



# Taken By the Leviathan King

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

**Description:** I traded my uniform for scales, my mission for a mate. Turns out, saving humanity might mean becoming a monster's queen

**Imogen**

One moment, I was securing the perimeter, the fate of the USS Legacy heavy on my shoulders, and the next, powerful claws dragged me beneath the turbulent, alien waves of Sanos. I'm face-to-face with Krak'zol, the terrifying, undeniably magnetic Leviathan King. He claims I'm his fated mate. His to protect. His to...change. His venom is transforming me, awakening a primal connection I can't deny, even as I fight him every step of the way. He is everything I should resist: a possessive alien warlord, a monster in the depths. But his touch? It ignites a fire I never knew existed. Now, to save both worlds, I must embrace a bond I never wanted, fight at the side of the king who kidnapped me, and become something...more.

**Krak'zol**

I never desired a mate—until her. That human fire, that defiant spirit...it calls to the beast within me. Imogen is mine. My venom flows through her, binding her to me, to the Abyss, whether she likes it or not.

But Rynor, my own brother, lusts for my throne and the ancient power it holds. He will stop at nothing. To protect my kingdom, to save this fierce, intoxicating woman who is now my queen, I must fight. And if she tries to resist our bond? She'll learn that a Leviathan King always claims what is his. Let her struggle. The fire only burns hotter.

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 a possessive alien king, a fated mates bond, forced proximity, and a heroine who will fight for her freedom...even as she surrenders to the monster who claims her.

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# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

## Chapter one

### IMOGEN

The paradise before us feels wrong—too perfect, too peaceful. I survey the pristine beach as we exit the landing capsule, my hand never far from my concealed weapon. Years of military training have taught me that the prettiest packages often hide the deadliest surprises. My heart pounds in rhythm with my racing thoughts; the weight of responsibility settles familiar and heavy on my shoulders. Seven women carrying humanity's hopes. No pressure.

The Quxon tower over us, their blue skin gleaming in the sunlight. Seven feet tall at minimum, built like warriors despite their diplomatic pretenses. I count six visible, but my instincts scream there are others watching from hidden positions.

Captain Harris enters their flimsy excuse for a diplomatic tent, and I resist the urge to follow. Some diplomatic summit this is—a few sheets of weatherproof fabric between us and whatever's lurking in those waters. At least it's not raining. Yet.

I scan the beach, tracking my team's movements with the same intensity I use to check my weapon—methodical, precise, leaving no blind spots. Can't afford mistakes. Not here, not with Earth's future riding on these treaties. My fingers twitch toward my holster—old habits from too many missions gone sideways. Like that last one... No. Lock it down, Vance. Different planet, different mission, same damn responsibility. Keep the diplomatic team alive, whatever it takes. At least this time the threat's right in front of us, not hiding behind handshakes and false promises. The beach stretches out like a tactical nightmare—too much open ground, too many

places for hostiles to—dammit, they’re spreading out too far. Again.

A tug at my wrist pulls me from my tactical assessment. It’s Samantha, practically vibrating with scientific enthusiasm despite the potential dangers surrounding us. Her wide, trusting eyes remind me of everything I’m fighting for—and everything that could go wrong if I let my guard down for even a second.

“Hey, looks like things haven’t started yet, so I’m going to explore. Okay?” she says, already eyeing the jungle’s edge.

I arch an eyebrow, keeping my tone dry but firm. “Not happening.” When her face falls, I soften—marginally. “At least not alone. We can do recon together.” I gesture toward the treeline with my chin, my braid swinging with the movement. “Place could be crawling with hostiles, and your credentials won’t mean much if you’re dead.”

“I’ll be careful, Imogen! But do you see this?” Samantha practically vibrates with excitement, cradling the alien seashell in her gloved hands like it’s a newborn star. “This structure! And the cellular composition—it’s reacting to touch!” Her brown eyes gleam with unfiltered wonder as she turns it toward the light, oblivious to the way my entire body tenses.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Samantha, for the love of all things breathing, put it down before it reacts to touch by eating you.”

We’ve been thrown together since stasis—her with her impressive botany credentials, me with my trigger finger and trust issues. And out here, in the wild unknown of Sanos, those academic distinctions don’t mean shit if you can’t stay alive long enough to use them. I exhale sharply, forcing patience into my tone.

“Look,” I say, voice pitched low enough that only she can hear, “I get it. You see

undiscovered species, I see potential threats. But we can work with that.” I check my sidearm, more out of habit than immediate need, before meeting her gaze. “You focus on your botanical breakthroughs, I’ll focus on keeping us breathing. Deal?”

Her expression softens, the spark of adventure still dancing in her eyes. She nods. “Okay, you’re right. Let’s see what we can find.”

We share a look, both glancing at the massive aliens and that damn tent that might as well be tissue paper for all the protection it offers. I take point as we move into the jungle, keeping Samantha behind me while trying to appear casual. Let them think we’re just curious scientists if they’re watching.

While she stops every few feet to collect samples, I keep my eyes peeled, scanning the dense foliage for any movement. The jungle feels alive in a way that sets my nerves on edge—too many shadows, too many places for ambush. Each rustle of leaves sends a jolt through me, reminding me of our precarious position.

I adjust my stance, trying to balance my protective instincts with the mission at hand. Glancing back toward the landing capsule, I see it looming behind a curtain of vines, its metallic surface a stark contrast to the vibrant greens and browns surrounding us. The other women are still on the beach, but the view is blocked from my angle. I take a calculated step forward, ensuring I can maintain a line of sight to them.

I take a moment to appreciate the flora, mentally cataloging the alien plants as I crouch beside a cluster of bioluminescent flowers. They pulse softly, casting an ethereal glow that makes me wonder what secrets they hold. I reach out to touch one, its petals warm and velvety against my fingertips, and my mind flits to the potential discoveries Samantha could make with these specimens.

But I can’t let myself get lost in the wonder. I straighten, forcing my focus back to our surroundings. I take a slow breath, the salty tang of the ocean mingling with the

damp earth, and let my senses sharpen. The air feels charged, hinting at an approaching storm, and I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched.

"Get your head in the game, Lieutenant," I mutter, my standard self-rebuke when that familiar prickle of unease crawls up my spine. Each deliberate step through the underbrush is muscle memory—the kind drilled into you through years of combat training. The twigs snapping under my boots might as well be proximity sensors, each crack a data point mapping potential threats.

Mom would've loved this—charging through alien vegetation on a do-or-die mission. Her voice echoes in my head, clear as the day she taught me to track: "The difference between a soldier and a survivor, baby girl, is knowing when to trust that gut feeling." Funny how advice outlives the adviser. I buried her in Earth's toxic soil, another casualty of humanity's stellar screw-up. Now here I am, light-years from her grave, trying to make sure her death wasn't just another entry in humanity's long list of failures.

The air shifts—a displacement that triggers every combat instinct I've got. Something's watching, waiting. And I've been in enough ambushes to know what comes next.

The explosion still catches me off-guard—because of course it does. That's the thing about combat; you can know it's coming and still get rattled by the bang. My body moves before my brain catches up, muscle memory dropping me into cover as I draw my weapon. The beach erupts in phaser fire, each shot painting the air with deadly intent.

"Perimeter breach imminent," I snap, shifting to place myself between Samantha and the dense jungle wall. "When a jungle goes silent, it means something's hunting. And we're not the apex predator here."

Behind me, I hear Samantha's quick intake of breath, followed by the subtle click of her sample case closing. Good. At least the scientist has learned enough survival instincts to recognize danger when it presents itself. I scan the treeline, my finger steady on the trigger as I track any hint of movement. The air is thick with tension and the scent of salt and smoke, a reminder that this place holds both beauty and betrayal.

"Stay close," I murmur to Samantha, careful to keep my voice low. "If I say run, you run. No samples, no data, just move." I push aside the gnawing worry that we're already too late for an extraction plan. Before I can guide us toward the fallback position, they appear—two massive aliens, one midnight black, the other azure with red crown-like protrusions. Their sudden emergence suggests they were waiting, watching. This was planned.

My grip tightens on my weapon as I widen my stance, creating a more effective barrier between the threats and my charge. Samantha's safety is my priority, even if her scientific curiosity is what landed us in this mess.

A flash of azure scales catches my eye—too late. The creature moves like liquid mercury, snatching Samantha before I can squeeze the trigger. Her scream pierces the air as she's swept away into the shadows of the dense jungle.

"Sam!" I launch after them, my boots pounding against the damp earth. Three steps in, something massive drops from above. The shadowy one moves faster than anything that size should be able to. One moment I'm taking aim, the next I'm airborne, my weapon knocked away. His grip is iron, and despite all my training, I can't break free. Panic surges through me, but I force it down—I can't let fear dictate my actions.

"Let me go, you oversized piece of seafood!" I slam my elbow backward, aiming for what I hope is a vulnerable spot, but my strike meets solid muscle. The contact sends

tingles of awareness through my arm—a sensation I absolutely refuse to analyze. “I swear to God, if you hurt my team—”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

His only response is a rumbling sound that vibrates through his chest and into mine where he holds me pinned against him. The grip around my waist tightens, and my feet leave the ground. Despite my training, despite everything I know about staying calm in crisis situations, my heart thunders against my ribs. Every point of contact between us burns, and I can't tell if it's from anger or something far more dangerous.

Then I catch a glimpse of the churning ocean below, and real fear claws its way up my throat. I can't swim—never learned, never needed to in our dying world of toxic seas. The thought triggers a fresh wave of struggle, my body moving on pure instinct against his iron hold.

“Your fear is palpable, little warrior,” he growls, his breath hot against my ear, voice deep enough to shake something loose inside me. “But it will not save you.” The way he says it—like a promise rather than a threat—sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with fear.

I meet his gaze, green eyes locking onto his molten silver. “And what makes you think I'm afraid?” I retort, forcing my voice to stay steady despite the tremor in my core.

The alien king smirks. “It's not just fear I sense radiating from you, little warrior. You can either drown here or trust me. Your friend is safe—at least for now.” His tone is low, gravelly, but there's an undercurrent of reassurance that catches me off guard.

The shadows in his eyes dance with something that sets my tactical instincts screaming. “Breathe? That's your grand solution? Because last I checked, humans



aren't exactly equipped for underwater adventures without—”

“I must transfer specialized enzymes through membrane contact,” he interrupts, his massive frame blocking out what little light remains. “A simple procedure.”

My eyes narrow. “Membrane contact? Why do I feel like you're leaving out some crucial details here— like I'm going to wake up with gills or start craving raw fish?”

A blast hits so close the ground trembles beneath us. The alien king's expression shifts to one of predatory intent that sends heat rushing through me despite my better judgment. Damn him and his stupidly attractive alien face.

“Trust or drown,” he growls. “Choose.”

Another explosion rocks the cavern. Well, hell. I give him a sharp nod, expecting... I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't the searing kiss that follows.

His mouth crashes into mine, hot and demanding, sending electricity straight down my spine and a shiver down below. Before I can process the fact that I'm kissing an alien king—and worse, enjoying it—he yanks me into the depths. The shock of the cold water is immediate but then replaced by something alien, something... right. A tingling starts in my toes and moves upward, prickling across my skin like static.

Before I can process the fact that I'm kissing an alien king—and worse, enjoying it—he yanks me into the depths.

My last coherent thought as the water closes over our heads is that I have no clue how this is going to work, but I'll be damned if I let him think he has all the control.

Chapter two

## KRAK'ZOL

She fights the water like it's an enemy to be conquered, all wild grace and desperate strength. My little warrior, still battling even as I guide her deeper into my domain. Her pulse thunders against my palm where I cradle her neck, the rhythm of it calling to something primal in my blood. Mine. The word echoes with each beat of my hearts.

The enzyme transfer burns through her system as she clings to me, her fingers digging into my arms with desperate strength. Her heart hammers against my chest—a rapid, human rhythm that betrays her terror despite her attempts to hide it. Most would have succumbed to blind panic by now, lost to the primal fear of drowning, but she fights it. Even as she trembles, she keeps her movements controlled, measured—a warrior's discipline warring with basic survival instinct.

I feel the exact moment the change begins to take hold—her grip loosens slightly, her body's desperate rigidity giving way to surprise as she takes her first underwater breath. The alarm doesn't leave her eyes, but something else joins it—a flash of wonder, quickly masked by that steel defiance from the shore. Even facing her fear, she refuses to break.

The press of her small body against my chest ignites something primal within me, and I tighten my grip possessively, letting her feel exactly how easily I could overpower her. Her nails bite deliciously into my scaled shoulders, the sweet sting of her defiance making my blood surge hot. A growl of pleasure rumbles through me at her fierce response—even now, fighting the inevitable, she burns like wildfire in my arms. Such a savage little warrior, marking me as if she could claim me before I claim her.

“Breathe,” I command through our telepathic connection, the ability another gift of the enzymes. “Your body knows how, even if your mind resists.”

Her response comes sharp and clear, that fighting spirit undiminished by our descent. “Easy for you to say, scale-face. Some of us weren’t born with gills.”

A rumble of amusement vibrates through my chest. Even facing transformation and the unknown depths, she maintains her spark. The urge to claim her fully, to mark her as mine, grows stronger with each passing moment. But no—she must come to me willingly. The chase makes the conquest sweeter.

The phosphorescent crystals embedded in the cavern walls cast an ethereal blue glow across my private sanctuary, illuminating pools of crystalline water and smooth stone formations that have taken millennia to form. As I set her on her feet in this hidden chamber, she immediately retreats, those fierce green eyes scanning every shadow and exit point with tactical precision. Her warrior’s instincts make my blood sing.

“Welcome to my personal domain within the Abyss,” I rumble, watching how the bioluminescent light plays across her sun-kissed skin. She’s beautiful in her defiance, chest heaving slightly from our underwater journey, dark hair clinging to her neck in wet tendrils. “Few surface-dwellers have seen these chambers.”

She backs away until she hits one of the spiraling crystal columns, maintaining that calculated distance that makes me want to close it. Her eyes narrow, assessing me with the sharp gaze of a warrior. “Before we continue this little tour, how about we start with names? I’m Lieutenant Imogen Vance.”

“Imoooooogeeen,” I repeat, savoring the way her name feels on my tongue. “Imoo-geen.” My pronunciation draws a fleeting look of surprise across her face, quickly masked by her usual defiance.

She blinks, a hint of amusement breaking through her wary expression. “Close enough, I suppose. And you are?”

“I am Krak’zol, King of the Leviathan,” I reply, allowing a hint of pride to color my tone. “Ruler of the Abyss and...” I pause, meeting her gaze intently, “your mate.”

Her eyebrows shoot up at that last part, but she doesn’t comment on it. Instead, she crosses her arms, all business once more. “Fascinating introduction, Your Highness. Now, where’s Samantha?”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

I gesture to the intricate network of tunnels branching off from the main chamber. “Your scientist is safe, being tended to by my most trusted guards in the eastern wing.” When she moves to charge in that direction, I block her path, enjoying how she bristles at my proximity. “She’s unharmed, but you’ll see her when I’m satisfied you understand your position here.”

“My position?” She lets out a sharp laugh that echoes off the cave walls. “Let me guess – prisoner? Hostage? Unwilling guest?”

I lean closer, inhaling her scent – a mixture of determination and that intoxicating spark of attraction she’s trying desperately to hide. “Mine,” I growl softly. “You’re mine.”

The way her pulse jumps at my words is far more satisfying than her scowl of denial.

“What the hell did you do to me?” she demands, hands running over her throat where the newly formed gills flutter with each breath. “And where’s Samantha?”

“Your friend is safe.” I move closer, enjoying how she tenses but refuses to retreat. “As for what I did—I saved your life. The enzyme transfer allows you to survive in my world.” My world that beats only for her now, I realize with a jolt that shakes even me. It hums with the same frantic, wild energy I’m only now recognizing in her.

She tilts her head back, letting the water flow over her face. It used to be a source of panic, a reminder of her helplessness. Now, it tickles along her skin, a playful current that dances around her newly formed gills. It felt...right. Disturbingly so.

My gaze trails over the subtle changes already manifesting—the faint shimmer of scales along her shoulders, the slight webbing between her fingers. “You’re becoming something more.”

She barks out a laugh, but there’s an edge of uncertainty to it. “Something more? I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t ask for any of this.” Her hand strays to where her weapon should be, finding empty air instead. “Take me back. Now.”

“No.” The word comes out as a growl, my possessive instincts flaring. “You are mine now, little warrior. The sooner you accept that, the easier this will be.”

“Yours?” Her voice drops dangerously low. “Listen carefully, your highness, because I’m only going to say this once. I don’t belong to anyone.”

I close the distance between us in two strides, backing her against the crystal-studded wall. She doesn’t flinch, even when I cage her with my arms. “Your heart says otherwise,” I murmur, inhaling her intoxicating scent—salt air and defiance, with an undertone of something sweeter that makes my fangs ache. “I can hear it racing. Is it fear that makes it beat so fast? Or something else?”

A flush creeps up her neck, but her glare remains steady. “Maybe it’s plotting your imminent demise.”

I laugh, the sound echoing off the cavern walls. “You are magnificent.” And the terror warring with the fierce spirit blazing behind her eyes makes my heart ache. That she is fighting is more enticing than her surrender. She hates how her pulse quickened when I touch her, how her skin prickles with awareness. It is a betrayal of everything she stands for, a weakness she cannot afford to let me see. It’s a secret I will relish unveiling.

Unable to resist, I trace one claw along her jaw, careful not to break skin. “But you

still don't understand what you are to me. What we are to each other."

"Then enlighten me," she challenges, though her breath catches when my claw grazes a sensitive spot beneath her ear. "Why me? Why now?"

I consider my words carefully, knowing they could either draw her closer or push her away. "The Leviathan Kings of the Abyss have ruled these depths since before your kind learned to walk upright. We are warriors, conquerors, death given form in the deep." My voice drops lower, intimate. "But even we have our matches. Our perfect companions. The ones who can stand beside us, rule with us, challenge us."

"And you think that's me?" Her skepticism is clear, but there's curiosity there too. "Because I kicked up a fuss about being kidnapped?"

"Because you face threats without flinching," I correct her, letting my tail curl possessively around her ankle. "Because your spirit burns fierce and bright, like the deepest flames of our volcanic vents. Because from the moment I saw you, everything in me recognized its match."

Her expression shifts, wariness warring with something deeper. "That's... poetic for someone who just dragged me underwater against my will."

"Would you have come willingly?" I counter, watching the play of emotions across her face. When she remains silent, I continue, "The other ocean kings plot against each other even now. Your presence here serves multiple purposes—your protection among them. We Leviathans rarely surface for these...political gatherings. The timing of your arrival is...convenient for some."

This catches her attention. "Protection? From what?"

"From those who would use you as a pawn in their games." My jaw tightens at the

thought. “The Quxon are not the allies they pretend to be. Their hospitality masks darker intentions.”

She processes this, her tactical mind working behind those fierce eyes. “The attack on the beach—that wasn’t random, was it?”

“Doubtful.” My hand slides to her waist as she sways, her body still adjusting to the pressure changes. When she tenses at my touch, I resist the urge to pull her closer. “They meant to take you themselves. I merely acted first.”

“How chivalrous,” she mutters, but there’s less bite in her tone. “And Samantha? What do they want with her?”

“Your friend is with the Kaerius, Ruler of the Ondrithar. Leviathans have...an understanding with his people. They guard the sacred waters, and we ensure the depths remain undisturbed.” I trace the ever-so-slight emerging pattern of scales along her collarbone, fascinated by how her body accepts my claim. My finger pauses as I consider the politics at play. “Though I suspect his interest in her goes beyond mere diplomacy. He seeks a mate of his own.”

Imoogeen shivers under my touch but doesn’t pull away. “And what do you want with me? Besides this...mate business.”

The question draws a possessive rumble from my chest. “Everything,” I admit, voice rough with honesty. “Your strength, your fire, your trust. I would have you rule beside me, help me unite the warring factions of my people.” My claws flex against her hip. “But more than that, I would have you choose me, as I have chosen you.”

She studies me with those fierce green eyes that first caught my attention, her gaze as sharp as any predator’s. “And if I don’t? Choose you, I mean.”



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

The mere suggestion makes my tail lash beneath the water, but I force my voice to remain steady. “Then you remain under my protection until the conflict resolves.” The words scrape against my throat like coral, every instinct rebelling against the thought of letting her go. “I am many things, little warrior, but I am not a monster who would force an unwilling mate.”

Something shifts in her scent—a softening of that delicious defiance. “No, just one who kidnaps them and changes their biology without permission.”

I rumble low in my chest, pleased by her continued fire even as she sways slightly with exhaustion. “To save your life,” I remind her, fighting the urge to trace the new, silvery patterns emerging along her throat. “The changes are...permanent, but they will not harm you. They allow you to survive here, to become what you were meant to be.”

Her hand rises to her throat, fingers brushing the delicate gills. The simple gesture makes my claws itch to touch her there, to feel her pulse beneath my hands. “Like breathing underwater?”

“Among other things.” Unable to resist any longer, I capture her small hand—so fragile, yet capable of such strength—and press it against my chest where my hearts thunder their claiming rhythm. “You will be stronger, faster, more resilient. Your senses will sharpen.” I lean closer, inhaling her changing scent. “And you will feel the bond between us, though you fight it now.”

She doesn’t immediately pull away, and my inner beast purrs with satisfaction. But her next words remind me of her stubborn nature. “I need to see Samantha. Make

sure she's really safe."

"Of course." Though every instinct screams to keep her close, I force myself to step back. The space between us feels like physical pain, a chasm carved out of my very essence. I found myself adopting her stance when she crossed her arms, my own massive arms mimicking her defiant posture without conscious thought. She must be mine, and soon.

"But first, you should rest. The transformation takes its toll, and there are things you must learn about surviving in the Abyss."

A yawn breaks through her warrior's facade, and I resist the urge to gather her against me. "Fine. But tomorrow you start explaining exactly what's happening to my friends."

"Agreed." I guide her toward my private chambers, where living coral bathes the space in a soft, pulsing glow. The sight of her in my domain sends a primal thrill through my blood. "Sleep, little warrior. Dream of the depths that are now your domain."

She arches an eyebrow, exhaustion unable to dim her spirit. "You always this dramatic?"

"Only for you," I purr, savoring the way her heart rate spikes at my words. "Rest. I will keep watch." For at this moment, there is no monster, no king, only a warrior desperate to keep safe that which has become more important than anything in all the oceans of the Abyss. Her beauty shines upon me, and for the first time in millennia, I am not sure that I am worthy of her. I will spend eternity in her service if that's what it takes.

As she settles onto the bed of sea-silk and living moss, her eyes already growing

heavy, I position myself between her and the entrance. My little warrior may not yet accept her place as my queen, but she will. I have waited centuries for her—I can be patient a while longer.

I watch her breathing even out, memorizing the way the bioluminescence plays across her features. After all, the hunt is half the pleasure, and she is proving to be the most intriguing prey I've ever pursued. Soon enough, she'll realize she's not just surviving in my world—she's meant to rule it.

### Chapter three

#### IMOGEN

I wake with a start, my body instinctively tensing for combat before I even open my eyes. The air feels...wrong—too thick, too heavy. My lungs strain against it for a moment before muscle memory kicks in, and I feel the gentle flutter of gills at my neck. Right. Underwater. Kidnapped. Alien king with boundary issues. It all comes rushing back, and I have to fight the urge to panic.

Slowly, I force my eyes open, blinking against the soft, pulsing glow that bathes the chamber. Living coral, I realize, its bioluminescence casting everything in an ethereal blue light. It's beautiful in a way that makes my chest ache—a reminder of how alien this world truly is, how alien I'm becoming.

I sit up cautiously, taking stock of my surroundings. The bed beneath me is softer than anything I've ever felt, a mix of what feels like impossibly fine silk and some kind of living moss. It molds to my body, supportive yet yielding, and I have to resist the urge to sink back into its embrace. Now is not the time for comfort.

My gaze sweeps the room, cataloging potential weapons and escape routes with the efficiency drilled into me through years of training. The chamber is vast, its walls

adorned with intricate carvings that seem to move in the shifting light. Elaborate tapestries of woven seaweed and precious stones depict scenes of epic battles and ocean depths I can barely comprehend. It's a king's chamber, without question, which only heightens my unease. What the hell am I doing here?

As if in answer, my body chooses that moment to remind me of its new modifications. A wave of fury washes over me as I flex my hands, noting the slight webbing between my fingers. My skin shimmers faintly in the coral's glow, a pattern of barely-there scales catching the light. I run a hand along my neck, feeling the delicate flutter of gills. Gills. He gave me gills. Rage bubbles up inside me, hot and fierce. How dare he? How dare Krak'zol alter my body without my consent?

I clench my fists, nails biting into my palms. This isn't me. It's a theft. He stole my body, my choices, my humanity. But as I push the water around me with growing ease, I can't help but wonder how long I can stay mad at him for saving me. I can't let myself be distracted by any perceived benefits. I have a mission, a team to protect. Samantha is still out there, probably terrified and possibly undergoing similar changes against her will. I need to focus on getting us out of here.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand, channeling my anger into determination. The world tilts for a moment, my body still adjusting to the pressure changes, but I forcemyself to stay upright. I take a tentative step, then another, grimly noting how easily I move through the water. It's like the currents themselves bend to accommodate me, guiding rather than hindering my movements—another reminder of how fundamentally I've been changed without my permission.

I make my way to what looks like an exit, a grand archway carved with swirling patterns that seem to move in the corner of my eye. Just as I reach for it, a low growl reverberates through the chamber, sending a shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with fear.

“And where do you think you’re going, little warrior?”

Krak’zol’s voice washes over me like a physical caress, and I hate how my body responds to it. I whirl around, fury burning through my veins.

“Away from you,” I snarl, fists clenched at my sides. “Or did you think I’d just roll over and accept being kidnapped and turning me into some kind of fish-human hybrid without my consent?”

He stands in the center of the chamber, every inch the predator king. His massive frame blocks out the coral’s glow, casting him in shadow save for the gleam of those molten silver eyes. They track my every movement with an intensity that makes my skin prickle with awareness.

“I saved your life,” he rumbles, a hint of steel entering his tone.

“By taking away my choice!” I shoot back, advancing on him despite the way my instincts scream at the recklessness of challenging something so much larger and deadlier than myself. “You had no right—”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

“To ensure your survival?” he cuts in, closing the distance between us in two swift strides. “To protect you from those who would use you as a pawn in their games?”

I glare up at him, refusing to back down even as his proximity sends my pulse racing. “And how are you any different? You took me, changed me, all to suit your own agenda.”

Something flashes in his eyes—regret, maybe, or frustration. “You’re right,” he says, the admission catching me off guard. “I acted hastily, driven by instinct and the need to keep you safe. For that, I apologize.”

The sincerity in his voice threatens to disarm me, but I refuse to let go of my anger entirely. “An apology doesn’t change what you did.”

“No,” he agrees, a flicker of something unreadable in his silver eyes. “It doesn’t. But perhaps understanding why I did it—why I had to change you—will.” He pauses, his gaze hardening. “I sensed treachery the moment your shuttle descended. Not all on Sanos desire a treaty with humankind, yet their petty squabbles are inconsequential. You are my concern, Imoogeen. Your safety is paramount.” His tail lashes behind him, a clear sign of agitation that my tactical mind immediately files away. “Regardless, the Abyss is not safe for you to wander alone, now. My brother Rynor grows bold in his ambitions.”

That catches my attention, pushing aside some of my fury. “Your brother? What does he have to do with any of this?”

Krak’zol’s expression darkens, a storm gathering in those silver depths. “Rynor has

long coveted my throne. With the surface kings gathered and tensions high, he sees an opportunity to strike.” His massive hand reaches out, claws ghosting along my arm in a touch so gentle it makes me shiver. “And you, my fierce little warrior, have now become a valuable piece in his game.”

I step back, needing distance to think clearly. “Because I’m human? Or because you’ve decided I’m your...what did you call it? Mate?”

“Both,” he says again, and this time there’s no amusement in his tone. “Rynor knows that claiming you would weaken my position. The Leviathan Kings have not taken a surface mate in millennia. To do so now, with war brewing...” He trails off, his gaze intense. “It complicates things.”

“Then let me go,” I argue, even as a part of me rebels against the idea. “If I’m causing problems—”

“No.” The word comes out as a growl that vibrates through my very bones. “You are mine now, Imoogeen.” His tail coils tighter around my leg. “And you will learn that what I claim, I keep.”

I bristle at his possessiveness, even as something deep inside me purrs at his declaration. “I’m not a possession to be claimed, Krak’zol. I have a mission, a team to protect. Samantha is still out there—”

“I’ve told you already, your scientist is safe with Kaerius,” he interrupts, moving closer again. This time I hold my ground, refusing to be intimidated. “But she is not your concern right now. Your safety is.”

“My safety?” I laugh, the sound sharp and bitter. “You kidnapped me, changed my biology without consent, and now you’re telling me it’s for my own good? Forgive me if I’m not feeling particularly grateful.”

Something flashes in his eyes—regret? Guilt?—before it's swallowed by that predatory intensity. "I saved your life," he reminds me, voice low and rough. "But I understand your anger. Come. Let me show you why all of this was necessary."

Before I can protest, he takes my hand, his massive palm swallowing mine whole. Calluses and ridges abrade my skin, and I hate how good it feels. He doesn't just hold my hand; he possesses it. And a thrill races through my body at the thought of being possessed. The contact sends a spark of awareness through me, and I have to fight the urge to lean into his touch. He leads me through the archway and into a vast corridor that seems to stretch endlessly in both directions.

As we move through the water, I can't help but marvel at the ease of it. My body cuts through the currents like I was born to it, each movement fluid and graceful. It's intoxicating, this newfound freedom, and I find myself relaxing despite my best efforts to stay on guard.

Krak'zol guides me through a maze of tunnels, each one more breathtaking than the last. His hand never leaves my back, his touch both guiding and claiming. The rough texture of his scales against my bare skin is a constant, dizzying reminder: I'm walking through his kingdom, and he is showing it off with me.

We pass chambers filled with bioluminescent creatures that paint the water in swirls of color, their light pulsing in hypnotic patterns. In one vast cavern, a school of fish with translucent bodies and glowing organs swims in perfect unison, creating a living tapestry of light and shadow.

"This is...incredible," I breathe, unable to hide my awe. "I've never seen anything like it."

Krak'zol's grip on my hand tightens slightly, and when I look up at him, his expression is softer than I've ever seen it. "This is but a fraction of the wonders the



Abyss holds,” he says, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine. “I would show you all of it, if you’d let me.”

The offer hangs between us, heavy with implication. For a moment, I’m tempted. The scientist in me yearns to explore this alien world, to uncover its secrets. But the soldier in me, the one responsible for Earth’s last hope, can’t forget my mission.

“It’s beautiful,” I concede, forcing myself to focus. “But it doesn’t explain why you brought me here, or why your brother is suddenly such a threat.”

Krak’zol’s expression hardens, and he pulls me closer as we enter a new chamber. This one is darker, lit only by the faintglow of bioluminescent algae clinging to the walls. In the center stands a massive stone table, its surface covered in intricate carvings and glowing crystals arranged in what looks like a map.

“The Abyss is not just our home,” Krak’zol explains, his voice low and urgent. “It is the source of our power. The crystals that grow here, the living energy that flows through these waters—they are what make us who we are.” He gestures to the map, and I watch in fascination as the crystals shift and pulse, forming new patterns. “But that power is not infinite. It must be balanced, protected.”

I lean closer, studying the map. “And let me guess—your brother doesn’t care about balance?”

Krak’zol’s jaw tightens, a muscle ticking beneath the surface. “Rynor believes that by harnessing more of the Abyss’s power, he can expand our territory, take control of the other ocean realms.” His gaze locks onto mine, intense and unwavering. “He would drain this place dry, destroy everything that makes it sacred, all for the sake of conquest.”

The implications hit me like a physical blow. “And the humans? My team?”

“Pawns in his game,” Krak’zol growls, his tail lashing behind him in agitation. “He sees you as a queen to be stolen. If Rynor captures you, he’ll parade you through the Abyss, demonstrating how easily he can rip away what is mine and steal my kingdom.”

I pull away, anger and frustration bubbling up inside me. “So what, I’m just supposed to stay here and play house while my team is in danger, while your brother plots war?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

Krak'zol moves faster than I can track, his massive frame suddenly looming over me. But instead of feeling trapped, I feel protected—sheltered. His hand comes up to cup my face, the gentle press of his claws against my skin sending sparks of awareness through me.

“You are not a prisoner here, Imoogeen,” he says, his voice rough with emotion. How he pronounces my name sends an unexpected shiver down my spine. “You are my equal, my mate. I brought you here to keep you safe, yes, but also because I sense something in you—a fire, a strength that calls to me.” His thumb traces the curve of my cheek, and I have to fight not to lean into the touch. “I’ve seen how you assess every situation, how your mind works. Together, we could face whatever threats come our way, be they from my brother or beyond.”

I want to argue, to push him away and demand he take me back to the surface. But the heat in his gaze, the sincerity in his words—it makes something inside me soften. “And Samantha? The rest of my team?”

“We will protect them,” Krak'zol promises, his other hand coming to rest on my hip. The contact sends a jolt of heat through me, and I have to suppress a shiver. “But first, we must secure the Abyss. If Rynor gains control here, the Abyss will become a weapon. He’ll poison your oceans, enslave my people, and turn Sanos into a tomb. He’ll show all of Sanos what it means to have angered the Leviathan King.”

I close my eyes, trying to think past the distracting press of his body against mine. He’s right, damn him. If there’s a threat to both our peoples, I can’t just ignore it. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“Fine,” I say at last, opening my eyes to meet his gaze. “I’ll help you deal with your brother, but on one condition.”

Krak’zol’s eyes narrow, but there’s a glimmer of respect in their silver depths. “Name it.”

“No more secrets,” I demand, poking him in the chest for emphasis. “You tell me everything—about the Abyss, about your brother’s plans, about what’s happening to my body. All of it. Deal?”

For a long moment, Krak’zol is silent, his gaze searching mine. Then, slowly, a smile spreads across his face—not the predatory grin I’ve come to expect, but something softer, more genuine.

“Deal,” he rumbles, and before I can dodge, he leans down and presses his forehead against mine. The gesture catches me off guard; it’s weirdly intimate for a guy who’s mostly growled at me so far. I feel something shift between us, and it’s not just the water currents. Damn it. This is more than just physical attraction or a convenient alliance. I’m in trouble.

“So,” I say, pulling back just enough to meet Krak’zol’s gaze. “Where do we start?”

His answering grin is all predator, all promise. “With your first lesson in Leviathan politics, little warrior. Are you ready?”

I square my shoulders, lifting my chin in challenge. “Bring it on, fish-face. I can take whatever you dish out.”

As Krak’zol leads me deeper into the heart of the Abyss, the thrill is a dangerous spark. Let the games begin, and may the best monster win.

## Chapter four

### KRAK'ZOL

Imoogeen's hand in mine feels right, like a weapon perfectly balanced for battle. Her fingers are small, fragile-looking things, but I can feel the strength in them. Good. She'll need that strength for what's coming. I lead her through the twisting passages of my territory, every instinct screaming to claim her, to keep her safe from the threats lurking in the shadows. Her scent fills the water around us—salt, defiance, and something human. It makes my fangs ache, my claws flex. I have to focus. There's no time for distraction, not with Rynor's treachery poisoning the Abyss.

We approach the war chamber, and I feel her tense beside me. Her warrior's instincts are sharp, even in this alien environment. Good. She'll need that edge in the coming days.

"Before we enter," I rumble, pausing outside the intricately carved doors, "there's something you should know."

Imoogeen arches an eyebrow, a gesture I'm quickly coming to associate with her particular brand of stubborn skepticism. "More secrets, Your Highness? I thought we had a deal."

The use of my title, dripping with sarcasm, sends a thrill through me. Such fire, even in the face of the unknown. My little warrior truly is my perfect match.

"Not secrets," I correct, resisting the urge to pull her closer. "A warning. My advisor, Zorath, can be . . . intense. He may not approve of your presence here."

She lets out a sharp sound, halfway between a laugh and a snort. The noise stirs something primal in me—a mix of amusement and possessiveness. My little warrior,

fierce even in her moments of mirth. “Shocking. An alien warlord’s right-hand man might not like the human captive. Who could have guessed?”

I growl low in my throat, my tail lashing behind me. “You are not a captive.”

“Keep telling yourself that, fish-face,” she mutters, but there’s less bite in her tone than before.

Before I can respond, the massive coral doors swing open with a groan that echoes through the water, sending a shiver of pressure against my skin, revealing the cavernous war chamber beyond.

The space stretches out before us, its vaulted ceiling lost in shadows pierced only by the eerie glow of bioluminescent creatures clinging to the rocky outcroppings. Intricate tapestries of woven seaweed and precious stones line the walls, depicting epic battles and mythical sea beasts that seem to writhe in the shifting light.

At the center of the chamber stands an enormous table carved from a single slab of obsidian, its surface etched with detailed maps of the Abyss and surrounding territories. Glowing crystals mark key locations in my kingdom, pulsing with an inner light that casts dancing shadows across the room.

Zorath stands at the far end, his scarred frame a living testament to countless battles fought and won. His skin, a mottled grey darker than Krak’zol’s, bears the raised patterns of ritual scars that speak of his high rank. Muscles ripple beneath his scaled hide as he turns, his massive tail sweeping a graceful arc through the water. His eyes, black as the deepest trench, fix on Imogen with predatory focus, assessing and cataloging every detail of the newcomer in their midst.

“My king,” he rumbles, voice like gravel over steel. “I see you’ve brought your . . . guest.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

The way Zorath says “guest” sends a ripple of irritation through my scales. I feel Imoogeen tense beside me, her quickening pulse a siren call to my protective instincts. Without conscious thought, I shift, positioning my bulk between her and Zorath’s piercing gaze. For a fleeting moment, I catch a flicker of something in Zorath’s dark eyes—not just skepticism, but almost . . . guarded. It’s gone as quickly as it appears, masked by his usual impassivity.

“This is Imoogeen,” I declare, my voice rumbling with the full authority of the Leviathan throne. “She stands with us against Rynor’s treachery.”

Zorath’s expression remains impassive, but the slight flutter of his gills betrays his surprise. And perhaps, that fleeting shadow I saw before was not surprise, but recognition. My inner beast purrs with satisfaction. Good. Let him be unsettled.

“I see,” Zorath intones, his skepticism barely veiled. His gaze lingers on Imoogeen for a fraction of a second longer than necessary, a subtle calculation in his dark eyes. “And how does an alien surface-dweller propose to aid us in the intricacies of Leviathan politics?”

I open my mouth, ready to assert Imoogeen’s value, but she surges forward before I can speak. The fierce set of her jaw, the defiant lift of her chin—it makes my blood sing.

“By offering a perspective your stagnant depths clearly lack,” she challenges, her voice as steady as the deepest currents. “Sometimes it takes an outsider to see the cracks in your precious system.”

Pride swells in my chest, and I unconsciously straighten, my tail lashing once in satisfaction. My little warrior, facing down one of the Abyss's most formidable minds without flinching. She truly is my perfect match.

Zorath's eyes narrow, but I catch the ghost of respect in his gaze. "Bold words, little one. Let's hope you can back them up with action."

"That's enough," I growl, my patience wearing thin. "Imoogeen is here as my equal, Zorath. You will treat her with the respect her position demands."

The words slip out before I can stop them, and I feel Imoogeen's sharp intake of breath. She turns to me, those fierce green eyes wide with surprise and something else—a flicker of heat that makes my blood sing.

"Equal?" she asks, her voice low enough that only I can hear. "I thought I was your prisoner."

I lean close, my chest rumbling with a possessive growl. "Prisoner? No, little warrior. You are my match, my future queen." My claws trace the emerging scales along her neck, relishing her shiver. "The sooner you accept that, the sooner we can face our enemies together."

She shivers, and I have to fight the urge to wrap her in my arms, to shield her from Zorath's calculating gaze and the dangers that lurk beyond these walls. But she is not some fragile thing to be coddled. She is a warrior, my equal. And it's time she understood exactly what that means.

I turn back to Zorath, keeping Imoogeen close to my side. "Tell us what you've learned about Rynor's movements."

Zorath nods, his demeanor shifting from wary to all business. He waves a hand over



the massive stone table that dominates the center of the room, and suddenly the surface comes alive with swirling patterns of bioluminescent algae. They form a three-dimensional map of the Abyss, each pulsing light representing a different faction, a different potential threat.

“Rynor has been busy,” Zorath says, his claw tracing a pattern of red lights that cluster near the eastern border of our territory. “He’s been gathering supporters among the lesser houses, promising them power and territory once he takes the throne.”

I feel Imoogeen lean forward, her eyes sharp as she studies the map. “These red lights,” she says, pointing to a particularly dense cluster, “they’re not evenly distributed. They’re concentrated here, near this . . . what is that? A trench?”

Zorath’s eyes widen slightly, clearly not expecting such astute observation from a surface-dweller. “The Obsidian Chasm,” he confirms. “It’s a source of rare minerals and crystals, vital to our people’s technology and energy manipulation abilities.”

Imoogeen nods, her mind clearly working through tactical possibilities. “So he’s not just gathering allies,” she muses. “He’s positioning them strategically. Cutting off your access to resources.”

Pride swells in my chest. My little warrior, already proving her worth. “Clever human,” I purr, unable to keep the satisfaction from my voice.

She shoots me a look that’s part annoyance, part something warmer. “I’m not a pet to be praised, Krak’zol.”

“No,” I agree, letting my hand rest possessively on the small of her back. “You’re so much more than that.”

Zorath clears his throat, drawing our attention back to the matter at hand. “Your . . . companion . . . is correct,” he says, grudging respect in his tone. “Rynor is moving to isolate us, both politically and economically. But that’s not the worst of it.”

With another wave of his hand, the map shifts, zooming in on a section of the Abyss I know all too well—the Heart of the Deep, where the very essence of our power resides. A pulsing blue light at its center represents the ancient crystal formation that has sustained our people for millennia.

“He means to claim the Heart,” I growl, fury building in my chest. “To drain it of its power and use it against us.”

Imoogeen’s sharp intake of breath tells me she understands the gravity of the situation. “And if he succeeds?”

“Then the Abyss dies,” Zorath says bluntly. “And with it, all hope of peace between our people and yours.”

I feel Imoogeen tense beside me, her mind no doubt racing through the implications. Her gaze locks onto mine, fierce and probing. “Why would Rynor do this? He’s your brother, isn’t he? This is his home too. Surely he must understand the consequences.”

Her question cuts deep, forcing me to confront the painful truth of my brother’s betrayal. I clench my fists, claws digging into my palms. “Rynor . . . he’s always craved power above all else. He believes he can control the Heart, harness its energy without destroying it. But he’s wrong.”

“And your people?” Imoogeen presses, her tone sharp. “Is he willing to sacrifice them too?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

I meet her gaze, seeing the fierce protectiveness there that first drew me to her. “Rynor sees them as a means to an end. He believes that with enough power, he can reshape the Abyss, create a new order with him at its center.”

Imoogeen’s eyes narrow, her tactical mind clearly working through the implications. “My team,” she says, her voice tight with renewed urgency. “If Rynor’s making his move, they could be in danger. We need to get them to safety.”

“No.” The word comes out as a growl, my protective instincts flaring. “It’s too dangerous. Rynor will be watching for any movement on the surface. If we try to extract your people now, we’ll only be painting a target on their backs.”

Imoogeen whirls on me, those green eyes blazing with fury. “So we just leave them there? Vulnerable and exposed?”

I catch her wrist as she moves to shove me, my grip gentle but unyielding. “Listen to me,” I say, forcing my voice to remain calm despite the storm of emotions raging within me. “Your team is safer where they are for now. The surface kings may be duplicitous, but they won’t risk open conflict while the negotiations are ongoing. We have time.”

“Time for what?” she demands, not backing down an inch despite our size difference.

I lean close, letting her feel the full weight of my presence. “Time to strike first,” I growl. “To cut off Rynor’s support and secure the Heart before he can make his move.”

Zorath nods approvingly. “A preemptive strike could work,” he says. “But we’ll need to move quickly. Rynor’s allies grow stronger by the day.”

Imoogeen’s eyes narrow, her tactical mind clearly working through the possibilities. “And where do I fit into all this?” she asks. “You didn’t bring me here just to look at pretty maps and state the obvious.”

I can’t help the rumble of amusement that escapes me. Even facing down ancient rivalries and the potential destruction of two civilizations, my little warrior maintains her fire. “You, my fierce one, are the key to all of this.”

She arches an eyebrow, skepticism written across her features. “Me? How?”

I gesture to the map, highlighting the complex network of alliances and factions that make up the political landscape of the Abyss. “Our people have been isolated for too long,” I explain, my voice a low rumble. “Set in our ways, resistant to change beyond our borders.” My gaze locks onto Imogen, assessing her reactions. “Your presence here, while unexpected, offers a unique opportunity. A perspective from the surface world that could provide valuable insights.”

I trace a claw along the map, careful not to damage the delicate crystals. “Your military training and tactical mind give you a unique perspective. You’ve faced threats, planned strategies in unfamiliar terrain. That, combined with my knowledge of the Abyss, could prove invaluable.”

I watch Imoogeen’s eyes narrow as she studies the map, her analytical mind clearly at work. “I may not know the players yet,” she says, “but I know how to read a battlefield. These currents here,” she points to a swirling pattern of crystals, “they’re natural choke points, aren’t they? Perfect for an ambush.”

Her quick assessment sends a surge of pride through me. “Precisely, mine. You see

why I value your insight?”

Imoogeen doesn't pull away from my touch when I move closer to her, but I can see the wheels turning behind those fierce eyes. “You want me to help you outsmart your brother,” she says, realization dawning. “To use my ‘human perspective’ to find weaknesses in his strategy.”

“Not just that,” I say, my voice dropping to a low rumble. “I want you by my side as we face this threat. As my equal, my partner.” I lean closer, inhaling her intoxicating scent. “As my mate.”

The word hangs between us, heavy with implication. I feel her pulse quicken, see the flush that creeps up her neck. For a moment, I think she might pull away, might reject the offer outright. But then something shifts in her gaze—a spark of determination, of curiosity.

“I'm not agreeing to anything long-term,” she says, her voice steady despite the tremor I can feel running through her. “But if working with you is the best way to keep my people safe and stop your brother from destroying everything . . . then I'm in.”

Relief and triumph surge through me in equal measure. I want to claim her here and now, to mark her as mine for all to see. But I force myself to remain still, to give her the space she needs. “A wise decision, little warrior,” I purr. “Together, we will be unstoppable.”

Zorath clears his throat, reminding us of his presence. “If you two are quite finished,” he says dryly, “perhaps we can return to the matter at hand? We have a war to plan, after all.”

Imoogeen straightens, all business once more. “Right. So, where do we start?”

As Zorath begins outlining our initial strategy, I marvel at the brave creature beside me. My little warrior, already adapting to life in the Abyss, already proving her worth as a strategist and ally. Pride swells in my chest, along with a possessiveness so intense it threatens to overwhelm me.

She may not fully accept her place as my mate yet, but she will. In time, she'll come to see that we are two halves of a whole, perfectly matched in every way. And when she does . . .well. The Abyss itself will tremble before our combined might.

## Chapter five

### IMOGEN

The gentle current tugs at my hair as I make my way through the winding corridors of Krak'zol's underwater palace. Each step feels both alien and unnervingly natural, my body adapting to this new environment faster than my mind can process. I catch glimpses of my reflection in polished shell surfaces—the faint shimmer of scales along my arms, the slight webbing between my fingers. It's like looking at a stranger wearing my face.

I'm so lost in thought that I nearly collide with a figure emerging from an archway. Instinct takes over, and I drop into a defensive stance before I can fully process what I'm seeing.

The creature before me is clearly Leviathan, but unlike any I've encountered so far. Her form is more slender than Krak'zol's, with iridescent scales that catch the light in mesmerizing patterns. What strikes me most, though, are her eyes—a swirling mix of blues and greens that seem to hold entire oceans within them.

“You must be Imoogeen,” she says, her voice melodic and soothing. “I am Nira, the royal healer. Krak'zol asked me to tend to you.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

I force myself to relax, though wariness still thrums through my veins. “Tend to me? I’m not injured.”

Nira’s laugh is like bubbles rising to the surface, light but with an undercurrent that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “No, but you are changing. The bond-bite brings more than just physical alterations. I’m here to help you understand and navigate those changes.”

The mention of the bond-bite sends a shiver down my spine, heat blooming across my skin as I remember Krak’zol’s fangs against my neck—the pressure, the sharp sting, the rush of something foreign and intoxicating flooding my veins. I shake my head, forcing the memory away. “Fine. Lead the way.”

The corridors narrow as we descend, the water growing denser, heavier against my skin. Each turn reveals new wonders that make me pause despite myself. Luminescent algae trace delicate patterns along the ceiling, pulsing in rhythmic waves that cast everything in an ethereal blue glow. My fingertips brush against the wall, and I’m startled by the texture—not cold stone, as I expected, but something alive, warm, and slightly yielding beneath my touch.

“What is this?” I murmur, unable to contain my curiosity.

“Living coral,” Nira answers, her melodic voice echoing strangely in the enclosed space. “Our structures grow with us, shaped by our needs and desires.”

As we descend deeper, the embedded mother-of-pearl in the walls grows more abundant, transforming from occasional accents to entire sections that shimmer like

captured moonlight. The iridescent surfaces catch and refract the bioluminescent glow, creating kaleidoscopic patterns that dance across my skin. The effect is disorienting and beautiful—like walking through the inside of some massive, living jewel.

The water carries strange scents—mineral-rich currents mingled with something herbal and unfamiliar. I feel it in my newly sensitive gills, taste it on my tongue. My body responds to this environment in ways my mind still struggles to comprehend, instinctively adjusting to pressure changes I wouldn't have survived a week ago.

When we finally reach Nira's chamber, I stop at the entrance, momentarily overwhelmed by the sensory experience awaiting me inside. The space feels ancient and alive, like stepping inside a living organism rather than a room. Glowing creatures pulse in glass orbs suspended from the ceiling, their gentle rhythm almost hypnotic. They cast everything in an otherworldly blue-green glow that makes my newly sensitive eyes tingle. Shelves carved directly into the coral walls hold countless vessels—translucent shells, polished stone jars, and delicate glass vials filled with liquids in colors I've never seen before.

"Sit," Nira instructs, gesturing to a raised platform covered in what appears to be living moss.

When I lower myself onto it, the surface shifts beneath me, molding perfectly to my body's contours. I fight the urge to jump back up as it cradles me like a sentient embrace.

Nira's webbed hands are cool against my skin as she examines me, her touch clinical but not unkind. Her touch is cool and clinical, a contrast to the heat of Krak'zol's hand. The thought sent an unwelcome shiver through me. I watch her face as she works, noting the slight furrow between her brows, the focused intensity of her gaze.



“The changes are progressing well,” she murmurs, more to herself than to me. Her fingers trace the faint pattern of scales emerging along my forearms, their iridescent sheen catching the light. “Your body is adapting quickly to the Abyss.”

“That’s what worries me,” I admit, the words escaping before I can stop them. I flex my fingers, watching the subtle webbing between them stretch and contract. “It feels like I’m losing myself. Like I’m becoming . . . something else entirely.”

Nira’s eyes meet mine, swirling depths filled with understanding and something deeper—wisdom tinged with what might be regret. “Change does not mean loss, Imoogeen. You are becoming more, not less. The bond-bite awakens potential that already exists within you.”

I snort, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice. “Potential to be what? Krak’zol’s perfect little mate?” My hand unconsciously rises to my neck, fingers tracing the mark he left there.

“To be his equal,” Nira corrects gently. “The bond-bite is not about subjugation. It is a joining of equals, a melding of strengths.” She continues her examination, her fingers pausing at my pulse point. “Krak’zol chose you because he saw something in you that complements his own nature.”

Her words stir something deep within me, a mix of longing and fear that I’m not ready to examine too closely. “You speak from experience?” I ask, studying her face. “Do you have a bond-mate?”

A shadow passes over Nira’s features, quick but unmistakable. Her hands falter for just a moment before resuming their work. “My personal history is not relevant to your treatment,” she says, her melodic voice suddenly distant.

Something in her evasion makes my stomach clench. I glance at her slender form, her

graceful movements, the way her scales shimmer with an almost hypnotic beauty. Had she and Krak'zol once shared this bond? The thought sends an unexpected stab of jealousy through me, sharp and raw. It's ridiculous. Illogical. And yet, the image of them together, connected in the way I'm beginning to understand, burns.

"I think it is relevant," I press, catching her wrist. My voice comes out harder than intended. "If I'm going to trust you with my transformation, I need to know you understand what I'm going through." I swallow, forcing myself to ask the question burning in my throat. "Were you and Krak'zol ever . . . connected?"

Nira's eyes widen slightly, then soften with something like pity. "No, Imoogeen. Not in the way you're thinking." She gently extracts her hand from my grip. "I understand more than you know," she says quietly, pain threading through her words. "But today is about you, not me." The finality in her tone makes it clear the subject is closed.

The knot in my stomach loosens, though I hate myself for the relief that floods through me. I decide not to push further—for now. "Tell me about the bond, then," I say instead, steering the conversation to safer waters. "What exactly is happening to me?"

Nira's hands continue their examination as she speaks, her touch soothing despite the lingering tension between us. "The bond-bite introduces Leviathan DNA into your system, awakening latent abilities and adapting your body to life in the Abyss." She presses gently on my ribcage. "Your lungs are already developing secondary chambers to process water more efficiently. You'll find yourself stronger, faster, more attuned to the currents around you."

I flex my hand, watching the play of new muscles rippling beneath my skin. I'm simultaneously fascinated and horrified by the changes—my body becoming a stranger to me with each passing hour. "I've noticed that. The other day, I shattered a coral cup without even trying." I swallow hard. "But it's more than just physical, isn't

it?”

Nira nods, a knowing smile playing at the corners of her mouth even as something wistful lingers in her eyes. “The bond creates a connection between mates. You’ll become more aware of Krak’zol’s presence, his emotions. In time, you may even be able to communicate without words.”

The idea sends a jolt of panic through me. I sit up straighter, dislodging her hands. “I don’t want him in my head,” I protest, my voice sharp with alarm. “I need to keep my thoughts my own. That’s—that’s the only thing I have left that’s still completely mine.”

“The bond does not strip away your autonomy,” Nira assures me, her tone gentler now. “It is a bridge, not a chain. You control how much you share, how deeply you allow the connection to form.” She hesitates, then adds, “Though fighting it entirely can be . . . painful, for both parties.”

I run my fingers along the faint shimmer of scales on my forearm, a cold dread settling in my stomach. “Will I even look human when this is done? Or will I become something . . . unrecognizable?”

Nira’s expression softens, understanding flickering in those ocean-deep eyes. “You will remain yourself, Imogen. The changes enhance rather than replace.” Her webbed fingers brush gently over my arm where the scales catch the light. “You will appear human to most eyes, but with . . . certain additions that allow you to thrive here.”

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“Additions,” I repeat, not entirely reassured. Great, what’s next, more gills and a blowhole? My mind races with possibilities, each more alarming than the last. “Like what, exactly? Will I grow a tail?” The question slips out before I can stop it.

Nira’s laughter ripples through the water between us, musical and light. Her eyes crinkle at the corners with genuine amusement.

“What?” I demand, heat rising to my cheeks. “It’s a legitimate question.”

She composes herself, though a smile still plays at the corners of her mouth. “Perhaps you should discover the full extent of your transformation as it happens,” she says cryptically. “Some surprises are worth the wait.”

I narrow my eyes at her, not appreciating being kept in the dark about my own body. “That’s not an answer.”

Her only response is another enigmatic smile as she continues her examination, leaving me to wonder just how much of my humanity I’ll retain—and what new parts of me might be waiting to emerge.

I sigh, studying her face for any sign of deception. Finding none, I nod slowly. “Fine. What else should I expect?”

Nira’s expression grows serious, the ambient light catching the fine lines around her eyes that I hadn’t noticed before. “The bond will continue to strengthen, drawing you and Krak’zol closer together. You may find yourself experiencing intense emotions, heightened physical awareness of each other.”

A flash of heat courses through me at her words, as my mind flashes to the image of Krak'zol, the way his muscles rippled beneath his scaled skin, and I curse inwardly. This was not the time for... distractions. I push the thoughts away, focusing on the implications.

“And if something happens to one of us? With Rynor’s threat looming . . .”

Nira’s posture stiffens almost imperceptibly, a flicker of something dark crossing her features at the mention of Rynor’s name. It’s gone so quickly I might have imagined it, but my soldier’s instincts catalog the reaction automatically.

“The severing of a bond can be . . . traumatic,” she admits, her melodic voice slightly tighter than before. “Especially if it occurs before the bond is fully formed. It is one of the reasons Krak'zol is so protective of you. He knows the danger Rynor poses, not just to his kingdom, but to your connection.”

I consider probing that reaction—there’s clearly history there—but decide against it. Everyone in the Abyss seems to have reason enough to hate Rynor without needing personal grievances. The monster trying to destroy an entire ecosystem and seize power; that’s sufficient cause for anyone’s discomfort.

The weight of it all settles heavy in my chest. I’m not just caught up in Leviathan politics anymore—I’m intrinsically linked to their future, to Krak'zol’s fate. The soldier in me rebels against the idea, but another part . . . a part I’m not ready to name . . . thrills at the connection.

“Tell me about your people,” I say, needing a distraction from my own tangled emotions. “Your customs, your history. If I’m going to navigate this new world, I need to understand it.”

Nira’s eyes light up, clearly pleased by my interest. “Our people have dwelt in the

Abyss for millennia,” she begins, her voice taking on a rhythmic quality that speaks of oft-told tales. “We were born of the Heart of the Deep, shaped by its power and bound to its rhythms.”

As she speaks, weaving stories of ancient battles and sacred rituals, I find myself drawn in despite my initial skepticism. The Leviathans are more than just the warriors I’ve encountered. They’re a people with a rich culture, with art and music and traditions that span generations.

“The bond-bite itself is one of our most sacred rites,” Nira explains. “It is not given lightly, nor is it easily broken. When a Leviathan chooses a mate, it is for life.”

The implications of that statement hit me like a punch to the gut. “For life?” I repeat, my voice barely above a whisper. “But Krak’zol barely knows me. How could he make that kind of commitment?”

Nira’s expression softens. “Our people feel deeply, Imogen. When we recognize our true mate, we know it in our bones, in the very essence of our being. Krak’zol may not know every detail of your life, but he knows your soul. The bond would not have taken if you were not truly compatible.”

I want to argue, to point out all the reasons why this is insane. But I can’t deny the pull I feel towards Krak’zol, the way my body seems to hum with awareness whenever he’s near. It’s more than just physical attraction—it’s like he’s become a part of me, as essential as the water I now breathe.

“I’m not ready for forever,” I admit, voicing the fear that’s been gnawing at me since I first woke in this strange new world. “I have a mission, a team to protect. I can’t just abandon everything I’ve known for . . . for this.”

Nira takes my hand, her touch gentle but firm. “No one is asking you to abandon your

past, Imogen. The bond doesn't erase who you are. It enhances it. Your strength, your loyalty to your people—these are the very qualities that drew Krak'zol to you. Embrace them, use them. They may be the key to saving both our worlds.”

Her words settle something within me, a resolve forming where there was only confusion before. I may not fully understand this bond, may not be ready to accept all it implies, but I can use it. If my connection to Krak'zol can help stop Rynor, can protect my team and secure a future for both our peoples . . . well, that's a price I'm willing to pay.

A familiar scent reaches me, a mix of salt and iron that makes my newly sensitive gills flare and my pulse quicken involuntarily. I know who it is before I even turn. He fills the doorway, his massive frame blocking out the ambient light of the corridor beyond.

“Imoogeen,” he rumbles, my name a caress on his tongue. “I trust Nira has been helpful?”

I nod, suddenly hyper-aware of every point of contact between my body and the moss-covered platform. “She's been . . . enlightening,” I manage, fighting to keep my voice steady.

Krak'zol's nostrils flare, and I see his pupils dilate. Can he smell the change in me? The growing acceptance of our bond? The thought sends a shiver down my spine, equal parts thrilling and terrifying.

“Good,” he says, his voice a low growl that seems to vibrate through my very bones. “We have much to discuss. Rynor's forces are on the move.”

Just like that, the spell is broken. I'm back in soldier mode, pushing aside the confusing tangle of emotions to focus on the threat at hand. “Tell me everything,” I

say, sliding off the platform and moving to Krak'zol's side.



### Chapter six

#### KRAK'ZOL

Imoogeen's presence at my side feels both right and maddening. Her scent fills the water around us—a tantalizing mix of human and something increasingly Leviathan. The changes in her fascinate me. Each new scale that emerges, each subtle shift in her movements as she adapts to life beneath the waves, draws my attention like a predator tracking prey.

But she is not prey. She is mine. My mate. My equal.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks, her voice carrying easily through the water. Another change—she's learning to modulate her speech to travel through the currents.

“I would show you my kingdom,” I rumble, unable to keep the pride from my voice. “The true Abyss, not just these palace corridors.”

She arches an eyebrow, a gesture I'm coming to associate with her particular brand of defiance. “And Rynor's spies? Won't they be watching?”

“Let them watch,” I growl, my tail lashing with barely contained aggression. “Let them see what happens to those who threaten what is mine.”

“I'm not yours,” she snaps, but there's less bite in her tone than before. We both know it's not entirely true anymore.

I lead her through a series of increasingly complex passages, watching as she catalogs each turn, each potential escape route. Always the soldier, my little warrior. The thought pleases me more than it should.

We emerge into the vast expanse of the Luminous Gardens, and I hear her sharp intake of breath. The sight never fails to inspire awe, even in those born to the Abyss. Massive coral formations rise like twisted towers, their surfaces alive with bioluminescent creatures that pulse in synchronized patterns. Schools of crystal fish dart between the structures, their scales refracting light in rainbow cascades.

“This is . . .” Imoogeen trails off, those fierce green eyes wide with wonder.

“Beautiful?” I suggest, moving closer to her. “Magnificent?”

“Dangerous,” she finishes, and my chest swells with pride at her perception. Of course, my mate would see beyond the surface beauty to the lethal reality beneath.

“Yes,” I agree, gesturing to a particularly stunning formation of purple coral. “Those tendrils? Their touch brings paralysis. The crystal fish? Their scales secrete a toxin that can stop a warrior’s heart.”

Imoogeen nods, studying the hazards with professional interest as a group of Leviathan guards swim past, their armor gleaming in the bioluminescent light. Two young acolytes hurry by with arms full of scrolls, their whispered conversation cutting off at the sight of us.

“Everything beautiful here has teeth.”

“As do you, little warrior,” I rumble, unable to resist reaching out to trace the emerging scales along her neck. She shivers but doesn’t pull away.

“Is that why you chose me?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

The question stirs something primal in me. I move closer, using my bulk to guide her back against one of the safer coral formations. A school of tiny, jewel-toned fish dart away from our movement, scattering like starlight. “I chose you because you are fierce,” I growl, letting my claws trail patterns across her skin. “Because you fight even when surrounded, even when outmatched. Because your spirit burns as bright as the Heart of the Deep itself.”

Her pulse quickens, but she holds my gaze. “Pretty words for a kidnapping.”

I can’t help the rumble of amusement that escapes me. Even now, pinned between my body and the coral, she maintains her defiance. A palace guard discreetly redirects traffic away from our alcove, though I catch the knowing glint in his eye. “Would you prefer I simply claimed you? Took what is mine without explanation?”

“I’d prefer you stopped talking about me like I’m property,” she retorts, but her body betrays her. She leans into my touch, even as she argues.

“Not property,” I correct, letting my fangs graze the sensitive spot where her neck meets her shoulder—where my mark lies. “Partner. Equal. Mate.”

A shudder runs through her, and I catch her wrist as she moves to push me away. It takes only two fingers—a reminder of the strength I could use but choose not to. Not with her. Never with her.

“We should keep moving,” she says, her voice rough. “You mentioned something about Rynor’s traps?”

I allow her to change the subject, though every instinct screams to press my advantage, to claim her fully here and now. But she’s right. We have more urgent

matters to attend to.

“This way,” I say, releasing her wrist but staying close as we navigate through the garden. “The currents here are treacherous. Follow my lead.”

I guide her through complex patterns of water flow, teaching her how to read the subtle shifts that could mean the difference between life and death. She learns quickly, her movements becoming more fluid, more natural with each passing moment.

“Your brother,” she says as we pause in a relatively calm section. “How did he become such a threat? What drove him to this?”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

The question cuts deep, forcing me to confront painful memories. “Rynor was always . . . ambitious. But it was the Heart that changed him. Its power called to him, corrupted him. He believes he can control it, use it to reshape the Abyss in his image.”

“And you?” Imoogeen asks, studying my face with those penetrating eyes. “Are you immune to its corruption?”

“No one is immune,” I admit, moving closer to her again. “But I have something he lacks. Something that anchors me, keeps me from losing myself to the Heart’s song.”

“What’s that?”

Instead of answering, I let my form shift, revealing more of my true nature. My scales darken, patterns of bioluminescence emerging across my skin. My tail lengthens, becomes moreserpentine. Spines unfurl along my back, and my fangs lengthen until they’re fully visible even with my mouth closed.

Imoogeen’s eyes widen, but she doesn’t retreat. Her heart rate spikes, but not entirely from fear. I can smell the sharp tang of attraction mixing with her apprehension.

“This is what you really are,” she breathes, reaching out to trace one of the glowing patterns on my chest. The touch sends electricity through my veins.

“This is part of what I am,” I correct, catching her hand and pressing it flat against my scales. “The other part is what you see when I walk among your kind in my more . . . civilized form. Both are real. Both are me.”

“And Rynor? Does he have this ability too?”

I nod. “All Leviathan rulers do. But Rynor . . . he’s lost himself to the monster. He no longer remembers how to be anything else.”

“The Heart doesn’t create monsters, little warrior. It reveals truth—amplifies what lies beneath the surface,” I rumble, watching her process this. “In Rynor’s case, it would feed the darkness that already consumes him, until nothing of my brother remains.”

My claws flex unconsciously, remembering the wild hunger in Rynor’s eyes when he spoke of the Heart’s power. “But for those with honor, with purpose beyond mere power . . .” I reach for her, unable to resist tracing the emerging scales along her arm, “the Heart strengthens what makes us worthy of our crown. Our ability to protect, to lead. To cherish what is ours.”

Recognition flashes in those fierce green eyes of hers. “The bond,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. The current carries her scent to me—salt and defiance—that makes my fangs ache. “That’s what this is really about. Why you needed a mate.”

“Needed you,” I correct her, my tail curling possessively around her waist. The feel of her against my scales sends heat coursing through my blood. Even in my partially transformed state, she seems smaller, more delicate—her frame dwarfed by my expanded musculature and thickened hide. The contrast awakens something primal in me, a fierce desire to enfold her completely within my protection.

“The darkness that consumes Rynor . . . it lurks in all of us. But you—” I inhale deeply, drinking in her scent “—you burn too bright for shadows.”

She doesn’t pull away, though I feel the delicious tension in her frame. My little

warrior, always ready for battle. Her hand presses against my chest, five fragile fingers splayed across scales that could withstand the crushing pressure of the deepest trenches. The sight of her—so small yet so fearless against my monstrous form—fills me with a tenderness that borders on pain.

“So I’m what, your personal lighthouse?” Her words are sharp, but there’s uncertainty beneath the bite.

A rumbling laugh escapes me, the sound deeper, more resonant in this form. Even facing down ancient powers and royal succession, she maintains that fire. “You are my equal,” I growl, letting my claws—now longer, more deadly—trace delicate patterns along her spine with impossible gentleness. “My balance. My queen.”

The last word makes her shiver, and satisfaction purrs through me. I could crush her with a careless movement, yet here I am, handling her with more care than the rarest treasure of the Abyss. Soon, she’ll understand just how perfectly we fit together. How the very currents of the Abyss sing when we touch.

She shivers, whether from my words or my touch, I’m not sure. “And if I fail?”

“You won’t,” I say with absolute certainty, my form shifting back to its more usual appearance, scales settling into place as my massive tentacles recede. The transformation ripples through me like a wave, but my eyes never leave hers. “We won’t. Together, we are unstoppable.”

A distant rumble interrupts the moment, and I feel Imoogen tense against me. “What was that?”

I scan the waters around us, my senses on high alert. “Rynor,” I growl. “He’s testing the barriers again. We must return to the palace.”

As if to emphasize my point, another tremor shakes the coral formations around us. Several crystal fish scatter in alarm, their scales releasing clouds of toxin into the water.

“This way,” I say, taking Imoogeen’s hand. “Stay close to me.”

We move through the gardens with renewed urgency, my form shifting back towards its primal state as we encounter more signs of Rynor’s interference. The scales along my spine flare and thicken, my claws extending to their full, deadly length. I sense Imogen’s eyes on me, tracking each transformation with wary fascination.

“There,” I growl, pointing to a seemingly innocent cluster of azure coral. “That wasn’t there yesterday.”

Imogen narrows her eyes, studying the formation. Her tactical mind works visibly behind those fierce green eyes. “A trap? It looks harmless enough.”

As if responding to her doubt, a small fish darts too close to the coral. In an instant, the formation erupts with deadly precision—barbed tendrils lashing out and impaling the creature before retracting with their prize.

“Venomous,” I explain, watching her expression shift from skepticism to grim understanding. “One touch would paralyze you within seconds.”



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

She steps closer to me, instinctively seeking protection though she'd never admit it. The gesture sends a surge of possessive satisfaction through my veins.

“How is Rynor doing this?” she asks, her voice low and controlled despite the danger surrounding us. “Setting traps in your territory without detection?”

The question gives me pause. It's something I've wondered myself but hadn't fully examined. My brother is cunning, but this level of infiltration suggests something more troubling.

“He must have allies among my people,” I admit, the realization burning like acid. “Someone with access to the royal gardens, someone trusted enough to move freely without question.”

Imogen's gaze sharpens. “A traitor in your inner circle?”

I nod grimly, scanning the altered currents that now flow in deadly patterns through what was once a peaceful sanctuary. The water itself has become weaponized—subtle undercurrents that would drag an unwary swimmer into the waiting arms of the venomous coral.

“We need to identify them,” she continues, her military mind already mapping strategies. “Set a trap of our own.”

My chest rumbles with approval. My clever, fierce mate, already thinking like a true queen of the Abyss. “Yes,” I agree, carefully guiding her around a particularly treacherous current. “But first, we must ensure your safety. The changes in you are

still developing. Until they're complete, you remain vulnerable."

Her jaw tightens at that, but she doesn't argue. Instead, she reaches for my arm, her fingers brushing against my scales in a touch that sends electricity racing through my blood.

"Then teach me," she challenges, eyes blazing with determination. "Show me how to survive your world, how to fight in it. If we're going to face Rynor together, I can't be a liability."

I catch her hand, deliberately encircling her wrist with just two fingers to demonstrate how easily I could restrain her—and how carefully I choose not to. "Very well, little warrior," I purr. "Your lessons begin now."

She looks down at my fingers around her wrist, then back up at me with that defiant spark that makes my blood sing. "Two fingers? Really? That's the intimidation tactic you're going with? I've been threatened by entire alien armies, fish-face. You'll need to do better than that."

I can't help the rumble of laughter that escapes me. Such fire, even when she's clearly out of her depth. My little warrior never disappoints. "You needed to see it. To understand what we're fighting for. What we're fighting against."

She's quiet for a moment, her hand resting over my heart. I feel her pulse through her fingertips—steady and strong, like everything else about her.

"I'm in," she says finally, her voice taking on that commander's edge I've come to recognize. "Not just for the bond, or for my team." Her eyes sweep across the luminous expanse of my kingdom, a fierce protectiveness hardening her features. "This place—your world—it's extraordinary. And I'll be damned if I let your brother destroy it because he's too power-hungry to see what he's breaking." She pauses,

something raw and vulnerable flickering across her face. “I’ve already watched one home burn. Earth is barely habitable now, everything I knew . . . gone. I won’t stand by while another world gets destroyed by someone who should be protecting it instead.”

Pride and possession surge through me in equal measure. I catch her chin with one claw, tilting her face up to mine. “My fierce little warrior,” I purr. “Together, we will make Rynor regret ever challenging us.”

## Chapter seven

### IMOGEN

“Again.”

Krak’zol’s voice rumbled through the water, a low, resonant command that vibrated through my very bones. I grit my teeth, pushing back the wave of exhaustion that threatened to consume me. We’d been at this for hours—or at least, what felt like hours in the perpetual twilight of the Abyss. My muscles burned, my lungs ached, and every inch of my skin tingled with the unsettling awareness of my own transformation.

“I’m trying,” I snapped, my voice tight with frustration. “It’s not exactly like learning to ride a bike, you know.”

We were in a secluded training chamber, a vast cavern carved into the heart of the living coral. Finned creatures with bodieslike liquid starlight pulsed softly in the walls, casting the space in an ethereal, ever-shifting glow. The water here was still, undisturbed by the treacherous currents of the open Abyss, but that didn’t make this any easier.

Krak'zol circled me, his massive form moving with a grace that belied his size. His eyes, those silver pools of predatory intensity, tracked my every movement. I could practically feel his impatience radiating off him in waves.

“You rely too much on your human instincts,” he said, his voice echoing strangely in the enclosed space. “You fight the water instead of becoming one with it. Feel the currents, Imoogeen. Let them guide you.”

Easier said than done, fish-face. I closed my eyes, trying to focus on the subtle shifts in pressure against my skin, the faint tug of the water around me. It's like trying to grasp smoke—elusive, intangible. I focused, trying to sense the pressure, the subtle give and take of the water molecules, the faint electrical hum that Krak'zol said was the key. He mentioned a gland, newly formed near my gills, that secretes a pheromone—a chemical signal that interacts with the water's own energy. I tried to feel for that gland, to consciously activate it.

“I don't—” I started, but he cut me off.

“Less talking, more feeling,” he growled, his tail lashing in a way that sent a shiver down my spine. It wasn't entirely fear, though. There was a thrill mixed in, an awareness of his raw, untamed power that I hated to admit—even to myself. Is this what Samantha is going through? This... surrender?

I took a deep breath, trying to clear my mind of everything but the here and now. I focused on the sensation of the water against my newly scaled skin, the faint, almost musical hum of the living coral around us, the rhythmic pulse of Krak'zol's presence beside me—a steady thrum that seemed to echo in my own bones.

Slowly, tentatively, I reached out with my senses, not just physically but... mentally. It was a strange, almost disorienting sensation, like trying to flex a muscle I never knew I had. I imagined the water as an extension of myself, a fluid limb that I could

control with my will.

A faint flicker of movement. A ripple in the water before me. I opened my eyes, staring in disbelief at the small vortex I'd created, swirling gently in the otherwise still water.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

“There,” Krak’zol said, his voice losing some of its harshness. “You begin to understand.”

He didn’t praise, didn’t offer empty encouragement. But the subtle shift in his tone was enough. A spark of pride ignited within me, pushing back the exhaustion.

“Again,” I said, my voice firmer now.

We continued the drill, over and over. I tried to replicate that first, tentative success, to control the water with my mind, to shape it to my will. It was frustrating, exhilarating, and utterly unlike anything I’d ever experienced—like discovering a new sense I never knew I possessed, a muscle I was only just learning to flex.

Slowly, I started to get the hang of it. The small vortexes grew larger, stronger, swirling with a faint, iridescent shimmer that matched the new scales on my arms. I learned to create currents, to push and pull the water around me with increasing precision. It wasn’t just about brute force—it was about finesse, about understanding the subtle interplay of pressure and flow, feeling the water’s resistance and yielding in a way that was almost... intimate.

Krak’zol watched me, his silver eyes narrowed in that way that made my pulse quicken and my newly sensitive gills flutter. He didn’t offer much in the way of verbal instruction, but his presence was a constant, palpable force, a gravitational pull I couldn’t ignore. I could feel his gaze on me, assessing, judging, and... something else—something that made my skin prickle with awareness, a heat that had nothing to do with the water temperature and everything to do with him. He was so close I could smell the salt and iron tang of him, feel the subtle vibrations of his low growls that

seemed to resonate directly in my bones. It was distracting as hell, but in a way I was starting to crave. Fantastic. A familiar wave of sarcasm washing over me. Now I'm addicted to being scrutinized by a giant, possessive fish-man.

"Better," he rumbled at one point, his voice a low purr that vibrated through the water. "But you still hesitate. You fear your own power."

He was right. I did. Every time I felt that surge of energy within me, that sense of connection to the water, I also felt a flicker of fear. It was a power that felt both exhilarating and terrifyingly alien. I used to rely on my training, my reflexes, my human limitations. Now, I was becoming something else, something more... and a part of me mourned the loss of the woman I once was. It was like I was tapping into something ancient, something primal, that I didn't fully understand.

"What if I lose control?" I asked, the words escaping before I could stop them. "What if I become... something else entirely?"

Krak'zol moved closer, his massive form blocking out the ambient light. He towered over me, a creature of immense power and barely contained wildness. But his eyes, when they met mine, held a surprising gentleness.

"You will not lose control," he said, his voice a low rumble that seemed to resonate deep within my chest. "The bond will guide you. It will anchor you."

The bond. Damned thing. It was a tether, a current, a hum of energy that vibrated between us whether I wanted it to or not. I still didn't fully understand it, still kicked and screamed against the pull—but I couldn't deny its power.

It wasn't just some mystical mumbo-jumbo. It was real. I felt it now, a subtle awareness, like my senses were extending outward, seeking him. It was more than just knowing he was there; I felt the weight of his gaze, the shift in the water when he

moved, the rumble of his voice deep in my chest as if I was tuned to his frequency. And, gods, the way my pulse echoed his, a matched rhythm that both thrilled and terrified me. It was like he was becoming a part of me, woven into the fabric of my very being. I hated it. I craved it. I shoved him. Hard. He barely moved, but instead of being angry, he smirked like I just did something adorable. Adorable? Was he mocking me? No...there was something else in those silver eyes, something that made my skin prickle.

“Now,” he said, his voice shifting back to that commanding tone that made my body respond without thought, despite my best efforts to resist. “Let me see you defend yourself.”

He didn’t give me time to react, to question. He moved with astonishing speed, his tail lashing out in a blur of motion—a display of raw power that stole the breath from my newly formed gills. My instincts screamed at me to dodge, but another part, the part that was increasingly his, recognized this as a test. I threw up my hands, trying to create a shield of water, a desperate attempt born more of hope than skill, but I was too slow, too clumsy. The water wobbled, offering no real protection, and for a heart-stopping moment, I braced for impact, sure I’d failed.

His tail caught me across the chest, sending me spinning backward through the water. It wasn’t a full-force blow—he was clearly holding back—but it was enough to knock the wind out of me.

I gasped, struggling to regain my equilibrium. My body screamed in protest, muscles burning from the exertion and the impact. But beneath the pain, something else was stirring—a surge of adrenaline, of anger, of... something else.

“Again,” Krak’zol said, his voice implacable.

He attacked again, and again, and again. Each time, I tried to defend myself, to use



the water as a shield, a weapon. But I was too slow, too predictable. He anticipated my every move, countering my clumsy attempts with effortless grace.

Frustration flared within me, hot and sharp. I'm a soldier, dammit. I was trained to fight, to survive. But here, in this alien environment, I felt like a child, fumbling in the dark.

"Stop holding back," I snarled, my voice echoing strangely in the enclosed space. "Fight me for real."

Krak'zol's eyes gleamed with something that might be amusement, might be approval. "As you wish, little warrior."

This time, there was no holding back. He moved with a speed and ferocity that took my breath away. His tail whipped around me, creating a vortex of water that trapped me, spun me, disoriented me.

I struggled to break free, to gain control, but it was like fighting a hurricane. Panic rose within me, a cold wave of fear that threatened to overwhelm me. I saw a flicker of something in Krak'zol's eyes—a brief mirroring of my own fear, quickly masked by his usual predatory intensity. It was gone in an instant, but it was enough to remind me that I even felt the weight of this situation.

And then, something snapped.

One moment, I was struggling to hold my own against the training current, the next, something clicked. It wasn't a conscious decision, not a thought-out strategy, but an internal knowing. The water, which had been a relentless adversary, suddenly felt like an extension of myself. A dam broke within me, a torrent of power surging through my veins, connecting me to the ocean's pulse in a way I never thought possible.

It wasn't just the water in the training chamber. It was the water in the walls, in the living coral, in the very fabric of the Abyss itself. I felt it all, a vast, interconnected network of power, and I was at the center of it.

Without conscious thought, I reached out, not with my hands, but with my mind, my will. The water responded, obeying my unspoken command. It rose, formed a swirling shield around me, deflecting Krak'zol's attack with effortless ease.

The force of the impact threw him backward, his eyes widening in surprise. He recovered quickly, but there was a new expression on his face—not anger, not amusement, but something closer to awe.

The water around me shimmered, glowed with an inner light. It wasn't just the ambient bioluminescence—it was something else, something emanating from me. I looked down at my hands, at my arms, and saw the faint shimmer of scales, now glowing with a soft, ethereal light.

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“What... what was that?” I breathed, staring at my transformed limbs in disbelief.

Krak’zol moved closer, his gaze intense. He reached out, his webbed fingers tracing the glowing scales on my arm. His touch sent a jolt of energy through me, a shockwave of awareness that made my heart race.

“The bond,” he said, his voice a low rumble that seemed to vibrate through the very water around us. “It is stronger than I anticipated. You are tapping into hydrokinetic resonance—a power that allows us to manipulate water on a molecular level. It should not have manifested for weeks, perhaps months. The bond is accelerating the process, weaving our life forces together, amplifying our individual abilities.”

I stared at him, my mind reeling. “What powers? What are you talking about?”

He didn’t answer, only continued to study me with that unsettling intensity. I felt exposed, vulnerable, like he could see straight through to my soul.

“Krak’zol—”

My words were cut short as a tremor shook the training chamber. The glowing fish in the walls flickered, their gentle pulsing disrupted by a sudden, violent surge.

“What’s happening?” I asked, instinctively moving closer to Krak’zol.

His eyes narrowed, his senses on high alert. “Rynor,” he growled. “He’s attacking.”

Even as he spoke, a section of the chamber wall exploded inward, sending shards of

living coral flying through the water. A figure emerged from the breach, sleek and serpentine, with scales the color of congealed blood.

It wasn't Rynor himself, but one of his elite assassins, a scout sent ahead to probe for weaknesses—and, I suspected, to test me. Rynor knew about the bond; he was trying to gauge my abilities, to see if I was a threat.

Instinct took over. I threw up my hands, creating a shield of water, just as I did moments before. But this time, it was different. The water didn't just deflect the attack—it exploded outward, a concussive wave of force that threw the scout backward, slamming it against the opposite wall.

The creature recovered quickly, its eyes burning with hatred. It lunged again, and this time, Krak'zol moved to intercept it.

But I was already moving, too.

It was like we were dancing, a deadly ballet of predator and prey. We moved in perfect synchronization, anticipating each other's movements, our bodies flowing together like two currents merging into one.

I used the water as a weapon, creating blades of compressed fluid that sliced through the water, forcing the scout to retreat. Krak'zol's tail lashed out, a blur of motion that cracked against the creature's scales, drawing a hiss of pain.

We fought together, seamlessly, instinctively. It was like we'd been doing this for years, not minutes. The bond between us was a tangible thing, a conduit of power that amplified our strength, our speed, our ferocity.

The scout was skilled, powerful, but it was no match for the two of us. We drove it back, forcing it to retreat through the breach it created.

As the creature disappeared into the darkness, I turned to Krak'zol, my heart pounding in my chest. My body hummed with residual energy, my scales still glowing with that strange, inner light. A young Leviathan guard swam past, offering me a respectful nod and a brief, admiring glance at my glowing scales. Krak'zol's tail twitched, a barely perceptible movement, but I felt the sudden tension in the water around him, a possessive ripple that sent a shiver down my spine. The guard quickly averted his gaze, swimming away with a hasty bow towards Krak'zol.

He looked at me, his eyes filled with a mixture of pride and something else... something that made my breath catch in my throat.

"You fought well, little warrior," he said, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers down my spine.

I wanted to retort, to tell him I wasn't this little anything. But the words died in my throat. The fight had changed something between us, deepened the connection that I'd been trying so hard to resist.

I noticed a small cut on Krak'zol's arm, a thin line of crimson against his dark scales. Without thinking, I reached out and touched it, my fingers tracing the edges of the wound.

He went completely still, his muscles locking beneath my touch. His eyes darkened, his pupils dilating until they almost swallowed the silver.

"Imoogeen," he breathed, my name a raw, guttural sound that sent a wave of heat through my core.

I didn't know what I was doing, what I was feeling. All I knew was that I needed to be close to him, to feel the steady beat of his heart beneath my fingertips.

As if of their own volition, my fingers continued their exploration, tracing the contours of his arm, feeling the play of muscle and sinew beneath his scaled skin. His scent, that intoxicating mix of salt and iron, filled my senses, clouding my thoughts.

“You’re healing,” I murmured, noticing that the cut was already closing, the edges knitting together with astonishing speed. It was another sign of my changing physiology, another step further away from my humanity.

“We heal quickly,” he said, his voice rough, strained. “Especially when...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but he didn’t need to. The unspoken words hung in the water between us, heavy with unspoken meaning. Especially when bonded. Especially when touched by our mate.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

I should pull away, should break this spell that was binding us together. But I couldn't. I was caught, trapped in the orbit of his presence, drawn to him with a force that defied logic, defied reason.

My gaze flickered to his mouth, to those full lips that hid such dangerous beauty. I remembered the feel of his fangs against my skin, the sharp sting of the bond-bite, the rush of his venom flooding my veins.

It shouldn't be arousing. It should be terrifying. But it wasn't. It was... exhilarating.

"Imoogeen," he said again, my name a plea, a warning, a promise.

And then, he closed the distance between us.

Chapter eight

KRAK'ZOL

Theadrenalineofthefight fades, leaving behind a raw, throbbing awareness of Imoogeen. Her scent, heightened by exertion and the strange, electric energy that still crackles around her, fills the water. It is a heady mix of human and Leviathan, of defiance and a burgeoning power that calls to something deep within me.

"Come," I rumble, taking her hand. "There's a place within my private chambers where the waters accelerate healing. It will help with the lingering effects of the venom...and the changes."

She doesn't resist as I lead her through a labyrinth of corridors, each turn spiraling deeper into the heart of my palace. Here, the stone gives way to living coral, sculpted by centuries of growth and the ebb and flow of Abyssian tides. Bioluminescent creatures throb within the walls, painting the passageways in hues that shift with every pulse. It must be a stark contrast to the cold, metal cage of her ship, and I watch her, searching for a flicker of recognition, a spark of understanding in those wary green eyes.

My little warrior. She has endured horrors, stared down death, and accepted a transformation that would shatter most. Yet, here she walks, her emerald eyes absorbing this alien world with a blend of wariness and burgeoning curiosity. The sight of her stirs a fierce pride within me, a possessive satisfaction that thrums in my very marrow—she is becoming, and she is mine.

We reach a hidden alcove, veiled by a curtain of shimmering, bioluminescent kelp. I push it aside, revealing a chamber unlike any other in the Abyss. The walls are lined with crystals, massive geodes that thrum with a gentle, internal light. The water here is warmer, infused with minerals that swirl and shimmer like liquid starlight. It is a sacred place, a sanctuary where Leviathan rulers have retreated for centuries to heal, to meditate, to connect with the ancient power of the Abyss.

“What is this place?” Imoogeen breathes, her voice hushed with awe.

“A refuge,” I answer, watching as she runs a hand through the water, mesmerized by the way the minerals cling to her skin, making it glow with a faint, otherworldly luminescence. “The waters here possess properties...restorative properties. They will ease your transition.”

She looks at me, a question in her eyes. “Transition? You mean...becoming more like you?”



I nod, unable to resist reaching out to trace the emerging scales along her arm. They are more pronounced now, shimmering with a faint iridescence that echoes the colors of the crystal cave. “The venom accelerates the process, but it is also harsh. These waters will soothe the discomfort, help your body adapt. You will not become a monster, Imoogeen, but...more. More than human, more connected, more powerful. Yet, still you.”

She shivers at my touch but doesn't pull away. The air between us crackles with unspoken tension, a potent mix of fear, attraction, and the undeniable pull of the bond. It is a dangerous combination, intoxicating and volatile.

“Undress,” I command, my voice rougher than I intended.

Her eyes widen, and a spark of defiance flares. “Whoa, hold your seahorses, Kingy. I may be all bonded up, but I still call the shots when it comes to my wardrobe—or lack thereof.” She crosses her arms, a playful smirk tugging at her lips. “Besides, after that little sparring session, I think you owe me a striptease.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, a chuckle rumbles in my chest. “A tempting offer, little warrior, but time is of the essence. The waters will accelerate your healing. And besides...” I step closer, my voice dropping to a husky murmur, “I suspect I'll have ample opportunity to see you...unburdened...later.”

A blush creeps up her neck, but she doesn't back down. “Fine,” she concedes, her gaze challenging. “But don't think this means I'm going all docile queen on you. I get to pick the music next time.” With a playful roll of her eyes, she unfastens the unfamiliar human clothing she wears slowly, hesitantly, revealing the curves and planes of her body. The sight of her, bathed in the ethereal glow of the crystal cave, steals the breath from my lungs. She is magnificent—a warrior's strength tempered by a delicate beauty that makes my claws ache with the need to touch, to protect, to possess.

She steps into the water, the shimmering liquid rising to encircle her waist. The effect is mesmerizing. The minerals cling to her skin, highlighting the subtle changes already wrought by the venom: the faint shimmer of pale scales, the elongated curve of her neck, the way her eyes seem to glow with an inner light. She is becoming something more, something...other.

I follow her into the water, the warmth enveloping me like a lover's embrace. I watch as she closes her eyes, her head tilting back, her expression a mixture of apprehension and...something else—something that makes my heart pound in my chest like a war drum.

“Relax, Imoogeen,” I murmur, moving closer. “Let the waters work their magic. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

She opens her eyes, her gaze meeting mine. There's a vulnerability there that I haven't seen before, a raw honesty that strips away her defenses. It is intoxicating, terrifying.

“God, I don't know,” she admits, her voice barely audible over the crystal's hum. “It's just...a lot. One minute I'm fighting aliens; the next I'm sprouting scales and practically married to a sea king. I don't even recognize myself anymore.”

The admission pierces me, a sharp pang of guilt that cuts through my possessive instincts. I brought her here, forced this transformation upon her. Yet, I can't regret it—not when the bond sings between us, a vibrant, undeniable force that binds us together.

“You are not losing yourself,” I say, my voice firm, reassuring. “You are evolving, Imoogeen. Shedding the constraints of mortality, embracing a legacy intertwined with the very fabric of this Abyss. You are becoming something...magnificent.”

I reach for her, my hand hovering over the curve of her shoulder, hesitant for once. It is a strange feeling, this uncertainty. I am used to taking what I want, to dominating, to controlling. But with Imoogeen, there's a different impulse: a need to protect, to cherish, to...earn her trust.

She meets my gaze, her green eyes searching, questioning. And then, she nods, a silent invitation that sends a surge of heat through my veins.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:07 am*

I touch her, my fingers tracing the line of her collarbone, the delicate curve of her neck, the faint, shimmering scales that now adorn her skin. She shivers but doesn't pull away. Her pulse quickens, a rapid flutter that echoes the frantic beat of my own heart.

"You are beautiful," I whisper, the words raw, honest. It is not a compliment, not a seduction. It is a statement of fact, an acknowledgment of the profound effect she has on me.

Her eyes darken, her pupils dilating until they almost swallow the green. She reaches for me, her hand hesitant at first, then bolder, her fingers tracing the contours of my scaled arm, the ridges along my spine.

"Show me," she whispers, her voice a husky murmur that sends a shiver down my spine. "Show me what you really are."

She asks to see the monster, yet I fear showing her the beast I truly am. What if the sight of me, fully unleashed, drives that spark of defiance from her eyes? What if she turns away? But the request, the vulnerability in her voice, unleashes something within me. The control I've been maintaining, the careful restraint, shatters. I let my form shift, revealing more of my true Leviathan nature.

My scales darken; patterns of glowing scales emerge across my skin, dazzling with an intensity that rivals the crystals surrounding us. My tail lengthens, becoming more serpentine, the tip twitching with barely contained energy. Spines unfurl along my back, sharp and dangerous, and my fangs lengthen, fully visible now, even with my mouth closed.

It is a monstrous transformation, a display of raw power that should terrify her. I watch her closely, my silver eyes searching for any sign of fear, of revulsion. It is a vulnerability I haven't allowed myself to feel in centuries, this need for acceptance, for...approval.

But there's no fear in her eyes—only wonder.

She reaches for me, her fingers tracing the glowing patterns on my chest, the sharp ridges of my spines, the smooth, powerful curve of my tail. Her touch is light, tentative, but it sends shockwaves of sensation through me, a jolt of pure, unadulterated pleasure that makes me shudder.

"There you are," she whispers, her voice filled with a strange awe that makes my heart ache with a tenderness I never knew I was capable of.

It is not fear she is showing, not a question. It is like she sees me, the real me, the monster I try to keep chained down. And at that moment, something inside me just...cracks. Everything I keep buried? It just floods out.

I pull her closer, my arms encircling her, my tail curling possessively around her waist. The contrast between us is stark—her soft, human flesh against my scaled hide; her delicate curves against my massive, powerful frame. Yet, it feels right, perfect.

"Imoogeen," I growl, my voice a raw, guttural sound that vibrates through the water. "Mine."

It is not a question, not a plea. It is a statement of fact, a primal claim that echoes through the centuries of Leviathan history. She is mine, bound to me by the venom, by the bond, by a force more ancient and powerful than anything in the Abyss.

She doesn't argue, doesn't resist. She meets my gaze, her eyes holding the same intensity as mine.

"Yours," she whispers, the word a promise, a surrender.

And then, I kiss her.

It is not a gentle kiss, not a tentative exploration. It is a claiming, a fusion of two beings, two souls, two destinies. My fangs graze her lips, a deliberate reminder of the power I hold, the bond that binds us. But there's tenderness too, a reverence that surprises even me.

She returns the kiss, her arms tightening around my neck, fingers sinking into my damp hair—fierce, demanding—a challenge that ignites the leviathan in me. This isn't tender; it is a battle, a dance between what she wants to yield and what I need to claim.

The water whips around us, reacting to the storm inside. The crystals throb, their song rising, vibrating through the very bones of the Abyss. Everything bends to the heat between us.

I deepen the kiss, my tongue claiming hers, tasting the salt, the sweetness, the metallic tang of my venom now coursing through her veins—addictive—a constant reminder that she is changing, that she is mine.

My hands roam, staking my claim: waist, hips, the delicate line of her spine. Her skin is soft, so incredibly soft, yet beneath it, I feel the subtle shift, the scales emerging, the hum of power building within her.

She moans, a soft sound that drives a spike of pure lust through me. I drag her closer, crushing her against me, feeling the frantic thrum of her heart against my chest,

echoing the beast inside me.

Without thought, my tail wraps around her ankle, a possessive act. I don't even realize I am doing it until I feel the faint tension in her muscles—primal—a need to bind her, to possess her, to protect her from everything.

I lift her, her legs clamping around my waist, her softness a shock against my scales. Every inch of her body pressed to mine is a brand. The thrill of it is a jolt—raw and possessive.

She gasps, her fingers digging into my shoulders, nails scraping my skin. A primitive part of me wants her to draw blood, to leave a mark as permanent as the one I left on her neck. I can feel her resistance breaking, the fight leaving her. This isn't surrender; it is an acceptance. She knows, on some primal level, that she is mine.

“Krak'zol,” she breathes, my name rough and needy on her lips—a plea and a challenge, all in one breath.

I move within her, slow and deliberate at first, savoring the feel of her body surrounding me, the tight, delicious friction that sends waves of pleasure through me. She responds in kind, her hips meeting my thrusts, her body moving with a natural rhythm that seems to anticipate my every move.

We find a rhythm, a dance of pleasure and surrender, of dominance and submission, of two souls merging into one. The water around us swirls, shimmers, responding to the intensity of our emotions. The crystals in the walls pulse with a brighter light, their gentle hum deepening into a resonant chord that seems to vibrate through the very fabric of the Abyss. I don't waste words. I answer the unspoken demand, my fangs dragging against the sensitive curve of her neck, right over my mark. She arches, offering herself—giving herself, finally.

And then, I slide inside her. No gentleness, no prelude—just a deep, possessive thrust that steals her breath and makes her cry out, a sound that fuels the leviathan in me. I fill her completely, stretching her, claiming her. She is so tight, so hot, it is almost unbearable.



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

It is a joining, a merging, a violent fusion of two beings into one. The water around us churns, the crystals pulse, the very air crackles with energy. It is raw, primal, intense. I grip her hips, holding her still as I pump into her, each thrust deeper than the last, making her mine, branding her soul with my touch.

I whisper Leviathan words against her skin, ancient claiming rituals that haven't been spoken in centuries because no mate has been worthy.

“What do they mean?” she gasps, her voice breathless.

“They bind us,” I admit, nipping at her lower lip, “soul to soul. They are words spoken only once, to the one true mate.”

Her eyes widen—understanding, then a flicker of fear and awe. It doesn't matter. Too late. She is mine now, bound by something older and stronger than the Abyss itself.

We move as one. I am lost in the moment, lost in her and the way we fit so perfectly together. A feeling so foreign that I almost missed the faint tremor in the crystal song, a discordant note that would soon shatter our fragile peace. Nothing exists but this—the press of her skin, the sound of her gasps, the way she clenches around me. A primal rhythm takes over, a dance of bodies and souls. I grip her hips, lifting her higher, driving deeper until she is impaled on my length. She cries out, a wild, untamed sound that makes my inner leviathan roar with satisfaction. This is it. This is her.

I will claim her, body and soul. Her heat wraps around me, a tightening vise that steals my breath. I surge again, deeper this time, feeling the slick heat and her

answering gasp of pleasure. I'll mark her, inside and out, until every inch of her body knows she is mine. My fangs find the sensitive hollow of her throat, nipping, claiming. She twists in my grasp, a wild creature caught in my snare, and I can't help the growl that rumbles in my chest. She smells of sea salt and arousal, a heady combination that drives me closer to the edge. Her muscles clench around me, milking me with each thrust. She is a storm, a tempest of sensation that threatens to drown me in her heat.

I thrust harder, faster, driving her higher and higher until she shatters. Her cry is a symphony of pleasure and pain, a sound that echoes through the crystal cave. I feel her contractions, the pulsing waves of her climax tightening around me, and I lose myself in the sensation. Every muscle in my body tenses. I can't hold back any longer. I surge one last time, driving deep into her core, and unleash my seed. The force of my climax is like a tidal wave, washing over us both, leaving us gasping and breathless in its wake. I hold her tight, my body trembling with the aftershocks of pleasure, knowing that she is now irrevocably mine.

And then, the kelp curtain parts, and Zorath shuffles in, his face etched with worry. He stops dead, his eyes widening as he takes in the scene: the shimmering water, the lingering scent of arousal, and Imoogeen standing beside me, her expression a mix of defiance and...well, something else entirely.

Zorath coughs, averting his gaze. "My king, forgive the intrusion, but Rynor—"

"Must he attack now?" I growl, the pleasure of moments ago replaced by a surge of icy annoyance. What precious time I could steal with my mate, ruined. My claws extend, carving grooves in the crystal floor. I shift, subtly shielding Imoogeen from Zorath's gaze; she remains wrapped in my arms, still flushed from our joining.

Imoogeen steps forward slightly, her hand finding mine. Her touch grounds me, pulls me back from the brink. "What's happening, Zorath?"

The advisor hesitates, clearly uncomfortable discussing matters of war in such a...delicate setting. “Rynor has broken through the outer defenses. He is heading for the Heart of the Deep.”

My blood boils. The Heart is the source of all our power, the lifeblood of the Abyss. If Rynor corrupts it...

“How did he breach the defenses?” I demand, my voice a low rumble that shakes the chamber.

“We don’t know, my king. It is as if he knew the weaknesses, the hidden passages...” Zorath trails off, his gaze darting nervously between Imoogeen and me.

“Treachery,” I realize, the word a venomous hiss. “Rynor didn’t just attack. He knew where to strike. Someone betrayed us, exploited the Abyss’s secrets.”

Imoogeen’s eyes widen, the pupils swallowing the green. “Then we have to stop him.”

I nod, my resolve hardening. “We have to go. Now.”

I wrench myself away from her, the loss a physical ache. Every instinct screams at me to keep her safe, to protect her from the coming storm. But I can’t. The Abyss is in danger, and she is the only one who can help me save it.

## Chapter nine

### IMOGEN

Myskinstilltingles—notjust from the residual pleasure of Krak’zol’s touch, but from something deeper: the venom working its changes through me. I can feel it in the way

water now feels like a second skin, in how the currents whisper secrets against my newly sensitive scales, in how the darkness of the Abyss no longer blinds me but reveals its hidden contours.

I've barely had time to process what just happened between us—that earth-shattering, universe-altering joining that's left me feeling both impossibly stronger and terrifyingly vulnerable—before we're racing through the palace corridors, following Zorath's urgent lead.

“The Heart of the Deep,” Krak'zol explains as we swim, his powerful tail propelling him forward while I struggle to match his pace. “It's the source of all power in the Abyss—a crystal formation older than time itself. If Rynor corrupts it—”

“Let me guess. We all die horrible deaths, and he gets to rule whatever's left?” I finish for him, surprised at how easily I'm slipping into the rhythm of his movements, my body instinctively mimicking his undulating pattern through the water.

“Worse,” he growls, silver eyes flashing. “The Heart doesn't just power the Abyss. It maintains the balance of the entire oceanic ecosystem on Sanos. If corrupted, it could poison the currents, kill the reefs that sustain our people, and collapse the underwater kingdoms that have existed for millennia.”

Well, shit. That escalated quickly from “secure a new home for humanity” to “prevent ecological catastrophe across an entire planet.” The thought of all those ocean realms—places I'd barely glimpsed but had already begun to marvel at—reduced to dead zones makes my stomach clench. If Rynor succeeds, there won't be any safe harbor for the USS Legacy. No future for the thousands of sleeping humans counting on me. Just another poisoned ocean, like the one we left behind on Earth. I didn't cross galaxies just to watch history repeat itself.

We enter a vast chamber where several of Krak'zol's warriors have gathered, their

expressions grim. Tension thickens the water, making it feel heavy against my skin. I notice how they part for us—for me—with a mixture of curiosity and something that looks suspiciously like respect. One warrior's gaze lingers on my neck, where Krak'zol's mark pulses with a faint luminescence. He immediately drops his eyes and inclines his head.

That's... new.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

“Report,” Krak’zol demands, his voice reverberating through the chamber.

Vara, the female warrior I’d met briefly before, steps forward. “My King, Rynor breached the outer sanctum through the western corridor—a passage that should have been impenetrable. Our defenses were compromised from within.”

“How many guards were stationed there?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Vara’s eyes widen slightly, surprised at my interruption, but she answers promptly. “Four of our strongest warriors, Lieutenant Vance. All found unconscious, not killed.”

Interesting. I frown, military training kicking in. “That’s... specific. Unconscious means either Rynor didn’t want to kill his own kind, or he needed to preserve something. Information, maybe?”

Krak’zol turns to me, one eyebrow raised. “What are you thinking?”

I move forward, studying the holographic map Zorath has projected into the water. It shimmers with glowing detail, showing the palace’s labyrinthine structure. “In my experience, when someone knows exactly where to hit and how to disable specific defenses, it’s because they have inside information.” My finger traces the path of Rynor’s attack. “These aren’t random strikes. They’re surgical. Precise.”

The warriors exchange glances, and I catch the subtle shift in their posture—a newfound wariness that spreads through the room like ripples in still water.

“You suggest treachery within my court?” Krak’zol’s voice drops dangerously low.

“I’m saying the evidence points that way.” I meet his gaze steadily. “Rynor knew exactly which corridors to target, which guards would be where, and precisely how to disable your security measures. That’s not luck or even good reconnaissance. That’s someone feeding him information.”

A murmur ripples through the gathered warriors. Krak’zol’s jaw tightens, the ridges along his spine flaring slightly—a tell I’m starting to recognize as agitation.

“If what you say is true,” he rumbles, “then the traitor could be anyone.”

“Not anyone,” I correct, studying the pattern of breaches more carefully. “Someone with access to your security rotations, someone who knows the palace intimately.” I pause, noticing something. “These attacks all happened during shift changes. Who would know exactly when those occur?”

The room falls silent. I can practically hear the mental calculations happening as each warrior considers the implications.

“Only the high council and my personal advisors have access to that information,” Krak’zol says slowly, his silver eyes narrowing.

I scan the faces around me, training kicking in. Years of reading micro-expressions during interrogations has made me sensitive to the tells of deception. Most of the warriors look appropriately concerned or angry. But there’s one face that stands out—not for what it shows, but for what it carefully doesn’t.

Nira, the gentle healer, stands slightly apart from the others. Her expression is perfectly composed, but her fingers twist nervously around a pendant at her neck. When Zorath moves to examine another section of the map, her eyes follow him with

a flash of... something. Fear? Concern?

“What about communications?” I ask, keeping my tone casual. “Has anyone been sending messages outside the normal channels?”

Zorath stiffens almost imperceptibly. If I hadn’t been watching for it, I would have missed it entirely.

“Our communications are secure,” he responds, a touch too quickly. “I personally oversee all outgoing messages.”

Perfect position to filter information, I think but don’t say. Instead, I nod thoughtfully. “Then perhaps we should use that to our advantage. Feed false information through the official channels and see where Rynor strikes next.”

Krak’zol’s eyes meet mine, understanding dawning. He catches my subtle glance toward Zorath and inclines his head slightly. We’re on the same wavelength.

“An excellent strategy,” he agrees, his voice betraying nothing. “Zorath, prepare a security briefing indicating that we’re moving additional forces to protect the eastern chamber. Make it appear as though we’re anticipating Rynor’s next move there.”

“At once, my king.” Zorath bows and moves to leave.

“And Zorath,” Krak’zol adds, his tone deceptively casual, “bring Nira with you. Her healing skills may be needed for the wounded.”

Nira’s head snaps up, her eyes widening fractionally before she schools her features. “Of course, my king.”

As they leave, I move closer to Krak’zol, lowering my voice. “You saw it too?”



“The way she watches him? Yes.” His hand finds the small of my back, a light touch that sends warmth cascading through me. “And the way he carefully avoids looking at her. There’s history there.”

“More than history,” I murmur. “Did you notice her pendant? It contains a fragment of the same crystal type as his ceremonial dagger. In human terms, that’s practically wearing someone’s class ring.”

A low rumble of amusement vibrates from his chest. “Your eyes miss nothing, little warrior.” There’s pride in his voice that makes something flutter in my chest. “Now we wait.”

We don't wait long.

Within an hour, our scouts report Rynor's forces mobilizing toward the eastern chamber—exactly where our false information indicated we'd be reinforcing defenses.

“The trap is sprung,” Krak'zol growls, satisfaction evident in his voice. “Vara, take your warriors and intercept Rynor's forces. Keep them occupied, but do not engage directly. I want them distracted, not defeated.”

Vara pounds her chest in acknowledgment and departs with a contingent of warriors.

“And now for our traitor,” I say quietly.

We find Zorath in his private chambers, frantically gathering what appears to be travel provisions. He freezes when we enter, his expression cycling rapidly through shock, fear, and finally resignation.

“My king,” he says softly, lowering his head. “I expected you sooner.”

“Did you?” Krak'zol's voice is deadly calm. “Just as Rynor expected our forces in the eastern chamber?”

Zorath flinches but doesn't deny it. “You don't understand—”

“Then explain,” I interject, stepping forward. “Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you betrayed your king, your people, and everything you've sworn to

protect.”

His eyes flick to mine, surprise evident at my intervention. “It’s not that simple, human.”

“It never is,” I agree, crossing my arms. “So make it simple.”

Before he can respond, the door opens again, and Nira enters. She stops short at the sight of us, her hand flying to her mouth. “No,” she whispers. “Zorath, no.”

The look that passes between them confirms everything. It’s not just guilt I see in Zorath’s eyes—it’s anguish, love, and desperation.

“He has her sister,” Zorath says finally, his voice breaking. “Rynor captured Nira’s sister months ago. He threatened to—” He can’t finish.

Nira moves to his side, her hand finding his. “We were bonded in secret,” she explains, her voice trembling. “Against tradition, against protocol. Zorath was your advisor, and I was just a healer. Such a union would never have been sanctioned.”

“So Rynor discovered your secret and used it against you,” Krak’zol concludes, his expression unreadable.

Zorath nods miserably. “He promised to release her sister if I provided information. Just small things at first—guard rotations, security protocols. Then larger things. Each time, he swore it would be the last.”

“But it never is with blackmailers,” I murmur, familiar with the pattern from countless hostage situations back on Earth.

“I knew what I was doing was unforgivable,” Zorath continues, his shoulders

slumping. “But I couldn’t—we couldn’t—let Bethra die. She’s all Nira has left of her family.”

The chamber falls silent. I watch Krak’zol, curious how he’ll respond. In his position, many human commanders would execute the traitor on the spot, regardless of motivation. The cold calculus of leadership often demands such harsh justice.

But there’s more at play here than simple betrayal. I can see it in the way Krak’zol’s gaze shifts between Zorath and Nira, in the subtle softening around his eyes. He understands what it means to be driven by a bond, to be willing to sacrifice everything for the one who holds your heart. He’s feeling it now, with me.

“Where is Bethra being held?” I ask, breaking the tense silence.

Zorath looks up, confusion evident. “In Rynor’s fortress, beneath the Sundered Reef. But why—”

“Because we’re going to get her back,” I state simply, as if it’s already decided. I turn to Krak’zol. “Rynor’s forces are currently engaged with Vara’s warriors, which means his fortress is likely undermanned. If we move quickly, we could extract Bethra and turn this situation to our advantage.”

Krak’zol studies me, his silver eyes gleaming with something that looks suspiciously like admiration. “And what advantage would that be, Imogen?”

I allow myself a small smile. “Zorath has been feeding Rynor information for months. Rynor trusts that information implicitly. If we control what Zorath tells him...”

“We control Rynor’s next move,” Krak’zol finishes, a predatory grin spreading across his face. “Clever, little warrior. Very clever.”

Zorath looks between us, disbelief etched on his features. “You would... use me as a double agent? Rather than execute me for treason?”

“Death is easy,” I shrug. “Making amends is harder. This way, you get a chance to right your wrongs and save Nira’s sister. Seems like a better outcome for everyone.”

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

“The traditional punishment for treason is execution,” one of the elder warriors interjects, his voice hard with disapproval. “Our laws are clear.”

Several others murmur in agreement, their gazes fixed on Krak’zol, waiting for his judgment. This is a test, I realize—not just of Zorath’s loyalty, but of Krak’zol’s leadership and my influence over him.

Krak’zol straightens, his massive form seeming to fill the chamber. The ridges along his spine flare, his tail lashing once with barely contained power. When he speaks, his voice carries the weight of ancient authority.

“Our traditions exist to protect our people and preserve our way of life,” he states, each word measured and deliberate. “But a king who cannot adapt, who cannot show wisdom in the face of new challenges, is no true king at all.”

He moves to stand beside me, his hand finding the small of my back in a gesture that feels both protective and declarative. The message is clear: we stand united.

“Zorath has committed treason, yes. But his motivation was not malice or ambition—it was love. A bond as sacred as any in our traditions.” Krak’zol’s gaze sweeps the room. “I will not punish loyalty to one’s mate with death. Instead, I offer redemption through service.”

A ripple of surprise moves through the gathered warriors. Some look uncertain, others approving. I notice how they look at me differently now—not as an outsider, but as someone with influence, with power.

As their queen.

The thought should terrify me. Instead, it settles over me with surprising rightness, like slipping into water that's the perfect temperature.

"Prepare a strike team," Krak'zol commands. "We move on Rynor's fortress at nightfall. Zorath and Nira will accompany us—their knowledge will be essential."

As the warriors disperse to carry out his orders, Krak'zol turns to me, his expression softening slightly. "You've changed the course of Leviathan justice today, Imogen. Not many could have done that."

I shrug, trying to ignore the warm glow his approval kindles in my chest. "I just applied a little human diplomacy to an underwater problem. Besides, executing your best intelligence asset seems like a waste of resources."

His laugh is a low rumble that I feel more than hear. "Always the tactician." His clawed hand gently tilts my chin up, his silver eyes searching mine. "But there was more than strategy in your advocacy. There was compassion. It's... not a quality prized among Leviathans. Yet I find myself valuing it in you."

The admission feels weighty, significant. Before I can respond, he continues, his voice dropping to a whisper that sends shivers across my skin.

"We move against Rynor tonight. The battle ahead will be dangerous, possibly deadly. If there is anything left unspoken between us, Imogen, now is the time."

My heart hammers against my ribs. There's so much unsaid, so much I'm still processing: The changes in my body, the bond between us, the way I'm starting to think of the Abyss as home rather than hostile territory, the terrifying reality that I might be falling for him—this alien king who claimed me as his own.

But what comes out is much simpler.

“Just don’t die,” I tell him, my voice rougher than intended. “I’m just starting to like you, and I’d hate to have to rule this underwater kingdom all by myself.”

His answering smile is fierce and possessive, full of promise. “As my queen commands.”

Later, returning to my chambers to prepare for the mission, I find a small, luminescent pearl resting on my pillow. It glows with an inner light that shifts and pulses like a tiny captured star. No note accompanies it, but I don’t need one to know who left it there.

I lift it carefully between my fingers, marveling at how something so small can feel so weighty with meaning. The pearl’s surface catches the light, refracting it into tiny rainbows that dance across my palm. Whatever this is, it’s not just decoration—it’s something precious, something meaningful.

My throat tightens unexpectedly as I close my fist around it. I’ve received medals, commendations, even the occasional token of appreciation from comrades, but nothing has ever felt like this—like holding a piece of someone’s heart in my hand. I don’t know what this pearl means in Leviathan culture, but I understand what it means coming from him.

This is Krak’zol—fierce, domineering, ruthless Krak’zol—acknowledging my judgment, thanking me, perhaps even telling me he’s proud.

“Damn you,” I whisper, but there’s no heat in it, just a strange, unfamiliar warmth spreading through my chest that I’m not quite ready to name. I slip the pearl into the small pocket near my heart, where I can feel its gentle pressure against my skin as I move.



It shouldn't matter this much. It shouldn't make me feel this way.

But it does.

Chapter ten

KRAK'ZOL

The ancient corridors leading to the Heart pulsed with an energy I could feel through my scales, a vibration that grew stronger with each powerful stroke of my tail. Beside me, Imoogeen moved with increasing grace through the water, her transformation progressing faster than I had anticipated. The venom bond had taken hold completely, her body adapting to survive in my world.

And survive she must. Tonight, we faced Rynor, and I would not lose her when I had only just found her.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

“These passages weren’t on any of the maps,” she observed, her keen eyes scanning the crystalline walls that grew more luminescent the deeper we traveled. Small flecks of bioluminescent algae clung to the ancient stone, casting her in an ethereal blue glow that accentuated the delicate pattern of scales now visible along her collarbones.

“They wouldn’t be,” I responded, watching how her fingers traced the carved symbols etched into the corridor walls. “The path to the Heart is known only to the ruling bloodline and the sacred guardians. Even Zorath has never ventured this deep.”

Her eyebrow arched in that challenging way that sent heat coursing through my veins. “Yet you’re bringing me here.”

“You are my queen.” The words emerged more possessively than intended. “Whether you have accepted the title or not.”

She didn’t argue, which surprised me. Instead, she studied the way the water currents shifted around us, carrying particles of light that swirled in our wake like tiny stars.

“These symbols,” she said, changing the subject. “They’re similar to the markings on your skin. The ones that glow when you’re—”

“When I’m aroused?” I finished, enjoying the subtle darkening of her cheeks. Even now, after she had surrendered to our bond, her human modesty surfaced in these small, endearing ways. “Yes. They tell the history of my bloodline, our connection to the Deep.”

We approached a vast archway where two guardians stood sentinel, their ancient

forms more serpentine than my own, with elongated spines and ceremonial armor that had grown into their bodies over centuries of service. Their eyes, clouded with age but sharp with awareness, fixed upon us immediately.

“King Krak’zol,” the elder guardian intoned, his voice like stone grinding against stone. “You bring an outsider to the sacred Heart?”

I drew myself to my full height, feeling the royal markings along my spine begin to pulse with proximity to the Heart’s energy. “I bring Queen Imoogeen, Bonded of the Deep, Shield of Two Worlds.”

Beside me, Imoogeen stiffened slightly at the formal title. I felt a tremor pass through the water between us—surprise, uncertainty, and, beneath it all, a reluctant pride that she could not quite suppress.

The guardians studied her for a long moment, their ancient eyes unblinking. Then, as one, they inclined their heads and parted, revealing the chamber beyond.

“The Heart awaits,” the younger guardian said. “It has been restless these past cycles. Perhaps it sensed her coming.”

Before we entered, I reached for Imoogeen, adjusting a piece of ceremonial armor on her shoulder—a curved plate of iridescent shell that I had commissioned for her in secret days ago. “It was my mother’s,” I said simply, watching her eyes widen at the significance.

The piece sat perfectly against her smaller frame, the royal insignia catching the ambient light. She was transformed in this moment—not just physically by my venom, but in presence. She carried herself like a warrior queen, her human resilience blending with Leviathan grace in a way that made my chest tighten with a possessive pride I’d never experienced before.

“Ready?” I asked, offering my hand.

She took it without hesitation, her fingers intertwining with mine despite the difference in our forms. “Lead on, Your Majesty.”

The Heart’s chamber opened before us, a vast cathedral of living crystal that stretched beyond sight, its ceiling lost in darkness far above. At its center floated the Heart itself—not a single crystal, as most believed, but a complex latticework of crystalline formations that pulsed with inner light, sending ripples of energy through the water in hypnotic patterns.

“It’s alive,” Imoogeen whispered, her voice filled with awe.

“In its way,” I confirmed, watching how the Heart’s light seemed drawn to her, tendrils of luminescence reaching out as we approached. “Not conscious as we understand it, but aware. It chooses the rulers of the Abyss, rejects those unworthy of its power.”

“And Rynor wants to control it.” Her eyes narrowed, taking in the strategic implications immediately. “If he corrupts this, he doesn’t just gain power—he rewrites the rules of succession.”

“More than that.” I guided her closer, feeling the energy intensify around us. “The Heart doesn’t just sustain our kingdom. It maintains the balance of all oceanic realms on Sanos. If corrupted, it would poison everything—the currents, the reefs, the very water that gives life.”

As we neared the center of the chamber, the Heart’s energy surged, responding to our presence. The royal markings along my body ignited fully, glowing with silver-blue light that pulsed in rhythm with my heartbeat. Imoogeen’s fingers traced one that curved across my forearm, her touch sending a shiver through me even in this sacred

place.

“They’re beautiful,” she murmured, watching the patterns shift and flow beneath her fingertips.

The Heart pulsed more intensely, bathing us in waves of light that seemed to penetrate to the core of our beings. I felt its ancient consciousness brushing against my mind, testing, evaluating—and then accepting, as it had since I first took the throne.

But then it turned its attention to Imoogeen, and the chamber filled with a light so bright it nearly blinded me.

“Krak’zol?” Uncertainty edged her voice as tendrils of energy encircled her, lifting her slightly from the chamber floor. “What’s happening?”

“The Heart recognizes you,” I breathed, watching in awe as her skin began to shimmer with faint patterns that mirrored my own royal markings—not permanent, but a manifestation of the Heart’s acceptance. “It’s showing you something. Don’t fight it.”

Her eyes closed, her face a canvas of shifting emotions as the Heart communicated with her in ways only she could perceive. I watched, torn between fascination and concern, as her body temporarily transformed further—her skin luminous with delicate scale patterns, her hair floating around her like a dark halo shot through with threads of bioluminescence.

She was the perfect balance of human and Leviathan in this moment—fierce and vulnerable, familiar and alien, mine and entirely her own.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

When her eyes finally opened, they shone with unshed tears and a newfound certainty.

“I saw Earth,” she whispered as the light receded, letting her drift back down beside me. “Not as it is now, with poisoned oceans and dying ecosystems. But healed. Restored.” Her voice strengthened. “The Heart showed me a future where humans and the kingdoms of Sanos work together—our technology and your natural power combining to heal both worlds.”

Hope flared in my chest, sharp and unexpected. “A true alliance, not just sanctuary for your people.”

“More than that.” She turned to face me fully, her expression transformed by what she’d witnessed. “A new beginning for both our species. But it also showed me what happens if Rynor succeeds.” Her voice hardened. “Death. Destruction on a scale that would make Earth’s ecological collapse look merciful.”

The Heart pulsed again, more urgently this time, and I understood what it was telling me. What must be done.

“Imoogeen.” I took both her hands in mine, feeling the weight of generations of Leviathan rulers who had stood in this exact spot. “The Heart has accepted you as my queen, but that makes you a primary target for Rynor. There is a ritual—ancient, seldom used—that would complete your transformation and bind you formally to the Abyss.”

Her eyes searched mine, wary but not retreating. “What would it mean? For me? For

us?”

“It would give you full Leviathan abilities while maintaining your human form. You would be stronger, faster, able to command the waters as I do.” I hesitated, knowing the cost. “But it would bind you irrevocably to the Abyss and its fate. If Rynor corrupts the Heart . . .”

“I would feel it. Suffer with it.” She finished my thought, always quick to grasp implications. “And there would be no going back to being fully human.”

I nodded, unwilling to deceive her about the gravity of this choice. “It is your decision, Imoogeen. I will not—”

“Do it,” she interrupted, her voice steady despite the gravity of her choice. “If this is what it takes to stop Rynor and secure a future for both our peoples, then do it.”

The certainty in her voice humbled me. This human woman, thrust into my world against her will, now stood ready to bind herself to its fate forever. For her people. For mine. For us.

I summoned the ancient priests who had been waiting silently in the shadows of the chamber, their forms so still they seemed part of the architecture. They moved forward now, carrying ceremonial implements carved from the same crystal as the Heart.

“The ritual requires an exchange,” I explained as they prepared. “My essence freely given to you, yours to me, beneath the Heart’s witness.”

A small smile curved her lips. “Doesn’t sound so different from what we’ve already done.”

Despite the solemnity of the moment, I found myself smiling in return. “Perhaps less pleasurable, but more permanent.”

The priests began chanting in the ancient tongue, their voices creating harmonics that made the water itself vibrate around us. I must recite the traditional vows, words passed down through countless generations of Leviathan rulers.

I began confidently, the familiar phrases flowing easily, until I reached a particularly complex passage. The ancient word caught in my throat, tangling my tongue momentarily. Imoogeen squeezed my hand—a gesture so human, so uniquely hers, that I couldn’t help smiling even amid the ceremony’s gravity.

The ritual reached its climax as the eldest priest presented a ceremonial blade made of heartstone. I took it, making a shallow cut across my palm before offering the blade to Imoogeen. She didn’t hesitate, drawing it across her own palm with a warrior’s steadiness.

When our bloodied hands clasped, the Heart erupted with a blinding white light, and a wave of raw power surged through me, searing my very essence. The water around us superheated, hissing and bubbling as it was forced into a swirling vortex. I could smell ozone and something ancient, primal, like the birth of stars. My blood sang with hers, a symphony of power and connection that resonated deep within my bones. I felt her blood mingling with mine, her essence becoming part of me as mine flowed into her.

The transformation was immediate and breathtaking. I watched, transfixed, as the delicate scales hardened and darkened, taking on the royal hue of my lineage. A primal surge of possessiveness ripped through me. Mine. She was utterly, irrevocably mine. The delicate scales that had begun to form along her body solidified and strengthened, taking on the royal blue-black hue of my lineage. Her eyes flashed silver momentarily before returning to their human green, now ringed with



luminescent silver. Most striking of all, the royal markings appeared permanently on her skin—subtle enough to pass for tattoos in the human world, but unmistakable to any Leviathan as the sign of a queen.

As the energy subsided, I did something no Leviathan king had done before. I kneeled before her in front of the assembled priests, reversing traditional roles to show that while I am king, she is not beneath me but truly my equal.

“Queen Imoogeen,” I pronounced, my voice carrying through the chamber. “Bonded of the Deep, Shield of Two Worlds.”

The priests murmured in surprise, but none dared object. The Heart had chosen, and its will was absolute.

Imoogeen regarded me with complex emotions swirling in her eyes—wonder, determination, and something deeper that neither of us was quite ready to name. She reached down, offering her hand to raise me back to my feet.

“Rise, Krak’zol,” she said, her voice carrying a new resonance that vibrated through the water. “We have a battle to win.”

## Chapter eleven

### IMOGEN

The royal markings on my skin pulse with a faint blue glow as I adjust to the weight of my new reality. Queen. The title still feels foreign on my tongue, but the power coursing through my veins is undeniable. I flex my fingers, watching the subtle shimmer of scales catch the ambient light of Krak’zol’s war chamber.

“You’re staring again,” I tell him without looking up. The bond between us has

heightened my awareness of his presence—the weight of his gaze is almost physical now.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

“You are... magnificent,” he rumbles from across the room, where he studies tactical maps with Zorath. The deep timbre of his voice sends an involuntary shiver down my spine.

“Save the flattery,” I reply, though warmth spreads across my cheeks. “We have more pressing concerns.”

Zorath clears his throat, clearly uncomfortable with our charged exchanges. The loyal advisor has been on edge since our return from the Heart, alternating between reverent bows in my direction and worried glances at the war table.

“Rynor’s forces have taken the eastern ridge,” he reports, gesturing to a three-dimensional projection of underwater territories. “His corruption spreads. Three more warrior pods have fallen under his influence.”

I approach the table, studying the map. Something nags at me—a pattern in Rynor’s movements that seems oddly familiar. “These attacks aren’t random. He’s systematically cutting off access points to the Heart while gathering resources.” I trace a finger along a deep trench. “But why take this outpost? It holds no strategic value for an assault on the Heart.”

Nira, who has been silently mixing healing salves in the corner, looks up sharply. “That’s where they took Bethra. My sister.”

The healer’s hands tremble slightly as all eyes turn to her. In the days I’ve known her, I’ve never seen the composed healer show such vulnerability.

“Your sister?” Krak’zol’s brow furrows. “You never mentioned she was captured.”

“Because I was told not to burden the king with personal matters during wartime,” Nira replies, her eyes downcast. “Bethra was studying ancient healing techniques in the eastern sanctuaries when Rynor’s forces took the ridge. She’s been his prisoner for three cycles now.”

The implications hit me immediately. “That’s why you’ve been helping me so readily. You’re hoping we’ll rescue her.”

Nira meets my gaze, unashamed. “She’s my only family. And now she’s held by a monster who twists minds to his will.”

I turn to Krak’zol, whose expression has hardened into something unreadable. I don’t need our bond to know what he’s thinking—a rescue mission is too risky, too personal, when the fate of kingdoms hangs in the balance.

“We need to get her out,” I say before he can object.

“Imoogeen.” His voice carries a warning. “Rynor would expect such sentiment. It could be a trap.”

“It’s not just sentiment.” I step closer to him, lowering my voice. “Think strategically. Nira and Zorath are your most loyal advisors. Rescuing Bethra secures their complete devotion. Plus, a prisoner from Rynor’s inner sanctum could provide critical intelligence about his plans for the Heart.”

I watch the calculations play out behind his silver eyes. He’s weighing risks against potential rewards, the soldier in him battling with the protective instinct that’s grown stronger since our bonding.

“You’ve been queen for less than a day,” he finally says, “and already you’re commanding rescue missions into enemy territory.”

“Is that a yes?” I raise an eyebrow.

A low rumble emanates from his chest—something between a growl and a laugh. “It’s an acknowledgment that arguing with you would waste valuable time.”

Zorath looks between us, clearly trying to hide his surprise at Krak’zol’s acquiescence. “The fortress is heavily guarded, my king. Rynor’s corrupted warriors patrol in overlapping patterns, and the waters surrounding it are laced with toxic elements that would weaken even your royal guard.”

“Then we don’t take the royal guard,” I say. “Just us. Krak’zol and I.”

“Absolutely not,” Zorath protests. “The king cannot risk—”

“The king,” Krak’zol interrupts, “will decide what risks are acceptable.” His eyes haven’t left mine. “You believe we can infiltrate undetected?”

I nod. “Our bond gives us an advantage. We can communicate silently, coordinate without signals that might alert his guards.” I turn back to the map. “Besides, two can move more quietly than an army.”

The plan comes together quickly. Nira provides detailed information about the fortress layout—she’d been there many times to visit her sister before Rynor’s betrayal. Zorath reluctantly offers intelligence on patrol patterns and guard rotations.

As we prepare to depart, Krak’zol draws me aside. From a ceremonial chest, he retrieves a small blade unlike any I’ve seen—its edge glimmers with an otherworldly blue light that intensifies as I reach for it.

“It’s made from heartstone,” he explains, placing it in my palm. “Rare, even among my kind. It responds to your energy signature now that you’re bonded to the Heart.”

I test its weight, feeling an odd resonance as I grip the hilt. “It feels... alive.”

“In a way, it is. It will always find its way back to you.” His massive hand closes over mine. “Like I would.”

The raw honesty in his voice catches me off guard. Before I can respond, he leans down, pressing his forehead against mine in a gesture that feels more intimate than any kiss.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

“Be careful, little queen,” he murmurs. “Your human recklessness concerns me.”

“Your overprotective hovering concerns me,” I counter, but there’s no bite in my words.

The waters grow colder and more turbid as we approach Rynor’s territory. Krak’zol and I swim side by side, our movements synchronized through the bond that pulses between us. His awareness, a warm, protective net, brushes against mine, searching the dark waters. I focus on the path, feeling the toxic currents like a physical pressure against my newly sensitive skin.

My transformation has given me abilities I’m still discovering—enhanced vision that cuts through the murky water, sensitive skin that detects minute changes in current and temperature. When a patrol of corrupted warriors approaches from the east, I sense them before I see them.

Three guards. Heavily armed. Moving in standard formation, I project through our bond.

Krak’zol’s response comes as a mixture of images and sensations rather than words—a hidden crevice in the reef wall to our right, the necessity of stillness, a warning about the guards’ enhanced senses.

We slip into the narrow space just as the patrol rounds the corner. The crevice is barely large enough for one Leviathan, let alone two. Krak’zol’s massive body presses against mine, his arm wrapping protectively around my waist to pull me deeper into the shadows.

The corrupted warriors pass slowly, their movements unnaturally synchronized. Their scales have a sickly green tinge, and their eyes glow with an eerie light that makes my stomach turn. Through our physical contact, I feel Krak'zol's rage building—these were once his people, now twisted into something unrecognizable.

Easy, I caution through the bond. Your anger ripples the water.

He responds by pulling me closer, his body curving around mine like a living shield. We remain motionless until the patrol disappears, communicating only through fleeting thoughts and impressions.

They're changing the patrol patterns, he observes as we emerge from hiding. Rynor grows more paranoid.

Or more prepared, I counter. He knows you'll come for the Heart eventually.

We approach the fortress from below, using natural formations in the sea floor to mask our approach. The structure looms before us—a grotesque parody of Krak'zol's palace, all sharp angles and unnatural geometries that seem to hurt the eye.

Bethra will be in the central chamber, I relay, recalling Nira's detailed description. Rynor keeps his most valuable prisoners close.

Krak'zol's response is tinged with concern. You sense the corruption growing stronger here. It will affect you more than me.

He's right. Even with my transformation, I'm still partly human. The corruption emanating from the fortress feels like static against my skin, uncomfortable but not yet painful.

I can handle it. My hand tightens on the heartstone blade, the smooth hilt suddenly



slick with a nervous sweat. My breath catches in my throat; a cold knot forms in my stomach. What if this doesn't work? What if I'm not strong enough? I shove the doubts down, but they linger like a bad taste.

We find an unguarded service tunnel—used for waste disposal, judging by the foul current flowing from it. The passage is narrow enough that Krak'zol must fold his massive shoulders inward, his powerful tail propelling us through the darkness.

Inside, the corruption is palpable—a sick energy that coats every surface. Guards patrol in rigid patterns, their movements mechanical and their eyes vacant. We dodge between patrols, using our bond to coordinate perfectly without words.

We're nearly discovered once when a guard changes direction unexpectedly. Krak'zol pulls me into an alcove, his body curving around mine protectively. His heart thunders against my back, a powerful rhythm that somehow steadies my own racing pulse.

The central chamber is exactly where Nira said it would be, but getting inside proves more difficult than anticipated. Four guards stand at the entrance, their weapons charged with the same sickly energy that permeates the fortress.

We need a distraction, I project to Krak'zol.

His response comes not as words but as a tactical plan—complete with timing and positioning. I nod, impressed by his strategic thinking.

Using the heartstone blade, I cut through a series of tubes along the wall—some kind of hydraulic system that helps regulate pressure within the fortress. Water begins to rush in uncontrolled bursts, setting off alarms that send the guards scrambling to investigate.

We slip inside the momentary chaos, finding ourselves in a vast chamber filled with containment pods. Most are empty, but in the center floats a single occupied pod. Inside is a female Leviathan who bears a striking resemblance to Nira—the same delicate facial structure and healer’s hands, but her scales have begun to take on the sickly green tinge of corruption.

Bethra, Krak’zol confirms through our bond.

I approach the pod carefully, searching for a release mechanism. The controls are unfamiliar, covered in symbols I can’t decipher.

Allow me. Krak’zol moves forward, his claws working quickly over the panel.

The pod hisses open, and Bethra’s eyes snap wide—not the warm amber of Nira’s, but a glowing toxic green. She lunges at me with unexpected speed, her hands curved into claws.

“Traitor queen!” she hisses, her voice distorted. “Rynor knows you’re coming. Rynor sees all!”

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

Krak'zol moves to intercept her, but I hold up a hand to stop him. This isn't Bethra speaking—it's the corruption using her voice.

"Nira sent us," I say calmly. "Your sister needs you."

Something flickers in those poisoned eyes—a moment of recognition quickly swallowed by rage. She launches herself at me again, but this time I'm ready. Using my new strength, I catch her wrists, holding her at bay.

"She's too far gone," Krak'zol growls. "We need to subdue her and leave before—"

"No," I interrupt. "I can reach her." An idea forms in my mind—dangerous, possibly foolish, but our only option. "The bond with the Heart gave me abilities. I can try to connect with her mind, break through the corruption."

Krak'zol's alarm pulses through our bond. The risk is too great. You could be infected.

"We didn't come this far to leave her behind." I meet his gaze steadily. "Trust me."

His silver eyes flicker, a storm raging beneath the surface. I feel the conflict through our bond – a clash of protectiveness and strategic calculation, a war between his heart and his duty as king. It's a fleeting tremor, gone in a heartbeat, but it leaves a raw, vulnerable energy in its wake. Finally, he moves behind me, his massive arms encircling both Bethra and me, creating a physical anchor.

"I will hold you both," he says, his voice low and fierce. "If you start to turn, I'll

break the connection immediately.”

I nod, then press my forehead against Bethra’s, closing my eyes to focus. The mental connection forms more easily than expected—a side effect of my transformation, perhaps. I push past her outer defenses, encountering waves of corrupted thoughts that burn like acid.

Rynor’s influence is everywhere, a tangled web of lies and compulsions. I search for Bethra’s true self beneath the corruption, following threads of memory—Nira and Bethra as children, swimming through sunlit shallows; Bethra studying ancient texts, her healer’s hands gentle and sure.

“Bethra,” I call to these memories. “Your sister is waiting. Come back.”

The corruption fights back, sending jolts of pain through my mind. Distorted images flash before me—Rynor standing before the Heart, draining its power; the oceans boiling with toxic energy; Krak’zol defeated, his people enslaved.

With horror, I realize these aren’t just nightmares—they’re Rynor’s plans. And at their center is a specific time: the celestial alignment three days from now, when the three moons of Sanos will form a perfect triangle above the Abyss.

“The Heart will be vulnerable then,” Bethra’s true voice whispers through the chaos. “That’s when he’ll strike.”

I grab onto this thread of her consciousness, pulling with all my strength. Help me fight him, Bethra. Show me how to break his hold.

Together, we push back against the corruption. It’s like swimming against a riptide, exhausting and seemingly futile, until suddenly we break through. Bethra gasps, her eyes clearing momentarily.

“Tell Nira... eastern sanctum... the text she seeks...” she manages before the corruption surges back.

I withdraw from her mind before it can trap me, but not before tendrils of the toxic influence seep into my consciousness. The world tilts sickeningly as I return to my body. Green-tinged visions cloud my sight—Rynor’s face, leering; the Heart shattering; Earth’s oceans turning to poison.

“Imoogeen.” Krak’zol’s voice cuts through the hallucinations, the particular way he says my name acting as an anchor. “Come back to me.”

I blink, reality reasserting itself. Krak’zol holds both me and the now-unconscious Bethra, his expression taut with concern.

“We have her,” I say, my voice raspy. “And we have Rynor’s plans. The alignment—three days from now. That’s when he’ll attack the Heart.”

Alarms blare through the fortress. Our time is up.

“Can you swim?” Krak’zol asks, already shifting Bethra’s limp form onto his back.

I nod, though my limbs feel heavy and my mind foggy. The corruption I absorbed from Bethra lingers at the edges of my consciousness, whispering temptations and fears that aren’t my own.

“Stay close,” he commands, leading us toward an emergency exit Zorath had identified.

We fight our way out—Krak’zol bearing the brunt of the combat while I guard his flank, the heartstone blade moving almost of its own accord in my hand. When we’re separated briefly by a surge of guards, panic flares through our bond from his side. I

send back a wave of calm confidence that steadies him, allowing him to clear a path for our escape.

Once outside the fortress, we swim hard for friendly territory, Bethra secured between us. The corruption I absorbed makes each movement an effort, but determination drives me forward. We have the intelligence we need. We know when Rynor will strike.

And when he does, we'll be ready.

Chapter twelve

### KRAK'ZOL

Threedaysuntilthealignment. The words echo through my mind like a death knell as I watch Imoogeen sleep.

My little queen lies curled on our shared bed platform, her transformation accelerating since our return from Rynor's festering fortress. Delicate scales, the color of a twilight sky, shimmer along her spine, catching the ambient light of our chamber. They are smooth, cool to the touch, yet beneath them, I sense the heat of her human blood, a tantalizing contrast. The scent of her is changing, too—less human, more... mine. A primal urge rises within me, a desire to trace the patterns of her new scales, to feel their texture against my own, to claim this beautiful, terrifying evolution as proof of our bond. I fight the urge, knowing she needs rest, but the Leviathan in me roars to possess her, to complete what the Heart has begun. Even unconscious, she radiates strength—this human female who dared to challenge a Leviathan king, who now carries part of the Heart's essence within her.

And part of Rynor's corruption.

I can sense it festering inside her—a parasite latching onto the connection between her mind and the Heart. She fights it even in sleep, her brow furrowed, fingers twitching against unseen enemies. The bond between us pulses with her discomfort, and I resist the urge to wake her. She needs rest after what she endured to save Bethra.

Nira approaches silently, her healer's eyes assessing Imoogeen's condition. "The corruption spreads," she murmurs, placing a bowl of luminescent paste beside the

bed. “This will help slow its progress, but it cannot cure her.”

“Nothing can cure her except destroying the source,” I growl, my claws extending involuntarily. “Rynor must die.”

“And yet you hesitate.” Nira’s gaze is knowing, uncomfortably perceptive. “He is still your brother.”

I turn away, unwilling to acknowledge the truth in her words. Memories surface unbidden—Rynor and I as younglings, racing through the thermal vents; teaching him to hunt the deep-dwelling kraken; standing together at our father’s deathbed as the crown passed to me.

“He chose his path,” I say finally, the words bitter on my tongue.

“As did you.” Nira gestures to Imoogeen. “When you claimed her as your mate, you set events in motion that cannot be undone. The question now is whether you will see them through.”

Before I can respond, Imoogeen stirs, her eyes fluttering open. For a terrible moment, I see a flash of toxic green before her natural color returns.

“How long was I out?” she asks, her voice raspy.

“Too long,” I rumble, moving to her side. “The council grows restless.”

She sits up, wincing slightly. Through our bond, I feel the shadow of her pain—a burning sensation where the corruption spreads beneath her skin.

“Did Bethra’s information check out?” she asks, all business despite her condition.



I nod. “Zorath confirmed it. The alignment occurs in three days. The Heart will be at its most vulnerable—and its most powerful.”

“Then that’s when we make our stand.” She swings her legs over the edge of the bed, determination overriding discomfort.

“You should rest,” Nira protests, but Imoogeen waves her off.

“I’ll rest when Rynor’s dead.” She meets my gaze, a challenge in her eyes. “Unless you’re planning to lock me away for my protection?”

A rumble builds in my chest—half amusement, half frustration. “I learned long ago that attempting to confine you only results in more trouble.”

The ghost of a smile curves her lips. “Smart king.”

The war chamber buzzes with barely contained tension as my commanders await orders. Zorath stands at my right, Imoogeen at my left—a formation that has not gone unnoticed by the council. Some approve of her elevated status; others remain skeptical of a human queen, transformed or not.

Vara, my fiercest warrior, kneels before us. “The outer defenses are secured, my king. But our scouts report Rynor’s forces have grown. The corruption spreads faster than we anticipated.”

“How many?” Imoogeen asks, her voice carrying the authority of command.

“Three thousand at least,” Vara replies without hesitation. Her immediate deference to Imoogeen silences any lingering whispers of dissent among the council. “They gather at the edge of the Midnight Trench.”

I study the tactical projection before us—a three-dimensional map of the territories surrounding the Heart. Rynor’s forces are positioned strategically, blocking all direct approaches.

“He expects a frontal assault,” I observe. “He knows our traditional battle formations.”

“Then we don’t use traditional formations,” Imoogeen counters, moving closer to the map. The royal markings on her skin pulse brighter as she focuses. “The alignment affects the Heart, but it also affects the currents.”

She traces a route through the map—a dangerous path through thermal vents and unstable canyons that no sane commander would consider.

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“The eastern passage,” Zorath identifies, his expression skeptical. “It’s too volatile. The pressure changes alone would crush most warriors.”

“But not Leviathan royalty,” Imoogeen points out. “The Heart’s essence protects us from such extremes.”

Us. The word sends a surge of possessive satisfaction through me. She truly sees herself as one of us now—my queen, my mate.

“It’s still a significant risk,” Vara cautions. “And Rynor will have considered this approach, even if he deems it unlikely.”

“Which is why we don’t all go that way,” I say, the strategy becoming clear. “We divide our forces. The main army approaches from the north—a direct challenge that Rynor will expect. Meanwhile, a smaller force, led by Imoogeen and myself, slips through the eastern passage.”

“A pincer movement,” Zorath nods, approval warming his normally stoic features. “Rynor will commit his forces to the northern battle, leaving the Heart vulnerable to a smaller, more mobile attack force.”

“Exactly.” Imoogeen’s eyes meet mine, a perfect understanding flowing between us. “But there’s more. The information I pulled from Bethra’s mind wasn’t just about timing. Rynor has developed some kind of parasite—a concentrated form of the corruption. He plans to implant it directly into the Heart during the alignment.”

Murmurs of alarm ripple through the council.

“Such desecration would poison not just the Heart, but all waters connected to it,” Nira says, horror evident in her voice. “Including the oceans of Earth.”

The implications hang heavy in the water. If Rynor succeeds, not only will my kingdom fall, but Imoogeen’s homeworld will lose any chance of salvation.

“Then we stop him,” I state simply, my decision made. “Prepare the army. We move at first light.”

As the council disperses to carry out orders, Imoogeen remains at the tactical display, her expression troubled.

“What concerns you?” I ask when we’re alone.

“The corruption inside me,” she admits, one hand unconsciously touching the patch of discolored scales at her ribs. “It’s connected to Rynor somehow. What if he can use it against us? What if I become a liability?”

I move closer, towering over her smaller form. Not to intimidate, but to surround her with my presence, my protection.

“You are my strength, not my weakness,” I tell her, my voice low and certain. “Our bond is stronger than his corruption.”

She looks up at me, vulnerability and strength warring in her gaze. “You can’t know that.”

“I can.” I place my hand over hers, where it rests against her corrupted scales. “Because I would tear apart the sea itself before I let him take you from me.”

Dawn brings no light to the depths of the Abyss, only a subtle shift in the

bioluminescent patterns that mark the passage of time. My warriors assemble in silent formation, their weapons charged with energy harvested from the Heart's outer chambers.

Imoogeen stands before them, resplendent in battle armor forged specifically for her unique physiology—part human, part Leviathan. The corruption has spread overnight, green tendrils visible beneath the translucent scales at her neck, but her eyes remain clear and determined.

“You should remain behind,” I try one last time, though I already know her answer.

“Not a chance.” She checks the heartstone blade at her hip. “Besides, according to Nira's research, we need both of us to neutralize the parasite. Your strength, my connection to two worlds.”

She's right, of course. The ancient texts Bethra referenced in her moment of clarity spoke of a ritual that requires the combined essence of bonded royals to purge corruption from the Heart. A convenient truth that neatly eliminates any possibility of keeping her safely away from battle.

My fingers brush the royal insignia hanging from a chain around my neck—a ceremonial piece worn by Leviathan kings since the first Heart-bond. On impulse, I remove it, the weight familiar in my palm.

“Kneel,” I command softly.

Surprise flickers across her face, but she complies, dropping to one knee before me. The warriors around us fall silent, recognizing the significance of the moment.

I place the chain around her neck, the insignia settling against her chest. It glows in response to her transformed essence, accepting her as its rightful bearer.

“By the ancient laws of the Abyss, I recognize Imoogeen Vance as my bonded queen, equal in authority and power,” I declare, my voice carrying to every warrior present. “Her commands are my commands. Her strength is the strength of the Abyss.”

When she rises, something has shifted in the way my warriors regard her—not just as my chosen mate, but as their queen by right and ritual. The formal acknowledgment settles something within me as well, a certainty that regardless of the outcome of this battle, she is truly mine now, as I am hers.

“Try not to die gloriously without me,” she quips, but I feel the depth of emotion behind her light words.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

“I would not dare deny you the pleasure of witnessing my glory,” I return, earning a genuine smile that eases the tension between us.

We part ways at the junction of the northern and eastern routes—Zorath leading the main force while Vara accompanies us with a select group of elite warriors. The eastern passage looms before us, a treacherous maze of thermal vents and crushing pressure zones that few have navigated successfully.

Imoogeen swims at my side, her movements fluid and confident despite her partial transformation. Through our bond, I sense her discomfort as the corruption fights against her control, but her determination never wavers.

“Stay close,” I tell her as we enter the first pressure zone. “The currents grow unpredictable here.”

She nods, her focus absolute as we navigate the dangerous waters. Twice we nearly lose warriors to sudden pressure shifts, and once a thermal vent erupts without warning, separating us briefly from the rest of our small force.

Through it all, Imoogeen remains steadfast, her presence a constant reassurance through our bond. When the corruption flares painfully within her, she grits her teeth and pushes through, refusing to become the liability she fears.

We emerge from the eastern passage to find the Heart’s chamber largely unguarded—exactly as we predicted. Rynor has committed his forces to the northern battle, confident in the impregnability of the eastern approach.

The Heart itself pulses before us, a massive crystalline structure that throbs with the life force of our world. Its surface ripples with energy patterns that respond to our presence, recognizing the royal essence we both carry.

“It’s beautiful,” Imoogeen breathes, momentarily transfixed.

A slow clap breaks the reverent silence.

“How touching,” Rynor’s voice echoes through the chamber as he emerges from behind the Heart, flanked by his elite guard. “The mighty Krak’zol and his pet human, come to save the day.”

Rage burns through me at the sight of my brother—his once-proud form now twisted by the very corruption he wields as a weapon. His scales have darkened to a sickly green-black, and his eyes glow with unnatural malice.

“It’s over, Rynor,” I growl, positioning myself slightly ahead of Imoogeen. “Your forces are engaged in the north. You are outnumbered.”

“Am I?” He smiles, revealing teeth that have sharpened to needle points. “Or perhaps I wanted you here, brother. Perhaps this was always the plan.”

With a gesture, he activates something within the chamber. The water around us shimmers with toxic energy that targets Imoogeen specifically, latching onto the corruption already within her.

She gasps, doubling over as green light pulses beneath her skin. Through our bond, I feel her agony as the corruption surges, fighting to take control.

“You see,” Rynor continues conversationally, “your little queen has been carrying my insurance policy. A direct link to me—and through me, to the parasite.”



He holds up a pulsing green orb—the concentrated corruption he plans to implant in the Heart. “She’s the perfect vessel. Already bonded to the Heart through you, already partially transformed. When the alignment comes, I won’t need to breach the Heart’s defenses at all. She will do it for me.”

“Never,” Imoogeen grits out, fighting for control. Her eyes flash between their natural color and toxic green as she struggles against his influence.

I move to her side, one arm supporting her as she sways. “Fight it, Imoogeen. Our bond is stronger.”

Rynor laughs. “Such confidence! Let’s test it, shall we?” He makes another gesture, and Imoogeen cries out as the corruption surges again.

Through our bond, I feel her slipping away, her consciousness being overwritten by Rynor’s control. In desperation, I press my forehead against hers—the most intimate gesture of my kind—and pour my essence into our connection.

Stay with me, little queen. I need you.

Her response comes faintly through layers of pain and corruption. The ritual. We have to complete it now, before the alignment.

She’s right. We can’t wait. If Rynor gains full control before the alignment, all is lost.

“Vara!” I call to my warrior. “Defend us. We begin the ritual.”

Understanding dawns in Rynor’s eyes. “Stop them!” he commands his guards, but Vara and our warriors move to intercept, forming a protective circle around us.

I guide Imoogeen to the base of the Heart, where its energy flows most directly into

the surrounding waters. The ritual requires both of us to enter a trance state, making us vulnerable while we work to separate the parasite from both Imoogeen and the Heart itself.

“I can’t hold it back much longer,” she warns, her voice strained. The corruption has spread visibly, green tendrils reaching up her neck toward her face.

“You won’t have to,” I promise her. “Trust me.”

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

Around us, battle erupts as Vara's warriors engage Rynor's guards. The water fills with energy discharges and the sounds of combat, but I focus solely on Imoogeen and the ritual.

I place my hands on the Heart's surface, feeling its ancient power respond to my touch. Imoogeen does the same, her smaller hands beside mine, the royal insignia around her neck glowing in resonance with the Heart.

"Together," I murmur, and we begin the ritual chant Nira taught us—a sequence of sounds more felt than heard, vibrating through the water and into the crystalline structure before us.

The Heart pulses in response, its energy flowing into us and through our bond. I feel Imoogeen's consciousness merge with mine more completely than ever before, our thoughts and emotions becoming indistinguishable.

Through this perfect union, we trace the corruption to its source—the parasite within the orb Rynor holds, connected to smaller seeds planted throughout the Abyss, including the one growing within Imoogeen.

The effort of maintaining the trance, of holding our minds as one against the tide of Rynor's poison, is immense. A burning cold sears through my veins, a perversion of the Heart's pure energy. Sweat, alien to my deep-sea existence, beads on my brow despite the chill of the surrounding water. I feel her pain, sharp and invasive, mirrored in my own flesh. Yet, intertwined with it, is the intoxicating rush of her—her thoughts, her will, her very essence blending with mine. It is agony and ecstasy, a terrifying, exhilarating union. Without breaking her focus on the ritual,

Imoogeen reaches up and gently wipes it away—a tender gesture amidst chaos that strengthens our connection.

Through our merged consciousness, we begin to isolate the parasite, severing its connections one by one. I provide the strength, she provides the precision—her partially human mind able to navigate the corruption in ways my Leviathan instincts cannot.

Behind us, the battle intensifies. Through fragmented awareness, I sense Vara taking a serious wound, feel the disruption as our protective circle begins to falter. Imoogeen feels it too, her concentration wavering as concern for our warriors penetrates the trance.

“Focus on me,” I command softly. “Only me.”

Her consciousness realigns with mine, our bond strengthening as we push deeper into the heart of the corruption. We find its core—a twisted piece of the Heart itself, corrupted by Rynor’s jealousy and ambition.

“You can’t save it,” Rynor’s voice penetrates our trance. He’s closer now, having broken through our defenders. “You can’t save her. She’s mine now.”

“She is not my weakness,” I respond, my voice steady despite the strain of maintaining the ritual. “She is the reason I will win.”

With those words, I channel every ounce of my strength into our bond, giving Imoogeen the power she needs to excise the corruption. Through our merged consciousness, I feel her precision as she separates parasite from host—first within herself, then reaching outward to the seeds scattered throughout the Abyss.

Rynor screams as his connection to the corruption is severed. The orb in his hand

destabilizes, toxic energy discharging in violent bursts that fill the chamber with chaotic currents.

Imoogeen gasps, her back arching as the corruption is purged from her system. Green tendrils withdraw from her skin, drawn back toward the orb as if pulled by a powerful magnet. Through our bond, I feel her relief and exhaustion in equal measure.

The ritual complete, we break from our trance to find Rynor collapsed before us, the corrupted orb pulsing erratically in his weakened grip. His guards lie defeated, Vara standing bloodied but triumphant over them.

“It’s over, brother,” I say, rising to my full height. “Surrender, and you may yet live.”

Rynor looks up, his eyes clearing as the corruption’s influence fades. For a moment, I glimpse the brother I once knew—proud, brilliant, but always in my shadow.

“Too late for that,” he rasps, clutching the unstable orb to his chest. “Too far gone.”

Before I can react, he crushes the orb against himself. Corruption floods his body, a last desperate attempt to maintain power. But without its connection to the Heart, the concentrated corruption has nowhere to go but inward.

Rynor convulses as the corruption devours him from within, his form twisting grotesquely before collapsing in on itself. Within moments, nothing remains but dissipating energy and the echo of his final scream.

Silence falls over the chamber, broken only by the steady pulse of the Heart.

I reach for her, my hand, still trembling from the strain of the ritual, finding the smooth curve of her cheek. The green tinge is gone, the corruption purged, leaving only the luminous beauty of her transformed skin. She leans into my touch, her

eyes—no longer clouded by Rynor’s poison, but clear, sharp, and fiercely hers—meeting mine. A silent understanding passes between us, a shared exhaustion, a shared triumph, a shared grief. The weight of what we’ve done, what we’ve lost, settles upon us, but in this moment, in this shared touch, there is also a profound sense of peace. The bond between us, forged in battle and sealed by the Heart, pulses with a steady rhythm, a promise of a future we will face together.

Imoogeen moves to my side, her hand finding mine. Through our bond, I feel her mixture of horror, relief, and grief on my behalf. She says nothing, understanding that no words can ease the pain of watching my brother destroy himself.

Instead, she simply presses her forehead against mine in the Leviathan gesture of deepest intimacy. In that moment of connection, I feel her promise—that healing is possible, even from the deepest wounds.

The alignment begins above us, three moons forming a perfect triangle that sends shafts of refracted light through the water to dance across the Heart’s surface. But instead of making it vulnerable, the alignment now strengthens it, the corruption purged by our ritual.

The Heart pulses with renewed vigor, sending waves of healing energy throughout the Abyss. I feel it flowing through me, through Imoogeen, through our warriors—repairing damage, cleansing the last traces of corruption.

“What happens now?” Imoogeen asks softly.

I look down at my fierce, transformed queen—neither fully human nor fully Leviathan, but something gloriously unique. Through our bond, I sense her uncertainty about the future, about her place in my world and her responsibility to her own.

“Now,” I tell her, my voice low and certain, “we rebuild. Together.”

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

The royal insignia glows against her chest, accepting her as its rightful bearer. My queen. My mate. The one who fought the darkness and won.

In the light of the aligned moons, surrounded by the Heart's pulsing energy, I make her a silent promise through our bond—wherever she goes, whatever she chooses, I will be at her side. The depths of the Abyss or the distant shores of Earth—it matters not.

She is mine, as I am hers. And together, we are unstoppable.

### EPILOGUE

Imogen

Sunlight filters through the water in ribbons of gold, casting dappled patterns across my skin. Even after three months in the Abyss, I still marvel at places like this—hidden pockets where the ocean surface is near enough that light penetrates the depths, creating a dreamlike atmosphere that reminds me of both worlds I now belong to.

“You’re staring again,” I say without turning, feeling Krak’zol’s intense gaze on my back as I explore the coral formations of our new sanctuary.

“I will never tire of watching you,” he rumbles, his deep voice sending pleasant vibrations through the water between us.

I smile, running my fingers over a delicate structure that pulses with bioluminescence at my touch. “You said that’s what this place was called? The Dreaming Shoals?”



“An inadequate translation,” he admits, swimming closer until his massive presence looms behind me. “In our language, it means ‘the place where worlds touch.’”

The poetry of it catches me off guard. For all his warrior ferocity, my Leviathan king has unexpected depths of sentiment that still surprise me.

I turn to face him, taking in the sight that never fails to steal my breath—seven feet of powerful, primal male, his silver eyes watching me with an intensity that makes my heart race. The royal markings on his skin glow softly in the filtered light, matching the patterns that now adorn my own transformed body.

“And you’ve claimed it for us,” I say, gesturing to the stone structures being carefully placed by Leviathan workers at the perimeter. “A royal retreat?”

His mouth curves in that half-smile that still makes my stomach flutter. “A home. Ours alone.”

The simple declaration holds layers of meaning. Since Rynor’s defeat, we’ve lived in the royal palace, surrounded constantly by advisors, warriors, and the endless politics of rebuilding a kingdom. This sanctuary represents something different—a place where we can simply be ourselves, neither king nor queen, just Krak’zol and Imogen.

“Come,” he says, extending his hand. “There’s more I want to show you.”

I place my smaller hand in his, feeling the now-familiar thrill when his fingers close around mine. Our bond pulses between us, a constant awareness that has only grown stronger since the ritual at the Heart.

He leads me deeper into the sanctuary, past living coral structures that seem to sing as we pass, their colors shifting in response to our presence. We swim through an archway formed by twin spirals of pearlescent stone, emerging into a sheltered grotto

that takes my breath away.

The space is a perfect blend of our worlds—human comfort and Leviathan aesthetics merged seamlessly. A large sleeping platform rests in a natural alcove, covered in soft materials that won't dissolve in water. Bioluminescent plants provide gentle illumination, their light reminiscent of the stars I sometimes miss. Most surprising are the personal touches—photo's, my fuzzy bear and other items from my quarters on the USS Legacy, salvaged and preserved.

“How did you—” I begin, touching a small hologram of Earth that floats above a crystalline pedestal.

“I may have enlisted Samantha's help,” he admits, referring to my teammate who has thrived in her home with the Ondrithar. She even managed to snag a king for herself. “She said these items would . . . remind you of home.”

The thoughtfulness of the gesture tightens my throat. Through our bond, I feel his uncertainty—the great Leviathan king, nervous about whether his gift pleases me.

“It's perfect,” I tell him, infusing the words with all the emotion I feel. “But you should know . . . home isn't a place for me anymore.”

I turn to face him fully, placing my palm against his chest where his heart beats strong and steady. “It's wherever you are.”

His eyes darken with emotion, and he pulls me against him, one large hand cradling the back of my head. Through our bond, I feel the surge of possessive satisfaction my words trigger in him.

“When I first saw you,” he murmurs against my hair, “I knew you were mine. But I never imagined how completely I would become yours.”

I lean back to look up at him, tracing the strong line of his jaw with my fingers. “Funny how things work out when you kidnap someone and declare them your mate.”

He growls playfully, the sound vibrating through the water between us. “You were stubborn. I was persistent.”

“You were arrogant,” I correct, but there’s no heat in my words. “And now you’re mine.”

His tail wraps around my ankle, a subtle, possessive gesture that has become as natural as breathing. The first time he did it, I bristled at the presumption. Now, I find it comforting—an unconscious reminder of his constant presence, his unwavering devotion.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

We drift toward the sleeping platform, the cool water gliding over our skin, our bodies moving in perfect synchronization, a silent dance in the liquid embrace of the Abyss. A gentle tug at my ankle, and I realize his tail has wrapped around me, not constricting, but possessive, pulling me subtly closer, a constant reminder of his presence. Since my transformation, swimming has become as natural as walking once was, my body adapted to life in the Abyss while retaining its human appearance.

“The delegation from the Legacy arrives tomorrow,” I say as we settle onto the platform, his larger body curving protectively around mine. “Captain Harris wants to discuss expanding the human settlement on the western shoals.”

“And what does my queen think of this proposal?” His fingers trace idle patterns on my skin, sending shivers of pleasure along my nerve endings.

I consider the question seriously. The balance between my responsibilities to Earth and to the Abyss remains complex, even with our bond making communication effortless.

“I think it’s time,” I say finally. “Expanding the human presence will fundamentally alter Sanos, and offering the choice of where to live is a freedom humans haven’t experienced in a very long time.”

He nods, his expression thoughtful. “And the young ones? Will they come as well?”

The question touches on a conversation we’ve had several times—the children in cryosleep aboard the Legacy, Earth’s next generation waiting for a home.

“Some of them,” I confirm. “Those old enough to adapt to life here. The youngest will remain in stasis until we’re certain of long-term compatibility.”

His hand settles on my abdomen, a gesture loaded with meaning. Through our bond, I feel his unspoken question—one that has been growing in both our minds.

“Nira says it’s possible,” I answer softly. “Our physiologies are compatible now, thanks to my transformation. Any children would be . . . unique. Like me.”

The thought still amazes me—that I could carry his child, a perfect blend of our species, of our worlds. The first true bridge between humans and Leviathans.

“Unique,” he echoes, his voice dropping to that deep register that sends heat pooling low in my belly. “And fierce, like their mother.”

I laugh, turning in his arms to face him. “And stubborn, like their father.”

His silver eyes darken as he studies my face. “Does the thought please you? Creating life together?”

The vulnerability in his question touches me deeply. This powerful king, who commands thousands with a gesture, still seeks reassurance in our most intimate moments.

“Yes,” I whisper, reaching up to trace the royal markings on his face. “More than I ever imagined it would.”

His response is immediate and physical—a growl that vibrates through the water as he pulls me flush against him. His mouth claims mine in a kiss that starts gentle but quickly blazes into something more primal, more demanding.

I respond with equal fervor, my hands exploring the familiar terrain of his powerful body. A thrill, both familiar and shockingly new, courses through me. This intimacy, this connection, is unlike anything I could have ever imagined on Earth, a bond forged in the depths of an alien sea. Our bond amplifies every sensation, creating a feedback loop of pleasure that makes it impossible to tell where my desire ends and his begins.

“Mine,” he rumbles against my throat, sharp teeth grazing the sensitive skin there. “My queen. My mate.”

“Yours,” I agree, my voice breathless as his hands map possessive paths across my body. “As you are mine.”

In the privacy of our sanctuary, we come together with the same intensity that has defined our relationship from the beginning—challenging, consuming, transformative. The kiss deepens, a wild, open-mouthed exploration that has my senses spinning. My fingers tangle in his damp hair, tugging gently, eliciting a low growl that vibrates through the water and straight to my core. He tastes of salt and storm and something uniquely him, a flavor I’ve become addicted to. His tail wraps more firmly around my leg, not just possessive now, but almost anchoring, as his body covers mine. The weight of him, the sheer mass of this powerful Leviathan, is a delicious pressure that grounds me in the floating weightlessness of our underwater world.

I arch against him, feeling the hard ridges of his scaled chest against my breasts, the subtle scrape of his skin a thrilling contrast to the smooth glide of water around us. He shifts, pressing me further into the soft bedding, one large hand sliding down to cup my bottom, fingers kneading possessively. A gasp escapes me as his other hand finds the sensitive skin of my inner thigh, his touch sending shivers of anticipation through me.

“Mine,” he rumbles against my throat, sharp teeth grazing the sensitive skin in a bite that is both possessive and exquisitely arousing. His hand moves higher, tracing the edge of my most intimate place, teasing me with delicate strokes that leave me craving more. I moan softly, my body aching with need as he continues to explore, his fingers delving deeper, finding the slick heat that betrays my desire.

“Krak’zol,” I whisper, my voice a plea as his fingers slide inside me, filling me with a delicious stretch that leaves me panting. His thumb circles the sensitive nub at my center, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me. I cling to him, my nails digging into his skin as he builds the tension higher and higher, his mouth capturing mine in a searing kiss that leaves me breathless.

He breaks away, his silver eyes dark with desire as he gazes down at me. “You are everything to me, Imoogeen,” he murmurs, his voice rough with emotion. “My queen, my mate, my heart.”

With a swift, fluid motion, he positions himself between my thighs, the hard length of him pressing against my entrance. I wrap my legs around him, urging him forward, and with a single, powerful thrust, he fills me completely. We both groan at the sensation, our bodies joined in the most primal way.

His movements are slow and deliberate at first, each stroke drawing out the pleasure, building the intensity. But as our passion grows, so does the urgency of his movements. He thrusts deeper, harder, his body claiming mine with a ferocity that leaves me gasping for breath.

“More,” I beg, my voice a ragged whisper. “I need more of you.”

He growls in response, his tail tightening around my leg as he drives into me with renewed vigor. The water around us churns with our movements, creating a whirlpool of sensation that heightens every touch, every kiss. His hands roam over my body,

possessive and demanding, as if he can't get enough of me.

I meet his thrusts with my own, our bodies moving in perfect synchronization. The pleasure builds, a tight coil of need that threatens to consume me entirely. And then, with a final, powerful thrust, he sends me over the edge, my body convulsing around him as wave after wave of ecstasy crashes through me.



*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:08 am*

He follows me moments later, his body tensing as he finds his own release, his roar of satisfaction echoing through the water. We collapse together, our bodies slick with sweat and the remnants of our passion, our hearts pounding in unison.

In the aftermath, we lie entwined on the sleeping platform, my fingers combing through his damp hair as he purrs contentedly against my chest. The sound vibrates through me, soothing and intimate. Through our bond, I feel his love and devotion, a constant presence that wraps around me like a protective embrace.

“I never thought I’d end up here,” I murmur, watching the patterns of light dance across his skin. “When they sent us to Sanos, I expected to negotiate a treaty, secure resources, and return to the Legacy. Simple mission parameters.”

His chuckle rumbles against me. “And instead, you found yourself claimed by a Leviathan king.”

“Claimed?” I raise an eyebrow, tugging lightly on his hair. “I think you’ll find it was mutual.”

His expression softens as he looks up at me, silver eyes reflecting the glow around us. “It was. From the moment you stood before me, unafraid despite being in my power. You claimed me then, though neither of us knew it.”

The memory brings a smile to my lips—how far we’ve come from those first confrontational meetings, from my fierce resistance and his arrogant presumption.

“We still have so much to do,” I say, thinking of the challenges ahead. The

integration of our species, the continued healing of the Abyss after Rynor's corruption.

“And we will face it together,” he promises, his large hand splaying possessively across my hip. “As we have faced everything else.”

Through our bond, I feel his absolute certainty, his unwavering commitment. It wraps around me like a protective embrace, stronger than any physical shelter.

In this moment of perfect peace, suspended between worlds in our private sanctuary, I allow myself to fully embrace the future we're building—not just for ourselves, but for both our peoples. A future born from unlikely circumstances, forged in conflict and sealed in love.

The Leviathan king and his human queen. A story no one could have predicted, least of all me.

But as Krak'zol's tail tightens possessively around my ankle and his purr deepens with contentment, I know with absolute certainty that I wouldn't change a single moment of our journey.

This is where I belong. At his side, between worlds, creating something entirely new from the ashes of what came before.

Home.