundings, it was loud—terrifying.

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One of the advisors moved forward, his tail fanning behind him in gentle motions, his expression smooth—almost unbothered. “The human is a threat to your rule. We are simply removing the problem.” That sounded like a party line, and Kaerius didn’t buy it.

He moved so fast I barely saw it—one second, he was holding me one-armed against his chest, his tail whipping down to keep both guards pinned beneath it. The next moment, he rushed forward and grabbed the male by the throat, lifting him off the ground with effortless strength. The pompous advisor choked, clawing at his grip, but Kaerius didn’t let go. Beneath that grip, I could see the man’s gills flare as he struggled to breathe, his blue scales growing paler along his cheeks until they looked as white as his pale blond hair.

“You do not decide who is a threat,” the king snarled. “You do not touch what is mine.” Mine—there was that word again. I barely had time to process that before he threw the man away with a flick of his wrist. The current caught the male, sweeping him out above the abyss—only this guy was strong enough to save himself, rapidly swimming back to the shelf and to safety, darting behind his companion’s back.

Kaerius swept his gaze over the others. None of them dared to move. “Get out of my sight,” he commanded. “All of you.” I bit my lip, but I knew he didn’t mean me. His arm was still snug around my waist, keeping me anchored to his side. Mine, he said, and I knew it meant he wasn’t going to let me go at all. I was relieved about that. I’d nearly died—I would have died down there—of the cold, of starvation, or eaten by a predator. I was staying right where I was, in his arms.

The guards hesitated for only a moment before scrambling up from the sand and

darting into the rising red kelp behind us. The pair of advisors exchanged glances but then bowed their heads and followed suit. Then, it was just me and Kaerius.

My breath was still coming in short gasps, my heart hammering against my ribs. I turned to face him, searching his expression, but it was unreadable—except for the storm raging in his eyes. “I—” My voice caught, shaking. “They were going to—” I couldn’t find the words to express what had just happened; it was too much for a bookworm like me. I wasn’t cut out for that much excitement—I didn’t just shrug off an attempt on my life.

“I know,” he said quietly. His hand lifted, hesitating for a moment before his fingers brushed my cheek—gentle despite the strength behind them. “I should have been here sooner.” His tone was full of self-recrimination, as if he were the one to blame for my plunge into that dark abyss. “I should never have left you alone.”

A tremor ran through me. “Why?” I needed to hear him say it again, even though I knew exactly what his words were going to be. It was starting to feel like that fact was the only certainty I could count on down here, under the water’s treacherous surface.

His expression darkened as if my question offended him. “Because you are mine, Samantha.” I should have argued. Should have pushed back. But as I clung to his arms, trembling from the near-death, the weight of his words settled deep inside me. He had come for me. He had stopped them.

He dipped his head, I raised mine, and we met halfway. His mouth, scorching hot against my cold lips, his tongue claiming me, conquering me until I had no choice but to accept what he’d been telling me from the start: I was his. I believed it, and now it was time to find out if that meant he was mine.

Kaerius

My mate was not out of danger yet—not by a long shot—but I could not stop myself from giving her what she needed. What I needed. Her mouth against mine, her small body safely wrapped in my arms and the coil of my tail. My fins spread wide to shield her from any prying eyes. If I was not careful, I would let passion sweep us both away on a tide of pleasure.

It was the rasp of a throat from the direction of the Asgata kelp that made me jerk my head up, my arms growing tight around Samantha. Bruinen had arrived with a contingent of guards, among them Aenon, who'd called out his warning about my mate—too late to help. My expression grew tight with the force of the anger I felt—anger and fear. If I had arrived a few seconds later, my mate would have plummeted straight into a nest of Shadefin.

Samantha was brave; she had more bite to her than the two males from Tapin's personal guard had expected. But that near brush with the deadly Shadefin and the darkness of the deep had shaken her—it had shaken me. She was trembling in my arms, her fingers digging into the scales along my shoulders. I would never forget the sight of all that blackness surging up to grab her as I raced to catch her before they did. The hundreds of eyes I'd seen made it clear that the situation was getting desperate.

“Arrest Tapin and Melar,” I snarled. My hand slid along Samatha's spine when she trembled, curling into her floating hair to cup the back of her head and press her against my chest. She was not leaving my side, ever. Not until I'd outed every single traditionalist and defeated the Shadefin threat. “There is a massive Shadefin nest below the precipice. We need to eradicate it before it can spread.”

That was a danger that each of these males knew well—one we had been forced to deal with more often lately, with ever greater frequency. Bruinen uttered orders

immediately, and the males advanced to the edge of the seashelf—the edge of our territory. The currents here were strong, forcing each of us to work our tails to prevent being swept off the edge and down into the black depths. Further into that darkness, the Sanos Abyss was home to King Krak'zol and his people, but here on the edge, the Shadefin now reigned.

I shifted Samantha against my side, holding her close so the two of us could watch closely. I did not want to see the nest again, but I forced myself to grab my trident and stand tall beside the warriors. We needed all the firepower we could get. If even the tiniest of spores escaped the burn, they would settle in anew and breed another wave of deadly, ever-hungry Shadefin.

The Shadefin nest loomed below us, a grotesque sprawl of undulating shadows and glistening tendrils, nestled within the depths of the abyss, clinging to the cliff wall and spilling out of the nooks and crannies where it had begun. Where it had previously been hidden from our patrols, the water now shimmered with the bioluminescent spores they excreted—a sickly blue-green that tainted the depths like a spreading disease. My jaw tightened, my gills flaring in distaste. Enough. This infestation ended today. It was only one of many, but at least we could end this one.

“Fire at will,” I ordered, my voice reverberating through the water, unyielding as the currents that shaped our world. The warriors obeyed without hesitation, releasing streams of incendiary plasma that ignited upon contact with the infestation. I fired my own trident at the same time, taking grim satisfaction in the way the force of it pushed against my shoulder and made me work to center my aim.

The luminous glow of the Shadefin spores was swiftly overtaken by a violent eruption of light and heat as the plasma burned through the nest's core. The water churned as the creatures inside writhed and screamed, their high-pitched keening—a death knell that vibrated through my bones.

Samantha tensed beside me, her gaze locked on the destruction. She did not flinch, though the horror of what we had uncovered was evident in her wide, alert eyes. Strong, this human. Braver than most of my own kind. I knew she was realizing just how close to death she'd come when she'd been swept by the current down into their greedy jaws—exactly as Tapin and Melar had wanted. A brutal, pain-filled execution I wouldn't wish on anyone. Anyone except those two bastards who had dared to attempt to snuff out the life of my mate.

I turned to my guards, and to Bruinen and Aenon, who watched with grim satisfaction as the nest went up in plasma destruction. They had fought these creatures before. They knew what it was to face death in the deep. But this victory was only the beginning, and we had finite resources. The Shadefin nested where we harvested the fuel for our plasma fire, for our tridents, and for the ship-palace and the homes of the civilians. We could not defeat them without it, and we could not get it because it was becoming too deadly.

Shoving those worries aside, I focused again on my mate. She held the answers. That ship she'd come from, the one that still hovered in space with thousands of other sleeping humans, could hold the Atara we needed to strike another deadly blow at the Shadefin, ending their rapid reproduction cycle and restoring balance. My mate had become my sole hope for a swift end to the war with the deadly creatures, and I wanted her to be a beacon of hope to the rest of my people. To that end, there was only one path forward—there only ever had been one path. “She is mine,” I declared, my voice a thunderous current through the water. “Samantha is my mate.”

Bruinen nodded, solemn and respectful. But Aenon hesitated—a subtle shift in his expression, the twitch of his gills, the tension in his posture—disapproval. My eyes narrowed. I had expected this: the splitting of loyalty, the dividing of my people as they either objected or celebrated their king mating an outsider. I had to act swiftly to quash any further sentiments of treachery and rebellion.

The displeasure had barely formed on his face before I struck, my tail lashing out with brutal efficiency. The impact sent him reeling, his body spinning through the water before he righted himself, stunned. I advanced, the spines along my arms flaring outward in silent warning. “You will not question me,” I growled, my voice low and edged with threat. “She is the key to our survival, to our victory over the Shadefin. She deserves your respect.”

Aenon bowed his head, chastened, though resentment still coiled beneath his skin. It did not matter. He would obey. They all would. There was no other outcome I tolerated, and once I had dealt with the two traitors who had almost killed Samantha, everyone would fall in line.

Satisfied that these men would obey and that the nest had been eliminated, it was time to focus on my female. She had pulled herself together, and though I still held her tight beneath my arm, pressed against my chest, she was no longer shaking. She had curled her fingers into my forearm, and I would not be surprised if she was preparing to slip from my grasp. That would be a mistake; the current would take her anew. My grip was firm, possessive. Protective. “Come,” I said, leading her away from the wreckage of the Shadefin nest, back toward the palace. “You stay by my side.”

She glanced at me, lips parting as if to protest, but something in my expression stilled her words. She nodded, and I felt an unfamiliar warmth settle in my chest. That was trust in her expression, her pale face beautiful, surrounded by her dark, silky hair, which swayed and curled on the currents.

As we moved through the corridors of my domain, I kept her close, ensuring no one dared approach. Those we passed wisely averted their gazes, sensing the depth of my claim. The human was mine, and woe to anyone who thought to challenge it. Aenon and Bruinen accompanied us, but the other males were dispatched to rally patrols to check our borders again.

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When I rose with Samantha through the pool in my chamber, we were finally alone. I did not expect the tidal wave of fierce emotions that crashed through me then; it swept me away, pushing me down a current as inevitable as the rising of the moon.

Chapter 10

Samantha

The water parted around us as Kaerius pulled me to the surface. My heart was still racing, my body trembling from everything that had happened—the Shadefin, the battle, his claim. I clung to him because despite everything, he had come for me. He had saved me.

The water cascaded off his body as he emerged from the pool in his chambers. I had seen him shift before, but never had I admired it as much as I did now. The way his body morphed so fluidly, the way his powerful tail split into strong, muscled legs. The gleam of water sliding down his sculpted chest, the way his dark hair clung to his sharp cheekbones. My breath caught. He was devastating. And he was both so alien and so human at the same time in this form. Only the hint of glittering scales here and there, and the gleaming silver-blue of his eyes, betrayed his true nature. It was exotic, and it was beautiful. He was beautiful.

His grip was firm on me as if he feared I would slip away. But I wasn't going anywhere. My body knew only one thing for certain: he was safety. That was enough for now. I also knew that he wanted me with a desperation that no man had ever felt for me before. The cloth that clung to his hips barely hid the rising evidence of his arousal. His cock was jutting straight up, lifting the cloth until I saw a hint of his balls

and the base of his shaft. He was completely unabashed about it, without a hint of modesty.

He turned to me, reeling me close with a hand around my wrist. His grip was firm, implacable, but also gentle. His silver eyes were molten with his heat for me, calling forth answering fire inside me. “You are mine,” he said, his voice deep, reverberating through me inside these air-filled chambers, echoing around me, thrumming through my bones.

I should have argued. I should have told him that I didn’t belong to anyone. But the way he was looking at me, the way he had risked everything to claim me—it made something deep inside me tighten, something I wasn’t ready to name. Freezing seemed to be a tendency of mine, one I wasn’t proud of, but his intensity—it was such an aphrodisiac. Nobody had ever wanted me the way this Ondrithar king wanted me, and it was addictive to bask in his heated gaze.

Instead of answering—words failed me anyway—I surged up, pressing my lips to his. The kiss was fire and water all at once—a clash of heat and coolness. His lips were demanding, claiming, but also worshipping. His hands roamed down my back, pressing me closer, and I melted into him.

His fingers found the edges of my damp clothing, peeling the fabric away inch by inch. My breath hitched as cool air kissed my skin, but the heat between us was scorching. He growled low in his throat, the sound sending shivers through me and pooling heat in my belly.

His hands were reverent as he lifted me, carrying me to the massive bed at the side of the room. The sheets were warm against my back as he followed me down, his mouth never leaving mine. I felt safe—so very safe—beneath the bulk of his large body. Not trapped, but cherished. This was fast, this was crazy, but after what had just happened at that cliff—with those monsters and those nasty traitors—I could not deny any of it.

This attraction was one of a kind, and I wanted to know that I could match him, that I fit him the way I'd never fit with anyone else.

When Kaerius began to trail kisses along the column of my throat, I moaned with need, arching beneath him. He went where I desired, his mouth closing over a nipple and sucking deeply. Pleasure lanced through me, hot and sharp, and he followed it down along my belly, lifting my legs wide so he could spear me with his tongue. That's when I shouted, his name springing from my lips as pleasure clashed and crested. He lifted his head, eyes glowing with satisfaction. "Yes, say my name. Scream it, brave mate."

I dug my fingers into his shoulders, giving him my fiercest glare. I was always unbalanced around him; he always caught me by surprise with what he did and how he acted. I wanted to know where we stood—I wanted answers. Opening my mouth, even though my timing sucked, I began to ask what was on my mind. And he did it again, derailing my train of thought. This time, he did it by pulling off the piece of fabric that was still valiantly clinging to his narrow hips. My mouth dropped open, and my eyes zeroed in on his proud cock.

We were really doing this, weren't we? I was sleeping with him, and I had a feeling it would put us well beyond the point of no return. Whatever this was between us—intense, crazy, all-consuming—it would not be something I walked away from. The rational, scientific part of me was telling me I should take a step back and consider all the options, have all the facts. But the biggest part of me didn't give a shit. I wanted him. He made me feel safe, good, strong—and that was good enough.

His cock was as thick as my wrist and almost as long as my forearm. His scales seemed to press closer to the surface here, or maybe he was just struggling to hold on to his human form, his control worn thin. I thought I was seeing more than my fair share of ridges and lines, as if that thick length was ribbed just to please me.

I caught the gleam in his silver-blue eyes then saw his satisfaction over my appreciative gaze. I licked my lips, and that was fuel to the fire. He curled his fist around my ankle and pulled my leg up against his chest, pinning me open. His hand brushed through my folds, testing my wetness, and I yelped when he slipped a finger inside. That yelp transformed into a moan when he curled that digit and found the bundle of nerves on the inside of my passage.

I wanted to beg him to do it again, wanted to ask him for more, but the warning light in his eyes made me bite my tongue. That was why I didn't regret it when I let him do what he wanted. His cockhead kissed my opening—blazing hot, thick, but smooth and slippery. It slipped in easily despite his size, and the way that made him growl sent all kinds of pleasure shooting through my body.

He was definitely losing control, scales rippling beneath the silk of his tanned skin. His eyes were wild, his mouth pulled into a snarl that displayed canine teeth sharper than normal. He sank deep, and I felt each ridge tingle across my insides, stretching me wide, flooding my senses with sensation. And then he began thrusting into me, and we spiraled together.

My crest broke first, my muscles clenching tightly around his invasion. I must have shouted, but all I was aware of was my hoarse throat and the way his cock kicked and bucked inside of me as he followed me over that edge. The growl he emitted shaped my name, vibrating through my flesh. I had never felt this good, and when he collapsed on his elbows above me, then gently gathered me against his chest, I had never felt so safe.

Chapter 11

Samantha

I woke to the feel of strong arms wrapped around me, the steady rise and fall of

Kaerius's chest beneath my cheek. His warmth surrounded me—protective, possessive. I felt rested and limber in ways I couldn't recall ever being before. The gentle twinge between my thighs only served to remind me of all the pleasure he'd given me when he and I had made love earlier. A blush crept up my cheeks as I recalled what we'd gotten up to throughout the night. We'd only taken breaks to scarf down some much-needed food or for short naps.

"You are quiet," he murmured, his voice still rough from sleep. "Do you regret it?" I turned my head slightly, meeting his gaze. His expression was unreadable, but there was something vulnerable beneath the sharp edges of his features—something hesitant. He was bracing himself for the worst but hopeful for the best.

"No," I whispered. "I don't." How could I? When I had learned so much about passion—about how tender and how wild he could be—about my limits? How could I regret any of what we'd done after he'd saved me—three times at this point, but who was counting?

Something shifted in his expression, and he let out a breath as if he had been holding it. His fingers traced lazy patterns along my spine. "Good." This was my Ondrithar king at his most open, his least kingly. He was showing me the side of him that I was certain very few people ever saw.

I swallowed, suddenly nervous. "When you said I was your mate..." I'd been trying to figure out what to make of that from the start and hadn't begun to believe it was something wondrous until after the first round of sex last night. But I had to have the words, and just as he had been braced for the worst, I now found myself doing the same.

His grip tightened ever so slightly. "You are my one—the only mate I will ever have. It is a bond that cannot be undone." His voice went rough as he spoke, his silver eyes flashing with passion, with fire. It felt like he was almost daring me to defy him on

this point.

My stomach fluttered. The intensity in his voice sent a shiver through me. “And what does that mean for me?” I couldn’t quite figure out what he wanted with a human like me. The fuel stuff that he wanted, maybe—but why call me mate? Why claim me in front of his men? That was bigger.

His gaze darkened, but there was no menace in it—only certainty. “It means you are my queen.” Those were the words I had expected him to say, and yet they still caught me completely by surprise. Kaeirus trailed his hand up my spine, his fingers brushing my shoulder and then my throat until I tilted my head and met his eyes. Goosebumps rose in the wake of his touch.

I blinked. “Queen?” Was he crazy? Did he even know what he was saying? If he made me queen of the Ondrithar, would his people accept me? At that moment, I realized this might be why I’d nearly been thrown into a nest of Shadefin off the side of a cliff yesterday—at least some people didn’t want me here. And what would that mean for the humans on the USS Legacy?

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“Yes.” He brushed a strand of hair from my face. “You will rule beside me. But more than that, you are mine to protect, to cherish.” My heart pounded. It was too much, too fast. And yet... it didn’t feel wrong. He exhaled, his expression turning more serious. “But there is more. I need to speak to you about the Shadefin.”

I stiffened. “What about them?” Remembering the hundreds of eyes from a writhing mass of black instantly dampened my mood. I had seen the image more than once in my dreams throughout the night. I’d learned enough by now to know they were a major problem the Ondrithar faced.

He sat up slightly, pulling me against his chest. “They are multiplying faster than ever before. The nest we destroyed—it was only one of many. My people once put them into hibernation using a poison derived from a fuel known as Atara.” He met my gaze. “That’s what I showed you before, what I asked you to look for. If we had even a small amount of it, we could drive them back once again and ensure the safety of the next generations.”

I sucked in a breath. “Atara fuel?” My mind raced. So that’s what it was called. It did not ring a bell, and I was beginning to believe that I had misremembered seeing it before. I had no way of knowing if the USS Legacy carried it unless I managed to make contact. “If we do,” I said carefully, “you want to use it?”

He nodded. “Without it, my people will not survive. The Shadefin devour everything in their path. We have no way to stop them.” I swallowed hard. The weight of what he was saying settled over me. This wasn’t just about me or him—it was about survival. And not just the survival of the Ondrithar, either. If the Shadefin were not driven back, they would multiply and multiply and become a threat to everyone else

on the planet—including us humans, if we did manage to secure land for a new colony.

I nodded. “Then we find out.” It was the only way, and I was certain that helping Kaerius would make him willing to help my people. I was beginning to know him—learning what he hid behind those sharp eyes—and what I saw was good, honorable. A man who cared about the safety of his people. A man who’d respect the same desire in me.

A slow smile spread across his lips, approval glowing in his eyes. “That,” he murmured, brushing a kiss against my temple, “is why you are my mate.”

Flushed with warmth and still floating a little on cloud nine, he helped me get out of bed. Neither of us wanted to leave the safety of his chambers, but the situation with the Shadefin couldn’t wait.

We washed up, dressed, and ate from the dish of fish and vegetables that had been brought—all pickled and seasoned to delight the taste buds. Then Kaerius tucked me under his armand led me to the exit pool. “You stay at my side,” he warned, for probably the tenth time already. “We swim to the surface to use your communicator, and then we come straight back down.”

“What about land for the people still aboard the USSLegacy?” I asked. Before we left, I had brought up the subject, and he hadn’t opposed my request for them to have a settlement in Ondrithar territory. But he hadn’t agreed on any specifics yet, either. “What about the other diplomats?” I added. “Do you know what happened to them?”

He drew me into the water, and the dress I wore swirled around my legs. I’d pulled it back on after he’d run it through a cleansing cycle in the bathroom area. Very handy, that. “I only know that your friend Imogen is with Krak’zol in the Sanos Abyss. The others, I do not know.” This was not the first time he’d mentioned that particular

ruler, and I wondered if the dark male I'd seen take Imogen knew what he'd bargained for when he took her. If anyone knew how to take care of herself, it was her.

Once we were in the tunnel, Kaerius tucked me against his body, his face breaking out in an uncharacteristic smile as he began propelling us through the water. He'd carried me this way last night, too, but I had been too rattled to pay attention. Now, I had all the time in the world to marvel at the tunnels through the ship, the bioluminescent trails that blazed the way, and the colorful Ondrithar that graced the hallways.

This was when I started to see that, though they had technology and used it, some things were much more old-fashioned. We passed a doorway where a group of people sat around, weaving baskets by hand from strings of red kelp. And once outside, I realized that the harvesting of the extensive underwater gardens was also handwork, unassisted by modern tools. The spaceship that had brought their ancestors here functioned to some degree, shining with blue light in strips along its pockmarked hull, but it was very much stranded. That was not a ship that could ever fly again.

After that final observation, I no longer had time to stare at the sights. Clear of the ship-turned-palace, Kaerius held me tighter against his body, and with an almost boyish grin, he sped up. Really sped up. We shot upward, racing through the water in tight twists and curls that I knew were designed to show off his skills—to exhilarate and excite. It worked. It was a wild water rush—playful, wild—a bit like a mating dance, the way our bodies were pressed tightly together. I loved every second of it, but all too soon, playtime was over, and he aimed us for the surface.

Chapter 12

Kaerius

The journey to the surface was slow and deliberate, unlike the wild ride I'd taken a moment before I started our ascent. I had to time this carefully so her more fragile body could properly adjust to the changing water pressures. The water shimmered around us as I kept Samantha close, my hand firm on the small of her back. She moved well in the water now, better than before, but she was still human—fragile in a way I refused to forget. Bruinen and Aenon flanked us, ever watchful.

She needed to make contact with her ship to reach the humans above and see if they held the Atara fuel we so desperately required. The Shadefin multiplied too fast, spreading like sickness in the currents. If we did not find a way to stop them, my people would drown in the darkness of their infestation. And after us, the rest of Sanos would quickly be swallowed too.

As we neared the surface, a ripple in the water signaled another's approach: Firia. Her pale green hair was loose from its usual bindings, flowing like tangled kelp around her face. Her chest rose and fell too quickly, her gills flaring in distress. She had come in haste, and she did not follow her normal strict adherence to protocol when she addressed me. "Kaerius." She spoke my name on a ragged breath, eyes darting to Samantha, then back to me. "You must return at once."

I narrowed my eyes. "What is it?" To see the female Ondrithar so disheveled was not right; Firia was always neat as a pin. She and I did not often see eye to eye—she was a strict bureaucrat and rule-follower—but I did respect her. Unlike the pair of scum I'd ordered captured yesterday for what they had attempted to do to my mate.

Firia hesitated, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. "Advisor Vekesh is stirring dissent. He claims Morven is not dead." Silence rang between us. Aenon let out a sharp exhale, his tail flicking in agitation. Bruinen shifted beside me, his muscles coiling. Her words had rained down on us like a blow, stirring old wounds, old worries, and questions that I'd uttered only in the dead of night.

“Impossible,” I growled. “I saw the beast take him.” It had been two cycles since the incident. I had scoured every inch of the cliff and the trenches where it happened, searching for any sign of my brother—the male who should be king in my stead if he were still alive. I had never wanted the throne, but I had been his only companion during that fatal Shadefin attack. I escaped with my life, and Morven vanished without a trace. I knew what they whispered—that I had led him to his death, that I had murdered my own brother.

Against my chest, Samantha stroked her fingers along my scales, reminding me that she was with me—that she had accepted our mating. It settled the roiling discontent beneath my skin, but it still ached when the Ondrithar councilwoman spoke again. “He claims there is no body,” Firia pressed, her voice urgent. “And without a body—”

“He seeks to challenge my right to rule,” I finished her thought, my mind sharpening with fury. So that was the next play. I had known that there would be resistance from all sides the moment my claim on Samantha became evident. But this... this felt like a low blow.

Aenon bared his teeth—loyal to a fault, even if he was stubborn and a little short-sighted at times. “Vekesh has always been a coward. If Morven lived, he would have returned. He would not have abandoned his throne.” And that was the truth; I knew it in my heart. Morven was a good, responsible male—he would never abandon the Ondrithar when we were facing the beginning stirrings of the Shadefin threat. He had to be dead, and even though there was no body, I had insisted on a full state funeral to honor him.

Firia shook her head. “It does not matter what is true, only what people believe.” Those rumors—they had persisted, even after I’d proven myself to be a good leader, a good king. I thought I’d weeded out the rotten seeds among Morven’s council, but it seemed that I was mistaken. Vekesh was power-hungry, and he was seeing an

opportunity to make his move.

I clenched my jaw, forcing my rage down. “We do this first,” I said, nodding toward Samantha. “Then we return.” Samantha looked between us, clearly understanding that whatever Firia had said was of great importance, but she did not interrupt. Behind her eyes, I knew, her shrewd brain was spinning rapidly as she pieced together what was going on. I’d explain it all to her when I had her alone, but for now, we needed to hurry.

We broke the surface, the sky stretching vast and endless above—a pale, endless blue that looked flat and boring to my eyes, so adjusted to always seeing the water. Samantha’s fingers immediately went to the device at her wrist, wasting no time. She pressed at its interface, brows furrowing, lights blinking urgently. A moment passed. Then another. Her breath came sharp, frustrated. “It’s not responding.” She raised her eyes to my face; they were big and worried, their brown soft as velvet.

Bruinen turned his gaze to me. “We should go.” I cupped my mate’s face, stroking her chin in reassurance, then dared to press a kiss to the crown of her silky hair. She tasted of salt, like the ocean I so loved. Despite the impatient words of my head guard, she tried again, her jaw tightening, but it was useless. The device remained stubbornly silent—it was either broken or something was blocking its signal. I’d have to find one of the rare ship engineers and beg a moment of their time to look at the device. It was imperative that we fix it so we could talk to her ship.

“We go,” I said, tightening my arms around her slender waist in preparation for the dive. She didn’t resist when I pulled her back into the depths. Anxious energy pounded through my veins as we began the swim back. Firia looked even more frazzled than before, as if she’d been pulling on her long hair with impatience. The thought struck me that it could be her leading me into a trap, but I doubted that. Firia tended to get a little single-minded and obnoxious, but she was a straight arrow.

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We had barely begun our descent when the shadows moved. The first Shadefin struck from the side, a blur of dark tendrils and glistening teeth. Aenon snarled, darting forward with his blade. Bruinen spun, catching another before it could strike from above. More came, surrounding us like a tide of nightmares.

I kept Samantha behind me, my trident spinning as I drove it into the nearest creature. Their screeches vibrated through the water, a sound that sent instinctual rage through my blood. I fought, my movements swift and brutal, but we were outnumbered. Bruinen shouted something, but my focus splintered when I felt Samantha jolt against me.

A Shadefin had reached for her. I tore through it with a single strike, its body ripping apart in a cloud of dark ichor. But it was too late. Thin, glimmering streaks of spores marred her arm, faint against her pale skin. My stomach dropped. “No,” Firia breathed, horror in her voice.

Bruinen was already moving, grabbing Samantha’s wrist as if to inspect the damage. His grip was too tight, his gills flaring. “She’s infected,” he said—the words I dreaded to hear, that I wished were never spoken. They were the fear of any harvester, any family member of those who braved the far reaches to supply us with what we needed to keep power on inside the palace and the town.

Samantha looked down at herself, confusion flickering across her features. “What—” She reached out with a hand, curiosity rather than fear in her eyes, intending to touch the pretty bioluminescent marks that now marred her skin. The Shadefin attack had ended the moment she’d been infected, as if these evil, ever-breeding, and multiplying monsters had planned this. Such tactics should have been beyond them,

but the clever withdrawal despite their upper hand made my senses tingle.

“Do not touch them,” I snapped, grabbing her shoulders. My hands burned with the urge to wipe them away, to take away the filth that now marked her. But to do so would be to infect myself, and it would not help her. My heart clenched painfully in my chest as I considered our only method of treatment. How far up had the spores spread? How much did she have to lose?

She met my gaze, unafraid but uncertain. “What does this mean?” I did not answer. I would never be able to get such words across my lips. Someone else would have to take the lead for once, be the bearer of bad news. I had sworn to protect her, sworn she was mine to cherish, and I had failed her. The weight of that failure was almost as bad as the fear of losing her.

I pulled her to me, gripping her tightly as I propelled us downward. “We get back. Now.” The others didn’t argue, though Bruinen, the male brave enough to quietly explain the danger of the spores to my mate, spoke with a tone heavy with remorse. And Aenon, my hot-headed friend, who not long ago had seemed so opposed to my connection with an outsider, hung his head and fought to keep his composure as we swam.

When Samantha let out a horrified gasp as Bruinen came to the part about treatment, my heart clenched in my chest. “I’m so sorry, my brave mate. I should have protected you from this.” Panic made my tail ache as I propelled us ever faster down to the palace and its medical center. The spores had climbed to her elbow, spreading and multiplying. We did not have long. If it spread much further, it would be a death sentence.

Chapter 13

Samantha

I struggled to wrap my head around what was going on, unwilling to believe that everything had gone from marvelous to deadly so fast—again. I wanted to rail and shake my fist at the sky, yell, “This isn’t fair! I’m just a nerdy labrat, not an adventurer!” But what was the point in that? It had happened, and I had to find a way to deal with it.

First, my communicator had refused to work, and the screen had been all wobbly and wonky. It was damaged somehow, possibly by the water, the water pressure, or maybe I’d knocked it into something when I fought those guards yesterday. Regardless, without that communicator, there was no way I could get Kaerius’s people the help they needed, and I couldn’t call home to tell the others I was fine, either. It sucked.

What happened next had sucked even more. I thought all those eyes in a coiling, writhing mass of black had been terrifying, but seeing several of those fully grown things attack was worse. Kaerius had protected me, shielding me with his body, and even so, one shadowy tentacle had whipped past and briefly brushed against me. It did not hurt, but it had caused what I’d call massive panic among the Ondrithar. Even without Bruinen—Kaerius’s head guard—explaining to me what it meant, I knew it was bad.

When he told me that, with an infection like mine, the only possible way to save my life was to stop it from spreading to the rest of my body, I knew I had to come up with a better plan; I did not want to lose my arm or my life. By the time I’d decided I didn’t want to lose my arm, I had already spent most of the rush back to the palace panicking. But that whole freeze thing—I was over it, and now I was ready to start using my head.

“What did you call those things again?” I said as Kaerius arrowed through an entrance and into the building, his speed never slowing. It tickled at the back of my brain, but Bruinen’s casual mention of amputation had made me forget the word. It

was stirring some subconscious part of me, and I had a feeling it was big.

“Spores,” Kaerius growled furiously, his eyes flashing as he glared at the spreading green and blue tendrils that curled around my forearm. They had spread up to my elbow at this point, and they were advancing more quickly now, as if they’d gained critical mass. It was no wonder these things, and the Shadefin, terrified the Ondrithar. But spores... Yeah, that was the word that had already sparked an idea in my head.

I had to assume that Kaerius and his people had done all they could to fight this phenomenon, but what if they hadn’t tried this? They had fought the Shadefin centuries ago when they were new arrivals on the planet themselves. They had crashed their ship, according to Kaerius, and then used their fuel as a last resort to poison the nests of these creatures. What else had they tried since? And how much did they still know about their own technology? The ship was mostly submerged—it had lights, and some computers functioned—but what about a fully kitted-out lab? I didn’t know what I could expect until we careened around the corner and arrived at the medical center.

It was a dry room, which made sense, and we surfaced through one of those pool entrances. Water sluiced off our bodies, but it beaded strangely on my affected arm, the drops protectively settling on top of each spore on my skin.

There were two people in the room, and they straightened as soon as they saw us. One wore a white coat, and the other a dark green dress, so I instantly assumed the pair were a doctor and a nurse. Neither introduced themselves but rushed toward me the moment Kaerius carried me through the entrance. The bright, sterile glow of the medical chamber stung my eyes, and I winced as the harsh white lighting glared off the walls. My arm had begun to tingle, the green-and-blue tendrils of the infection curling higher up toward my shoulder, pulsing like something alive beneath my skin.

“Put her down,” the doctor ordered, already reaching for a set of instruments on a

nearby table. He had short black hair and a very serious expression on his face, one that bordered on grim. The nurse rushed to obey his commands, swiftly unrolling a pale-blue medical sheet onto a sleek metal bed. “We need to begin preparation immediately.”

Preparation. My breath hitched. “No,” I croaked, twisting in Kaerius’s arms. “No, wait—what exactly are you prepping me for?”

There were quick, grim looks shared all around the room—from the medical staff to the pair of guards, and even the councilwoman, Firia. Kaerius’s arms tightened around me, squeezing as if he feared to let me go, or I’d disappear.

“We must halt the infection before it spreads to your torso,” the doctor said gravely. “If it reaches your vital organs, there will be nothing we can do.” He was already holding up some kind of syringe, and when I looked past him at the tray next to the bed, I saw an array of sharp knives and something that looked suspiciously like a bone saw. Heck no.

“I know what you’re implying,” I said, my stomach dropping. “But I am not losing my arm.” I flexed my fist, and my skin burned along the trails of color the spores had left. This was a barbaric solution, but this room looked high-tech enough to offer better options. Surely they had tried everything before resorting to this?

Kaerius let out a snarl, his voice edged with fury. “You will not refuse treatment.” I heard what he wasn’t saying, the fear beneath that anger: his fear of losing me. It made my chest ache with a weight of all kinds of feelings, but this felt so wrong. I couldn’t accept it.

I met his glare, my own rising frustration matching his. “Not until I know more! What treatments have you tried?” Kaerius’s eyes flashed silver-bright, his scales pressing against his skin as if his body couldn’t contain his fury.

“Everything,” the doctor said impatiently. “Nothing has stopped the spores from taking root once they reach this stage.” I sucked in a sharp breath, my mind racing. Spores. A fungal infection. The pieces clicked into place, pulling from hazy memories of an elective I’d taken years ago in college.

“I’m not a mycologist,” I admitted, glancing at the spreading tendrils on my arm. “But I took some side courses in fungal biology, and I know that some spores can be destroyed with a hydrochloric acid solution.”

Silence filled the room. Now, the glances shared all around weren’t grim so much as uneasy, confused. The doctor shifted closer, his gray eyes narrowing. “Hydrochloric acid? What is that?” He crossed his arms over his chest, but he was leaning closer, listening. I could also see how he was keeping careful watch of the tendrils that climbed my arm. They had almost reached my shoulder, and I knew he wouldn’t want to wait much longer.

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I swallowed, trying to recall details from my chemistry courses. “It’s... a solution that can break down organic material. It disrupts the cellular integrity of spores. It’s used in some antifungal treatments on Earth. And all you need is salt and water to make it, though the process is a little dangerous and involved.” But it wouldn’t necessarily take long, depending on what setup they had.

Firia, who had been standing tensely near the door, took a step forward. “Kaerius,” she said, her voice sharp with urgency. “You need to handle the Vekesh situation now. This infection isn’t your only crisis.”

Kaerius’s entire body went rigid. “I will not leave her.” My gasp was fuel to that fire, and I raised my untainted hand to contain it. I did not want him to leave, either, but I recalled the harried, fearful expression on the Ondrithar woman only too well. She thought Kaerius’s kingdom was on the brink of collapse because of this final councilman, Vekesh.

“That is not an option,” Firia snapped. “He is stirring rebellion in your absence! You swore to protect our people. The kingdom must come first.” I hated every word of that statement, but I had to admit I admired her loyalty. If this was about the safety of the humans in stasis on the USS Legacy, I knew I wouldn’t have much choice either.

Kaerius’s jaw clenched. “She is my heart,” he growled. “Nothing else matters.” My heart clenched. This was everything I had feared. His love—his claim—was pulling him away from his duty. I couldn’t let my presence be the reason his kingdom fell apart.

I reached up, cupping his face and forcing his silver gaze to meet mine. “Go,” I

whispered. “Be a king.” His lips crushed against mine—desperate and consuming—as if he were sealing a promise between us. I kissed him back with everything I had, even as fear twisted in my gut. When he finally pulled away, I saw the battle raging in his eyes. Then, with a final glance, he turned and left. I let out a shaky breath and turned back to the doctor. “We don’t have time. I need to make that solution.”

He hesitated only a second before nodding. “Tell me what you need.” Digging through the recesses of my mind, I rattled off the basics of hydrochloric acid synthesis—what elements, what temperatures, what stabilizers. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t a guarantee. But for the first time since I had been infected, I had a sliver of hope.

As the doctor moved to prepare the solution, I felt Aenon step closer, his presence steady beside me. When I glanced up at him, I saw something new in his expression—not just duty, but respect. I wasn’t just Kaerius’s mate. I wasn’t just some helpless human to him anymore—a liability. No, I’d proven myself.

Chapter 14

Kaerius

I had never felt so torn. Every instinct screamed at me to turn back, to abandon my duties, to return to Samantha’s side. She was fighting for her life, her body warring against the Shadefin spores, and I had left her—left her in the hands of my healers, left her to battle an infection that had never been beaten. But I was a king, and my kingdom demanded my presence.

Water rushed past my gills as I propelled myself through the tunnels, my tail slicing through the current with brutal efficiency. My mind was a storm, chaos twisting within me as I fought against the primal urge to return to my mate. I could still feel

her warmth on my lips, the fierce determination in her eyes as she told me to go.

Be a king. The words echoed through me, warring against the pull of my bond—the instinct to protect her above all else. But I could not protect her if my kingdom fell.

The moment I reached the entrance to the throne room, I surged upward, breaking through the surface in a violent cascade of water. The chamber was packed with my people—a seething mass of bodies—their voices a dull roar against the chamber walls. The crowd filled the space from the edges of the great war table to the raised platforms where my advisors normally stood. But today, no counsel was being held. Today, they gathered in anger. And at its center stood Kevesh.

I did not shift as I rose onto the dry floor, water streaming from my scaled skin. My fins remained fully extended, the deep blue of my Ondrithar lineage shining under the bioluminescent glow of the chamber. I wanted them to see me like this. I needed them to remember who I was—their king.

Kevesh's voice rang out as he turned to face me. "There he is!" he roared, his dark eyes gleaming with triumph. "Our mighty king who abandoned us for his human whore." The crowd snarled in agreement, their frenzied energy swelling.

"She is dying." My voice cut through the noise, sharp as a trident's edge. The room fell silent, the echo of my words hanging in the air. I glided forward slowly, letting my scales scrape against the metal floor with deliberate purpose. "That outsider you so despise is fighting for her life as we speak. She's battling the Shadefin spores that our healers have never been able to stop. And she does it with more bravery than most of you in this room."

A murmur rippled through the gathered Ondrithar, uncertain and uneasy. Good. Let them think. Let them see the truth. "She is a scientist," I continued, my voice steady, cutting through the murmur. "And she will find the answers we need to destroy the

Shadefin once and for all.”

Kevesh scoffed. “And you expect us to trust an outsider?” He spread his arms, turning to the crowd as if they were his to command. “A human? A weak, land-dwelling creature who does not belong in our waters?” The crowd ate it up greedily, nodding their heads. I wanted to curse them for it, but I knew fear had them in its thrall.

“Trust?” I snarled. “You speak of trust?” I lifted a hand, and Firia stepped forward, her expression cold and merciless. I knew there was a reason Morven had always preferred her counsel over any other, and she was proving to be as loyal to me—and to the kingdom—as she had been to its previous king.

“Kevesh is the traitor. He marked the human for death before the King ever claimed her,” she announced, her voice unwavering. “Kevesh sought to eliminate her. He sent his men to drag her into the abyss, to be swallowed by the darkness. Would you follow a male who would kill the only hope we have of ending the Shadefin threat?”

A stunned silence fell over the chamber. The rage that had once fueled the crowd wavered, now laced with uncertainty. “You would believe in a human over your own kin?” Kevesh spat, but there was an edge of panic in his voice. He had not anticipated Firia’s testimony about his scheming nature. I should have known that Tapin and Melar were too short-sighted to act independently.

“I would believe the truth.” I turned to my warriors. “Bruinen, take him.” Bruinen did not hesitate. He stepped forward, his broad frame cutting through the tension like a blade, and seized Kevesh by the arm. The traitor snarled, struggling, but it was pointless. He had lost. The crowd, their fury now turned to quiet contemplation, slowly began to disperse.

I did not stay to watch Kevesh be dragged away. I turned, dove into the water and

raced back to Samantha.

Epilogue

Kaerius

The soft hum of the council chamber's holo-table filled the room, its blue light casting shifting shadows over the curved walls. My hand rested lightly on the edge as I watched the glowing projection of the Ondrithar territory: the shape of the palace ship, the edge of the seashelf, our pastures, and our town. Across from me, Samantha was adjusting the controls, her fingers swift and certain as she fine-tuned the frequency.

Two weeks.

It had been two weeks since she arrived on Sanos, since she stormed into my life like an unexpected tide and refused to be swept away. Two weeks since I nearly lost her to the Shadefin spores, only to watch her survive—no, conquer—what had once been an assured death sentence.

The hydrochloric acid solution had worked. What had seemed a desperate gamble had turned into our greatest weapon, giving us control over the infestation that had plagued us for generations. We had burned through entire nests with it, driving the Shadefin back into the Abyss where they belonged.

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It was not a permanent solution. It did not kill anything but the spore stage of the Shadefin, but we could now heal our warriors and prevent the nasty beasts from breeding. It was a start—a very good start—that had brought peace, stability, and hope.

And now there was another step forward. I let my gaze drift to the holo-map of Sanos, where a new marker had been placed—a small island within my territory, one that would soon become home to the humans of the USSLegacy. That is, if we could reach them and if they were willing to accept the terms Samantha and I had agreed upon.

“You sure this will work?” Samantha asked, glancing up at me with that skeptical expression I had come to love. She shifted uneasily on her feet, and I flicked my eyes from her pretty face down her curvy body, heat simmering through my veins.

“I had my engineers repair your communicator,” I said, watching as she tapped a final command into the console. “If your ship is within range, it should reach them.” My engineers were no longer learned enough to repair the entire Ondrithar ship or to keep all its intricate systems running, but they knew how to repair water-damaged circuits, and that had done the trick.

She exhaled slowly, then hit the transmit button. A small light blinked green. We waited. For the first time in days, uncertainty settled in my chest. The thought of her people taking her back, of her stepping onto that ship and leaving this world—leaving me—sent a sharp, unwelcome pain through me.

The static on the comm remained unbroken, but she did not look concerned. Instead,

she turned to me, her lips curving into a soft smile. “It’s strange,” she mused, “how different everything feels now.”

I tilted my head. “Explain.”

She leaned against the table, her fingers tracing absent patterns along its edge. “When I first got here, all I could think about was getting back to my people, making sure we had a place to survive.” Her eyes met mine, warm and steady. “But now... this is my place. I don’t need a lab aboard a ship, not when there’s so much more I can do here.”

Warmth spread through me, but I kept my expression neutral. “So you would stay?” I couldn’t allow myself to hope that she was saying she’d remain—the possibility of losing her so soon after she’d nearly died twice was too much. I would not allow it, but I had to ask all the same.

She reached across the table, her fingers brushing mine. “Kaerius, Iamstaying.” Her smile was beautiful, radiant, and her exotic brown eyes glimmered with happiness.

Relief crashed over me like a wave, and I did not fight the instinct that told me to move—to close the space between us. My hand captured hers, pulling her toward me. “Good,” I murmured, my voice low. “Because I would not let you go.”

She arched a brow. “Possessive, much?”

“Completely.”

Her laughter was bright and effortless, and I found myself aching to hear it again and again. She reached up, resting her palm against my chest, just over my heart. “I love you, Kaerius.”

The words settled into me—deep and unshakable—like they had always belonged there. I caught her chin, tilting her face up to mine. “And I you, Samantha.” My lips

brushed against hers—a soft vow against her skin. “My life is better this way.”

The static on the comm crackled, and a voice cut through the silence.
“USS Legacy receiving. Samantha, is that you?”

THE END