



Abducting Sarah (Planet Orhon Alien Romance #1)

Author: *Brenna Sinclair*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Seeing ghosts used to be the strangest thing that'd ever happened to me...

I hallucinated dead people regularly. So, no one believed me when I said I was being stalked. Even I started to question it after a while. Until my stalker abducted me...and took me to another planet.

Jacaranda is fierce. Beautiful. Entirely alien—and under orders to deliver me to his boss, Deacon Ladrang. See, Deacon says I'm a conduit between the living and the alien dead, and he thinks I can save his family. He'll let me go home when our mission is complete.

The catch? I have to marry him in a ceremony that includes consummation—with my new husband and Jacaranda. Surprisingly, I'm not opposed. To any of it. Because I want my sexy alien captors with a passion that terrifies me. In fact, I'd love to turn this marriage of convenience into a happily ever after.

But first, I'll have to figure out if this is all real ...or just the most delicious, erotic hallucination I've ever had...

Total Pages (Source): 24

CHAPTER 1

Sarah

“I was followed today,” I told my fiancé over supper.

The grand dining room in the opulent mansion had been silent, outside of the tings of our forks on proper china. Every tap echoed on the wood-lined walls and the chandeliers above. The rose vase in the middle of the table almost blocked my view of Ryan.

He was handsome, with a perfect smile and hazel eyes. Ryan Lakeworth had the good looks of an underwear model and the money of a pharmaceutical heir, because that’s what he had been and what he was now. I couldn’t believe my luck when I met him—I was just a barista at the café where my little sister works. There he was, a former model and heir, and he wanted me. I felt so blessed.

Until things changed.

A year later, he’d had me on so many meds, I wasn’t sure which way was up. It took another six months to get them to a point where I felt safe enough to drive. They helped me—he was right about that—yet nothing ever felt right. I was foggy or confused all the time. And I still saw the ghosts now and then.

Ryan sipped his wine and asked, “What was that?”

“Remember how I told you I was going shopping today in Charleston with the girls?

Someone was following me around.”

He sighed. “Sarah, we’ve talked about this.”

His tone sank something inside of me. “I’m not lying, and it wasn’t another hallucination, Ryan. He was real.”

“What did he look like? Faint and wispy?”

“He wasn’t a ghost. He was a man. Solid.”

He sighed heavier than before. The air between us was thick with old conversations and the scars of hurt feelings. “I know you hate when I ask you this, but I need to know. Have you been taking your meds? Consistently?”

I dropped my fork on my plate and the sound was harsh, like his words. My jaw went tight as I said, “You know I have.”

“I don’t know anything at all. For all I know, you could be dropping your pills in the toilet.”

“Don’t you think I want to get better?”

“I don’t know what you want anymore, Sarah. I thought you wanted to get married—”

“I do!”

He shook his head. “Then, you know you have to take your meds.”

“I have been!” I shouted, tears filling my eyes. “I’ve been taking all of those stupid

pills for months now, just like we agreed! I've done everything you've asked of me, Ryan. Everything! Why are you doubting me now, when we're so close to the wedding?"

"You forget that I know you, Sarah. You have made self-sabotage into an artform, so as much as I love you, yes, sometimes, I doubt you."

"Why?"

"Experience!" he barked. "Don't you remember the first year we were together? When you took your meds for a couple of days at a time, and then you decided you were better, so you stopped and the next thing I knew, my girlfriend was at a party with my family, talking to people who weren't in the room! I can't go through that again! Do you know how embarrassing that was for my family? There were senators there, Sarah! You humiliated me in front of very important people!"

"Oh. Well, since there were senators at a party over a year ago, I guess that's a good enough reason to yell at me now." I tried to keep my voice calm, but it wobbled anyway. "I'm so sorry I embarrassed you in front of your family and the senators, Ryan." I was shaking with anger. "I'll be sure to send the ghosts away before the holidays."

The tick in his jaw relaxed a fraction. "Don't be like that, Sarah...look, I know you have a grip on reality again, and I'm glad you're doing better—"

I stiffened. "But?"

He swallowed hard and said, "However, you know there are certain expectations when it comes to my family, and hallucinations are not one of them. You want us to keep living the life we have, right? Here in the mansion? The shopping trips, the vacations, all that?"

“Yes, but—”

“Then we have to keep them happy. Do you think talking to your imaginary friends will make them happy?”

I crossed my arms and glared.

“Neither do I. I’m sorry—I know you don’t like the pills. But it’s necessary. They don’t want to leave their family fortune to a crazy—”

“Oh fuck you!” I jumped up from my seat and stomped out of the dining room, tears falling.

There wasn’t enough oxygen in the mansion’s halls, so I ran upstairs to our bedroom and threw the windows open wide. Long, gasping breaths filled my lungs with cool night air. October had been unseasonably warm, but the nights felt crisp, yet somehow still humid.

Spanish moss drifted on the breeze as it dangled from the ancient oak trees that made up Lakeworth Forest—what Ryan called our backyard. A full moon lit the treetops, but the light barely touched the ground. Something at the base of the trees caught my eye. I wasn’t sure, not at first. But then I realized someone was down there.

Ice shot up my back as I studied him. He stared right back at me. Not a ghost—he was solid. He was tall, thickly built, and wore a black hood over black pants. I couldn’t see his face. But he saw mine. I wanted to scream or shout at him or call for Ryan, and I couldn’t. If I called for Ryan, the man would disappear—I knew it. Something in my gut told me so. If the stranger disappeared, then I would never know who he was or why he was outside my house.

I tried to call down to him, but he stepped into a pool of moonlight and my voice

failed me. The stranger pulled his hood from his head. Definitely the same man from the shops in Charleston . He had a strong jaw and a shaved head. He appeared white in the moonlight, but I wasn't sure.

Our bedroom door opened and startled me. I spun around and saw Ryan. Gruffly, he said, "We weren't done talking."

"I was." I turned back around to the window, and the man was gone. "Dammit."

"What?"

"The man who followed me in Charleston—he was outside, just now."

He huffed. "Just stop, Sarah. There's no one outside, just like there was no one following you in Charleston. Stop."

My blood boiled as I stared into the forest. The moonlight shifted in the trees. When I looked up, a black cloud had shaded it out. I gritted my teeth and said, "You owe me an apology."

"Because I want you to live up to your end of the bargain?" he asked sarcastically.

"You called me crazy."

"If you don't like it, then don't be crazy."

He walked into the en suite bathroom and shut the door. The sink ran. His nightly routine before bed—brush his teeth, use tooth whitening strips, and perform his mini-facial. Ryan lived by his routines and had tried to get me to follow suit, but regiment was not in my vocabulary.

I had never lived a scheduled, rigid life. It was not in me to do something that tedious. Maybe that's the real reason we're not a good fit?

I sighed deeply and stared out the window again. Such a quiet night to be thinking about breaking up with Ryan. Not that I actually planned to. He was a catch—both of my sisters envied what I had with him. Engaged to a millionaire and future billionaire, most women envied me. But did I still love him anymore? It was hard to say. Our relationship had long been tainted by my hallucinations.

I tried to put it all out of my mind. I had gone over the details countless times—the pluses and minuses of leaving him—and there was no point in going over it all again. I always came to the same conclusion. He would be a wonderful provider for our children.

I focused on the night instead. Moonlight poured over the trees once more. The black cloud had moved, this time it was over the house. I saw only the edge of it above. It struck me as odd. Clouds aren't black. Not even at night. They're grayish at night. Is that smoke?

Suddenly, I couldn't move, and everything went silent. Bright white light flooded the window, surrounding me like a bubble. I tried to scream or breathe or blink, and I couldn't. I was frozen.

Is this a stroke? Some strong bastard of a ghost? The fuck is happening? All I could do was watch helplessly. I couldn't feel the floor beneath my feet anymore. I had begun to float in my bedroom.

Panic washed over me as I passed through the open window frame. I'm hallucinating. That's all this is. Just another hallucination. A bad one. It's not real, it's not real, it's not real!

I floated upward, toward the edge of the roof, beneath the black cloud. As I came closer to the cloud, it reflected the moonlight the way a black car did—shining yet dim. Part of the black cloud slid away from the rest of it, and the light bubble I was inside of stretched and extended into the opening of the cloud.

It was like being sucked upward.

As my bubble entered the cloud, a familiar humming overtook my ears. Bees. Why would bees kidnap me? It was a ridiculous thought, and I would have laughed at it, if I could have laughed. I still couldn't do anything. I worried I would suffocate, but I didn't feel like I was. Outside of absolute terror and the gallows humor I got from my now deceased mom, I didn't feel anything at all.

Until I saw my captors. Upon seeing them, I wished I couldn't see anything at all.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

CHAPTER 2

Jacaranda

The hum of my cockpit was a nice change from the unpredictable sounds on Earth. The way humans chattered was hell on the nerves. That forest had been nice, though—reminded me of home. Can't wait to get back there and for all this nonsense to be over .

Egg-shaped glass surrounded me on three sides to improve my view. Unlike my boss, I was my own pilot, so my cockpit was designed to my specifications. Deacon's ship was top of the line in every way and one of the most uncomfortable vessels I had ever been in. But he was classed and moneyed and with that came certain expectations. Apparently comfort was not one of them.

I flipped the switches for the power driver and the infirmary buzzer light came on. I hit the receiver and asked, "Ode, how is the patient?"

"Eh, not great. Can you come down here?"

"Why? I'm not a doctor."

"Jacaranda Cozz, I am not delivering a human in her condition to our boss! Get down here!"

Turning off the intercom, I made my way through the ship toward the infirmary. No one was at their station, as I had ordered. What is going on with this girl that caused

my whole crew to abandon their posts? Whatever it is, it's not good.

I double-timed it to the infirmary, past the curved corridors and blinking blue lights. Shouts peppered with Earth-English obscenities came from the infirmary. They released her. Fuck.

When I came around the open doorway, I quickly took in the sights. Ode wielded a jet injector as she leaned away from the human, her blue hair dangling back and her black skin shimmering like crude oil. My crew wore black fatigues, all but Ode. She liked the white lab coats of humans. Even though Ode was two heads taller than the human, she wasn't aggressive, and defending herself against a patient was not in her.

Sarah had somehow gotten a hold of a penknife and was swinging it wildly at Ode and warning her to stay away. Treg's green, blubbery form stood between the human and Ode to shield his girlfriend.

My android, Camp Deo, hid in the far corner. Her copper machine parts shone in the bright white laboratory lights—hiding in the corner did nothing to hide her. Camp Deo, being a Deo model android, had no instinct for violence. Deos were best for analytics, languages, ship repairs, and other tasks that required a delicate touch. Wrangling a wild human was not in her programming.

My other crew members, Kapok and Tiger, were sneaking up behind her. Their family resemblance was obvious—like all Ladrians, they had an opalescent layer in the skin that gave them a shimmer, but their family was one of the last who had a purple tinge over their gray skin. When Kapok and Tiger were within reach of Sarah, she turned and nearly nicked them both.

She shouted, “Back the fuck up, bitches!”

I laughed and walked up behind her, tapping her on the shoulder. She was faster than

I had expected though and whirled around and slashed my cheek. Then, appearing shocked by my presence, she dropped the penknife.

“I’m sorry—what are you...did they take you too?”

Shit, I still look human. I turned to my crew and said in Ladrian, “You have to look human, or she will keep freaking out. Hit your mogs.”

Each of them tapped the button on their belt transmogrifiers, and they transformed into their human appearances, confusing the actual human. She blinked rapidly, not believing her eyes. In the confusion, Ode was able to sneak up on her and hit her with the jet injector.

The human frowned and looked around, then she clutched her head. In Ladrian, she asked, “What’s happening to me?”

“I’ve given you an injection,” Ode explained. “It will help you to understand our language and to speak it. How are you feeling?”

“I feel a little...strange. Why do you all look human now?” The way her mouth chewed my native language was appalling.

“All your questions will be answered soon, I promise,” the doctor assured her. “Are you feeling drowsy?”

She stumbled against the exam table and frowned. “Yeah, what’s...?”

Ode signaled Kapok and Tiger, and they lifted the human onto the table, where she swiftly fell asleep. With the crisis over, I asked Ode, “What was she doing awake?”

“Do you have any idea how many drugs she is on? I’m amazed she survived the

transfer beam ride here! I had to wake her just to make sure there wasn't any neurological damage."

"Drugs?" I asked in confusion. "Why would Deacon want some addict?"

Ode frowned. "You would do best to ask him yourself."

"I know, I know," I huffed in annoyance. "She was really that messed up?"

"Yes. I wouldn't have woken her otherwise. I know better."

Kapok strapped the human to the table, then stared at her a little too long for my comfort. I snapped my fingers at him. "Hey."

He looked up with that glint in his eyes. "What?"

"Stop thinking that," I ordered.

He blinked. "Thinking what?"

I glared at him. "I've known you too long for you to be able to lie to me."

"What?" He shrugged. "I've never had one of them."

"And you won't be having this one, either," I said in a firm tone. "You want a human, you'll have to catch one. This one is going to Deacon."

Tiger asked, "Why does he want her specifically?"

"Couldn't tell you." Because it's classified. And embarrassingly dangerous. "Now that the excitement is over, maybe you could all get back to your jobs?"

“Can we de-mog?” Treg asked.

As much as I preferred him in his human form, I wasn’t going to stop him from being himself. Gorrks were sensitive about their gelatinous, transparent looks. I liked the guy, but the fact that he resembled a midcentury jello dessert made me wonder about Ode’s tastes in men.

I nodded and said, “Go ahead. All of you. I’ll set the course for the orbit of Halla and—”

“Halla?” Tiger asked as he de-mogged back into his alien form. “I thought we were going to Deacon’s.”

“We are.” I headed for the doorway.

“What’s he doing on Halla?”

The kid had always been a curious sort, but sometimes it irritated me, and I couldn’t keep it from the tone of my voice. “Not really your business, is it?”

“Sorry, sir,” he said as he averted his eyes.

Kapok’s eyes, however, were on me while he de-mogged. His expression was a mix of disapproval and anger and didn’t change much when he shifted from human back to Ladrian.

I sighed. “I didn’t mean to snap, Tiger. I’m not allowed to divulge why Deacon is on Halla. You understand.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“And is there a reason that one human was able to garner the attention of my entire crew, or are you all just here to gawk?”

Kapok ushered the other two toward their stations, probably hoping to avoid more of my wrath. I felt bad for snapping at his cousin, but if Tiger wanted to be treated like one of my crew, then he had to harden up. He was too soft for someone his age. Hell, I had been a scout for six years by the time I was twenty. I hoped he grew out of his softness soon. I couldn't wait around for Kapok's cousin to catch up to him in maturity—I had hoped he would be as capable as his cousin when I hired him. Kapok was a fierce warrior. Tiger was a wannabe.

Sarah sleepily mumbled in Ladrian, “Who is Deacon?”

“How is she awake?” I barked at Ode.

“I told you, she's on a ton of drugs, Jacaranda. She is not well.” Ode hit her mog again to appear human. “And there's no telling how she will react to our medicine.” She walked to her bedside. “I'll make sure you're ready to meet him, just hold still.” She pulled out the jet injector again.

The human tried, and failed, to swat it away. “Nnn. Who's Dea-on?”

I leaned over her and said, “He's your new master, and—”

“What?” She shrieked out.

I held my ears while Ode sedated her once more, and the human dozed off. The doctor warned me, “If I have to knock her out again like that, I don't think she'll make it to Deacon.”

I huffed. “So damned delicate. All of them.”

“All of whom?” Ode asked.

“Humans. I don’t understand how they’ve lasted as long as they have as a species.”

I stared at my quarry. Honestly, she was quite pretty for a human woman. Exotic, wavy brown hair the color of her eyes. Matte ivory skin that humans mistook for white. Slender, but still shaped like a woman. Her name was peculiar—Sarah Hollinger—but most human names were odd to me. What does ‘Sarah’ even mean? She was the size of a teenaged Ladrian, small and fine. Far too fragile for the work ahead of her.

“No clue why he’s so obsessed with her,” I muttered.

Ode laughed. “That’s funny to hear, coming from you.”

“What about me?”

“The only person I know more obsessed with humans than me is you.”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall with a smirk. “You’re a human biologist, but I’m more obsessed with humans than you? Do tell.”

“Of all the people I have ever known, who has had more missions to Earth? Who uses their turns of phrase? Who has tattooed one of their trees and taken it for his name? An ancestry tattoo, of all things!”

“Alright, alright, you made your point—”

“And how many of them have you paired with over the years? Dozens? Hundreds?”

More . “I concede that culturally, I may have absorbed a bit of their world. But you

studied their anatomy, their sciences. You are an expert and—”

“Which is why you hired me.” She smirked. “And Treg.”

“No,” I smiled at Treg. “I hired him because he is a gifted engineer and keeps my ship running.”

A lot of Ladrians did not associate with Gorrks because of how they looked, but his nearly formless body shape allowed him to get into all the small spaces of my ship, so I didn’t care how he looked. Not much, anyway.

“Speaking of which, the carbon dioxide scrubber, how’s that coming?”

“It needs replacing,” Treg said.

“You said that last month.”

“Because it needed replacing last month, too.”

“You can make it work, though, right? We’re not in any danger?”

Treg laughed and his body shook in every direction. “I told you we were in danger last month. Now, we are in more danger.”

I frowned at him. “Then what is this that we’re breathing now?”

“While you were stalking the Hollinger, I was flushing the system with Earthen air,” he informed me. “How long until we reach Deacon’s ship at Halla?”

I shrugged. “An hour, give or take once I get us moving.”

“Good. I can dock our system with his for more air, and once we get back to Orhon, I’ll be able to replace the scrubber.”

“How much will it cost?”

He closed his eyes and said, “Outside the budget, I’m sure.”

“Get a used one—”

He huffed and groused, “We have a used one—”

“And if we want to keep breathing, then I shouldn’t waste air arguing about it, right?”
I smiled and left the infirmary.

We needed a new carbon dioxide scrubber, but I had more important things on my mind. Well, maybe not more important—breathing was technically more important than most other things for five of the six of my crew—but Deacon’s recent foolhardiness took precedence in my head. It had been days since he told me about his plan, but I would need more than just days to be able to grasp it.

If he wanted to take anyone from Earth, it should have been Sarah’s sister, Jenny. She would have been less hysterical, I was sure of it. The youngest Hollinger was a believer in a lot of things—tarot, conspiracy theories, other things humans deemed silly. I imagined she would have been more receptive to being on board a spaceship, though perhaps I was giving her too much credit.

I sat back in the cockpit and flipped the charger for the power driver. Energy surged through the lever and zapped my hand, forcing it to jerk away. I hissed at the lever and cursed, before I pulled the inducing lever, and we took off. My ship, *Sovereign*, was an old crusty beast and when she wasn’t happy, she told me all about it.

I sighed and patted the dashboard. “I know, girl, I know. I’ll get you patched up when we get home.”

All I had to do was deliver the human woman to Deacon, complete the foolhardy mission, get paid, and get us back home on Orhon, where I planned to surprise Treg with a doubled budget for repairs.

Sovereign deserved more love than I had been able to afford in the past six months. As much as my plan sounded simple, I couldn’t remember the last time anything had been simple. Considering Deacon’s plan for Sarah Hollinger, rising dread filled the back of my mind.

My boss had lost his damned mind.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

CHAPTER 3

Deacon

My eyes did not wish to open, but a shift in the light begged for attention. Huffing, I regretfully opened them. I had hoped I was wrong. However, the view out my window told me I was right.

I called out, “Intercom-bridge.”

Allegiant, my ship, responded through the intercom, “Bridge on.”

“Drift, why do I see the suns?” I asked.

My pilot sounded nervous. “There were some Gorrk and Doxude ships in the nearby orbit cloud, and I didn’t like the look of them, sir, and I certainly did not like how close they were coming to us.”

I couldn’t help but smile, in spite of my irritation. Drift Skir always worried. It was part of his job as my pilot, but the more important part of his job was to follow my orders. “Didn’t I tell you we were to wait on the dark side of Halla’s orbit until my business with Jacaranda Cozz has passed?”

“Yes, but—”

“But you thought you knew better?”

He huffed. Like so many Ladrians, he had taken to using Earthen responses in conversation. I tried to avoid such disdainful behavior, but after centuries of exposure to humans, their culture had permeated my own. I supposed it was inevitable. These days, it was the eldest generations who saw human expressions as rude. Most of us could not recall a time before their ubiquity.

Drift explained, “The dark side of Halla is no place for good people to be.”

“Then, it’s exactly where I need to be.”

“But Deacon, I—wait— Sovereign is calling.” A pause, then Drift said, “Go ahead, Sovereign .”

Jacaranda’s gravelly voice rang clear, “ Allegiant , we will be docking in thirty seconds. Seems our scrubber needs replacing, so we might be there a while to borrow the capacity of yours.”

I called out, “That is not a problem, Jac. Drift, prepare for docking.”

“Yes, sir.” My pilot sounded relieved.

“Deacon out.” The hushed background hissing tone of the intercom was off, leaving me with my thoughts. An unpleasant turn of events. Instead of introspection, I chose to focus on everything else. Introspection had not been my friend as of late.

Drift probably sounded relieved because he is likely thinking we won’t be here much longer. He’s going to be very unhappy after our business with Sovereign has concluded.

I stood and stretched from my neck to my tail. I loved my ship, but Allegiant was built for grandeur only, and my muscles always stiffened when I slept on board.

I pulled on my khaki ship uniform and looked in the mirror. With each passing day, I liked what I saw less and less. Today will change that .

Today will change everything .

When I opened the door to my quarters, Jacaranda Cozz stood before me. I grinned instantly at my old friend. Taupe skin with a blue overtone, blue hair, and violet eyes, just like his family was said to have. But he broken with many Ladrian traditions. Jac liked to do things his own way. He always had, even when we were children. Being that the Cozz family were unclassed, they weren't expected to alter their skin tone or change their hair color. But Jacaranda had marked his skin with an ancestry tattoo that ran from the base of his neck to the back of his legs. It was strange that he chose a tattoo for his skin alteration, but never tanned.

Tanning was the only socially acceptable way to alter one's skin, and it was the only way for me to avoid earning ridicule for my family—most of my family had gloriously obsidian skin with a purple overtone. My beige skin had a pink overtone, and I had grown up filled with envy for my cousin's skin. We all shared the same gray hair, thankfully. From our heads, down our spines, and ending at our tails.

Much to my cousins' chagrin, my tail was longer than all of theirs, so our envies balanced each other out. Being taller than all of them helped, as well. When Jacaranda had been given to my father as a child, we were the same age, but he was so much smaller than me and my cousins that we had thought he was far younger. In the years that passed, his diminutive height became his motivation to grow stronger and faster than all of us. Some of my cousins had teased him, saying that he was not much taller than a human. They ate those words, along with some of their own teeth. No one picked on him after that.

I clapped his shoulders and said, "Jacaranda, come in."

He smiled back. “Don’t mind if I do.”

He walked in, wearing those tacky black fatigues he loved so much, and sat on the end of my bed.

“Tell me how it went.”

“She’s in your infirmary, with Wave giving her the once-over.” His words were positive, but his tone was thick with judgment.

“Speak your peace,” I said.

“This is a shit idea, Deacon.”

I laughed. “You have got to spend less time on Earth. Your words are theirs.”

He shrugged. “Not really the topic at hand, is it?”

“I suppose not. Why do you object to—”

“She’s got drugs in her blood, according to Ode. Enough that the doctor was afraid the girl would die in transport, if we kept sedating her.”

“Why would you need to sedate her more than once?”

“She woke up because of the drugs she already had in her system,” he said adamantly. “Whatever she is on, it interferes with our medicines. She even had pain when Ode injected her with our language.”

I frowned. “That should be painless—”

“Exactly. This one...I understand why you want her specifically, but she’s not the right one for the job. She’s too strung out.”

“It has to be her,” I insisted.

“She is not the only conduit—”

“It has to be her, Jac,” I said more firmly. “I can’t trust anyone else to do what I need done. You know I’m right.”

“I know you think you’re right.”

I sighed. “How did it go when she came out of sedation?”

“Not well.” He pointed to a cut on his cheek. “She did this.”

I laughed. “Are you kidding me?”

Jac glared. “Now who sounds like a human?”

“Seriously, Jac, how did she get the drop on you , if she was all drugged up?”

He shook his head and sighed, embarrassment plain on his face. “I got too close when she was looking the other way, and she was much faster than I had anticipated when she spun back around. I’m still not sure how she got a hold of the penknife, but I think it was the one from Ode’s lab coat.”

“So, she snuck a penknife and managed to be faster than you thought. Seems she’s got more spunk to her than you had imagined, drugged or not.”

“Don’t sound so proud of your new pet. You don’t know what will happen to her

without her drugs.”

“You think she will suffer withdrawals?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Ode was worried about it, though. She’s walking Wave through her vitals and her biology—”

“Wave knows human biology.”

“No one knows it like Ode Hrimp.”

I smiled and nodded once. “True, and with the drugs in her system, it is prudent of her to aid Wave. She is a good doctor, Jac. I’m sorry I ever doubted her.”

“I get it—she’s with a Gorrk. That makes it hard not to question her judgment.” He hesitated for a moment, then added, “And speaking of questionable judgment, what the hell are you thinking with Sarah Hollinger?”

“We have been over this. Many times.” I walked to the monitor on the wall and said, “Allegiant, give me a view of the infirmary.”

“Infirmary in progress,” the ship’s soothing voice said as the view changed from the bridge to the infirmary.

There, I saw my new captive. She was striking—a long shock of dark brown hair flowed from her head. Only her head. Wide brown eyes—a darker shade than my own—stared upward at the camera. She wore a strange blue dress, and given her file, I assumed it was something expensive. Wave and Ode examined her together, while Ode took the lead on the matter, pointing out various interests and oddities of human anatomy.

But all I could see was how pretty she was for one of her kind. I used the link and told Wave, “Have her bathed and brought to my quarters, when she can be taken from sedation.”

“Right away, sir,” she responded.

Studying Sarah Hollinger, I noted, “She’s so small.”

Jac said, “Smaller in person. Taking her to Halla is like tossing a cina to a pack of jem’hora. It’s cruel, even for a Ldrang.”

My head whipped around at him. “What’s wrong with a little cruelty when it keeps you alive?”

“You are not like your cousins, Deacon. You never have been.”

He’s right, you know, I could almost hear my father’s voice saying it. Quietly, I said, “Perhaps if I had been crueler, my father would still be alive.”

Jac sighed. “What cruelty could you have leveled against our ruler to save your father, Deacon? He has an army and the support of the realm. What were you to do?”

“If I had been fearsome or terrible, perhaps Justice wouldn’t have taken his head. Perhaps he would have been afraid to do so. I don’t know.”

“That’s my point,” Jac said. “You can never know. We can never know anything anymore. He made it impossible...he made so much impossible...”

I swallowed my anger, while my fists tightened. I wanted to hit something. No, I wanted to hit some one. Justice the Ruler. With time, it might be possible to hit him...

“If he hadn’t murdered all the conduits...if he hadn’t demanded the people stop worshiping the ghosts of Halla and start worshiping him, then none of this would have hap—”

“If your father hadn’t gotten Justice’s daughter pregnant,” Jac pointed out, “then none of this would have happened. There is a lot to this equation, Deacon, and you can’t lay all the blame on Justice.”

I stiffened indignantly. “He did not have to behead my father.”

“No, he didn’t, and he should suffer oblivion for it,” Jac agreed. “But Valor was not innocent in all of this, and I feel like you keep overlooking that fact—”

“He is my father!” I roared and turned around to shout directly at Jac. “I am loyal to my father!”

“Even though he wasn’t loyal to you?”

More than anyone else in my life, Jac knew how to deflate my anger with a sting. I hissed and looked out the window. A Gorrk ship flew by rather close, with its amorphous shape and flashing pink cells. I wanted to stare at it all day long, instead of going through with what I had to do.

But loyalties wait for no one.

I mumbled, “He was in love. What else was he supposed to do?”

“I don’t know—maybe not impregnate the woman you were set to unite with?”

Silence Bateen. A beauty, if ever there was one. Silken hair, satin skin, and curves made of dreams, Silence had the obsidian skin and honey eyes of a goddess. I had

adored her from afar my entire youth, but when I learned of my father's affair with her, it all came crashing down. Like the rest of my life.

"It does not matter now, does it? There is more at risk than just my pride. I have a brother or sister to save from Justice's executioner."

He nodded. "I know, but you really think Sarah is the key to saving your sibling?"

"It's all I have to go on at the moment, Jac. This plan might be a waste, but it's all I've got."

Jac stood up and smiled as he joined me at the window. He crossed his arms and stared out at the Gorrk ship. "When all you've got is a bullshit plan, you call me. I'm honored."

I laughed. "There's no one else I would rather do a bullshit plan with than you."

"Hey, you said it right this time," Jac said, his tone amused.

"Bullshit is the same as a waste?"

He nodded. "Basically, yes. But bulls are thousands of times larger than a a. On Earth, a are like mice."

Jac often taught me the ways of humans and their references. It was one of the many things I learned from him. "I've sent your payment to Sovereign for this job, by the way."

"Much obliged. I think Treg will lose it when he sees how much I've set aside for repairs."

I laughed. “I’m not sure how a Gorrk keeps it together at any given moment, as it is. They’re so...”

“Gelatinous? Squishy? Slippery?”

“What’s squishy?”

He smiled and we spoke like old friends again, instead of like boss and employee. It was a bad habit I had never been able to break with Jacaranda Cozz. Had he not been raised in my father’s household, perhaps I would have been able to keep those lines sharply drawn. But I held Jac in high esteem and great affection, despite being his employer.

Our youth had been one of missions and the odd night of sharing a sleeping fur. We had grayed the lines between us so many times that my father often teased us for our closeness.

But when I reached twenty-two, we had the talk that every classed man must have with his son. Class cannot mix with unclassed, no matter the temptation. But my father’s temptation had nearly ruined my family and my life, so who was he to lecture anyone on such things?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

CHAPTER 4

Sarah

The bright lights above nearly blinded me, but at least I could understand my captors' words this time when I woke. "...wants to see her as soon as you believe it is safe to take her out of sedation."

"Then let's do it now, because I don't want her sedated any longer than she must be," the familiar alien said.

"Ode, I appreciate your concern for the specimen, but she is under my care now."

"I understand that, Wave, but you don't know them like I do, and if you—"

"Thank you for your wisdom. I will be sure Deacon sends a bonus for your added input on the matter. I'll take her from here. You may return to Sovereign . Now."

I'm not sure what's happening to me, but the familiar alien just got her ass handed to her in the nicest way possible . My mind tensed from the frisson between them and tried to prepare my body for a fight, but none of my muscles would respond.

The familiar alien said, "Wave, if you kill her because of your ego, Deacon will have your head."

"Have a nice trip back home."

The familiar alien looked down at me, her blue hair falling around her face and framing it. “When you can, speak up if you have side effects from your drugs or your withdrawals, Sarah Hollinger. No one else here will understand it, but maybe they can return you to me—”

“Safe travels, Ode Hrimp.” The new alien shoved the gurney I was on through a doorway, and my nerves tried to creep up again.

Where the hell am I going now?

The hallways were nicer than the other ship—bright white with golden trimmed things in the walls. I couldn’t smell anything yet. The state they kept me in stopped me from breathing or doing anything outside of staring. Thankfully, the hallway lighting was less harsh than it had been in the laboratory, so that was a plus.

Everything seemed warmer than the other ship. Not by temperature—I still couldn’t feel anything—but by coloring and lighting. The machinery looked sleeker, too. This ship felt like an upgrade with the exception of being taken to my master.

Is master a formal title or a BDSM thing...is this some kind of sex trafficking thing for aliens? All those stupid stories about getting probed...they can’t be real, right?

The new alien’s hair was gray and braided, and her skin was black, but had a sheen to it—they all did. Her sheen was blue, so when the light really lit her skin she looked unreal. The same was true of the other aliens, too. All of them looked like a Hollywood creature—human-like, but extremely different than us. They were all around seven feet tall or more. All were muscled, but some more so. The males and females were easy to tell apart. Broad shoulders and deeper voices for the males, while the females were voluptuous and had softer voices.

Their evolution must have been similar to our own.

I tried to think of my experience as being on safari. I was only a visitor, and I would go home soon, and everything would go back to normal. So, I tried to think of my observations as something David Attenborough would say on his documentaries that I grew up watching with my sisters. It was the closest thing we had to a decent education on animals—rural South Carolina wasn't big on the sciences.

But whenever she could, my older sister, Elizabeth, made us watch nature documentaries. Elizabeth would make popcorn and we'd study the films, while Jenny would ask why he didn't do documentaries on fairies, because that would be more interesting.

Thinking of my sisters made my heart ache, and I would have cried, had I been able to.

As the new alien pushed my gurney through the halls, he said, "I don't think you can hear me or maybe even understand me. Ode Hrimp's medical credentials are far below my own. None the less, I am Wave Reesk, and I will be managing your care now. I will be taking the straps off of you in a moment. If you struggle against the sedation, you may die. Don't do it."

What does that even mean?

We turned a corner and were in a room filled by steam. I saw the straps in her hand as she removed them before she lifted me from the gurney like I weighed nothing. Then she dropped me into a vat of hot red liquid, submerging me completely.

I was almost scared of drowning in it, but I hadn't been breathing for a while, so I calmed down fast. The liquid sloshed in the vat, before she lifted me from it again.

She said, "You are parasite free now and you certainly smell better."

The hell?

She placed me back onto the gurney and pushed it beneath a dryer that blew the thick red liquid from me. “Perfect. Now, on to your master.”

Something about that word terrified me more than the rest of my ordeal. I don’t want or need a master! I just want to go home! I would happily take Ryan’s coldness and all the drugs he wanted me to swallow over this!

My mind wandered, trying to sort this out. All the drugs ...earlier, I had thought this was all a hallucination... it has to be . No matter who Wave was taking me to, none of it was real. Maybe I overdosed and this is whatever lucid nightmare my mind has conjured up before I die .

I comforted myself with the knowledge that aliens were not real and I was probably just dying on the floor of our bedroom. When Ryan comes out of the bathroom, he’ll hit me with an epi pen or something, and I’ll be fine .

The gurney shifted as we turned out of the door from the steam room and walked down a longer hallway, with my head leading the way as Wave pushed by my feet. Dread built inside my mind with no physical outlet. I wanted to scream and run away and force them to hunt me down on the ship. Even though I knew it wasn’t real, it was like being immersed in my worst nightmare.

This is the strongest hallucination I have ever had, and I want out!

The door behind me opened and I heard voices before I saw their sources.

A deep voice asked, “How is she?”

“She seems well. I don’t know what Ode was so worried for.”

A scratchy male voice said, “Because she’s the best human anatomist in all of Orhon, so you’d do best to listen to her, Wave.”

But she rolled her eyes before she looked down at me. “Sarah Hollinger, this is your new master, Deacon Ladrang.”

Then, she left, and the door slid closed behind her.

The tallest alien I had seen so far looked down over me as he came closer. His skin was deeply tanned, yet had a strange cast over it, like the others. Clearly muscular, his posture was imposing. His eyes were brown, and he had gray hair, which made him less terrifying somehow. It was almost as though he had tried to appear human and failed. When he smiled, I expected fangs or a green tongue or something equally horrific. But it was only a gentle smile.

“You will save my family, Sarah Hollinger.” Then, he waved a hand over my face.

Suddenly, it was as though my body came back online. I felt everything—nothing hurt—and I could smell something...citrusy. I filled my lungs and to my relief, there was air.

I blinked a lot before I tried to speak. “What the hell is this?”

Deacon Ladrang frowned and was soon joined by my human stalker, who said, “He doesn’t speak English. Try your other language.”

It was my turn to frown. “I don’t know any other language.” But by the end of the sentence, my words sounded bizarre and garbled to my ears.

The stalker said, “Better.”

Deacon smiled again and said, “We don’t have any time to waste—”

“What did you mean when you said I will save your family?” I interrupted him.

“You are the only one who can be in charge of the ghosts.”

I looked to the stalker to explain, and in turn, he told Deacon, “You’re going to need to tell her more than that.”

Deacon took a breath and impatiently, but politely smiled. “Sarah Hollinger, you are a conduit—eh, one who speaks to ghosts—so I am going to take you with me, and we are going to rescue my father’s pregnant mistress from the royal prison, fake her death, and take her to Halla, a micro-planet inhabited by ghosts. There, you will coordinate with the ghosts for them to raise my sibling as a warrior, so my sibling will join me on my crusade against the ruler of Orhon. Understand?”

I burst into laughter and cracked up until tears streamed down my face. When I could finally speak again, I gasped, “This is the most ludicrous hallucination I have ever had!”

They frowned at each other, before Deacon asked, “Is this how humans react to important issues? I’ve never—”

“Not usually,” my stalker sounded annoyed, “but in all fairness, she is right. It is a ridiculous plan.”

Deacon appeared angry, as his nostrils flared and his brow ridge became pronounced. He shouted, “You are the only one who can do it, Sarah Hollinger!”

I cowered back from him, waiting for a slap or worse.

But then he stepped back and looked bewildered. “Why do you pull away?”

“You are loud when you’re angry...”

“So?”

“I thought you might hit me.”

He was aghast. “I would never hit you, Sarah Hollinger. Not without a cause.”

His wording was strange, so I asked, “Anger isn’t a cause?”

“No. Only violence is a cause, and you are too small to bring violence.”

That’s a relief. “And what if I were to disappoint you?”

“I don’t know how you could.”

“I want to go home,” I insisted. “I can’t be a conduit or whatever. Take me back to my home.”

His full lips spread into a flat line of frustration. Then he said, “ Allegiant , Lanai Dea’s view.” He pointed behind me.

When I looked, there was a monitor that played porn. Is this supposed to get me in the mood? The room was familiar... there’s the painting I bought on our last vacation to Florida . Then I heard a recognizable grunt and my gut dropped.

I mumbled, “What the hell?” as I watched my fiancé climb on top of another woman.

He kissed her, then moved down her perfect naked body to eat her out. Staring from

her point of view, his head bobbed between her thighs. I hadn't seen that view in over a year, due to his alleged neck problems. She dug her fingers into his hair, pushing him against her pussy.

Deacon had stepped closely to me when I had been distracted. His voice was in my ear and still deep, but this time, it was softer, "Would you like him executed for this betrayal, Sarah Hollinger?"

I could hardly speak, but it wasn't sedation that did it to me this time. It was the shock of viscerally seeing my fiancé cheat on me.

I whispered, "What?"

"She will kill him right now, if you like. She has him in position, and we can watch. Lanai Dea can rip his head off or use her thighs to crush his head or something more painful, if you prefer. Perhaps bring you his manhood as a souvenir?"

"I...she can do that?" I asked in shock. "He's screwing an alien?"

"Lanai Dea is an android, though she looks human at the moment."

"And you would tell her to kill him, like it was nothing?"

"Not like it was nothing." Deacon solemnly shook his head. "Nonconsensual infidelity is punishable by death—is that not the human custom, as well?"

"Not where I come from—not usually and not legally, anyway." My mind ran wild with the thought of it and slipped into a pool of logistics to avoid thinking of the actual problem of killing Ryan for an affair. Since this is a hallucination, am I thinking of killing him? "...I wouldn't want her to be arrested."

He laughed and it was a peculiar sound. Almost as if he didn't do it often. "No human prison could keep Lanai Dea, but more importantly, she would never be caught. The moment the deed is finished, she can use her locator ring and be automatically transported here. Just say the word, Sarah Hollinger, and your partner will be—"

"You taste so fucking good," Ryan moaned against the robot's pussy. She shoved him down again, and he groaned for it. Ryan had always hated when I tried to be rough with him...

"Is this...is he drugged, like I was?" I asked in confusion. "Or is this something he's choosing to do?"

Deacon nodded. "Lanai Dea is not the only woman he has had congress with, apart from you. Allegiant , the others." As we watched the monitor, pictures of Ryan with other women, some clothed, some not, flashed on half of the screen. "He has been having dozens of other women. I sent Lanai there as a police officer investigating your missing person case. Everything you see here has been his choice. Say the word and he is done."

I was enraged and I spun my engagement ring until it slipped from my finger. When the large diamond hit the floor, it made the smallest sound, like it had hardly ever existed at all. My heart felt as if it sheared into two pieces. It wasn't that I was madly in love with him or that I thought he was with me. I was hurt, certainly, but I was more upset about the alteration of my future. I was nothing without his money, and that fact embarrassed me. But I would rather live in my car than have that cheating bastard in my life after watching him fuck a robot.

"No," I shook my head, halfway not-believing I was turning the offer down, "I can't have his death on my conscience. I don't want anything of his anymore."

"Very well. Lanai, come back when you are ready. Allegiant , outside view." The

monitor switched from their escapade to a haunting view of space.

Okay, if I play along with my hallucination, then maybe I found evidence of Ryan's affairs and that's why my mind shattered like this. If I play along with the scenario, I bet I'll wake upThat had been a lot of work for this alien to set up for me. Maybe he sees me as someone worthy of the effort? If I treat him well, maybe he will do the same, take me home, and I'll wake up?

I asked, "Could you bend down here?"

He frowned but did as I asked, lowering until his head was level with mine.

I kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

He stood up straight again and stared at me. "Why are you thanking me? How can you go from seeing that betrayal to gratitude?"

"You sent your robot to Earth, putting her at risk of whatever dangers she could encounter, all so you could have proof of my cheating asshole fiancé and you could show me the truth. That's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

"Then you need better friends," my stalker piped up.

I laughed bitterly and said, "That's probably true."

Deacon explained, "I only did what any Ladrian would do, Sarah Hollinger. Betrayal is the highest offense. Loyalty is everything to us."

I took one of his hands in mine. It was enormous and far warmer and softer than I had expected. He was shocked by the gesture but in my hallucination, he let me hold his hand.

I smiled and said, “Loyalty is everything to me, too.” I gave his hand a squeeze before I let him go. “Now, do I get to go home?”

“No.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

CHAPTER 5

Jacaranda

Sarah's delicate nature would get her killed on Halla, but I didn't want to say that and scare her. "You see what I was saying, Deacon? She's too soft for the job ahead of her. She can't even give the order to execute her betrayer. She doesn't have what it takes. Too weak."

"I was strong enough to cut you," she snapped, hand on her hip.

Deacon laughed. "She has a point, Jac."

"Is that your name?" she asked.

"He did not introduce himself?" Deacon asked.

I sighed. "I didn't think I would need to. I hoped you would come back to your senses."

Deacon turned to her and said, "Your captor is Jacaranda Cozz, my oldest friend and favorite employee." Then he looked at me. "And if you wouldn't mind de-mogging?"

I rolled my eyes and hit the button on my belt. I had thought Sarah would be more at ease with another human in the room, so I had changed back into the man who had taken her before Wave delivered her. Once I had transmogrified into my native form, her mouth dropped open as she stared up at me with huge, round eyes.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Sarah.”

She gulped. “Oh. Okay.” She sounded like she wasn’t sure what to believe.

But it didn’t matter what she thought. There was no point to any of this. “Can’t I just take her back to South Carolina? She does not belong here.”

“No,” Deacon said firmly. “Sarah Hollinger will help keep my sibling safe—”

“She can’t even keep herself safe!” I argued.

“—and we will enter into a union to keep her safe on Halla.”

My inner self raged, but I didn’t want to scare her any more than I already had.

“Please tell me you’re just trying to get my goat.”

“What’s a goat?” Deacon asked.

Sarah frowned. “Huh?”

“He doesn’t know what a goat is,” I said to her, then told him, “It’s a figure of speech. What I meant to say is, please tell me you’re lying.” Sometimes navigating the intricacies of multiple languages tripped me up, and I lost track of who would understand what.

Deacon was quite serious as he said, “I would never lie about a union, Jac. Who would lie about a union? They are sacred.”

I groaned in frustration. “This is madness, and you know it. She has no idea what this means—”

“It’s like a human marriage,” he explained to her.

Sarah’s eyes went wide with apprehension. “You want to marry me?”

“Yes, but only to protect you from the ghosts.”

Her brow furrowed. “What?”

I ran my fingers through my hair and fell back onto Deacon’s bed near the window.

“Tell her. She needs to know everything.”

Deacon said, “The ghosts of Halla can possess living tissue. It’s been many years since it has happened, but our historians tell us of the times they’ve inhabited a human. Being possessed is violent and painful—they can do anything with your body, use it as they see fit, or torment you—it merely depends on the ghost. But they cannot possess someone who is united with another. Union is the only bond they cannot break to enter a person’s body, and thus, it is very sacred to us. I do not enter this bond lightly, Sarah Hollinger, but I do it to protect you.”

She covered her mouth and shook her head. “I can’t marry you.”

“You must. It is the only way to protect you—are you having a side effect from your drugs? I did not think I would have to explain this more than once.”

I almost laughed at his confusion. “Deacon, she’s not asking for you to explain it again. She’s telling you she doesn’t want to do it.”

He frowned. “What she wants does not matter. It will protect her.”

“It matters to me!” she snapped and began to cry.

I saw an opportunity. “This is your savior? The woman who can’t refuse a union without crying? You think she’s strong enough to protect your sibling? She’s hardly strong enough to stand on her own two feet!” I walked over to her and expected her to cringe, but she didn’t. She just watched me and sobbed. “Look at her tiny body and this soft hair. She’s like a cina. Head to toe weakness, that is. I bet she can’t even push me away. Go ahead and try, little cina.” I carefully nudged her shoulder.

“I’m not playing your—”

“Push me!” I barked in her face.

She shoved me with all her might. I stepped back to stop from falling, but landed against Deacon, who laughed.

Suddenly, Sarah slapped my face and screamed, “Leave me alone!” before she realized what she had done. Then she folded her arms against herself, like a shield. Her eyes were glued to me, and her lip quivered, as if I was about to attack her.

Someone has hit her before . I had seen it with orphans and others who had been abused. That palpable fear, the tight posture. I stood straight but hunched my shoulders to appear smaller and softer. I lowered my voice, too.

“Sarah, I’m not going to hurt you for that. I was trying to get a rise out of you. I needed to know you would defend yourself.”

Her nose crinkled and her eyes became slits. “You were testing me?”

“Yes, I can’t let this insanity continue without knowing you can handle yourself.”

“Did I pass your little test?” she spat.

“Better than expected, but not as good as I had hoped.”

“Next time you come at me, Jacaranda Cozz, you better hope I can’t hit you back, because I won’t stop.”

“See?” Deacon sounded proud. “She has strong fighting spirit in her. I almost think it would be enough to protect her without the union.”

Sarah hopefully said, “Then we don’t need to—”

“But we are,” Deacon interrupted.

She huffed and slumped against the wall.

“If she’s so strong, let her stand on her own against the ghosts, Deacon. No union, no guards. Let her prove how strong she is.”

“I will not take such a risk. I require her for my sibling.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. I didn’t want to bring his family into the mix, but I had no other cards to play. “So you want to unite with a human woman, who you don’t even know, to protect your sibling...what would your father say about this?”

“I am doing this because of my father, Jac,” he said, his jaw clenched. “He would want me to protect my sibling.”

“Fine. What would your mother say about this?”

His eyes darkened as he turned on me. “Why are you bringing her into this?”

“She has a right to know, doesn’t she?”

“My mother...” He grumbled, “She lost her right to tell me what to do the day she turned her back on my father.”

“She did not do so without cause,” I pointed out.

He gritted his teeth and admitted, “No. She did not. But all of that aside, it does not matter what she wants in this circumstance. I will do anything to protect my father’s child, as I hope any of his other children would protect me. I recognize that you don’t grasp the concept of classed family, Jac, but this is how it is for us.”

He had to bring that up? “I may not be classed , but I understand what family is, Deacon. You can condescend like that to your crew, but don’t try that shit with me.”

He winced and explained, “I only meant to say that things are different for me than they are for you, when it comes to family. I did not mean to offend you and for that, I am sorry.” It hadn’t been the apology that pained him. It was the fact that he had crossed a line with me that had pained him.

“Forgiven. Always.”

Deacon gave half a smile. “I know this is not the best circumstance for a union, Jac. If I thought there was any other way around it, then I would have taken that path. But since Justice murdered all the other conduits on Orhon, Sarah Hollinger is the nearest one, which makes her the best candidate for the work. I do not like what I must do, but rich or poor, we must do our duty, yes?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then I will unite with this human. We will have the ceremony and all its pomp right here on Allegiant . Once the ceremony is over, we will go to Orhon, where you and your crew will rescue Silence from her prison cell. Shouldn’t be too hard, right?”

I laughed. “I have broken out how many prisoners from the royal cells now? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

Deacon chuckled. “More than enough to make you the expert in such matters. After that, we take them both to Halla, secure them, and that will be that. Nothing else to worry about.”

“Dun dun, dun!” Sarah said with a shake of her head.

We both turned to her, frowning.

She explained in a mix of English and Ladrian, “Sorry. It’s a human way to say someone had jinxed themselves by tempting fate.”

“What is jinxed ?” Deacon asked.

I said, “She thinks you cursed yourself by saying there was nothing else to worry about—it’s a superstition—if you say something like that, then things will go wrong according to human lore.”

“It is a curse to be confident for humans?”

I sighed. “For someone about to unite with one, you certainly have a lot to learn about them.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

CHAPTER 6

Deacon

“ I will learn about humans as I go,” I said with a shrug. “No matter, there is no time to waste. We must be united, then the pomp, then we rescue Silence—”

“Why don’t I go rescue Silence, while you handle the pomp?” Jacaranda asked.

I frowned. “You are my oldest friend. I would be distraught if you did not participate in the pomp.”

“Even on Earth, best friends help celebrate weddings,” Sarah told him.

“I know all that, but you don’t understand—”

“It is settled,” I interrupted Jac. “Please send Wave in to perform the ceremony.”

Sarah frowned. “We’re getting married by the doctor?”

“We are being united by the ship historian,” I explained.

“I thought she was the doctor.”

“No, merely the most knowledgeable Ladrian on my ship. Wave was engineered, like so many classed, to be the perfect knowledge machine.”

“That explains the ego,” she sighed.

“She is confident—again, you make that sound like a bad thing. I do not understand.”

Sarah shrugged. “I think it’s a cultural thing. Americans, that’s what we call humans who come from—”

“I know what Americans are,” I interrupted her.

“Well, we tend to believe humility is a good thing. Unless you’re a politician or a billionaire.”

“Americans are strange.”

She laughed. “You’re not wrong about that.”

“I know. That’s why I said it.”

Jac put his hand up and said, “She’s agreeing with you, Deacon.”

Sarah’s ways mystified me, and I looked forward to unraveling them. “Very well, then. Jac?”

He nodded and when he left, trepidation had taken over his face. Why is he so upset about the pomp? I would have thought he would be in support of such traditional things, considering our untraditional union. Regardless of his concerns, there were other issues to attend.

I asked Sarah, “Are you comfortable uniting in what you’re wearing now? I understand humans prefer special clothes for their ceremonies, and I can have a small dress delivered, if that makes you more comfortable. But I should get started on that

now, so we do not waste any more time.”

Her brow crinkled in a frown. “Wait, you said you sent Lanai Dea to Ryan as a police officer investigating my missing person case, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“How long have I been missing?”

“A few hours, Ladrian. But that is approximately two days on Earth.”

Her eyes fluttered as she rapidly blinked. “What?”

“Time here is different than Earth. It’s not a one-to-one ratio, but I can acquaint you with the formula we use to calculate the two. Are you familiar with advanced calculus?”

She laughed. “The fuck are you talking about?”

“Advanced calculus, it is what we base many of our—”

“No, Deacon, I’m sorry, that’s just an expression to tell you I’m lost in the conversation at this point.”

“Very well—I do not have the time right now to explain it. We must make haste for the union.”

“Deacon, I know you’re dead set on us being united, but you need to understand, I don’t want this.”

I huffed loudly. “Sarah Hollinger, I—”

“And if you’re going to keep saying my name, just say Sarah. I don’t hear you always calling Jac ‘Jacaranda Cozz,’ so why are you using my whole name like that?”

“Sarah Hollinger is not your conversational name?”

“Just Sarah.” She smiled the way someone smiles at a child who did something sweet and pointless.

It bothered me. “Fine. Sarah, I do not understand why you would want to go to Halla un-united, when I have told you what will happen. Do you not believe me?”

“It’s not that—”

“Then what is it?”

“I want to go home, Deacon. Even if this is a hallucination, I don’t want any of this.”

I stretched my spine down to my tail, trying to avoid outward signs of annoyance. She challenged me at every turn, and I was not accustomed to such rudeness, but in school, I had learned humans were disagreeable by their very nature—they did not know any better. My schooling taught us humans responded well to reason. If I keep a cool mind, she will understand .

A deep breath later, I said, “Sarah, what I am giving you is a great honor. Please accept it in the spirit in which it is given.”

“It’s an honor I do not want!” Her voice had cracked with emotion and her eyes welled. “I’m not a conduit—”

“You see ghosts.”

She shook her head and her wavy brown hair swished side to side appealingly, but her face turned pink as she mumbled, “I don’t. I just see hallucinations. They’re not real. That’s why I take all those drugs that Ode was worried about. They keep the hallucinations at bay. No one sees the dead, Deacon. None of it is real.”

My insides twisted for her. I finally understood why she was so confused. Jac had told me when the light-skinned humans turn pink, they were embarrassed or ashamed, and I never wanted that for her. I took her hand in mine, the way she had done to me earlier. It was so small and cool to the touch. Delicate, like one of those butterflies Jac had brought me as a present from Earth.

I held her hand with both of mine and softly said, “I am so sorry the drugs take your gift from you, Sarah. You do not see hallucinations. You see ghosts. It’s a part of who you are, and you should never be ashamed of that. It’s a wondrous gift, and you should be proud of who and what you are. A conduit.”

She swallowed audibly, but I could hardly hear her words. “I’m not.”

“You are. That’s why I have brought you here to help save my sibling. You are the only active conduit with your heritage that can save them.”

Jerking her hand away, she snapped, “Well, I don’t want to save them. You kidnapped me, Deacon! Why should I do anything to help you? Why should I save someone who could do that to another human?”

I thought I had gotten through to her. I was wrong. “You are going to help me, Sarah, whether you want to or not. I am uniting with you to save you from the misery of being violated by ghost after ghost after ghost. I don’t have to do this. I am doing this as a favor to you, to show my gratitude for the work you are about to do for me. But if you’re not grateful, then why should I be?”

“Grateful?” her voice sizzled. “You think I should be grateful that you kidnapped me and you’re forcing me into some job that I never wanted? Is that honestly the tactic you’re trying right now?”

“You are right, of course. I did have you stolen from your home, taken from everything you’ve ever known and thrown into a strange situation.” I folded my arms and my tail raised with my anger. “So, since you have had all your other choices taken from you, I will give you this choice. You can choose whether to unite with me. You can choose to let the ghosts violate your body until they’re done playing with you, and they leave you broken and dead. And once you’re dead, I’m not sure what will happen to your ghost. I am not certain what happens to a human ghost on Halla, if the human died there—I don’t know if that has ever happened before. Your ghost might be stuck there for eternity. It certainly won’t join the ether—”

Confusion flashed across her face. “What are you talking about, Deacon?”

“When a Ladrian dies, their body is delivered to Halla and burned before the next full moons on Orhon. Their ghost emerges from the fire and lives among the other ghosts on Halla, until they die—”

“Your ghosts die?” she sounded incredulous.

We were getting off the topic, but I needed her to understand everything fully. I nodded. “Yes, it is generally one hundred years after their arrival on Halla, though lately, it has been happening much faster. My point is, when a ghost dies, they return to the ether from which all ghosts are reborn as Ladrians.”

Her cute nose scrunched up in thought. “It goes, Ladrian, then ghost, then ether, then Ladrian again? So, it’s like reincarnation?”

“Yes.” She finally understands something . “We are reincarnated and born on

Orhon.”

“Do you remember anything of your past life?” She sounded fascinated.

I shook my head. “Very few of us do. But we are said to have innate memories of our former lives. Like if someone was burned to death in their original life, then they may have an overwhelming fear of fire in their next life, things like that.”

“How do you even know any of that is true?”

“It is a part of our history, our culture—”

“But if conduits are the only ones who can see ghosts, how do you know any of that is real?”

I smiled. “On Halla, we can all see the ghosts. Sometimes, ghosts can become strong enough to travel, either in form or in voice, and haunt the living. But it is only the conduits who have authority over them, so if a ghost leaves Halla, it is to find a conduit.”

She sounded so sad when she said, “Then you have proof of your religion?”

“Yes, why does this bother you?”

“I keep thinking that if any of Earth’s religions had tangible proof it was real, then there would have been far fewer wars in our history.”

“You are sad for your people?”

She nodded. “Billions of people wouldn’t have died in a million nightmarish ways, if we had one unified religion among us.”

I thought of my father's beheading and the way my heart cried out when it happened. I was the only one of my family who did not turn their back on him at the ceremony, so I watched as it happened. I had never felt so much rage and helplessness in my life. When Silence collapsed to her knees beside his body, I focused all my attention on the Ladrang baby in her belly. I couldn't watch as his body drained blood onto the crowd below. I struggled not to think of him not being able to hold his future child.

I swallowed my rage for that day and said, "It is hard to think of what might have been."

"What is it like to grow up, knowing what will happen when you die?"

"You do not know what will happen when you die?"

"No," she sighed. "It's one of the great mysteries for humans."

What a horror . "That must be terrible for you."

Sarah's eyebrows pinched together, like she was deep in thought. "It is, and it isn't. Since we don't know what happens, we try to live our lives to the fullest. Most of us anyway. Maybe if we knew, we wouldn't try so hard to make things better for our families."

I shook my head and smiled. "That does not stop, just because you know what happens when you die." I laughed softly at the thought. "For instance, I have embarked on a strange and perilous journey to secure the life of my unborn sibling."

She smiled up at me. I wondered if I could ever love a human—it seemed wrong. But when she smiled at me like that, I wasn't sure what was right or wrong anymore.

Sarah said, "Yeah, you did."

My door opened and Wave strolled in. “Jac says you are to unite now?”

“That is Sarah’s decision,” I told her.

I was concerned she would refuse the union. If she did that, what good would she be to my sibling? But she was right—I had taken all her choices from her. She deserved to choose this part of her future.

Sarah took a deep breath and asked, “There’s no way I can go home, is there?”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry for this, but you are needed here more than you are needed there. You saw what your fiancé was doing. Your sisters are independent. No one needs you there. But I need you here.”

Her lip quivered, and I thought she might cry. But she said, “If this is the only way to keep me safe from the ghosts, I guess we unite.”

I could finally take a full breath. Smiling, I said, “Wave. Unite us.”

Wave asked incredulously, “Now?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Very well.” She sneered with disdain at Sarah. “You need to lock your arm with his.”

I moved my elbow out toward her to show her the gesture. “Like this.”

She laced her arm around mine, but our height difference made her wrap her arm around my wrist. “Like this?”

Wave answered, "Close enough." Then, she pressed her cylindrical badge to record the event for the official record. "On the 12, 497 th day of Muraska, I unite Deacon Amroll-Bellket Ladrang to Sarah Hollinger. May you produce many heirs." She pressed her badge once more to end the transmission.

"Oh, god, heirs?" Sarah's body tensed next to mine.

"Offspring, children, descendants," Wave said, annoyed. "Does she not understand what heirs are?"

"I know what they are," Sarah snapped. "I just...I didn't think about that when I said yes."

Wave looked to me for direction.

"You may return to your other duties," I told her.

She nodded once and left us.

"Do not think about that now," I said to Sarah. "There is one more thing we must do to protect you from the ghosts."

She stepped away from me and asked with apprehension, "Is it sex?"

The union wasn't official without the pomp. "Yes."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

CHAPTER 7

Sarah

I didn't want to make him angry again, but I had to say it. "Uh, Deacon, I'm not ready for that."

He frowned. "Of course you're not ready for it." He turned his head toward the door and said, "Allegiant, lock my quarters' doors." A thump sounded, and he faced me again, smiling. "Now we're ready."

Unease rippled through me. "Um—"

Deacon ripped his clothes off, and the brown tatters fell like they were nothing. I swallowed hard as I studied his body. His muscles rippled beneath that shimmering tan skin. There appeared to be extra muscles in every direction—his thick forearms had stacked layers, a twenty-pack, instead of a six-pack. I did everything I could not to look lower. But he had the seductive V-taper that I loved and pointed in that direction. My eyes were compelled to look at his dick.

The first word that popped into my head was, "proportionate." For an eight-foot tall male of any species, he seemed to be comparable to any human who might have reached that height. Regardless of how appropriate his length and girth was for his height, my mouth dropped open at the sight of his cock. I wasn't sure how I could get my hands around it, much less any other part of me.

And he looks to be only half-hard right now. What will that thing be like when he's

completely hard? And those veins—thick and pulsing and rigid—what would they feel like?

I shot my eyes upward, too scared to think about that thing anymore.

His shoulders were like boulders, and this mountain of an alien looked at me as though I was on the menu. Every hair on my body stood on end, as I stared at the ceiling and tried to think clearly.

He's not real. None of this is real. It doesn't matter what I do here. It's all a hallucination .

“Why won't you look at me?” he asked.

“I don't—I'm—”

“You are nervous?”

“Aren't you?”

“No,” he said with a smile. “I have had sex many times.”

I laughed at the absurdity of his answer. “That's not why I'm nervous, Deacon.”

“Wait—have you not had sex?”

“Of course I have.”

“Then why are you nervous?”

I took a deep breath and huffed, “Because I have never had sex with an alien before,

and I'm not exactly sure I'm in the mood after everything I have been through today."

"Mood?" He frowned. "What mood?"

"You know what I mean. Being kidnapped doesn't usually make a girl horny."

"That is alright. I know how to do that."

I gave him a skeptical look. "Do what?"

"I know how to get you into that mood."

I met his gaze and what I found sent shivers through my body. His eyes burned for me. But I started to panic. Everything felt too real, even though I knew it wasn't. I backed up and bumped into the bed behind me. Not good. With muscles like his, I knew I couldn't fight him off, no matter how hard I tried.

Ladrian women, the few I had seen so far, they were muscular compared to most human women. He's probably used to a woman who can throw down—I bet they like it rough. If I don't fight him, maybe he won't be as rough as he could be...

"Deacon, what do you mean you know how to get me into that mood?"

"Take off your dress."

"I..." my voice trembled, "I don't want to."

He stepped closer, pressing himself into my personal space, but not touching me. "I can take it off for you."

Sounds like the dress is coming off, either way. Might as well not let him destroy

it—it's the only clothing I have . I sighed and untied the waist string on the wrap dress I was wearing. It fell open, and I slid it from my arms onto the floor, before I hugged myself for warmth.

He studied my bra and panties. "It is always strange to me that your kind wear clothes beneath your clothes. Take them off," he ordered.

I lifted my chin stubbornly. "I'm cold."

He waved a large hand toward the nearby mattress. "Climb into the bed, under the fur, then you can remove the underclothes."

He was so matter-of-fact about everything, and considering this wasn't really real , I followed his directions, and the bed was far warmer than anywhere else on the ship, bar the hot vat of red liquid I'd been dipped into earlier. The soft gray fur was massive, and I hoped to never meet the creature who had lost it. Warily, I kept my eyes on the other massive creature in the room.

Deacon stared at my face, then his eyes traced over my fur-covered body. He growled, a low and deep arousing sound that made my nipples hard, and he slowly lifted the far end of the fur from my feet.

It tickled and with every inch of skin revealed, my breath sped up. My heart pumped faster than ever. I panted, "I'm not sure about this—"

"I am."

He tossed the rest of the blanket up onto my waist, exposing my lower naked body. Then he grabbed my ankles and spread them apart. I expected him to lay on top of me, but he didn't. Instead, he had laid his upper body between my legs. He was eye-to-clit with my pussy. Deacon took a deep breath, lowered his head, then licked me

there and something rumbled in his chest.

I gasped swiftly, unsure of what his plan was. I knew he wasn't going to hurt me—or at least, I was mostly sure of it—but I was completely panicked. I didn't know what Deacon's people did during sex or if their mating was anything like human sex, and my mind ran wild with the thought. I tried to crawl backwards to get away from him, but he wrapped his arms around my thighs, and I wasn't going anywhere.

Maybe I can reason with him. “Deacon, I—”

His long tongue painted my outsides, before it probed my insides, making me groan. It was hot, like his hand had been. I lost my words from the sensation, as he flicked my G-spot.

There were many benefits to a guy with an extra-long tongue, it seemed and when he figured out where to lick to make me groan the loudest, he stayed right there. His tongue felt different than anyone else's, and not only because of the length—it took me a few times to realize his tongue had nodules bigger than taste buds. The texture added so much to the experience—when each one passed over my sensitive flesh, I nearly swooned. My legs tensed in his grip, while I lost my mind to the pleasure.

None of this is real. For fuck's sake, he has a tail, of course he's not real! Just let the monster do his thing and enjoy the attention. It's not real. I'm not cheating on Ryan—fuck that guy, he's cheating on me! Isn't he? Oh who cares, this feels too fucking good and this was a hallucination I didn't want to wake up from.

He found my rhythm and soon, my body shook for him. Any minute now, I'll try to push him away, I told myself. But I clutched the fur in my fists instead, moaning obscenities in English. The pleasure was on the verge of too much.

My body clenched around his tongue when my orgasm came on, and I gasped,

“Fuck!”

But he didn't stop. Deacon's tongue slipped out of me and around my wet pussy, until he found my clit. His eyes were on my face as he licked me slowly, thoroughly. They brightened while he watched my reaction to what he was doing to me. Then he began to twirl his tongue around my clit, teasing me, making me want more.

I couldn't hold still in his grasp. My body writhed in his arms. Everything inside of me locked down as the most exquisite bliss tore through me. This climax was much bigger than the other one. Air fled my lungs so fast that my throat went dry, and my next sounds were raspy whimpers. I floated in a sea of warmth, barely feeling my own body anymore. Only the unparalleled pleasure he gave me.

No hallucination has ever felt this way, and I don't care if I ever wake up .

Deacon's tongue left my clit, and he climbed underneath the fur and up my body. He licked different spots, as though he was trying to find another clit someplace. When he reached my nipples, I brazenly gripped his hair in my hands and panted for more. That magic tongue of his was enough to make me crazy. His mouth sucked on my breasts, one after the other, with his tongue dancing around the soft skin there. My back arched as the sensations started to take me over once again.

But then I felt it. That thing .

Because of our height difference, his enormous and erect cock pressed against my shin. It was hotter than the rest of him and like a pillar of steel. I didn't have the energy to panic anymore, though. My body was spent. Not just from the orgasms, though. This was different—an undeniable exhaustion.

He said it had been a couple of days on Earth—is this some kind of jet lag? Spaceship lag? Whatever it was, I was too weak to fight him off.

If this were real, would I try to fight him, if I had the energy?

I lied and told myself , of course, I would. I just can't right now. Too tired. And if I was honest with myself, his attention felt too damn good.

Deacon's head emerged from the fur with that hunger in his hazel eyes. I needed to know more about that magic tongue, so I kissed him. He initially stiffened against me, but as I pulled him against my mouth, his body relaxed. His tongue had soft bumps and exploring it with my own was enough to make me relax further.

But he pulled back and murmured, "Tell me."

"What?"

"Tell me why you did that."

"I wanted to kiss you."

He looked pensive. "Is that like tasting? You wanted to taste my tongue?"

The question was so odd, I almost giggled. "Yes. I wanted to taste your tongue."

A furrow formed between his brows. "It's strange."

"Do you like it?"

Slowly, he nodded, like he had just found a new food he enjoyed—tentative, but his eyes brimmed with pleasure and curiosity. Deacon kissed me this time, his tongue prodding into my mouth. I choked when he hit the back of my throat, and he immediately pulled away.

“You triggered my gag reflex,” I explained.

“I apologize,” he murmured. Concern flickered in his gaze and he gently smoothed a strand of hair away from my face. “Are you injured?”

I smiled and shook my head. “No. Just don’t stick your tongue so far into my mouth.”

He appeared thoughtful for a moment, then asked, “May I try again?”

“Yes.”

He kissed me, this time more carefully. Things heated up fast between us and I wrapped my legs around him while our mouths feasted on each other. I didn’t care anymore about him being too big for me. I was willing to try anything he wanted. After being deprived for so long, my body desperately wanted to be fucked.

Deacon lifted himself upward, arching his back at the same time. The thick head of his cock poised at my wet slit. But he waited, with his eyes on mine. I was taken by this show of restraint, and I nodded my acquiescence.

He murmured, “If I hurt you, tell me and I will stop so you can adjust to my size.”

“I will.”

He slowly pressed himself into me, spreading my pussy wide with his cock. The feeling overwhelmed me. I had never been so completely filled in my life. I took a deep breath, and it shot out of my lungs. The stretch was almost enough to make me come—with only so much room to maneuver, my G-spot was tight against his cock. His solid veins pulsed against my insides, toying with me there and making me quiver for him.

He had entered me with one stroke, then held still. It was as though he was waiting for me to object. But I cocked my hips up to him, ready to receive whatever he wanted to give me, because what the hell. Why not enjoy this insane alien fantasy?

He took the cue, retracted, and thrust deeper still. This time, he groaned, too. Deacon angled himself back, making the head of his cock massage my G-spot more, shorting out my brain. Each thrust was fireworks in my core, and I knew I would explode. Hopefully, before he tore me apart with his massive cock.

He couldn't fit all of himself into me, and I was glad he didn't try. He was already bottoming out on most strokes. But the true masochist in me almost wanted him to make the effort. Just to try it.

His eyes closed and the taupe shimmer of his skin pulsed and fluttered while he fucked me. I was shocked at first, but I wondered if his shimmer pulse was the human equivalent of the goosebumps he gave to me. I snaked my arms beneath his, planted my nails in his meaty back, and licked up his chest as I writhed on his cock. I needed to feel his body with everything I had.

He growled like a beast and said, "You're so fucking tight."

Maybe the shimmer pulse means he's about to come?

Oh hell—heirs.

Then I nearly laughed at myself. Not like I could get pregnant from him anyway. Wrong species.

"Come for me, Deacon," I purred, seducing him instead.

"I'm right here," he said, confused. "Can you not feel me?"

It was all I could do not to laugh at our miscommunication, but I didn't want to upset him. I gasped as he thrust once more. "I feel you, Deacon. You feel incredible. I want you to orgasm."

He took my hands from his back and pinned them to the bed above my head. "You first."

Then he pounded me into the mattress. Carefully still, but he went much faster than before, making my body bend to his will. His enormous weight on my hands was too much though, and I winced.

He stopped abruptly. "Are you hurt?"

Between gasps, I panted, "Too much on my hands. Too heavy for me."

He jerked his own away, flattening the mattress as he moved them. "I apologize, Sarah."

"Don't stop, Deacon, I'm so close," I whispered.

He resumed driving into my body with his own, but this time, he gripped the edge of the mattress. He used it for more leverage. With him on top of me, surrounded by his body, overwhelmed by his cock, I was trapped by every part of Deacon, yet I knew I could stop him at any moment. All it took was a wince or a word, and he would stop. I was in charge of this massive beast, and that made me feel powerful.

Until that power surged through my body, weakening me to the point of nothingness. My orgasm curled through my limbs, making me feebly thrash beneath him. His cock throbbed and swelled inside of me, making his thrusts shorter and stronger. He growled again, but there were no words this time. Guttural utterances croaked through his chest and his head whipped back when he howled.

Abruptly, Deacon pulled out, coming all over my stomach—long, hot spurts of thick fluid painting my skin. I was relieved to see it was whitish and similar to human cum, except for the volume, which was abundant and more than I could have held inside my body.

“ Fuck .” He panted, looking at me with wry shock. “Never so hard... ever .”

“Same here,” I agreed, trying to catch my own breath before asking for a towel to clean myself up.

“Of course.” He moved off the bed and stumbled toward part of the wall. “ Allegiant , towels.”

The nearest bit of wall slid open, and steam poured out, but when it cleared, there was a stack of emerald green cloths inside. He delivered one to me and used another to clean his cum from my stomach.

“What’s this one for?” I asked, trying to ignore the soft brush of his fingers against my skin and how much I liked it.

He smiled, but his brows thickened in confusion. “For yourself. You make a lot of moisture.”

I blushed and swabbed between my legs and he wasn’t wrong. All his foreplay, along with those orgasms, had made me extremely wet and slick. More so than I’d ever been. “That was thoughtful. Thank you. What do I do when I’m done with the towel?”

“Say, ‘ Allegiant , laundry,’ and the floor will open for you to drop it there, wherever you are in the room.”

I didn't know why I doubted him—maybe because it sounded too easy, and yes, very futuristic. But I smiled dubiously and said, “ Allegiant , laundry.”

Sure enough, a whooshing sound happened next to the bed. I peeked over the edge and a square of the floor had slid open. I dropped the used towel there, and the floor closed. “Huh.”

Deacon returned to the bed with glasses of a clear red liquid. “I'm sure you are thirsty. Drink this.”

“Punch?” I guessed.

He frowned profoundly. “Why would I hit you?”

I closed my eyes and sighed. Our communications were sketchy, but I knew we could work on that. Then, I looked up into his surprisingly handsome face and tried to explain. “No, it's a drink humans have sometimes. Fruity, sweet. What is this?”

“Water with herbs. It prevents hunger.”

“Oh.” Strange post-coital custom, but sure .

The red water tasted like every citrus fruit I had ever tried all at once, with a fennel finish. Sweet, sour, and sweet again. It was peculiar, but delicious, and made me think of a fennel and citrus salad I had in Italy on my first vacation with Ryan.

“That's wonderful,” I said, not realizing just how parched I'd truly been.

“I am glad you like it. That will give you the strength and energy you need for the pomp.”

The pomp? What the hell was the pomp?

He took the glass from my hand, set it aside, then said, “ Allegiant , let them in.”

Startled and still naked beneath the fur, I jerked the covers up to my neck and blurted out, “Let who in?”

CHAPTER 8

Jacaranda

Those earthly butterflies gnawed at my gut after they had fluttered in it for an hour. I do not want to participate in the pomp. I want nothing to do with this. But it was expected of me and the Ladrang family was nothing, if not traditional. If I wanted to remain a faithful employee, then I would participate.

More importantly, as Deacon's best friend, it would insult him if I did not join in.

As I stood in the hallway waiting for the door to his quarters to open, Kapok, Tiger, and Drift walked toward me.

Shit . Drift was the smallest of us—even shorter than me. But he wasn't muscled like I was—his was the runt of his family. They had sent him to the academy when he was barely a child, and from what I had heard, the Skir clan had hoped the academy would kill him. But he had thrived instead, becoming the youngest pilot in the academy's history. On a day like today, none of that mattered. It was impossible to view any of the others with more than mild disdain.

I frowned and said, "Tiger, I thought you weren't going to be in on this."

"Kapok says I should learn about the pomp, so I'm here to observe."

I grimaced at Kapok. "Really?"

“He’s got to learn some time, doesn’t he? We’re all under Deacon’s employment. He would be mad if we weren’t all here to make the union official, so—”

The door opened. Deacon was nude and Sarah was on the bed, covered by his fur, her eyes huge with shock.

He grinned and said, “Welcome, friends, come in.”

But she was not as happy as her groom. “What is going on, Deacon?”

“The pomp,” he said, tipping his head at her. “Do you not have the pomp on Earth?”

The door closed behind us, sealing us in. I felt as trapped as Sarah looked.

She said, “Pomp on Earth means you celebrate. What does it mean here?”

“The same thing.”

She nibbled anxiously on her bottom lip. “Then why are your friends here when I’m naked?”

Deacon frowned and waved a hand impatiently between them. “To celebrate, as you said. I don’t understand why I keep having to explain everything many times.”

Because I was well aware of the various miscommunications between earthly beings and aliens, I tried to explain the situation to my friend. “Celebrations on Earth are different than for Ladrians, Deacon.” I walked toward the bed, but Sarah visibly shrank back from me, so I stopped. “Sarah, the pomp after a union means Deacon will share you with us.”

She gasped, her jaw dropping in shock. “Share?”

“We are here to fuck you, little human,” Kapok growled as he stripped.

She stared at me, her eyes begging me to deny his response. But I nodded and averted my own gaze instead so I didn’t have to see the fear written all over her face.

Sarah shifted her gaze to Deacon. “You want to share me?”

“That is the way of things,” he said and shrugged, because it was a Ladrian custom. “After a union, the consort is shared with the partner’s friends and employees. This way, if she were to become pregnant right away, no one knows who the father is of her first born, and they all work to protect the child, and you as well.”

She looked appalled. “You have all this technology, but you can’t do a paternity test?”

I quickly interjected. “We can. We choose not to, in order to preserve the tradition. It keeps bonds strong between our people, the classed and the unclassed. This way, there are no revolts and less abuse between us.”

Deacon tried to brush my cynicism under the rug. “But that’s not the only reason why we do it. We do it, because it is a beautiful tradition.”

She sat up, keeping the fur over her chest and ran her fingers through her hair, tousled from her first round of sex with Deacon. “So, you want me to have sex with all of these guys—”

“Not me,” Tiger said, shaking his head. “I’m only here to watch.”

“And you think that’s beautiful?”

Deacon smiled and nodded. “Yes. Very much. I want to see you with them. I am

aroused by the thought of it.”

That much was plain for all of us to see. Kapok was, too, and I wondered how this small human would accommodate our kind. But since Deacon seemed as though he had already taken her, I knew she could do it.

I told Sarah, “If you would prefer I didn’t, I won’t—”

“I will.” Kapok eagerly leapt between us and started at her feet. He picked her up by her ankles, leaving her shoulders on the bed and making the fur drop from her body. She gasped as he licked her feet. “So small.” Then he let go, and her legs fell straight down onto the bed. He parted them as he climbed onto her body. “I’ve never had a human before.”

She squeaked in surprise. “That’s not how we like it—”

“I’ve fantasized about how I would take one, though.” He lifted her hips up and his cock pressed against her entrance. “I’ve always wanted to make one scream with pleasure.” He thrust into Sarah, making her scream.

It was not a happy scream of ecstasy.

I grabbed his shoulder and ripped him back from her, pulling his cock out, too. He rocked back onto his knees and growled at me. “What are you doing, Jac? I am doing my job.”

But Sarah crawled back from him, trying hopelessly to yank the fur out from beneath his weight so she could cover herself.

“Jac, this is his duty,” Deacon said.

“That’s not...” I sighed and struggled for the right words. “Kapok, you can’t take a human the way you take a Ladrian. You have to make her want it. Her body does not respond to being taken forcefully like that.”

He frowned and looked at Sarah more than a little skeptically. “It doesn’t?”

She quickly shook her head.

Softly, I asked the one thing I didn’t want to ask. “Sarah, is it okay if I show him how to pleasure a human woman?”

Her lashes blinked rapidly. “You...you know how?”

“I do. I’ve been with many humans.”

She licked her lips to stall for time. Then she whispered, “Okay.”

Her agreement was enough to make my cock hard, along with the sweet curves of her body. I took my clothes off and climbed onto the bed next to her.

“Lay on your back for me, Sarah.” She got comfortable but seemed cold—her nipples were hard. “Kapok, get off the fur.” He stood, and I pulled it up over her waist. “Better?”

“Yes,” she whispered, still wary.

I told him, “Generally, humans do something they call kissing before they fuck.” Which was not something we did at all with our own kind.

I brushed the hair away from her face and cupped the back of her head, before I gently pressed my lips to hers. She was cool to the touch, but receptive. We made out,

and her moans filled my head. I was pleasantly surprised when after a few minutes she hooked her leg over my hip. Guess she's decided to give this a try . Her wet sex brushed against my cock, making me want to thrust into her as boldly as Kapok had.

A Ladrian woman's body did not respond unless the man's body was forceful. They loved when we threw them around and took them in every way we could think of. I was on a scouting mission when I discovered human women were not that way at all. At least the majority of them.

Reaching under Sarah's ass, I pulled her on top of me without entering her. She was shocked I had done so—her face told me as much.

I told Kapok, "If you let her be on top, then she can control the depth of our cocks."

He grumbled, "Why would you want to do that?"

"Humans are not as deep as Ladrians," I said, sliding my hands over the curves of her waist. "You don't want to hurt her, right?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then let her control the depth and pace," I said, staring at her perfect tits and hard, rosy nipples. "Plus, you get a nice view when she's on top. Come see."

Sarah blushed as the men walked around to the head of the bed, which afforded them the same seductive view as I had. Full breasts, soft stomach, and spread thighs that were straddling my hips.

"Keep your eyes on me," I told her, seeing how nervous she was as they stared. "Only on me. They're not even here. It's just us."

She nodded, and keeping her eyes trained on mine, she began grinding her wet sex up and down my shaft. She was already so slick and hot. I couldn't help myself—I pumped up toward her. She reached between us and took my massive cock in her tiny hand and aimed me toward her entrance. As she sank down onto me, my body tensed. It wasn't the first time I had fucked in front of Deacon or Kapok, but Tiger and Drift were new.

A strange sense of exhibition came over me. I wanted to give them a show.

Placing my hands on her quivering thighs, I ran my fingers up that smooth skin past her belly and up to her tits. They were soft and smaller than any Ladrian woman, but her nipples were just as responsive when I plucked them. Her pussy clenched on my cock when I teased the mound of her breasts, and she moaned again.

“You like that?” I asked, certain she did.

“Yeah...feels so...good,” she murmured, lost to the sensations I was creating in her body.

Grabbing her ass, I sat up so I could feel her tits against my chest as she rode me. Her tail-free backside was so strange—like all humans—but the muscles squirmed under my hand—like a Ladrian woman. Sarah Hollinger was small, but mighty. She had a power in her core that was fiercer than any human woman I had met. Even when she had been on all those drugs, she was still quick enough to cut me—no small feat for a human.

I held her close to me, the sensual squeeze of her pussy mesmerizing me, pulling me deeper under her erotic spell. Her diminutive body—

“She doesn't have a tail?” Tiger asked, taking me out of the moment.

I had forgotten I wasn't just here for the pomp—I was also here as an educator. I had to push my pleasure aside and answer his question, but it was hard. “It is the rare human who has a tail—almost none of them do.”

“How odd,” he noted.

“Do you think I could fit in that hole?” Kapok asked, pointing to her backside.

But she tensed up and said, “No!”

I kissed her again to calm her down. “I won't let him. Don't worry.”

She smiled at me and kissed me again while she rode me, only taking a small part of my immense length inside her body. It was strange—I was simultaneously at ease with her on my cock and distraught by it, as well. I could not sort out my feelings on the matter. She held onto my neck, and I rolled her onto her back. When I thrust into her again, her sounds renewed a passion that had not waned. Fascinated by her, I touched her face, her lips, her throat. She cried out as I grabbed her breasts, pinching them, biting them, wanting to release deep inside of her.

But that was not the custom.

A first born, if conceived on the day of the union during the pomp, was to be a mystery child. If I came inside of her, that would be a breach of protocol, an insult to Deacon, and grounds for dismissal. It would irreparably ruin our friendship, too. I couldn't do that to him.

But every cell in my body wanted to.

Sarah's keening wails told me she was already there. As her body rolled beneath me, her sex tightened against my cock. It was all I could do not to release in her.

She stared into my eyes and gasped, “Mmm, fuck!”

I pumped into her twice more, before I pulled out and came on her belly. I laid onto her, irrespective of my mess, and kissed her wildly. Nothing else mattered in that moment. I didn’t know my own name. Her tongue and her small body were the only things that existed.

“Here,” Deacon said, interrupting our moment. He passed us both steamed towels to clean ourselves.

We did, and I kissed her one more time before I left her on the bed. Now comes the less fun part.

The watching.

Kapok laid next to her and said, “I don’t want to hurt you, little human. You can be on top.”

She laughed sardonically and said, “Gee, thanks.”

“The kissing, Kapok,” Deacon said.

“Right, right.” He fumbled through it for a minute, before he said, “This is odd.”

“But good?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. We should try again.”

They made out, and a surge of envy shot through me. I didn’t like watching him touch her. I was worried he might hurt her. Or she might like it better with him. Whatever the reason, I was worried for her.

And for me, because these were inappropriate feelings for Deacon's mate, let alone a human.

She carefully pushed Kapok onto his back and sat astride his lap. He laughed and said, "This is a good view."

Sarah blushed, but she was less timid this time. She allowed him to penetrate into her and started to ride him. But when he reached up and grabbed her tits, she winced.

I advised, "Gentler, Kapok."

"I'm being as gentle as I can!"

I huffed and got onto the bed behind her and between his legs. Her ass was round, and I liked watching it bounce. I understand why he wants to try that hole ...I shook my head of the thought and said, "I'm going to touch you, Sarah."

"Yeah," she panted.

I reached around and cupped her breasts as she rode Kapok. I loved touching them, and it felt good to protect some part of her from him. But I had no right to stop him from her, so I made it an instruction. "See, Kapok, gently, like this." I gave her hard nipples a subtle pinch, and she squirmed on him.

He looked completely perplexed. "I don't think I'll get the hang of it."

"Gentleness is not in your nature, Kapok," Deacon declared. "Perhaps it is best that you take her only for the pomp."

I could not agree more. I moved her long, wavy hair over her shoulder and kissed Sarah's neck, and my cock grew hard once more as I pressed against her ass. She

moaned loudly, reaching over her shoulder to touch me, sliding her hand around to the back of my neck. I wanted to throw Kapok out of the bed and take her again. Frustration hit me once more but I kissed her bare shoulder one last time before I left the bed again.

But she reached out for me, her eyes hazy with arousal. “Come here.”

“Yes?”

“Stand in front of me,” she said in a husky tone. “I want to taste you.”

Unable to refuse that request, I climbed onto the bed, carefully balancing a foot on either side of Kapok. There I stood before Sarah, and she studied my cock, like it was the first one she had ever seen. She licked along the underside, her tiny tongue fluttering all over my most sensitive places. Then, she tried to get me into her mouth. But she couldn't.

She giggled and said, “Sorry.”

Deacon chimed in. “I have an idea. May I assist?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

He reached between her and Kapok and played with her clit. When her lips parted on a soft, sudden gasp, Deacon gave my ass a shove forward into her mouth.

He smirked up at me. “She needed to be relaxed.”

Once she adjusted to having a few inches of my cock in her mouth, her tongue began to slip and slide over the head while she rode Kapok's cock and Deacon stroked her clit. It didn't take long before she was making those arousing moaning sounds, telling

me that she was orgasming again, and I could have come right then, but I held back. She reached up and grabbed my ass to pull me into her mouth in time with her bucking on Kapok.

Pleasure pushed through my cock as I came, and I snarled, “ fuck !”

Sarah choked on my gift and had to stop to swallow as I filled her mouth. Once she was done, she coughed and gasped, then said, “Punch, please?”

I frowned in confusion and stepped down from the bed. Deacon left for his producer and returned with a glass of water with herbs. She drank it down, before continuing with Kapok. But he didn't last much longer. He pushed her off of him before he came.

Sarah fell to the bed beside him on her back, while Deacon gave them more steamed towels.

He brushed his lips across hers and said, “I am so proud of you.”

She laughed breathlessly. “What for?”

“This has been a lot for you to take, I know this,” he said in that formal way of his.

She nodded, her eyes shifting to Drift. “Next, I guess.”

But the Ladrian flinched. “I, um...I know this is wrong, but I cannot.”

Deacon shot him a look, then smirked. “Good. Get out. All of you,” he ordered brusquely. “I will have my consort again, without an audience.”

I took a deep breath and corralled the other two from the captain's quarters, relieved

to be leaving. I was the last one out the door, and heard Deacon tell Sarah, “Now, you are mine .”

His words were like daggers.

I put them out of my mind. Sarah was not mine—there was no reason to feel this way—so territorial and possessive of someone I could not have beyond the pomp. Instead, I caught up to Drift in the bright halls of Allegiant .

“Hey, why didn’t you join the pomp?” I asked him.

Drift’s eyes darted to Kapok and Tiger, as they headed to Sovereign . He guided me to a storage room, free of Ladrian ears. “I have been courting someone in secret.”

This was momentous news. Last I had heard, Drift had no interest in courting anyone. “Who?”

He shook his head. “I cannot say. Our passion is forbidden.” He quickly glanced away. “I want to tell you, Jac, but the more who know, the more we are at risk. Please don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t tell, Drift. I promise. Secrets are sacred to me.” I had a secret of my own, and I knew how heavy that burden was.

“Thank you.” He clapped me on the back. “One day, I may tell you who it is.”

I smiled. “No matter who it is, I am happy for you.” And I meant it.

CHAPTER 9

Sarah

Best. Hallucination. Ever. I cannot believe how good that sexfest was.

I knew it wasn't real. No man or alien could ever put it down like that. But I didn't care. If this is what my hallucinations have become, so be it. I was happily at their mercy. It was strange though—I had been taking my meds consistently, so why was this hallucination so strong? Whatever the cause, this one had been the wildest ride of my life.

Sandwiched between Deacon's tree-trunk thighs and leaning back against his chest, I was surrounded by his heat and had never felt more delicious. Sure, I was sore, and I knew I'd be sore for days to come, but I didn't care. Maybe hallucination sex soreness doesn't translate into the real world, and I won't be sore when I come to? I wasn't sure—I had never had rough alien sex during one before.

Deacon played with my hair and periodically kissed the top of my head. I hadn't expected him to be so affectionate, but I liked it. Still, part of me wished Jac was in the bed with us. He understood me in ways that Deacon never would. I liked the way he touched me, too. It was as if he knew my body, as if he knew me .

Deacon said, "You smell like dessert."

I grinned and asked, "What do you eat for dessert around here?"

“Nothing too strange—usually sweet bean paste cakes or fruit.”

I could live with that. “Sweet bean paste cakes? That sounds Vietnamese or something.”

“Ladrians have been scouting to Earth for many generations, so we’ve taken to many of your foods and grow them on Orhon. Well, we try. Our soil and rain patterns differ greatly from yours. Additionally, most of us cannot digest a strictly human diet, so we make modifications.”

“Like what?”

“We ferment most of our foods. Aside from water with herbs, most of our diet is things like aliubock, banwine, meeser, rannat, nothing too scary for humans. I’ve been told aliubock is similar to your kimchi. Meeser is like a salad. Rannat...I’m not sure what it might be like.”

Kimchi and salad? Okay, at least it’s food. “What is rannat made of?”

“As I understand the process, cinas are milked—and they’re small, so it takes a lot of them—and that milk is fermented with spores. Then that mixture is dried and becomes a paste.”

I gulped. “Maybe I’ll stick with the aliubock and the meeser.”

“Rannat is one of our best sources for protein. You will learn to like it.”

“We’ll see, pushy guy,” I teased. “How is it that Jac knows so much about humans?”

“He has been a scout since we were young.”

I wasn't sure how he would take the next question. "What I meant to ask was, how does he know so much about pleasuring them?"

He chuckled. "He has always been popular when he travels to Earth. He has seduced many of your kind."

That would explain it. Practice makes perfect, and he was as close to perfect as it gets. Still, I didn't like hearing that he was a manwhore. It bothered me for no good reason.

"Ladrians are pretty relaxed when it comes to sex, aren't you?" I asked, glancing up at him.

"We do not have the same issues surrounding sex that humans do, if that's what you mean."

"Why is that?"

"Why would we?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it seems natural to me to be prudish about sex, but I suppose that's because of how I was raised. What is your culture around sex?"

"When we are young, we learn about our bodies," Deacon said, absently playing with my hair. "As we get older, we learn what our bodies are good for. We do not allow for nonconsensual behaviors, not for any reason. There are other taboos—"

"Like what? Are there problems with homosexuality or—"

"What's that?"

So, I explained it to him. But by the end of the explanation, he was still lost.

Deacon asked, “Why would anyone have a problem with that?”

I took a deep breath and tried to figure out how to explain it, but thousands of years of human history felt like too much to get into, so I simply said, “It’s a long story, but it boils down to religion, pretty much.”

He thought about it for a moment, then said, “Our gods are better.”

“They don’t have a problem with that then?”

“Of course not,” he scoffed. “Our gods decide what body you are given when you come from the ether, they control the flow of water and our weather, they even speak to the ghosts sometimes, but they do not care where we put our cocks. It is Ladrians who have rules about where we put our cocks and release, but that is only to ensure our bloodlines remain strong. Our gods do not care about anything like that.”

I smiled and sighed. “Sounds freeing.”

“If your gods care where you put your cocks, then human life sounds like a trap.”

I laughed and nodded. “It really can be.”

He glanced out the window and said, “We will be landing on Orhon soon. You will need to dress and transmogrify.”

“That’s the mogging thing, right?”

“Yes.”

I bit my bottom lip. “What is it, exactly?”

“There is no need to be nervous, Sarah. It is painless.”

I didn’t like that he already knew my nervous face. “Well, what happens when you mog?”

“We will put you into one of my crew’s uniforms and attach a mog belt. You press the blue button, and your body will go through many changes. Your cells will expand to their proper size and change until you look properly Ladrian. I am excited to see how your cells change. I’m not sure if I will like you better as a human or a Ladrian.”

He sounded so excited, and I laughed at the thought. “I’m not sure if I should feel insulted right now. You seemed to like me well enough as a human.”

“I do,” he said earnestly, “but you might be fetching as Ladrian, too. There is only one way to find out.”

“You promise it’s painless?” I couldn’t help but ask.

He smiled with a serenity in his eyes that set my mind at ease. “I promise. There will be no pain.”

We found a uniform close to my size. I was lucky Drift was on his crew—he wasn’t much larger than a human man, so his uniform draped on me, but not as badly as the first one Deacon had me try on.

He wrapped the mog belt around my waist and said, “Blue button to change to Ladrian. Purple button for human. When we are on Orhon, you will want to remain as a Ladrian. I am told the change can be awkward, at first. You will be much taller, your limbs longer. Do not be surprised if you knock things around. Watch your

surroundings more carefully, and you will be fine.”

“You were told all this?” I asked curiously as I fiddled with the belt. “You don’t mog?”

“I have been doing it since I was a child. I am accustomed to the alterations.”

“Oh.”

“Ready?”

I swallowed hard and took a deep breath. “Let’s do it.”

I flicked the blue button. The change was instantaneous, and though it was pain-free, being eighteen inches taller all of a sudden was very strange. It was like I was on a step stool.

“How do you feel?” Deacon asked. There was a sparkle in his eyes, like he enjoyed what he saw.

“Way too tall,” I replied, already feeling awkward. “But at least the uniform fits better now.”

His eyes were all over my new body. “It does,” he said enthusiastically.

Now that I was taller and larger, I felt like I was on display for him. My shorter, smaller human body was out of his eye-line. He had to look down at me. But as a Ladrian, I was only a foot shorter than him, and I could tell that he liked it.

“Give me a mirror,” I asked, curious to see what I looked like as a Ladrian.

He said, “ Allegiant , mirror view.” Then he pointed to the monitor behind me.

It had become a giant mirror. What I saw shocked me. As a Ladrian, my pearly skin had a faint blue sheen. I had purple eyes and my hair was blue. My mouth dropped, but I just stared at myself. Words had left me.

Deacon came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, also staring at me. “You’re gorgeous. I knew you would be.”

“I...I don’t know how I feel.”

He nuzzled my neck. “You should feel proud of your beauty.”

Something felt off behind me. I fidgeted against him, but there was no relief.

He softly chuckled, then reached into the rear hole of the uniform.

I tried to glance back to see what he was attempting to do. “What are you doing?”

But then, he pulled my tail through the hole.

My tail. Attached to me.

“The fuck?” I hissed and my tail drooped.

“It is just another part of you as a Ladrian, Sarah. There is no need to panic.”

My tail was around six inches long and covered in blue hair. It was kind of pretty in a strange and absolutely terrifying way. The hair had a nice glossiness to it. As I noticed the good things about my tail, it perked up.

I frowned. “Is this...do the tails work like a mood ring?”

“I’m not—”

“Do they tell other Ladrians how you’re feeling?” I asked, knowing he hadn’t understood my earthly reference.

He nodded. “Yes, for the most part.”

I sighed. “That must be hell for lying.”

“It takes practice but is not unmanageable.”

I narrowed my gaze at him. “Are you a good liar, Deacon?”

He became bashful, which looked adorable on him considering his size and masculine features. “I have told a lie or two in my lifetime.”

“I’m not judging you for it. Humans lie all the time.”

“Now you are a Ladrian, and Ladrians do not lie all the time,” he said more firmly now. “There are courtesies, of course, and we are not always literal, but real lies are not well tolerated.”

I was glad for the distinction. “Why am I a Ladrian now? What is so wrong with taking a human to Orhon?”

He took a deep breath, like he was nervous. “Humans are not new to Orhon, however, there are those who believe humans and Ladrians should not mix, socially or otherwise. Many of those who feel that way are my family. It will be easier to complete this mission, if you present as a Ladrian.”

“Do you feel like we shouldn’t mix?” I asked softly, surprised by how much his answer mattered to me.

He shook his head adamantly. “No. I have never understood their disdain for humans, not since we were able to sort out the disease factors.”

I frowned. “What disease factors?” And did I really want to know?

“Centuries ago, when we first came to Earth, there were various Earth diseases which killed most of the explorers. We have since made many upgrades to our medicines, allowing us to interact safely with those from other planets and stars. There are still places we cannot go, but we are making advancements and will one day.”

I thought back to all those history documentaries that talked about a similar thing happening with indigenous tribes as they met the Europeans. “And so, your people think humans are diseased now?”

“Well, it’s not without cause, is it?”

I thought back to something that had happened when I arrived on the ship. “Is that why Wave dropped me into that hot vat of red liquid when I was brought on board?”

He nodded. “To guarantee there would be no issues.”

“Oh.”

“Moving on, when we land, if people ask who you are, you are my consort from Thunder’s capital, Yesanol.”

I shook my head. “The weather has its own capital city on Orhon?”

“ Her own, yes.”

My brows rose. “Thunder is a girl?”

He laughed at my misunderstanding. “Thunder Bateen is a fierce general and sister to our ruler, Justice Bateen,” he explained. “Yesanol is the capital where she rules in his stead, and Justice lives in the proper capital, Ladrille. The Bateens have ruled over Orhon for many generations.”

“And this Justice Bateen, he is the one that you are on a crusade against?” I asked, trying to make sense of it all.

He placed his hands on his lean hips. “Yes.”

“Why?”

His eyes darkened, and I suddenly felt awful for asking the question. “Justice Bateen beheaded my father.”

Everything stopped. My breathing, my thinking, my heart. I had no idea what to say to that horrific announcement.

Deacon continued, “It was four months ago. He discovered my father had been having an affair with his daughter, Silence. She is the people’s most favored princess, so Justice cannot behead her—there would be a revolution of revenge for that, and he is too prudent to do such a thing. He interrogated my entire family to understand who knew about the affair. None of us did. My father was careful to keep us from knowing. For many reasons...”

Moments before I had asked the question, he had seemed so full of life and joy. But now, he appeared to have aged. His voice became heavy with emotion as he

continued. “If any of us had known about the affair, then we would have been just as guilty as he and Silence. Any of us but my mother.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If my mother had known about the affair and had consented to it, then it would not have been illegal. But my father did not tell her about it, because then,” he took a deep breath and sighed, “she would have told me about it. If she had told me about it, I would have been within my rights to object to the affair.”

It all sounded so convoluted. “Why?”

“Because I was to unite with Silence.”

“Wait. . .” I thought I might tumble backwards over all of the deceptions, so I sat down on the bed before clarifying for myself, “Your dad was nailing your fiancée?”

His lips thinned before he answered. “In effect, yes.”

“And now, she’s having his baby?”

He nodded, and a fierce light flickered in his eyes. “And I will do whatever I need to do to protect it.”

The entire conversation was making my head spin, as was Deacon’s acceptance of the situation. “Why? It’s evidence of his betrayal of you. Why wouldn’t you want the kid dead?”

“It is not the child’s fault,” he pointed out. “I am loyal to my father. He raised me—”

“He betrayed you!”

Again he nodded, but slower this time. “He did. For love.”

My heart swelled for him. His compassion and his forgiveness were remarkable. But then, I asked, “What about your mom?”

“She turned her back on him at his beheading,” he said, quieter now. “It was the deal she had to make with Justice—if she turned her back on my father, then our family was able to keep our lands and our titles. If she had not, then Justice would have taken our properties and stripped us of everything. I do not malign her for her choice. But I do not have to like it, either.”

“I can understand that.” I thought about everything he had just told me, and it had rattled me. I wasn’t sure what to think about anything. So, I changed the topic. “What happens when we land on Orhon?”

“It will be night, so you will get to see the city lights. They are quite pretty.”

“No, I mean as far as the mission goes.”

“Currently, Sovereign is docked with Allegiant , so once we enter the atmosphere, Sovereign will leave and head for the royal prison, where Jac and his crew will rescue Silence. Allegiant will land at my family’s estate, and I will introduce you to my family as Star Qvia, my consort from Yesanol. I have already sent word ahead and they are interested in meeting you. Being from Yesanol is the perfect story, as no one from Ladrille cares about the high society of Yesanol—”

“That seems snobby.”

He grinned. “Get used to it. My cousins might be that way toward you, but I doubt my mother will be. Regardless, we will wait there until Jac sends word—”

“Why go there at all?” I wanted to know. “Seems strange to me.”

“My mother will have heard her son was united. If I do not bring you to her, she will be insulted.”

I smirked. “Mothers are mothers, no matter the species, huh?”

He looked confused. “Yes, that is what makes them mothers.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Turn of phrase. Go on.”

“After we receive his message, we will meet in Halla’s dark orbit once more. From there, we will go to Halla, and your new life as a conduit between the living and the dead will begin.”

Oh, joy.

CHAPTER 10

Jacaranda

The comforting hum of my cockpit did nothing to alleviate my suffering. I could still smell Sarah, still feel her. Those lusty moans replayed in my mind repeatedly. The way her body rolled and moved and throbbed...what should have made for a great pomp only made me twitchy.

I need a fight. Anything to take her off of my mind because she is forbidden to me in every way that mattered.

Part of me hoped that retrieving Silence would be complicated. But I knew that it wouldn't be. Despite Sarah's thoughts on the matter, taking Silence from the prison would be easy. The royal prisons were in disrepair, and the guards were underpaid. With Deacon's money, bribing them would be a breeze.

Why won't this erection go away and why does it feel like it's got Sarah's name on it?

I rolled my eyes at my cock and readjusted in my seat to be more comfortable. I had never been with a woman, human or otherwise, that made me want her more after the sex. The issue was, most of the time, I didn't get to know them beforehand. But I had stalked Sarah for days.

Deacon needed to know I had the right woman before I took her. I had gotten to know Sarah's most intimate predilections, her patterns. The way she petted every dog that

she passed in the city. The time she bought an ice cream for the little girl who had dropped hers. She was quick with a smile or a laugh. Most importantly to Deacon, she was a conduit. Most importantly to me, she was everything I'd ever wanted.

My cock ached in my fatigues. "Simmer down, fucker," I muttered out loud.

Cocks were stupid. They didn't know what was best for themselves and being in love with my employer's new consort was most certainly not the best for my dick. It was a one-way ticket to an execution.

"Sovereign, are you there?" Deacon asked on the comms.

"It's Jac, Deacon, go ahead."

"We need to discuss the plan. Meet me on Allegiant, in the café."

"Sure thing." I hung up and grumbled, "Of course you want to meet on Allegiant. Can't imagine you stepping foot on Sovereign."

It wasn't his fault that he was moneyed and classed and I was not, so I tried not to hold that against him. But his union made it much easier to hold anything against him.

I knew I would get over it eventually. At least, I hoped that I would. But knowing Deacon's plan going forward, I was at the mercy of whatever this bullshit tightening the walls of my chest cavity was.

On the way to the hullmate, I ran into Kapok and Tiger. "You got the message, too?"

"Yeah. Deacon wants us briefed," Kapok said.

Tiger had a hard time looking me in the eye. “Yes, sir.”

“What’s the problem?” I asked him.

“No problem.”

Kapok said, “He’s disappointed he didn’t get to participate in the pomp.”

Tiger backhanded his chest. “Hey!”

But his cousin laughed. “If you want to keep secrets, keep them to yourself and don’t spill them to other people. It’s the only way.”

“Cheer up, Tiger,” I said as we passed into Allegiant , “one day, when you are officially employed, you’ll have a pomp to participate in.”

He huffed. “That could be years.”

“Yeah, it could be.” I wasn’t going to lie to the kid.

The halls of Allegiant were offensively bright, so I plugged forward as fast as I could without running. I didn’t want to see Sarah, either. The café was small and private, overly lit by the stars and the strips of lights along the walls that made them glow white. I wasn’t sure why Deacon always wanted everything so bright, but he seemed to like it. He sat at a round silver table in the center of the room with another Ladrian, one I didn’t know. She was stunning, and the coquettish way she stared up at me was vexing.

“Sarah?” I asked incredulously.

She giggled. “Um, when I’m like this, it’s Star.”

I turned my gaze to Deacon. “What the fuck?”

My employer and friend smiled, looking very pleased with himself. “Star Qvia. My consort from Yesanol. That’s the story we are using on Orhon. Down to business?”

“Yeah, sure.”

I sat opposite them, mystified by her. I wasn’t sure which way I liked her better, and I wanted to try this version out, too. But I could never ask such a thing. It would have meant too much to me and nothing to her.

“When we enter the atmosphere, we will separate,” Deacon began. “I will take Star to my family estate, where she will meet my family. You will take your crew, and any others you require, to rescue Silence. Afterwards, send a message and we will meet you at the orbit of Halla.”

I nodded, but Kapok asked, “And we’re getting paid double for this, right?”

Deacon frowned at Kapok. “Double? Why double?”

“The way I see it, we’ve gotten you a consort, and we’re about to pick up another one for you. Double consorts, double the money.”

Sarah’s hand squeezed around Deacon’s arm, in a selfish gesture.

But he shook his head. “Kapok, pricing for this job is between me and Jacaranda, your boss . Additionally, Silence is not to be my consort. She is to be treated as my father’s widow, and if you give her anything less than her due respect, Jac and I will discuss your future employment.”

Kapok shrugged. “I tried, boss.”

I chuckled and rolled my eyes. “Valiant effort.”

Deacon said, “After we meet in orbit, we will go to Halla. Once I have Silence, you are welcome to return to Orhon.”

Leave Sarah’s side? “Absolutely not.”

“Why not?” Tiger asked.

What’s a good excuse to stay with her? “Because I have too many valuable contacts on Halla who can help. People who owe me.”

Deacon brows furrowed even more. “You mean the other people you helped escape from the royal prison?”

“They’re the reason we know Halla is safe from Justice and his soldiers. They have been hiding on Halla and they don’t trust easily. You’ll need me and mine with you on Halla, at least while you’re getting her established. They will never believe that a classed person like yourself is doing what you’re doing, Deacon. You’ll need my help.”

He paused. “Very well. This is why I love working with Jac,” he told Sarah. “He thinks of all the things I never would.”

She almost smirked and said, “I bet he does.”

Why is she flirting with me? Maybe staying on Halla is a bad idea. “Uh, maybe—”

“We are approaching atmo in one minute,” Drift announced through the intercom.

Deacon smiled. “It is time.”

I shared one fleeting glance with Sarah, before I took my men back to my ship. We unmated the hulls and went our separate ways. Every speck of distance between me and Sarah felt like a wound that could never heal until I saw her smile once more. Jesus, I had it so bad for her.

Night on Orhon was my favorite time. The sky nearly black, with stars in every direction. 6400 light years from here, Earth twirled in her solar system. It formed a brilliant series of patterns overhead. They sparkled in all their beauty. It was no great wonder why our ancestors decided they had to go to Earth and to her family of planets. They were too pretty not to try to get there.

Below us, the city of Ladrille spilled out. There was not much light pollution, as most residents enjoyed the starlight and tried not to drown it out. Tall trees littered the landscape—many of the homes were actually in the trees. Bridges between the houses and families were common, like a web that connected the tree tops. The most expensive were either on the outer reaches of the city or in the canopy.

I had spent my childhood on the ground.

Until Deacon's father made a deal with my parents. They moved up to the Midtrunk, and I became his son's companion until I was old enough to scout. I was small and had been unhealthy, so they agreed. When I visited them years later, there was a look of mistrust in their eyes. Like I had come back as a different person. In many ways, I had.

I hadn't thought about them in months. The feelings Sarah had dredged up...I shook my head at myself and got on with the job. Sentimentality had no place on my mission.

I clicked the comm on and warned my crew, "We will be coming around to the dump. Be prepared for the smell."

If they weren't used to it by now, they never would be. Meeting at the city dump made things simpler for me and my crew. State task forces tended to avoid it at all costs.

The stench hit our damaged scrubber, filling the ship fast. I could almost hear the complaints through the cockpit door. But they knew we shared the same air, and I was not exempt from it, either, so no one bothered to complain to me directly.

That first whiff was what got you—like a punch in the gut that made you want to hold your breath. But holding your breath was worse, because the next one you took would be deep and made the stench stay. Best to keep it short and light, without hyperventilating.

Piles of Ladrille garbage were stacked higher than some of the trees. I landed Sovereign in the middle of several garbage piles for cover and took Tiger and Kapok to meet with our contacts. As soon as we stepped outside of Sovereign, I caught the familiar draw and click of a Gorrk gun before it was pressed against my right ear.

The familiarity of it made me smile. “Boundless, is that you?”

“That depends,” she drawled. “You got my money?”

“I will. Soon.”

Instead of being withdrawn, the gun charged. “I told you, if you didn't have my money the next time I saw you, I would kill you. Isn't that what I told him, Kapok?”

“That is what she told you, boss,” Kapok agreed.

“So tell me why I shouldn't shoot you right here and now?” Boundless asked me.

“Because then I couldn’t fuck you?”

She huffed and put the gun back in its holster. “You’re lucky you got that good dick of yours.”

I turned to her and smiled. Boundless was a former pirate-turned-garbage dump owner. It was an easy line of work for someone trying to go legit, but less so for a woman with her looks. She kept her hair dyed bright pink and had skin like onyx. No one understood why she didn’t try to marry someone classed or do something else to lift herself from such a life, but it seemed to suit her.

I kept my smile on and said, “Could be luck, could be skill. Have you seen Curse or Patch?”

“Not for a week. Why?”

“We’re meeting here tonight—”

She drew her gun up again. “I told you last time, I don’t want you meeting your mates here. I run a clean business—”

“You run the city dump,” Tiger pointed out.

“Yeah, and I keep my nose clean by stopping the criminals from meeting here. I don’t want no trouble from the Bateens.”

Slowly, I tapped the gauntlet driver on my arm. I didn’t want to spook Boundless. Getting shot by her twice had been twice too many, and I didn’t want to add a third. My gauntlet driver lit the one on her arm and she watched as the money dropped into her account.

Her smile increased by half. “That all?”

I added another thousand credits.

Her smile filled out, and she re-holstered her gun. “Strange, isn’t it, officers? I heard a ship, but I didn’t see no one by the time I got out of my house.” She turned around and headed back to her home inside the rubble.

Kapok asked after Boundless, “Ain’t you gonna take this out on his ass?”

I shot him an angry glare and muttered, “What the fuck?”

But as she walked on, she said, “The game is on. Eriffs versus Drecks. Wouldn’t miss it, not even for that dick.” She vanished between the garbage heaps.

“Come on,” I said, shaking my head as I led my men to the dock.

Traversing the garbage of Ladrille was always a sticky prospect, but this time, it was particularly ripe. Aliubock season was always that way. It was a common food for the unclassed, so it was trendy for the classed to try to make it themselves, which meant loads of half-fermented cabbage hybrids filled the dump.

Once we reached the dock, I used my gauntlet driver to signal Curse and Patch’s ship, Regal . “Should be any minute now.”

Tiger complained, “This was the only place to meet them?”

“The only place safe enough and close enough to the prison, yes.”

He huffed and stared into the sky, then jumped when he heard the large bubbles beneath the dock.

Kapok laughed at his cousin. “Trouble?”

“What is that?” Tiger asked.

“Regal,” I answered.

The ship rose from the sewage-filled depths of the Emerald Sea and sat next to the dock. When the door opened, Curse sprang out. He was bald, with rich bronzed skin and a set of blue fatigues that had seen better days.

“Jac! Kapok! New Guy!” he greeted jovially. “Come on in!”

“It has been a while, hasn’t it?” I asked. “That’s Tiger, Kapok’s cousin.”

“The more the merrier, that’s what they say, right?”

“You got my message?”

“We’re rescuing Silence Bateen for way more money than she’s worth—that kind of message does not get lost. The usual play?”

I nodded. “Should be sufficient.”

Kapok and I stepped toward Regal, but Tiger hesitated. “We’re riding in that thing?”

Curse slapped the side of his ship and said, “Best ship there is, boy. You’d do well to remember that.”

“It’s floating in muck.”

Curse laughed. “The kid doesn’t know much about being sneaky, does he?”

I sighed. “He’ll learn. Come on, Tiger.”

He grumbled but followed us inside.

Nothing had changed in Regal—a vessel with none of the amenities I was used to. It was designed to run with a two-person crew and host a handful of guests who didn’t mind a rough ride. We were in the cargo hold as Curse and Patch set course for the royal prison. I hadn’t seen Patch on my way in and I didn’t expect to—he was always in his cockpit.

Tiger jolted when the ship submerged beneath the surface and rambled. “So, we get there, and then what?”

“We pull up into their sewage tunnel, park about a third of the way in,” I told him of the plan. “After that, we bribe the guards we need to bribe—”

“Or pummel them,” Kapok said with a laugh.

As much as I wanted a fight, I had to suppress the urge. “Yes, but that’s an option we should avoid. Busted faces beg questions. Anyway, we bribe, abscond with Silence, and that should be that.”

“And she would agree to go with us, why? She doesn’t know us,” Tiger pointed out.

“She knows me,” I said.

My anger at the girl on behalf of Deacon had to be pushed aside for what was transpiring. No matter how much I wanted to wallow in it.

Regal pulled up to the sewage tunnel and Patch, pilot extraordinaire, threaded the ship into the tight passage. While he drove, we changed into old diver uniforms that

covered us head to toe. They protected us from making contact with the raw sewage. Being the new guy, Tiger got to wear the pack that carried Silence's uniform and the fake body Curse had created for her. It wasn't a work of art or anything—if someone looked closely, they would know it wasn't her. But all we had to do was fool them for a short time, until we had Silence safely away from the prison.

When Regal stopped, the cargo hold opened, and Tiger struggled with the scent. “How does the prison smell worse than the dump?”

Kapok laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Don't worry. It gets worse. Let's go.”

We trudged through the waist-high sewage and made our way through the first and second guard stations. They were easy to bribe. But the asshole posted at her door was less so.

He puffed out his chest. “I don't care what the others—”

I hit him just hard enough that his head knocked against the rock wall behind him, leaving him unconscious. There was a strong sense of satisfaction in punching him, but it was soured by the worry that I had made a mistake. Tiger grabbed the guard's hand and placed it onto the palm reader. When the door opened, I was relieved.

Silence was not.

She cowered in the back corner of her bunk in the rotten little room. A bucket of her waste sat in the other corner, and a small high window would have given her just enough light during the day to not go mad. In the night, though, there was no light, save for what fell through the doorway behind us. If I reached my arms outward, I would have hit both sides at the same time.

She began to raise her hand to defend herself.

But I pulled my hood off first. “Silence, I’m here to rescue you.”

Her perfect face melted into joy. “Jacaranda? Is that you?”

“Yes.” I yanked the pack off of Tiger, pulled out the body and tossed the uniform to her. “Put that on fast. We have to hurry.”

Then, I threw the body onto the waste bucket, where Kapok slit its throat to make it look like she’d committed suicide. Fake blood spilled over the edge, and he dropped the head in, to slow the urge to confirm her identity.

She nodded and struggled to get the uniform on over her pregnant body. Once dressed, she said, “I’m ready.”

We ran through the rock halls as quickly and quietly as we could, and knew we were close to Regal by the smell. I was impressed that Silence did not complain about the sewage tunnels or the ship. She only sat quietly once we were on board.

Before we returned to the dump, I had to ask, “You don’t have questions for me?”

“You’re a mercenary, Jacaranda, so I presume you did this on Deacon’s behalf, yes?”

“Yes.”

“That is all I need to know. You’re taking me to be executed by your best friend for betraying him, and quite honestly, I am grateful for it.”

I frowned. “What?”

“The prison...” she shuddered. “It was worse than death. At least on Halla, I’ll be reunited with Valor. That’s all I can hope for now. You will burn my body there, won’t you?”

“Silence, that’s not why Deacon wants you.” I explained his plan and watched confusion overtake her.

“I...I don’t deserve any of this. You have to stop him. He will ruin his family, if he does this. My father will take everything from them, if he doesn’t execute them, which is just as likely. He can’t do this!”

“You’re worried for his family now ?” I asked incredulously, considering her betrayal.

She nodded solemnly. “I know what I am, Jacaranda. I know what I’ve done and how I betrayed Deacon. But, I love Valor Ladrang. I never want anything bad to happen to his family.”

“ You happened to them,” I said petulantly.

Kapok nudged my shoulder. “Deacon said to treat her like his father’s widow—”

“ She’s the reason Deacon’s father has a widow,” I growled at him.

He backed off to let me handle her.

She gulped and said, “No matter the past, I don’t want Deacon to ruin his family for me.”

“He has made his mind up, Silence. If I could have talked him out of it, I would have because you’re right—you don’t deserve what he’s giving to you. All I ask is that you

make it worth this sacrifice.”

“Nothing is worth this sacrifice, Jacaranda.”

“I’ve been saying that for days.”

CHAPTER 11

Deacon

“It looks like a hotel made of glass,” Star/Sarah cooed in awe, as we approached the Ladrang estate.

I smiled proudly. “If you are impressed by this, wait until you see a proper Ladrille hotel. This is only a large home.”

She laughed. “A large home? It’s bigger than Ryan’s family’s mansion, and that place was obscene.”

“My family often hosts our extended family, so we need a home appropriate to the task.”

“How big is your extended family, because this is ridiculous,” she said, indicating the structure once more.

I frowned. “How is it ridiculous? We have 124 relatives who—”

“What?” Her head dropped in disbelief.

“126, if Placid has had her twins.”

“And so,” she spoke slowly, “you need rooms for all of them?”

“No, we have rooms for half.” I cast her a curious glance. “Your extended family does not visit?”

She shook her head, and a sad look passed across her Ladrian features. “I barely know my cousins. I met my aunt twice when I was a little girl. That’s it. It’s nice that you’re so close with them.”

“Uh,” the right words stuck in my throat, “I would not say we are close. I know them, but it is a superficial knowledge. I know their taste in banwine, their occupations. Not the important things. Not the way families should be.”

When we arrived at my mother’s home, I had expected to receive some grief about my union. My mother had been a Sellac prior to uniting with my father, and the Sellacs were an old, highly respected family. Tall and regal, they were some of the first families specially bred to retain knowledge. Many were historians themselves, so to be excluded from her eldest son’s union would feel like an insult to her.

We were greeted at the door by a servant and led into the sitting room. It was one of my favorite rooms in her home. Overrun with plants in many colors, Mother’s sitting room should have been a place to relax and unwind. It had been, when I was young. But when I saw her angry face, I felt like the boy who had broken her antique mirror.

I swallowed nervously and said, “Greetings, Mother.”

The lighting was dark, but I could see her expression did not change. She sat among my cousins and siblings on a long, padded bench. Even seated, she was still taller than all of them. She wore the blue mourning robes of a widow beneath her purple over-cloak. Her black skin shone gray in the light.

Those purple eyes glared at me. “I did not know you held me in such low regard, Deacon.”

“I do not—”

She lifted her chin haughtily. “For me to find you have united in a private ceremony by message, you must hold me in low regard.”

I sighed. “I meant no insult, Mother. I was overcome with love for my consort and could not wait for propriety,” I fibbed, because she would never understand the truth. That Sarah was a human conduit and our family needed her. Desperately.

Her eyes shifted to Star, narrowing as she studied her very intently.

I quickly introduced her. “Mother, this is Star Qvia, my consort.”

Those dangerous eyes softened briefly. “Qvia? I do not know this name.”

“It is an old name in Yesanol,” Star lied, sounding very sure of herself.

I was impressed that her tail did not change posture and assumed it was because humans were practiced liars.

My cousin, Candle, grimaced. “You’re from Yesanol? No wonder you wanted to have an off-world union, Cousin.”

My other cousins snickered.

I glared at her for the rude comment, and she looked at her fingernails to avoid my scathing gaze.

“That is enough, girls,” Mother said. “Star is a guest in my home, and you will treat her as I treat you. If you are in any way rude to her from this moment forth, I will show you exactly what I think of you, and most of you do not wish to know.” Then

she turned her focus back to us. “Come, child. Let me have a look at you.”

Star looked nervously to me, but I nodded, so she stepped forward to where my mother was sitting. Mother looked her over once more on a closer inspection, then with lips pursed with disapproval, she asked me, “Can you not afford to purchase proper clothes for your consort, or is she to look like one of your crew?”

The comment didn’t surprise me. Mother was always about propriety. “I have already sent for a proper wardrobe for her.”

“See to it.” Mother stood, towering over everyone in the room, by at least a head. Then she plucked two grapes from the vines behind the bench. She handed one to Star, nodded, and ate hers. The guests in the room almost collectively held their breaths, and I fought the urge to join them.

Star ate hers, as well. She swallowed and smiled graciously. “Thank you.”

Mother returned the smile as the tense moment passed. “Star, you are welcome in my home. All our amenities are yours to enjoy. Deacon, give your consort a tour.”

As we left the sitting room, Star asked, “Why did everyone act so weird when I had the grape? It was very good.”

“Because if you meant anyone here any harm, it would have poisoned you.”

She gasped in shock. “Are you joking right now?”

“I would never joke about poisoning you.”

She stopped walking, so I did the same and looked at her.

Her tone was serious when she next spoke. “If someone might try to poison me, I’m gonna need you to tell me, Deacon.”

She was clearly unhappy, though I did not understand why. “I am sorry to have upset you. I know you mean no one any harm, so I was not concerned. I trust you, Star.”

Her new eyes squinted at me, before she half smiled. “You didn’t tell me, because you trust me?”

“Of course.”

“Okay, that’s messed up, but you’re off the hook.” Then, she took my arm in hers and we walked on.

I showed her around but had only one thing on my mind. Once we were in my old bedroom, I closed the door behind her and said, “I often dreamed of what it would be like to bring my consort here.”

She gave me a sultry smile that did funny things to my insides and made my cock harden. “And what did you specifically dream of?” she asked with an expectation in her eyes I could not resist.

“This.” I brushed Star’s hair behind her ear and kissed her soft mouth. It was such a strange human custom, but I liked it. Biting was more my speed—but the subtle touch of her lips and tongue was addictive. I wanted to feast at her mouth and every other inch of her.

“I want you,” I murmured.

A playful giggle escaped her, and I loved the sound of it. “You want to fuck in your childhood bedroom?”

I nodded and kissed her again, but this time, I roughly took her in my arms, knowing she was now equipped to handle my strength in her new Ladrian form. The press of her taller, curvier body against mine set me on fire. I needed her. More than that, I needed to take her like a Ladrian. Brutally hard and deep.

I reached beneath her ass and effortlessly picked her up, lifting her legs around my waist. I walked her back into a wall, forcing a grunt from her lungs. She growled in my mouth. The kiss must have emboldened her. She clawed at my uniform, eager to get me naked, and it didn't take long before my clothes were off and I was out of my mind. My thick, hard cock throbbed for Star.

I peeled her hands from my body and pinned them against the wall above her head so she couldn't touch me. Not yet. I bit her lip, earning a groan from her. I released her hands and mouth, and when she struggled for position, I spun her around, pressing her face against the wall next to my window. I flicked the knob on the front of her uniform that held it together, then reached inside the trousers until my fingers slid through her slick pussy, coating them with her arousal.

She tried to shove the pants down so I could fuck her, but I said, "No."

She whined, "Please..."

I clamped my teeth onto her shoulder to quiet her down, but she still made desperate little noises as I played with her clit. My bare cock pressed against her lower back and I longed to be inside of her. She rocked her hips back against me, her body calling to mine. As I stroked that nub between her legs, her body undulated against me.

Seconds later, a cry erupted from her and her body pulsed blue as she came, her Ladrian form shuddering in pleasure as she writhed on my fingers.

It was a beautiful sight to see, and I released her shoulder and nuzzled the side of her neck. “You are my joy,” I purred into her ear.

She gasped without words, trying to catch her breath.

I grabbed her trousers and yanked them beneath her ass and her enticing tail twitched for me. Then, unable to wait any longer, I ripped the utility pants all the way off her lithe body so she was just as naked as I was.

She whimpered. “Yes, fuck me, Deacon!”

I turned her around and pressed her back onto my old bed, then drove all the way inside her without any gentleness, because in this form she could take my size and girth and length. All of it. Every inch. And it felt fucking glorious.

Her pussy massaged my cock on every thrust, but that wasn’t what stirred the beast inside of me. It was her expressive face. The look in her eyes, the desperation and the hope. The need for my body. The need for me .

Our time together so far had been short, but it didn’t seem to matter. We were already connected in so many ways.

She was nothing I had ever expected. Sarah had been nothing more than a part of my plan for vengeance against Justice. A tool. But our false union had brought about more than I had dreamed possible. Being inside of her was indescribable. A sense of completion or elation or comfort—perhaps some combination of all of it. Whatever it was, it was exactly what I had been missing and now craved with her.

Another ramming thrust, and I drove her across the bed and grabbed the far edge of the mattress for leverage as I pounded relentlessly into her. She pulled me down to her mouth for a wild kiss and wrapped her limbs around me, like she craved me, too.

Our bodies were like magnets, and her need pulsed through her core and into me like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

I rolled onto my back, and she immediately climbed on top of me, straddling my hips, her legs spread wide so I could see her glistening sex and where we were joined. Her gorgeous blue skin glistened in the low light as I watched her lower herself down my aching cock. My eyes rolled back from the sheer pleasure of it.

In her Ladrian form, she could take all of my length inside of her, and it was phenomenal. She bucked against me, brazenly scratching her nails down my chest. My back arched from the intensity of the sensation, making me snarl like the beast I was for her. There was no fear in Sarah—not when she was naked. Her lush breasts bounced with her motions, and I was hypnotized by them.

No. I was hypnotized by her .

Everything she did aroused me. The way she smelled, the way she looked when she spoke. Her little lip bites when she was unsure. Is this what love is? Surely, it must only be obsession. We have known each other such a short time. She is my consort, after all. Is it wrong to be obsessed by her?

Her body emanated her inner light in waves. She tipped her head back and howled when she came again, her skin shimmering beautifully before she collapsed onto me. I held her close as I pumped up into her body, my own thrusts becoming erratic. I felt her heart beat next to mine, strong and sure. It was a perfect moment, and I lost myself to it.

The power of our connection swelled through me. Rapture took over as I spasmed into her depths one last time before I pulled her off me and came so hard I saw stars. Before I finished, she wrapped her hand around my sensitive, erupting cock, and milked me dry, my cum splashing all over my stomach.

When we were done, she rolled onto the bed beside me, panting. “Wow, is it always like that?” she whispered in awe.

I smiled over at her, glad that she’d felt the same intensity of our joining, as well. “No. That was—”

“Mind-blowing,” she finished for me.

Her choice of words startled me, and when she saw my horrified expression—because I did not want the top of her head blowing off—she shook her head and laughed.

Amusement danced in her eyes. “It’s an Earth term for amazing.”

“Oh,” I said, immensely relieved as I stood up to get a towel, then cleaned myself up.

“I should check in with the crew,” I said, and checked for messages on my comm in my uniform pocket.

Disappointment rippled through me, but duty called. I sighed and glanced at Star, lounging so gloriously, enticingly naked on my bed. “As much as I hate to leave this bedroom when I’m not close to being done fucking you, it looks like we must say our farewells to my family and go. Jac has Silence.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

CHAPTER 12

Sarah

We arrived back at the ship and left within minutes of the message from Jac. In the cockpit with Deacon's crew, I fidgeted. I couldn't explain why, but I was nervous to meet Silence Bateen.

Also, a part of me didn't want to leave Orhon. It was lush and vibrant around Deacon's family's estate. So calm and serene. Tall trees dotted the cityscape, with buildings around and in the trees. His family home was on the outskirts of Ladrille and epic in every way. I didn't want to go anywhere. I didn't want to leave.

Holy crap, I'm hooked on my hallucination .

And why wouldn't I be? So far, it had been a thrilling adventure that made me feel so vibrantly alive, and I wasn't ready to let that sensation go and return to what had been a banal and uninspired existence for me the past year with Ryan.

I closed my eyes and shook my head at myself. Not wanting to leave was not a good sign. I should be fighting this ...but I didn't want to. Even though I knew none of what I was seeing was real, I almost didn't care. I felt more at home on the ship and on Deacon's estate than I had ever felt anywhere else.

How sad is that?

En route to the dark side of Halla, Deacon turned to glance at me. "You can be a

human once again.”

I fiddled absently with my mogging belt. “I don’t need to be Ladrian on Halla?”

“You can, if you would prefer it, though I don’t recommend it,” he said. “Additionally, the ghosts know when someone is mogged, so you will not be hiding anything. At least, not from them.”

I scrunched up my nose. That confusing ghost thing again...and me being some kind of conduit. I supposed he’d explain my part in all that at some point.

“Do you prefer me this way?” I asked Deacon, curious to know his thoughts.

He merely smirked, and shrugged those big, broad, sexy shoulders of his.

“Oh my god, you do prefer me this way!”

He laughed, a low, deep, delicious sound that curled through me. “I enjoy you both ways, consort.”

Truth shone in his eyes, and I was...relieved that he found me appealing in both forms. “Well, I would like to be back in my old skin—wait, will this uniform go back to its original size?”

I didn’t want to flash anyone who hadn’t already seen me naked. Poor Drift couldn’t even look me in the eye when we had entered his cockpit.

“It stretches both ways, yes. Still too big for you, but yes.”

I pressed the purple button on my belt and within the blink of any eye, I was me again. I caught my reflection in the glass on the dashboard for confirmation. Then, I

turned and tried to look at my ass.

Deacon laughed again. “Your tail is gone—do not worry. There are no mixes like that.”

“A girl can’t be too careful.” Though I kind of liked the cute, furry tail. Then, I wondered aloud, “Why aren’t I tired? Or sore anymore?”

“When you transmogrify, your cells must be put back together in their original configuration,” Deacon explained. “This process, because it breaks a variety of bonds in your body, releases energy. It also reforms other bonds, but almost always breaks more than it reforms, so there is an energy surplus. Going back and forth between forms can leave you feeling revitalized and can heal minor wounds.” He yawned before continuing, and it sounded like his sex growl, and I was instantly aroused. “So, you may find you have far more energy when you mog.”

“Why don’t you do it all the time, then?”

“Because it can eventually cost you who you are,” he replied, his eyes serious. “Staying in a different form, this can change your perspective and leave you feeling less like yourself. It is a wonderful tool, but it is not without cost, like anything else.”

“So when you mog—”

“You are full of questions after sex,” he said, interrupting me. “Is this normal for you?”

I laughed. “Are you tired of answering them?”

He slid his hand around to the back of my neck and brought our mouths together, kissing me and making his crew cringe or frown in confusion. But when they realized

that was all that was happening, they went back to what they were doing before the kiss.

“Never,” he said when he lifted his lips from mine. “Though this is to be a trying time for me, and I may not answer everything as well as I would like to for you. Please forgive me.”

“You are worried about letting me down?” I asked softly.

He nodded, but his eyes were on the glass as we approached Jac’s ship, Sovereign . “I do not wish to disappoint anyone who is important to me.”

His loyalty impressed me, and learning that I was important to him made my heart swell in my chest. I squeezed his hand as the hulls tapped together, then mated. “You never could.”

“I hope that is true.”

We left to greet the escaped prisoner, Silence Bateen, along with Jac at the hullmate. Seeing Jac again lifted my spirits—despite Deacon’s attention, I’d missed him—but the Ladrian woman’s beauty stopped my heart.

If she is my competition and Deacon’s ex, I am fucked.

Her skin was luminous and dark, but her eyes were the color of amber or honey. She had one of those sweet round faces that always seemed to be smiling in some way. When she spoke, her voice was like a calming tune you couldn’t get out of your head. A welcome earworm. I would have felt more threatened by her, if she were not enormously pregnant by Deacon’s deceased father, Valor Ladrang.

Despite the ordeal she’d undoubtedly been through in prison, she smiled amicably

and said, “Greetings, Deacon.”

“Greetings, Silence.” Then he gently grabbed my hand and pulled me forward to introduce me. “This is my consort, Sarah Hollinger.”

I almost preened at the title, consort. It sounded so regal.

“Greetings, Sarah Hollinger,” she said, nodding her head at me. “It is an honor to meet you.”

Unsure of their formalities, I followed suit, still not sure how I felt about the woman who had broken Deacon’s heart. “Greetings, Silence Bateen. It is an honor to meet you, as well.”

She smirked knowingly as her sharp eyes took me in, not missing the possessive way Deacon held my hand. “Let us not jest. I am not the honorable one here. That is you.”

I had no clue what to say to that or even what she meant. “I am not—”

Interrupting me, she stepped forward and said, “No, you are . Jacaranda has informed me of Deacon’s plan and your part in it, and I must say, you are the most honorable human I have ever heard of in my life. To do this for Deacon’s family...” she began to cry and placed a protective hand on her protruding belly. “I cannot explain how grateful to you I am.”

I looked to Jac for an explanation—that fucking ghost conduit thing again that would save Deacon’s family. But he didn’t meet my gaze.

“And you ,” Justice said, taking Deacon’s hands in hers, and I had to resist the petulant urge to swat them away, “thank you for not bearing me any ill will, regarding our situation. When Jacaranda told me he was not taking me to my

execution—”

“I’m sorry, what ?” I asked, horrified at the notion.

“The penalty for nonconsensual infidelity...” Jac hinted under his breath, keeping me in the loop.

My eyes widened. “Oh. Right.”

Silence continued, “I could not believe him. I did not want to believe him. I thought this was a foolish plan, at first. But I know you, Deacon. You are wiser than most, and you would not do this if you were not certain of your actions and the outcome. I trust in you.”

“You made your choice, Silence,” he said in an even tone. “Despite everything, I am grateful you are faithful to my father. That is all I ask of you. To carry on his legacy with the child inside of you.”

She nodded and gave him a tremulous, grateful smile. “Loyalty, above all.”

He bowed politely, abruptly ending the personal conversation. “We must away to Halla. Jac, can you take Silence to the guest quarters? Sarah, if you would like, you may make yourself at home in mine. I must speak with Drift.”

Then, he left us in the hullmate.

I assumed his shortness with us was because he had some residual anger toward Silence—not that I blamed him at all. I wanted to hate her, too. But she seemed so contrite that it was hard to stay mad at her. She had screwed up and clearly felt terrible for her crime. We all screw up sometimes , I figured.

It wasn't like with Ryan and his hookups. That was obviously just about sex or whatever. A one night stand was not about love, and even Deacon characterized his father's affair with Silence as a love affair. Perhaps Deacon was right—there were different morality rules for different infractions.

As Silence and Jac passed me in the hullmate, neither of them spoke, either to me or each other. It was odd. She didn't know me, so I expected it of her. But Jac had been different from all the other Ladrians when it came to me, so understanding and kind, I had expected some acknowledgement of my presence, at least.

But all I got was crickets from him. Which annoyed me more than it should have.

I huffed and went to Deacon's quarters, passing the beautiful lights and glowing wall buttons along the way. I figured I would learn what they were eventually. Until I remembered none of it was real and why did it matter?

I swallowed back a frustrated growl and lectured myself, "None of this is real. Not Silence's pregnant belly that comes down to her knees, not Deacon's sweetness with me, not Jac's... awkwardness ? Not sure what his deal is, and it doesn't matter, because it's all figments of my imagination."

Inside Deacon's quarters, I watched the space-scape blur by the window. It was pretty, in a light show kind of way. Like the one time I tried ecstasy at a rave with my sister Jenny. Some random guy danced around with glow sticks in his hands and the lights trailed in fuzzy patterns.

When the ship slowed down and things came into focus, I was blown away. Like when we breached the atmosphere of Orhon, the ship rumbled, then stilled. But unlike Orhon, it was early morning on Halla. Even more unlike Orhon, Halla was not as metropolitan. I imagined it was like Orhon in its infancy.

A glittering ocean laid out before us until it became land. Tall trees in every direction, with mountains and rolling hills. Green as far as my eyes could see on the land, but an early morning lavender and pink sky as the two suns rose. Between the trees was more greenery—bushes, I assumed.

Not too many structures, either. A periodic building here and there. They almost blended with their surroundings, except for the gleaming silver of the roofs. The buildings had nothing in common with the ones I saw on Orhon. These had a primitive vibe going on, and I tried to imagine who lived in them.

I might find out soon .

I couldn't think about that. Living moment to moment in this hallucination took a lot of mental work I was not used to. Never having been a schedule person, I had not realized how spoiled I was by my carefree life. But it was carefree by my very careful design—by choosing Ryan Lakeworth as my partner.

Ryan's money made my life that way, and if I was honest with myself, it was a large part of my attraction to him. The security of his money. I realized it more in every passing moment. With his money, I no longer had to worry about whether I would have a roof over my head or food in my stomach. My adult life was starkly different from my childhood, and I had meant to keep it that way. I tried hard to make things work with him, in part, because the memory of my life before him was terrifying.

Maybe that's why I've snapped. I figured out he's been cheating, and I created a world without him in my head, because I don't know what else to do . But I couldn't focus on that. Whatever the duration of the hallucination, it was where I was, and I had to make the best of my situation.

All the greenery made me think it had to be more humid than Orhon—I had noticed the dryness of the air as soon as Allegiant had opened on the other larger planet. I was

accustomed to the humidity of South Carolina, so it gave me the hope of a comfort of home on Halla.

Outside the spot where we landed, there was one of those buildings. But this one had blue flowers planted out front in a yard that looked tended to. Are we at someone's home?

Wherever we were, it was lovely and pastoral. Like a hobbit's house. Wooden walls, a round structure. Circular windows that looked free of glass. There were blue flowered vines that grew around the openings—at the doors and windows—and they were the same shade as the planted flowers. But the silver roof caught my eyes. It seemed like it belonged as part of Deacon's ship, not as a roof for a hobbit house.

I didn't know what to expect when we left the ship, but I wanted to look my best. I finger-combed my hair, unsure of where any grooming supplies were, and tried to look less messy, but failed. I shrugged in the mirror, and the door opened.

Deacon smiled at me, anticipation glowing in his eyes. "Are you ready for this?"

"Not at all," I admitted, mostly because I had no idea what to expect once I stepped out on this planet. Or what my purpose was to Deacon's plan.

He immediately frowned, worry flashing across his features. "You're not backing out, are you—"

"Nope. Let's go."

He exhaled a deep, relieved breath, and we left the dual ships with Jac, Silence, and a motley mix of the two crews. Instead of forging ahead, we stood at the open bay door of Deacon's ship.

Finally, I asked, “Um, so where are we going?”

“Nowhere yet. Wait,” Deacon replied, then went quiet as his eyes scanned the forest ahead.

So, I stared out that way, too. And then I saw one and I gasped, my heart jumping in my chest, even though I’d seen these apparitions before.

A literal ghost peeked from behind one of the tall trees. She was faint, at first, but soon became solid as she approached us. As solid as a ghost ever got, anyway. There was always a slight transparency to them when I saw them on Earth, and that held true, seeing them here, too. She was near the same height as Silence, but with tan skin and blue hair. Her sheen was hard to see or gone—I wasn’t sure which.

I gripped Deacon’s hand, adrenaline rushing through me. “Do...do you need me to speak to her?” Was that now my job as this conduit he’d insisted I was?

But he gently squeezed mine back and shook his head. “No. Not yet.” Then he addressed the apparition. “Greetings, Predict. Is my father nearby?”

My mouth dropped in shock. “You can really see her? And talk to her?”

Deacon gave me a quick, puzzled look. “Of course I can. It is as I said before. I do not understand why you doubt everything I have told you.” He sounded affronted.

“Humans like to say, trust, but verify,” Predict said, while she looked me over and I did not like her expression. It was filled with disdain, for me. “Do not take it personally, Deacon. They have weak faith. Your father is inside.”

But the door to the hobbit house swung open wide and a male ghost sprang forward. I knew in an instant he was Valor Ladrang. He looked just like Deacon, but older.

Same tan skin, lustrous gray hair, brown eyes, and still so very handsome, despite the difference in their age. But more than that, it was the look of love the older Ladrian had for Deacon when he saw him there.

Deacon's eyes welled at the sight of his father. As the pair came close, I realized a terrible, heartbreaking thing. Their arms went out to each other, but they could not hug or connect in any way physically, and their arms slowly drooped to their sides.

An initial, joyful instinct gone awry. It made me cry, too, while the hole in my heart begged to be filled. I felt the frustration for wanting to hold your parent and not being able to—I had felt that way every single day since my mother had died, and I had never been able to hold my own father since I hadn't known him at all.

Clearly, the ache of familial love and the grief that came with death still haunted Ladrians, even with their living ghosts.

Is it worse to be able to see them and not be able to hold them? I wasn't sure. I had never been able to see my mother's ghost. But my heart broke so devastatingly for Deacon that I knew I was never leaving this hallucination.

CHAPTER 13

Jacaranda

It was hard to watch Valor try to hug his son. It was worse to see the sadness in Sarah's eyes for the pair of them.

She is falling for Deacon.

I cleared my throat to shake myself free of the sticky emotion around me and told Silence, "I have business elsewhere. If anyone asks, I will be back in an hour, give or take."

Deacon glanced my way. "Where are you going?"

But I walked to the rear of Sovereign and hit the lift button. It lowered and there was my onworlder. The crusty vehicle was an ancient ATV from Earth that I had swiped from a junkyard—I couldn't afford a real Ladrian onworlder and it worked just as well as any of them. Most of the time.

I hopped on and drove down the path into the forest. Bushes and trees closed around the path—the ghosts weren't sticklers for maintaining wide open trails. On Halla, some ghosts could solidify small parts of their bodies at will to touch things, but only momentarily and it took a lot of strength to do it. Not all ghosts could do it. Since there was almost no point in solidifying their legs, they never noticed if a path was clear until it wasn't.

The air smelled cleaner on Halla. It hadn't been as clear-cut as Orhon. Many Ladrians thought of the microplanet as overgrown and wild, but I liked it that way. Every inch of Halla smelled fresh and felt alive. I loved it. Nothing like riding through the forest to forget my troubles.

Fuck my troubles.

It wasn't long before I parked outside my contact's hovel. His roof was unlike the newer buildings on Halla—Gram Skir wanted his home to blend into the trees, so it would never be seen from overhead. The top was covered in branches he changed frequently. Tall bushes snuggled around the walls. If I hadn't been there before, I would have ridden past it. There were no flowers, like at Valor's home. Even the front door was a series of woven vines. It was well-hidden by nature. Almost like no one lived there anymore.

It made me worry for him. "Gram, you here?"

"Jac, thank the gods it's you."

When I turned around, there was movement in the bushes. He stood up and emerged with branches attached to his green clothes. Gram was short, being a Skir, but far more muscular than Drift. Gram and I looked more alike than he and his cousin—we had the same taupe skin and blue hair. But gray eyes, unlike most in his family. He smiled before he hugged me.

"Good to see you, Gram," I greeted him. "How have you been?"

He laughed. "What is it that you want?"

"Protection."

That caught his attention. “ You need protection?”

“Not me. Protection for Deacon’s new consort, Sarah. She will be living on Halla, and I have a bad feeling about this situation. How have things been here?”

“You haven’t been watching the news, have you?”

“Not about Halla. Actually, there haven’t been that many feeds coming out of here, come to think of it.”

“Sounds like Justice’s doing.” He shrugged and pulled the branches and twigs from his clothing. “Since he murdered the conduits and demanded no one burn the dead, uh, things have become sketchy near the cities.”

I nodded and sighed. “And since there are all those bodies available, that makes for a lot of abandoned bones...”

“And a lot of bone knives, hence the violence,” Gram added. “I guess we should be grateful the ghosts can’t kill each other with regular weapons, eh?”

My gut tightened. “This is not the news I had hoped for, Gram.”

“But it had to be expected, right? I mean, Justice wants the people to worship him instead of their ancestors. If all the ancestors are murdered, then he gets everything he wants. Leaving unburnt bodies is just leaving toolkits for the murder of ancestors.”

“Murdering the conduits was only the beginning of his power grab...” I huffed in frustration at the thought. “You got any banwine?”

“That shit’s hard to come by here. But I might have a bottle of the good stuff stashed away for a special occasion. Come on,” he said as he let me into his hovel.

I ducked under the doorframe, and the scent of rot hit me. An open cadaver laid on his table and my stomach rolled. “What are you doing with that?”

“Making bone knives. You want the big glass or the small glass?”

I glared at him. “You’re a part of this?”

He shrugged. “Everyone’s a part of this here, and I have to make a living, Jac. Big or little?”

I looked at him like he was stupid.

He grabbed the big glass from his cabinet and filled it with the clear liquid from the bottle, then handed it over.

I drank half of it down. “Do you ever regret that I sprang you from the royal prison, only for you to come here and make weapons?”

“Hey, I sell to those who want to defend themselves. I’m helping people. And don’t come into my home, acting like you’re so perfect. How much did you charge me to get out of prison?”

“Not enough,” I muttered. “I have mouths to feed, too.”

“Yeah, yeah. Speaking of them, how’s your crew doing, anyway?”

I smirked. “Ode is doing well.”

He chuckled and said, “I didn’t ask about her specifically.”

“Specific or not, you were asking about Ode.” I grinned at the older man. “Anytime

we meet, you're asking about Ode. You could have tried to be less transparent about it, but I would still know."

He leaned against his sink and changed the topic. "I know you are employed by Deacon Ladrang, but have you ever considered leaving his employment?"

"How, by dying?" I drawled sarcastically.

"You could always fake your death the way you faked mine."

"No. I am loyal to the Ladrang clan."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Valor Ladrang raised me alongside his own son. Deacon is nothing, if not honorable, just like his father," I said, taking a drink of the banwine. "They pay well, too. Why would I go back to springing people from the royal prisons to make half as much money?"

"They might be as honorable as you think they are. They might not be. But if they are, then why do they still have contact with the conduits?"

I narrowed my gaze at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Predict," he said of the ghost that had met them when they'd arrived on Halla a short while ago. "She has been hanging around Valor's place."

My brow knitted together. "Why is that a problem?"

"You don't know...wait...you have no idea, do you?"

“Know what?”

He ran his fingers through his hair, aggravated. “Since they were murdered and became ghosts themselves, the conduits have grown ruthless. They built a temple here on Halla, and no one came. No one paid them tribute, because what was the point anymore? They don’t need to talk to the dead for the dead, you know what I mean? Ghosts can talk to each other without conduits.”

“But the faith—”

“No. When the older conduits, the ones who were still on Halla when the younger ones arrived, they didn’t understand why the younger conduits were building a temple. They told them their authority was stripped the moment they died, but the young ones wouldn’t hear of it.”

I shook my head. “The conduits not only spoke for the dead, but they spoke for the gods, too. Why didn’t anyone come to the temple?”

“Think about it. When was the last time you prayed to the gods?”

I shrugged. “Okay, fair, but—”

“Jac, you don’t understand. The younger conduits murdered the older conduits.”

My blood ran cold. “They did what?”

He slowly nodded. “They are the reason there is violence on Halla. Well, an increase in violence. They started demanding tribute from the ghosts, from the living, from anyone. They are afraid people no longer take them seriously.”

“Halla is supposed to be the one place where we are all equal. We are all equal in

death,” I insisted. “It’s one of the first tenets of the faith. How could they try to create a power structure here?”

He shrugged. “They had power once. They want it again.”

I was infuriated and my voice became an angry growl. “The power that Justice stole from them...”

“Yeah,” he drank his banwine down. “But even Justice can’t scare them as much as their own myths.”

More confusion settled inside me. “What are you talking about?”

“According to the conduits, someone is coming to help the residents of Halla, both the living and the dead. Not sure how. A special conduit of some kind. I don’t know, I don’t follow the mystical stuff. But whatever it is, they are not happy about it.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around any of it. They were respected by all, before Justice murdered them. Ladrians used to worship at their temples and pay tribute. It was a part of all our lives, until Justice decreed otherwise. “I can’t believe the conduits formed a gang.”

Gram sighed. “You could call it that. And they’re not the only ones. Since the conduits have been killing the unfaithful, others have been banding together for safety. People are choosing sides, Jac. Halla has gotten a lot colder in the past couple of years.”

“A shame...I had thought about retiring here.”

He laughed. “Not a great plan. Not anymore.”

“Yeah, well, I still need protection for Sarah. She’s a human. Can you do it?”

“I can try, but the conduits have their eyes on me. You might have better luck with some of the other living.”

“Why are their eyes on you?”

“I make bone knives,” he pointed out. “And then, there’s Omen...”

I finished my banwine. “You ever think about giving that up? The knife business.”

“I gotta eat.”

“There are other ways to make money,” I pointed out.

“Not as fast.”

“Understandable.” I held my cup out for more banwine and he poured, “Thank you. Have you heard from Fan and Bell lately?”

Gram shook his head. “Not in over a month.”

Not a good sign .

“Why is Deacon’s consort coming to Halla?” Gram asked.

“It’s a long and stupid story. But she’s a human and she is also—”

“He united with a human?” Gram’s eyes went wide with shock.

“Yeah, but she’s not just a human, she’s a—” Conduit.

Shit. Realization hit me, and I dropped the big glass and ran back to my onworlder. Gram didn't wait for an invitation—he jumped on behind me, gripping my waist for safety.

He shouted over the motor, “She’s what?”

“In trouble,” I hollered back.

I couldn't shout what she was—a human conduit—not if the other conduits were spying on Gram because then Sarah's life would be in bigger, mortal danger.

The motor smoked because I had it cranked all the way up, but I wasn't about to slow down for anything. Part of me wanted to pray to the conduits that she was safe, but that felt wrong in light of everything Gram had said and how evil so many of them had become. I pulled in front of Valor's cabin and ran past the garden into the house, with Gram close behind.

I didn't see Sarah anywhere, but I did find Deacon. “Where is Sarah?” I asked in an urgent tone. I desperately needed to see for myself that she was okay.

Deacon frowned at me. “Jac, what's—”

“Where?” I demanded.

“In the toilet room,” he said, annoyed with my tone. “What is going on?”

“And Predict?”

“I don't know. She's around somewhere—”

Sarah came from the hallway and her smile lit up as soon as she saw me. “Jac, you're

back. Why do you look so odd?”

I panted my relief and took a half a breath before I saw Predict behind Sarah in the hallway, a sharp bone knife in a falling, arcing hand toward Deacon’s consort. She knew what Sarah was and planned to murder her.

Without hesitation, I ran forward, knocking Sarah out of Predict’s reach. The knife sliced through my chest and hit something sensitive, almost frying out my nerves as it embedded deep into my skin. I hissed in pain. I couldn’t think anymore—only the searing agony existed.

Thankfully, I had already begun to swing on Predict before she had stabbed me, and I knocked her into the wall and off balance. Valor lunged around me, stabbing Predict in the throat with his own bone knife.

Predict tried to scream and couldn’t, the fucking bitch. I fell to the ground next to her, our eyes locked in a deathly gaze, which is exactly what I wished for her. To fucking die.

My vision faded as I wheezed, “Is Sarah hurt?”

The last thing I remembered was her scream and the fear that I had failed her.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

CHAPTER 14

Deacon

The peal of Sarah's scream enraged me as she fell to the floor. I was on my knees next to her without a second thought. "Are you hurt?"

She started to hyperventilate. "Jac—he's—oh god!"

I shook her by her shoulders. "Are you hurt?" I demanded, my heart slamming against my ribcage at the thought of anything happening to her.

She shook her head, her panic filled eyes on Jac. "No, I'm fine, but Jac—"

I shouted, "Get the door," before I hoisted Jac up in my arms.

His eyes were lifeless, and his sheen was gone. Gram held the door open for us. I muttered to Jac, "Stay with me," and ran onto Sovereign. "Ode!" I yelled for the doctor.

But the infirmary was empty. I laid Jac onto the examination table and Sarah ran in, as I rifled through Ode's equipment on the hunt for anything to save my best friend.

Tears filled her eyes. "What do we do?"

"Go get Wave!" I ordered. "She should be on Allegiant!"

Father's voice shouted outside for Ode, but it was Treg who came in. "Ode went into town for supplies." Then he saw Jac's prone body on the table, along with the bone knife still protruding from his chest. "Hells, who did this?"

"Predict, she stabbed him. I'm afraid to remove the—"

Treg pulled the bone knife out and a spurt of blood followed it.

"The fuck!" I shouted at him.

Treg's eyes grew round with horror. "I don't know—I panicked—I don't know Ladrian anatomy—hells!"

Blood poured from Jac's chest and onto the floor.

"Put pressure on the wound," I said as I hunted for anything that could help stave off the flow of Jac's life source.

I was relieved to see Sarah return with Wave, but as soon as the historian saw his blood, she fainted.

I told Sarah, "Help my father find Ode!"

She whirled back around and almost ran into the doctor on her way out of the infirmary.

Ode came barging in and yelled, "Out of the way, Treg!" as she pushed past him and replaced his gelatinous hands with her own to maintain pressure on the wound. Jac's chest made a sucking sound during the exchange, as he breathed his own blood.

"Deacon, you stay, everyone else, out !" Ode ordered.

But Sarah wanted to stay. I saw desperation and worry in her eyes. Instead, she and Treg dragged Wave's unconscious body from the doorway, allowing it to close.

I turned to Ode, my jaw clenched as I tried to maintain my own composure. "How can I help?"

"Keep pressure here," she said, indicating where her own hands were. "I have a lot of work to do to save Jac."

I held my hands exactly where hers had been and the seconds ticked by like days. My hands were covered in his blood up to my wrists. "If you die on me, I am never talking to you again."

In response, Jac coughed blood before his body went completely slack. I felt no heartbeat and his blood stopped pouring.

"Ode!" I shouted in a panic.

"There is no need to yell, Deacon." She turned around with a jet injector and pressed it to Jac's temple. "I am right here, and my infirmary is not that big. All it will do is rattle me, and I am rattled enough right now."

I nodded in understanding, then I felt a heartbeat beneath my hand again and the blood flowed freely once more. A good sign and a bad one. "How do we stop the bleeding?"

"That depends. Who stabbed him?"

"Predict. She meant to stab Sarah. I don't know what's going on, but why does that matter?"

Ode frowned as she searched her cabinets. “Because if it was some street fight, I wouldn’t be worried about poison on the blade. But conduits are educated and if we stop his body from purging a poison, that might be what kills him.”

“Fuck!” I roared.

“I wish we had one of his relatives on board—better chance for a blood match—”

“Take mine,” I insisted.

“We don’t know if—”

“We do,” I nodded. “In the war, we had to know our matches. We’re both ospine-A-R. Do it.”

“Not until we know if he was poisoned.” She grabbed another device I didn’t know or recognize and said, “Move your hands.”

Reluctantly, I did, and she plunged it into his stab wound. Lights flashed on the readout, reflecting in my best friend’s blood. I couldn’t believe I could lose him like that—murdered by a conduit.

Not only that—Predict had been my family’s trusted advisor for years. Why did she try to attack Sarah? How did Jac know she was going to? I needed answers. Maybe Gram knows something. As soon as I thought that, I wanted to ask him, but I would not leave Jac’s side. Not ever. Not until I knew he was going to be okay. He had to be okay.

Over the hours Ode and I worked to save his life, one question rang loudest of all in my mind: Why did he knock Sarah aside and take the knife in her place? It went beyond loyalty or the heat of the moment. Jac was a fierce fighter—it made no sense

for him to be taken down by a conduit like Predict.

It was sloppy of him, and Jac is never sloppy. He had to have been distracted. But what had taken him off his guard?

It felt like weeks had passed since Ode had begun her work. By the time she had finally sewn him up and connected us with her tubing so we could transfuse my blood, I started to have hope he might make it.

Exhaustion started to hit harder than I had expected. After staying awake for so many hours to get Sarah acclimated and set my plan in motion, I had been awake for far too long. Before Jac had burst into my father's home, I was almost asleep from the droning conversation between my father and Silence.

I fell asleep at Jac's side, still tubed to him.

"You still snore like a dreck," a deep voice rasped.

I blinked and looked around the room, unsure how long I had been out. Next to me, Jac sleepily smirked. "Hey you."

"Hey." Relief flowed through me, which was quickly replaced with a spurt of anger.

"The fuck, Jac?"

He laughed, then held his chest like it hurt to laugh. "Ooo, that sucks."

"Take it easy. I'll call for Ode—"

"No, wait," he objected before I could summon the doctor, still sounding and looking very weak. "Just wait a minute."

“What is it?” I asked.

He winced. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head in confusion. “What could you possibly have to be sorry for, Jac?”
He’d saved Sarah’s life and had almost lost his own.

“I should have been faster with Predict. Sarah’s okay, right?”

I nodded. “She is fine. You saved her.”

He closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Why were you there at all?” I asked. “How did you know what Predict was up to? Why did you save Sarah? You are faster than some conduit—so how did she get the upper hand? I’m confused.”

Jac cleared his throat. “Gram said the conduits—the ones Justice murdered—they’ve gone rogue, formed a gang. They’re trying to run Halla and get back their former power.”

“Rogue conduits?”

He nodded but stilled quickly after he winced. “Yeah. They built a temple and murdered all the old conduits, the ones who had died before them.”

“Why would they—”

“Power,” he coughed, “I’ve always told you, people will do stupid shit for power. You’ve never believed me.”

I frowned. “I believe you, Jac. I just don’t think power is as big of a deal as you think it is.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “People kill for power. You saw it with the Bateens and Justice specifically. How many of your friends and family will have to die, before you understand that people,” he coughed harder, “without power will do anything to get it and people with it will do anything to get more? You have just enough power to be satisfied, but most people are not like you!”

He hacked, so I quickly got him water with herbs.

Maybe he’s right , I thought as he drank. When he was breathing normally again, I asked, “What does any of this have to do with Sarah?”

“Some conduit myth is about a special conduit who is coming to save Halla. They’re afraid of this special conduit, Deacon. They’re going to want to kill Sarah, if they figure out that she’s one, too.”

“Special how?”

“I don’t know. But Sarah is a human and a conduit, and that make her pretty damned special to me.”

A sinking sensation took me over. “That’s why you barged into my father’s house? You knew Predict would kill her for being the special conduit?”

“After I put two and two together, yeah. It took me an embarrassingly long time to do that, though, and that’s why I wasn’t there faster. I should have been faster,” he grimaced and balled his fists.

“Ode says you’re going to be alright, Jac. Calm down—”

“Calm down?” he nearly yelled. “Sarah almost died!”

“That’s what you’re mad about? Not the fact that you got stabbed?”

He scoffed and looked away.

“Jac, what is it about Sarah?” I narrowed my gaze on him. “Why did you take the knife meant for her?”

He sighed and said, “You might as well finish what Predict started.”

I shook my head in confusion. “What? Why?”

He looked away. “Because I don’t want you to hate me when I tell you the truth.”

“I never could.”

“Something tells me you might find a way,” he said sardonically. Then, he looked me in the eye once again. “I care for Sarah.”

“Of course, she’s a wonderful person.”

“No,” he insisted, and took my hand in his, staring into my eyes. “I care for Sarah. In a way that I shouldn’t.”

His truth hit me hard, making me sit down again. How could I blame him for caring about her, since I’d sent him to look after her on Earth? At first, I didn’t know what to say and had no thoughts. But a moment later, I had all the thoughts at once.

I organized them into a response and exhaled a deep breath. “After you have healed and the dust of Halla has settled, I will make an official offer of antagonism, so we can

settle this like the respectable Ladrians we are.”

He huffed out a laugh. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I am not lying.”

“I’m not respectable.”

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. “Whatever you are, I respect you, Jac. We will duel, and whoever comes out the winner can have Sarah.”

He shook his head. “I think she would object to such an antagony.”

“I did not mean it as though she was a prize to be won. I only meant, whoever is left can pursue her.”

“She would have hated to hear you say that about her, but that’s not how I meant it,” Jac said. “What I mean is, she wouldn’t want either of us to die in a combat for her. She’s not that kind of person. She would hate the winner for that.”

I rubbed my fingers across my forehead. “Then, how do we move forward?”

Cautiously, Jac asked, “What if we were to share her?”

My frown furrowed painfully into my face. “How...how would that work, exactly?”

“I’m not sure. It is pointless to fight each other, leaving one of us dead and the other one with her disdain for eternity, when we could share her instead.” His shoulder lifted in a slight shrug. “I think...all three of us could be happy. If I’m being honest with you...I had the time of my life with her during the pomp and my only regret is that it doesn’t happen every day.”

I sat back in my chair and thought about the pomp. It had been great fun to share her then. Why wouldn't it be fun to share her going forward? "You don't think the singular nature of the pomp added something to your fun with her?" I asked Jac.

"That had nothing to do with any of it. It was being with Sarah and sharing her with you — not Kapok — that I enjoyed. I've thought about it every second since it happened. I know what I want, Deacon."

The door opened and Ode walked in, interrupting our interesting conversation. "You were supposed to call me when the patient woke up."

"He distracted me," I muttered, his unconventional suggestion still tumbling through my brain.

She smirked and removed our connecting tubing, before examining Jac. "How are you feeling?"

"Like someone stabbed me in the heart."

"That's because someone did." She used another jet injector, this time on his chest. I watched as his body reknitted that hole so it was gone. "But your wounds are healing well and there was no poison on the bone knife. I expect you to be on your feet within the hour or less. You'll be sore for a few days, though, so no lifting weights, no running around and taking bone knives to the heart."

Jac chuckled, then winced. "Thank you, Ode."

She shook her head then pointed to me. "Thank Deacon. He's the one who got you here, got you help, and gave you his blood to save you. He even cleaned you up."

Jac smiled and shifted his gaze to mine. "You did all that?"

“Had nothing better to do,” I teased.

She rolled her eyes and gave me a pointed look. “You two should stop hanging around each other so much. You’re starting to sound like Jac.”

“There are much worse things in the world, Ode,” I said. “Almost had one of them today.”

She nodded and smiled. “Rest, Jac. I’ll check on you in a while.” She left us alone again, but this time, she left the door open.

I gave him an amused grin. “Must think you’re on the mend, if she’s leaving the door open for people to see you.”

He smirked. “Yeah. If I was gonna die, she wouldn’t let anyone see her failure.”

I nodded in agreement, then sobered, wanting to revisit our interrupted discussion. “Were you serious about sharing Sarah? Or was that the massive blood loss talking?”

“I was serious. And let’s face it, if I’m healed, I would totally kick your ass in an antagony, so you should take me up on the offer.”

I laughed hard. “Is that right?”

He grinned and shrugged, before he winced again. “That shot Ode gave me is working, but now my wound itches when I move.”

“She’s a great doctor. You are lucky to have her.”

“And I’m lucky to have you , Deacon. Thank you for saving my life.”

“Of course.” I paused for a moment, then added, “And thank you for saving Sarah’s.”

“Always.” He sighed. “Is Predict dead?”

“She has been born to the ether, yes,” I assured him of her fate. “My father did it.”

“Good. She needs to begin again.”

“Agreed.” As we quietly sat there, I thought about his proposal some more. “Do you believe we could make this work? The three of us?”

“It used to be done all the time in the old days.”

“I know, but—”

“So, why couldn’t we?” Jac said, before I could come up with any feasible argument.

“It’s not like you and I haven’t been...intimate.”

My skin prickled pleasantly at the thoughts of times gone past. “You mean, when you and I shared furs?”

He smirked too arrogantly, and the heated look in his eyes made my body hum. “It’s been a long time, I know, but so much of it came back into focus during the pomp. The way we used to be, the things you and I did...it was...it meant a lot to me, Deacon.”

“To me, as well,” I admitted truthfully. “But we aren’t boys anymore. We don’t, I mean, we haven’t...in so long.”

Jac carefully sat up to face me, his legs draped over the side of the exam table. There was perverse misconduct in his eyes when they met mine. “How long has it been

since you were with a man?"

I laughed and dodged his gaze. "A long time. You?"

"Probably not as long as you," Jac openly shared. "And he definitely wasn't as long as you."

I laughed again, but felt embarrassed or proud, I wasn't sure which. I stood between his legs and stared into his ghost. "You have always been a troublemaker, Jacaranda Cozz."

"Want some trouble?" I had rarely ever seen Jac nervous, but I saw it then. He reached out for the side of my face. "I'd be more than happy to give it to you."

I leaned into his palm as he pulled me close to his mouth. He bit my bottom lip as Ladrians do, before I turned it into a hot, deep kiss, like the humans do.

CHAPTER 15

Sarah

“Y ou’re sure it’s okay to go see him?” I asked Ode, anxious to know for myself that Jac was alive and okay.

She smiled reassuringly and said, “The blood has been cleaned up, Sarah. It’s fine.”

“Blood doesn’t bother me, Ode, I’m not a baby—”

Wave scowled at me. “I didn’t faint because I’m a baby!”

I rolled my eyes. “I only asked because guys get weird when they’re in pain—they don’t like us to see them weak.”

Ode frowned. “That sounds like one of those weird human customs. It’s fine to see Jac now. Go ahead.”

I walked down the corridor to the infirmary, gulping down my fear. I had wanted to rush into the room and see my savior, but I didn’t know what to expect. Would he be on a hundred machines to keep him alive, like if he were a human? I couldn’t take seeing someone I cared about like that—not after seeing my mom that way.

As I closed in on the infirmary doorway, I heard a strange grunting sound. I peeked inside and to my shock, found Deacon and Jac making out like two horny teenagers. Nothing in my life had prepared me for that.

Though, to be fair, nothing in my life had ever prepared me for anything since I had left Earth.

My mind went utterly blank as I watched them. These two Ladrian men, both whom I had begun to find irresistible, were entwined in each other's arms, kissing and biting and licking and making all kinds of sexy sounds of pleasure. It was entrancing.

Should I be mad?

No, I don't think so.

I was too damned aroused by the sight.

My heart fluttered, making me dizzy. Blood rushed from my head downward. My pussy throbbed and soon, the rest of me did, too. I wanted them. Like a mindless zombie, I walked into the infirmary and waited until they were done.

When Deacon's eyes opened, a panic stricken look passed over his features and he jumped back from Jac. "Sarah, this is—"

Jac turned around and saw me, too, but his response was much different. "Oh fuck, Sarah, you're alright!"

"Yeah, but um, what is going on?" I asked, pointing between the two of them.

"I don't..." Deacon started, but trailed off awkwardly, until he finally finished, "...have an excuse. We have done wrong."

"No, we haven't," Jac said, smacking Deacon in the shoulder. "Remember the plan."

Deacon nodded quickly. "Right, right. Sarah, we would like to propose an idea."

I smiled, still at a loss for words. “Sure. What is it?”

Jac cut in, taking over. “I am going to ask you something, and I need your honesty, no matter what you think we want to hear. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You and Deacon are united, and I know you care for each other—”

“Yes.”

Jac exhaled a deep breath. “But is there room in your heart for another?”

I tipped my head in confusion, not following his question. “I don’t understand.”

“Everything here for you is new,” Jac went on calmly. “It will take you time to adjust to it all and I understand if you don’t have an answer right away. I don’t know if you have ever been with more than one man at a time, but—”

My eyes widened as his insinuation became clear. “You two want to share me?”

They exchanged a look between them, before they slowly nodded.

Deacon explained, “When we were young, Jac and I were together, intimately. I have missed that element in our relationship. But I understand if you are angry or do not want that to happen anymore. Or,” he sounded sad, “if you wish us executed.”

I gaped at him, certain he was jesting. “Why would I want that?”

“For our kisses.”

My mouth dropped open at the thought. “Deacon...your and Jac’s kisses were some of the most beautiful, and hottest, things I have ever seen.”

Very slowly, Jac asked, “You’re not mad?”

“I wouldn’t know how to be mad right now,” I said, and laughed, opting for honesty. “I’m too turned on.”

Jac smirked. “And you like the idea of us sharing you, don’t you?”

Biting my lip, slowly, I nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“Sovereign, seal the infirmary door,” Jac ordered gruffly, and the door behind me shut immediately. “Come here, Sarah.”

Unable to ignore his command—not that I wanted to—I stepped forward, barely aware of my own body. Every muscle hummed, and my skin practically tingled with the electricity in the room. When he reached out for me, I looked up to Deacon, even as I stepped into Jac’s arms.

Deacon nodded once in approval. It was all the permission I needed. I kissed Jac, feeling the sexual tension between us just like at the pomp. He knew how to kiss like a human and set me on fire with his lips. I lifted my arms around his neck and my body melted against his.

But then Deacon was suddenly behind me, pressing close and nibbling on my shoulder. Goosebumps shot down my spine, and I was glad I no longer had a tail, or it might have whacked into his already hard cock. Then he leaned over my shoulder and kissed Jac, their mouths fusing erotically for me to see.

The pomp had not prepared me for this. Not even close. This was something else...

Being in between them as they kissed, I reached out for both of their cocks, one in front of me, and the other behind me. Jac growled into Deacon's mouth and scooted off the exam table. I let them make out, while I sort of knelt between them. Their height difference meant one cock was a foot higher than the other. As quickly as I could, I lowered their trousers, almost getting knobbed in the eyes with the way their eager dicks sprang out of their pants.

Both their cocks were completely stiff, so I stroked them at the same time. The guys groaned in unison.

My guys. I loved the way that sounded.

Jac started to pump against my hand, while Deacon worked on removing Jac's shirt. His chest was miraculously healed somehow, and his abs rippled and shimmered in the low light of the infirmary. Deacon tore his own shirt off, and soon, I was the only one who was dressed in the room.

Drunk on hormones, and still kneeling between them, I licked Jac's cock. He was too big to take him deep into my mouth, but I tried. His rigid veins and smooth skin enticed me. My tongue lined each vein in turn, making him grunt in Deacon's mouth as they resumed kissing above me. Then I felt Deacon's big hand tangling in my hair, guiding my head back and forth on Jac's shaft, making him fuck my mouth.

I loved the feeling of it all—being pushed onto Jac's cock by Deacon's hand, like I was his instrument to pleasure Jac with. It made my wet pussy ache for them both.

I had no idea the two of them had been together when they were younger, but it explained their comfort with mutual nudity. Did their history make the pomp extra awkward or extra better for them? I reminded myself to ask, once we were finished. I fisted both my hands around Jac's cock as best I could, while I sucked on the end, moving together to give him more sensations.

He broke his kiss with Deacon and panted, “She should be naked by now.”

“Agreed.” Deacon unfastened my uniform and pulled it off of me, while I kept at Jac’s cock. Then, he licked and bit down my back, until he got to my ass. His large hand reached beneath me there, stroking the outside of my pussy and passing around my clit. “She is already so wet, Jac.”

“Fuck her bent over like this while she’s sucking my cock,” he ordered gruffly. “I want to see you do it.”

Deacon lifted my hips up and I imagined he had to crouch down considerably for me to feel his cock slide against me. But then he said to Jac, “I have a better idea. Move out of the way.”

Jac pulled from my mouth, and I whined for more. He softly chuckled at my protests and walked away from the exam table.

Deacon lifted me up and laid me over it, face down. My feet could no longer feel the floor—I was too short for that. My torso was on top of the padded table, making my head and my pelvis available to them. This was much better than trying to do anything crouching or standing. Once I was comfortable, Deacon pointed to the other side of the table and told Jac, “Over there.”

Jac returned to my head and knelt in front of me first. Gently stroking the hair away from my face, he said, “I’m going to watch Deacon fuck you, while I fuck your face. Because now, you belong to us .” Then he took my head in his hands and kissed me roughly. His tongue had the same kind of bumpy texture as Deacon’s and something about it lit my brain up.

Behind me, Deacon spread my legs open and sandwiched himself between them, before his cock dipped into me. I moaned into Jac’s mouth. I loved the feeling of both

of them like this—like I was theirs and they were mine and they were each other's, too.

Jac pulled back and kissed my forehead before he stood up again. Positioning the head of his cock at my parted lips, he cupped the back of my head and thrust into my mouth at the same time Deacon drove into my body a few inches deeper.

I gasped around Jac's thick cock. Full and satisfied in a way I had never felt before, my whole body hummed on their energy. It was almost indescribable, but I felt lit from within. The pulsing veins in Deacon's cock bumped up against my G-spot and each thrust stoked my fire. The taste of Jac's cock was my new favorite thing, making me crave another taste after the last one.

He growled, "Fuck, I love watching you take her like that, Deacon."

"Just wait till you see me fuck her as a Ladrian," he panted behind me. "She can take every single inch of me then."

I smacked Jac's thigh, and he pulled out of my mouth. I turned to look over my shoulder at Deacon and said, "Stop."

Deacon immediately pulled out. "Yes?"

Gasping, I turned over onto my back and tentatively asked, "Do you...are you disappointed I'm not—"

"No!" he practically shouted. Then he laughed and his voice lowered. "Sorry, I didn't mean to yell. I just meant, I could never be disappointed with you, Sarah. I only meant to say that I thought we could add some variety to our fun. If you would like, we can mog into our human forms, too."

“Oh.” I giggled at the amusing thought. “I hadn’t thought about that. Maybe some time, but not anytime soon. I like you both the way you are.”

“And we like you the way you are, too,” Jac said as he stroked my hair. “You’re beautiful as a human—”

“And as a Ladrian,” Deacon added.

Jac continued, “Yes, that too. And I am burning to be inside of you.”

I bit my bottom lip. “You boys want to switch sides?”

They nodded.

“Come on, then,” I said, and as they circled me with that hungry look in their eyes, I shivered, feeling like their prey.

I moved to turn over onto my stomach again, but Deacon shook his head and said, “Stay like that. On your back for us.”

Deacon scooted my upper body toward him so that my head fell over the edge of the table. Then, he rested his hands on either side of my waist, and since he was much taller, his cock brushed against my lips. I opened up for him, licking his glossy head and tasting myself on his shaft.

He pushed forward and began to fuck my mouth, just as Jac rubbed the head of his dick against my clit. I shivered against him, and he wrapped my legs around his waist and pushed inside of me, stretching me with his girth. I gasped, sucking in more of Deacon’s cock as the pleasure began to build once more. Jac came forward, shoving as deep into my pussy as he could go, and between Deacon’s thrusts into my mouth, they kissed again right above me while they were both inside of me.

Jac shortened his thrusts to stay close enough to kiss Deacon. There were two veins that massaged my G-spot in that position, and they were ruthless and fast on his shorter thrusts. It was kindling my fire. My core began to tighten, and I choked on Deacon's cock—I couldn't time my breaths right anymore. I was too distracted by the seductive pleasure increasing inside of me. He arched his back, pulling out an inch. It was just enough to let me breathe again.

When Deacon reached down and stroked my clit, I erupted on them both. My pussy locked around Jac's cock, as I moaned around Deacon's. Ecstasy was a wildfire that threatened to burn me to the ground, and as the intense pleasure shot through my muscles, I decided it didn't matter that none of this was real. I didn't care anymore about going back to Earth or any of that. My home was between these two fierce and loyal aliens.

Deacon growled, "Are you coming on his cock for me?"

I nodded and groaned, still gagged by his cock.

"Yes, that's it," he said as he coaxed my clit toward another orgasm. "Do it again."

I whined, unsure if I could.

But he kept at me there, while Jac resumed his longer thrusts inside me. Pulling all the way out and driving all the way back in, as much as he could.

Jac growled deep in his throat, a sexy, inhuman sound. "Fuck, her pussy keeps squeezing on me, Deacon, she's so tight and wet...she's gonna make me come."

"Good, I want to see you come in her."

"Are you sure about that?" Jac sounded panicked.

“Yes. Without question,” Deacon ordered him. “Give her every single drop you’ve got.”

“ Fuck ,” Jac hissed as he ruthlessly pumped into my body. He grabbed my hips and worked himself into me harder and faster, every thrust getting me closer to the peak of pleasure.

“I want you to come when he does, consort,” Deacon said, another command. “You will do this for me, won’t you?”

“Mm, hmm,” I whimpered around his cock.

“Close!” Jac warned.

So Deacon’s fingers sped up and pushed me right over the edge into another realm of bliss. Jac’s cock swelled inside of me as I came and made my orgasm even bigger. Deacon pulled out of my mouth, so my screams filled the room as I came hard on Jac’s cock, my entire body clenching and shuddering around his length.

Jac roared as he came inside of me, filling me up with his lust, marking me as his. His strong grip would have hurt my hips, but I didn’t feel anything but pure bliss in the moment. His thrusts became reckless until he finally finished. Jac’s cock softened inside of me, and he laid onto me, licking up my neck and kissing my lips before meeting my heavy-lidded gaze. I knew the look in his purple glowing eyes, and I felt it, too.

But then a new expression took him over as he cast his gaze upward toward Deacon. He slyly smiled, kissed me one more time, and pulled out. Unable to hold all his seed, his lust poured onto the floor from me. The absence of him felt strange—like I was missing something.

And then, Deacon came around and stepped between my legs. His cock had darkened in the interim. The intimidating length almost looked angry, but Deacon did not. His golden amber eyes were filled by the unmistakable look of a man in love. I wasn't sure which one of us was his paramour—maybe both of us.

Sharing me was one thing, but sharing emotions felt different in my mind. More dangerous, because there was more at risk. But when he pressed his cock into my extremely slick and messy pussy, thanks to Jac's cum, I didn't care what was at risk. All I knew was that I needed them both, in any manner I could have them.

Jac circled back around to my head and massaged my tits and lightly pinched my nipples, while Deacon plunged into me. I moaned and laid there, letting them pleasure me. There was the extra splash of Jac's cum around Deacon's cock, and that made everything feel incredibly dirty in the best way possible. I held onto the edge of the table padding for something to grip as Deacon continued plowing into me, stronger and faster and deeper.

He didn't slow down or do little strokes inside of me the way Jac had. Deacon pounded into me as best he could without ripping me apart. He kept his large hand on my stomach, pressing me into the padded table to hold me still for his relentless fucking. But then his hand gradually moved lower, until his thumb had access to my clit. He rubbed and stroked me rhythmically, making me cry out.

“Want you to come again, Sarah.” He grunted out the order.

I gasped. “So...close!”

“When you do, I'm going to come inside of you, too.”

“Mm, fuck yes!” Jac tweaked my nipple, and my back arched as my body pulled tight around Deacon's shaft.

He growled, “She’s close, I can fucking feel it.”

Jac gave my breast a slight smack, jolting pain and pleasure through me like a live wire. “Come for me.”

I wasn’t sure who he spoke to, me or Deacon, but it didn’t matter. I was coming either way, my body pulsing in waves on Deacon’s cock. It was almost too much—my legs wrapped tight around his muscled waist, trying to pull him deeper still. But he was strong and resisted me as he came and gasped like he was finally coming up for air. His thumb kept at my clit, making one orgasm feel like a dozen that reverberated off each other.

I couldn’t breathe or move and I couldn’t care. My body was a temple for our pleasure and that was all.

Deacon pulled out before he leaned down for a kiss, which let his cum spill out onto the floor, mingling with Jac’s. He panted against my lips and smiled. “This is what I have needed for so long. You, this, us .”

I looked at them both, still trying to catch my breath. “Me too.”

“Same here,” Jac added, his eyes glowing with triumph. Then he said, “ Sovereign , clean floors, clean air.”

A whirring sound came on, and I assumed it was like on Allegiant , when the floor had opened up to take the laundry. I couldn’t get up to find out, though. I was a boneless noodle.

They cleaned me up and eventually, we all dressed. But it took time—we kept groping at each other and making out. I had never been so satisfied in all my life. But it was more than physical this time—not like at the pomp. Now it was different.

Everything was different. For me, my whole world had been turned upside-down by these aliens, in every way imaginable.

And I wasn't mad about it. Not at all. Oddly enough, I was extremely happy.

Just as Jac unsealed the door, we heard raised voices near the hullmate. "Come on," he ordered, grabbing my hand as we hurried toward the sound.

Valor, Wave, Ode, Treg, and a guy I didn't know all looked concerned as they chatted.

Ode smirked when she saw Jac and said, "I figured you were up and feeling fine, since I couldn't get into my infirmary."

"What's wrong?" Jac asked, ignoring her insinuation.

"Nothing is wrong . Silence is in labor."

CHAPTER 16

Jacaranda

Silence is in labor.

“That’s my cue to exit,” I told them.

Deacon frowned at me. “You do not want to be here for this?”

“You want to be here for this?” Sarah asked him incredulously, now well aware of the history between Silence and his father and the betrayal of their affair.

“My family is growing today. Of course, I want to be here.”

“And I do not,” I said, and sighed, not understanding how he could be so forgiving, and accepting. “Nothing against your family, Deacon, but birth is too messy for me. I can take war, I can take on fights, I can even take the sewers of the royal prison. Birth is where I draw the line. Besides, I need to see some of my other contacts here so we can figure out what we’re doing for security.”

Our eyes met in agreement, because we both knew I was referring to Sarah’s safety, which was now paramount to both of us. “Understood. Be safe.”

“Always.” I offered Gram a ride back to his place, but he declined once he heard where I was going afterwards. “Suit yourself,” I said with a shrug.

“If I’m home when you get to Omen’s place, when she’s done killing you, she’ll come after me.”

I laughed. “Why would she kill me or you?”

“I told you where she lives, and she hates you.”

I scoffed at that. “She doesn’t hate me—”

“She threatened to feed you to her baby drecks, and we both know you wouldn’t be the first to end up as food for them.”

I frowned. “Keep an eye on my crew and Sarah while I’m gone. Don’t let anyone into Valor’s house who isn’t already here. Not under any circumstances.”

“Why are you going to see her, anyway?” Gram asked.

“Answers.”

After exiting Sovereign, I hopped onto the onworlder and rode into the forest again. Omen’s place was deeper than Gram’s, so it took an hour to get there. Just enough time to pre-regret going to see her.

Omen’s home wasn’t as hidden as Gram’s. She had one of the newer silver roofs on top of a white cylindrical home. Pink flowers grew on thorned vines across her yard. A blue stone path led to her front door.

I turned the onworlder off and took a deep breath. I’ve come this far, and I’m not going back without answers. Walking up to her door, my heart sped. I didn’t want to see Omen Ayext, but I didn’t have a lot of options, either.

I knocked and called out, “Omen, you in?”

The door opened, and there she was, her gaze immediately narrowing on me. Another woman who wanted me dead. Her transparent body was just as curvy as I recalled, but her smile was absent. “Come to feed my drecks, have you?”

I arched a brow. “Any chance we could have a conversation instead?”

She produced a bone knife and thrust it toward my throat before I could move. But the point stopped before it pierced my skin. “Just so we’re clear, Jac. We are not friends.”

“We’re clear.”

She moved the knife back into her holster and said, “Then you can come in.”

I took a breath and stepped into her home, feeling like a cina in a dreck’s lair. Her home was much nicer than Gram’s, though that might have been the lack of a dead body on her kitchen table. It was well-decorated and pristine. I felt like I was bringing dirt into her home. Good.

“Sit there.” She gestured to the padded bench in the parlor. She left for the small kitchen and returned with grapes, the kind that would release a deadly poison if you harbored any ill will toward the other person. “As we are not friends, I need to know.”

I sighed. “Of course.”

She ate hers, then I ate mine. She stared as she waited, and when I did not drop dead within a minute, as she’d clearly anticipated, she asked, “Water with herbs?”

“No, thank you. I’m not here for pleasantries.”

“Then tell me, why are you here?”

I got right to the point. “I’ve heard the other conduits have gone mad.”

She huffed and sat back in her own seat. “So?”

“Are you with them?”

“Are you asking if I’ve gone mad?”

I shrugged. “I’m asking if you’ve gone back to your roots.”

She smiled. “I haven’t been with the sisterhood for many years, though it’s not as if anyone cares.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Justice Bateen didn’t care that I am no longer with the sisterhood. He only cared that I’m a conduit, so,” she drew a line across her throat with her finger, “that was all it took. I had stopped working as a priestess for over five years by the time he had gotten around to killing all of us.” She huffed. “Guilt by association, I suppose. And now you’re here to accuse me of being on their side.”

“Not accusing you of anything, Omen. Are you in touch with them?”

“Why would I tell you anything?”

“Because a long time ago, we were friends, and—”

She laughed. “Is that what you call a few cheap thrusts in the back of the temple every couple of months when we were young? That’s a friendship to you?”

I didn’t appreciate the jab. “Hey, I saved your brother from the royal prison when you called me, didn’t I?”

Her full lips smoothed into a line of acquiescence. “You did. That’s the only reason I didn’t butcher you the moment you knocked on my door.”

“I hope his life is worth more than just the absence of a bone knife in my throat.”

She laced her fingers together on her lap. “How is Gram, anyway?” she asked of her brother. “I haven’t seen him in a week.”

“What makes you think I’ve seen him lately?”

She laughed caustically. “Who else but my baby brother would have told you where I live?”

“He’s good,” I told her. “Stupidly selling bone knives, but he’s good.”

She almost smiled. “And Drift?”

“Your cousin is doing great on Deacon’s ship.”

She nodded, looking pleased. “Glad to hear it.”

I tipped my head curiously. “I thought you hated the Skir side of your family tree.”

“Oh, I do,” she said, then sipped her water with herbs. “but they’re still family. And Drift never stood a chance at the academy, not without Deacon in his corner. The

Ladrangs are good Ladrians. I imagine you're working for them again?"

"Among others," I said, then got back to business. "I need information, Omen. Will you help me?"

"That depends on what information you want."

"The conduit who is foretold, what do you know about that?" I asked.

A thought flashed through her eyes, before she feigned innocence and asked, "A conduit who is foretold?"

I nodded slowly. "I understand there is a special conduit who makes the others nervous. She's foretold to bring about some kind of change, and by the look on your face, you know exactly what and who I'm talking about."

She looked away and muttered, "This is why we could never be friends, Jac. You know me too well."

"Some would say that enhances a friendship."

"Fools."

"What do you know about the special conduit, Omen?" I persisted.

"What makes you think I would spill the secrets of the sisterhood?"

"Because you hate them as much as I'm starting to," I growled irritably.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then, she began to sing. It wasn't words, or maybe it was a language I didn't know, but when she sang, my head vibrated from

the inside. I held my ears to make it stop, but it didn't matter. She was inside my brain. Pain drilled through me there and something dripped down my face from my eyes. I closed them tight.

Then she stopped.

When I opened them again, either her house had changed or we had transported, but we were inside of a ship. The walls were gray and covered in finger-sized panels.

She said, “ Enlightenment , show us Text 8:62.” Then, she tossed me a piece of fabric. “Wipe the blood from your face, Jac. It's unseemly.”

I did and the ship's panels morphed together into one image of text. It was the Holy Script—a book I had only ever heard of and no one but conduits had read. I knew it in my bones as soon as I saw the image. There was no reason for her to be so secretive otherwise.

I read it aloud, “The contra will come in the guise of an ally. She shall be unlike the conduits of Orhon in stature and breeding yet filled by royal blood. Her ways will be strange, and you will know her by her essence. She will bring an end to the power of Orhon conduits, if she is not destroyed. Beware, my daughters.”

Royal blood? That's not Sarah. The fuck?

I needed some kind of confirmation. “What does this even mean?”

“Seems rather obvious to me.”

“They think some foreign conduit will come and destroy the power of the sisterhood?” I asked incredulously.

She flatly laughed and rolled her eyes. “Fucking conduits. Bunch of paranoid little girls. Good news for you, none of them like me since I left, so I don’t really care what they think of me talking to you about all of this. No, I take that back, talking to you will piss them off and that suits me just fine.”

“I’m glad to be of service, Omen. Any idea who their leader is these days?”

“No. It was Mother Portend, but from what I’ve heard, she’s holed up in the mountains, keeping away from all of it.”

“Damn,” I muttered beneath my breath before asking, “So, what does the text mean, according to the conduits?”

“They think the contra is some alien conduit who is coming to destroy them.” She shook her head in disgust. “They don’t realize that Justice Bateen was the contra. He murdered us and took our power—it’s right there in the text. But none of them think it was him, because of the pronouns.”

She laughed caustically. “As if we hadn’t spent years interpreting and reinterpreting the sacred texts, debating their true meanings and hidden mysteries...yet somehow, this section of text must be completely accurate, according to the sisterhood. According to them, the contra has to be a woman, so it couldn’t be Justice Bateen. They’re ridiculous!”

I frowned. “Is that why they’re trying to rebuild here on Halla? To strengthen themselves before a fight with the contra?”

“I guess that could be it. That, or they feel slighted because no one has paid them homage since they arrived here. Maybe both. I don’t know what they’re thinking anymore.”

The conversation felt like a dead end. “Where are we, anyway?” I wondered, glancing around.

“My home.”

“Your home is a ship?”

“Can you think of a faster way to get off of Halla?”

I shook my head. “If you leave Halla...wait, are you strong enough to leave Halla?”

She smirked. “I may have done it once or twice.”

“Damn, Omen, I had no idea.”

“Never underestimate a powerful woman, Jac.”

“I try not to. Why come back?”

She sighed. “I may be powerful, but even I have my limits. When you’re dead, Halla pulls at you when you leave. It’s the strangest sensation. Like when you try to separate magnets— you’re just drawn back here, until you’re born to the ether. Not physically, but mentally. I don’t know how else to describe it.”

“Hmm.” I felt the same way about getting back to Sarah and Deacon. “And your ship—when it’s your home, it’s an illusion?”

“Every conduit has her gifts.”

“Even some non-conduits do too, I’ve heard.” I didn’t mention the gifted Ladrians I knew.

She nodded once. "That's true. What are you fishing around for, Jac?"

"I need to know if you would use your illusions or anything else to attack the contra."

"Attack Justice Bateen?" She laughed. "If I get the chance, absolutely."

I wasn't sure if I should share what was on my mind, but I needed to know where her alliances were. "What if the contra wasn't Justice Bateen? What if the other conduits are right, and it's some alien conduit? Would you attack her?" I had to know, for Sarah's safety and wellbeing.

"That's an interesting question." She pondered it for a moment. "But I would not. If there is someone who can stop the conduits' reign of terror here, I would support that. Wholeheartedly. If you ever come across such a creature, let me know. I'll be first in line to follow her."

I tried to get a read on her, but Omen was too mysterious for me. "How can I know you're telling me the truth?"

"You can't. We're not friends."

"And if we were?"

"Can you ever really trust your friends, Jac?"

"I do."

"Fool."

I laughed. "Probably."

Then, she smiled. “Perhaps one day we can be friends, Jacaranda Cozz. I have shared a secret with you. I expect a secret in return.”

“As is the way of the sisterhood,” I mused. “I thought you had left them behind.”

“I left the sisterhood, but their ways are wise. Tell me a secret, or my knife takes another life.”

I nodded once. “Uh, okay. I’m allergic to cashews.”

She punched me in the chest. “Give me a real secret, or I give Halla another ghost. Yours.”

I rubbed my chest where it ached. “You can keep your knife in the holster, thanks. A real secret, then?”

“Make it a good one, worthy of the information I’ve given you.”

I thought fast and blurted the first thing that came to mind, “I came in my boss’ consort today.”

Her eyes lit up as she studied my face. Slowly, she smirked and said, “You’re not lying, are you?”

“No.”

“A worthy secret.” Then, she began to sing again.

I held my ears and closed my eyes faster this time, but still, blood dripped down my face. After we were back in her house, I wiped my face with the fabric she had given me before.

“You be careful fucking your boss’ consort, Jac,” she warned. “Someone who doesn’t like you would use it against you.”

“Do you plan to use it against me?”

“No.”

“Does that mean you like me, Omen?” I teased.

“I could be persuaded to hate you less. Probably. One day.”

I grinned at her. “I’m wearing you down.”

She chuckled and rolled her eyes at me. “Get out.”

I left Omen Ayext’s house-ship and rode back to Sovereign , hoping Silence’s whole birth thing would be over by the time I returned, but I doubted it. Ladrian labor could go on for days.

The ride back was long and full of unwanted thoughts. If the conduits believe Sarah is the contra, then they will never stop coming for her. To try to kill her.

I didn’t know how to stop over a hundred of the most highly trained, best educated Ladrians who ever existed. Outside of that, I didn’t know how to tell Sarah that they were going to hunt her down. I hoped Predict hadn’t told them anything before she had died, but I didn’t know for sure. And I really needed to know for sure.

When I pulled up to Valor’s property, everything seemed fine, which told me Predict probably hadn’t been able to send before her demise.

Wave was outside with Camp Deo. The pair came to me, and Wave said, “Silence

had her babies.”

“Babies?” I asked in shock. “Plural?”

“A girl and a boy,” Camp said happily.

“Did Silence survive the birth?”

Wave nodded. “She’s fine. Strong, actually. It is rare for a birth to be this fast.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Maternal deaths weren’t common, but not unheard-of, either. “Glad to hear it.”

“Want to come in and see them?” Camp asked.

“Uh—I’m good. Feel free to go in without me.”

She practically skipped into Valor’s house. Once over banwine, Camp had confessed she hated that she would never get to have her own babies. She adored them. But being an android made that impossible. I had pointed out that she could assemble one, but according to her, it wasn’t the same thing.

I asked the historian, “Why aren’t you in there, cooing over the babies?”

Wave raised an eyebrow at me, like she had smelled something unpleasant. “I recorded their birth data. That is the end of my responsibilities with them. Why aren’t you in there?”

“I’m not a baby person, either. Wanna go for a ride on the onworlder instead? I could use the respectability of a historian with me when I talk to some people.” I used my gauntlet driver to contact Kapok and Tiger for them to join us.

She sighed as she looked at my ride. “Sure. Why not? I wouldn’t mind a distraction.”

CHAPTER 17

Deacon

Father's bedroom on Halla was sparse compared to what he had on Orhon. Just a bed, some lamps, and a window, all in blues and grays to match the rest of his home. No décor. No style to speak of. The setting suns had dimmed the light coming through his window. Father had pulled me into his bedroom to speak privately.

"Take a seat," he gestured to his bed.

"What is it, Father?"

"Where do I begin?" He started to pace. "I have not seen you in over a month. You return, united to a human, and with my pregnant mistress. Jac, a man who is like a son to me, almost dies protecting your consort, and I had to kill a conduit who I have known her entire life to save him. Today has been long and draining, so tell me truth. What is happening?"

I flopped backward across his bed. It felt wonderful to lay flat and relax for a moment. I didn't want to move. I was so damned tired after everything. "It's all a part of my plan. With the exception of Predict—I hadn't seen that coming. Apparently, the conduits have grown paranoid after their murders, and in addition to building their authority here on Halla, they are afraid of some special conduit."

"They have been particularly on edge, as of late," father agreed. "Predict assured me we were not under any suspicions with them. She knew the Ladrangs are true to the

faith. That is why she had been around so much lately. To make sure none of the other conduits bothered me.”

“Was she going around to homes of other faithful ghosts?”

He thought for a moment, then nodded. “I believe so.”

Good. That means she most likely did not know about Sarah, and her being a conduit, before we arrived . “I don’t—”

“No. No more of your questions,” father interrupted impatiently. “Tell me why Predict is dead. What is this about a special conduit? What does your consort have to do with that?”

“Her name is Sarah—”

“Yes, I know that—”

“Hollinger,” I finished for him.

My father’s eyes widened in shock. “ That Sarah? The conduit?”

I nodded solemnly. “I found your notes on her and her family. I brought her here to help Silence and you raise your child— children , now—and help to manage the other ghosts. A living conduit can do what no dead conduit can.”

“You think she is the special conduit, don’t you?” he asked quietly.

“That would explain why Predict attacked her, would it not?” I replied in a wry tone.

“Predict was smart, measured. Careful. She was not the sort of person to make rash decisions.”

Father agreed. “It is the only thing that makes sense. But how would Predict have known?”

“I am not sure. Perhaps it is part of being a conduit—maybe they know each other on sight. All I know is, if Predict knew it, the others will, too, at some point. Jacaranda is trying to put together some kind of security for Sarah—”

“I will not allow harm to come to Sarah, Deacon,” my father vowed.

I smiled. “I thank you, but you are one man, and a ghost. One with new children. Sarah is supposed to be here to help you—not the other way around. You and Silence need to focus on your children. Sarah needs to focus on the ghosts. So I will take care of security.”

“Deacon, I am your father,” he huffed. “You will listen to me—”

I laughed angrily. “ You are the man who screwed over my entire family. I am doing what I can to keep our family together, despite all of that. You do not get to make demands of me anymore. That part of our relationship is over, Father. I respect you for what you have done in the past, but do not push me on this. We are doing this my way.”

My father stiffened at my tone. “You dare speak to me in this manner?”

“You took my future from me,” I hissed, fury lowering my voice.

His jaw tightened in anger. But then it loosened as he took a breath. “You are right, of course. I...my love for Silence is the greatest shame of my life. Yet, I feel none for it. Nothing could ever change my love for her. I regret taking your future, my son. For this, I apologize. I thank you for everything you have done for her and for our family.”

I nodded once, gratified. “You are welcome. Once security has been settled here on Halla, I will go back to Orhon and pretend like nothing has happened for a time. I had Sarah mog to meet the family—they know her as Star Qvia from Yesanol. When I come to visit here, I will tell them I am going to Yesanol to see her.”

“How is your mother doing?” my father asked.

“You are not watching the family?”

He glanced away. “The single time she prayed to me, she asked me not to watch the family.”

I blew out a deep breath. “That’s rough.”

“It is understandable. In her position. I deserve her disdain.” He glanced my way once more. “So, after you get back to Orhon, what then?”

“I am amassing a group of like-minded people to help me take down the Bateens.”

He closed his eyes in frustration. “Has everyone lost their minds? First Justice, then the conduits, and now my son.”

I had known he would hate my plan. But his disapproval did not change it. “I will not let your murder go unavenged, and I will not stand by and watch that maniac, Justice Bateen, go unchallenged.”

“You think I want that life for you?”

“What you want does not matter anymore.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “My plan is in motion—”

“Nothing you can’t undo—”

“Jac stole Silence from the royal prison on my orders,” I pointed out. “You think I can undo that? And I united with Sarah, a human . There is no going back. There is only going forward!”

He sat next me, and because of his ghostly form, the bed did not move. Father’s voice lowered. “You could stop now, could you not?”

“I have contacted some old friends from the war, Father. They want in. No one is happy on Orhon anymore. Only Bateen loyalists want them to stay in control. Now that Thunder runs Yesanol, they have made things worse for anyone who is not a loyalist. Another war is coming, and this time, I plan to be the one to declare it.”

“I do not want this for you, but I can see it in your eyes—you will not be dissuaded from this course of action.”

I shook my head adamantly. “No, I will not.”

He sighed in resignation. “Then, how can I help?”

“I need you to raise the twins as warriors here on Halla. I will need all the allies I can get. They will be the children of Silence, the people’s most favored princess. That will carry weight.”

My father’s brows furrowed skeptically. “It will be five years before they could be considered warriors of value, Deacon, you know this.”

“Not with Sarah’s help.”

He half-smiled, but there was a hopeful light in his eyes. “You think she can do it?”

“If she is the special conduit they are all afraid of, she most definitely can make that happen.”

“You believe in her that much?” my father asked quietly.

I nodded. “I do. She is unlike any other person I have ever known, Father.”

“Very well, then.” He smiled. “I am glad for you, son.”

My insides twisted, but I needed to tell him something else. “There is more. Sarah is not the only person with whom I am involved.”

He frowned. “But you are united to her.”

“Yes, but—”

“Son, do not make the same mistakes I did,” he said, looking anguished for the sins he’d committed, and the devastating aftermath of those choices.

“I am not. Sarah knows.”

He paused. “She has given you her permission to take on another lover?”

“She participates.”

“I am not sure I need to know more than that, son—”

“It’s Jac.”

His mouth dropped open in shock before he could catch it. “Are you—you two are—again? Like when you were young?”

I nodded. “We are. Sarah has welcomed him into our union.”

“That is a very traditional idea of a relationship,” he mused. “But then you are of a different generation and far more open minded about such things.”

“You’re not upset by this?” I asked, wanting to be sure.

“Are you happy, son?”

“As far as my relationships go, yes. I am ecstatic.”

He nodded. “Then I am happy for you. Not upset. Your happiness is what matters here. And, if I am to be honest with you, I may have a twinge of jealousy on the matter.”

“Why is that?”

“Your mother never would have given her permission for me and Silence to be together, and certainly never would have joined us.”

I smiled uncomfortably, trying to keep the image of the three of them together from my mind. “No, she wouldn’t have. And I am sorry she asked you to stay away from the family, Father.”

“Speaking of the family, I think we should go see everyone out there,” he said, indicating outside of his bedroom. “Come with me.”

I followed him through the house until we found Silence asleep with the twins on the guest bed. He reached for them instinctively but could not touch or pick his new children up.

The weight in my chest was crushing, but I pushed it aside, or I would cry for his plight. “I have them, Father.” I bent and picked up my new sister and brother, one on each arm. They were so warm, tiny heartbeats thundering in their little chests. It was a comfort to hold them.

“Why don’t you and Silence get some rest?” I suggested. “I’ll take them for a while.”

“You are a good son, Deacon. I could use the rest.” He laid next to Silence, but she didn’t seem to notice. Birth must have exhausted her, after everything else she has been through .

I took the children with me to the parlor, where I found Sarah chatting with Camp Deo. Briefly, I wondered where Lanai Dea was, since I had not seen her in so long. But I trusted my android would return soon.

Sarah smiled languidly when she saw me. “Hey, you.”

“Greetings. Would you like to take one of these? They are very warm, and I seem to be sweating just by holding them.”

She giggled and began to stand, but Camp Deo was on her feet first, arms out. “Oh, may I?”

“Sure.” I was surprised the android wanted to hold one. When she held the baby, there was such a strange look on her metallic face that I was almost worried. “Camp Deo, are you in need of repairs?”

“No, I’m fine,” she said softly, her eyes on the baby. “I don’t see babies often, Deacon. But I enjoy them.” She sat on the sofa with Sarah once more.

I joined them on the other side of Sarah, and she took turns smiling longingly at both

of the children and watching them. “You want him?” I asked her, indicating the baby in my arms.

“Okay,” she said, as she took my brother, then laughed as the bundle settled into her arms. “Heavier than he looks.”

Camp Deo said, “Ladrians have a considerably higher muscle mass ratio than humans. This includes the newborns.”

“Believe me, I’ve noticed,” Sarah said with a smile. She looked so natural with my brother—like she was made to be around babies.

“I’ve spoken to my father about us,” I said in a quiet voice. “And Jac.”

Her eyes went wide and a pink flush stole across her cheeks. “You told him about the three of us?” she squeaked.

“Yes, he—”

“I can’t believe you did that! I thought what we—” She stopped herself and looked to Camp Deo, before returning her gaze to mine and lowering her voice. “That is private.”

“Why would it be private?”

Her lashes fluttered rapidly in embarrassment. “Because it’s...it’s kinky.”

Smiling, I reached out and stroked a finger along her soft cheek. “For us, it is not. It is the old way.”

Confusion chased across her expression. “Huh?”

I explained, “Unions, in their original form, were meant to increase the population in ways that did not disrupt society. Often, they contained whole groups of Ladrians—this is how many of the classed families began, my own included. To have more than one partner is to be, as my father put it, old-fashioned.”

She rapidly blinked, seemingly unsure of what to say, at first. “We’re old-fashioned , by including Jac into our union?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Which brings me to my next question,” I said, shifting my gaze to the little one cuddled in so naturally in her arms. “When do you want to have babies?”

She laughed. “I have no idea. I know you said there are other humans on Orhon, so would we have to go back to Earth to get sperm, or would we make some kind of a deal with a human here? I’m not sure how all that would work.”

I frowned at her. “Why would we use human sperm?”

“Because...we’re two different species, Deacon. Different species can’t make babies together.” She looked at me as though I was the confused one.

“You...” I tried to sort out how to tell her the truth. “You do not know, do you?”

“Know what?”

“Give my brother to Camp Deo. We need to talk.”

“Those are four words no woman likes to hear, Deacon.”

I acknowledged her statement with a nod. “That may be truth, but we do need to speak about this, and I may be saying many more words you do not want to hear soon, so give my brother to her.”

Sarah looked at me warily, then passed the baby to the android.

“Come with me.” I took her hand and led her outside into the night. The fresh air helped to clear my head for what was to come, but I was also very aware of how alone we were. “Where are the others?”

“On the ships, I think. Why?”

“Good. I want privacy for this.”

“For what?” She shifted anxiously. “You’re making me nervous, Deacon.”

I sighed. “I do not mean to. It is only that this is important.”

“Then tell me already,” she insisted.

I exhaled a deep breath. “If you believe that we could not have children together, then that tells me you do not know who you are.”

She frowned in the soft moonlight. “What are you talking about?”

I struggled to figure out a way into the conversation. “Your power as a conduit...where do you think you get that from?”

She thought for a moment, seemingly struggling with the answer to the question. “I—umm, I honestly don’t know.”

“What did your mother tell you about your father?” I prompted.

She huffed. “She would never talk about him. Our mother told us he was the love of her life, but it was too painful to speak about him.” Then, she frowned. “Why? Do you think that’s where I got the power to see ghosts?”

“I know it is,” I said with absolute certainty. “You have that power, because members of your father’s family have that power.”

“You know who my father is?” Her voice was small and wondrous.

Everything in me felt loose and unstable, as if I were the one getting bad news, instead of the one delivering it. “Your father is Volatile Bateen. Justice’s brother.”

She gasped in horror, and both her hands covered her mouth as she whispered, “What ?”

This time, I knew she had heard me and understood what it meant, but she still asked what, as though she had not. It was a peculiar reflex of my consort. Instead of repeating myself this time or asking why she tended to doubt me, I merely nodded. I wanted to give her the space and time she needed to process the information.

“How...how is that even possible?” she asked in shock.

“I...” Does she really mean how? “You are well-versed in the how of this, Sarah. Your talent for sex—”

“No, how did they meet ?” she interrupted me.

“It is unclear,” I admitted. “But Volatile often travelled to Earth for many years—he was a merchant before the war. After the war, he has lived alone on an island in the

Diamond Sea of Orhon.”

“My father is alive? And he never came to see me or my sisters?” She sounded sad and angry. “Not even after our mother died?”

“I cannot speak for him, Sarah. I know not his reasons.”

She stepped forward, and I thought she might strike me in fury. It is fine, I can take it. Whatever she needs to do right now to deal with this new information. But she hurled her arms around me and buried her face against my abdomen, instead. She sobbed against me, so I gently held her. I cradled her to me and petted her soft hair. She seemed so exhausted by everything, and I knew I was, too.

After a while, she sniffled and looked up at me, her wet eyes so luminous in the moonlight. “That makes me half-Ladrian, doesn’t it?”

I nodded and brushed an errant strand of hair away from her face. “This is why you can use a transmogrifier belt. Pure humans cannot, though we have been working on that technology.”

“Why...why don’t my sisters see ghosts too?”

“I do not know,” I replied honestly. “Being a conduit is a rare gift, even among pure Ladrians. But Volatile’s sister Constance had it. She was beloved by all, much the way Silence is now. Until the day Constance was murdered, she was a wonderful—”

Sarah gasped. “She was murdered?”

I set out to explain the situation. “Her murder was perpetrated by Justice and blamed on a general. The general was executed, his body burned here on Halla, and his ghost was murdered by another right after it emerged from his body, so that he would be

born to the ether, taking Justice's secret with him."

"The fuck?"

"What can I say?" I sighed. "Justice is thorough."

CHAPTER 18

Sarah

“How do you know all of this?” I asked Deacon, still trying to make sense of everything he’d just dropped on me.

“I have pieced it together from many stories of other people and I have not shared this suspicion with anyone but you. Constance’s gift as a conduit played a large role in why she was so well-respected, so when we went to war, Justice used it as an opportunity to get rid of all the conduits. He blamed them for not warning us of the impending war. He argued they should have seen it coming and since they did not warn us, they were treasonous and he had them executed. He declared the old faith was treason, as well.”

I listened to Deacon and tried to keep my shit together but felt like I was falling apart. My father, whom I’ve never known, was an alien. I was half-Ladrian and a conduit that had the ability to communicate with ghosts. And Justice Bateen, my fucking uncle, sounded like a complete lunatic and asshole.

“Deacon...this is a lot for me to handle right now...I don’t think I’m doing a very good job of it. I miss my pills,” I said, wondering if this was all just another wild hallucination. It certainly felt like one.

“You mean those drugs that had Ode Hrimp so worried about you?” he asked.

I nodded and sat on the ground. “I have no idea how to handle any of this

information.” Or really, if any of it was actually real.

He sat next to me and pulled me against his warm body and I automatically cuddled close to him. “You have done well, Sarah. You have had a lot of new things come to you in a very short span of time. I think it is time for sleep.”

But I was too wired for that, and my mind whirled with a dozen different questions. “I don’t think I could sleep if I tried, Deacon. Why don’t I look half-Ladrian? Why don’t my sisters?”

“Our bodies do not mix that way,” he said, stroking a hand along my arm. “You either look like one or the other. Most often, the offspring will take after the mother.”

Mom . I huffed a big breath, trying not to cry. In the years since her death, I had wanted to speak to her several times, but none so desperately as right now, discovering I was half-Ladrian. “I wish I could talk to her. Ask her about Volatile and everything else. It’s cruel to find this out now, when she’s dead and gone and I can’t ask her questions about what happened.”

“You have not seen her ghost?” Deacon asked, sounding surprised.

“No.” I sniffled and shook my head. “I’ve tried, but it’s not like I have any control over what I see.”

He gave me a gentle squeeze. “Actually...there might be a way.”

Hope rippled through me. “How?”

“Just a moment—I need to ask my father something.”

He went into the house, while I sat under the stars. Without any light pollution, I saw

them all. It was a beautiful night, in spite of the circumstances.

I'm half-Ladrian. I'm a conduit. Is any of this real?

My fingers tugged at the grass beneath me. It felt real. All of it. Everything since I had looked out the window at Ryan's and had seen Jac lurking along the tree line had felt real. The ghosts are not hallucinations. Every bit of this is real.

Once that thought hit me and really sank in, somehow everything felt easier.

For years, I had wanted the ghosts to be hallucinations. If it was just me that was crazy, then ghosts weren't real, and the afterlife was a peaceful place. Better to have one crazy woman, rather than countless ghosts who wandered the world and could not speak to their loved ones. It seemed cruel, like a ghost's afterlife was some sort of sick joke. So, for a long time, I had wanted to be crazy.

But accepting the truth made my internal struggle quiet down. It was as though I could breathe fully. Finally.

It was real and it was true.

A flock of birds flew overhead, blotting out the moons for a minute. I watched as they soared together, on a mission going somewhere fast. Strange—I don't really see birds fly like that at night back home. Then, they started to circle over the house. They were large birds and squawked loudly at one another. One landed on the roof of the house. It stared at me, and in the night's light, I studied it.

Silvery feathers reflected the starlight, making the bird glitter. Its beak was long and pointed, but dark. But it was the eyes that took my breath away. They were missing. Just two hollow spots where eyes should have been.

What the fuck?

More birds landed on the roof, all of them staring at me with their absent eyes. One hopped off the roof and onto the lawn, just a few feet from me. I almost jumped away, but I held still instead. It was taller than it had looked before—taller than me sitting on the ground. I should get to my feet . But my body would not listen.

Its head bobbed side to side, as it came closer. It was then that I saw the feet were not what I had expected. They were much larger and had talons the size of my hands. I held my breath as its head dipped toward my foot. But instead of taking a bite, it poked my shoe with its beak. Not hard—it was like it wanted to touch me, not hurt me. Then it stood up to stare at me with those black holes, his head tilted to the side.

Does it want me to touch him?

Tentatively, I reached out for the odd bird with my foot and tapped its talon with my shoe.

The bird walked next to my leg and poked my thigh, a light peck as if to say hello .

So, I reached out with my hand this time and touched its long, scaly leg, trying not to be too weirded out by its missing eyes.

Abruptly, the bird hopped onto my lap, startling me, but cozied up to me there, like I was a nest. It gently poked my leg with its beak again, so I petted his soft feathers. The bird made a cooing sound like a dove, seeming to be content with this arrangement.

More birds came to me from the roof and sat in a line on my left and right, with me in the middle. I had no idea what to do, but I petted the one on my lap and the ones next to me, as they poked each other, lovingly.

I'm the Jane Goodall of alien birds. What the fuck.

When Deacon returned, he froze when he saw my situation. His voice was tense when he asked, "Sarah, are you unhurt?"

I smiled at his formal choice of words. "I'm fine. I think these birds think I'm one of their own or something."

Very softly, he said, "Remove the jem'hora from your lap."

"Okay." I assumed he meant the bird, so I gently scooped my hands beneath it, and lifted it onto the ground next to me. The little guy looked perturbed but accepted my choice and sat there. "Now what?"

"Slowly stand up and come over here to me."

I did as he told me. "What's wrong?"

"Camp Deo," he said, raising his voice a bit so that his words traveled into the house, "there is a flock of jem'hora here."

"What?" The android sounded panicked and rushed outside to join us. "Cover your ears."

I stared at the android in confusion. "Huh?"

Deacon covered his, so I did the same.

Camp emitted a sound like a cross between a screech and a siren. It was deafening, even with my hands pressed against my ears. The flock of jem'hora squawked back at her, before they took off and disappeared into the night.

Once they were gone, she stopped making that noise, and asked, “Is anyone hurt?”

“No, we’re good, Camp Deo,” Deacon said.

“What is going on?” I asked, having no clue what had them both so fearful. “Do they carry some kind of disease or something?”

The pair looked at each other in astonishment. Then Deacon explained, “Jem’hora are fearsome predators. They are drawn to newborn Ladrians and will fight and kill adult Ladrians to get to them. It is likely they caught the scent of the twins—I do not understand why they did not attack you.”

“Maybe they don’t like the taste of humans?” I shrugged.

“You’re right—they don’t,” Camp said. “But they are known to kill humans for sport and leave the carcass behind.”

My blood ran cold. “Oh.”

“They are why Ladrians who come to Halla nearly always have an android with them,” she went on to explain. “We are one of the best defenses against the jem’hora. Fighting them is difficult—there always seem to be more. Chasing them away is the best strategy, so more do not come.”

“Well. That’s...bracing.”

“Did you feed them?” she asked curiously.

“No.” I shook my head. “One came right up to me, checked me out, and sat on my lap. Before I knew it, I was the middle of a line of them. I don’t know why.”

“Thank you for chasing them away,” Deacon said to Camp Deo as he took my hand in his, “but if you’ll excuse us, we have somewhere we need to be.”

Camp nodded. “Of course.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you for saving me,” I said as Deacon started pulling me toward the Allegiant. “Why are we suddenly rushing?” I asked him.

“Now that the jem’hora are gone, there is no need to waste any more time. We are going to the temple.”

“The temple? Should we call Drift to fly—”

“I can fly my own ship,” he said, sounding a little miffed as we entered the cockpit.

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

“I can do some things myself.” He still sounded annoyed.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Deacon.”

He huffed, then calmed down. “I know. It is only that, being classed, many unclassed assume we are helpless.” He flipped some switches, then placed his hands onto the touchpad thingie I had seen Drift operate. “Take a seat.”

I sat next to him and watched as we soared into the air, just above the treetops. Truthfully, Halla was beautiful at night. Very few artificial lights meant the trees were bathed in pure moonlight. Every once in a while, one of those silver roofs shimmered between the trees.

“So, I’m unclassed, right?” I asked him curiously.

He laughed, then said in a proud tone, “You are unofficial royalty, consort.”

Royalty, hmm . “That’s classed?” I asked, trying to understand.

“It is like a triangle. Royals are the top point. The next level is classed. The widest level is unclassed. But all of the parts are important—it is how Ladrian society has functioned for many generations.”

I process that for a moment. “Oh. So, in Ladrian society, I am more important than you?” My voice cracked because of how uncomfortable I was with the idea.

He smirked, confirming my question. “This disturbs you, yes?”

I shifted in my seat. “It’s definitely a strange idea for me.”

“Quite honestly, with your bloodline, you would need to be legitimized through acknowledgement by an elder Bateen, before anyone else would officially declare you a royal,” Deacon said, pressing a button on the console before meeting my gaze again. “Being a royal conduit is a special thing, but it would put a target on your back, so I am in no hurry for any of them to know you exist.”

My head dug back into the headrest and I pressed my fingers to my forehead. “I do not understand any of this.”

“I had hoped it would be obvious to you by now, that you have Ladrian blood.” He sounded genuinely contrite. “I am sorry I did not tell you about your father before—I was not sure how to bring it up.”

“No, that part I understand, actually.” I watched his handsome face smile in the moonlight. “I have no idea how I would have broken the news to you about something like that, either.”

“Then what is it that you do not understand?”

“What I don’t understand is, in the middle of all of this chaos, why are we going to temple?”

“Because conduit temples are holy sites.”

I frowned, still not comprehending. “You said that like it explains something obvious.”

He chuckled. “I suspect your questions will be better answered when we are there.”

“Okay.” I stared ahead into the darkness.

Before long, a clearing parted the trees. It was on a hill with all the bushes cut away. On the top of the hill sat a tall cylindrical building. The whole building was dark, like it was painted black. Deacon landed Allegiant next to the building.

“This is the temple,” he announced.

“It looks so desolate,” I whispered, taking it all in. “I would have thought the temple would be prettier. Flowers or landscaping or something. The rest of the planet is so lush—”

“Conduits need space to work.”

I followed him out and the air smelled differently than by Valor’s house. “It smells like spices here. Almost like Christmas.”

He nodded. “It will get stronger inside.”

The doorway was larger than I had expected—much larger than needed for a Ladrian, too. He was right about the smell. It was like inhaling heavily spiced chai inside. As we passed through the doorway, the building opened wide.

It was a rectangular room, with a stone altar in the middle. They could have parked several school buses inside, the interior was so large. The interior was heavy gray stone. A square of stone was missing from above the altar, letting the moonlight shine down on it. The floor was sunken, and steps framed the entire floor. Furs lined most of the floor and steps, but a wide strip was bare stone to leave a clear path to the altar.

Deacon helped me down to the floor—the steps were too tall for me to just step down on my own. Once on the main floor, I said, “I thought altars were supposed to be in front of the congregation at a church, not in the middle.”

“We are not in a church, and we do not often congregate together at designated times in temples. When the faith was more popular, people came at any time. Conduits were always around to help connect people with their loved ones. Now...” he sighed and looked around, “temples are usually empty.”

“So, why are we here?”

“You want to speak to your mother,” he said with a smile. “I do not know precisely how the conduits’ gift works, but when they call the ghosts, they place their hands on the altar there. Since you are a conduit, I’m hoping you will be able to summon your mother’s ghost and be able to speak to her.”

Hope tightened in my chest. “Really? You think I have the power to do that?”

He chuckled. “There is only one way to know.”

Inhaling a deep breath, I approached the altar, with Deacon close by. It looked to be

stone like the rest of the building, but the top of it was covered in a thick black liquid.

“They just put their hands here?” I asked skeptically.

He nodded. “That’s all it looks like to us. I do not know more.”

“Too bad Predict decided to attack me,” I said, only half-joking. “I could have used a conduit friend who knows how this works.”

“Did she look strange to you?” Deacon asked as I continued to contemplate this mysterious looking altar.

“No stranger than any other Ladrian. Why?”

He shook his head. “I have been trying to figure out how she knew you were a conduit.”

“I’m not sure.” I stared at the black liquid, not really listening to Deacon any longer because my nerves were starting to get the best of me. “I don’t know about this. If I touch this black stuff and something seems wrong, pull me from it, okay?”

“Yes, of course.”

My heart jumped into my throat as I placed my hands into the liquid. It was cold and as soon as I touched it, a chill shot through me, making my bones ache. My hands were sucked into the liquid over my wrists, but no further.

“Should I pull?” Deacon asked immediately.

“Not yet.” There was nothing hurting me in the liquid—only the chill—so I figured it was okay for the time being. “And now, I just wait?”

“I don’t know. Think of your mother, perhaps?”

As soon as I closed my eyes and imagined her presence, I smelled her hair. She used a cheap vanilla shampoo that smelled more like cookies than actual vanilla. I could see her in my mind. Her brown hair. The way she smiled. Tears trickled down my face, but I didn’t open my eyes. I felt like she was there with me. Her presence was palpable.

Then, I heard her voice. “Sarah?”

I opened my eyes and there she was, right in front of me. Translucent, but my mother, nonetheless. My voice broke. “Mom?”

“Oh my gosh.” Her face radiated happiness as she stepped forward and tried to hug me. And failed. Just like Deacon’s own father hadn’t been able to embrace him. “Sarah...what are you doing here?”

I ignored the pain in my heart and swallowed back the lump in my throat. “I don’t know if I have time to explain, but Mom, what the hell?”

Then, she saw Deacon in his alien form and her gaze narrowed on him. “Oh. They’ve contacted you.”

“This is Deacon Ladrang,” I said, introducing him. “We are united, do you know—”

“You got married?” Her voice rose in shock. “To a Ladrian?”

“Mom, focus! I don’t know if I can maintain the connection. Why didn’t you tell us... anything about our father, Volatile Bateen?”

She shifted her gaze back to me. “I didn’t tell you about Vol because he begged me

not to. He knew it would put all of us in danger, because of his powerful family. He didn't trust his brother, Justice, not to come after us."

"That lines up." I sighed. "But seriously, nothing ? Ever? I grew up thinking my dad hated us."

"I'm sorry, my dear," she said softly, sadly. "Are you safe? Are you happy? Did you want to unite with Deacon?"

She shot Deacon another reproving look.

"I'm good, Mom. I promise. God, I have so many questions," I said, and they started to spill out of me. "What's the afterlife like? Have you seen Nana and Pop? Are you bored? What do you do all day?"

She laughed. "You were always the curious one."

"Where do you spend all your time, Mom?"

"It's hard to explain," she began, as a serene look passed over her features. "But most of the time, I'm with old friends and some of our family. Sometimes, I can check in on you girls, especially when you think about me. I always feel where you are, or at least I did, until a few weeks ago. I was worried for you. Where is this place?" She glanced around the temple.

"We're on Halla—"

"Oh my gosh, really?" My mother's eyes widened as she took in the scenery. "I've never been to Halla before. Vol always said it was beautiful here, but this just looks like a fancy cave."

“We’re inside a conduit temple,” I explained. “That’s how I’m able to contact you.”

My mother’s lips pursed with worry. “You stay away from those women, Sarah. Those conduits are dangerous.”

Deacon stepped closer to my side. “How do you know about that?”

“The dead talk. Conduits, mediums, witches, whatever you want to call them, they are important to us. Without them, we haven’t been able to contact our loved ones the ways we used to.”

Something in my arms weakened, and my mother’s apparition started to fade. “I think I’m losing our connection, Mom. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too, Sarah.”

I swallowed back the emotion clogging my throat. “Is it okay if I call on you like this again?”

“Anytime you want, my dear.” Her ghost-like image flickered, then vanished.

Tears flowed down my face as I glanced at Deacon. “Why can’t she stay here on Halla, like the other ghosts do?”

“I do not know, but I have heard it is hard for ghosts to go from planet to planet, and if she passed on Earth, then Halla would not be a normal resting place for her.”

I pulled my hands from the black liquid, and they were surprisingly dry. I wiped my tears away, but soon Deacon took me in his arms. I let him hold me as I cried. But while we stood there, my sadness faded fast and it was replaced with gratitude.

I looked up at him and said, “Thank you.”

He tipped his head to the side. “What are you thanking me for, Sarah?”

“I haven’t spoken to my mother in years, Deacon,” I said, blinking back a wave of fresh tears. “I am extremely grateful for this gift you’ve given me. I thought I would never see her again.”

He smiled. “It was nothing.”

I fisted my hands in his shirt and used his uniform to pull him down to my mouth for a kiss. “It was everything to me.”

“I am happy to help you—”

I kissed him again, deeper this time, and he held me tighter. I couldn’t get enough of him. My body throbbed and ached, and I was wet before I had another thought. I tore at his clothes until I found his warm, firm skin. He stripped me down too, and soon we were both naked in the temple.

I wasn’t sure if it was the gratitude or something in the temple, but I needed Deacon inside of me. I grabbed the top of his shoulders and he lifted me up, then lowered me onto his stiff cock. I was sore from everything that had happened with him and Jac earlier that day, but nothing could have held me back from being with Deacon now. I wrapped my legs around him and groaned as he entered me, then began lifting me up and down his length, burying himself as deeply as my body would allow.

I needed him and he seemed to need me, too. Am I falling for him? Is that what this is?

I didn’t know anything about love—I had come close in my past, but even then, it

didn't feel like this intense, overwhelming need I was experiencing right now with Deacon. I rolled my body on him, while he supported my weight. Our desperate sounds filled the temple. Deacon bit my shoulder and held me still, while he pumped up into me, grunting with pleasure.

Every stroke drove me higher. I dug my nails into his neck—I needed something to hold onto when I came. The intensity of my orgasm tore through me, wrenching a gasping moan from my soul. My back muscles locked, and my head tossed back. He bit my throat as he came, too. He growled my name through his teeth, and the vibration felt like another orgasm in my skin there.

When the blissful sensations gradually ebbed, Deacon gently set me onto a fur on the floor. He gathered a few more for both cleaning me up and for covering us. After we were settled, I nuzzled onto his chest and fell asleep, exhausted to my ghost.

CHAPTER 19

Jacaranda

The ride out to Mother Portend's mountain cabin was long and annoying, mainly because of my passenger.

Wave shouted over the onworlder, "Can we stop again?"

"You wanted to come, remember?" I shouted back.

"I didn't know it would take this long," she grumbled.

Right then, the trees opened up to a clearing and a cabin, so I slowed down to a stop. My battered body was grateful for the reprieve. Being crouched forward on a bumpy path for over an hour with my arms outstretched to hold the handlebars had irritated the deeper parts of my healing chest wound.

The sharp pains dulled when I sat up and stretched. "Seems like we're here."

"Thank the gods," she mumbled as she wobbled off the vehicle and walked into the forest.

"Where are you going?" I asked her retreating back.

"I have to pee again," she replied in a snarky tone. "Is that okay with you?"

I rolled my eyes and checked my gauntlet driver to see where Kapok and Tiger were. But the readout didn't work. I smacked it a couple of times, but still, I got nothing. Then I saw Kapok and Tiger ride up on the proper onworlder we borrowed from Allegiant .

Once they reached me, Kapok brought the onworlder to a stop and asked, "You think this is the place?"

"It's the only cabin on the nearest mountain," I said, glancing around. "I'd say it's a good guess."

A green light came on inside the cabin.

"That's weird," Tiger said, pointing to it.

"I don't know. Maybe Mother Portend likes colored light." I shrugged and headed for the cabin.

Kapok and Tiger came with me to the door. I knocked and while we waited for a response, Kapok asked, "And we're here because you think the conduits are going to come after—"

I silenced him with a sharp look. "I just want information."

"Then why are we here?" Tiger asked.

"The better to threaten her for information."

The door slid open, and an old ghost stood there. She was faded from time, but still present. Long gray robes covered her all the way to the floor. The kind of robes conduits wore for battle. I wondered if she was always dressed in her old war

uniform, or if we were special.

Her wizened face formed a smirk as she flirted, “Three handsome boys at my door in the middle of the night. How could I get so lucky?”

“Good evening,” I said, ignoring her comment and getting right to business. “Are you Mother Portend?”

“That depends. Are you here to kill her?”

“Unlikely,” I said.

“But not a denial?” She laughed hard. “Come in, boys. Yes, I am Mother Portend.”

We walked into her cabin, and I hoped it was not like Omen’s. I didn’t want to be stuck inside another ship. It was dumb luck that Omen hadn’t decided to escalate the situation—if she had, I would have been screwed. I looked around but had no idea how to spot an illusion. More than that, conduit powers varied widely, so there was no reason to suspect her of such a tactic. But the faded old lady didn’t hesitate to let us into her home, which meant she was not afraid of us.

“How are things all the way up here?” I asked her. “You like staying away from everyone else?”

“Who are you?” she asked, eyeing me cautiously.

“Jacaranda Cozz.”

Her brows raised. “You’re Wishful’s son?”

“You know my mother?” I replied in surprise.

She smirked. “We’ve spoken. And you boys?”

“Kapok and Tiger Orne,” I answered, introducing them both. “Why are you up here in the mountains all alone?”

“I like the quiet,” she said, her reply vague. “What brings you boys here?”

“Sightseeing,” Kapok lied.

She smiled up at him. “Not much to see here. Just a dead old lady on the top of a mountain, so unless you have a very specific fetish, there’s really no reason for you to be here.”

“I’m game, if you are,” he said with a wink.

“Oh, I like this one,” she said, her cackling laughter echoing in the room. “He has spirit.”

“I like him too, that’s why he works for me,” I replied, then directed the conversation back to business. “Tell me why the conduits have lost their minds, Mother Portend.”

“Getting murdered tends to put people in a bad mood,” she said flippantly. “You’ll find out one day.”

“Your mood seems just fine.”

Another smile. “I don’t let much get me down.”

Tiger said, “You were in charge of the conduits, right?”

“Yes, boy. Why do you ask?”

“They were your responsibility, and you’ve let them run wild here on Halla,” he said, an edge of hostility in his voice. “The violence here is your fault, isn’t it?”

Fuck. Why did he have to come out swinging?

She stepped up to him and roughly grabbed his cock over his uniform, making Tiger grunt in pain. “So this is why you think you can talk to me like that? Like I’m some sort of helpless old woman you can sass, boy?”

“Please—” Tiger’s voice was hoarse.

“Let him go,” Kapok shouted and lunged for her.

But she held her other hand up and he froze in midair. Her eyes never left Tiger’s though. “I am no one to be trifled with. You come to my home, running off at the mouth like this at me? Me ?”

I tried to come up behind her, but she stomped the floor and it opened beneath me. I fell several meters into a narrow pit, crunching into a pile of bones. Some of the bones were stripped of their flesh. Some weren’t.

I dug my hands and feet into the sides for purchase and started to climb my way back up. The mostly healed wound in my heart stabbed at me as a reminder that I was supposed to be taking it easy. I ignored it as best I could, but halfway up, my arm seized up and I dropped back down. Fuck.

The crone peeked over the edge and laughed manically. “Do you think you can get out of my pit, boy? Better men than you have tried. Just sit tight. I’ll be back soon.” Then, she vanished from view.

Oh, fuck this shit . I grabbed two long bones from some of her corpses and used them

to anchor into the dirt walls on my way back up. Searing pain shot through me, but I had expected it and forged on this time. When I reached the top, the cabin was empty, and the door was open. Everyone was outside.

I spied around the edge of the doorframe, so no one saw me. Kapok and Tiger were on their knees in the middle of a circle made of dead conduit ghosts. Mother Portend stood behind the Orne cousins. “These boys came to my home and accused me of letting you lot run wild,” she said to the ghosts. “They seem to think you are not operating under my orders. Are any of you under that impression?”

The dead conduits shook their heads. One said, “None of us have disobeyed you, Mother.”

“Someone thinks you are operating on your own,” she said, then regarded Kapok and Tiger again. “Boys, who told you I was here by myself? The first one who speaks lives.”

“We were just following our boss’ orders,” Tiger answered quickly. “You would have to ask him.”

“We don’t know anything,” Kapok said.

“The youngster is smarter than you. It’s a shame. You had spirit.” Mother Portend rammed a bone knife through Kapok’s heart from behind. It pierced through the front of his chest and he made a gurgling sound as blood poured out of him.

I slapped a hand over my mouth to stop from shouting as Kapok collapsed to the ground, his body lifeless, but I heard a scream anyway. It wasn’t Tiger, either—he had passed out.

Wave. Shit.

She had walked up just as Kapok was murdered. The crone held her hand up and Wave was dragged into the middle of the circle by her throat. Wave's eyes were huge and filled with fear, as they ought to be considering what this ghost was capable of.

Mother Portend said, "You with them?"

"Sss," Wave hissed around being strangled.

"Good." She dropped her to the ground next to Kapok's body. "Your friend is dead. The youngster hasn't the stomach for this kind of thing, and your other friend is in the hole inside my cabin. Would you care to join any of them?"

Wave shook her head frantically. "No, ma'am."

"Finally, some reverence," Mother Portend said, sounding pleased with Wave's acquiescence. "Tell me, girl, why are you running with such terrible men?"

"I don't have a lot of options," she croaked out. "I'm just a historian."

"For what family?" Mother Portend demanded to know.

"The Ladrangs."

Fuck. Why did she have to tell the truth?

Mother Portend paused at that bit of information. "Employments end when your employer dies, so Valor didn't send you since his own brother beheaded him. Who then?"

Wave swallowed hard. "I...I work for Deacon."

The crone's eyes narrowed on Wave. "Why is he poking around my planet?"

"I don't know." Wave visibly shook in fear. "I was bored at Valor's house and went for a ride with Jac. That's all I know."

"Deacon came to visit his father?"

Shut your mouth, Wave. Do not mention Sarah, Silence, or the twins.

"Last I heard, Deacon was yelling at his dad about Silence Bateen."

The crone chuckled. "Can't say I blame him there, considering Valor's betrayal. Is Deacon fond of the men with you?"

She nodded jerkily. "I believe so."

Mother Portend tapped her chin thoughtfully. "And what of the conduit he brought with him?"

My heart dropped to my feet, panic clutching at my chest. Keep your fucking mouth shut, Wave .

"All the conduits are dead," she said, confused.

She doesn't know. Thank the gods.

The crone stared at her, then one of the conduits near her nodded. Mother Portend said, "Oh, that's what you really think. How interesting. I want you to get a message to your boss, Deacon. Tell him that he can have his men back in exchange for his conduit. He has until the suns go up."

Wave shook her head. “He doesn’t have a conduit—they’re all dead—”

“Are you telling me my business girl?” Mother Portend snapped.

“No,” Wave said quickly.

“Then go.” The crone waved an impatient hand in the air. “You have only a few hours for him to return with my conduit.”

Wave stepped backward, then turned around and ran to Allegiant’s onworlder and left. Once she was no longer visible, Mother Portend ordered some of the dead conduits to follow her.

Then she told the others, “Put the boy and the body in the pit with the other one. We have work to do.”

Another conduit used her power to levitate Tiger and Kapok in front of her as they came back to the cabin.

Fuck. I was outnumbered, outgunned, and a man down. I can try to fight my way out, but I’ll die, and she will still try to trade Tiger for Sarah . The two bones in my hands were not sharp enough to work as knives. I hated yielding to Kapok’s murderer. But I was out of options.

I ran back to the pit and tried to climb down but falling was faster and better for my healing chest wound. I landed with my knees bent, which didn’t make the landing much easier, but at least I didn’t blow out my legs.

Mother Portend looked down into the gaping hole and taunted me from the opening. “You look lonely, Cozz. Don’t worry. I brought your friends.” Then she added, “One of them wasn’t good at telling me what I needed to know. Sorry.”

Kapok was dropped in first. His body fell on top of me.

“Fuck you, Portend!”

She cackled. “Be nice, or the youngster will have one more thing in common with his cousin.” Then she dropped Tiger in, too.

Thankfully, Tiger wasn’t stabbed. The floor above us closed up and we were left in the dank, dirty dark. It was then that I heard Tiger’s whimpers. “She killed him, Jac.”

“You’re awake?”

He sniffled. “She thought I was weak, so I pretended to pass out. I figured she wouldn’t kill me if she thought I was useless.”

“That was smart, Tiger,” I said, knowing the guilt was eating up the other man inside. “You did good.”

“I didn’t save Kapok,” he rasped.

“Neither did I—”

“You couldn’t,” he said angrily. “You were here.”

“I was at the doorway,” I confessed. “I saw it all go down. I—”

He shoved me against the wall. “You should have saved him!”

“I never would have stood a chance,” I yelled back, trying to make him see reason. “Neither would you. We both did the smart thing.”

“A lot of good it did,” he huffed and released me.

“We can’t take on an army of conduit ghosts on our own, Tiger.”

“But Kapok said you could take anyone ,” he countered.

I sighed wearily. “Since I’ve gotten to Halla, I’ve gotten stabbed by one conduit and almost died. I was abducted by another one and tossed around like ragdoll by the oldest conduit I have ever met. If you haven’t noticed, muscle and fighting skills are not what it’s going to take to survive this. I don’t know if being dead makes the conduits faster or if it’s that they have nothing left to lose...I don’t know anything about them anymore. But what I do know is, we have to fight smarter.”

I heard Tiger do something in the dark. “My gauntlet driver won’t work. Yours?”

“Mine stopped working the moment we got here.”

The bones shifted around me, knocking into each other as Tiger dug around. “I can’t get Kapok’s to work, either. I could try to wire them together, amplify their callouts—”

“I don’t think it’s the drivers,” I told him. “It’s the conduits’ gifts. I’ve heard of conduits who can deaden electronics.” Truth was, I didn’t want to contact anyone even if we could. If they knew we were alive, then they would try to save us and they would end up dead, too.

“Fine. It’s not like I could do it in the dark, anyway.”

He sounded so defeated. I wished I could have offered him some kind of comfort, but I had nothing left to give.

Tiger kicked the bones. “Fight smarter, huh? Seems smart to me to start making knives. You?”

It was useless—there was no way we could fight our way out. But the kid needed something to do. And a knife will make it easier to do what I have to do.

“Yeah, let’s do it. We can use the flat rocks in the walls to grind the bones to sharp points. Feel around until you find something like that. I’ll try over here.” I reached around in the dark and kept finding Kapok’s lifeless body.

I will make my knife as sharp as possible, so it cannot be felt. I don’t want Tiger to suffer, and it will be easier to cut my own throat with a sharp blade. I won’t let us be traded for Sarah .

I found a femur and a flat rock and began to hone.

CHAPTER 20

Deacon

A siren abruptly woke me in the conduit temple. I gave Sarah a few nudges. “Up, up, up!”

She lifted her head and glanced around groggily. “What—what’s that sound?”

“Allegiant’s siren. Get dressed, we have to go now !” We threw on our clothes and while we ran to the ship, I hit the comm and shouted, “Allegiant responding, go ahead!”

“Deacon, is that you?” Silence asked, her voice breaking.

“Yes, go ahead.” After we reached the cockpit, I worked on getting the ship ready to fly. Sarah strapped into her seat next to me.

“Wave just got here and...Kapok is dead—”

“What ?” Sarah gasped.

“Tiger and Jac have been taken by the conduits’ leader, Mother Portend,” Silence went on in a rush. “Wave says she wants to trade for our conduit. I don’t understand what she means—”

“Where is my father?” I demanded, cutting her off.

“We’re all in the house.”

I headed the ship in that direction. “Has he called anyone for help?”

“Yes, a few—”

“Call more. I’ll be there shortly. Allegiant out.”

“The fuck is going on?” Sarah hissed, looking just as panicked and worried as I was.

I pushed Allegiant to its limits. “You know as much as I do.”

“Why did they go to Mother Portend’s house?” Sarah asked.

I hesitated a moment, knowing she wouldn’t like the reason. “Jac has been trying to find out why Predict attacked you. I guess his investigation led him there.”

A horrified look passed across Sarah’s features. “It’s me...they want me...don’t they?”

I swallowed hard and nodded, refusing to lie to her about the situation. “That’s what it sounds like.”

“Then, I have to go,” she insisted. “It’s my fault they were out there. This is the only way to save them—”

“Absolutely not!” I shouted.

“I have to!” she yelled right back. “What choice do we have?”

“We have choices,” I assured her. “We are not without friends on Halla, my consort.”

Sarah curled her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, as tears flowed down her face.

I reached out and touched her arm, trying to comfort her. “We will save them. I promise you.”

She sniffed hard and nodded but did not respond.

I had no other words for her. Instead, I focused on getting us to my father’s home quickly and safely. But all I could think of was Jac and Sarah. How could I trade one for the other? I was loyal to my best friend, but also to my consort. They both meant everything to me. There was no clear path forward.

Like the war, all over again.

When we landed next to Sovereign , Wave ran out to the ship. She looked awful, angrily pounding on the window.

Sarah asked, “What is she doing?”

“I don’t know.” I knew what she was doing, but it was too much to explain to a civilian. We came out of Allegiant , and Wave ran to us. Without a word, she slapped me across the face.

In my defense, Sarah jumped on Wave and threw her to the ground, surprising me.

I pulled her off of Wave, who wailed in the dirt, “You weren’t there!”

I crouched next to her and said, “I’m here now.”

I opened my arms and Wave sat up, letting me hold her as she sobbed in dismay. I

had seen it in the war, this sort of hysteria brought on by true horror. It made me fear for what Kapok's fate had been, which I did not want to think about.

Father and the others soon followed and eventually, we made it into his house. Wave croaked out what had happened, and something deep inside of me went numb, preparing for what was to come.

I can't lose Jac like this .

Ode offered sedation for Wave, but she refused. "When I close my eyes, I see the knife protruding through Kapok's chest. You think I will ever sleep again, Ode?"

I asked Father, "Who did you call?"

"Bell and Fan," he said. "But they aren't answering my call. Offhand has been silent for weeks, but I tried anyway. Mock answered, though. He's on his way."

"That's it?" I asked incredulously, my hopes sinking. "That's all we have coming to help defend us?"

"No one talks to me anymore," my father said sadly. "It's not like the old days, son. After my execution, your mother wasn't the only one to turn her back on me."

I growled and punched the wall, startling everyone. The surface didn't move—instead it bloodied my knuckles and crunched some bones. I didn't feel a thing.

Ode rushed to me. "Let me see that—"

"I'm fine," I barked angrily, jerking my arm out of her reach.

She cringed slightly, making me realize what I had done.

I exhaled a harsh breath. “Sorry, I need some air.” I trudged out of the house.

Sarah came out after me. “Deacon, let Ode help—”

“What can she do?” I asked, whirling around to face her, my insides in knots. “Bandage me up? What’s the point?”

But her kind eyes saw my hand, so she took it in hers and raised it to her lips and kissed my scraped knuckles, tears shimmering in her eyes. “I can’t imagine how you’re feeling right now. I won’t pretend to. Your father can’t rouse his friends to help. I don’t know why Portend wants me, but—”

“She will kill you , Sarah,” I said in a harsh tone. “Just like Predict tried to. Mother Portend was their leader when they were alive, and that means Predict tried to kill you because Portend wanted her to. If you were to go to them, then you would die, and I am not letting that happen.”

“That is not up to you, Deacon.” She lifted her chin stubbornly. “This is my choice. I’m not going to let two people die for one. Mom said the afterlife isn’t all that bad—”

The thought of losing Sarah made me insane, not to mention the horrific afterlife she would endure. “You would be stuck here on Halla, with the conduits who murdered you. What is the point of that?”

She met and held my gaze. “You respect me, don’t you?”

“Of course, what kind of question is that?”

“Then let me do this,” she rasped, the emotion in her voice coming through. “It’s the only way to save Tiger and Jac. You have known me for a few days, but you and Jac have been together since you were boys. I won’t let that end because of me.”

“You can’t—”

“She’s right, son,” Father said as he came out of the house. “You owe Jac more loyalty at this moment.”

“Keep that word from your mouth,” I hissed at him angrily. “It’s your fault we don’t have allies—”

A shriek from inside the house jolted us all. Wave ran out of the house, pointing up the path, still shrieking. As the suns came up behind the forest, a procession of thirty conduits marched down the treelined path toward the house. Their gray hooded battle robes marked them as conduits. They were ready for a fight too—their ghostly bodies lost their translucent nature and solidified in waves.

They are practicing solidification, so that they might come at us with everything they have. They are not prepared for a peaceful prisoner exchange. They are prepared for a battle.

Sunlight shone through portions of them, instead of all of them. Nearly all were solid at their hands and feet. Watching their bodies go from sheer to solid with such speed was dizzying, and I wondered if that was the point. Each carried bone knives and other bone-based weapons. There was no telling how many weapons each had—their hooded robes covered them head to ankles, with only their mouths and hands fully exposed.

Sarah began to step forward toward them, but I grabbed her arm to hold her back.

She glanced back at me, tears welling in her eyes. “Let me go, Deacon.”

My heart slammed in my chest and I could barely breathe. “I can’t—I just found you.” There was no mistaking the desperation in my voice.

“Please let me do this,” she pleaded. “Let me save Jac and Tiger.”

My heart ruptured in two as my hand loosened around her arm and I reluctantly let her go. I had to prove I respected her. How could I doubt her now?

Head held high, Sarah bravely walked toward the conduits, and her every step away from me was a knife in my heart. Another group of thirty conduits approached from the other side of my ships. The two groups came together forming a circle in front of my ships to surround their crone.

Mother Portend stood in the middle of the circle alone. Sarah walked to the edge of Father’s blue flowers, and the conduits in the front of the procession stopped there, too, facing off with her.

One conduit asked, “You are the conduit they keep?”

“Yes,” Sarah answered.

“And you come willingly, knowing we could murder you?”

“Let my men go into the house first,” Sarah demanded. “And then I will come with you.”

The conduit waved her hand, and Tiger and Jac were revealed to be on their knees in the middle of the conduits’ circle with Mother Portend.

Jac looked around and upon seeing Sarah shouted, “Sarah, no, you can’t!”

“It’s alright, Jac. Everything is going to be fine,” she lied, her voice eerily calm. “Let them into the house.”

“How do we know you won’t change your mind and fight us?” the conduit asked.

“If I did that, you would slaughter everyone here,” Sarah said accurately. “I don’t want that.”

The conduit nodded once, but Mother Portend put a hand on each man’s shoulders as she called out, “When I opened my pit, these boys were sharpening bones to kill us. I take offense to that. I am impressed that you would offer yourself up for them, contra. But would you offer yourself up for only one of your men?”

My fists balled as my body tensed. I wanted to spring at them, but that would get everyone killed. We were alone in this, and I had to be smart. But I wanted to be stupid and release the rage simmering inside of me.

“Yes,” Sarah answered.

Portend smiled evilly. “I am glad to hear it. Tell me, which of them—”

“Jac,” she answered instantly.

Portend scowled, looking aggravated at Sarah.

“Oh, did I step on your moment?” Sarah boldly challenged the crone. “You were going to make some big speech about making me choose between them, right? I choose Jac. Hand him over. Now.”

Portend glared at me. “She’s got spirit, like the dead one. Good. It will be fun breaking your consort before I kill her.”

The crone lifted Jac to his feet with her power and sent him on his way to us. Then she forced Tiger to stand.

She taunted Sarah, “You get to choose the way this one dies, but we will wait to do that in private. More intimate that way. I want you to have time to think of something truly painful. Do you like fire? I like fire.”

As Jac passed by Sarah, he demanded, “You can’t do this!”

“It’s done,” she said sharply. “Take care of each other for me, okay?”

“Don’t go,” Jac begged her, all of us feeling helpless at the situation and what we were up against.

She kissed him, then shoved him toward me. I caught him and kept him on his feet. Then, she offered her hands to the conduits.

“Now what?”

The conduit nearest to Sarah smirked and said, “I’m first in line.”

She peeled back her hood, revealing herself to be Omen Ayext. Then, shocking everyone, she drove her bone knife into the conduit next to her, clearly defending Sarah. The conduit struggled, but the bone knife was driven through her belly, and she fell to the ground.

Omen stood between Sarah and the rest of the conduits, protecting her. “Get back in the house,” she told Sarah.

Sarah shook her head. “No, I—”

An explosion distracted us all, as Fan and Bell rode down the path behind the conduits on their onworlder. Fan drove, while Bell threw another grenade at the conduits. It must have been filled with bone fragments, because when it burst, the nearby conduits fell to the ground.

The rest of them scattered, including Mother Portend, who left Tiger behind. He seemed to have been hit by the fragments, too—he’d fallen to the ground with the others when the grenade went off.

Omen laughed at the sight of Fan and Bell, then produced a whip from her robe. It was spiked and ivory colored. She swung it around herself, cracking the air and hitting two more conduits with it, slicing through their necks and killing them both.

Father handed me and Jac bone knives, and we ran toward the fray. He gave one to Sarah on his way into battle so she had something to defend herself with. Jac and I stood on either side of her, prepared to protect her with our lives and ready for the next conduit to come at us.

Fan and Bell must have run out of grenades—they drove up to us and Fan asked, “You got more weapons? We’re out.”

Suddenly, the conduits vanished, seemingly into thin air, all but Sarah and Omen. Omen warily backed up to where we were by Sarah. Father had one of the conduits down on the ground, but then she vanished with the others.

He turned to Omen and asked, “What is happening?”

Omen looked just as confused, and concerned, as we all were. “I don’t know—”

“Can you see them?” I asked.

“No,” Omen said.

“Sarah, can you?”

She looked around frantically and shook her head. “No.”

But then we heard them. Chanting whispers that got louder as we stood there, like they were closing in on us. Fan drove the onworlder toward a dead conduit and snatched up her bone sword, just before another conduit appeared and slashed at him with her knife. Then, she vanished again.

He clutched his arm and cursed, before driving back to us. Bell hopped off the onworlder and reached out for Omen’s first victim’s knife but was thwarted by a conduit. She stabbed the back of his thigh, then disappeared again. He fell to the ground and fought to get to his feet.

Mother Portend’s voice proclaimed, “You can’t kill what you can’t see.” Then a bone knife slashed the air, before it sliced across my chest, drawing blood.

I sucked in a painful breath and quickly brought my weapon up to defend myself, but my attacker was gone before I had moved.

Omen said, “If we can stop whoever is chanting then we can break the gift they’re using.”

“How the fuck are we supposed to do that?” Jac asked.

The door on Father’s house creaked, and I turned that way, afraid a conduit had snuck past us. But it was Silence coming out to the battle. Surrounded by Gram, Treg, Drift,

and Camp Deo, she strode toward us with the twins on her back in a pack.

Once next to us, she raised her hands, and the whispers instantly stopped. White fog flowed from invisible conduits into Silence's palms. With her own powers, she had stolen the voices of the chanting conduits. All of our enemies were visible once more.

We wasted no time fighting back. I lunged at those in front of me, and the others did the same, except for Camp Deo, who took Silence's babies back into the house. Fighting alongside my friends and family and my consort, I prayed we would survive this. But the odds were not in our favor.

I dodged a conduit's slash, leaning around her for the one behind her. Jac took on the one who slashed at me first, then twirling back for the two behind himself. Father, being a ghost, was able to fight both hand-to-hand, and with his bone knife. He didn't need them to solidify to fight them on even terms like the rest of us.

Gram fought with two knives, slashing in unison. Treg had taken half a dozen knives into his gelatinous body, before they realized they could not kill him that way. He began to chase after conduits, swinging a pilfered bone sword and shouting, "Come on! I want to play, too!"

It was Drift and Sarah who worried me the most.

Drift had taken Sarah out to get Tiger, before I had a chance to stop them. He crouched to check on Tiger, while Sarah watched for attackers. I couldn't get to them—there were too many combatants between us. As I spun around, knife in hand to take out the three who had closed in on me, I saw that Mother Portend was approaching Drift and Sarah.

I dove between Father and his attacker, stabbing her, then ran through a hole in the crowd. But someone cut my calf before I could reach them, and I fell on top of a

conduit on the ground. She wasn't dead—and she was nearly solid.

We struggled, turning in the dirt. She kicked my groin and shoved me off of herself as I coughed from the impact. She straddled my chest, bringing her knife down toward my face, but I bucked her off and she tumbled over my head. Soon we were both on our hands and knees in the dirt, facing off. As she lunged, Treg stepped on her back, forcing her flat with his mighty, gelatinous weight. He stabbed her in the back, smiled at me, and kept moving after more of them.

I turned to see Sarah's predicament. Drift was bloodied and laid out on Tiger's back. But Sarah was on her feet, knife in hand, squared off with a cackling Portend. I ran to her, barreling into solidified conduits until there were too many to push and all I could see was them.

An explosion, louder than the grenades, sounded near us. Conduits flew into the air in parts. Some of those nearby looked around or felt around their bodies for signs of shrapnel. I took out a few more while they were distracted. But my focus was only on Sarah, and I cut a deadly path toward her.

When I had a clear view a few meters from them, Portend had her eyes on me, a handful of Sarah's hair, and a knife to Sarah's throat. Blood ran down the side of my consort's face and she appeared listless, her body limp and upright only by Portend's grip on her hair. Fury, unlike anything I'd ever felt before, raged through me.

Smug satisfaction filled the crone's eyes. "You should be grateful I am doing this for you, Deacon Ladrang. The living will only ever disappoint you."

"Let her go!" I demanded, even though Portend had the upper hand, and she knew it.

"Drop your knife," she countered.

I did without hesitation, praying it saved my consort's life.

As it clattered to the ground, Sarah suddenly thrust her left leg out for leverage, grabbed Portend's knife hand and twisted sideways. Sarah pushed the blade backward across her own throat, sacrificing herself as she managed to shove the tip up into Portend's torso.

I ran to them as they both fell to the dirt. I heard nothing but an awful roaring sound in my head. I saw only a sea of red as the battle raged on around me.

When I reached them, Sarah's blood was everywhere. Portend was dead. I dropped to my knees and held my hand over Sarah's gushing throat. Her eyes were on me for a breath, before they fluttered back and her body went completely limp.

An awful, helpless feeling nearly strangled me. "No, no, no!" I screamed, then I shouted for help.

I looked up to see if assistance was on the way and was shocked by what I saw. My android, Lanai Dea, had returned, and she was with Mock—the short Ladrian was atop her pink shining metal shoulders and swinging two bone maces on chains. Lanai Dea used a bone sword and skewered conduits as she outran them with mechanical speed. The pair tore through enemy troops.

Ode appeared next to me and immediately went to work on Sarah. She applied injection after injection, and the wound at her neck began to reknit and close. It was then that my hearing came back all at once.

"...don't know where to get blood for her," the doctor was saying.

"I don't— Silence ." Seemingly out of nowhere, the idea came to me. "You said family is the best bet?"

Ode nodded. “Yes, but—”

I ran through the dwindling battlefield as fast as I could and shouted, “Silence!”

“Yes?” She came from the back.

“Come with me!” I grabbed her hand, and we ran together. Narrowly missing another one of Treg’s chases, we made it back to Sarah. “Use Silence for blood.”

Ode was confused. “But she’s not—”

“Sarah needs your blood, Silence,” I said, interrupting Ode. There was no time to discuss Silence’s complicated family connection to Sarah. “Can you—”

Without question, Silence lifted her sleeve up for Ode and offered her arm. “Whatever you need to save her. Do it.”

“What is going on?” the doctor asked me.

“No time to explain, just do it!” I demanded.

She pulled her tube out and set Sarah up for the transfusion. “Watch for conduits, Deacon. I’ve got this.”

But the rest of our side had the conduits on the run. Our enemies did not come for us—now, they were too busy trying to escape. I did not know what had turned the tide. I assumed it was the big explosion that had sent conduits flying into the air.

It was a miracle, but I could not celebrate until I knew my own miracle was going to survive.

CHAPTER 21

Sarah

B right light. Should I go to it? They always say to go to the bright light, but I don't want to. I don't want to leave Jac and Deacon and my new friends. Can I haunt Halla, or will I have to haunt Earth? Please let me stay—

With a gasp of breath, my eyes fluttered open, and I needed a minute for them to adjust to the brightness overhead. Nothing I saw made any sense— the afterlife has machinery?

“She’s awake!” Deacon shouted joyously.

“Are you alright? How are you feeling? Don’t sit up!” Jac said at the other side of the exam table when I tried to move.

Suddenly, I remembered everything all at once. The screams. Rage shooting through me. The sight of Jac and Tiger on their knees by Mother Portend. The scent of so much blood and sweat. My own warmth, gushing down my body from my throat...

I lifted a hand to touch my neck, but Deacon gently grabbed my wrist before I could make contact. “No, stop, it’s healing.”

“I’m healing?” I rasped, hearing the awe in my own voice when I thought I’d died. “I’m alive?”

The pair smiled at each other in relief. Then, Jac nodded at me. “Yes, Sarah. You’re alive.”

“Oh.”

Deacon laughed. “Oh? Is that all?”

“Tiger and Drift?” I asked, more recollections flooding me of the battle as I tried to account for everyone. “What—who—died?”

“They’re both injured, but they’ll heal. Actually, we didn’t take any losses, outside of Kapok,” Deacon said sadly. “We managed to win this battle.”

“How?”

Jac moved closer and picked up one of my hands in his, soothing me with his warmth. “During the fight, I managed to run to Allegiant and put a call out to Lanai to come back to the ship asap. Lanai—”

“The android that fucked Ryan?” I asked, remembering the name.

“Yes,” Deacon said. “Lanai Dea is the newest De model, and in addition to seduction techniques and other skills, she has incomparable combat capabilities.”

“Basically, he got the fancy android, and she saved all our asses,” Jac explained with a laugh. “She and Mock, anyway.”

“Who is Mock?” I asked, trying to connect those dots. “And the conduit who helped us? I don’t understand.”

“My father’s friends, Mock, Bell, and Fan, they were compatriots of his in the old

days,” Deacon explained as he smoothed his hand along my cheek, seemingly needing to touch me as much as Jac did. “Jac had helped Bell and Fan escape from the royal prisons a few years ago. Mock had moved to Halla after—”

“There are Ladrians who live here with the ghosts?” I asked in surprise.

Deacon nodded. “It is usually for those who have lost their way. Mock fell apart after his consort died in the war. He lives a quiet life here on Halla.”

“We destroyed his quiet,” I mumbled.

“It is quiet once again,” Deacon assured me. “The remaining conduits have gone into hiding. Omen Ayext, the conduit who helped us, estimates there are likely fewer than thirty on Halla now.”

I took a breath and let it out slowly. “Some of the conduits escaped?”

“Yes, but we will hunt them down,” Jac said.

I rapidly shook my head. “No—”

“We have to,” he insisted. “Otherwise, they’ll come after you, Sarah.”

“No, they can’t—”

“They can and they will,” Deacon insisted.

I gestured with my hands to stop them from continuing—I just needed them to shut up a minute. Before I could take a moment to reset my brain, a hot white fog started pouring from their mouths and noses and into my hands.

Terror gripped me. “The fuck!”

Both of them tried to speak and couldn’t.

I shook my hands in a panic, and the eerie fog returned to them. So did their voices. They were shouting together at the same time, so I held my ears. “Stop, please!”

Jac shut his mouth, but Deacon yelled for the doctor. “Ode!”

The doctor ran in and smiled as soon as she saw me. “Look who’s awake—”

“I just did something,” I blurted out hysterically, not understanding what had just happened. “I don’t know what I did, but I didn’t mean to!”

She frowned and looked to the other two for answers. “What is she talking about?”

Deacon looked scared or worried or both. “Remember during the fight, when Silence left Father’s, and stole the voices of the chanting conduits when she lifted her hands?”

“Yes, but—”

“Sarah just stole our voices,” Deacon told her.

“I gave them back!” I yelled defensively.

Jac chuckled and kissed the top of my head. “We know you didn’t mean to do it. It’s okay.”

Ode took a beat, thinking things over before responding. “It’s probably because we took Silence’s blood for her.”

“You did what ?” Jac asked.

“It was the only way to save her, according to Deacon,” Ode said, shifting her gaze to Deacon and arching a brow. “I had no idea Sarah was royal-born.”

“I learned only a few hours before the fight,” I piped in. “But Deacon knew.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?” Jac snapped at Deacon.

He merely sighed, instead of barking back at him. “I was protecting you, Jac. I didn’t know who would use that information against you or anyone on your crew.”

I reached for each of their hands, not liking when they were at odds with one another. “Hey, the cat’s out of the bag now, so let’s not dwell on it, okay?”

Jac continued to glare at Deacon, who avoided his gaze.

Ode went on, ignoring the tension in the room. “It’s likely a side effect of taking Silence’s blood, so there’s a good chance it will wear off as your body replenishes your own blood supply. Try not to wave your hands around too much for the next few days, and you should be fine. You may want to speak to Silence about controlling it, though, just in case.”

I smiled at the doctor, appreciating her care. “Thank you, Ode.”

She gingerly touched what should have been a fatal wound at my throat. “How is your neck feeling?”

Shockingly, I felt no sharp or excruciating pain as she gently probed. “Tender, but in one piece.”

“Good.” Ode patted my shoulder. “The tenderness will fade in a day or two. I still can’t believe you did that, just to kill Mother Portend.”

I shrugged. “I knew I would nick myself—I just wasn’t sure how off my aim was, going backward at Portend like that. But I thought—well, I had hoped —you could save me, if I screwed up. Considering how hurt Jac was after he was stabbed, I figured you could do anything.”

Ode scowled at me. “Please don’t ever test my medical credentials like that again. It was touch and go for the past five days—”

I blinked at the doctor. “Five days?”

She nodded. “You’ve been in a minimally conscious state for the past five days, Sarah. You responded to some stimuli, but—”

“It’s been five days?”

“She does this sometimes, Ode,” Deacon advised, shaking his head in exasperation. “When she hears something she does not agree with or does not want to believe, she often repeats herself or parrots back what you said. I do not believe it to be a sign of neurological damage—”

Ode and Jac laughed in amusement, and Deacon frowned at them.

“I’m familiar with human speech patterns, not to worry,” Ode said. “I did not think poorly of her for it. I will let you three speak alone. I need to check on Tiger and Drift.”

“Thank you, Ode,” I said, grateful for everything she’d done to make sure I didn’t die. “They’ll be okay, too?”

“You saved them both,” she said, and smiled. “Portend would have killed them. Truth is, killing her very likely saved the rest of us, too. You’re a hero.”

It was my fault you were in danger in the first place . I had no clue what to say. “Oh.”

She finally left us, closing Allegiant’s infirmary door behind herself.

“We will hunt the other conduits down, Sarah.” Deacon took my hand and kissed the back of it. “I swear to you.”

“No, and don’t interrupt me this time, or I’ll use my magic hands on you again,” I said firmly. “I don’t want anyone hunted down for me. I don’t want any more death. I can’t have that on my conscience.”

Also, I knew I couldn’t have either of them be in mortal danger for me ever again. I cared about both of them too much. I hated myself for saying it, but I had to. I didn’t see any other option. For any of us.

“I want to go home,” I said.

“We will set up a residence for you here, and—”

I shook my head and Deacon stopped speaking. “I want to go back to Earth ,” I clarified. “I can’t...I can’t handle being here. This life is too terrifying for me.” But I knew it was so much more than that.

Very quietly, Jac asked, “Are you sure about this, Sarah? This is what you truly want?” His beautiful purple eyes looked pained, as did Deacon’s glowing amber ones.

Tears burned my eyes. “I am not equipped to deal with any of this, Jac. I wouldn’t

even know where to begin. I have never been more scared, angrier, more..." in love . It tore me up inside to admit it, but I had to do this for them. I had to save them from trying to save me.

"I can't do this," I whispered, forcing out the words and trying to ignore the crestfallen look on both their faces. "I'm not a soldier. I barely have an education, much less the knack for handling any of this. I don't know what I'm doing here. You both..."

I started to cry, and I couldn't stop the tears from flowing. The thought of leaving them behind was like a dagger to my heart. "I almost died, and I'm frightened, and I just want to go home."

Jac wrapped his arms around me and I buried my face against his chest. "I'm so sorry, Sarah. I didn't mean to get ransomed—"

I laughed and snotted on his uniform. "I know that."

"This is all my fault," he grumbled.

"No, the fault lies with me," Deacon said quietly. "I am the one who initiated all of this by having Jac abduct you. No one would have been in danger, were it not for me thinking Sarah was up to the task at hand."

Jac uncurled himself from me and shot his friend a droll look. "I won't say, 'I told you so,' but I'm going to think it very loudly."

Deacon smirked at him. "You are well within your right to tell me. Go ahead. I can take it."

But Jac shook his head and smiled. "Not my style."

Their sweet playfulness made me smile, too, before it made my heart ache even more for how much I was going to miss them. “I don’t want to leave you both behind, but I don’t know what else to do. This is way above my pay grade.”

Deacon nodded solemnly. “We will return you to Earth. I am sorry for all the trouble I have caused you, Sarah. This was too much for any human to deal with, and I should have heeded Jac’s original advice on the matter.”

“What was the original advice?” I asked curiously.

Jac started, “Volatile Bateen—”

“My father?” I asked, interrupting him.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. That’s who your father is?” He rolled his eyes in a sardonic manner, as if finally putting all the pieces together for himself. “Of course it is.”

“What?” I asked, not understanding.

“Your dear old daddy was a merchant before the war, and that guy travelled all over the universe to move product,” Jac said in a wry tone. “Let’s just say, he was not shy with any of the ladies. And some of the guys. And others.”

I frowned. “My dad is a manwhore?”

Jac laughed. “Yes. So, my original plan was for us to search for his offspring, who could be conduits—Deacon, how hard was it for you to keep Sarah’s parentage a secret?”

Deacon winced guiltily. “The knowledge burned in my brain like a thousand suns.”

The pair chuckled with each other before Jac slapped Deacon on the back and said, “Good. Glad it hurt. Maybe next time you’ll trust me.”

“I trust you!” Deacon defended himself. “I did not tell you because I wanted everyone to be as safe as possible.”

“How can I go back?” Part of me meant physically, but the rest of me meant emotionally. How can I leave these two men, who I have fallen for and want so badly? How can I leave them behind?

To protect them. Because that’s all that mattered to me. Their lives. And on this planet, here with them, I was a liability.

Even though there was a sadness in Deacon’s eyes, he smiled and pulled something from his pocket. “I understand diamonds are an important commodity on Earth, right?”

“Yes. Why?”

He held out his big hand and in his palm was the largest solitary diamond I had ever seen on a ring. Square-cut, the diamond looked to be the size of my thumbnail.

“This ring is like the one that Lanai Dea uses to travel between worlds,” he explained. “This one is smaller than hers, but I thought it was more appropriate to your size—”

“You knew I would want to go back?” I interrupted him.

His gaze met and held mine. “I had hoped you would not. But I feared you would. Though after everything that happened...” he sighed. “I would have been worried if you had wanted to stay. The ring will allow you to return, if you ever feel the desire to do so. It will return you here to Allegiant, if you turn the diamond one-quarter turn

to the right.”

He slipped the ring onto my left ring finger. A perfect fit. It felt appropriate and odd to leave Earth with an engagement ring but return with this one. “Thank you, Deacon.”

He nodded somberly.

Jac huffed and looked away, grumbling, “I can’t believe you’re leaving.”

I swallowed the tight knot of emotion gathering in my throat. “Are you angry with me?”

“Never,” he said in a raspy tone, then shifted his gaze back to my face. “Only...I will miss you more than I know how to say.”

Deacon looked like he knew exactly how Jac felt. Completely devastated.

My own sorrow was just as acute, but so was the desire that stirred inside of me for these two alien men who’d come to mean so much to me. I wanted—no, I needed—them one last time.

Sitting up on the exam table, I reached out for Jac’s uniform and used it to pull him close, giving him a sultry smile. “I don’t have to leave this minute.”

Then, I kissed him. The tension in his body melted as his noduled tongue slipped past my parted lips. It was like pressing pause on my overwhelming anxiety. I didn’t have to think about the perils of Halla and that nightmare I had barely survived, as long as I was kissing him.

Deacon snuggled up behind me, lifting my hair out of his way. He licked up the back

of my neck, sending shivers down to my toes. I reached back for him, sliding my hand around his neck—I needed to touch him, too.

Then, in a gruff tone he said, “ Allegiant , bed. And seal the infirmary doors.” The two of them stepped away.

“Infirmary doors, sealed,” Allegiant’s soothing feminine voice said.

The exam table I’d been sitting on stretched outward in all directions, until I was in the middle of what looked like four king sized mattresses morphed together.

I turned around to see them standing at the foot of the new bed. Their eyes were on me, hot and hungry, as they quickly took their clothes off until they were completely naked.

Before they climbed aboard, they kissed each other, seemingly enjoying that human tradition, as did I. It was so damn erotic to watch them go at one another with such passion and masculine dominance. While they made out, I slipped out of my infirmary gown and crawled down the bed to their end. I stroked their stiff cocks, still struggling to get my hand around their girths. But then I had a thought.

I searched Jac’s discarded uniform for his mog belt and put it on. Then, I hit the button and morphed within seconds.

The transformation made my neck stop aching so much, but what made mogging truly valuable was seeing Jac’s lustful reaction to my sleek, feminine, Ladrian body. He lovingly stroked my blue hair from my head down to my tail, and the sensation made me quake with pleasure.

“ Fuck ,” he growled, before he took me in his arms and flung me onto the bed.

I let out a soft squeal of surprised laughter at his manhandling, which quickly died away as he climbed on top of me, licking my strange skin with that knobby tongue of his and eliciting more arousing sensations. Then, he started to bite at me.

In my Ladrian form, the sharp nip of his teeth along the inside of my thighs took on a whole different dimension. It was like each one shot pleasure through that part of me. The bites were rougher than humans usually do—almost like he was trying to mark my flesh and claim me barbarically...and I loved it. By the time he made it up my legs, I was panting for breath, wetter than ever, and playing with my full, firm breasts that were much larger than my own.

Until Deacon joined us.

He sat behind me and wrapping a strong arm around my waist, he hauled me onto his lap, my legs between his. My sensitive tail was pressed against his cock, making me writhe against him. Jac pulled my legs apart, so they were draped over Deacon's, and Deacon spread his legs wide, forcing mine even wider, exposing me for Jac's pleasure.

I groaned as Jac's tongue swiped up my pussy and over my folds, while he got comfortable on his stomach. With his big hands splayed on my thighs, he pushed my legs even wider, and his tongue dove deep into me, those textured nodules reaching and rubbing against all sorts of erogenous zones.

I cried out, gripping Jac's hair in my fingers, while Deacon grabbed my tits.

He plucked my nipples until they hurt and growled in my ear, "Does that feel good, consort?"

My entire body jolted. "Yes!"

He slapped my breasts then squeezed them harder, and my pussy quivered around Jac's deep, marauding tongue. "You like it when we're rough with you like this?"

My pulse raced and liquid heat rushed through my veins. "Fuck, yes!"

He pinched and pulled my nipples, one after the other, and I couldn't get enough of that pleasurable pain. Between his abrasive hands and Jac's searing tongue, I was blissed out.

Deacon buried his face against the side of my neck and said, "Your tail is twitching against my cock, consort. Feels so good."

"I want to make you feel good," I panted, squirming against him.

He untangled his limbs from mine, and Jac got out of the way as Deacon repositioned me, pushing me backward onto the bed.

Then, he straddled my chest, fisted his hand in my hair to angle my head, and fed me his cock until the head was buried in my throat. "This is how you make me feel good now."

Deacon's shaft stretched my lips wide as he fucked my mouth rhythmically, almost brutally—because he could—while Jac's tongue resumed working my G-spot over. I raked my nails up Deacon's thighs. He hissed and I moaned around his cock. I was so close to the moment of ecstasy I couldn't remember what had me so upset before.

All thoughts were gone, except for everything these two men made me feel. My men. Even as they ravaged me, I still felt worshipped and adored. Cherished. I was theirs, and they were mine.

"Jac, move!" Deacon suddenly said, withdrawing his cock from my mouth.

I made a whimpering sound of protest, and much to my dismay, Jac obeyed the order, leaving me empty and bereft until Deacon moved lower, between my spread legs. His hands gripped my thighs apart, so forcefully I was sure there would be glorious bruises later, before he lined up the head of his cock at my core.

His jaw clenched and his amber eyes glowed as they held mine. “I’m going to wreck this pussy, consort, so you’ll remember who you belong to. Us. ”

Even transformed with an alien physique better suited to accept all of him, Deacon was still huge and thick and ruthless as he slammed all his inches inside of my Ladrian body, burying himself balls deep. We snarled at each other like animals, and my pussy lit up every time he thrust deeper, forcing me to take his merciless pounding.

I did. Willingly and enthusiastically.

I reached out for Jac—I needed him, too. He came to me, his thick, long cock dripping with lust. I grabbed his pulsing shaft and greedily took him into my mouth. With a low, deep growl, he palmed the back of my head and took over Deacon’s face-fucking duties, gagging me with his cock, but this time, my head was turned to the side.

Jac stroked my face as he marveled at me. He touched my cheek when his cock passed by there. It was like he was fascinated, and enamored by, my Ladrian body. And me.

He forced me to swallow him down until I choked, his voice burning when he spoke, “You are exquisite, Sarah.”

I was hypnotized by the two of them as they both continued to use me for their pleasure. Deacon’s thickness and veins rubbed me in all the ways I needed, and it

wasn't long before my orgasm crested. Jac, sensing I was close, let his dick slide out of my mouth while I grabbed onto Deacon's shoulders for something to keep me grounded as I cried out and came all over his cock, triggering his release. He roared as he came inside me, his cock pulsing in time with his shimmering skin.

As soon as he finished and moved away, Jac took his place, granting me no reprieve as he pounded into me without respite—like he had been waiting that whole time just to get inside of me, to claim me, as well. Then, abruptly, he pulled out and flipped me over onto my stomach. He stroked me again like before—head to tail—and my body shook hard from those pleasurable caresses and a purring sound rolled out of my throat.

He petted my furry tail as he entered me again, while I was on my hands and knees, grinding into me with rough, deep gyrations that made me moan. His fingers gripped my hips, giving him the leverage to yank my body back onto his cock every time he slammed forward.

Deacon laid back and our eyes met as he watched us with a hooded gaze, his hand stroking his already half hard cock, a testament to their stamina. “You like when I watch you with Jac, consort?”

I bit my bottom lip, while Jac grunted and hammered into me, jarring me forward every time he drove his shaft deep inside my body. “Yes!”

Deacon reached out and tenderly smoothed my blue, silky Ladrian hair away from my face, a wicked smile on his lips. “Well, I like sharing you and watching him fuck you. I know how good his cock feels.”

My mind danced with the thought of the two of them in the same position we were in, making my heart pound. Jac's hands were like vise grips on my hips, holding me tight as he continued drilling into me. “You two...fuck like this?”

Deacon smirked. “We used to. All the time.”

Then, he shimmied his way beneath me, so my tits bounced in his face. He licked and bit them until they were sensitive and sore, while Jac’s cock hollowed me out and I was a moaning, quivering mess of need.

It was all too much. My fists clenched the sheets. I couldn’t hold back any longer, and as I came, Jac petted me again down to my tail, and it was like triggering an erogenous zone. The biggest orgasm I ever had rained through me, making me toss back my head and howl like a beast in the forest. Every muscle locked tight, every feel-good chemical in my brain raced through my neurons. The fire between us became an inferno.

Jac felt it, too. He thrashed wildly against me, and the animalistic sounds erupting from his chest grew louder.

“Come in her, Jac!” Deacon demanded from beneath me.

Jac’s powerful, warrior’s body shot into me, his hips slamming against my ass with wicked speed and his cock pulsating, until he buried himself as deep as he could go and came with a ghost-shattering groan I felt all the way to my soul. He held onto me with a bruising grip, while his cock twitched and danced inside, his hot, slick fluids spurting and filling me.

When he finally pulled out, Deacon said, “Lay back, consort.”

But I couldn’t move, so Jac helped me to lay on my back once more, then settled on his side next to me. Deacon wedged himself between my legs and licked into me, and I gasped in shock. What he was doing after Jac just released inside of me was so damn filthy, I lost my mind.

“Fuck!” I couldn’t believe he wanted to do that, but it felt too good after such a masterful fucking. Like his tongue was there to soothe my battered and raw insides.

Jac chuckled against my ear, the sound a little more than depraved. “Don’t be so shocked, Sarah. Our classed Deacon is a very dirty boy. And it’s not like he hasn’t tasted my cum before.”

The image painted an erotic picture in my mind, elevating my desire. Each deep lick was another flame inside of me, and soon my body shamelessly rocked against his mouth. I was too lit up not to orgasm again, and it wasn’t long before I did.

“God, now!” I cried out.

Jac crushed his mouth to mine and kissed me, while Deacon made me come on the tip of his tongue. It was like an aftershock of an orgasm, and it brought friends. When the first one was over, another came into me. Jac pressed against the back of Deacon’s head to force his tongue even deeper into my pussy so that it fucked me. His tongue lit me up with every pass, and I could not stop coming until I was utterly spent and exhausted.

It wasn’t until Deacon’s tongue finally slowed that I could breathe again. His tongue slipped out of me, as he licked me clean everywhere. Each sensual stroke calmed me down until I nearly dozed off. Finally, he kissed my belly and laid next to me, pulling me close to his side. Jac did the same, slinging an arm around my waist and settling on the other side of me.

Sandwiched between my guys, I fell asleep once more.

CHAPTER 22

Jacaranda

When I woke up, Deacon had spooned me, while I spooned Sarah. It was the best way to wake up, so I snuggled against them both and fell back to sleep.

Until I remembered it was the last time I would ever get to do this.

Then, my eyes were wide open. I breathed her in, absorbing Sarah's essence as much as I could, while I still had her in my arms. She smelled and tasted differently when she was a Ladrian. Not better—just different. I adored both her forms, but it was nice to not hold back with her anymore. Her human form was too fragile to do what I wanted to do to her.

All this time, I thought we might get the chance to do it as humans together...

I pushed the longing out of my mind and focused on what was next. Taking Sarah home. Gently, I elbowed Deacon to rouse him. He snorted awake, and we crept from the bed, dressed, and went into the hall.

The silence was heavy between us, because we both knew it was time. "You want me to take her home, don't you?"

Deacon nodded, looking as miserable as I felt. "If you do not mind. I need to sort out what happens next with my father, and that will take some time. I am uncertain of what to do about the conduits, now that she is going back."

“We can stick with my original plan. I will go to Volatile and ask him about his other children. We will go from there. If that sounds—”

“Very likely,” Deacon cut in wryly. “But I need to speak to my father first, to ensure Volatile would be agreeable to such a thing.”

I sighed and dragged my fingers through my loose hair. “I hate saying goodbye to her,” I said, my tone gruff.

He nodded solemnly. “As do I, but I cannot and will not force her to stay.”

I met Deacon’s gaze, wondering where that left the two of us. “Does her leaving change things between us?”

Deacon glanced down at our shoes and said, “I hope not.”

“Same here.” I took his handsome face in my hands and kissed him. But it wasn’t as passionate as our other kisses we’d recently come to enjoy. We were both too depressed for that. Still, it was a good kiss. A comforting one.

When I finally lifted my head from his, I took a deep breath and said, “We should wake her and get on with it, don’t you think?”

He nodded in agreement. “The sooner, the better for these kinds of things, I suppose. I have never had a relationship end quite like this, so I am unfamiliar with the protocol.”

“Me, too.”

We walked back into the room, and Sarah was already awake, but still in her Ladrian form.

“Hey, guys,” she said softly, her eyes lacking their normal luster. “When should we head back to Earth?”

“Soon. If we can,” I said, knowing it made no sense to put off the inevitable. “If that’s okay.”

A half-hearted smile lifted her lips. “I was thinking soon, too. Can I borrow your mogging belt, Jac? Going home like this would lead to a lot of questions.”

I chuckled and passed it to her. She de-mogged back into her beautiful human physique and dressed.

Her voice was thick with emotion when she met my gaze and asked, “Can I have a private moment with Deacon to say goodbye?”

“Of course,” I said gruffly.

I stepped out and closed the door behind me. I was glad to not be there for their final farewell. It was going to be difficult enough when the two of us eventually parted ways. If I had to watch Deacon’s heart break, too, I was going to lose it.

A few minutes later, she emerged from the infirmary, her eyes red. I gulped to stop myself from tearing up, too.

“Can we go now?” she whispered, her voice breaking. “I can’t say goodbye to anyone else.”

I nodded in understanding, and the two of us absconded with Sovereign privately. It wasn’t a long trip back to Earth, but I wasn’t looking forward to the journey, no matter the duration.

I set the autopilot to take over, in case she needed to speak to me. Sarah sat with me in the cockpit, her knees folded up to her chest beneath the dress she had worn when I had taken her what felt like eons ago.

I cleared my throat, and she glanced my way. “Sarah, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry about all of this.”

She tipped her head to the side. “What do you have to be sorry for, Jac?”

“For taking you against your will on Deacon’s orders. Being rude to you when I tried to get a rise out of you—”

“Stop, please, just stop. There’s no need for all of that now. I understand why you did those things...” she looked away and very quietly added, “if I loved Deacon the way you do, I couldn’t have refused him, either.”

I took a deep breath and let it out carefully. My heart raced, and I realized this was my one and only chance to tell her everything. “He’s not the only one that I love, Sarah.” If I was being honest, I’d fallen in love with her before I’d abducted her from Earth.

Her body tensed and her eyes widened. She licked her lips, before she confessed, “Same.”

Everything seemed to stop in that moment. I turned to her, and she faced me, too. I reached for her, and she leapt into my arms. But before we kissed, I held up a finger for her to wait. I hit my mog belt and became a human for her.

She smiled, studying my face and new masculine features before lightly skimming her fingers over my shaved head. Then, she kissed me.

Feeling her simple tongue against my own, I was lost in her mouth. I wanted to explore every part of her. I pulled at her dress, until it dropped to the floor. We took turns tugging at the fabric between us, licking the skin we rediscovered under the cumbersome layers. Once we were both nude, Sarah straddled my lap, taking my human cock inside of her.

The sensation was so different from Ladrian feeling—more cerebral than animal. Human sex was gentler, sweeter, and a part of me reveled in it because it was with her.

But once she was filled by my shaft, Sarah bit my shoulder like a Ladrian woman. Hard, wild, and full of need. I grabbed her ass and pushed and pulled her up and down on my cock, working her body with my own. She was just as tight and wet, Ladrian or human. She growled for me with my flesh trapped in her teeth. I loved hearing that erotic sound from her.

I picked her up, setting her onto the dash. Behind her, the stars whizzed by in a blur. I shoved her legs wide apart and pumped into her body, every stroke more intense than the last. I loved Sarah Hollinger with all my might, and my body was compelled to show her in every way I knew how.

I reached between us to rub her clit, but she grabbed my hands and leaned back, making me pin her to the dash. It couldn't have been comfortable—between the buttons, switches, and levers, I wasn't sure how she wasn't complaining yet—but she didn't seem to notice it at all. But then, she got a sinful look in those sensual brown eyes of hers and I knew something had shifted.

Sarah slipped her hands away from mine and around the back of my neck, before she wrapped her legs around my waist. I picked her up like that, and she groaned, “Lay down.”

I laid back on the floor, not caring about anything but the woman on top of me. Once she was in position with her knees at my sides, she rode me hard. Her tits jiggled and her long, lustrous hair fell forward. The sight of her was captivating, until she stopped.

Her eyes told me something new. The soft look in her eyes made my heart swell. She laid on top of me, flattening her body to mine, with my cock just barely inside of her.

She groaned, her internal muscles clenching around my dick. “Jac, you feel so good.”

“So do you,” I panted, skimming my palms down her back until I gripped her ass in my hands.

“I hate that I’m leaving—”

“Not now,” I gasped, my heart already frayed at the edges at the thought of losing her. “Not now.”

She nodded and kissed me. I tasted the salt of her tears as she rolled her hips down onto me again. Our kisses became slow and intimate. I stroked her long hair and held her close to me. I wanted to keep her there on my body forever.

I rolled her onto her back, burying myself deep inside her pussy as I resumed fucking her. Each thrust was something I instantly cherished and tried to memorize. The textures and contours of her luscious body, the way her back arched beneath me. Her sounds, those delectable songs she sang when she came on my cock. The way her body throbbed as her own orgasm consumed her, and me. Everything about her was something else to savor.

Something else to miss when she is gone .

I wrapped my arms beneath her, keeping her as close as I could while my cock lost all control inside of her. Our mouths fused to each other, neither one of us giving ground. The orgasm that tore through me was relentless, like a bomb made of purest ecstasy. It scorched me from the inside out, leaving nothing but mindless rubble in its wake.

As the torrents of bliss slowed and ebbed, our kisses did, too. Sarah touched my face and smiled. “You’re very handsome as a human, too.”

I smiled at her. “I’m not—”

“You are !” she insisted, and passed her hand over my shaved head. “And for the record, I like the bald thing on muscular guys. It’s hot.”

I chuckled and kissed her again, before I pulled out. We cleaned up and dressed, and I checked the autopilot to make sure we didn’t fuck anything up. We were still on course for Earth.

As we resettled into our seats, I glanced over at her. “So, you like the bad boy look on your humans?”

“Not normally,” she admitted, then grinned. “I’ve always tended to go for the more refined kind of guy, but I think my taste has changed.”

Which made me think of the man waiting for her back on Earth. “After you return, will you go back to Ryan?” I asked, sick with the thought, but I needed to know.

“Oof, there’s something I haven’t even thought about,” she said, then sighed. “I have no idea what my future will be, Jac. Like, none. I know he’s been cheating on me, and I hate him for it, but he’s also the only real way I have to support myself right now until I figure things out.”

“You could sell the ring Deacon gave you.” I hated myself for even pointing it out, but I wanted her to be taken care of and not dependent on some cheating asshole who didn’t appreciate her at all.

She touched the diamond on her finger and shook her head vehemently. “Never in a million years. If I die penniless in a ditch somewhere, it will be with this ring on.”

“Neither of us want that for you,” I said. “If it’s between eating and that ring, pick eating.”

She tried to give me a reassuring smile. “I’ll figure it out as I go.” Then, she sat back and stared at the stars and I did the same. Her voice was small when she said, “I can’t believe I’m going back to Earth.”

“You almost sound like you don’t want to.”

“I don’t,” she said softly. “But I’m terrified of Halla, Jac. And the conduits and the powers I have...It’s too much—”

“I know. You don’t have to explain it to me. The five days you were in a coma were the scariest days of my life. I don’t want you to...” I huffed and tried to take stock. “I don’t want to lose you like that. If I have to lose you like this by taking you back to Earth, then so be it. At least this way, I know you’re safe and still stand a chance.”

She took my hand in hers, swallowed hard, and said, “Please know, you are always in my heart. You and Deacon both are.”

I knew the ache in my own heart would not dissipate anytime soon. “So are you.”

CHAPTER 23

Deacon

I had expected to feel catastrophically depressed after Sarah and Jac left, but all I felt was a dull numbness, like the world had grown colder. My consort has left me . The more I thought about it, the more numb I became.

There were few Ladrians I knew who had been left like that, and the rarity of the occurrence made me feel all the more alone. Like I had no one to turn to for advice or comfort.

I stumbled out of Allegiant and through Father's flower patch. Their pale blue color was a contrast against the dark green of their stems and leaves. The flowers had a six-pointed star shape to them. No fragrance to speak of, but lovely all the same. I wondered how beautiful Sarah would have looked, had I pinned one behind her ear. It would have suited her, and with that thought, my numbness was displaced by the sting of regret.

"You like the flowers?" Father asked from his front door.

I nodded. "They're very nice."

My father glanced beyond me. "Jac's ship is gone—did he head off on a mission?"

I sighed. "Yes. He is taking Sarah back to Earth."

“Is she alright?” he asked in genuine concern. “The coma—”

“She’s fine. Physically,” I assured him. “But what happened with Mother Portend, and the battle with the conduits, it was all too much for her to manage. I...I made a mistake, Father. I never should have taken her. Not here or anywhere else. It was wrong of me. And I should not have forced her to unite with me before I knew more about her. I was a fool.” I shook my head in disgust.

He walked straight to me and glared. “Do not ever speak of my son that way in my presence.”

I almost smiled at the correction. “But it’s true. Father, I stole her from her home on Earth to bring her here to help our cause—”

“We used to steal humans all the time,” he said, shrugging a ghostly shoulder. “It was our way.”

“It is not my way. Not anymore. Uniting with her was foolish—”

“Deacon,” my father said sternly. “You are not a fool. You do not do things for foolish reasons. You did what you did because you thought you were doing the right thing for your family. I understand that, and I am sure she does, too.”

I rubbed my fingers across my forehead. “She seemed to understand why I did what I did. At the end.”

“Did you mistreat her, Son?”

I straightened at the question. “Outside of taking her from Earth against her will, I tried to treat her with the utmost respect.”

He nodded along. “I was impressed by Sarah. She was very brave to offer to take Jac’s place knowing that it would most likely cost her her life. And she was quick-witted enough to upset Mother Portend by cutting her off when she was about to make her big speech.” Father chuckled at that. “I will not forget the look on the crone’s face when Sarah did that. It was good to see that old woman put in her place, even if just by a little.”

As a ghost himself, my father’s words and praise surprised me. “You did not respect Mother Portend before the fight?”

He looked aghast. “She was a self-important manipulator who used the conduits like her own militia. Halla is safer without her. Once the remainder of the conduits are hunted down and disposed of, we will all be safer for the time being.”

I frowned, suspecting there was more that my father was not telling me. “I know they have not been the only threat here, but I do not know much more than that. Who else has caused you troubles?”

“I am fortunate to live where I do—far away from Faithless,” he said, mentioning a name I’d never heard before. “No one else has caused me trouble, though I do expect trouble down the road.”

“Faithless?” I asked as I sat down wearily on the stone bench outside his house. “What is that?”

“I don’t want to trouble you, Son, you have enough to—”

“Father,” I demanded. “Speak the truth.”

He huffed. “Do you remember Rex Terian?”

That name was a cold knife in my chest. “Yes.”

“Faithless is a territory on the other side of Halla,” he explained. “It is eight days’ walk from here, thankfully. Faithless is as described— without the faith . It is a decrepit, corrupt city. There are no temples there, and when the conduits tried to assert their authority in the area, they were brutally rebuffed. Of all the Ladrians to run it—

“Rex?” I guessed, still feeling a chill at the name.

Father nodded once. “He has fallen from a life as the favored son of a classed family to something of a power hungry bastard warlord, if the rumors are true. He is ruthless and cruel and sadistic and it’s only a matter of time before he will wreak havoc on planets outside of Faithless, including ours.”

I shuddered at the thought. As much as it had crushed me to watch Sarah leave, a part of me was relieved she was no longer on Halla and in harm’s way. “Then Sarah will be safer on Earth.” Because if Rex Terian ever found out who Sarah was and what she was truly capable of—

“It was the fight with the conduits that sent her back, right?” Father asked.

“I believe so, yes.”

His eyes crinkled with his smile. “You did right by her, as much as your circumstances would allow, and you have nothing to regret,” he said in an attempt to soothe my conscience. “And now, you are no longer united and single.”

“I may be no longer united, but there are many things I regret.” Rex Terian being a major one .

“Regret is something we have in common. The fight with the conduits was a messy thing, and considering Sarah’s injuries and what could have happened to her, it makes sense for her to leave. I do not like that she left you behind, but I understand why she did it. Mortal fear is a powerful motivation.”

My jaw clenched. “I can’t help but feel like all of this is my fault.”

“You were bold, Son. Your plan was brave. You want to raise an army and defeat the most powerful family on Orhon, the Bateens—there are many kilometers yet to go. Your steps forward will not be without some stumbles along the way. No war ever started easily. I trust you in all things. You will win this conflict, one way or another.”

“You are not angry with me for wanting revenge against Justice Bateen for beheading you and imprisoning Silence?”

He sighed. “I do not like the pursuit of revenge—not because I don’t understand it. I do. But I do not like it, because I want my family to be safe despite everything I’ve put everyone through. I want you to be safe.” Then, he stared out at the forest. “But safety is an illusion. Something we tell ourselves so we can sleep at night. Something we hope our children will have, even though no Ladrian in history has ever been safe from everything. That is not the nature of living. The nature of living is to live life. To experience every facet before we die. If I asked you to stop your quest for revenge, it would be like asking you to stop living. You deserve to experience this life as you want to experience it. On your terms. I respect you too much to ask for anything less.”

Relief poured through me, that I at least had his blessing to move forward with my plan, even if it was without Sarah. “Thank you, Father.” I thought about what had precipitated this need for revenge, and Justice’s fierce reaction to it all. “Father, why did you carry on your affair with Silence?”

He frowned. “I love her. I told you this.”

“I know, but...” I ran my hand over my hair, stalling for time. I wasn’t sure how to ask him what I needed to know. “You knew what you were risking by moving forward with her. Not just our family, but Justice’s wrath for both yourself, and Silence, his own daughter. He murdered you and condemned her to prison until Jac rescued her. I know you love her, and you are in love with her, and you love your children by her—that’s not why I’m asking.”

I hesitated, trying to gather the rest of my thoughts to put them into the right words. “I am asking, because I do not understand love the way that I believed I did before knowing Sarah.” Because what I’d felt for Silence before discovering her affair with my father paled in comparison to the overwhelming emotions I now had for Sarah.

Father’s eyes filled with surprise. “Are you in love with her?”

I laughed nervously. “Would it be wrong to be in love with her, so soon after meeting her?”

“No. Not at all. Sometimes, your ghost simply knows. Being in love is not always an obvious or easy thing.”

“Were you in love with Mother?” I asked.

“I still am, Son.”

His answer shocked me, all things considered. “How do you know?”

“Love is both an instinct and a measure of contrasts.”

I frowned at him and scuffed my boot on the stone pathway beneath the bench I was

sitting on. “I don’t understand.”

“It is the difference between how you feel when they are near versus how you feel when they are far. It is in the way your body feels when you think of them. The knot that forms in your gut when you think of something bad happening to them. The surety you feel in your bones, knowing what you would do to anyone who would do them harm. And the elation that takes you over, when you see something go well for them. Their joy is your greatest achievement, their sorrow, your greatest wound. It is an unstoppable force that overrides all sense of right and wrong, because it is what is right, no matter what is wrong.”

His reply was long and winded, but I knew exactly what he meant. He had perfectly described my feelings for both Sarah and Jac. But it also sounded like madness, and I was too upset to let his description of love hang in the air unchecked. “Is that how you justified stealing my future from me?”

Father sighed, and had the grace to at least look contrite. “Yes.”

“You do know how irresponsible that was—”

He laughed. “I lost my head for it, Son, and Silence was banished to prison. I am aware my actions were insane, but I couldn’t help it. But I am crazy about Silence, even in the afterlife. She and the twins are my everything.”

“I am glad you have each other, Father.” I glanced toward the house and frowned. “I worry for her being here with the twins, though.”

“As do I,” he agreed. “Justice, as we all know, is capable of anything.”

I nodded. “I intend to get my crew off-world as soon as I can. If you would like, I can take Silence and the twins with us to keep them safe.”

A sly glint entered my father's eyes. "I was thinking of something more...permanent and binding."

His comment confused me. "You cannot unite with Silence. Unions are not permitted for ghosts," I reminded him.

"Not a union with me ." He sighed and looked me directly in my eyes. "But someone I trust. I know this is selfish of me to ask after all I've done, but I need you to protect Silence, and the twins."

"Of course, Father," I promised him. "Anything you need."

"Good." He gave a satisfied nod. "With Sarah now gone, and you are again single, I want you to unite with Silence. It is the only way to assure that she and the twins are well protected and guarded."

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:36 am

Sarah

Lakeworth Forest was bathed in moonlight that made the enormous oak trees the perfect place to hide Sovereign . Jac had tucked the ship between a thick thatch of them before he opened the cargo bay for me. The warm Earth filled my lungs with the scent of rotted leaves in the autumn breeze. South Carolina, in all her glory.

“Goodbye, Jac,” I said, tears making my throat tight. “I’ll never forget you.”

He gave me a sad, gut-wrenching smile. “You are always in my heart, Sarah Hollinger.”

I stepped onto my home world and had never felt less at home. Once my feet were on earthly soil, the cargo bay door went up, stealing my view of Jac. Everything within me screamed to run back to him. To tell him I had made a huge mistake and to take me back to Orhon, and Deacon, too. But then flashes of Jac on his knees with Mother Portend’s hand on his shoulder came to mind, and I knew I couldn’t put him, or anyone else, in such a dangerous position again.

I forced myself to turn toward Ryan’s mansion and marched forward. A house full of safety and the protection his money had brought me, which is what I thought I’d wanted. What I needed. Now, it all just felt so wrong. Now that all the drugs that he’d insisted I take were out of my system, there was a clarity to my thoughts that hadn’t been there for the past year.

I smiled to myself. I hadn’t been crazy after all. I hadn’t been hallucinating. I was Volatile Bateen’s daughter, half-alien royalty, and seeing and communicating with

ghosts is a part of my genetic make-up.

The mansion was bigger than I had remembered—ostentatious might have been a better word than merely bigger . Something about the overly manicured flowers and those decorative touches around the doors and windows, it all seemed out of place. Unnatural. It was nothing as sweet and pastoral as Deacon's father's home with the blue flowers that seemed to grow wherever they wanted and the simple silver roof.

As I came toward the front door, I noticed my sister's cars were parked nearby. I wonder how long I've been gone, Earth time. I'm sure I'm about to find out. Taking a deep, fortifying breath for what lay ahead, I pressed my finger to the biometric lock, hoping I was still in the system.

An alarm sounded and startled, I jumped back. "What the fuck?"

The door swung open and a large man I didn't recognize stood before me. His eyes widened in shock when he saw me, and he grabbed my arm and quickly ushered me inside.

I stood in the foyer, and he looked outside, his gaze scanning the mansion's grounds. "Are they still here?" he demanded to know.

"Who?" I asked, completely confused.

He shut the door behind me, peeping out the window next to it, his brows furrowed together. "Your kidnappers. Are they still here?"

Did he mean Jac? "Uh, no, I'm fine—"

"Sarah?"

My sister Jenny's excited voice rang out, and I turned toward the sound as she ran to

me from the living area of the house with an excited squeal of happiness. I smiled at seeing her, and had the thought that the heavy streaks of blue in her hair would have been more appropriate on Halla than inside Ryan's fancy, and oppressive, home.

"Oh, my God, you're okay! We've all been so worried!" She wrapped me up in a hug and tried to squeeze the life out of me, while my other sister, Elizabeth, ran to join us. She clamped down on both of us, as we cried together.

When the nice moment was over, Elizabeth stepped back, concern in her eyes as she looked me over. "Where have you been? Who kidnapped you? Are you alright?"

"No one kidnapped me," I fibbed until I could figure out how to explain everything. "I'm fine. It's a long story—"

"You're fine ?" Ryan barked irritably as he entered the foyer. "Do you know how much trouble you have caused me and you're fucking fine ?"

I pursed my lips, annoyance swirling in my stomach. "Nice to see you too, Ryan," I said flatly.

"Let me look at you." He took my hands in his, spread them wide, and gave me a once over before his gaze narrowed on my face. "Are you hurt? You look...odd."

God, it was still the same old shit with him. I jerked my hands from his grasp, refusing to let him make me feel inferior, like he used to. "I'm not hurt," I said through gritted teeth.

Ryan braced his hands on his hips, looking completely put out as he glanced over at the man who'd answered the door. "Marshall, contact your boss and let him know we will no longer be needing his services. Sarah is fine, no thanks to you."

The large man's face colored in embarrassment, and with a curt nod he left the house,

his cell phone to his ear. Ryan slammed the door shut after him.

“Who is he?” I asked.

Ryan scoffed. “I had to hire a company who deals with kidnap negotiations to—”

“You did what?”

Elizabeth stepped up to me and put a hand on my arm. “I insisted he hire them. After you were gone with no note, and no calls from the kidnappers, we didn’t know what was happening. The police could only do so much, and we needed experts to handle the situation.”

I nodded, remembering what Deacon had told me about sending his android, Lanai Dea, to Earth in human form as a police officer investigating my missing person case so that it would seem as though real law enforcement was pursuing the issue.

“Okay, that makes sense,” I mumbled, realizing just how much worry I’d put them through. My sisters at least.

Jenny, the more gregarious, happy-go-lucky of my two sisters, grinned and gave me another hug. “I’m just so relieved they let you go.”

“I...I wasn’t taken .” I didn’t like lying to her, but I didn’t know what else to say without any of them thinking I’d lost my mind and gone certifiably insane. How do I explain any of it?

“What do you mean you weren’t taken?” Ryan snapped.

Elizabeth, the caretaker sibling who avoided conflict at all costs, put her arm around Jenny and said, “Uh, we should get going. I’m sure you have a lot to talk about with Ryan, and this conversation sounds like you could use some privacy.”

Ryan's hands fisted at his sides as he glared at me, ignoring my sister. "You go missing for over a month, and you weren't even kidnapped?" he snarled furiously. "Do you know you missed the Founder's Banquet for work? I needed you there and you left me high and dry. Where the fuck were you that was more important than supporting me at a work event?"

Anger shot through me, that he'd turned things around and make the situation all about him. Of course he would, the narcissistic asshole!

All the times I had told myself that Ryan loved me...all the times I had tried to make his mansion into our home because that's what he'd expected of me. The time I had wasted on him, trying to do whatever it took to make him happy, including going on medications that had fogged my brain and dulled my senses, because he'd insisted I was not in the right mind when I told him about the ghosts I saw.

As that fury inside me built, I looked around and realized there wasn't a trace of myself to be seen anywhere. His mansion was my address, but it had never been my home. I had been nothing more than a shell of myself during our entire relationship. Someone Ryan could control and mold into a perfect little Stepford wife.

Then, with clarity, I realized, I am fucking done with him.

I straightened my shoulders, and with my brain cleared of any drugs or depressants, I finally fought back. "How is your neck these days, Ryan?" I asked, narrowing my gaze on him. "Still not able to go down on a woman, because of your neck problems, right?" I asked, reminding him of the excuse he'd always given me, during sex.

He frowned, marring his perfectly handsome face, despite the Botox injections he received once a month. "What are you talking about? Of course I still have neck issues."

"Really?" I laughed, then lowered my tone to mock the voice he'd used when I'd

watched him on Deacon's ship monitor as he'd fucked Lanai Dea. "Mmm , you taste so fucking good...that's what you told the cop you screwed in our bed when I went missing. I bet you don't even remember. How many women ago was that for you, Ryan?"

Jenny removed Elizabeth's hand from her arm, her eyes lighting up gleefully. "Oh, we are not going anywhere," she told our sister.

Elizabeth seemed riveted by the conversation, too, and they stood and watched my confrontation with Ryan, instead of leaving.

Ryan's face flushed. "You're being ridiculous. Obviously, you've been off your meds for too long—"

"I saw you, Ryan," I said, stepping toward him and jabbing him in the chest with my finger. "I saw everything . Including pictures of you and our dentist, you and our neighbor—"

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said, shaking his head as though he felt sorry for me. "Clearly, you are delusional and you need your pills."

I laughed, but the sound lacked any humor. "I've never been more lucid and clear headed. I'm never taking those things again. They were how you kept me under your control and always doubting myself so I never asked questions, like why did you have so many late night meetings at hotels, and why did you come home smelling like perfume so many times? You stopped me from trusting myself and what I know is true, and you will never do that again."

He glared at me and my sisters. "It's a shame, you know? When I found you in that coffee shop, you seemed like the right girl to fit into my life to be the perfect fixer upper. Sweet and quiet and someone I could mold into a suitable wife and in return I'd give you all the things you'd never had. But I got bored quick, and I had to find

real women to spend my time with. Can you blame me?"

I laughed again, unphased by his deliberately hurtful words and insults. "A real woman, huh? The cop you fucked was an android, Ryan. A fucking robot."

He rolled his eyes and pointed to Jenny and Elizabeth. "You heard that, right? Androids? Your sister isn't making any sense. This is why she needs her medications. You two gave me shit for her prescriptions when she disappeared and blamed me for her taking too many, saying I probably killed her with the pills, but this shit is why I had her on them," he railed at my siblings. "This is the kind of shit I had to put up with on a daily basis. First ghosts, then some bald man stalking her, and fucking androids, now?" He shook his head in disgust. "She is unstable and a danger to herself. I told you so."

"Android?" Elizabeth asked with a wince, while Jenny looked fascinated by the entire conversation and everything I'd revealed. "Sweetie, are you sure you're feeling okay?"

"I am feeling great, actually. Better than ever." My thumb probed the giant diamond on my left ring finger, and just touching it made me feel calmer, more centered. More sure of what I wanted in my life. "You see this?" I asked, lifting my hand and showing them the ring.

"Jesus," Elizabeth gasped.

Jenny's eyes widened, too. "I don't even like diamonds, but that's beautiful. Did Ryan upgrade your old stone before—"

"I didn't buy that." Ryan's voice rose in anger. "Where is the ring I bought you?"

I smirked at him. "I think Allegiant probably ate it, considering how the place cleans up cum towels with a snap of the finger."

He shot my sisters another incredulous look. “You’re hearing this, right?”

“This ring is going to take me to my real home.” I glanced at my sisters, making my choice, which was my happiness, for the first time ever. “Jenny, Elizabeth, I love you both more than damn near anything, but I have to do this. I will be back to explain everything one day, I promise, but I have to go now.”

Jenny nodded as if understanding, while Elizabeth frowned in that pragmatic way of hers. “What are you talking about? Who gave you that ring? Are you going back to him?”

“Them . There are two alien men who love me, and I love them. They are where I belong.” Praying my sisters would forgive me, I turned the ring just as Deacon had instructed. In a flash of light, I vanished right before their eyes and appeared back on Allegiant , in the infirmary.

I smiled, already giddy with the knowledge that I’d soon be reunited with the two men I adored and loved. The two men I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, even if that meant embracing my powers as a conduit and facing all my fears. With the two of them by my side, I could do anything.

I’d never felt so alive as I did in that moment, and I quickly searched the ship for anyone, but no one was there. I glanced out the windows, seeing that Allegiant was still parked next to Valor’s home on Halla. Thank goodness .

I ran out of the cargo hold, searching for Deacon. The front yard was empty, as was the house. Where the hell is everyone? I didn’t have any other way to contact them.

Someone gasped behind me. I turned, expecting to see Deacon.

It was Omen.

She gushed with excitement, “Moons above, you came back!”

I grinned at her enthusiasm and nodded. “And I am eager to see everyone. Where are they?”

From overjoyed to seeing me, to nervous in a flash, her lips puckered as she stalled. “Uh, well—”

“What is it?” Now, worry trickled through me. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yes, everyone is fine, but...” She fidgeted where she stood. “I am not sure you should go see them. Not right now.”

All the anticipation of seeing Deacon and Jac deflated right out of me. “What are you talking about, Omen? What is going on?”

She frowned and huffed, before she gestured for me to follow her. “Come with me. You will find out eventually, so no sense stalling.”

I couldn’t be more confused as we walked around to the back of Valor’s home. The short blue flowers in front were nothing compared to the verdant, breath-taking garden in the back. Multicolored flower vines draped over the chest-high wooden fence. Well, chest-high for me, but hip-high for the Ladrians.

The middle of the yard was peppered with tall trees and big bushes, each one more colorful than the last. I smiled at the sight. They were like the trees from a Dr. Seuss book—fluffy rainbow pompoms of strands that could have been leaves or flowers dangled from the highest spots, while the many tight clusters of trunks were skinny, like bamboo.

People stood in the middle of them, but I couldn’t make out who they all were. The trees were clumped too tightly together to be able to see anyone unobscured.

Omen didn't meet my eyes when I asked, "What's going on?"

She merely said, "They're over there."

Wave's familiar voice carried as I walked toward the copse of trees. "...day of Muraska, I unite Deacon Amroll-Bellket Ladrang to the Princess Silence Reticent Bateen. May you produce many heirs."

Standing there, facing one another, were Deacon and Silence. I recognized those words from when I'd united with Deacon, and my blood ran cold at the realization of what was happening, while my eyes burned hot.

My heart felt as though it had stopped beating in my chest, and I mumbled my last hope. "This can't be real. It has to be a...hallucination."

But I knew it wasn't. Deacon was no longer mine. Now, he belonged to Silence Bateen, and I had no one to blame for the union but myself since I'd been the one to leave him.

An awful, strangled sound rose up into my throat and escaped me at the crushing blow.

What was I going to do now?