



# Asking Fur Trouble (Paranormal Dating Agency #88)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Bess Campos never imagined that escaping her dead-end job would lead to an interstellar adventure wild enough to change her life forever. When offered a chance at a fresh start on an alien planet, she doesn't expect to find herself face-to-face with a gorgeously muscled prince who makes her heart race faster than a shooting star!

Prince Charov Mavac, heir to an alien shifter throne, needs a mate—fast. With his coronation approaching and political pressure mounting, the commanding royal asks for help in desperation. What he doesn't anticipate is meeting a fiery Earth woman whose curves and sass challenge everything he thought he knew about love and leadership. Now he's got his royal hands full with a stunning human who's as independent as she is irresistible!

As Bess and Charov navigate the treacherous waters of royal politics, their undeniable chemistry grows stronger by the day. Can a determined human woman embrace her destiny as an alien queen? Will the proud prince risk everything for the mate who's captured his heart? Or will power-hungry rivals and ancient traditions tear them apart before they can claim their cosmic happily ever after?

**Total Pages (Source):** 45

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:44 pm*

## ONE

Bess stared at the fresh stack of manila folders that had materialized on her desk while she had been in the bathroom. Her stomach sank as she recognized her boss's distinctive sticky note on top with his messy scrawl: "Need these processed by EOD. -Martin"

Her fingers hovered over her phone where a text from her friend Alicia glowed: Still on for tonight? Jake's friend is super excited to meet you!

"Not again," Bess whispered, flipping through the stack of manila folders. At least thirty claims, each requiring meticulous review. The blind date she had been looking forward to all week slipped away like sand through her fingers.

Martin chose that precise moment to stroll by her office with his coffee in hand. "Ah, Campos, you saw the Hendricks accounts. They're high-priority clients."

"But I already have the Westfield portfolio due today," Bess said, gesturing to the equally intimidating stack she had been working through since early morning.

"That's why I brought these to you." Martin's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Nobody else has your attention to detail. And the quarterly review meeting is next week. This could really strengthen your promotion case."

The dangled carrot. Always the carrot.

"Right. Of course." Bess forced a smile as Martin walked away.

Her fingers typed out the inevitable reply to Alicia: Have to cancel. Work emergency. Again. I'm so sorry!

Alicia's response came almost instantly: Bess! That's the third time this month! Your vagina is going to grow cobwebs!

Bess snorted despite herself. Her cheeks flushed hot as she typed: Better than getting fired. Rain check?

She set her phone face-down and pulled the first folder from the stack. Through the window beside her desk, she could see people heading home for the weekend. They were laughing and chatting animatedly, probably planning Friday evenings full of fun and perhaps even romance. Meanwhile, her "big night" would involve the humming fluorescent lights and the janitor's vacuum cleaner as background music.

"Jake's friend would have been perfect for you," said the little voice in her head. "Remember what his profile said? Engineer, loves hiking, six-foot-two..."

Bess shook away the thought and focused on the claim in front of her. As the office emptied, the quiet settled around her like a familiar blanket. By seven o'clock, she was the only one left on the floor.

"There goes another Friday night," Bess muttered, stretching her arms above her head. Her body ached from sitting too long.

She opened her desk drawer and pulled out the emergency chocolate she kept for nights like this. As she unwrapped it, her phone lit up with another message from Alicia: Just FYI, Jake's friend has forearms like a Greek god and apparently knows how to make a mean breakfast.

Bess groaned and let her head fall to her desk with a soft thud. "Fantastic. Just what I

needed to know right now.”

The clock on her computer read 7:23 PM. The stack of completed claims was growing, but she still had hours to go. Another night of dedication to a job that demanded everything and returned just enough to keep her coming back.

At 10 PM, Bess finally called it a day. The night air felt cool and refreshing on her skin compared to the stale office atmosphere. Her heels clicked a lonely rhythm against the sidewalk as she fumbled with her phone, dialing Martin’s number. Three blocks to her apartment, and she could finally collapse into bed.

“Martin? It’s Bess.” She shifted her purse to her other shoulder, wincing at the ache in her neck. “I finished processing all the Hendricks claims. They’re ready for your review.”

“What about the Westfield portfolio?” Martin’s voice came through sharp and clear as if he’d been waiting for her call.

Bess’s steps faltered. The streetlight above cast harsh shadows across her pale face. “I... had to put those aside to finish the Hendricks claims. You said those were the priority.”

“I never said to neglect existing commitments, Campos.” His voice took on that patronizing tone she had grown to dread. “The Westfield portfolio was supposed to be submitted today as well. Do you know how this makes us look?”

A lump formed in her throat. “You gave me thirty new cases at four in the afternoon.”

“I expect better time management from someone who wants that promotion.”

Bess stopped walking entirely, her free hand balling into a fist. The night breeze

tossed her wavy brown hair across her face as another group of laughing thirty-somethings passed her, headed for the bars and clubs that lined the next street over. Their carefree existence felt like something from another universe.

“I stayed late tonight finishing what you asked me to do.” Her voice came out smaller than she intended.

“And I appreciate that dedication, but results matter. I need you to come in this weekend and finish the Westfield portfolio. No excuses.”

The unfairness of it all crashed over her. Three years of canceled plans, of working through lunch breaks, and of being the first one in and the last one out. Three years of “almost” getting that promotion.

“I can’t keep doing this, Martin. I?—”

“This attitude isn’t helping your case for that promotion, Bess,” he cut her off abruptly. “I expect you in the office tomorrow, nine sharp.”

The call ended with a click that felt more like a slap. Bess lowered her phone and tucked it into her purse as her vision blurred with tears.

A soft cough made her look up.

A petite older woman stood a few feet away, her white hair gleaming under the streetlamp. Her blue eyes, lined with the wisdom of decades, held an unexpected warmth. She wore an elegant burgundy coat despite the mild evening, and something about her bearing suggested old wealth and older secrets.

Bess quickly wiped at her eyes, mortified that a stranger had witnessed her professional humiliation. The woman’s gaze didn’t waver, neither judging nor

pitying, but something more... evaluative.

Heat crept up Bess's neck under the scrutiny. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, suddenly aware of how disheveled she must look after fourteen hours at her desk.

The woman tilted her head, her eyes sparkling in the lamplight. "You look like someone who could really use a stiff drink," she said, her voice carrying the confidence of someone who knew things—important things. "I'm Gerri Wilder, by the way."

She extended a manicured hand, her nails painted a perfect burgundy that matched her coat and the designer handbag hanging from her elbow.

Bess hesitated, then accepted the handshake. The woman's grip was surprisingly strong for someone who couldn't be more than five feet tall.

"Bess Campos," she replied automatically, wondering why she was engaging with a total stranger. But something about Gerri's presence felt... reassuring. "And honestly, a drink sounds amazing, but I should probably eat first. I haven't had anything since..." She tried to remember when she had eaten last. The granola bar at her desk around noon?

"Darling, you're practically fading away in front of me," Gerri remarked knowingly. Her gaze raked over Bess with an intensity that felt almost physical. "I know a fantastic restaurant just around the corner. Best risotto in the city, and they make a martini that'll make your toes curl."

The way she said "curl" sent a strange tingle down Bess's spine. Alarm bells should have been ringing. Following a stranger to a restaurant after dark wasn't exactly Safety 101. But Gerri Wilder seemed more likely to arm-wrestle any potential threats into submission than pose one herself.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:44 pm*

TWO

“I really should just go home,” Bess protested weakly, even as her stomach growled loud enough for both of them to hear.

Gerri’s perfectly shaped eyebrow arched. “Home to what exactly? Leftover takeout and paperwork?”

The accuracy of her guess made Bess blink. “How did you?—”

“Honey, you’re carrying enough tension in those shoulders to power a small city. Besides,” Gerri winked, “I know a workaholic when I see one. Takes one to know one.”

Against her better judgment, against the responsible voice that reminded her about her 9:00 AM Saturday obligation, Bess felt herself nodding. The prospect of sitting alone in her apartment with nothing but Martin’s disappointment echoing in her head suddenly seemed unbearable.

“Sure,” she said. “Why not?”

Gerri beamed, and for a second, Bess could have sworn her eyes flashed gold. It must have been a trick of the streetlight.

“Excellent decision! This way.”

Gerri looped her arm through Bess’s with the casual familiarity of an old friend and

guided her down the street with a brisk pace that belied her small stature. Her designer heels clicked with purpose against the pavement as if each step was precisely calculated.

As they walked, Bess felt an odd sensation blooming in her chest. It took her a moment to recognize it as spontaneity—something so foreign to her carefully scheduled life that it nearly made her dizzy. Or perhaps that was just hunger.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Bess murmured, more to herself than to her companion.

Gerri patted her arm. “Sometimes the best decisions are the ones we don’t overthink. And trust me, darling—” she stopped in front of an unmarked door with only a small brass plaque indicating it was a business at all, “—you need this more than you know.”

Bess peered at the plaque that simply read “Stellato’s.” No menu posted and no hours listed. She lived in this neighborhood for three years and had never noticed this place before.

Gerri pushed the door open, and warm golden light spilled onto the sidewalk. The scent of butter, herbs, and something exotic Bess couldn’t name wafted out. Her stomach growled again in response.

When Bess stepped inside, she noticed how the restaurant defied its nondescript exterior. Vaulted ceilings with twinkling lights created the illusion of dining beneath stars. Plush velvet booths in deep jewel tones lined the walls, and in the center, a bar of polished stone gleamed. Despite the luxurious setting, only a handful of tables were occupied, their patrons engaged in hushed conversations.

A tall, impossibly elegant man materialized beside them. “Ms. Wilder, always a



pleasure.” He bowed slightly. “Your usual table is ready.”

“Thank you, Darian.” Gerri guided Bess through the room with proprietary ease.

Their booth sat in a secluded corner with a perfect view of both the door and the small stage where a woman played a haunting melody on an instrument Bess had never seen before.

“First things first,” Gerri announced once they were seated. She snapped her fingers, and Darian appeared with two martini glasses filled with iridescent liquid. “Drink.”

Bess took a tentative sip and gasped as the flavor bloomed across her tongue—citrus and spice and something deeper, like memories of summer nights distilled into liquid form. Heat radiated through her body, dissolving tension she hadn’t realized she was holding for so long.

“This is incredible,” Bess admitted, taking another sip.

“Now, tell me about this boss who makes you work until ten on a Friday night,” Gerri prompted, her eyes gleaming with interest that seemed both professional and personal.

Perhaps it was the strange martini or the surreal setting, but Bess found herself pouring out every frustration. The endless claims, the perpetually dangled promotion, and the way Martin took credit for her detailed work while blaming her for any delays.

“Three years,” Bess said, slicing into the truffle risotto that had appeared without her ordering it. “Three years of canceled dates and lost weekends. My friend told me today that my vagina is growing cobwebs.”

Gerri threw her head back and laughed. “Your friend has a valid point. What was the last truly exciting thing you did?”

Bess opened her mouth and mumbled, “I... went to a seminar on insurance regulations.”

“Oh, honey,” Gerri placed her small hand over Bess’s. “That’s not living—that’s extending your work hours with educational content.”

“Well, what would you suggest?” Bess asked, surprised by the defensive edge in her voice.

Gerri leaned forward, her eyes suddenly flashing that strange gold Bess had noticed earlier. “How about an adventure that would make even your wildest dreams seem tame? A journey to another world and a date with a shifter prince.”

Bess nearly choked on her risotto. “I’m sorry, a what prince? In another world?”

“A shifter. Someone who can change forms. And yes, on another planet. One where the sky is purple at sunset and the oceans glow at night.” Gerri’s expression remained completely serious. “I can take you there. Tonight.”

“Right.” Bess laughed nervously. “And I suppose we’ll fly on your spaceship?”

“Not exactly, but close.” Gerri’s smile didn’t waver.

Bess set down her fork. This woman was clearly delusional—charming and generous with her expensive dinner, but delusional, nonetheless. Yet something about Gerri’s unwavering certainty made Bess hesitate.

“Look, I appreciate the fantasy you’re offering, but I have work tomorrow and?—”

“Work that crushes your spirit and steals your joy,” Gerri interrupted. “Work for a man who doesn’t value you.”

The truth of those words hit like a punch to the gut. Bess stared at her half-empty martini. When had her life become so... predictable? So empty?

What if this is real? a small voice whispered inside her head. What if there are worlds beyond this one and possibilities you’ve never imagined?

Bess suddenly pulled out her phone, her heart beating faster. Before she could change her mind, she opened her email and typed:

Martin, I quit. - Bess Campos

She hit send then downed the rest of her martini in one gulp.

“Okay,” Bess said, her voice shaking with either terror or exhilaration. “Take me to this other world and introduce me to your shifter prince.” She took a steadying breath. “Either I’m about to have the adventure of a lifetime, or I’m following a lunatic after foolishly abandoning my career, and honestly, both options sound better than processing the Westfield portfolio tomorrow.”

Gerri’s smile was incandescent. “That’s the spirit! Now finish your risotto. Interstellar travel requires proper nourishment.”

Bess laughed, dizzy in the aftermath of her decision. Three years of predictability and postponed happiness shed in a moment of either pure bravery or utter stupidity.

## Page 3

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### THREE

Charov dug his climbing claws into the yellow cliff face of Mount Sarakon. The rush of adrenaline surged through his veins as he hauled himself up another ten feet, his muscles bulging beneath his form-fitting climbing gear. The two suns of Nova Aurora beat down on his broad shoulders and cast twin shadows on the rock face below.

“Coming up slow today, Your Royal Teddy Bear!” Oberon called from thirty feet above, his hulking form perched on a narrow ledge like some impossibly tall spider. “Age finally catching up with you?”

Charov snorted, finding another grip. “Just enjoying the view. Something you might try instead of racing up everything like it’s a competition.”

“Life is a competition. Especially with you.” Oberon flashed a wide grin. “And I’m winning.”

The bear shifter growled, his inner beast stirring at the challenge. With renewed vigor, he scaled the sheer cliff face in powerful, deliberate movements, eating up the distance between them.

Both men paused to catch their breath on the narrow ledge, the sprawling forests of Mavac Territory stretching out beneath them. The view was breathtaking—a thousand shades of purple and azure cut through with silvery rivers that caught the yellow and orange lights of the two suns.

“Your mother contacted me this morning,” Oberon said, taking a swig from his hydration pack. “Asked if I could talk some sense into you.”

“And what did you tell her?” Charov wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his forearm.

“That it would be easier to teach a wolf to sing opera.” Oberon chuckled. “She’s worried, though. With your father’s condition...”

Charov’s jaw tightened. “Which is exactly why I need this.” He gestured to the expansive view. “Once the crown sits on my head, my life becomes meetings and treaties and diplomatic functions. This—” he indicated the mountain, the sky, and the freedom, “—becomes a memory.”

The weight of impending responsibility pressed down on him harder than any mountain. His father’s illness had progressed faster than anyone anticipated. Soon, all this fun and excitement would end.

“Your Highness craves one last taste of adventure before becoming a stuffy old monarch?” Oberon’s tone was light, but his brown eyes held understanding.

“Something like that.” Charov surveyed the route ahead—challenging, dangerous, and exhilarating. Just the way he liked it. “Ready for the hard part?”

“Born ready.” Oberon checked his harness. “Though I’ve been meaning to ask—why climbing? Your bear form could just lumber up here in half the time.”

Charov’s blue eyes sparkled with mischief. “Where’s the fun in that? The bear gets enough time to play.” He flexed his hands, feeling the strength in them—the human part of him craved conquest as much as his bear did. “Sometimes the man also needs to remember what it feels like to be alive.”

Without warning, he launched himself upward, finding invisible handholds in the sheer rock face. His taunting echoed against the mountainside as Oberon cursed and scrambled to follow.

If these were to be his last moments of freedom, Charov intended to make every single one of them count.

He pulled himself higher and higher, feeling the satisfying strain in his muscles. The physical exertion was a temporary distraction from the thoughts that had been plaguing him since the royal physician had delivered the news yesterday: his father King Sawyr had just a few weeks left, if that.

“Hell of a view from up here, isn’t it?” he called down to Oberon, masking the hollow feeling in his chest with practiced ease. The bear inside him growled with displeasure at the deception, wanting to roar his grief to the mountainside.

Charov surveyed the expanse of his territory. Soon, it would all be officially his to rule. The thought landed like a stone in his gut.

The wind picked up, carrying the scents of the forest below—pine and wildflowers and the distant musk of a herd of elkara grazing in the valley. Charov inhaled deeply, committing the smell to memory. These were the moments he would need to recall when trapped in endless meetings and obligations.

He found a ledge wide enough to pause on and braced his back against the rock face, letting one leg dangle over the thousand-foot drop. The danger heightened his senses, making him feel alive when everything else inside him felt like it was dying alongside his father.

“You’ve been unusually quiet today,” Oberon noted, joining him on the ledge with a grunt.

Charov stared out at the horizon, where the two suns were beginning their slow descent. “The physician says my father won’t see the next full moon.”

It was the first time he had said the words aloud. They tasted bitter on his tongue.

“Shit.” Oberon ran a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. “I didn’t know it had progressed that far.”

“Neither did my father.” Charov clenched his jaw. “He hid his illness from everyone for a long time, including my mother. Claimed he didn’t want to worry us.” His fist clenched around a loose stone, crushing it to powder between his fingers. “Stubborn old bear.”

“Like father, like son.”

“My mother won’t leave his bedside. I’ve never seen her look so... broken.” The image of his mother Queen Zyre’s tear-streaked face haunted him. She had always been a pillar of strength. Seeing her crumpled beside his father’s bed had shaken something fundamental in Charov’s world. “True mates aren’t built to live without each other.”

The reality of what lay ahead crashed over him like an avalanche—the funeral rites, the coronation, the weight of an entire territory looking to him for leadership, all the while watching his mother fade from grief. And underneath it all, the suffocating knowledge that his days of freedom were numbered.

“Sometimes I think about just... running.” The admission surprised even him. “Taking to the mountains in my bear form and never looking back.”

“But you won’t,” Oberon said simply.

“No.” Charov shoved away from the rock face and reached for the next handhold. “I won’t. But for today, I’m still just a bear shifter who needs to climb.”

He attacked the rest of the ascent with fierce determination as if he could outclimb the destiny waiting for him below.

Later that evening, Charov sprawled across his oversized bed, his muscles pleasantly sore from the day’s climb. His royal quarters—all massive timber beams, stone walls, and floor-to-ceiling windows—glowed silver in the moonlight. He had showered away the sweat and dust of Mount Sarakon, but the exhilaration still hummed in his veins.

The ride back to the castle had been too short. Each turn of the wheels had brought him closer to the reality he was trying to escape—a dying father, a heartbroken mother, and the imminent weight of a crown he’d always known would be his. But not like this. Not this soon.

He reached for the crystal decanter on his bedside table and poured three fingers of Nova Auroran whiskey into a glass. The burn down his throat matched the fire in his chest—grief, anger, and a restless energy that demanded release.



### FOUR

His bear prowled beneath his skin, beyond agitated. The animal didn't understand politics, only pack and territory and the primal need to run free. Sometimes Charov envied its simplicity.

A sharp rap at the door interrupted his brooding. Before he could respond, Torborn Arona—the royal assistant whose spine seemed permanently fused into a straight line—stepped into the room.

“Your Highness.” Torborn bowed so precisely it could have been measured with a protractor. “The King requests your presence immediately.”

Charov didn't move, deliberately swirling the whiskey in his glass. “Does my father request me, or does the King command me? There's a difference, Torborn.”

The assistant's face remained impassive, though a muscle in his jaw twitched. “His Majesty used the word ‘request,’ Your Highness. But his condition has... deteriorated since this morning.”

The glass froze midway to Charov's lips. Something cold slithered down his spine, but he kept his face neutral. “Deteriorated how?”

“The royal physician believes His Majesty may not survive much longer.”

The words landed like physical blows. Not weeks anymore. Just days.

Charov set the glass down with deliberate care, though his bear wanted to hurl it against the wall. “When were you planning to tell me this, Torborn? Before or after I finished my drink?”

“I’m telling you now, Your Highness.” A rare flash of emotion—something close to sympathy—crossed Torborn’s face. “And if I may speak plainly...”

“When have you ever not?”

“Your father is asking for his son. Not the prince. His son.”

Charov stood, his imposing height forcing Torborn to look up. The bear in him wanted to roar, to break something, to run until his lungs burned and his legs gave out.

“Tell him I’ll be there shortly.” His voice came out steadier than he felt.

“Your Highness, I don’t believe ‘shortly’ is?—”

“I said I’ll be there.” The words rumbled with a touch of his bear’s growl. “Now leave me.”

Torborn bowed again and retreated, closing the door silently behind him.

Charov began pacing his chambers like a caged predator, each step marked by the flexing of his powerful muscles beneath his tailored black shirt. A vase nearly toppled as he passed, his broad shoulder clipping the pedestal. He caught it with lightning reflexes, then considered smashing it against the wall anyway. The destruction would match the chaos inside him.

He ran his fingers through his dark hair, disheveling the perfect style he normally

maintained. “Fuck,” he growled, the word bouncing off the stone walls.

After five more minutes of useless pacing, Charov straightened his shoulders and headed toward his father’s royal chambers. The guards posted outside stiffened to attention as he approached, their eyes carefully avoiding his. They knew. The entire castle probably knew by now. It wouldn’t be long before his father was dead.

The royal chambers smelled of medicine and illness—scents that assaulted his sensitive shifter nose. His mother sat beside the massive bed where his father lay propped against silk pillows. The once-mighty bear shifter king had been reduced to a shadow, his broad frame now gaunt and his golden skin ashen. Only his eyes remained unchanged—piercing amber orbs that locked onto Charov with unwavering authority as Charov entered the room.

“Son.” The word was barely a whisper, yet it held the weight of command.

“Father.” Charov crossed to the bed, kneeling beside it despite his aversion to submissive postures. Even dying, his father deserved respect.

The king’s hand trembled as he reached for his son. Charov clasped it, shocked by how cold the skin felt. Bear shifters ran hot—always. The chill in his father’s fingers was more alarming than any medical diagnosis.

“Mavac Territory needs stability,” his father said, pausing for a labored breath. “And you... need a queen.”

Charov’s muscles tightened. “With all due respect, Father, I think Mavac Territory needs a strong king first. Let me establish myself before?”

“No.” The king’s voice strengthened momentarily. “Our people need to see continuity. They need to know our line is secure. I need...” He faltered, rare emotion

breaking through his kingly facade. “I need to know you won’t be alone.”

Charov felt trapped, perfectly cornered. The bear inside him snarled at the constraint. “Father, finding a mate takes time. It’s not something?—”

“I’ve taken care of that,” his mother interjected softly. Her elegant hand stroked her mate’s arm, but her gaze fixed on her son. “I’ve contacted Gerri Wilder.”

The name hit Charov like ice water. Gerri Wilder—the paranormal matchmaker whose reputation extended across worlds. The woman who claimed 100 percent success in finding true mates.

The woman who would effectively end his freedom altogether.

“You what?” Heat flushed through him, his bear rising dangerously close to the surface. “Without consulting me first?”

“Your father is dying,” his mother snapped, fire flashing in her eyes. “And his last wish is to see his bloodline secure. Is that too much to ask, Charov? Is your... lifestyle ... worth denying him peace?”

Charov recoiled as if slapped. The barb found its mark. His “lifestyle” as she delicately put it—the string of willing partners, the avoidance of commitment, the constant chase for the next thrill—suddenly seemed trivial against his father’s mortality.

“She’s found someone,” his father rasped. “A human woman. Your match.”

“Already?” Charov didn’t bother hiding his dismay.

His father’s grip tightened with surprising strength. “Promise me, son. Promise you’ll

meet her. Wed her. Continue our line.”

Charov stared into his father’s golden eyes, seeing both the king and the father who had taught him to shift, to hunt, and to lead. The man who had shaped him into who he was.

“I promise,” Charov said finally, the words tasting extremely bitter. “I’ll meet this woman. I’ll...” He swallowed hard. “I’ll wed her for Mavac.”

Relief flooded his father’s face, and his mother’s shoulders relaxed slightly.

Inside, Charov’s bear howled in protest. He silently vowed to keep emotional distance from this arranged mate. He would fulfill his duty, but he would fortify his heart against the kind of love his parents shared—the kind that was destroying his mother as his father slipped away.

There was no possible way he would ever allow himself to be so vulnerable.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:44 pm*

### FIVE

The crisp night air hit Bess's face as she stepped out of the restaurant with Gerri. Her stomach was full of incredible food, but her mind was spinning faster than a tornado.

"What the hell am I doing?" Bess whispered under her breath, tugging at the hem of her sensible blouse. "I just quit my job. In an email. To go to... another planet? With a stranger?"

Gerri glanced over her shoulder with a knowing smile that crinkled the corners of her bright eyes. "Having second thoughts already, dear? Most people do. It's completely normal."

"Normal? There's nothing normal about this!" Bess's voice pitched higher than intended. "Aliens? Shifters? Wormholes? Thirty minutes ago, I thought all these things only existed in movies!"

"Life is certainly full of surprises." Gerri's petite form seemed to glide rather than walk as she led them away from the restaurant, her designer heels clicking with renewed purpose against the pavement. "But trust me when I say, the universe has much more in store for you than processing insurance claims for a man who doesn't appreciate you."

Bess followed obediently as her mind raced through all the responsibilities she had just abandoned. "My apartment... my plants... my phone payments..."

"Details we can sort out later." Gerri waved her manicured hand dismissively. "First

adventure, then logistics.”

They soon arrived at the city power plant, a hulking concrete structure that hummed with electricity. Gerri approached a side entrance with unexpected familiarity, punching a security code into a keypad with practiced ease.

“You have access to a power plant?” Bess hissed, looking over her shoulder as if expecting security to descend upon them.

“I have access to many things, dear.” Gerri winked, holding the door open. “Harold! We’re here!”

A lanky man with thinning hair and thick glasses rushed forward. “Ms. Wilder! Right on schedule.” He glanced at Bess with undisguised curiosity. “This is the one?”

“This is she.” Gerri placed a warm hand on Bess’s elbow, guiding her toward an industrial elevator. “Harold manages this power grid and helps me with my little transportation needs.”

The elevator doors slid open, revealing a steel cage that looked like it had been installed when the plant was built decades ago.

“We’re going down in that?” Bess’s knees felt weak.

“Don’t worry,” Harold assured her with a gap-toothed smile. “I serviced it myself just last week.”

Somehow, that didn’t make Bess feel any better.

The descent was longer than Bess expected, giving her ample time to question every life choice she had ever made. The elevator finally shuddered to a halt, opening to

reveal a long concrete corridor with a single door at the end. The nameplate read “G. Wilder” in elegant script.

“You have an office 1000 feet below a power plant?” Bess asked, following Gerri down the corridor.

“Not an office, darling. A gateway.”

The room beyond the door was surprisingly sparse—just concrete walls, floor, and ceiling, with no furniture or decorations. Gerri reached into her designer handbag and pulled out what looked like a small metal egg.

“Watch closely now.” She brought the egg to her lips and whispered something Bess couldn’t hear.

The egg began to hover, floating away from Gerri’s palm to the center of the room. A soft blue glow emanated from within it, growing stronger and brighter until Bess had to shield her eyes. The light expanded outward, forming a perfect circle in the air big enough to walk through.

And then, impossibly, the circle filled with an image—a landscape unlike anything Bess had ever seen. Purple forests stretched beneath a blue sky. In the distance, yellow mountains rose majestically, their peaks capped with what looked like blue snow.

“Welcome to Nova Aurora,” Gerri said, her voice filled with satisfaction at Bess’s slack-jawed amazement. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It’s... it’s real?” Bess whispered, her hand reaching out involuntarily toward the shimmering portal.



“As real as you and me. Shall we?”

Before Bess could answer, Gerri took her hand and stepped forward. One moment they were in the concrete room; the next, Bess felt a rush of wind, a disorienting swirl of light, and then?—

Her feet touched solid ground. Warm air caressed her skin, carrying scents both familiar and foreign—something like lavender but sharper and sweeter.

“I can’t believe it,” Bess breathed, turning in a slow circle. “I’m really on another planet.”

Bess’s head still whirled from the wormhole travel as she followed Gerri along a cobblestone path gleaming in the afternoon sunlight. Her body tingled with a peculiar energy that made her skin feel electrically charged and her mind fully awake despite her lack of sleep.

“That’s the Sapphire Sea,” Gerri pointed toward the gleaming expanse of water that shimmered with an impossible pink that shifted to yellow near the shoreline. “The color comes from microscopic crystals suspended in the water.”

“It looks like someone dumped cotton candy into it,” Bess murmured, unable to tear her gaze away. Her fingers itched to touch it, to know if it felt as magical as it looked.

They soon passed through a marketplace where vendors with decidedly non-human features haggled good-naturedly with customers. One merchant, his skin a beautiful copper tone with subtle scales along his neck, offered Bess a fruit that resembled a star-shaped peach.

“Go on,” Gerri encouraged with a mischievous smile. “Food here is compatible with human digestion. Mostly.”

Bess took a cautious bite and nearly moaned as flavors exploded across her tongue—honey, citrus, and something spicy that lingered pleasantly at the back of her throat.

“Oh my,” she whispered, wiping juice from her chin. “This makes Earth food taste like cardboard.”

The merchant beamed, his amber eyes crinkling with pleasure. Gerri flipped him a coin and he caught it with clawed hands.

They continued through winding streets where the buildings seemed to be grown rather than built, their organic curves flowing into one another. Bess noticed how people—beings?—nodded respectfully to Gerri. Some even bowed.

“You’re kind of a big deal here, aren’t you?” Bess asked, hurrying to keep up with Gerri’s surprisingly quick pace.

“Let’s just say my services are highly valued.” Gerri’s eyes twinkled with secrets. “Speaking of which—look ahead.”

Rising above the tree line stood a castle that defied earthly architecture. Massive stone towers spiraled upward, connected by bridges that seemed to float without support. The stone itself appeared alive, shimmering with veins of gold and silver that pulsed like heartbeats under the two suns.

“The Mavac Castle,” Gerri announced proudly. “Home to the Mavac bear shifter royal family and your prince date.”

Bess’s stomach flipped with sudden nerves. “You know, twelve hours ago I was filing insurance claims. Now I’m about to meet an alien bear prince?” She tugged at her blouse. “I’m not dressed for this, Gerri.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Gerri patted her arm reassuringly. “Prince Charov isn’t interested in your clothes.”

“That’s not as comforting as you might think,” Bess muttered, earning a laugh from the older woman.

They approached the massive entrance gate where two guards stood at attention. Both were at least seven feet tall with shoulders broad enough to fill a doorway. Their faces remained impassive, but their eyes tracked every subtle movement with predatory focus.

“Gerri Wilder,” one announced, his voice a rumbling bass that Bess felt in her chest. “Queen Zyre and Prince Charov are expecting you.”

The enormous gates swung open without a sound revealing a courtyard paved with stones that subtly glowed underfoot. A fountain at the center featured a massive bear rearing on its hind legs, water cascading from its open jaws.

Bess’s heartbeat thundered in her ears. This was really happening.

“Remember,” Gerri whispered, squeezing Bess’s hand, “just be yourself.”

“My boring, insurance clerk self?” Bess hissed back.

“There’s nothing boring about you, dear. You just haven’t had the chance to discover that yet.”

Once they made it inside the castle foyer, Bess’s practical heels sank slightly into plush carpets that seemed to shift colors with each step. The stone walls soared upward, inlaid with what looked like actual gemstones forming intricate patterns that told stories she couldn’t decipher.

A man of medium height with silver-streaked hair and a face lined with experience rather than age approached them with measured steps. He bowed slightly to Gerri.

“Ms. Wilder, what an honor.” His voice was crisp and formal. “I am Torborn, assistant to the royal family.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:44 pm*

SIX

Bess fought the urge to curtsy, settling on an awkward half-bow that made Gerri's lips twitch with amusement.

"The Queen and Prince await in the Azure Room," Torborn said, turning on his heel.

As they followed, Bess leaned toward Gerri. "Should I address her as 'Your Majesty' or?—"

"Just follow my lead, dear," Gerri whispered back. "And try not to hyperventilate when you see the prince."

Bess rolled her eyes. "I'm sure I can handle?—"

The words died in her throat as they entered a circular room with azure-tinted windows casting otherworldly light across elegant furnishings. A regal woman rose from an ornate chair, her long silver-blond hair cascading over shoulders draped in midnight blue silk.

But it wasn't the queen who stole Bess's breath.

It was the man standing beside her.

Prince Charov towered over everyone in the room, his broad shoulders stretching the fabric of a charcoal suit cut to perfection. Dark brown hair was swept back from a face that could have been sculpted by Renaissance masters—strong jaw, high

cheekbones, and lips that were inexplicably both firm and sensual. His eyes, piercing blue like arctic ice, locked onto Bess with an intensity that made her knees weaken.

Holy mother of?—

“Gerri!” The queen’s excited voice broke the moment. “You’ve brought us our guest!”

Gerri glided forward, embracing the queen with familiarity that shocked Bess. “Zyre, radiant as always. May I present Bess Campos of Earth.”

Queen Zyre turned warm eyes to Bess. “Welcome to Mavac Territory, Bess. We’ve heard wonderful things.”

“You have?” Bess blurted, immediately regretting it. “I mean, thank you, Your... um, Majesty.”

“King Sawyr sends his regrets,” Queen Zyre continued. “He’s indisposed with matters of state today.”

Charov made a sound—something between a grunt and a sigh—that drew Bess’s attention back to him. His expression had darkened, a muscle twitching in his jaw. When he noticed her watching, his face smoothed into practiced charm.

“Ms. Campos.” His voice was deep, rumbling like distant thunder. “Welcome to our home.”

Bess stood frozen as he approached, taking her hand in his much larger one. Heat radiated from his skin, sending tendrils of warmth up her arm. Up close, she caught his scent—pine forests after rain and something wild and masculine that made her pulse quicken.

“We’re so pleased you accepted Gerri’s invitation,” he continued, his eyes moving over her with unmistakable male appreciation. His gaze lingered on the curves of her hips before returning to her face with a heat that made her face flush.

“I’m happy to be here,” she managed, though “overwhelmed” would have been more accurate.

They spoke with the queen for nearly half an hour, Gerri and Zyre bantering while Bess tried not to stare at Charov. He remained mostly silent, answering when addressed but volunteering nothing. Yet his eyes barely left Bess, tracking her smallest movements with predatory focus.

“Charov,” Gerri finally said, “why don’t you show Bess the royal gallery? She’s quite interested in your family’s history.”

“I am?” Bess whispered.

“You are,” Gerri confirmed with a wink.

Charov stood and helped Bess out of her chair. “It would be my pleasure.”

His hand on her back sent electricity through her body as they left the room, and Bess couldn’t help but feel like prey being led away by a particularly magnificent predator.

After about twenty minutes, Bess struggled to match Charov’s long strides as he led her through corridor after gleaming corridor. Her heels slipped against the polished marble that seemed to contain actual stardust, glittering with each step she took.

“This hallway contains portraits of every Mavac ruler for the past three hundred years,” Charov explained, his voice a practiced tour-guide monotone. His hand rested at the small of her back, the heat from his palm burning through her thin blouse.

Bess nodded, attempting to appear fascinated by the stern-faced bear shifters whose eyes seemed to follow her from their frames. “They all have the same... intensity.”

“A family trait.” His gaze swept over her again, lingering on her curves. “We’re known for our... appetites.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly aware of how her basic blouse and skirt must appear to him.

The massive room stretched longer than a football field, paintings interspersed with gleaming weapons and artifacts. Charov recited dynasties and conquests while suddenly keeping a careful distance between them. Despite his apparent disinterest, his eyes kept returning to her, hot and assessing in a way that made her skin prickle with awareness.

“And this medallion was awarded to my great-grandfather after the Battle of—” He broke off, seeming to realize he was losing her. “I apologize if this bores you.”

“Not at all,” Bess lied, fighting the urge to fidget. “Earth’s history is much the same. Men fighting over land, power changing hands.”

His mouth twitched. “A cynic.”

“A realist,” she countered.

Something in his expression shifted, like he’d momentarily seen something interesting before dismissing it. “We should return. Dinner will be served soon.”

Disappointment settled in Bess’s stomach. So much for an alien prince romance. She had traveled across the galaxy to meet a man who was as emotionally distant as her last blind date, just with better abs and a crown.



The dining room dazzled with crystal chandeliers that seemed to float without support. Bess slid into a chair, admiring tableware that shimmered with opalescent light.

“So, Bess,” Queen Zyre began, her smile warm, “Gerri tells me you process insurance claims. That sounds fascinating.”

“Oh, um, it’s really not,” Bess laughed nervously. “Unless you enjoy paperwork and angry phone calls.”

Gerri chimed in, “Bess is being modest. She’s incredibly efficient and smart. Her company has great success because of her.”

“Former company,” Bess corrected, still reeling at the thought of her emailed resignation. “I quit yesterday.”

Charov’s eyebrow arched. “Impulsive.”

“Overdue,” Bess replied, straightening her shoulders. “My boss expected me to work through another weekend with no compensation.”

“And you refused?” Something resembling respect flickered in his eyes.

“I did more than refuse. I finally walked away.”

Charov’s mouth curved slightly as servers brought platters of food that made Bess’s mouth water—meats in glistening sauces, vegetables in colors she’d never seen, and fruits arranged in patterns too perfect to disturb.

As the meal progressed, Bess noticed how Zyre and Gerri chatted like schoolgirls, while she struggled to engage Charov.

“Do you enjoy hunting?” she tried.

“When necessary.” He sliced into his meat with precise movements.

“Reading?”

“When time permits.”

Bess bit her lip, running out of small talk. “What about humor? Do bear shifters have jokes?”

His gaze snapped to hers, a brief flare of surprise. “We laugh.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” she muttered under her breath.

His jaw tightened, but before he could respond, Gerri turned their way.

“Charov, didn’t you promise to show Bess the Nova Aurora sunset? It’s simply spectacular.”

The prince pushed back his chair obediently, extending his hand toward Bess. “Yes, I would be delighted to.”

His palm engulfed hers, strong and warm as he helped her stand. The contact sent an unwelcome thrill up her arm. Gerri was right—the man was hotter than a Greek god with a body built for sin. Too bad his personality seemed to be frozen over.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:44 pm*

### SEVEN

Charov swallowed his growing irritation. He had promised no such thing of taking Bess to watch the sunset, but contradicting Gerri Wilder was never a good idea.

As he helped Bess out of her chair at the dining room table, the contact sent another unwelcome jolt of electricity up his arm. His bear rumbled with approval beneath his skin. Seven hells. He didn't need this complication right now.

While he had agreed to meet his mate and marry her to satisfy his father's dying wish, he couldn't believe she was this... boring human from Earth. A paper-pusher who processed insurance claims. He had always imagined his destined partner would be someone exciting like a warrior queen or a renowned explorer. To make matters worse, he overheard this Earthling hadn't even known until yesterday that interplanetary travel was possible.

"The western viewing point offers the best angle," he explained, guiding her through the palace's ornate corridors. His gaze drifted to the gentle sway of her hips beneath her plain skirt. For all her dullness, he couldn't deny how beautiful and sexy she was. Those curves would drive any bear shifter wild.

His inner beast growled with approval. Mine .

Charov silenced it with a mental snarl. This wasn't the time. The mating could wait.

Outside, the royal transport waited, its sleek black exterior gleaming under Nova Aurora's two suns. He helped Bess inside, catching another whiff of her

scent—something floral undercut with a hint of citrus that made his nostrils flare. His bear stirred again, more insistently.

“So,” Bess said as the vehicle glided away from the castle, “you handle the regulatory paperwork for the entire kingdom?”

Charov suppressed a groan. More talk of paperwork. “My administrators deal with a lot of that. I oversee territorial defense strategies and diplomatic relations.”

“That must be exciting.” Her voice was flat.

“It can be.” He tapped his fingers on his knee. “Last year, I led an expedition into the Frostspine Mountains to negotiate a peace treaty with the snow leopard clan. We were caught in an avalanche. I had to shift and dig out eight diplomats before they suffocated.”

For the first time that evening, he saw a flicker of genuine interest in her green eyes. “You actually turned into a bear? To save them?”

“That’s generally what ‘shift’ means.” The words came out harsher than he intended. Damn it. His father’s grave condition was making him cruel. “Sorry. Yes. My bear form is... efficient for many tasks.”

The transport curved along a mountain road, providing breathtaking views of the capital city below. Bess pressed her face to the window, momentarily transforming into someone entirely different—wide-eyed and full of awe.

“It’s all so beautiful,” she whispered.

Charov perked up a little. Perhaps there was more to this human than her dull profession suggested. The thought both intrigued and terrified him. He didn’t want to

be intrigued. He wanted to fulfill his duty without emotional complications.

“You should see it during the Festival of Lights,” he found himself saying. “The entire city glows for seven nights straight.”

“Will I still be here for that?” she asked, turning those piercing green eyes on him.

The question hung between them—a reminder of why she was here.

“That depends,” he managed, unable to look away from her beautiful face. The mate pull was undeniable, tugging at something primal within him. “On how well this... works out.”

Confusion flickered across her face at his comment, but she didn’t pursue it any further. Instead, she turned her attention back to the window, her lips parting slightly as she drank in the view. The silence that fell between them wasn’t the strained one from dinner but something different—more contemplative.

He studied her profile as she gazed outside. The dying light of Nova Aurora’s suns bathed her skin in a golden-crimson glow, highlighting the curve of her cheek and the delicate line of her throat. His bear stirred restlessly, urging him to touch her.

He noticed her complete absorption in the surrounding landscape—the purple forests, the crystalline pink lakes, and the distant yellow mountain ranges of his territory. There was something refreshing about her genuine wonder in all of it. Most Nova Aurorans took their world’s beauty for granted as he often did himself.

When they finally reached the western viewing point—a stone platform extending from a cliff face—Charov stepped out first, then extended his hand. “Careful. The edge is secure but steep.”

The moment her hand slipped into his, his bear growled with satisfaction. He fought the impulse to pull her flush against him.

She gasped as she stepped onto the platform. “It’s... I don’t have words.”

He instinctively placed his arm around her waist as he guided her toward the edge. The protective gesture surprised him—it wasn’t calculated, just necessary. Her curves fit perfectly against his side, her warmth seeping through the thin fabric of her blouse. His fingers splayed possessively against her hip.

“You’re safe,” he said, his voice dropping lower. “I won’t let you fall.”

The two suns hung low on the horizon, one blood-orange, the other amber-gold, casting long shadows across the valley below. The capital city glittered as buildings began illuminating for the coming night.

“I’ve seen this sunset thousands of times,” he admitted, surprised by his own candor. “But I haven’t really looked at it in years.”

She leaned slightly into his touch, unaware of how the small movement sent his pulse racing. “How could anyone get used to this? It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Her voice held such sincere appreciation that he found himself seeing his homeland through new eyes. The way the two suns cast dual shadows, how the crystalline spires of the city refracted the light into countless rainbows, and the distant calls of moonwings preparing for their nightly hunt.

“There’s a saying in Mavac,” he said, tightening his grip on her waist as a gust of wind swept across the platform. “We do not own the land; we are merely its temporary guardians.”

His bear was unusually calm now, content in a way he couldn't remember feeling since before his father's illness. Her presence beside him felt right as though she belonged there.

"Thank you for showing me this," she whispered, her green eyes reflecting the sunset's fire. "I can't believe twenty-four hours ago I was on Earth stressing about insurance and my nonexistent social life."

He let out a rich laugh, the sound startling them both. When had he last genuinely laughed? "And I can't believe Gerri Wilder set me up with an insurance clerk." He turned to face her, keeping his hand on her waist. "You're full of surprises, Bess Campos."

Her cheeks flushed pink in the fading light. "I haven't done anything surprising."

"But you have. You appreciate things." He gestured toward the horizon. "You see beauty where others see the mundane. That's rare."

He couldn't tear his gaze from her face as her eyes locked with his. His bear surged forward in his consciousness, demanding he claim her lips and make her his in every way possible. The intensity of the urge shocked him.

Control yourself, he commanded his bear.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:44 pm*

### EIGHT

Charov's heart hammered against his ribs as the seconds stretched between them. The air felt electric, charged with possibilities he hadn't allowed himself to consider since agreeing to this arrangement. This was supposed to be a simple transaction—meet his mate, marry her, and secure the bloodline. Nothing more.

Yet here she stood, all soft curves and genuine interest, making him feel things he had no business feeling with his father dying and a kingdom waiting to fall on his shoulders.

“We should head back,” he said, his voice coming out rough. He reluctantly dropped his hand from her waist, immediately missing her warmth. “It's getting late.”

She blinked, seeming to snap out of whatever spell had momentarily bound them together. “Right. Of course.”

He guided her back to the transport with a firm hand on the small of her back, hyperaware of every point of contact between them. His bear growled its displeasure at the distance he was forcing himself to maintain.

Once inside the vehicle, he put deliberate space between them, though the confines of the backseat made it nearly impossible to avoid the brush of her thigh against his. The scent of her—floral with that hint of citrus—filled the enclosed space, making his nostrils flare and his mouth water.

“Are you always this quiet?” she asked, breaking the loaded silence.



He turned to look at her, surprised by her boldness. “Only when I’m fighting the urge to do something I shouldn’t.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Like what?”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Careful what you ask. I don’t typically hold back when directly questioned.”

His bear prowled restlessly, urging him to close the distance, to taste her, and to claim what was rightfully his. It took every ounce of his considerable willpower to remain seated on his side of the backseat.

“You’re not what I expected,” he continued, his gaze traveling over the swell of her breasts beneath her blouse before returning to her eyes.

“What did you expect?”

“Someone who wouldn’t make this complicated.”

She tilted her head, confusion crossing her features. “Make what complicated?”

He leaned forward, the space between them shrinking. “This little arrangement. I wasn’t supposed to actually...” He trailed off, his jaw clenching.

“Actually what?” she pressed, leaning toward him unconsciously.

“Want you,” he finished, the words escaping before he could stop them.

The transport hit a bump in the road, sending her tumbling against his chest. His arms instinctively wrapped around her, steadying her, then pulling her close. The feel of her curves pressed against him sent a jolt of pure desire through his body. His bear

roared in approval, clawing at his insides, demanding he claim what belonged to him.

Not now. Not like this.

He forced his arms to release her, though every cell in his body protested the action.

His bear snarled. Mine. Take. Claim.

“I apologize,” he said, his voice a deep rumble that betrayed his internal struggle.

The silence between them stretched for several moments, punctuated only by the soft hum of the transport’s engine and her slightly elevated breathing. He ran his hand through his dark hair, his usual composure shattered by this woman who had walked into his life mere hours ago.

“I haven’t been the warmest host,” he said suddenly, surprising himself with the honest admission. “And for that, I’m truly sorry.”

Her eyes widened slightly.

“My father is dying,” he continued, the words slipping out easier than he had expected. “He has been ill for months, but recently his condition has deteriorated rapidly. The doctor says he has days left.”

Her expression softened immediately. “I’m so sorry, Charov. I had no idea.”

“How could you? We only just met.” He laughed humorlessly, then looked out at the darkening landscape. “But that’s why Gerri brought you here. My father’s dying wish is that I take a mate before he passes. Secure the line of succession and ensure stability for the territory.”

The transport curved around another bend, the lights of the castle appearing in the distance. He turned back to her, struck again by how beautiful she was in the dim light.

“I agreed to this arrangement to ease his passing. To make my mother’s grief more bearable by giving her something to look forward to.” He leaned slightly closer. “The doctor says the sooner we marry, the better chance my father has of seeing it happen.”

Her mouth fell open, her eyes widening in shock. The color drained from her face as his words sank in.

“M-marry?” she stammered. “But we just met today. I thought this was a... a date.”

He frowned. Had Gerri not explained the situation? That didn’t seem like the matchmaker’s usual style.

“Gerri Wilder brought you here as my mate,” he said, the words coming out more forcefully than planned. His bear was growing impatient with these human courtship rituals. “When shifters meet their fated mates, they know immediately. The connection is... undeniable.”

She stared at him, completely silent now. Her hands clutched her purse so tightly her knuckles turned white.

“You’re saying we’re... what? Destined mates? And that I’m supposed to marry you immediately?” Her voice was but a whisper.

“That was the arrangement,” he confirmed, confused by her reaction. “Did Gerri not explain this to you?”

She only shook her head, her lush lips pressed into a thin line. She turned away from him to stare out the window, her body language screaming discomfort.

His bear paced anxiously. Something had gone terribly wrong here. He should fix it, make her understand—but the words wouldn't come. He had never been very good at these emotional situations.

As the castle loomed closer, the silence in the transport grew heavier. The woman beside him—his mate—had withdrawn completely, her face a mask of shock and confusion.

If he didn't do something now, this entire thing was going to blow up in his face.

### NINE

Bess's thoughts collided like a twenty-car pileup on a foggy highway. Marry? As in wedding bells, vows, and till-death-do-us-part? With a bear shifter prince she had known for approximately eight hours?

The transport's plush leather seat suddenly felt too soft, like she might sink into it and disappear. Outside the tinted windows, alien trees with luminescent purple leaves cast eerie shadows as they drove, making the moment feel even more surreal.

"You're awfully quiet." Charov's deep voice broke through her internal panic. His massive frame took up more than his fair share of the backseat, his knee occasionally brushing against hers with each turn of the vehicle. "Did Gerri not discuss the arrangement?"

Bess studied the intricate patterns on the transport's ceiling, buying more time. Her heart thundered in her chest. Gerri hadn't said anything about marriage. An adventure, yes. A date with an alien bear shifter prince, absolutely. But a wedding? That detail had mysteriously been left out of the brochure.

"Bess?" Charov leaned forward, those impossibly blue eyes searching her face. The movement brought his scent closer—something wild and earthy that made her dizzy in ways she couldn't explain.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding." Her voice came out smaller than she meant, barely audible above the hum of the transport's engine.

Charov's brow furrowed, creating a small crease between his eyes. "What exactly did Gerri tell you about coming here?"

Bess shifted on the seat, her blouse rustling softly. "She mentioned an adventure. Meeting you. Nothing about..." She gestured vaguely with her hands, unable to even say the word marriage without her brain short-circuiting.

His jaw twitched beneath his smooth bronze skin. "That's not like Gerri."

"I need to talk to her." Bess twisted her hands in her lap, her mind racing through a thousand scenarios, none of them ending with her becoming an alien queen.

Charov's large hand moved toward hers, then stopped, hovering inches away before retreating. "Of course."

The transport curved around a bend, revealing the gleaming spires of Mavac Castle in the distance, its crystalline towers catching the moonlight of the twin moons. It was breathtaking—and terrifying.

"I understand this is sudden," Charov said, his voice gentler than before, though still carrying that undercurrent of authority that seemed to be his default setting. "But my father doesn't have much time, and I promised him?—"

"I can't just marry someone I've barely met," Bess blurted out, finally finding her voice. "Even if you are..." she gestured at his entire presence, from his chiseled jawline to his broad shoulders, "...all of this."

A flash of something—amusement?—crossed his face. "All of what, exactly?"

Bess felt heat crawl up her neck. "I need to speak with Gerri first," she repeated firmly, choosing to ignore his question.

Charov nodded once. “Fair enough. But know this—Gerri Wilder doesn’t make mistakes. If she brought you to me, there’s a reason.”

The certainty in his voice sent a shiver down Bess’s spine. She turned to look out the window, watching the glittering castle grow larger. The night sky of Nova Aurora cast everything in a silvery-blue glow, making the landscape look like something from a dream—or perhaps a nightmare, considering she was apparently expected to marry an alien prince she had just met.

Charov cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him. The formality that had stiffened his posture earlier had mysteriously melted away. He leaned toward her, his massive frame somehow less intimidating now that the tension had left his shoulders.

“You know,” he said, a hint of mischief flickering in those impossibly blue eyes, “I’m not always this boring. Promise.”

Despite herself, Bess felt a small smile tug at her lips. “Is that right?”

“Last month I went cliff diving in the Cerulean Canyons.” His voice dropped an octave, taking on a silky quality that sent unexpected heat crawling up her spine. “The drop is three times higher than anything on Earth, and the water below is inhabited by creatures with tentacles longer than this transport.”

Bess’s eyes widened. “And you jumped into that? Voluntarily?”

“Not only jumped—I did a backflip.” He grinned, showing perfect white teeth. There was something almost predatory in that smile that made her heart rate accelerate. “The rush is indescribable.”

The transport curved, and Charov’s thigh pressed briefly against hers. Even through the fabric of her skirt, the contact sent electricity shooting through her body. She

shifted slightly, trying to ignore how her skin tingled where they had touched.

“What else do you do for fun?” she asked, genuinely curious now. “Besides risking your royal neck.”

“Glacier surfing. Desert racing. Zero-gravity combat training.” His eyes never left hers as he listed each activity, his deep voice flowing over her like warm honey. “My father always said I have the soul of an explorer trapped in the body of a crown prince.”

When he mentioned his father, something tender flashed across his features—a glimpse of the pain he was carrying. Bess felt a stab of sympathy.

“They sound like they are good parents,” she said softly.

“The best.” Charov gazed out at the night sky for a moment. “My mother taught me compassion. My father taught me courage. They ruled side by side as equals—true partners in every sense.”

The wistfulness in his voice made something ache in Bess’s chest. He wasn’t just losing a king or a father—he was losing a role model for what love could be.

“And what did they think of your death-defying hobbies?” she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Charov laughed, the sound rich and deep. “My mother banned the royal guards from accompanying me after the third one broke his leg trying to keep up. Said it was either let me go alone or fund an entire hospital wing just for my security detail.”

Bess couldn’t help laughing along with him. This was a different man than the stiff, formal prince who had escorted her around the castle. This version of Charov radiated



life and energy that was magnetic.

“Look,” he said, suddenly serious, leaning close enough that she could feel his breath caress her cheek. “I know this situation is far from ideal. But I want you to know—I’m not the cold bore you met at dinner. I don’t know what I was thinking. But I’d like the chance to show you who I really am.”

The intensity in his gaze made Bess’s breath catch. There was something raw and honest in his expression that hadn’t been there before. The bear shifter prince was showing her his true self in this moment—not the polished royal, but the man beneath the crown.

She wasn’t sure what to make of him yet. But she was certainly more intrigued than she had been an hour ago.

The transport finally came to a stop at the castle’s grand entrance. Bess’s stomach knotted as two imposing guards pulled open the doors. Charov stepped out first, then extended his hand to her. His palm was warm as he engulfed her fingers completely, helping her from the vehicle.

“I’ll have someone show you to your quarters,” he said, his voice low and intimate. His broad frame blocked the cool night air, creating a pocket of heat between them. “We can continue our conversation tomorrow after you’ve rested.”

TEN

The way he looked at her—as if memorizing every feature of her face—made Bess’s heart flutter against her ribs. She could tell this was the real Charov and he was dangerous in an entirely different way.

Once inside the castle, a petite woman with dark hair and luminescent skin waited with hands folded neatly at her waist. She bowed deeply at Charov’s approach.

“Emesyn will take good care of you,” Charov said, his hand lingering at the small of Bess’s back. The heat of his palm seeped through her blouse, branding her skin. “She’s married to my royal assistant, Torborn. You couldn’t be in better hands.”

“Thank you,” Bess managed, acutely aware of how his fingers splayed possessively across her lower back.

He leaned in, bringing his lips close to her ear. “Sweet dreams.” His warm breath sent shivers cascading down her neck, and then he was gone, striding away with the confident gait of a predator.

Emesyn led Bess through winding corridors of polished marble and soaring arches. “You’ll be comfortable here, Miss Campos,” she said, opening an ornate door. “The prince ordered our finest guest suite prepared for you.”

The room was breathtaking—all plush fabrics and gleaming surfaces that somehow managed to feel both alien and welcoming.

“Where’s Gerri?” Bess asked, running her fingers over a strange crystalline flower that seemed to pulse with inner light. “I need to speak with her immediately.”

“Someone called?” Gerri’s voice chirped from directly behind her.

Bess whirled around, nearly knocking over the alien flower. Gerri stood there in a tailored crimson suit that seemed to shimmer as if sewn with living flame, not a single white hair out of place. Emesyn gave a quick bow and discreetly exited, closing the door behind her.

“You!” Bess pointed an accusing finger. “You neglected to mention that this adventure involved an arranged marriage to the alien prince!”

Gerri’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Would you have come if I told you?”

“That’s beside the point!” Bess paced across the plush carpet. “You lied by omission. This wasn’t just a date—Charov expects me to be his wife!”

“I’m an intergalactic paranormal matchmaker, dear,” Gerri said, settling onto a settee and crossing her legs primly. “With a 100 percent success rate, I might add. I don’t just set people up for casual flings.”

Bess stopped pacing. “What does that even mean—paranormal matchmaker?”

“It means I have a gift for finding true mates.” Gerri’s eyes shifted from blue to a startling gold. “And you, Bess Campos, are Prince Charov Mavac’s true mate.”

“He mentioned something about being destined, but?—”

“All shifters have one true mate,” Gerri explained, her golden eyes warm. “The one person in the universe perfectly suited to them. Not all are lucky enough to find that

person on their own—that's where I come in."

Bess sank onto the edge of the bed, still reeling. "And you think that's me? For him?"

"I don't think, darling. I know ." Gerri's confidence was unshakable.

"Don't I get a choice in this?" Bess asked, her voice small against the enormity of what Gerri was suggesting.

"Of course, you do!" Gerri's laugh tinkled like wind chimes. "You're free to leave any time you want. Just say the word, and I'll take you back to Earth."

Bess wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly unsure. The thought of returning to her empty apartment and dull life held none of the appeal it should have. And the memory of Charov's hand on her back, his breath on her ear, stirred something deep inside her.

"I need to think," Bess whispered.

"Think about all you need," Gerri said, rising gracefully. "But remember—true mates are rare. What you and Charov have is special, even if you haven't fully realized it yet."

Gerri's golden eyes twinkled mischievously as she leaned forward, her small frame somehow commanding all the attention in the massive alien suite.

"Is he really that bad though?" she asked, one perfectly arched eyebrow raised. "Bad enough that you wouldn't give this relationship a chance to bloom for a few days at least?"

Bess fidgeted with her blouse as she considered the question. The memory of

Charov's heated gaze during their sunset ride flashed through her mind, along with the way her skin had sparked to life whenever he had placed his hands on her.

"I'm not sure about him," Bess admitted, wincing at how pathetic that sounded. "One minute he's this cold, formal prince giving me the castle history tour like I'm a school group, and the next he's telling me about cliff-diving with alien sea monsters."

"You need to give it time, honey." Gerri's voice softened. "Charov is going through a lot with his father dying."

Bess nodded, recalling the raw pain in Charov's eyes when he had mentioned his father. "He hinted at that in the transport."

"And speaking of not seeing the real person," Gerri continued, folding her hands primly in front of her, "if you think you're not fully seeing Charov's true self right now, honey, I guarantee he's not seeing yours either."

The crystal flower on the nearby table pulsed with soft blue light, casting shadows across Gerri's knowing smile.

"Maybe you should let your fun side out to play," Gerri suggested, her tone light but her eyes penetrating. "Show him there's more to Bess Campos than insurance claims."

A hollow laugh escaped Bess's lips. "I'm not even sure I have a fun side anymore." She stood and crossed to the window, gazing out at Nova Aurora's twin moons hanging like jewels above the alien landscape. "Maybe I am just a boring paper pusher who doesn't deserve the love of someone as amazing as Charov."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Gerri's exclamation was sharp enough to make Bess turn around. The tiny woman had stepped closer to her, her crimson suit seeming to glow

with indignation. “I don’t accept matches who don’t deserve each other.”

Bess blinked, taken aback by the ferocity in Gerri’s voice.

“I see something special in you, Bess Campos,” Gerri said with the utmost confidence. “Something worthy of a queen.”

“But I?—”

“Life has gotten you down.” Gerri reached up to pat Bess’s cheek. “That jerk boss of yours and that soul-sucking job have caused you to lock up your fun-loving side. You just need to reconnect with that part of yourself.”

Bess’s throat tightened. No one had spoken to her like this in years – like they could see beneath her careful veneer of competence to the unfulfilled woman beneath.

“You must have had a fun side as a child or teenager, right?” Gerri prodded.

Memories flooded Bess’s mind – sneaking out of the house at sixteen to go skinny-dipping at the lake with her friends, jumping from the roof of her parents’ garage onto a trampoline at fourteen, hitchhiking to a concert two towns over at seventeen. A smile tugged at her lips before she could stop it.

“There it is,” Gerri said, her golden eyes triumphant. “That’s the woman Charov needs to meet – the one who takes risks, who laughs with her whole body, and who doesn’t worry about tomorrow.”

Bess hugged herself, suddenly feeling exposed. When had she lost that girl? Somewhere between college loans and insurance claims, she had packed that vibrant, daring part of herself into a box and shelved it.

“Charov Mavac doesn’t need a paper pusher,” Gerri’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “He needs a woman who can match his passion for life, who can challenge him and surprise him.” She gave Bess a wink that somehow managed to be both innocent and scandalous. “And from what I know of teenage Bess’s adventures, you’re exactly what that bear prince needs.”

Heat flooded Bess’s cheeks as she realized just how much Gerri seemed to know about her past. “How do you?—”

“Never mind all that,” Gerri waved away the question. “What matters is that girl is still inside you. Let her out to play with the prince.”

### ELEVEN

Charov was unusually anxious as he sat at the polished breakfast table waiting for Bess to arrive. He scanned the entranceway for the tenth time in as many minutes. The morning sunlight streamed through the tall castle windows, bathing the intimate dining alcove in a warm glow. The servants had prepared a spread fit for royalty—which, of course, it was—but he found himself completely disinterested in the food.

When footsteps finally echoed in the hallway, Charov straightened his posture instinctively. His bear senses picked up her scent before she appeared—a delicate mix of something floral and distinctly... Bess.

Then she stepped into the room, and his brain short-circuited.

Gone was the stiff Earth woman in her practical garments. In her place stood a vision in Nova Auroran silk, the pale green sundress clinging to every curve of her body like it had been painted on. Her brown hair cascaded in loose waves around her shoulders, catching the sunlight with hints of gold and amber. The dress accentuated her full breasts and the swell of her hips in a way that made his inner bear growl with delight.

“Good morning.” Her voice cut through his thoughts as she approached the table.

Charov rose to his feet instantly, a primal response he couldn’t have controlled if he had wanted to. “Good morning. You look...” He searched for a word that wouldn’t sound like a crude come-on. “Different.”



A slight blush colored her cheeks. “Good different, I hope? Queen Zyre helped me select something from the royal wardrobe.”

“My mother has excellent taste.” His eyes lingered on the way the silk draped across her thighs as she sat down. His bear clawed at his insides, demanding to get closer to her. Mine , it insisted. Mate .

He poured her a cup of local tea. “Did you sleep well?”

“Better than expected.” She took a tentative sip, her green eyes widening with surprise. “This is delicious.”

“Frost berry tea. It only grows on the northern slopes of Mount Visak.” He leaned back, studying her transformation with unabashed interest. “You seem... much different this morning. Not just the clothes.”

Bess set down her cup. “I’ve been thinking about our conversation yesterday. About all your adventures and experiences.”

“And?” He reached for a piece of fruit, momentarily distracted by how the dress hugged her waist when she shifted in her chair.

“And I realized I don’t even know what I like to do for fun anymore.” Her eyes met his, a new spark of determination there. “I’ve spent so many years buried in paperwork that I forgot what it’s like to actually live.”

Charov’s interest spiked. “That sounds like an invitation.”

“It is.” She smiled, and for the first time, it reached her eyes. “If you have time today, I’d like to experience some of your favorite things. Show me what makes Nova Aurora special.”

The bear inside him practically roared with excitement. “I know exactly what we should do.” A slow grin spread across his face. “But you’ll need to change.”

“Change? What’s wrong with this?” She gestured at her dress with a frown.

“Nothing. In fact—” He cleared his throat, reining in his thoughts. “It’s perfect for dinner in the royal hall. But for what I have planned, you need pants.”

Her eyebrows shot up.

“Are you game?” He leaned forward, challenging her. “Or would you rather stick to the safe, guided palace tour again?”

A flicker of something crossed her face—determination, maybe even defiance. “I didn’t travel across the galaxy to play it safe, Prince Charov.”

He grinned, admiring her newfound boldness. “Meet me at the transport bay in thirty minutes. The blue transport this time.”

“You’re not going to tell me what we’re doing?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” He winked, enjoying the way her cheeks flushed again. “Trust me. You’re going to love it.”

Charov strode into his royal chambers with newfound energy pulsing through his veins. He peeled off his formal attire, the heavy fabrics of royal life dropping away as his bear spirit rumbled with anticipation. This was exactly what he needed today—what they both needed.

“Torborn!” he called out, and his loyal assistant materialized in the doorway. “I’m taking Bess skydiving today. Have the plane prepared and ready. Full safety

protocols, but nothing that will dampen the thrill.”

Torborn’s eyebrows shot up, but he knew better than to question his prince. “Of course, Your Highness. Shall I alert the landing crew to expect two jumpers?”

“Yes. And have a picnic and refreshments waiting at the basin afterward.” Charov pulled on a fitted black jumpsuit that hugged his muscular frame. “We’ll be taking the blue transport. Make it discreet—no royal flags.”

As Torborn departed, Charov caught his reflection in the mirror. Soon, the weight of the crown would limit these escapes. These moments of pure, unadulterated freedom would become rare treasures once his father passed. The thought weighed on him, but he pushed it aside. Today wasn’t about that darkness. Today was about discovery.

He wanted—no, needed—to see what Bess was truly made of. Anyone could be polite at a royal dinner. Anyone could appreciate a sunset. But free-falling through Nova Aurora’s atmosphere? That separated the adventurers from the administrators.

His bear instincts told him there was more to this Earth woman than meticulously filed paperwork. That spark he had glimpsed at breakfast needed kindling, and nothing ignited hidden fire like fear conquered.

The blue transport hummed silently as it pulled up to the transport bay. Charov leaned casually against its sleek exterior, his eyes fixed on the entranceway. When Bess emerged in fitted cargo pants and a simple white T-shirt, her thick hair pulled back in a practical ponytail, his pulse quickened. The simple clothes somehow accentuated her curves more than the fancy dress had.

“Right on time,” he said, opening the door for her. “I appreciate punctuality in a woman.”

“And I appreciate a man who doesn’t keep me waiting.” She slid past him, her scent—now mixed with Nova Auroran soap—flooding his senses.

As the transport glided through the castle gates and toward the mountains, he studied her profile. The nervous energy radiating off her was intoxicating.

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going yet?” she asked, breaking the silence.

“You’ll find out soon enough.” He stretched his arm along the back of the seat, not quite touching her but close enough to feel the heat from her body. “Patience is a virtue.”

“One I’ve never been particularly good at.” She turned to face him, her eyes challenging. “Give me a hint.”

He grinned, enjoying her boldness. “Let’s just say it involves the sky and a spectacular view of my kingdom.”

“That could be anything from a hot air balloon to a mountaintop picnic.”

“Much more exciting than either of those.” The road curved sharply upward, and he watched her gaze drift to the increasingly steep drop beyond the window. “Nervous?”

“Should I be?” Her voice carried just the slightest tremor.

“Fear is just your body’s way of telling you you’re about to do something worth remembering.” He reached over and took her hand, his thumb brushing over her knuckles. “Do you trust me, Bess?”

She hesitated for a heartbeat before answering. “I’m still deciding.”

He laughed, a deep rumble that matched his bear's satisfaction. "Honest. I like that."

The private airfield came into view, and he watched her eyes widen as she spotted the sleek aircraft waiting on the launchpad.

"We're... flying somewhere?"

"Not exactly." He grinned, feeling more alive than he had in months. "We're jumping."

Her mouth dropped open, and he couldn't help but admire the perfect O it formed. He soon got out of the transport and held out his hand, pulling her out with a firm grip.

"Skydiving? You're taking me skydiving?" But she didn't pull away from him as they walked toward the gleaming aircraft. "Are you sure about this?"

"Trust me. It's better than staying on the ground your whole life." He held her gaze, challenging her again. "You said you wanted adventure."

### TWELVE

Charov materialized a sleek jumpsuit from a compartment near the plane, holding it out to her. The black fabric matched his own with subtle Mavac Territory insignia embroidered at the collar.

“Put this on over your clothes. It’ll keep you warm up there.”

She took it, running her fingers over the material. “It feels different than anything we have on Earth.”

“Thermal-regulating nanofabric. One of the perks of dating royalty.” He winked, reveling in how that blush spread across her cheeks.

He watched as she slipped into the jumpsuit, the material hugging every delicious curve of her body. His bear growled with possessive satisfaction at the sight. When she zipped it up, he stepped forward to adjust her collar, deliberately letting his fingers brush against the sensitive skin of her neck.

“Perfect,” he murmured, feeling her pulse quicken beneath his touch.

Oberon, his best friend and head bodyguard, waited for them at the aircraft stairs.

“Your Highness,” Oberon nodded. “The weather conditions are optimal. I’ll meet you at the Basin landing zone after your jump.”

“This is Oberon,” Charov told Bess. “Best pilot in the territory and the only man I

trust with both our lives.”

“That’s reassuring,” Bess said, extending her hand to Oberon.

Oberon’s stoic expression softened slightly as he took her hand. “First time jumping, Miss Campos?”

“First time doing a lot of things this week,” she replied with an unexpected spark. “First interstellar travel, first alien planet, first royal dinner. Why not add plummeting from the sky to the list?”

Charov’s chest swelled with pride. She had more fire in her than she let on. His bear approved.

Inside the aircraft, Charov guided Bess to a seat alongside the viewing window. As they climbed into Nova Aurora’s stratosphere, he watched her face transform with wonder. The dual suns cast a golden-crimson light across the mountain ranges below, illuminating the crystalline lakes that dotted his territory.

“It’s breathtaking,” Bess whispered, pressing her palm against the glass.

“Wait until you’re free-falling through it,” Charov replied, securing her harness to his with practiced movements. “Believe me, there’s nothing like it.”

When they reached jumping altitude, Oberon’s voice came through the intercom. “Opening bay doors, Your Highness.”

The floor beneath them slid open, revealing the vast expanse of sky. Wind whipped through the cabin, and Charov felt Bess tense against him.

“Still game?” he asked, his mouth close to her ear.

She turned and stepped closer to him, their lips inches apart. “Absolutely.”

He secured her tightly against his chest, their bodies pressed together in an intimate embrace. Her curves fit perfectly against his hard frame, and his bear roared with pleasure at her proximity.

“Three,” he counted down, feeling her heart race against his chest. “Two.” He tightened his grip around her waist. “One.”

They plunged into the open air, and Charov’s spirit soared. The rush of wind, the breathtaking view of his kingdom below, and the warm body of a beautiful woman pressed against him—this was living. But something was different this time. The thrill was heightened, the colors more vivid, and the sensations more intense.

Bess’s laughter rang out, pure and uninhibited, as they cut through the clouds. She wasn’t cowering or screaming in terror—she was reveling in it, arms outstretched like wings, embracing the free fall with a joy that matched his own.

“This is incredible!” she shouted over the rushing wind, her green eyes wild with excitement.

In that moment, watching her come alive in his arms thousands of feet above his kingdom, Charov felt something within him shift. This wasn’t just another adventure. This was connection—raw and real.

His bear knew it before he did. Perfect mate.

Charov soon tightened his grip on the ripcord and yanked hard, feeling the satisfying jolt as the parachute deployed above them. The free fall transitioned into a gentle glide, and he immediately wrapped his arms more securely around Bess, pulling her against his chest. Her body molded perfectly to his like she had been designed



specifically to fit there.

“We did it!” Bess laughed, the sound carried on the wind. Her eyes sparkled with exhilaration, more alive and vibrant than he had seen since her arrival.

“You did it,” Charov corrected, his mouth close to her ear as they floated toward the green expanse below. “Most people scream their first jump. You laughed.”

He breathed in her scent, now mingled with adrenaline and pure joy. His bear practically purred with satisfaction deep within him. This was right. This was perfect.

Charov guided their descent with practiced ease, steering them toward the landing zone while keeping Bess securely tucked against him. She gasped as they floated over a crystalline waterfall that cascaded down the mountainside.

“I’ve seen this view hundreds of times,” he admitted, “but watching you experience it for the first time makes me see it all so differently.”

And it was true. Through her eyes, his kingdom transformed from familiar territory to something magical. The suns reflected off the lakes below, creating bursts of golden light that danced across the landscape. The ancient forests, the jagged peaks of the northern mountains, the sprawling plains—all of it felt new again.

“Ready for touchdown,” he warned as the ground rushed up to meet them. “Legs up!”

The landing was smooth, and Charov absorbed most of the impact, keeping Bess steady as they touched down. He didn’t immediately release her from his embrace, savoring the warmth of her body against his for a moment longer than necessary.

When he finally disengaged their harnesses, he caught her staring up at him with flushed cheeks and bright eyes. The wind had teased several strands of hair from her

ponytail, framing her face with wild wisps that he itched to brush away.

“That was amazing,” she breathed, still riding the high of their jump. She spun in a small circle, her arms outstretched. “I’ve never felt so alive!”

Charov couldn’t tear his eyes away from her. The jumpsuit clung to her curvy body, emphasizing the dip of her waist and the fullness of her hips. His bear growled possessively inside him.

“Look,” he said, gesturing toward a grassy knoll where Torborn had outdone himself.

A plush blanket laden with an array of delicacies stretched across the ground beneath a flowering tree. A bottle of Sidaii wine, a Nova Aurora staple, chilled in a gleaming silver bucket. Crystal glasses caught the sunlight, throwing rainbow prisms across the setting.

“Your timing is impeccable,” Bess noted with an appreciative smile.

“One of my many talents,” Charov replied, guiding her toward the picnic with his hand on her back.

They settled onto the blanket, and Charov poured the wine, handing her a glass. Their fingers brushed during the exchange, sending electricity up his arm.

“To new experiences,” he toasted, clinking his glass against hers.

“And to perfect landings,” she added before taking a sip.

Charov watched her throat work as she swallowed, transfixed by the delicate column of her neck. He forced himself to look away, gazing instead at the vast territory spread out below them.

“This might have been my last jump,” he admitted, the words coming out before he could stop them.

“What? Why?” Bess set down her glass, genuinely concerned.

He leaned back on one elbow, his powerful frame stretched out beside her. “Kings don’t typically hurl themselves from moving aircraft. Not good for national security.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she protested. “You can’t just stop doing something you love.”

“It’s part of the responsibility.” He shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant despite the weight of his future pressing down on him. “I’ve been trying to pack in all the experiences I can before the crown becomes mine. Skydiving, cave diving, canyon racing—anything to feel alive.”

He suddenly reached out, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “But today was different. Getting to experience that moment with you... that was what I’ve been looking for all along.”

### THIRTEEN

Bess's skin tingled under Charov's touch. "I felt it too," she admitted, surprised by her own honesty. "That connection when we were falling through the sky together. I've never experienced anything like it." She looked out across the rolling hills of Nova Aurora, the sunlight casting everything in a soft golden glow. "I felt more alive in those moments with you than I have in years."

Charov's intense blue eyes locked with hers. "Tell me more."

"It was like..." Bess searched for the right words, taking a sip of the sweet wine that tasted like cherries and starlight. "Like I'd been sleepwalking through my life until that moment. Filing insurance claims. Saying yes when I wanted to say no." She gestured to the picnic spread between them, the exotic fruits and breads unlike anything on Earth. "I never would have imagined doing something like jumping from an airplane. Or traveling to another planet. Or having a picnic with a bear shifter prince."

Charov laughed, the sound deep and resonant. "And I never imagined my mate would be an Earthling who makes my heart race faster than any freefall."

Bess felt warmth bloom across her cheeks. "Being in your arms, hurtling toward the ground... I should have been terrified, but I had never felt safer."

"I would never let anything happen to you." His voice dropped an octave, sending a shiver down her spine.

She nodded knowingly. “And I’m beginning to understand now what you’re facing,” she said, reaching for a purple fruit that looked like a cross between a peach and a star. “It’s not just your father’s illness. It’s knowing your whole life is about to change.” The fruit burst with flavor in her mouth—sweet with a hint of spice.

Charov nodded, his powerful shoulders tensing. “Freedom has always been everything to me. The ability to chase the next thrill and the next experience.” He poured more wine into her glass. “But duty comes for us all eventually.”

“It doesn’t seem fair that you have so little choice in the matter.”

“Life rarely is.” His hand found hers across the blanket. “But finding you in the middle of all this chaos... maybe the universe knows what it’s doing after all.”

Bess felt that magnetic pull again, stronger than gravity. The wind picked up, playing with the hair escaping her ponytail, and something primal flashed in Charov’s eyes as he watched.

“You’re completely different today,” he observed, his thumb tracing circles on her palm. “More... you.”

“I think I am more me,” she laughed. “Turns out the real me was buried under a mountain of paper and a boss who treated me like garbage.”

Charov leaned forward, his presence commanding the space between them. “I want to know every part of the real Bess.” His voice was a growl that sent heat coursing through her veins. “The parts you’ve shown the world, and the parts you’ve kept hidden.”

The sheer intensity in his gaze made her feel simultaneously exposed and protected. This wasn’t the rigid, polite prince she had met yesterday. This was a man—a

shifter—who saw her. Really saw her.

The tranquility of their picnic shattered like glass when high-pitched screams cut through the air. Bess jerked her head toward the sound, her heart skipping several beats.

“Stay here,” Charov commanded, already on his feet. His relaxed demeanor vanished, replaced with something primal and fierce. Before Bess could respond, he was sprinting toward the edge of the clearing, his powerful body moving with surprising speed.

“Like hell, I will,” Bess muttered under her breath once he was out of earshot.

Kicking off her shoes, she followed at a cautious distance, her stockinged feet silent on the soft earth. The screams grew louder, punctuated by snarls that raised the hair on the back of her neck. She crept to the edge of a small ravine and peered down.

Three children—two boys and a girl who couldn’t be more than eight years old—were backed against a rocky outcropping. Facing them were five beasts that resembled wolves, but with elongated snouts and mottled purple-gray fur that rippled over muscular frames. Their eyes glowed an eerie amber in the sunlight.

“Don’t move,” Charov’s voice reached Bess, though she could no longer see him.

What happened next knocked the air from her lungs.

Where Charov had stood only seconds before, a massive bear now reared on its hind legs. It was at least ten feet tall with dense dark brown fur and shoulders broader than any Earth bear she’d ever seen in documentaries. The beast let out a roar that vibrated through Bess’s bones, and she knew—she just knew—it was Charov.

“Holy shit,” she whispered, gripping a nearby tree for support.

The wolf creatures turned as one, hackles rising as they faced this new threat. The largest of the pack lunged forward, jaws snapping. Charov swatted it aside with one enormous paw, sending it flying several yards away.

Bess tore her eyes away from the magnificent creature and focused on the children. Charov was creating a diversion, but the kids remained frozen in terror. Another wolf creature circled wide, trying to flank Charov, bringing it closer to the children.

Without thinking, Bess slid down the embankment. “Hey! Kids!” She waved frantically. “Come to me, quick!”

The little girl spotted her first, tugging at her companions’ sleeves. Bess crouched low, extending her arms. “That’s it. Run to me. Now!”

The children bolted toward her just as Charov charged into the remaining beasts, his bear form moving with shocking agility for its size. The sounds of battle—snarls, roars, the impact of massive bodies—created a terrifying soundtrack as Bess gathered the children against her.

“Up the hill, fast as you can,” she urged, positioning herself between them and the fight. One of the boys stumbled, and Bess scooped him up without breaking stride. His tiny arms wrapped around her neck as they scrambled upward.

Behind them, a wolf creature yelped in pain. Bess couldn’t help glancing back. Charov had one beast pinned beneath his massive paw while fighting off two others. His movements were ruthless and efficient, his bear eyes flashing with something both wild and intelligent.

Something primal stirred in Bess’s core at the sight of him defending them so

fiercely—something that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with raw attraction.

“He’s protecting us,” the little girl said in awe as they reached the picnic spot.

“Yes,” Bess replied, her voice slightly breathless. “Yes, he is.”

Suddenly, the sleek black royal transport tore across the landscape, kicking up dust before skidding to a halt near the picnic spot. Bess’s heart leaped with relief as Oberon emerged from the driver’s seat. His imposing frame tensed immediately when he saw the three wide-eyed children huddled against Bess.

“What happened?” Oberon demanded, his hand already moving to the weapon at his hip.

Bess pointed toward the ravine, her pulse hammering against her throat. “Wolf creatures attacked these children. Charov shifted to protect them. He’s down there fighting them off right now.”

Oberon cursed under his breath, his face hardening. “Get them in the transport. Lock the doors.” He tossed her a small device that looked like a key fob. “Press this if anything approaches. I’ll go help our prince.”

Before Bess could respond, he was sprinting toward the sounds of battle, his movements fluid and predatory in a way that suggested he might shift at any moment too.

“Come on, little ones,” Bess urged, opening the transport’s door. “Let’s get you somewhere safe.”

The smallest boy clung to her leg. “Are the gall wolves going to eat the prince?”



Bess's stomach tightened at the thought, but she forced a reassuring smile. "No way. Did you see how big his bear was? Those wolves don't stand a chance." Her words were as much to convince herself as the children.

Once inside the luxurious vehicle, Bess tried to distract herself from imagining Charov's massive bear form being overwhelmed by those creatures. The image of him rearing up, protecting them without hesitation, had awakened something deep within her. Her mate. The word echoed in her mind, foreign yet somehow fitting.

God, she had just met him, and already the thought of him being hurt made her chest ache.

"You're shaking," the little girl observed, her purple eyes—so alien yet expressive—studying Bess.

"Just a little cold," Bess lied. "Hey, I'm new to Nova Aurora. Would you teach me some songs from your planet? I could teach you some Earth songs too."

The children's faces lit up, momentarily forgetting their fear.

"You're from Earth?" The older boy gasped. "Do you really have oceans filled with just water? No luminite at all?"

Bess nodded, grateful for the distraction. "Just water as far as you can see. And our moon doesn't change colors either."

"Boring!" the little boy decided, making Bess laugh despite the tension coiling inside her.

"What about Earth animals?" the girl asked. "Can they shift like our people?"

“No shifting,” Bess explained while keeping one eye on the ravine. “Our bears are just... always bears.”

While teaching them “The Wheels on the Bus,” Bess couldn’t stop her thoughts from drifting back to Charov. The fierce protectiveness in his eyes before he shifted. The raw power of his bear form.

She peered through the tinted windows, searching for any sign of movement. What was taking so long? Had Charov been injured? The thought of him fighting for his life made her physically ill. She barely knew him, yet she couldn’t imagine not seeing those blue eyes again or feeling that surprisingly gentle touch from hands that could transform into deadly claws.

Was this what Gerri had meant about true mates? This bone-deep connection that defied logic and time?

She imagined Charov’s powerful arms around her again, the way he had held her during their skydive jump. The intensity in his eyes when he had said he wanted to know every part of her. The commanding timbre of his voice that made her feel simultaneously protected and desired.

He had to come back to her. He had to.

### FOURTEEN

Charov reared up on his hind legs and towered over the largest beast of the pack. His massive bear form cast a long shadow in the suns of Nova Aurora, his fur rippling with muscle as he roared a challenge that echoed through the ravine. The beasts—wolf-like creatures with split jaws and elongated limbs native to the outer territories—had cornered the children in a perfect ambush spot. Now they were the ones being hunted.

The alpha beast lunged at him again. Charov batted it aside with a swipe that sent it backward into the rocky cliffside. His bear growled with satisfaction deep in his chest.

A dark blur crashed through the undergrowth—Oberon, his massive black fur a stark contrast to Charov's dark brown. His friend had arrived in full bear glory and immediately tackled two of the beasts that were trying to circle around.

About time you showed up , Charov projected telepathically, a skill bear shifters shared when both in animal form.

You looked like you were having too much fun without me , Oberon's thoughts rumbled back. Left flank .

Charov pivoted just as another beast attempted to dart past. He charged, forcing it back toward the ravine exit where they wanted the pack to flee. As crown prince, Charov had learned long ago that conservation mattered more than dominance. These weren't evil creatures—just predators seeking prey in his territory. They needed

redirection, not extermination.

Together, they herded the pack, strategically blocking escape routes except the one that led away from settled lands. The alpha beast made a final, desperate lunge at Charov, who caught it with his massive paws and lifted it off the ground. He stared into its eyes, communicating one primal message: this territory is protected.

When he dropped the creature, it scampered away, the rest of the pack following in a disorderly retreat.

They won't be back for a season at least , Oberon projected. That alpha will remember your scent in its nightmares.

Charov nodded his massive head, watching until the last creature disappeared over the ridge. Only then did he allow his bear form to recede, bones cracking and reshaping as he transformed back to his human form.

Naked and covered in dirt, he stood tall, unconcerned with his nudity. Being royal had taught him dignity existed regardless of circumstances.

Oberon shifted beside him with a groan. "I'm getting too old for this shit."

"You're two years younger than me," Charov scoffed, running his fingers through his dark hair.

"Yes, but I don't have a beautiful Earth woman waiting to see if I survived." Oberon smirked as he walked toward the transport, his muscles flexing with each step.

The mention of Bess sent an unexpected surge of possessiveness through Charov. He hadn't planned for, or even originally wanted, this fire she ignited in him, hadn't expected the thrill of showing her his world—or the satisfaction of protecting it while

she watched.

Oberon popped the trunk and tossed him a bundle of clothes. “Your Highness’s royal garments.”

“Shut up,” Charov laughed, catching the simple clothes—black tactical pants and a fitted T-shirt that wouldn’t announce his royal status. He pulled them on with practiced efficiency. “Those kids were from the valley village, weren’t they?”

“Yep. Third time this season they’ve wandered too far.” Oberon dressed quickly. “But first time they had a royal escort and an Earth guardian angel.”

Charov paused. “How was she with them?”

“Your mate?” Oberon’s emphasis made Charov’s eyes narrow. “She had them wrapped safely in her arms by the time I left. She was completely calm despite never seeing shifting before. Not the reaction I expected from a boring human.”

There was that word again—boring—but somehow it didn’t seem to fit anymore. Not after seeing Bess leap from a plane with a wild laugh, not after watching her face light up throughout the day.

Charov felt his bear stir restlessly, hungry for something beyond the simple adrenaline of the fight. “Let’s not keep her waiting then.”

Charov climbed into the back of the elegant transport, his body still humming with post-battle energy. The scent hit him first—Bess’s delicate floral-citrus perfume mixed with the faint sugar smell of young children. The combination stirred something primal in his chest.

“—and that’s how astronauts manage to eat in space,” Bess was saying, her hands

gesturing in a way that had all three children utterly captivated.

The kids—two boys and a girl from the valley village, all with the distinctive silver-flecked hair of hill-dwelling Nova Aurorans—sat cross-legged on the floor of the spacious vehicle. Their eyes widened when they spotted him.

“Your Highness!” The tallest boy scrambled to his knees. “You saved us from the gall wolves!”

“That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen,” the girl whispered, her fingers curling into small fists of excitement.

Charov slid onto the leather seat beside Bess, his thigh pressing against hers. He allowed himself a small smile, enjoying both the children’s reverence and Bess’s subtle shift toward him rather than away.

“I’m just glad I was nearby to hear you.” He leaned forward, dropping his tone to a conspiratorial level. “Though perhaps next time, you three could honor your parents’ warnings about wandering past the eastern ridge?”

The kids squirmed, exchanging guilty glances.

“We were tracking star beetles,” the smallest boy admitted.

“A beetle collection isn’t worth your lives.” Charov’s voice remained even but firm. “My father once told me the true measure of courage is knowing when adventure crosses into foolishness.”

Bess’s hand brushed his, a featherlight touch that sent heat racing up his arm. “The prince is right. Even Earth has dangerous places where children shouldn’t go alone.”

“Do Earth children have royal protectors too?” the girl asked, scooting closer with unabashed curiosity.

Bess laughed, the sound ringing against the transport’s windows like music. “Not exactly. But we have our own kinds of heroes.”

The warmth in her voice when she glanced at him made his bear rumble with pleasure. Charov hadn’t expected to enjoy being anyone’s hero—it felt like another duty, another expectation. But seeing that look in Bess’s eyes made something click into place inside him.

Oberon navigated the vehicle down the winding road to the valley village, a collection of domed houses nestled among ancient trees. Parents waited anxiously at the village center, rushing forward when the transport stopped.

“Remember what we discussed,” Charov said as the children prepared to exit. “Straight home, and no more adventure seeking without proper supervision.”

They nodded solemnly, though he caught the gleam of mischief still lurking in their eyes. Children were the same across all territories—rules were merely suggestions to their wild hearts.

Once the children were safely delivered, Oberon guided the transport back toward their town. Charov turned to fully face Bess, taking in her flushed cheeks and slightly tousled hair.

“You were incredible with them,” he said, noticing her hands trembling slightly in her lap. “Are you all right?”

Her eyes met his, swimming with an emotion he couldn’t immediately place. “I was so worried about you,” she whispered. “Those creatures were vicious, and there were

so many of them.”

The concern in her voice struck him like a physical blow. Not fear of his shifting form—fear for his safety. Something cracked in the careful wall he had built around his heart. His bear surged forward, demanding he comfort their mate.

“Hey.” He captured her hands between his larger ones, marveling at how perfectly they fit together. “I’ve been fighting gall wolves since I was a teenager. They look terrifying, but my bear can handle them.”

“I know you’re capable, but that doesn’t stop me from caring if you get hurt.”

The simple statement slammed into him with unexpected force. When was the last time someone had worried about him—not the crown prince, not the future king, but him? His parents loved him, of course, but they expected his strength. Oberon was loyal but would never show such naked concern.

The mate bond hummed between them, stronger than he had ever felt with anyone. This was what Gerri promised—not just any match, but the perfect match. His true mate.

Charov had fought this connection, fearing the devastating grief he witnessed in his mother. But sitting here with Bess, her eyes shining with worry for him, he couldn’t imagine refusing this gift any longer. The pain of potential future loss suddenly seemed a fair exchange for whatever time they might have together.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way now,” he murmured, more to himself than to her.

“What?”

He smiled, running his thumbs across her knuckles. “Nothing. Just thinking that bears



protect what's theirs."

Charov's hands remained entwined with Bess's, their connection strengthening with each passing moment. His bear purred with contentment—a rare feeling that surprised him. He planned to show her the crystal caves next where the light refracted in ways that made Earth's northern lights look dull by comparison, followed by dinner at Nova Aurora's finest restaurant.

His comm device vibrated against his wrist. The royal crest flashed across the screen—his father's personal line. Concern jolted through him as he tapped to answer.

"Father?"

"My son." King Sawyr's voice sounded stronger than it had in weeks. "I'm having a good day. The best in months."

Charov's heart leaped. "That's wonderful news."

"I hear you've been showing your Earth mate our territory's finest views." There was a hint of playfulness in his father's tone that Charov hadn't heard in far too long.

"Word travels fast," Charov replied, his eyes meeting Bess's curious gaze.

"When the heir jumps from royal aircraft with a human, people notice." His father's chuckle dissolved into a brief cough. "I'd like to meet this brave woman before I rest tonight."

The request wasn't truly a request—it was a royal command wrapped in gentle words. Charov felt the weight of it, along with hope blooming in his chest. If his father was feeling better, perhaps...

But he looked at Bess, remembering how she had thrown herself into every experience today without complaint. His bear growled protectively. She deserved consideration, not commands.

“Father, one moment.” He muted the call and turned to Bess, his eyes intense. “My father is having a good day and wishes to meet you now. I won’t force this on you if you’re tired from our adventures.”

Bess squeezed his hand, her green eyes shining. “Of course, I’d be honored to meet your father.”

Something sharp and possessive flared in Charov’s chest. This woman had just faced wild beasts and skydiving without flinching. Now she would face a king with the same grace.

“We’re on our way,” he told his father, ending the call.

“Oberon, change of plans.” His voice brooked no argument. “Take us back to the castle now.”

Upon arriving, Charov escorted Bess to her chambers. She touched his arm gently, sending electricity through his skin.

“I’d like to freshen up first. Give me ten minutes?”

“Take whatever time you need.” He brushed a strand of hair from her face, unable to resist the contact. “You don’t need to change a thing to impress my father—you’ve already impressed his son.”

The flush that spread across her face sent his bear into a frenzy of possession. He forced himself to step back before he gave in to the urge to claim her lips right there.

Charov soon strode through the royal wing toward his father's royal chambers. He nodded curtly to the guards who snapped to attention. Dr. Morran stood reviewing charts outside the king's room.

"Tell me the truth," Charov demanded without preamble.

Dr. Morran's face fell. "Your Highness?—"

"He sounds better. He feels better. Explain."

The doctor's eyes held the compassion Charov had come to dread. "It's called terminal lucidity, Your Highness. A surge of clarity and energy that sometimes comes before..." The doctor cleared his throat. "It's not a sign of recovery. If anything, it often signals the final decline."

Charov's jaw clenched, defiance rising in him. "You've been wrong before."

"Your father's illness has spread to his bloodstream. It's resistant to all our treatments." Dr. Morran's voice was gentle but unflinching. "I'm sorry, but I recommend you cherish this time with him."

Charov turned away, unwilling to let anyone see the emotions warring on his face. He was about to argue when movement caught his eye. Bess glided toward them down the corridor, and his breath caught in his chest.

She had changed into a Nova Auroran dress of deep emerald that matched her eyes, the fabric flowing around her curves like water. Her hair fell in loose waves past her shoulders, and she had applied a subtle shimmer to her skin that caught the light.

She was magnificent—regal without trying, powerful in her quiet confidence. His mate. His queen.

His bear roared its approval, drowning out the doctor's grim warnings and his own fears. In this moment, introducing Bess to his father was all that mattered. Tomorrow's grief could wait for tomorrow.

### FIFTEEN

Bess walked toward Charov down the royal wing corridor, her heart fluttering in her chest like a trapped bird. The Nova Auroran dress she had chosen—a deep emerald that matched her eyes—whispered against her curves. She had let her hair down in loose waves and applied a shimmery powder, along with other makeup in her bathroom, to her skin that gave her an otherworldly glow.

Charov's eyes darkened when he saw her, his posture shifting from tense discussion with the royal doctor to something more primal. He dismissed the doctor with a curt nod and moved toward her with fluid grace.

“You look stunning,” he murmured, taking her hand in his. His thumb traced circles on her palm, sending shivers up her arm. “My father is eager to meet you.”

“I hope I don't disappoint,” Bess whispered, suddenly nervous. Meeting the king of an alien territory hadn't exactly been on her agenda when she'd woken up on Earth days ago.

“Impossible.” Charov's voice dropped lower, the rumble in his chest almost like a purr. His eyes traced her figure appreciatively. “He'll adore you as much as—” He stopped himself, clearing his throat. “This way.”

Charov pushed open the ornate double doors, keeping her hand firmly in his as they entered the royal chambers. The room was vast yet intimate with tall windows letting in streams of golden light that played across the massive four-poster bed where King Sawyr reclined against a mountain of pillows.

Despite his obvious illness—the pallor beneath his skin, the thinness of his once-powerful frame—there was an undeniable regality to him. Queen Zyre sat at his bedside, her elegant fingers intertwined with his.

“Father,” Charov announced, his voice softening with affection, “may I present Bess Campos of Earth.”

King Sawyr’s eyes—the same striking blue as his son’s—lit up. “So, this is the woman who has my son jumping from aircraft again.”

Bess felt her cheeks warm. “It was my first time skydiving, Your Majesty. I hope I didn’t encourage any royal misbehavior.”

The king’s laughter transformed his face, years falling away in an instant. “Oh, I like this one, Charov.”

“As do I,” Charov replied, his hand moving to the small of Bess’s back, steady and possessive.

Queen Zyre smiled knowingly. “Come closer, dear. My husband has been pestering me with questions about you since we heard of your arrival.”

Bess approached the bed, sinking into a curtsy that she hoped looked graceful rather than awkward. “I’m honored to meet you, Your Majesty.”

“Tell me about Earth,” King Sawyr requested, gesturing for her to sit in the chair beside his bed. “What sort of kingdom did you rule?”

Bess nearly choked. “Oh, I’m not royalty. I was just a regular person—an insurance clerk.”

“Insurance?” The king tilted his head. “Explain this occupation.”

“Well,” Bess began, settling into the conversation, “when people suffer losses or damages, I helped determine what compensation they’re entitled to.” She didn’t mention the soul-crushing monotony, the ungrateful boss, or the canceled dates.

“Ah,” King Sawyr nodded sagely, “so you dispensed justice and mercy. A noble calling.”

Bess had never thought of her job that way. “I suppose I did, in a small way.”

The king’s eyes twinkled. “And what do you think of our Charov? Has he shown you a proper Nova Auroran welcome?”

“Father,” Charov warned, his hand tightening on Bess’s shoulder.

“Your son saved a group of children today,” Bess answered, looking up at Charov with genuine admiration. “He didn’t hesitate before shifting into his magnificent bear and facing down those beasts. It was incredible.”

King Sawyr beamed with pride. “He will make a fine king.”

“The finest,” Bess agreed, surprising herself with how much she meant it. She felt Charov’s eyes on her, intense and searching.

Suddenly, the chamber doors swung open. Gerri swept in, wearing a sleek silver pantsuit that caught the fading sunlight. Despite her small stature, her presence filled the room like a force of nature.

“Your Majesty,” Gerri performed a slight bow with a flourish, “I see you’re looking more vibrant today.”

King Sawyr's eyes crinkled with genuine pleasure. "The matchmaker herself! Come closer, Gerri Wilder."

Bess watched in fascination as Gerri approached the royal bed with the confidence of an old friend. Charov stood behind Bess, his large hand still resting possessively on her shoulder, his thumb occasionally brushing the sensitive skin at the nape of her neck. Each touch sent delicious sparks cascading down her spine.

"You've outdone yourself this time," King Sawyr proclaimed, reaching for Gerri's hand. "This Earth woman is everything my son needs."

Bess felt her cheeks flush hot with embarrassment and pleasure. Charov's fingers tightened slightly on her shoulder.

"I believe you mean everything I want, Father," Charov corrected, his deep voice rumbling through Bess's body like distant thunder. The possessiveness in his tone made Bess's stomach flip with a heady mixture of desire and nervousness.

"Our kingdom will be forever indebted to you, Gerri Wilder." King Sawyr gestured weakly to Queen Zyre, who produced an ornate wooden box from beside the bed. "Please, accept this token of our gratitude."

The queen opened the box, revealing glittering gold coins nestled in dark velvet. Bess's eyes widened. Even she could tell this was no small sum.

Gerri shook her head, her white bob swaying gently. "You know my policy, Your Majesty. I never accept payment for matters of the heart."

Bess blinked in surprise. Who turned down what had to be a fortune in alien gold?

"Then what would you have of us?" the king asked.



Gerri's eyes momentarily flashed golden—so quickly that Bess thought she might have imagined it. “Continue to rule with a fair hand and an eye toward those in need. That's all I ask.”

The sincerity in the matchmaker's voice made Bess's throat tighten. She was beginning to understand why everyone treated Gerri with such reverence.

The king nodded solemnly. “You have my word.”

A knock at the door preceded the royal doctor's entrance. The stern-faced man took one look at King Sawyr and frowned. “Your Majesty needs rest now. All visitors must leave.”

Charov stiffened behind Bess, his entire body radiating tension. She instinctively reached back, placing her hand over his where it rested on her shoulder. The simple gesture seemed to calm him, his muscles relaxing slightly under her touch.

“Come, dear,” Gerri said to Bess, “let's give the family some privacy.”

As Bess rose, Charov caught her hand and brought it to his lips. “I won't be long,” he murmured against her knuckles, his breath warm against her skin. His eyes—intense, searching, hungry—held hers with an almost predatory focus.

Bess nodded, barely trusting herself to speak with those piercing blue eyes locked on hers. She followed Gerri toward the door on unsteady legs, feeling Charov's gaze on her back like a physical caress.

Once outside the king's royal chambers, Bess took a deep breath. The emerald dress clung to her curves as she leaned against the cool stone wall, trying to process everything.

Gerri sidled up beside her, those keen eyes missing nothing. “So? How’d it go today with our bear prince? He seems rather taken with you.”

“I took your advice,” Bess admitted, unable to suppress the smile that blossomed across her face. “I let my fun side out. We went skydiving, Gerri. Skydiving! On an alien planet!” She shook her head in disbelief. “Three days ago, I was canceling a mediocre date to process insurance claims, and today I jumped out of an aircraft strapped to a bear shifter prince.”

“Life comes at you fast, sugar.” Gerri’s laugh tinkled like wind chimes.

“The thing is...” Bess lowered her voice, “I’m actually getting to know the real Charov. Not just the polite prince, but the man underneath. And he wants to know the real me too.” Her fingers traced the intricate embroidery on her sleeve. “But this is all still so strange. Shouldn’t I be back on Earth right now, handling my life? Finding another insurance job?”

Gerri’s eyes flashed golden. “Is that really what you want , Bess? More canceled dates and ungrateful bosses?”

### SIXTEEN

The question hit Bess with almost physical force. She hadn't actually considered what she wanted in years. She had been too busy doing what was expected.

"No," she whispered, the realization dawning on her like the twin suns of Nova Aurora. "That's not the life I would have chosen for myself."

The heaviness of this admission settled over her as they made their way to dinner. She might actually be staying on Nova Aurora. For good. With Charov.

The royal dining room sparkled with crystal and candlelight. Queen Zyre looked elegant but tired, her grief momentarily masked by regal composure. Charov entered moments after Bess, his powerful frame commanding attention. His eyes found hers across the room instantly and he closed the distance between them in three long strides.

"You look lost in thought," he murmured as he pulled out her chair, his breath hot against her ear. His hand briefly skimmed the curve of her waist—proprietary and possessive.

"Just processing a lot," Bess admitted, sinking into the seat. The wine glittered like liquid rubies as a servant filled her glass.

Throughout the meal, Bess found herself studying Charov's features when he wasn't looking—the strong line of his jaw, the way his dark hair fell across his forehead, how his massive hands dwarfed the silverware. Could she see herself here forever

with him? The thought no longer terrified her as it might have yesterday.

“Earth to Bess,” Gerri teased from across the table. “Or should I say, Nova Aurora to Bess?”

Bess blushed, realizing she had missed a question. “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Queen Zyre was asking if you enjoyed seeing more of our territory today,” Charov supplied, his hand coming to rest on her thigh under the table. The heat of his palm seared through the fabric of her dress.

“Oh! Yes, it’s magnificent,” Bess replied, fighting to keep her voice steady as his thumb traced small circles against her leg. “Earth has nothing like your double sunset or those incredible yellow mountains.”

As conversation flowed around her, Bess continued to process her revelation. This connection she felt with Charov—it was unlike anything she had experienced. Electric. Primal. There might really be something to this fated mate concept after all.

“More wine?” Charov’s question pulled her from her thoughts. He leaned close, his muscled shoulder pressing against hers, his blue eyes dark with unspoken promises.

“Please,” she answered and found she meant it in more ways than one.

After dinner, Bess accepted Charov’s invitation to stroll through the royal gardens. Her emerald dress caught the moonlight as they walked between exotic flowers that seemed to glow in the darkness. Two moons hung in Nova Aurora’s night sky, casting an ethereal silver-blue light across the landscape.

“Earth only has one moon,” Bess remarked, tilting her head back to take in the celestial display. “This is... absolutely breathtaking.”

Charov stepped closer, his muscular frame radiating heat in the cool evening air. “I’ve seen these moons my entire life, but tonight they seem different.” His eyes, intense and focused, never left her face. “Perhaps it’s the company.”

Bess felt a flutter in her chest. Was this really happening? Walking through an alien garden with an actual prince who looked at her like she was some kind of goddess?

They reached a secluded alcove with a stone bench surrounded by luminescent blue flowers. The petals pulsed gently as if breathing.

“Moonblossoms,” Charov explained, guiding her to the bench with his hand at her back. His touch sent electricity through her. “They only bloom when both moons are visible.”

Bess reached out to touch one. “They’re warm!”

“Much like you.” Charov grabbed her hand as she withdrew it from the flower, his massive palm enveloping hers completely. His thumb traced her wrist, finding her pulse point. “Your heart is racing.”

“Can you blame me?” Bess met his gaze directly, surprising herself with her boldness. “I’m in an alien garden with a shifter prince. My heart hasn’t slowed down since I met you.”

His eyes darkened. “Neither has mine.” He moved impossibly closer, one hand coming up to cup her cheek. “May I kiss you, Bess?”

Her breath caught. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

He didn’t hesitate. His mouth claimed hers with authority, his lips firm yet unexpectedly soft. Bess melted into him, her hands finding their way to his broad

shoulders. The kiss deepened as his tongue sought entrance, which she eagerly granted. He tasted like the exotic fruit from dinner and something wild she couldn't name.

Bess had been kissed before, but never like this—like she was being consumed, claimed, and worshipped all at once. When Charov finally pulled back, his breathing ragged, she felt dizzy with want.

“You taste like Earth sunshine,” he growled, his voice deeper than she'd heard before. One of his hands had tangled in her hair, the other gripped her waist possessively.

“Is that good?” Bess whispered, her lips still tingling.

“It's addictive.” He pressed his forehead against hers. “I should take you back to your suite before I forget I'm supposed to be a gentleman out here.”

They walked through the castle corridors in charged silence, his hand never leaving her waist. When they reached her bedroom door, Bess turned to face him, summoning courage she didn't know she possessed.

“Would you like to come in?” The words tumbled out before she could second-guess herself.

Charov's response was immediate. His pupils dilated, and a low growl escaped his throat. “Yes.” The single word contained a universe of hunger. He stepped closer, filling her personal space with his imposing presence. “Are you certain that's what you want?”

Bess nodded, suddenly unable to form words as his scent—pine and musk and male—overwhelmed her senses.

“Say it,” he commanded softly, his breath hot on her neck. “I need to hear you say it.”

“I want you to come in,” Bess said, her voice steadier than she felt. “I want you, Charov.”

### SEVENTEEN

The moment Bess's suite door clicked shut behind them, Charov's hands were on her, pressing her back against the cool stone wall as his mouth claimed hers in a kiss that was anything but gentle. Bess gasped into him, her fingers clutching the lapels of his suit jacket. His lips were demanding, his tongue sweeping past hers with a possessiveness that made her knees buckle. She had never been kissed like this—like he couldn't get enough, like she was the only thing he had ever wanted. It was intoxicating and overwhelming, and she found herself gripping him tighter, her body arching into his as if it had a mind of its own.

"Charov," she breathed when he finally broke the kiss, her voice shaky and her chest heaving. His name tasted like honey and heat on her tongue.

He didn't respond, instead trailing his lips down her neck, nipping at the sensitive skin just below her ear. She let out a whimper she didn't know she was capable of, her hands sliding under his jacket to push it off his broad shoulders. He obligingly shrugged out of it, his hands never leaving her body.

"You're so beautiful," he growled against her throat, his voice rough with need. His hands slid down to her waist, gripping the fabric of her emerald dress. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

"Don't stop," she replied quickly, her hands fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. "Please."

One sharp tug and her dress pooled at her feet, leaving her standing there in nothing



but her bra and panties. His eyes darkened as he took her in, his gaze raking over her curves with a hunger that made her feel like the most desirable woman in the universe. She had never felt this way before—confident and wanted, utterly consumed by the way he looked at her.

“You’re perfect,” he murmured, his hands sliding up her hips, his thumbs brushing the underside of her breasts. He leaned down, his lips finding the sensitive skin between her collarbones, and Bess gasped, her fingers tangling in his hair as he kissed his way lower.

When his mouth closed over one lace-covered nipple, Bess let out a moan that echoed through the room. The heat of his tongue through the fabric was almost too much, and when he pulled the bra aside to replace the lace with his mouth, she nearly came undone. His hands gripped her hips, holding her steady as he lavished attention on her breasts, switching between them with a skill that had her panting.

“Charov,” she gasped, her hands roaming over his shoulders, down his chest, desperate to feel more of him. She managed to undo the last button of his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders, revealing the defined muscles of his chest and abs. His skin was warm under her palms, every inch of him hard and perfect.

He straightened, catching her lips in another searing kiss as his hand slid down her stomach, slipping under the waistband of her panties. Her breath hitched as his fingers found her slick folds, teasing her with slow, deliberate strokes.

“You’re so ready for me,” he growled against her lips, his voice thick with desire. “Tell me what you want, Bess.”

“You,” she managed to say, her voice breathless. “I want you.”

His fingers pressed deeper, curling inside her, and Bess cried out, her nails digging

into his shoulders. He didn't stop, his thumb circling her swollen clit as his fingers worked her with a rhythm that had her seeing stars. Her hips moved against his hand, her breath coming in short, desperate gasps as pleasure coiled tight in her core.

"That's it," he murmured, his lips brushing against her ear. "Let go, Bess."

It was the permission she didn't know she needed. Her body shattered, her climax crashing over her in wave after wave of pure ecstasy. She clung to him, her head falling back against the wall as she rode out the intense pleasure, her moans filling the room.

When she finally came down from her powerful orgasm, her legs trembling and her breath ragged, Charov pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

"You're incredible," he said, his voice soft but laced with the same hunger that had driven them both to this point. Bess could only smile, her body still tingling with the aftermath of pleasure, her heart racing with the promise of what was yet to come.

Before she could think, Charov lifted her naked body off the ground, his hands firm and possessive on her hips. Bess let out a soft gasp, her arms instinctively wrapping around his neck as he carried her to the four-poster bed. The cool silk sheets brushed against her skin as he set her down gently, his eyes never leaving hers. The hunger in his gaze caused her heart to race.

She reached for his belt buckle, her fingers trembling slightly as she fumbled with the clasp. Charov's low chuckle sent a shiver through her. "Need help with that?" he teased, his voice rough with desire.

"I've got it," she replied, her voice breathless but determined. She managed to undo the buckle and pull his pants and boxers down in one swift motion. His cock sprang free, thick and hard, and Bess couldn't help but stare. She had never seen anything

like it—long, thick, and perfectly formed, a testament to his shifter heritage. A thrill of anticipation ran through her, her core clenching in response.

She wrapped her hand around his length, her fingers barely able to meet around his girth. She began to stroke him slowly, her touch tentative at first but growing more confident as she felt him pulse in her hand. Charov's breath hitched, gripping her shoulders as he watched her with hooded eyes.

“Bess,” he growled, his voice strained. “If you keep doing that, this is going to be over before it starts.”

She smirked, a playful glint in her eyes. “Wouldn't want that, would we?”

He sat on the edge of the bed and motioned for her to stand in front of him. His large hands soon reached for her hips as he guided her to straddle him. “Take control,” he said, his deep voice a low rumble that sent heat pooling between her legs. “I want to watch you.”

### EIGHTEEN

Bess hesitated for a moment, her cheeks flushing at the thought of being so exposed, but the raw hunger in his eyes gave her the confidence she needed. She positioned herself over him, her hands resting on his broad shoulders for balance. Slowly, she lowered herself onto him, inch by glorious inch, until he was fully sheathed inside her. The sensation was overwhelming—he filled her completely, stretching her in the most delicious way.

She began to move, her hips rocking against his in slow, deliberate motions. Charov's hands gripped her hips, his fingers digging into her skin as he fought to maintain control. "You feel so good," he murmured, his voice heady with need.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, her lips finding his in a passionate kiss. Their tongues tangled, the kiss deepening as she continued to ride him, her movements growing more confident. The room was filled with the sound of their ragged breaths and the slick slide of their bodies coming together.

Charov's restraint began to falter, his hips thrusting up to meet hers with increasing urgency. "Bess," he groaned, his voice breaking. "I can't hold back much longer."

"Then don't," she whispered, her voice trembling with need. "Let go, Charov."

His hands tightened on her hips, his thrusts becoming harder and deeper, until she felt herself teetering on the edge. The pleasure built, coiling tighter and tighter until it finally snapped. Her body convulsed, her orgasm crashing over her like a tidal wave. She cried out, her nails digging into his shoulders as she rode out the intense pleasure.

Charov's own release followed shortly after, his cock driving deep inside her as he spilled his hot seed. He held her close, his breath ragged against her neck as they both came down from their highs.

She rested her forehead against his, her body still trembling with the aftershocks of her mind-blowing orgasm. "That was... amazing," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He chuckled, his hands gently stroking her back. "You're amazing," he replied, his voice filled with warmth and affection. "I've never felt anything like that."

She smiled, her heart swelling with a sense of deep connection. In that moment, she knew that this was just the beginning of something extraordinary.

Bess reluctantly separated from Charov's naked body, her skin still humming with the aftershocks of their intense connection. His hands lingered on her hips as if unwilling to let her go, and he pulled her up with him onto the bed. The sheets were cool against her heated skin, but Charov's body was a furnace, radiating warmth as he wrapped her possessively in his arms. His chest pressed against her back, his heartbeat steady and strong. It was a comforting rhythm that made her feel safe and cherished in a way she hadn't known was possible.

She nestled into him, her head resting on his bicep, her fingers tracing idle patterns on the arm draped over her waist. The room was quiet except for their breathing, the air still thick with the scent of their passion. Bess's mind was a whirlwind of emotions—excitement, disbelief, and a deep, aching tenderness she couldn't quite name. She had never felt so electric, so seen, as she did in this moment, wrapped in the arms of a man who was everything she never knew she wanted.

"What's going on in that beautiful head of yours?" Charov murmured, his voice low and rough against her ear. His breath sent a shiver through her, and she felt his lips

brush the curve of her shoulder.

She hesitated, her fingers stilling on his arm. “I’m just... trying to wrap my mind around everything. This isn’t exactly how I pictured my life playing out.”

He chuckled, the sound vibrating through her body. “Life has a funny way of surprising us, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she said softly, a small smile playing on her lips. “But I think I like the surprise this time.”

Charov’s arm tightened around her, his hand splaying possessively over her stomach. “Good. Because I’m not letting you go, Bess.”

His words sent another thrill through her, a mix of excitement and something deeper, something she wasn’t ready to name yet. She turned in his arms, her eyes meeting his in the dim light of the room. His blue eyes were dark with emotion, his gaze intense and unwavering. She reached up, her fingers brushing a strand of dark hair from his forehead.

“You’re very sure of yourself, aren’t you?” she teased, her voice soft but laced with amusement.

“When it comes to you? Absolutely.” His lips curved into a smirk, but there was no mistaking the seriousness in his eyes. “You’re mine, Bess. My mate. My future queen. And I’ll spend the rest of my life proving to you that you made the right choice.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his words, the raw intensity in his eyes making her feel both vulnerable and powerful at the same time. She leaned in, her lips brushing his in a soft, lingering kiss. “I think you’re off to a pretty good start.”

He growled low in his throat, his hand sliding up to cup the back of her head as he deepened the kiss. His tongue swept into her mouth, claiming her with a possessiveness that made her toes curl. When she finally pulled back, they were both breathless, their foreheads resting together.

They lay there for a while, wrapped in each other's arms, the world outside their room fading into insignificance. Bess's mind drifted, her thoughts a jumble of emotions and sensations. Charov's presence was overwhelming in the best possible way, his strength and passion a perfect counterbalance to her own quiet determination.

As the minutes stretched into hours, Bess felt her eyelids grow heavy, the exhaustion of the day finally catching up with her. She nestled deeper into Charov's embrace, her body relaxing against his. His hand stroked her back in slow, soothing circles.

"Sleep, Bess," he murmured, his voice soft but firm.

She didn't need to be told twice. With a contented sigh, she closed her eyes, letting the warmth of his body and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat lull her into the most peaceful sleep she'd had in a long time.

### NINETEEN

The sharp buzz of his comm device sliced through Charov's contentment like a knife. His eyes snapped open, instantly alert despite the drowsy warmth of the bed. He glanced at his wrist, and the simple message displayed there turned his blood to ice.

"The King has passed."

His father. Gone.

Charov's gaze shifted to Bess, her soft curves tangled in the sheets beside him, her face peaceful in sleep. Her wavy brown hair fanned across the pillow, one delicate hand curled near her face. Last night had been... transcendent. Now that joy felt like a distant memory, a dream from someone else's life.

He eased from the bed with the silent grace that belied his massive frame. Every instinct screamed at him to wake her, to draw strength from the connection they had forged. But the raw, jagged grief rising in his chest was too private and primal. He couldn't bear for her to see him like this – not yet.

Charov dressed silently, his movements mechanical. He allowed himself one final glance at Bess, memorizing how the early morning light gilded her skin. Then he slipped from her suite without a sound.

The corridors of the castle, usually alive with activity, were eerily silent as he strode toward his father's chambers. Guards stood at attention, their eyes downcast and their



faces grim. They parted without a word as he approached.

The door to his father's chambers loomed before him. Charov squared his shoulders, drawing himself to his full height. He was Prince – no, King now. The title felt like a massive weight crushing down on his shoulders.

“My King,” the royal doctor bowed as Charov entered, but he barely registered the words.

His mother's keening wail tore through the chamber. Queen Zyre sat beside the bed, her elegant frame folded over his father's still form, her hands clutching his. Her grief was so naked and so raw that Charov had to look away for a moment.

The king lay on his bed, still and silent. His father's once-powerful body seemed diminished, the vibrant force that had animated him completely vanished. Sawyr, the mighty Mavac Bear King, reduced to an empty vessel.

Charov's knees nearly buckled. A roar built in his chest – his bear demanding release to howl its anguish – but he swallowed it down. Instead, he crossed to his mother and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Mother,” he whispered.

Queen Zyre looked up, her eyes red-rimmed, streaks of tears mapping her face. “He waited for you to find your mate. After you left yesterday, he told me he was ready. He said the kingdom would be safe with you and Bess.”

The mention of Bess sent a pang through Charov's heart. “I should have been here.”

“No,” his mother said fiercely. “He didn't want that. He wanted you to find joy with your mate.” Her voice broke. “He loved you so much, Charov.”

Charov moved to his father's side. Tears he couldn't control spilled down his face as he leaned down to press his forehead against his father's.

"I will make you proud, Father," he whispered, his voice rough with emotion. "I will protect what you built. I swear it."

His bear rumbled inside him, mourning and determined all at once.

The Kingdom of Mavac Territory had lost its king. And the son had lost his loving father.

Later that afternoon, Charov swirled amber liquid in his crystal tumbler, watching the light fracture through the facets. The Royal Mavac whiskey – his father's favorite – burned in his throat but did nothing to numb the hollow ache in his chest. He had long since lost count of how many he'd had.

"If you're trying to drown yourself, I should remind you that bears are excellent swimmers," Oberon said, leaning against the doorframe of Charov's royal chambers.

Charov didn't look up. "Not in the mood for jokes."

Oberon crossed the room, his heavy footfalls echoing against the polished stone floor. He didn't ask permission before pouring himself a drink and dropping into the chair opposite Charov.

"Your mate's been asking about you."

Charov's bear stirred at the mention of Bess, clawing at his insides with urgent need. Go to her. She's yours. She'll comfort you. The image of Bess's face flashed in his mind – those full lips that had yielded so sweetly to his, those expressive green eyes that had looked at him with want.

“She doesn’t need to see me like this.” Charov tossed back his drink in one swallow.

“That’s exactly what mates are for,” Oberon countered. “To see you at your worst and still want you.”

Charov slammed down his glass hard enough to crack the crystal. “Like my mother wanted my father?” His voice turned savage. “You’ve seen her. She’s a ghost walking around in my mother’s skin.”

He stood abruptly, prowling to the window overlooking the kingdom – his kingdom now. The weight of that reality pressed down on him like a mountain.

“I saw her face when the doctor told her there was nothing more to be done. I watched as every bit of light drained out of her when he died. That’s what happens when you let someone become your everything.”

His bear growled in protest, but Charov forced it down.

“So, what’s your brilliant plan?” Oberon asked, his voice dangerously quiet. “Push away your true mate because you’re afraid?”

Charov whirled, his eyes flashing. “I’m not afraid.”

“Bullshit.” Oberon stood to match him, never one to back down. “You’re terrified. The legendary Prince Charov, who jumps out of aircraft for fun, who faces down predators without blinking, is running scared from a curvy little human who has him completely bewitched.”

“I’m protecting myself,” Charov snarled. “And her.”

“No, you’re being a coward. Your father would?—”

Charov moved with shifter speed, slamming Oberon against the wall, his forearm pressed to Oberon's throat. "Don't tell me what my father would think."

Oberon didn't struggle. "Your father found his happiness with your mother. Decades of joy. Would you trade that away just to avoid the pain at the end?"

### TWENTY

The question hit Charov hard. His grip loosened.

“I was with Bess last night,” Charov said, stepping back. “She was...” Words failed him. How could he possibly describe the way she’d moved against him, the sounds she’d made, the way her eyes had held his as if seeing straight into his soul?

“She was everything,” he admitted finally, the fight draining out of him.

His bear growled with agreement: Mate. Ours.

“And that’s what scares you shitless.”

Charov ran his hands through his hair. “I watched as my mother lay wailing over my father’s lifeless body this morning. Like her world had ended.”

“And yet,” Oberon said quietly, “I bet if you asked her, she would say it was worth it. Every moment.”

The following afternoon, Charov sat rigid beside his mother, his massive frame dwarfing the ornate ceremonial chair. The great hall of the castle had been transformed for the viewing of his father’s body—the late King Sawyr lay in state on a raised dais, dressed in royal regalia, looking more peaceful than he had in months. The line of mourners stretched beyond the castle walls, a testament to his father’s legacy.

Hours blurred together as Charov accepted condolences with mechanical nods and murmured thanks. His bear chafed beneath his skin, wanting to roar its grief into the wilderness rather than maintain this veneer of controlled dignity. But the crown—though not yet physically placed on his head—already weighed on him, demanding his composure.

His mother occasionally squeezed his hand, her touch anchoring him to the present when his mind threatened to drift too far. Her eyes remained dry now, her grief transformed into something quiet and dignified that somehow felt even more devastating than her earlier wailing.

“Your Highness.” The royal chamberlain leaned close. “The Duke and Duchess Nuele have arrived.”

Charov nodded, straightening imperceptibly. The Nueles had been his parents’ closest advisors and friends. If anyone understood the burden he now faced, it would be them.

As the couple approached, Charov’s gaze drifted past them, catching on a familiar form standing at the edge of the room. Bess. She wore a dark purple dress in the Nova Aurora fashion, her curves accentuated by the tailored fabric. Her wavy brown hair was pulled back loosely, revealing the elegant curve of her neck. Those mesmerizing green eyes were fixed on him with such raw compassion that something cracked in Charov’s chest.

Despite his fear—his determination to keep emotional distance—seeing her flooded him with a sense of relief so profound, it stole his breath.

His bear surged forward, demanding he go to her, take her in his arms, bury his face in her neck and breathe in her scent. The urge was so powerful he nearly rose from his seat before forcing himself to remain still.

Not now. Not here.

“Your Majesty.” Duke Kynon Nuele bowed deeply, his sharp features set in practiced sorrow. “Deepest condolences on your tremendous loss. King Sawyr was a visionary leader and a dear friend.”

His wife, Duchess Nya, curtsied elegantly. “We grieve with you and the Queen Mother. Such a terrible tragedy.”

Charov inclined his head. “Your presence honors my father’s memory.”

Kynon stepped closer, lowering his voice. “When the appropriate time comes, Your Majesty, we stand ready to assist with the transition. Your father always said you would be a magnificent king, but even the strongest shoulders can use support.”

“Indeed,” Nya added, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. “We were like family to your parents. Consider us the same to you.”

Charov’s gaze flickered to Bess again. She had moved slightly, talking quietly with Gerri Wilder now. Something in him longed for her simple honesty after the practiced diplomacy of court interactions.

“Your counsel will be welcome,” Charov said, his voice carrying the authoritative rumble of his bear. “I’ll call upon you soon.”

As the Nueles moved on, Charov fought the urge to beckon Bess forward. His instincts demanded he claim her publicly as his mate, show everyone that the new king had found his queen. But fear of that deep connection—of eventually experiencing the devastation his mother now endured—kept him frozen in place.

Still, his bear wouldn’t let him completely ignore her presence. Our mate is here. She

came for us in our grief.

Charov allowed himself one more lingering look at Bess, a promise to himself that he would face this particular internal battle soon.

After several more hours, Charov nodded mechanically to the last of the royal line, his jaw aching from holding the same rigid expression all day.

When the final mourner departed, he rolled his massive shoulders and turned toward his chambers. The solitude beckoned—another bottle of whiskey, another night of numbing the pain.

“Charov.”

Her voice wrapped around him like a warm hug. Bess stood in the corridor’s shadows, still wearing that purple dress that clung to her curves. Her eyes were soft with concern, not pity. He appreciated the distinction.

“Bess.” His bear inched forward at her scent. “You should be resting. It’s been a long day.”

She moved closer, not intimidated by his size or the growl beneath his words. “So should you. But I know you won’t.” Her hand touched his arm, warm through the fabric of his formal attire. “I’m here for you. Whatever you need.”

His bear roused fully inside him, demanding. Woods. Mate. Now.

For once, Charov didn’t fight the primal impulse. “Walk with me.”

“Where to?”



“The forest.” He didn’t ask—he commanded. “I need... space.”

She nodded, slipping her hand into his without hesitation. “Lead the way.”

The guards straightened as they passed but said nothing. Royalty had its privileges, even in mourning.

Once beyond the castle walls, Charov felt his chest expand. The forest called to his bear, the ancient trees offering sanctuary no marble hall could provide. Night birds scattered at their approach as he led Bess deeper into the woods.

“My father brought me here when I was a cub,” he said abruptly, the words tearing from his throat. “Taught me to track and to hunt.”

Bess squeezed his hand. “Tell me about him.”

The dam finally broke. A roar ripped from Charov’s chest—not quite human, not fully bear. He fell to his knees on the forest floor, hunched over as his grief tore through him.

“He was everything a king should be,” he gasped. “Strong. Just. He protected what was his, and I—” His voice cracked. “I couldn’t protect him.”

Bess dropped beside him, her arms encircling his massive frame without fear. “You gave him peace, Charov. He saw his son find his mate before he passed.”

“I’m supposed to be stronger than this.” His fist pounded the earth. “What kind of king breaks?”

“The kind who loved his father.” She cradled his face between her hands, forcing him to meet her eyes. “The kind who feels deeply enough to make a good king.”

Her words penetrated the wall of grief. Charov leaned into her touch, his bear settling under her gentle hands. For the first time since seeing his father's lifeless body, he felt like he could breathe.

“Stay with me tonight,” he murmured against her palm.

Bess nodded. “Whatever you need.”

“I need you,” he said simply, the admission costing him less than he'd expected. His bear rumbled in agreement as something fundamental shifted between them—a deepening of their bond that transcended physical desire.

As Bess wrapped her arms around him again in the sacred quiet of the forest, he finally allowed himself to fully grieve.

### TWENTY-ONE

Bess stretched across the vast expanse of Charov's bed, her hand sliding over the cool sheets where his warmth had been. The morning light filtered through ornate curtains and cast his royal chambers in a golden glow that highlighted the luxurious furnishings. Her fingers found a folded note on his pillow.

Had to do more funeral stuff and didn't want to wake you. Thank you for staying with me last night. -C

She pressed the note to her chest, remembering how he had broken down in the woods—the way his massive frame had roared into the night sky exposed and vulnerable. The memory of holding his powerful body as he trembled with grief sent a protective surge through her.

“Who would've thought I'd be comforting an alien bear prince?” she whispered to herself.

Slipping from between the silken sheets, Bess found her purple dress from yesterday draped over a chair. She smoothed the fabric, marveling at how the Nova Auroran textile shifted colors in the light—deep violet to almost midnight blue.

As she dressed, her mind wandered to Gerri's offer from yesterday to take her back to Earth. The decision to stay had come so naturally, surprising even herself.

“I couldn't leave him now,” she murmured to herself, fastening the delicate closures of the dress. “Not when he needs me.”

The night before had been intense. After their walk in the woods, Charov had led her to his chambers without a word. She had expected him to avoid her, to retreat into his solitude. Instead, he stripped bare and asked her to as well, then requested:

“Just hold me. Please.”

And she had. All night, his massive naked frame had curled against her naked body, his face buried in her neck, his powerful arms wrapped around her as if she were an anchor in a storm. She had stroked his hair, humming softly as his breathing eventually steadied into sleep.

Bess padded across the polished floor toward the door, pausing to look back at the rumpled bed. It struck her that she’d never seen him look so unguarded as he had last night—this man who’d saved children from wild beasts without hesitation, who carried the weight of a kingdom on his shoulders.

She slipped into the hallway, nodding to the guards who maintained stoic expressions despite surely knowing where she had spent the night. The castle was hushed, draped in mourning, yet somehow felt more like home than her apartment back on Earth ever had.

As she made her way back to her guest suite, Bess realized something had completely shifted inside her. The woman who had allowed her boss to walk all over her would never recognize this version of herself—the one who’d held a grieving shifter prince through the night, the one who’d chosen to stay on an alien planet because someone truly needed her.

She did these things not because she had to. Because she actually wanted to.

Bess traced her finger along the enormous stone windowsill, feeling the cool, polished granite beneath her touch. The royal funeral procession had finally

concluded that afternoon, a somber five-day affair that had drained the color from Charov's face with each passing hour. The entire Mavac Territory had come to pay respects, leaving the castle grounds overflowing with mourners dressed in deep blue—Nova Aurora's color of remembrance.

She leaned against the window frame, watching Queen Zyre's caravan disappear into the night, heading toward her country estate. The widowed queen had barely spoken today, her grief a palpable force that seemed to bend light around her.

"Will you be needing anything else for your tea, Lady Bess?"

Bess turned to find Emesyn standing in the doorway, holding a tray of steaming Nova Auroran herbal tea that smelled like cinnamon and something unfamiliar but pleasant.

"Just your company," Bess said, gesturing to the plush seating area. "I've been rattling around this wing alone since Gerri left yesterday."

Emesyn smiled, setting down the tray. "The king has been quite occupied with the transition council these past few days."

Bess felt a flutter in her stomach at hearing Charov being called "King." Though they'd shared his bed that second night after King Sawyr's death, Charov had been sleeping in his royal study since, often working through the night.

"It feels strange," Bess admitted, sinking into the velvet armchair and pouring the tea. "Being here without really knowing my place."

Emesyn's eyes widened. "But my lady, you're to be our new queen."

Bess stirred her tea, watching the swirling liquid. "I'm not entirely sure of that. We've barely spoken since... well, everything happened so quickly."

“If I may be so bold,” Emesyn said, perching on the edge of her seat, “Gerri Wilder has a 100 percent success rate. Everyone knows this.”

“So I’ve heard,” Bess said. “But what does that actually mean?”

Emesyn’s face lit up. “Oh! Well, take King Alyx and Queen Bella—they rule all of Nova Aurora, you know. Gerri matched them ten years ago. Queen Bella was from Earth too! They’re deliriously happy.”

“Really?” Bess leaned forward.

“Absolutely! And there’s Chancellor Vorn and his mate Lexi—she found them as well. And my own sister’s best friend was matched with the Alpha of the Southern Territories.” Emesyn counted on her fingers. “Oh! And Prince Dravon of the Eastern Isles and his Earth mate Callie. They have twin cubs now.”

Bess’s mind whirled. “All happy?”

“Blissfully so.” Emesyn’s eyes softened. “When His Majesty looks at you... it’s the same way all those mates look at each other. When he thinks no one is watching.”

Heat climbed Bess’s neck. “He watches me like how?”

“Like you’re water in the desert.”

Bess nearly spilled her tea from embarrassment.

Emesyn giggled. “Oh, and when a shifter claims someone as their mate—especially an alpha like our king—it’s forever.”

Forever. The word echoed in Bess’s mind. One week ago, she was on Earth stuck in a

terrible loop of self-induced misery, and now she was potentially weeks away from becoming queen of an alien shifter territory.

Yet somehow, that felt less terrifying than the thought of returning to Earth without Charov.

Bess woke up earlier than usual the next morning, restless energy pulsing through her veins. After dressing in a simple dress that complemented her eyes, she wandered the castle corridors with purpose. Three days had passed since she'd had any meaningful time with Charov. She understood his duties kept him busy, but the distance gnawed at her.

"Excuse me," she stopped a passing staff member. "Where might I find King Charov this morning?"

"His Majesty is in the royal study, my lady. Has been since before dawn."

### TWENTY-TWO

Bess thanked him and made her way through the labyrinthine halls, her mind racing. He must be handling things well if he's been able to manage on his own, she thought, ignoring the twinge of hurt that he hadn't sought her company.

When she reached the ornate double doors of the study, two guards nodded and stepped aside. She pushed the heavy door open and froze at the threshold.

The spacious room was in complete disarray. Stacks of documents teetered precariously on every surface. Charov sat hunched at a massive desk, his broad shoulders tense, his dark hair disheveled as if he'd been running his fingers through it repeatedly. Three different advisors stood around him, speaking over one another.

"The Northern provinces require immediate?—"

"—trade agreement expires at midnight?—"

"—funeral expenses have exceeded the?—"

Charov's massive fist came down on the desk, silencing them. "Enough!" His voice held the deep growl of his bear. The advisors stepped back, exchanging nervous glances.

Bess's heart clenched at the sight. This wasn't a king in control—this was a man drowning.



“Your Majesty,” she said, stepping forward with confidence she didn’t know she possessed. “May I assist you?”

Charov’s head snapped up, his blue eyes locking onto hers. For a moment, she glimpsed raw vulnerability before his expression smoothed.

“Bess.”

Her name on his lips sent shivers through her body.

“I see you could use some help with organization.” She approached the desk, already scanning the chaos with a professional eye. “This is actually my specialty.”

The advisors exchanged doubtful glances.

“Lady Bess was an insurance clerk on Earth,” Charov explained, a hint of pride in his voice. “She handled complex documentation daily.”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty,” one advisor began, “these are matters of state?—”

“And they’re currently in complete disorder,” Bess interrupted, already sorting papers into categories. “First, let’s separate urgent from non-urgent matters. Then prioritize by deadline.” Her fingers flew through the stacks with practiced efficiency.

Charov leaned back, watching her with undisguised admiration as she transformed chaos into order. “Listen to Lady Bess,” he commanded the advisors.

Within an hour, Bess had implemented a system—color-coded folders, priority tags, and a scheduling system for meetings. When the treasury minister arrived demanding immediate attention, Bess intercepted him smoothly.

“His Majesty will review your proposal at two o’clock,” she informed him, checking the schedule she had created. “He’s currently addressing the Northern provinces’ concerns, which have a more immediate deadline.”

The treasury minister blinked in surprise but nodded respectfully.

As the morning progressed, Bess found her groove, managing the flow of people and papers with ease. It felt good—no, incredible—to be useful again and exercise the skills she had spent years refining.

During a brief lull, Charov appeared behind her, his large body radiating heat. His hands settled on her waist as he leaned down, his breath tickling her ear.

“You’re magnificent,” he whispered, his deep voice sending tremors through her. “I’ve been drowning in paperwork for days. I should’ve asked for your help sooner.”

Bess turned, finding herself trapped between his powerful frame and the desk. “You should have,” she agreed, boldly holding his intense gaze. “This is what I do.”

His eyes darkened as they dropped to her lips. “What else do you do exceptionally well, I wonder?”

Heat bloomed across Bess’s cheeks, but before she could respond, the study door opened. Charov stepped back, but the possessive look in his eyes promised they’d continue this conversation later.

Thirty minutes later, Bess had just finished sorting a stack of trade documents when a soft knock on the open door drew her attention. A man with silver-streaked dark hair and a perfectly tailored navy suit strode in with the confidence of someone who belonged within palace walls. His posture was impeccable, and his smile practiced as his gaze slid over the organized stacks of papers she had created.

“Ah, I see His Majesty is occupied with important matters.” The man bowed slightly toward Charov, who was deep in conversation with his finance minister across the room.

Bess stepped forward, unconsciously smoothing her dress. “May I help you?”

“Duke Kynon Nuele,” he said with another small bow, this one directed at her. His eyes, an unsettling pale blue, assessed her with calculated interest. “And you must be the Earth woman everyone’s talking about.”

“Bess Campos,” she replied, feeling oddly exposed under his scrutiny.

Kynon smiled, his teeth unnaturally perfect. “I had hoped to speak with our new king about an important matter, but I can see he’s overwhelmed with royal duties.” He gestured toward Charov, whose broad shoulders were now hunched over a map with three advisors. “I’ll return at a more convenient time.”

Something about the way he said it raised the hairs on Bess’s neck. She noticed he spoke just loudly enough as if ensuring that everyone would hear him being considerate.

“I’ll let him know you—” Bess began.

“No need to trouble yourself. He has so much to contend with already.” Kynon’s smile never reached his eyes. “It’s been challenging for everyone since our beloved King Sawyr passed. Such a tragedy.”

As he turned to leave, he added, “I see you’re helping our new king adjust to his responsibilities. How... thoughtful.”

The subtle condescension in his tone made Bess’s cheeks burn. Before she could

respond, he was gone, leaving behind the faint scent of expensive cologne.

As she returned to her work, Bess overheard two aides whispering near the water dispenser.

“Duke Kynon has been everywhere this week,” one murmured. “Visited three villages personally to distribute food after that storm.”

“The people love him for it,” the other replied. “They’re saying he’s filling the void left by King Sawyr. No one’s seen much of King Charov except at the funeral.”

“Well, Duke Kynon has always been ambitious.”

Bess’s stomach tightened as she pretended not to listen. Why would Kynon make such a show of coming to see Charov, only to leave without actually speaking to him? And why announce his departure so publicly?

She glanced at Charov, who was now growling instructions to his military commander, his powerful presence commanding the room. His blue eyes flashed momentarily toward her, softening for just a heartbeat before returning to his work.

Something about Duke Kynon’s visit felt calculated, like he was setting a stage rather than making a genuine attempt at communication. Bess filed the information away—Charov had enough burdens without her adding baseless suspicions to his plate.

### TWENTY-THREE

Charov leaned back in his chair and stretched his neck. The royal study still felt too big for him despite the two weeks he'd spent trying to fill his father's considerable shoes. The antique oak desk before him groaned with paperwork, though significantly less than there had been this morning. He glanced at the mahogany clock on the wall, its ornate hands showing he had just enough time to clean up before dinner.

He rolled his shoulders and glanced at the empty chair beside his desk—Bess's chair—where she'd sat for hours helping him wade through the endless documents requiring his royal attention.

His bear rumbled contentedly at the thought of her. She had transformed from the shy, reserved woman he'd first met into something remarkable. She stepped in exactly when he needed her and organized his chaos, privately and publicly, with quiet efficiency.

The study door burst open, shattering his moment of calm. Torborn, his normally composed royal assistant, stood in the doorway breathing heavily.

“Your Majesty, there's?”

“Don't call me that when we're alone.” Charov winced. “Makes me think my father's standing behind me.”

“Apologies, but there's a situation. The Nuele estate. Their annual ball—it started two hours ago.”

Charov's brow furrowed. "What ball?"

"The one honoring the warriors who served under your father. The one you're meant to be attending. Right now."

Charov shot to his feet. "That's impossible. There's nothing on my schedule."

"Duke Kynon's messenger seemed quite... distressed when I informed him you weren't preparing to attend. He claims a formal invitation was delivered last week."

"That doesn't make any sense." Charov rifled through the papers on his desk, finding nothing. "Where's Bess?"

Councilor Varden appeared in the doorway behind Torborn, his thin face pinched with disapproval. "This is precisely what happens when you rely on an outsider to manage royal affairs. The human clearly missed the invitation."

A growl rumbled in Charov's chest, his bear rising close to the surface. The temperature in the room seemed to drop. "Choose your next words with extreme care, Councilor."

"Your Majesty, I simply mean?—"

"I know exactly what you mean." Charov's voice cut like ice. "Bess has done more in one week to organize this kingdom than you've done in a decade of advising my father. She's the reason I'm not drowning right now."

"But the invitation?—"

"Could have been misplaced by anyone during the chaos of my father's death." Charov's fist came down on the desk. "I won't hear another word against her. Am I

understood?”

The movement in the doorway caught his attention. Bess stood there, her eyes wide, a stack of fresh papers clutched to her chest. Her lips were parted in surprise, and Charov wondered how much she had heard.

Their eyes locked across the room, and Charov felt something tighten in his chest—something that had nothing to do with missing balls or royal duties and everything to do with the woman who’d stepped into his life like she belonged there.

He watched as her face suddenly fell, her eyes instantly shimmering with unshed tears. His bear wanted to roar at the sight.

“I’m so sorry.” Her voice trembled as her fingers tightened on the stack of papers. “I must have misplaced the invitation. This is entirely my fault.”

Before Charov could speak, she continued, the words tumbling out in a familiar pattern of self-blame that made his jaw clench.

“I should have been more careful. I’ll make this right. I can organize a formal apology letter. I’ll work through the night to?”

“Out.” Charov’s command cut through the room like a blade, directed at Torborn and Councilor Varden. “Now.”

The councilor opened his mouth to protest, but something in Charov’s eyes—perhaps the flash of blue fire that preceded his bear’s emergence—made him reconsider. The two men backed out, pulling the heavy door closed behind them.

Charov crossed the space between them in two long strides, taking the papers from her hands and setting them on a side table. He captured her trembling fingers between

his much larger ones.

“Stop.”

Her mouth opened, another apology clearly ready to spill out.

“No.” He shook his head, his voice a low, commanding rumble. “You’re not doing this. Not with me.”

He tilted her chin up with one finger, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Listen to me, Bess. You’ve done nothing wrong. Nothing.” He squeezed her hand gently. “If Kynon wanted me at his event, he should have confirmed directly with me.”

“But I was supposed to?—”

“You were supposed to help me, and you have.” His thumb traced gentle circles on her wrist, feeling her pulse jump beneath her skin. “More than anyone else in this entire castle. I’ve watched you work yourself to exhaustion for me—for this territory—without complaint.”

Her eyes widened at his words, a soft blush coloring her face. The sight sent heat surging through his veins.

“We’re going to attend this ball together,” he continued, stepping closer until he could feel the warmth radiating from her body. “We’ll make our apologies for missing the beginning, and then, my future queen, we’re going to dance.”

“Future Queen?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

Charov’s lips curved into a predatory smile. “Did you think I’d let you go back to Earth?” His hand moved to cup her cheek. “I’ve been watching you, Bess. How



naturally you've stepped into this role. How perfectly you fit at my side."

His bear purred in agreement, and Charov leaned closer, his mouth a breath away from hers.

"Everyone will soon see what I already know—that you belong here. With me."

His fingers tightened around Bess's smaller hand. The contact sent a pulse of possessiveness through him.

"Tonight," he said, his voice lowering to a register that made her pupils dilate, "we're going to remind ourselves that life isn't all paperwork and royal duties."

He pulled her impossibly closer until the subtle floral scent of her skin filled his senses. Her curves pressed against him when she stumbled forward, sending a shot of heat straight to his core.

"Emesyn is waiting for you in your suite with several gown options," he said, his voice low and possessive. "I want you dressed in something that makes every male at that ball choke on their envy when they see you walking in with me."

Her eyes widened, and Charov felt his lips curl up. His bear liked shocking her, and liked watching color flood those perfect cheekbones.

"We've done nothing but work since my father died. Tonight, we remember how to live." He released her hand only to slide his palm up her arm, savoring the shiver that followed his touch. "I'm going to show my future queen how to have fun Nova Aurora style."

"But—"

“No buts.” He pressed a finger to her lips, fighting the urge to replace it with his mouth. “This isn’t a request. This is your mate telling you what’s going to happen.”

The words slipped out, but Charov didn’t regret them. Not when he saw the flash of heat in those eyes or the way her breathing quickened.

His bear pushed forward, demanding he claim what was his. Charov leaned in until his breath mingled with hers.

“No more hiding who I am from you. No more pretending I don’t feel this pull between us.” His thumb brushed her cheekbone. “From now on, we face everything together. No secrets. No holding back. You deserve all of me—the king, the man, the bear.”

Charov watched understanding bloom in her eyes, followed by something deeper that made his chest tight again.

“The kingdom is mine to protect, but you—” he growled, the sound vibrating between them, “—you are mine to cherish. My equal. My queen.”

He finally gave in to his bear’s demands, lowering his mouth to claim hers in a kiss that left no doubt about his intentions. When he pulled back, her eyes remained closed for a heartbeat longer.

“Now go,” he ordered, reluctantly putting space between them. “Get ready. I want to see Kynon’s face when we walk in and steal his spotlight.”

### TWENTY-FOUR

Bess felt the lingering heat of Charov's kiss as she hurried down the corridor toward her suite. Her lips tingled, and the memory of his firm mouth against hers sent shivers racing across her skin. She touched her fingers to her lips, stunned at the shift in him. For two weeks, he'd been distant, buried in grief and royal responsibilities, but that kiss... that was something else entirely.

When she entered her suite, Emesyn was already bustling about, gowns spread across the bed in a rainbow of jewel tones.

"My lady! The king has informed us you'll be attending the Nuele ball tonight." Emesyn's eyes sparkled with excitement. "I've pulled our finest options."

Bess approached the bed, running her fingers over fabrics so luxurious, they seemed to glide like water beneath her touch. "I've never worn anything like these before."

"This emerald would match your eyes beautifully." Emesyn held up a gown with a plunging neckline that would showcase curves Bess usually kept carefully hidden.

Bess hesitated. On Earth, she'd worn sensible clothes, practical for long days at a desk. The thought of stepping into something so boldly sensual made her heart race.

"He called me his future queen," she murmured, almost to herself.

Emesyn smiled knowingly. "Because that's who you are becoming. Now, shall we make you look the part?"

As Emesyn helped her dress, Bess couldn't stop thinking about Charov's words. He wanted to show her a good time. He wanted them to walk in together and command attention. For years, she'd lived in the background, arranging others' lives while neglecting her own. Now Charov was pulling her into the spotlight – and surprisingly, she wanted to step into it.

“I've been hiding,” Bess realized aloud as Emesyn fastened the back of the gown. “Not just here, but for years.”

“Hiding what, my lady?”

Bess turned to examine herself in the mirror and barely recognized the woman who looked back. The emerald gown hugged her every curve and exposed her ample cleavage, and the color made her eyes blaze like gemstones.

“This part of me. The part that wants more than paperwork and practicality.” She smoothed her hands down the silken fabric. “The part that wants to be seen and live life to the fullest.”

“And now you will be.” Emesyn stepped back, admiring her handiwork. “The king won't be able to take his eyes off you tonight.”

A sharp knock at the door startled them both, and Charov's deep voice came from the other side. “Are you ready to make an entrance, future queen?”

Bess opened the door and watched his expression transform from impatience to undisguised hunger as his blue eyes swept over her.

“By all the stars,” he breathed, his voice rough. “I knew you were beautiful, but this...” He circled her slowly and possessively. “Every man there will surely envy me tonight.”

“Even Kynon?” Bess remarked, surprising herself with her boldness.

Charov smiled wide, offering his arm. “Especially Kynon.”

As they walked toward the royal transport, Bess felt a new kind of confidence flowing through her veins. She had spent the past week organizing Charov’s kingdom using her expertise, and tonight, she would stand beside him as his equal.

“Thank you,” she said suddenly.

“For what?”

“For seeing me. The real me.”

Charov stopped walking and turned to face her fully, his expression intense. “I think we’re both finally seeing each other clearly. And I certainly like what I see.”

The transport soon purred along the curved roads of Nova Aurora’s capital district, lights from the elegant buildings dancing across the vehicle’s tinted windows. Bess smoothed her hands over the emerald fabric covering her thighs, still getting used to the sensation of being dressed like royalty. She glanced at Charov beside her, his powerful frame looking both regal and dangerous in his formal attire. The black suit emphasized the breadth of his shoulders, and the subtle gold embroidery marking him as the Mavac Territory king caught the light whenever he moved.

Emesyn’s earlier words in her suite echoed in Bess’s mind: “The kingdom needs stability. A mated king and queen would ensure that.”

Bess bit her lower lip. Charov had called her his future queen, yet he hadn’t mentioned any timeline for their official union. Was he having second thoughts? Or was he simply overwhelmed with royal duties?

“You’re thinking so loudly I can practically hear it,” Charov said, his deep voice breaking through her thoughts. He reached over and grabbed her hand. “What’s going on behind those beautiful green eyes?”

Bess felt heat rise to her face. “I was just thinking about something Emesyn mentioned while getting ready for the ball—about the kingdom needing stability.”

Charov’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. “Everyone has opinions about what the kingdom needs.”

### TWENTY-FIVE

“B ut you said no more secrets between us, yet...” Bess trailed off, not wanting to sound demanding.

Charov shifted, turning his body toward her, one arm stretched along the back of the seat. The posture was casual, but there was nothing casual about the sheer intensity in his eyes.

“Yet what, Bess?” There was a challenge in his tone.

“Yet I don’t know where I stand,” she admitted. “You call me your future queen, but is that happening next week? Next year? Never?”

His eyes flashed, something primal and possessive darkening his gaze. “You think I’d let you go now?”

The air between them thickened. Bess felt her heart quicken, but she held her ground. “I think you’re holding something back.”

Charov leaned closer, his scent—woody and wild—enveloping her. “Tonight isn’t about royal agendas or kingdom politics. Tonight is about us.” His hand slid to her neck, his fingers tangling in the hair at her nape. “About showing everyone that the woman who stands beside me is the one I’ve chosen.”

Bess felt the weight of those words and simply nodded, deciding to shelve her concerns for the night. He was right—this evening was meant for them to enjoy each

other, not worry about royal succession timelines.

“I want to see you have fun tonight,” she said, reaching up to touch his face. “I’ve missed the fun-loving prince who took me skydiving.”

A slow, dangerous smile spread across Charov’s face. “He still exists. And tonight, he might just steal you away from the ball for something more... adventurous.”

The promise in his words made her heart race. “Don’t tempt me.”

Charov’s laugh was rich and genuine—the first real laugh she had heard from him in days.

The moment they stepped into the Nuele’s grand ballroom, Bess felt every eye turn their way. The opulent space shimmered with crystalline chandeliers that cast rainbow prisms across marble floors and gilded walls. Musicians played melodic tunes from a raised platform while Nova Aurora’s elite swirled across the dance floor in a kaleidoscope of color and movement.

Bess squeezed Charov’s arm, suddenly painfully aware of her Earth origins among these elegant aliens. As they descended the grand staircase, she caught snippets of whispered conversations.

“Quite the oversight, wasn’t it? The king missing the formal dinner...”

“...heard it was the human’s fault. Can’t keep a proper schedule...”

“What does he see in her anyway? She’s not even from our world...”

Bess stiffened, but Charov’s hand covered hers, his grip reassuring and possessive.



“Ignore them,” he murmured against her ear, his breath warm against her neck. “They’re jealous of what they can never have.”

Kynon and Nya approached with practiced smiles. Nya, tall and willowy with silver-blond hair, embraced Bess with artificial warmth.

“We’re so pleased you could join us for at least part of the evening,” Nya said sweetly, her eyes flickering with something that made Bess’s skin crawl. “Though we did miss you at the dinner. Such a pity about the invitation.”

Bess met the woman’s gaze directly. “Yes, quite strange how that happened. I’m usually so careful with the king’s correspondence.”

“These things happen,” Kynon interjected smoothly, but Bess caught the calculated look he exchanged with his wife. “What matters is that you’re here now.”

Charov’s arm slid around Bess’s waist, drawing her closer to his side. The heat of his body seeped through the fabric of her gown. “If you’ll excuse us, I believe I owe my future queen a dance.”

Without waiting for a response, Charov led Bess onto the dance floor. His hand positioned possessively across her lower back, his fingers pressing into the curve just above her backside.

“That was interesting,” Bess murmured as he swept her into the steps of a dance she didn’t know but somehow followed. “I’m starting to think there was never an invitation.”

Charov’s blue eyes darkened. “I’ve been thinking the same thing.”

“But why would they?—”

“Politics,” he cut in, spinning her in a graceful turn that left her breathless. “Always politics. Kynon has been hungry for more power since I was a cub.”

“And now he’s making his move while you’re vulnerable,” Bess realized.

Charov pulled her closer, their bodies flush against each other. “Let him try. He doesn’t know what I have.”

“What’s that?” Bess asked, her heart racing at the fierce intensity in his eyes.

“You.” His voice rumbled, deep and possessive. “My greatest strength disguised as my weakness.”

The music shifted to something slower and more sensual. Charov’s movements changed with it, guiding her with authority that made her knees weak. His hand slid lower, erasing any space between them.

“Everyone is watching,” she whispered, feeling the hard planes of his body against her softness.

“Good.” His lips brushed the shell of her ear. “Let them see who rules this territory—and whose queen you’ll be.”

As they moved together, Bess felt her suspicions about Kynon crystallize, but so did her feelings for Charov. Whatever game their rivals were playing, she wouldn’t be a pawn in it. She would be a strong queen—his queen—and together, they would be unstoppable.

### TWENTY-SIX

Charov guided Bess with firm hands on the dance floor, holding her so close that the emerald fabric of her gown whispered against his formal attire. Her pupils dilated as she gazed up at him. The bear inside him growled with delight. For days, he'd been drowning in paperwork and responsibilities, but tonight—with Bess in his arms—he remembered what it felt like to be alive.

His hand slid lower on her back. "I'm thinking we should leave."

"But we haven't been here long."

Charov dipped his head, inhaling the scent of her neck. "And we've made our appearance. They've seen their king. Let Kynon have his little gathering. I have other plans for us."

"What kind of plans?" The playfulness in her voice was new—this Bess was different from the woman who'd been helping him organize his kingdom this week. This was the woman who'd jumped from an aircraft without hesitation.

"You'll see." He spun her one final time before pulling her off the dance floor. "You wanted to see my fun side again, didn't you? The one I had before all this responsibility."

The music faded behind them as he guided her through the ballroom. His advisors tried to intercept, but Charov silenced them with a look. Tonight wasn't about politics.

“Your Majesty,” Oberon appeared at his side. “The transport is ready.”

“Perfect.” Charov nodded to his friend before turning back to Bess. “Ready for another adventure?”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “You’re really doing this? Just—leaving?”

“Kings can do that.” He winked, guiding her up the grand staircase. “One of the few perks.”

The night air greeted them as they exited the building, cool and refreshing after the stuffy ballroom. The transport waited, sleek and black against the moonlight. He opened the door for her himself despite the attendants hovering nearby.

“Where are we going?” Bess asked as he slid in beside her.

“Somewhere that will make you forget all about royal paperwork.” He signaled to Oberon, then turned to her. “Are you always this impatient or just tonight?”

“Says the man who couldn’t wait to escape his own royal appearance.”

Charov laughed, the sound surprising even himself. His father’s death had cast a shadow over everything, but somehow, Bess had found a way to bring light back into his world.

“I’ve been a terrible host these past two weeks,” he admitted, taking her hand. Her skin was soft beneath his fingers. “You came to experience Nova Aurora, and instead you’ve been trapped in my study helping me manage a kingdom.”

“I don’t mind at all. I’m good at that kind of thing.”

“Too good,” he said, his voice tinged with pride. “But tonight, we do something I’m good at.”

The vehicle hummed as it sped away from the city. Charov watched Bess’s face as she gazed out at the passing landscape, illuminated by the planet’s two moons.

“Tell me something,” she said suddenly. “If you weren’t king, what would you be doing right now?”

The question caught him off guard. “Exactly what I’m doing. Taking a beautiful woman on an adventure.”

The transport wound along the coastal road, the rhythm of the engine vibrating against Charov’s back as he watched Bess’s silhouette against the window. His bear prowled under his skin, pleased to have his mate so close to him after days of tedious royal duties. When the vehicle finally slowed, he caught the first glint of moonlight on the water—the famous pink sea that surrounded his territory, shimmering like a pool of rose quartz under Nova Aurora’s twin moons.

“We’re here,” Charov said, not waiting for Oberon to open the door. He stepped out first, extending his hand to Bess with a possessive flourish. The way her emerald gown clung to her curves made his throat tighten. “Your chariot awaits.”

His royal boat gleamed at the dock—sleek, powerful, and ready. The crew stood at attention, but Charov waved them off.

“No crew tonight,” he commanded. “Just prepare the vessel and leave us.”

The captain looked uncertain. “Your Majesty, protocol dictates?—”

“Protocol can go to hell,” Charov growled, his bear surfacing just enough to make his

eyes flash. “I captained this boat long before I wore a crown.”

Bess raised an eyebrow, and he caught the hint of a smile. That small gesture sent heat flooding through him.

Within minutes, they were alone on the water. Charov steered them away from shore, enjoying the familiar vibration of the engines beneath his feet. With each passing moment, the immense weight of the crown seemed to lighten.

“So this is what bear shifters do for fun?” Bess teased, coming to stand beside him at the helm.

“This one does.” He cut the engines when they reached a secluded spot far from shore, where the pink waters stretched uninterrupted to the horizon. “Look up.”

Bess tilted her head back, and her soft gasp was exactly the reaction he had hoped for. Without city lights, Nova Aurora’s night sky exploded with stars—bright pinpricks of blue, silver, and gold unlike anything visible from Earth.

“It’s absolutely incredible,” she breathed.

He moved behind her, his chest pressed against her back. “I used to come out here whenever I needed to escape. Whenever I felt trapped by what was expected of me.”

He guided her to the bow where there were plush cushions and blankets. They settled side by side, looking up at the vast expanse of cosmos.

“I always thought I needed to get it all in—every adventure, every thrill—before the crown came,” Charov admitted, his voice rough. “I believed that once I became king, there would be no more of this. No more freedom. No more fun.”

His finger traced the line of her jaw. “And I was right. Two weeks as king, and this is the first time I’ve breathed free air.”

Bess studied him, her eyes reflecting the starlight. “Is that true of all kings? Because Emesyn tells me stories about King Alyx and Queen Bella that suggest otherwise. They seem to find time for adventure.”

### TWENTY-SEVEN

The observation struck something deep in Charov's chest. He had never considered that. Alyx was respected throughout Nova Aurora, yet the stories of his exploits with his mate were legendary.

"Maybe..." Bess continued, shifting closer, "your father wasn't serious because of his duty, but because that was who he was." Her eyes locked with his. "Is there room for you to be your own kind of king?"

The question hung between them as vast as the starry sky above. His bear rumbled thoughtfully.

He stared into Bess's eyes, her words striking a chord deep within him. His own kind of king. The concept settled into his mind with surprising comfort, like a key sliding into its perfect lock.

"You know something?" He brushed her hair from her face, his fingertips lingering against her skin. "For someone who's only been on Nova Aurora for a short time, you understand more than most who've lived here their entire lives."

His bear surged forward, recognizing the wisdom in her words. King Alyx wasn't trapped by his crown—he had made the position work for him, not the other way around.

"My father ruled the way he needed to. But I'm not him." The realization allowed him to shed a burden he'd carried his entire life. "I never will be."



Bess's eyes reflected the twin moons, her curves silhouetted against the starlit sky. "Would he want you to be?"

"No," Charov said with sudden certainty. "He wanted me to rule, but he never asked me to become someone else to do it."

He leaned back against the cushions, pulling Bess against his chest. The warmth of her body against his sent his bear into a contented rumble.

"Thank you," he murmured into her hair, inhaling her floral-citrus scent. "For tonight. For the escape. For..." He gestured broadly at the sky and water. "For reminding me who I am."

"And who's that?" She twisted to look up at him, her expression playful yet earnest.

"Charov Mavac." He grinned, feeling freer than he had in weeks. "Bear shifter. Adventure seeker. King who doesn't have to sacrifice one to be the other."

The gentle lapping of waves against the hull created a rhythm that seemed to sync with his heartbeat. He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

"So, what does King Charov do now?" Bess asked, her body melting against his.

"Right now?" He traced the curve of her hip. "He stops thinking about being king altogether."

His mouth found hers, claiming her lips with the pure, primal need that had been building for the past two weeks. His bear roared with pleasure as she responded, her fingers threading through his hair. The sweet taste of her flooded his senses.

He deepened the kiss, one hand cupping the back of her head while the other pressed

firmly against her lower back. He was done holding back his desires and done pretending that this wasn't exactly where he wanted to be...alone with her.

"I've wanted to do this properly since that night in my room," he murmured against her lips, nipping gently. "Without grief clouding everything."

Bess smiled against his mouth. "Is this properly?"

"Not even close." He rolled them so she was beneath him, the cushions conforming to their bodies as the boat rocked gently. "But it's a start."

Her laughter was cut short as he captured her mouth again, hungry and demanding. The bear in him wanted to claim and mark her, to make absolutely certain that everyone would know she was his. But the man in him wanted to savor this perfect moment beneath Nova Aurora's stars.

### TWENTY-EIGHT

The door to Charov's chambers closed with a soft click, and Bess barely had time to catch her breath before his hands were on her, guiding her toward his massive bed that dominated the room. The moonlight spilled through the tall windows, casting a silvery glow over the dark wood and rich fabrics. His touch was firm but not rough, his fingers tracing the curve of her waist as he backed her toward the edge of the mattress.

"You looked stunning tonight," he murmured, his deep voice low and thick with desire. His eyes roamed over her, lingering on the way the emerald gown clung to her curves. "But I think you'll look even better without this."

Her heart raced as he reached behind her, his fingers deftly unfastening the intricate clasps of the gown. Cool air brushed her skin as the fabric slipped away, pooling at her feet. Charov stepped back, his gaze scorching as it traveled over her bare body. Bess crossed her arms over her chest instinctively, but he caught her wrists, gently pulling them away. "Don't hide from me," he said, his deep voice a command softened by something tender. "You're perfect."

She flushed under his praise, her pulse quickening as he guided her onto the bed. The sheets were cool against her back, but his body was warm as he leaned over her, his hands sliding up her thighs. "You've been on my mind all night," he admitted, his lips brushing gently against her neck. "Every time you smiled, every time you laughed—I wanted this."

His mouth trailed lower, nipping lightly at her collarbone before moving down to her

breasts. Bess arched into his touch, her breath catching as he took one taut peak into his mouth. His tongue flicked over her sensitive skin, sending shivers through her. She tangled her fingers in his hair, urging him closer, and he chuckled, the sound vibrating against her skin. “Impatient again, aren’t we?”

“You’re teasing me,” she accused, her voice breathless.

“And you’re loving it,” he shot back, his grin wicked as he moved lower. His hands slid down her sides, his thumbs brushing the delicate skin of her inner thighs. Bess’s breath hitched as he settled between her legs, his hot breath fanning over her most intimate place.

“Charov—”

“Relax,” he murmured, his hands gently spreading her thighs wider. “Let me take care of you.”

His mouth was on her before she could protest, his tongue flicking over her sensitive folds in slow, deliberate strokes. Bess gasped, her hands clutching at the sheets as waves of pleasure rolled through her. He was relentless, his tongue working her clit with a skill that left her trembling. She bit her lip to stifle a moan, but he glanced up, his eyes dark with desire.

“Don’t hold back,” he said, his voice rough. “I want to hear you.”

As if to emphasize his point, he slid two fingers inside her, curling them just right to hit that spot that made her see stars. Bess cried out, her hips lifting off the bed as he drove her closer to the edge. His mouth returned to her clit, sucking and teasing until her entire body was taut with anticipation.

“Charov, I’m—oh, God?—”

Her climax hit her like a freight train, her body arching off the bed as she came apart. Charov didn't let up, his fingers and mouth working her through every shuddering wave until she collapsed back onto the mattress, utterly spent. He kissed his way up her body, his lips brushing softly against her hip, her stomach, her breasts, before finally capturing her mouth in a deep, heated kiss.

"You're magnificent," he murmured against her lips, his voice thick with primal satisfaction. "But I'm not done with you yet."

Charov straightened, his hands moving to the buttons of his formal black suit. His movements were deliberate and unhurried as if he were savoring the anticipation. Bess watched, her breath hitching, as he stripped off the jacket and then the crisp white shirt underneath, revealing the chiseled planes of his chest and the hard lines of his abs. Her eyes dropped lower as he undid his pants and pulled them off. Her pulse quickened when his thick, hard cock sprang free, already straining for her.

He lay back on the bed next to her. "Get on top," he commanded, his voice low and rough.

Bess hesitated for only a second, her cheeks flushing at the raw authority in his tone, before she obeyed. She positioned herself above him, her heart pounding as she guided him to her entrance. Slowly, inch by delicious inch, she took him into her, a low moan escaping her lips as he filled her completely. Her body stretched to accommodate him, the sensation both overwhelming and exquisite.

"Show me what you want," he said, his hands settling on her hips, his touch firm but not demanding.

Bess bit her lip, her own desire mingling with the thrill of being in charge. She began to move slowly, her hips rolling in a rhythm that made her shudder with pleasure. The friction of his hard length sliding in and out of her was intoxicating, and she could

feel the tension building within her with every thrust.

“That’s it, Bess,” Charov growled, his voice husky with approval. His hands tightened on her hips, guiding her movements as she quickened her pace.

Her breath came in short, sharp gasps as she rode him, her body moving with a growing urgency. Her pleasure spiraled higher, the room starting to blur at the edges as the intensity of the moment consumed her. She threw her head back, her wavy hair cascading past her shoulders, and let out a loud, unrestrained moan.

Charov’s hands moved to her breasts, his thumbs brushing over her hardened nipples in a way that dragged another cry from her lips. “You’re so beautiful like this,” he murmured, his voice a mix of admiration and raw hunger. “Look at you, taking me so perfectly.”

Her entire body trembled as she approached the edge, her movements becoming more frantic. She could feel the pressure building, coiling tight in her core, until it finally shattered.

“Oh my god, Charov!” she screamed, her voice breaking as waves of ecstasy rolled through her.

Charov’s control snapped, his hips thrusting up with a primal force that drove her even higher. With a deep, guttural growl, he spilled himself inside her, his powerful release sending her spiraling into another orgasm. Her body convulsed around him, and she collapsed onto his chest, her breaths ragged and her heart racing wildly.

For a long moment, they lay there, their bodies still intertwined, the only sound in the room their mingled heavy breathing. His hands stroked her back, his touch oddly soothing after the intensity of their union.

“Wow, Bess. That was so hot,” he said, his voice filled with a mix of amazement and possession.

Bess smiled against his chest. “You’re pretty hot yourself,” she murmured.

His arms tightened around her, and for the first time in weeks, Bess felt a sense of happiness settle over her. Here, in his arms, she felt wanted, needed, and cherished—something she hadn’t realized she’d been craving until now.

Charov soon pulled Bess off the top of him with a gentle yet firm motion, nestling her against his side. His skin radiated heat like a furnace as she settled her head against the solid wall of his chest. The powerful thump of his heartbeat filled her ear, steady and strong, a rhythm that matched the certainty she felt blooming inside her.

His fingers traced lazy patterns on her bare shoulder, making her shiver despite the warmth. “We’re going to visit my mother tomorrow morning,” he announced, his deep voice rumbling through his chest and into her body. “At our family’s country cottage.”

Bess lifted her head slightly, her eyes meeting his intense blue gaze. “Really? I’d love that.”

The unexpected thrill that shot through her took her by surprise. It wasn’t just about seeing Queen Zyre again—it was what this invitation meant. Taking her to visit his grieving mother felt significant like crossing a threshold into her future.

“This means something, doesn’t it?” she asked, suddenly feeling vulnerable despite the intimacy they had just shared. “Taking me to see your mother.”

Charov’s hand moved to cradle her face, his thumb brushing across her cheek with surprising tenderness for such a powerful man. “It means everything,” he confirmed,

his voice lowering to a husky whisper.

Bess felt her heart swell with a mix of joy and nervous anticipation.

“I never thought my life could completely change so fast,” she admitted.

“Having second thoughts?” His question carried a hint of challenge, his arm tightening possessively around her waist.

“No,” she answered honestly, surprised at her own certainty. “I can’t imagine going back to Earth now. I can’t imagine a life without you in it.”

The admission felt weighty, significant in the moonlit darkness of his royal chambers. Bess had never pictured herself as royalty—as recently as a month ago, she couldn’t even picture herself taking a proper vacation. Yet here she was, contemplating a crown and forever with this magnificent man who looked at her now like she was his entire world.

Charov’s answering smile was possessive and tender all at once. “Good,” he rumbled, rolling suddenly to hover over her, his powerful arms caging her beneath him. “Because I won’t let you go.”

The kiss he pressed to her lips was deep and claiming, leaving no room for doubt. When he pulled away, they were both breathless.

“Get some sleep now,” he breathed, though his eyes still smoldered with barely banked desire. “We leave early.”

She nodded, settling back against him as he pulled her close, one muscular arm draped possessively across her waist.



As sleep began to claim her, wrapped in his protective embrace, she marveled at how right this felt.

### TWENTY-NINE

Charov steered his sleek silver hovercraft along the winding road that led to his family's country cottage. The morning sun glinted off the polished metal, casting golden ripples across the dashboard. His hands gripped the controls firmly as he glanced over at Bess, whose face was alight with wonder at the passing landscape.

"The mountains look different out here," she said, leaning closer to the window. "More vibrant somehow."

"The Mavac Range has a different mineral composition than the mountains near the castle," Charov explained, enjoying her fascination. "The sunrise hits them just right this time of year."

His bear lounged contentedly within him. After that night with Bess—their bodies intertwined, her soft moans filling his chambers—his inner animal had become increasingly insistent that they make things permanent. For once, the man and beast were in complete agreement.

The cottage came into view—a sprawling stone structure nestled against the mountainside, surrounded by gardens his mother had cultivated for decades.

"It's really beautiful," Bess whispered.

"Wait until you see the inside." Charov's lips curved into a smile. "My great-grandfather built it himself after winning the territory in the Third Bear Wars." Pride swelled within him as he parked the craft. "My father proposed to my mother here."

The significance of his words hung between them, but Bess didn't catch on—exactly as he had planned.

His mother met them in the grand foyer, her eyes rimmed with red but her posture regal as ever. She embraced Bess warmly before turning to Charov.

“My son.” Her voice still carried the heaviness of her grief.

“Mother.” He wrapped his arms around her, his large frame dwarfing hers.

They settled in the sunroom overlooking the eastern gardens. Charov couldn't help but notice how naturally Bess fit into the space, how she looked at home in the antique furniture that had been in his family for generations.

“Bess has been indispensable this past week,” Charov announced, his chest puffing slightly. “She reorganized the entire council meeting schedule and found discrepancies in the northern territory trade agreements that had been overlooked for years.”

Bess flushed. “I just applied the same principles I used at my old job. Organization is organization, whether it's insurance claims or royal decrees.”

“You're too modest,” Charov insisted, his eyes intense as he gazed at her. “She's brilliant, Mother. The advisers who were skeptical are now requesting her input directly.”

Queen Zyre studied Bess with newfound appreciation. “I knew Gerri wouldn't let us down.”

“The matchmaker has quite the track record,” Bess admitted, and Charov noticed how she sat straighter now, accepting the compliment rather than deflecting it as she might

have days ago.

His inner bear growled approvingly. Their mate was growing into her potential right before their eyes.

“Bess,” Charov said suddenly, standing and extending his hand. “Why don’t you explore the gardens while Mother and I discuss some territory matters? The eastern path leads to a waterfall you might enjoy.”

Bess looked between them, then nodded. “I’d like that.”

Once she was out of earshot, Charov turned to his mother. “I need Grandmother’s ring.”

Queen Zyre’s eyes widened before a slow smile spread across her face. “I was wondering when you’d ask.”

“It’s time,” Charov stated firmly. “She’s proven herself not just to me, but to the territory. And my bear...” He paused, surprised by the intensity of emotion welling up. “My bear knows she’s our true mate.”

His mother rose and walked to an ornate cabinet, removing a hidden panel to reveal a small safe. “Your father would be pleased,” she said softly as she worked the combination. “He saw it in her immediately.”

The small velvet box she placed in his palm carried the weight of generations. Charov opened it, revealing the platinum band with its central blue diamond surrounded by smaller white ones—stones mined from the very mountains visible through the windows.

“She’ll make a fine queen,” Zyre said, touching his arm.

### THIRTY

Charov closed his fingers around the box. His bear prowled eagerly beneath his skin, ready to claim what was rightfully theirs. He looked up at his mother, her face a complex tapestry of emotions.

“How are you really doing, Mother?” he asked, his voice deepening with concern. The sunlight streaming through the windows caught the silver threads now prominent in her once purely blonde hair.

Queen Zyre sighed, her shoulders dropping just enough to reveal the burden she carried. “Some moments I forget, just for a heartbeat. I turn, expecting to see him there with that insufferable smirk he always wore when he proved me wrong.” Her fingers traced the arm of her chair. “Then I remember.”

Charov reached across to take her hand. His bear urged him to comfort and to protect. “I miss him too.”

“But this—” she nodded toward the ring box, “—this gives me joy, Charov. Your father would be ecstatic.”

“I’m not rushing this because of Father’s wishes,” Charov said firmly, his jaw setting in that stubborn way inherited directly from the man they were discussing. “Bess is my true mate. Every fiber of my being knows it.”

“She’s quite remarkable,” Zyre agreed, “but, darling, it’s been barely three weeks since she arrived. For humans, that’s?”

“Fast,” Charov finished, his blue eyes intense. “But what would more time prove? My bear recognized her instantly. I’ve never felt more certain of anything.”

His mother’s lips curved into a knowing smile. “And that day at the royal viewing? When you couldn’t tear your eyes away from her? When you growled at Councilor Dern for standing too close to her?”

Charov’s cheeks heated. “He should know better than to encroach on another male’s mate.”

“She doesn’t wear your mark yet,” his mother reminded him gently. “Just remember, humans operate differently than we do. They don’t have the instinctual certainty our bears provide.”

Charov’s fingers tightened around the box. “So you think she’ll refuse my proposal?” The very thought made his bear rise in protest, claws scraping at his insides.

“I think,” Zyre said carefully, “that humans need time for their hearts to catch up to what our bears know instantly. It doesn’t mean the love isn’t there or won’t come—just that their path to certainty follows different terrain.”

She leaned forward, her expression serious. “I want you to know that the years I spent with your father were worth every moment of this pain, Charov. Every single second. I would endure this agony a thousand times over for just one more day with him.” Her eyes glistened. “But we must respect that Bess might need time to reach that same understanding about you.”

Charov’s bear grumbled, impatient and possessive. “Last night,” he said, his voice lowering to a husky timbre as memories of Bess’s soft curves pressed against him flashed through his mind, “she told me she doesn’t want to return to Earth. Said she can’t imagine her life without me in it now.”

Hope bloomed in his chest, fierce and demanding. “That has to mean something.”

“It means everything,” his mother agreed. “It means she’s on the path. But the question is whether she’s reached the destination yet.”

Charov pocketed the ring box with a decisive motion. His bear rumbled with delight at the way it felt against his thigh. He stood tall, shoulders squared in the sunbeam that sliced through the windows of his mother’s country home.

“I’ll make the proposal unforgettable,” he promised, an edge of determination hardening his voice. “Something so spectacular, she won’t even consider saying no.”

His bear prowled, already planning the claim, imagining Bess wearing his mark and his ring. The thought alone sent heat coursing through his veins.

Queen Zyre’s eyes twinkled with knowing amusement. “The gardens at sunset here would be lovely. Your father proposed to me there.”

“The gardens are too predictable.” Charov shook his head. “Bess deserves something as extraordinary as she is.”

His mother’s smile softened. “Before you go,” she said, her tone shifting to something more serious, “I heard about what happened at the Nuele ball.”

Charov’s jaw tightened. “A simple scheduling oversight.”

“That was fortunate you arrived when you did, even if late.” Queen Zyre’s fingers traced the arm of her chair absently. “The Nueles have been making quite an impression lately. Kynon has been hosting gatherings and making appearances in villages throughout the territory.”

“Let him.” Charov shrugged dismissively. His bear rumbled with indifference. “Planning banquets isn’t exactly how I intend to rule.”

The queen’s gaze sharpened. “Don’t be naive, my son. Our family has ruled for generations, but that doesn’t make it a guarantee.”

Charov’s bear bristled at the implication. “The people love us. They’ve thrived under Father’s rule, and they’ll thrive under mine.”

“The people ultimately decide who they want to govern them,” she countered firmly. “If they feel neglected or believe another could better serve them, they can petition for new leadership. It’s in our oldest laws.”

“That hasn’t happened in centuries.” His voice betrayed his irritation.

“Because your ancestors understood that crowns must be earned daily.” Her tone brooked no argument. “Your father spent half his weeks among the people—trading stories, solving disputes, and celebrating births. They loved him because he loved them first.”

Charov’s bear retreated slightly, chastened. He hadn’t considered that aspect of his father’s reign, too focused on the formal duties and paperwork. The realization made his chest tighten.

“I’m not saying Kynon has designs on your throne,” Queen Zyre continued, “but never underestimate ambition wrapped in generosity.”

“I understand.” The words came out more clipped than he intended, his bear bristling at the correction.

His mother stood, cupping his face with her hands. “Show them who you are—the



real Charov. The one who jumped from a plane because he loves adventure. The one who faced down beasts to protect children. Let them see the man Bess is falling for.”

The tension in his shoulders eased slightly. “I’ll arrange more public appearances. And Bess—they should know their future queen.”

His mother’s eyes gleamed with approval. “She has a way with people that can’t be taught. She was born for this role.”

Pride swelled in him. Yes—Bess was perfect. His perfect mate. His bear preened at the thought.

“I promise,” he said, taking his mother’s hands in his much larger ones. “I won’t let you or Father down. And I won’t let anyone threaten what’s ours.”

The possessiveness in his tone didn’t just refer to the territory. It encompassed everything—his legacy, his future, and most importantly, the woman currently wandering his family’s gardens, unaware she was close to becoming the most important piece of his kingdom.

### THIRTY-ONE

Bess traced her fingers through the crystalline water that cascaded down the rock face behind Charov's family cottage. The droplets sparkled like diamonds under Nova Aurora's dual suns, creating miniature rainbows that danced across the surface. She wandered through the elaborate gardens while Charov spoke with his mother, finding solace in the exotic flora that reminded her how far from Earth she truly was.

Footsteps crunched on the stone path behind her. She turned to find Charov approaching, his broad shoulders blocking the sunlight, creating a halo effect around his silhouette. Her heart skipped—something about him seemed different, more intense than when they had arrived.

"There you are," he beamed as he closed the distance between them. "Thank you for coming with me today. I know my mother can be... overwhelming."

"She's lovely." Bess smoothed her dress, suddenly self-conscious under his intense gaze. "Is everything okay?"

Charov's hand slipped into his pocket, then back out. "Everything's perfect. But I'm starving. Are you hungry? There's a place in town I want to show you."

"I could eat." Her stomach chose that moment to growl audibly.

"Your body speaks the truth." His lips quirked up in a smile that transformed his serious face. He reached for her hand, engulfing it in his. "Let's go."

The silver hovercraft hummed beneath them as they sped toward town. The countryside blurred around them in streaks of purple and gold, alien yet increasingly familiar.

“Hold on tight,” he called over to her, accelerating through a curve that made her squeal.

When they pulled into the town square, Bess instantly sensed the difference. Unlike their previous outings, heads turned immediately. Conversations halted mid-sentence. A ripple of whispers spread through the crowd.

“The King!”

“It’s King Charov!”

“Who’s the woman with him?”

Charov dismounted with practiced grace, then lifted Bess off the hovercraft with hands that spanned her waist. He set her down but kept one possessive arm around her.

“Your Majesty!” A stout man bowed deeply. “What an honor! Please, my restaurant is at your disposal.”

Three more merchants appeared, each offering their establishments. Charov handled it with diplomatic charm, but his grip on Bess tightened.

“Mikal’s place has the best honeyfruit pie on the planet,” he told her, loud enough for others to hear. “We’ll dine there.”

They couldn’t take five steps without someone approaching—mothers with children,

elderly couples, and young men who looked at Charov with awe. Each wanted a moment with their new king, and by extension, with Bess.

“And this must be your future queen!” A woman with tanned skin pressed Bess’s hands between hers. “Such lovely coloring! Those eyes—are all Earth women so exotic?”

Bess’s smile remained fixed as anxiety bubbled beneath. On Earth, she had been just another average citizen. Here, strangers scrutinized her every feature and her every movement.

“She’s even more beautiful than rumors suggested,” someone else commented, examining her as if she were livestock at auction.

Charov pulled her closer to his side. “She certainly is. And she’s probably hungry, so if you’ll excuse us?—”

Once inside the restaurant, Bess slid into the booth, grateful for the momentary reprieve, while her mind raced with a single thought: Was this her future? Always on display and always being judged?

“You’re quiet.” Charov reached across the table, his thumb brushing her knuckles. “The food here will make it worth the fuss, I promise.”

Bess nodded as she gazed nervously around the restaurant. Every face seemed fixated on her, judging her curvy form in the Nova Auroran clothing that still felt foreign against her skin.

She leaned forward, lowering her voice. “Charov, would it be terrible if we went back to the castle for lunch instead? This is... a lot.”

His easy smile faltered, and his eyes clouded over. A muscle in his jaw twitched—the first sign of displeasure she had seen from him today. “Is there a problem with the restaurant?”

“No, the restaurant seems lovely.” Bess fidgeted with the strange metallic utensil beside her plate. “It’s just—everyone’s staring and whispering. On Earth, I was nobody. But here it feels like I’m under a microscope.”

Charov gently squeezed her hand. “What’s bothering you, truly?”

“The attention,” she admitted. “I’m not used to being the center of it.”

His shoulders tensed, and his voice dropped to a timber that sent shivers through her. “This is part of being with me, Bess. This public life—it’s what I have to do as king.” His thumb traced her palm, contradicting the firmness in his voice. “I need my future queen to be willing to play her part in it.”

Future queen. The words hung between them, unacknowledged yet impossible to ignore.

### THIRTY-TWO

“Is this what it will always be like?” Bess asked, gesturing subtly at the crowd. “Always on display? Always being judged?”

Charov’s gaze sharpened, something primal flashing in those blue depths. “Yes. But they’ll love you once they know you.” His voice softened. “As I do.”

Heat crept up her neck at his words. For him, she could try.

“Okay,” she conceded. “We’ll stay.”

His smile was devastating—all white teeth and triumph. “Thank you, Bess.”

The food arrived in an elaborate display of colors and textures Bess couldn’t begin to identify, but her appetite had vanished. Throughout the meal, a parade of townspeople approached their table. Charov greeted each by name, asking after relatives, and discussing local concerns. His charisma was mesmerizing and his authority absolute.

And Bess sat forgotten, a prop in this performance of royalty.

“Your Majesty, about the north field irrigation?—”

“King Charov, my daughter would like to ask?—”

They barely acknowledged her presence, directing all questions and comments to

Charov. He answered each with confidence and charm, occasionally touching her arm or shoulder as if to include her, but never actually bringing her into the conversations.

Bess sipped her sweet, unfamiliar drink and observed. The dynamic wasn't so different from her old job, where her needs were secondary to everyone else's. Only the setting had changed—the castle for her office and a king for her boss.

Yet when Charov's hand found her thigh under the small table, squeezing gently in silent thanks for her patience, she realized the fundamental difference: her old boss had never looked at her with such heat, such possession, or such pride.

Maybe being on display wasn't so bad if it meant being the woman who held the king's attention when no one was watching.

Another thirty minutes had passed, and Bess continued to watch Charov command the room, his deep voice resonating with authority as he addressed yet another townspeople's concerns.

The reality of the situation weighed down on her as the minutes kept passing by. This wasn't just lunch. This was her potential future—a lifetime of public scrutiny and standing in Charov's massive shadow while being expected to somehow shine beside him.

Could she really do this? Be a queen to these people who viewed her as an exotic Earth curiosity at best?

I could go back, Bess thought, imagining her tiny apartment on Earth. The predictable life of an insurance clerk. Another boss who took her for granted. The canceled dates and lonely dinners.

The very idea of returning made her chest constrict painfully. She glanced at

Charov's profile—the strong jaw, the intense concentration in those sapphire eyes as he listened to his subjects—and the truth hit her with sudden clarity.

I love him.

The realization wasn't a thunderbolt but rather the final piece clicking into a puzzle she hadn't known she was solving. Somehow, between his bear-shifting heroics and late nights helping him with paperwork, between his devastating kisses and the vulnerability he had shown her, she had fallen completely, irrevocably in love with this alien king.

Charov turned to her suddenly, as if sensing her epiphany. "What do you think, Bess?"

She blinked, having missed the question entirely. "I'm sorry?"

His eyes crinkled at the corners with amusement. "Madame Ellara asked if you'd like to join the women's council meeting next week. They're eager to meet Earth's contribution to our royal lineage."

The elderly woman smiled expectantly, but Bess saw the assessment behind her kind eyes.

Can this outsider handle our traditions? Is she worthy of our king?

Instead of shrinking from the scrutiny as she might have earlier, Bess felt something unexpected unfurl inside her—a steely determination she had always possessed but rarely acknowledged.

"I'd be honored," she replied, her voice steady. "I'm eager to learn more about Mavac Territory's customs. On Earth, I managed complex systems and helped people



navigate difficulties. I hope those skills might be useful here too.”

Charov’s hand found hers on the table, squeezing it with surprising tenderness. Pride glimmered in his eyes.

The woman nodded approvingly. “Well said, my dear. We meet at midday on the seventh bell.”

As the woman departed, Charov leaned in. “That was perfect,” he murmured.

“I meant it,” Bess whispered back. “If I’m going to be here with you, I want to contribute. I’m not just decorative, you know.”

His eyes darkened, roving over her appreciatively. “No, you’re certainly not just decorative, though I do enjoy the view.”

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. “Be serious.”

“I am serious.” His hand slid to her thigh, possessive and warm. “You’ve already proven invaluable to me—organizing my study, handling my schedule, and mediating between me and my advisors. You have strengths I’ve never seen in anyone on this planet.”

His praise washed over her, bolstering her confidence. Maybe she could do this after all. For him. For herself. For them both.

“I just need time to adjust,” she admitted. “Back on Earth, I was invisible. Here, I feel like everyone’s watching and waiting for me to fail.”

Charov’s jaw tightened. “Anyone who expects you to fail will answer to me.”

### THIRTY-THREE

Charov signaled for the check. Their lunch was completely ruined by his new royal status. The taste of the meal—some local delicacy he ordered without thinking—lingered bitterly in his mouth, though not as bitter as his disappointment.

His gaze drifted to Bess, who sat across from him, her shoulders slightly hunched. The vibrant green dress she wore highlighted her curves in all the right ways, but her smile had faded hours ago. Now she merely nodded politely whenever someone approached their table, which had been approximately every three minutes since they had arrived.

“King Charov! My sister’s son works in the northern mines. Perhaps you could review the safety protocols there?” An elderly woman placed a wrinkled hand on his shoulder.

Charov’s inner bear growled with frustration. He tamped it down and flashed the practiced royal smile his father had perfected.

“I’ll have my staff look into it immediately. Please, have your nephew contact the castle administrator.” He motioned to the waiter. “We really must be going.”

The small restaurant had become increasingly crowded as word had spread of the new king’s presence. What had started as a quaint lunch venue was now packed wall-to-wall with citizens eager to bend his ear. Charov had spent the entire meal navigating political requests, personal grievances, and awkward congratulations on “finding his mate,” while Bess had barely touched her food.

“Ready?” He stood and extended his hand to Bess. His fingers closed around hers, savoring the warmth of her skin. Her touch still sent electricity through him, a constant reminder of their connection that transcended the chaos around them.

They weaved through the crowd toward the exit, Charov using his broad shoulders to clear a path. His protective instincts flared as people pressed in from all sides.

“King Charov, about the eastern trade routes?—”

“My lord, when will the coronation?—”

“Is this your future queen? When’s the wedding?”

Charov placed his hand on Bess’s back, guiding her forward while keeping the crowd at bay. He felt her tense beneath his touch.

“Almost there,” he murmured close to her ear, inhaling the faint scent of citrus in her hair.

At the door, a young bear shifter blocked their path, eyes wide with excitement. “My king! I’ve waited all day! Could you please sign this for my cub?” He thrust forward a small wooden carving of a bear.

Bess subtly shifted away from Charov, stepping into a pocket of space near the door.

His bear roared inside. She’s pulling away. Fix this.

“Just one moment,” he told the eager father, quickly scrawling his signature. Then he reached for Bess’s hand again, threading his fingers firmly through hers.

“No more delays,” he announced loudly enough for everyone to hear. “The king has

personal matters to attend to.”

A few knowing chuckles rippled through the crowd, and Charov watched a blush creep up Bess’s neck. The sight stirred something primal in him.

As they stepped into the bright afternoon sunlight, Charov felt the heavy weight of the crown press down on him. He failed today. Failed to give Bess the attention she deserved, failed to balance his public duties with his private desires.

And his grandmother’s ring in his pocket felt heavier with each passing minute.

Charov guided Bess through the throng of people, his arm wrapped protectively around her waist. His inner bear was itching to growl at anyone who dared step too close to his mate. When they finally reached his silver hovercraft parked at the edge of the town square, he took a deep breath.

“Finally.” He tapped the biometric scanner, and the sleek vehicle’s doors slid open with a soft hiss. “Allow me.”

He helped Bess into the passenger seat, unable to resist brushing his fingers along her arm as he did. The way her green dress hugged her curves made his mouth water, and he had to force himself to focus on the moment.

Once settled in the driver’s seat, Charov engaged the privacy shield, tinting the windows to prevent any more curious onlookers from peering in. The hovercraft hummed to life, rising a few feet off the ground. He guided it away from the town center, heading back toward the castle through a scenic route along the river.

“Bess, I’m sorry,” he said softly. “That was a disaster. I had no idea we’d be mobbed like that.”

She stared out the window, her profile illuminated by the afternoon sunlight streaming through the glass. The golden rays caught the highlights in her wavy brown hair making it shine.

“It wasn’t what I expected either,” she said quietly.

Charov’s grip tightened on the steering controls. “I promise it won’t happen again,” he said firmly. “Now I know, and I’ll be better prepared in the future.”

Bess turned to him, her emerald eyes searching his face. “What does that mean exactly?”

The vulnerability in her expression made his chest tighten. He had never felt this protective of anyone before—this desperate to make things right.

“It means that when we go out next time, we’ll have options.” He reached over and grabbed her hand gently, his thumb caressing her soft skin. “We can either arrange for more privacy—I know secluded places where we won’t be disturbed—or we make it an official royal appearance where the expectation is that we’ll mingle with the people.”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed. “So not every outing has to be a royal circus?”

“Not at all.” He flashed her the roguish smile that used to win him admirers across Nova Aurora. “I know how to disappear when I want to. Been doing it my whole life.”

A hint of a smile played at her lips, making his heart race. “That sounds... really good actually.”

Charov squeezed her hand. “I want you to be comfortable here, Bess. I know this

isn't what you signed up for."

The hovercraft glided smoothly above the water, creating ripples on the surface below. The castle appeared in the distance, its spires gleaming in the sunlight. Charov noticed the worried crease between Bess's eyebrows deepen as the hovercraft glided further over the water. Her fingers fidgeted with the emerald fabric of her dress.

"Charov," she said, her voice barely audible over the engine's hum. "Will our life always be this way? The constant attention, the people, the demands?" She looked up, her eyes wide with concern.

His inner bear wanted to pull her into his arms, to show her through touch rather than words that whatever life threw at them, they would face it together. Instead, he eased back on the throttle, slowing their approach to the castle.

"No," he said firmly. "That's not how this works." He flashed her another grin. "I never paid attention before, but I understand now why my parents maintained the country cottage—why they insisted on getting away regularly."

The hovercraft veered away from the main river channel, heading toward a less-traveled tributary.

"They knew that to rule effectively, they needed time alone. Time to be mates, not just king and queen." Charov's voice deepened. "I have responsibilities, duties I won't shirk. But I also have something they taught me was even more important."

"What's that?" Bess asked, leaning closer.

"The duty to make sure my mate feels loved and adored." His eyes locked with hers, unyielding in their intensity. "You deserve nothing less, Bess."

Before she could respond, Charov spotted the hidden inlet he was searching for—a secluded cove where the river curved around an outcropping of ancient, moss-covered rocks. Trees with trailing purple blossoms lined the banks, their reflections rippling in the crystalline water.

“We’re making a detour,” he announced, steering the craft toward shore. His grandmother’s ring pressed against his thigh through his pocket, and a burst of inspiration struck him. This place—this moment—felt right.

The hovercraft settled gently on the soft sand of the shoreline. Charov jumped out and extended his hand to Bess, his touch lingering as he helped her onto the bank. The scent of wildflowers mingled with her natural sweetness, making his bear rumble with pleasure.

“What are we doing here?” Bess asked, taking in the secluded beauty of their surroundings.

Charov’s heart pounded as his plan crystallized. He wouldn’t just give her the ring—he would create a moment worthy of the mate who had already changed his life. A moment that showed her she was more than a royal obligation.

“I want to show you something.” He led her toward a small clearing where sunlight dappled through the purple canopy overhead.

His inner bear was restless, eager to claim what was his. Charov breathed deeply, channeling that primal energy into something more controlled but no less powerful. He would make this perfect for her.

“The royal appearances, the crowds—that’s just one facet of this life.” He tucked a strand of her wavy brown hair behind her ear, allowing his fingertips to trail along her jawline. “But this—” he gestured to the private cove “—this is what matters. The

moments that are ours alone.”

Charov’s heart thundered in his chest, each beat hammering against his ribcage with primal force. This was it. The perfect moment in the perfect place. He’d faced down savage beasts without flinching, ruled a territory of powerful shifters, but now his hands trembled ever so slightly as he reached for Bess’s soft fingers.

“You’ve seen what this life demands of me,” he said, his voice deeper than usual, thick with emotion. “But you haven’t seen what I’m willing to give for you.”

The sunlight filtered through the purple canopy, casting a violet glow across Bess’s face. Her eyes widened as Charov lowered himself to one knee, the sand cool beneath him. His inner bear roared with approval, urging him to claim what was his.

“The moment Gerri brought you to Nova Aurora, something shifted inside me.” He pulled the ring box from his pocket and opened it, his grandmother’s heirloom catching the light.

“I tried to fight it.” His blue eyes locked onto hers, unwavering. “Tried to protect myself from feeling what my parents had, from risking that same devastating loss.”

Bess’s lips parted slightly, her breath quickening. The reaction sent heat coursing through him, stoking the fire within him.

“But you, Bess Campos...” Charov’s voice rumbled with certainty. “You dismantled every defense. You organized my chaos. You challenged me to be more than just my father’s son—to be the king I was meant to be.”

He held the ring higher between them, its brilliance eclipsed only by the raw intensity in his gaze. “I love you. Not because some shifter instinct tells me you’re my mate, but because I’ve seen your heart. I’ve watched you take charge when everything



around me was falling apart. I've felt your touch heal wounds I didn't know I had."

The breeze stirred her wavy brown hair, and Charov fought the urge to reach up and run his fingers through those soft strands. His bear was growing impatient, demanding he finish this and claim her completely.

"My life as king begins now. And I don't want to rule a single day without you beside me." His voice dropped to a possessive growl. "I need you, Bess. Not just as my mate, but as my queen, my partner, my everything."

He drew a deep breath, savoring the perfect mix of her scent with the flowers surrounding them.

"Will you marry me? Will you be my queen?"

His words hung in the air between them. Charov watched Bess's face, waiting for the smile to break across her beautiful features, for her to throw herself into his arms as his bear expected.

But seconds passed, and Bess remained frozen, her green eyes wide and unblinking, her lips slightly parted but silent. The breeze stirred her hair again, but otherwise, she might have been carved from stone.

Charov's heart sank like a stone in the river beside them. His inner bear growled in confusion. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. His mother's words echoed in his mind: humans operate differently than shifters .

Had he moved too fast? Had he misread everything between them? The passionate nights they'd shared, the way she'd helped him through his grief, the perfect way she fit against his body—had it all meant something different to her?

“Bess?” he prompted, his voice rougher now, vulnerability bleeding through his alpha confidence.

Still, she stood there, staring at the ring, her chest rising and falling rapidly. But not a single word escaped her lips.

### THIRTY-FOUR

Bess stared at the ring nestled in the velvet box. It was breathtaking—an ancient-looking platinum band with an iridescent central blue diamond that seemed to capture the entire spectrum of Nova Aurora’s skies. Her heart hammered against her ribs so hard she wondered if Charov could hear it.

Say something, she screamed inside her head. Anything. But her brain felt like it had short-circuited.

She loved him. From the moment she held him in her arms as he cried out his grief in the woods. Maybe even before that when he held her against his chest as they were free-falling through the Nova Auroran clouds.

But marriage? Already? To become Queen of Mavac Territory?

Charov’s blue eyes studied her, his jaw tightening with each silent second. The confidence in his posture wavered just enough for her to notice, and it broke her heart a little.

“I—” she started, but what came next? Yes? No? Maybe? Can I have some time? Her thoughts tangled together in a hopeless knot.

A sharp electronic chirp cut through the tension. Charov’s comm device on his wrist flashed insistently. He ignored it, his gaze never leaving her face. The device chirped again, more urgently this time.

His jaw tightened impossibly further, the muscles in his neck flexing as he shoved the ring box back into his pocket with barely concealed frustration. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, his voice thick with disappointment. “I should have known it was too soon.”

“No, Charov, it’s not that—” Bess reached for his arm, but he was already turning away slightly, checking his comm device.

Tell him you love him , her heart screamed. Tell him you’re just scared .

But his attention had shifted. His powerful frame went rigid, eyes narrowing at whatever message had come through.

Bess grasped his forearm, feeling the corded muscle beneath her fingers. “Charov, please, I need to explain?—”

He looked back at her, and for a moment, the vulnerability in his eyes made him look younger, more like the carefree prince he’d been before the crown’s weight settled on his head.

“You don’t need to explain,” he said, his voice gentler than she expected. “I rushed you. I always rush everything.”

The comm device chirped a third time, more insistently. Charov glanced at it with a growl that made Bess’s skin tingle.

“I do need to take this,” he said, his thumb hovering over the answer button.

Charov tapped his comm device, his attention diverted from the devastating proposal. She watched his face transform from vulnerable to regal in an instant, the mask of kingship sliding into place.

“Speak,” he commanded, his voice deeper, more authoritative than moments before.

Bess stood awkwardly, her heart still thrumming with unspoken words, her fingers toying with the shimmering fabric of her dress. The secluded cove around them suddenly felt too quiet, the lapping of water against the shore too loud.

“Kynon Nuele requests your presence at his estate immediately,” Torborn’s voice crackled through the device. “He’s heard you’re in town and insists on a meeting.”

Charov’s free hand curled into a fist. “Now? Of all times?”

“He was most insistent, Your Majesty.”

Charov ended the call with a frustrated tap and turned to Bess, his blue eyes stormy.

“We have to go.”

“Can’t it wait?” Bess asked, desperate for a chance to explain her hesitation, to tell him she wasn’t rejecting him—just overwhelmed.

“Not if I want to keep the respect of the territory’s most influential family.” His voice softened slightly as he took in her expression. “In our position, declining such an invitation would be seen as a slight. Politics,” he added with a grimace.

The journey to the Nuele estate on Charov’s sleek hovercraft gave Bess time to stew in regret. The same magnificent building that had hosted the ball now loomed before them, its crystalline architecture catching the afternoon light.

Nya Nuele greeted them in a sunlit parlor, her smile too wide, too perfect. She ushered Bess to a plush settee while servants poured fragrant purple tea into delicate cups.

“I’m so delighted you could join us,” Nya simpered, her jeweled fingers arranging pastries on a plate. “How are you finding Nova Aurora, dear? The culture shock must be immense.”

Bess nodded politely, but her attention remained fixed on the adjacent room where Charov had disappeared with Kynon. Through the partially open door, she caught fragments of their conversation.

“...growing petition,” Kynon was saying, his tone sympathetic yet somehow predatory. “These are turbulent times for the territory.”

Bess shifted on the settee, straining to hear more. Nya prattled on about fashion trends and social events, but Bess only half-listened, mumbling occasional responses.

“Your Majesty,” Kynon’s voice carried clearer now, “you’re still young. Do you truly want to be shackled by duty when there’s so much life to experience? The crown is a burden few are prepared to bear.”

Bess’s stomach clenched. Was Kynon suggesting what she thought he was?

“What exactly are you proposing, Kynon?” Charov’s voice had gone dangerously quiet.

“Simply that perhaps stepping aside voluntarily would be more... dignified. The petition has nearly enough signatures to force a hearing before King Alyx. I would, of course, be honored to shoulder the responsibility in your stead.”

Bess’s breath caught. This was a coup happening in real time, disguised as friendly concern. She waited for Charov’s roar of outrage, for his bear to emerge in righteous anger.

Instead, his voice came calm and measured. “It’s something to consider.”

The teacup nearly slipped from Bess’s fingers. Was he serious? After everything his father had wanted for him was Charov actually entertaining the idea of abandoning his birthright?

Bess finished the last sip of her purple tea with Nya Nuele, setting the delicate cup down with hands that trembled slightly. She’d been straining to hear more of the conversation happening behind those partially closed doors, but the men’s voices had lowered to indistinguishable murmurs.

### THIRTY-FIVE

When Charov finally emerged from the room with Kynon at his side, Bess saw something in his expression that sent a chill through her—a distance that hadn't been there before. Even as they exchanged polite good-byes with the Nueles, Charov's normally expressive face had turned to granite, his jaw set in hard lines.

The silence in the hovercraft was stifling as they soared back toward the castle, Nova Aurora's rolling landscape blurring beneath them. Bess couldn't bear it anymore.

"What did Kynon want?" she asked, twisting her fingers in her lap.

Charov's powerful hands gripped the controls, his signet ring catching the light. For a moment, she thought he might not answer.

"He thinks I should step down willingly," he finally said, his voice flat. "Give up my birthright."

"And you're considering it?"

"The man has a point." His eyes remained fixed on the horizon, refusing to meet hers. "I still have a lot of life to live, more experiences to chase. Maybe the crown isn't for me."

Bess stared at his profile in disbelief. "But your father?"

"Besides," he continued as if she hadn't spoken, "Kynon and Nya are a strong couple,



established in the community. While I...” His voice hardened. “I don’t even have a queen. The kingdom is unstable with just me. The one I truly want to be my queen didn’t even bother to answer after I proposed.”

The accusation stung, heating Bess’s cheeks. “That’s not fair. I was just?—”

“Scared? Overwhelmed?” Charov cut her off, his knuckles whitening on the controls. “I don’t need explanations, Bess. I’m a big boy. I just would appreciate it if you’d let me know if you’re deciding to leave Nova Aurora. That’s all I ask.”

Bess fought the tightness in her throat. “I promise I will talk to you before leaving, if that’s what I decide.”

The rest of the journey passed in suffocating silence. Bess watched his profile, the tightness in his strong jawline, the slight flare of his nostrils with each controlled breath. The bear shifter who had swept her off her feet now seemed unreachable, locked away behind walls of pride and hurt.

When they landed at the castle, Charov disembarked with fluid, powerful movements that reminded her just how physically imposing he was. He extended a hand to help her down—ever the gentleman, even when angry—but dropped it the moment her feet touched the ground.

“I’ll be in my study for the rest of the day,” he said, already turning away. “I need to be alone.”

Bess stood frozen, watching his broad shoulders disappear through the castle doors. The sting of rejection burned in her chest, hot tears threatening at the corners of her eyes. She had messed up royally, both figuratively and literally. The man who had offered her his heart, his kingdom, and his future had interpreted her silence as the ultimate rejection.

As she made her way back to her suite, Bess fought to keep her composure, nodding politely to servants who passed by. Only when her door closed behind her did she allow the first tear to fall, sliding down her cheek and landing on the intricate carpet beneath her feet.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she whispered, pressing her palms against her eyes. How could she have frozen like that? And now he was actually considering giving up his throne—his birthright and his father’s legacy—all because of her.

Bess paced her suite like a caged animal, her eyes now bright with determination. The thought of Charov giving up his throne because of her made her stomach knot with a mix of guilt and something fiercer, more protective. She had messed up by freezing during his proposal, but by the stars of Nova Aurora, she wasn’t going to let him throw away everything his father had worked for.

“The Nueles,” she muttered, tapping her fingers against her thigh as she walked. “Something’s not right there.”

Ever since the ball invitation debacle, an uneasy feeling had settled in her gut about that couple. Their polished smiles didn’t reach their eyes, and the way they’d positioned themselves to make her look incompetent. This petition Kynon mentioned couldn’t be a coincidence.

Bess pulled the silken bell rope beside her door, and within moments, Emesyn appeared.

“You needed something, Lady Bess?”

“Emesyn, I need your help.” Bess leaned in, lowering her voice although they were alone. “How connected are you with the other staff in the territory?”

Emesyn raised a knowing eyebrow. “Very. My cousin works in the Nuele household, and my brother-in-law handles deliveries for most of the noble families.”

“Perfect.” Bess’s heart raced with renewed purpose. “I need information about the Nueles—specifically about this petition against Charov and whether they orchestrated that invitation mix-up.”

The servant’s eyes widened. “You think they’re behind all this?”

“I’m not sure, but I intend to find out.” Bess reached for Emesyn’s hands, squeezing them gently. “Charov is actually considering stepping down. I can’t let that happen—not because of me, and certainly not for the benefit of those two vipers.”

Emesyn’s expression hardened with loyalty. “The king belongs on his throne. I’ll put the word out discreetly.”

“Thank you. And Emesyn?” Bess bit her lip. “Can you ask Torborn to look into who had access to Charov’s schedule before that ball? Someone deliberately removed that invitation.”

After Emesyn departed, Bess sank onto her bed, her mind racing. Had she been so focused on her own insecurities that she’d failed to see the political machinations happening around them? The paper-pusher in her wanted evidence, facts, a trail she could follow.

A knock at her door interrupted her thoughts. She opened it to find Oberon filling the doorway with his massive presence.

“His Majesty asked me to check if you require anything,” he rumbled, but his eyes held something more—concern, perhaps suspicion.

Bess straightened her spine. “Actually, yes. I need allies who care about Charov as much as I do.”

Oberon’s expression didn’t change, but something in his posture shifted. “Go on.”

“The Nueles are orchestrating a coup,” she said bluntly. “I need to prove it before Charov makes a terrible mistake.”

A slow, dangerous smile spread across the bear shifter’s face. “I knew there was a reason he chose you.” He stepped into her room, closing the door. “My cousin guards the territorial records office. If anyone’s gathering signatures for a petition, they’ll have filed initial paperwork there.”

Bess felt a flutter of hope. “Can your cousin check who initiated it?”

“Consider it done.” Oberon’s massive arms crossed over his chest. “What else?”

“We need to find out who tampered with Charov’s schedule before the ball.”

“The royal scheduler answers directly to Torborn,” Oberon nodded. “I’ll speak with him personally.”

Bess felt her confidence returning. She wasn’t just some Earth woman in over her head—she was a problem solver, a paper trail expert, and apparently, already thinking like a queen.

### THIRTY-SIX

Charov slammed the door to his royal study. The ancient wood reverberated with the force of his frustration. His heart hammered in his chest like a wounded animal. The ring box felt like a lead weight in his pocket, mocking him with each movement.

“Damn it all,” he growled, pacing across the polished stone floor. His inner bear roared in confusion—how could their mate hesitate? The animal inside him couldn’t comprehend what had happened, could only feel the sting of perceived rejection.

He yanked off his suit jacket and tossed it across a nearby chair, then braced his hands against the massive oak desk. The documents scattered beneath his palms—petitions, treaties, requests—all meaningless compared to the turmoil in his heart.

“Your Majesty?” Torborn’s voice came after a gentle knock and the door opening a crack.

“Enter,” Charov barked, not bothering to straighten or compose himself.

Torborn slipped inside and shut the door behind him, his expression carefully neutral as he assessed his king’s state. “I take it the proposal did not go as planned.”

Charov let out a bitter laugh. “She didn’t even answer, Torborn. Just... froze. As if the very idea of being my queen horrified her.” He pushed away from the desk and stalked to the window overlooking the royal gardens where he and Bess had walked just days before. “Perhaps Kynon is right. Perhaps I should just step down.”

“Because of one awkward moment?” Torborn poured two glasses of Auroran brandy from the crystal decanter. “Forgive me for speaking bluntly, but that seems rather impulsive, even for you.”

Charov accepted the offered glass, downing half its contents in one swallow. The liquid burned pleasantly down his throat. “If my true mate rejects me, what hope is there for our royal lineage? What’s the point of fighting for a throne that will end with me?”

Torborn settled into a chair, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. “Women are complex creatures, Your Majesty. Human women even more so.” He took a contemplative sip. “Emesyn has explained to me that humans don’t have our instinctual recognition of mates and destinies. They require... time.”

“Time,” Charov repeated, the word tasting sour on his tongue. “We’ve had time.”

“A few weeks isn’t ‘time’ by human standards. They form attachments differently.” Torborn leaned forward. “And if I may be so bold, dismissing her and not giving her a chance to explain wasn’t your finest moment as a potential life partner.”

Charov’s bear growled at the criticism, but the man recognized the truth in it. He rubbed a hand across his face. “I panicked. The rejection hurt.”

“Was it truly rejection, though? Or was she simply surprised? Perhaps overwhelmed?” Torborn’s voice softened. “Emesyn tells me that Miss Bess has been uprooted from everything familiar to her. And now she’s expected to become queen of a territory on a planet she didn’t know existed mere weeks ago.”

The heaviness of Torborn’s words settled on Charov’s shoulders. He hadn’t considered how alien everything must still be to Bess.

“So, what am I supposed to do?” Charov asked, uncharacteristic vulnerability coloring his tone. “Watch her walk away?”

“Well, the last thing you should do is push her away,” Torborn said firmly. “Instead of retreating like a wounded bear, perhaps you should continue to court her. Make her comfortable. Help her gain the certainty that we shifters take for granted.”

Charov turned the advice over in his mind, his bear settling as it recognized the wisdom. “I’ve been a fool, haven’t I?”

“Not a fool, Your Majesty.” Torborn smiled. “Simply a man in love.”

The following morning, Charov tapped his fingers against the leather armrest of the royal transport, his bear’s impatience thrumming beneath his skin. Last night, after his conversation with Torborn, he’d paced his chambers until dawn, plotting how to mend what his wounded pride had damaged.

“Have the charity houses been informed of our visit?” he asked, adjusting the cuffs of his midnight blue suit.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Oberon glanced at him in the rearview mirror. “They’re quite excited. It’s been some time since royal attention has been focused on the children’s homes.”

Charov nodded, satisfaction mingling with the nervousness coiled in his stomach. When he’d sent the invitation to Bess’s chambers this morning, he’d half-expected her to decline—or worse, to have already packed for Earth. His relief when she had accepted had been embarrassingly palpable.

The royal transport slowed to a stop before the palace’s east entrance where Bess would be waiting. Charov quickly exited the transport and straightened, his heart

accelerating as the door opened. And then she appeared.

The sight of her stole his breath. Bess stepped into the morning light wearing a shimmering yellow sundress, the Auroran fabric catching the sunlight like liquid gold against her skin. Her wavy brown hair cascaded freely around her shoulders, and the subtle curve of her hips beneath the flowing material made his bear rumble with possessive desire.

“Your Majesty.” She dipped her head in a small, formal greeting that made something twist uncomfortably in his chest.

“Please,” he said, extending his hand to help her into the vehicle. “After everything we’ve shared, I think ‘Charov’ will suffice.”

Her fingers were warm against his palm, and he fought the urge to pull her directly into his arms. Instead, he let her settle beside him, close enough that her scent enveloped him.

As the transport pulled away from the palace, Charov studied her profile. The golden light streaming through the windows illuminated the delicate curve of her neck, the fullness of her lips that he’d tasted just days before.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come,” he admitted.

Bess turned to face him, those piercing green eyes meeting his blue ones with a directness that both challenged and thrilled him. “I said I would talk to you. I keep my promises.”

He leaned closer, needing her to understand his actions from last night. “I’m not accustomed to uncertainty, Bess. My bear doesn’t handle it well.”



A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “Is that your way of apologizing?”

“My bear doesn’t apologize either,” he growled playfully, rewarded when her smile widened. “But the man does. I’m sorry, Bess. For pushing too hard and then walking away.”

The tension between them softened. She angled herself toward him, the movement causing her dress to shift against her curves in a way that made his blood heat.

“These charity houses,” she said, “tell me about them.”

### THIRTY-SEVEN

Charov allowed the change of subject, filing away the unfinished business between them for a more private moment. “There are five throughout the capital. They house children who’ve lost their parents—some to illness, others to the dangers of our wilder territories.”

“Like those beasts we encountered?”

“Among other things,” he nodded, admiring how quickly she grasped the realities of his world. “My father believed strongly in supporting these houses. It was one of his most passionate causes.”

Her eyes softened. “And now it will be yours.”

“Yes,” he said simply.

The sunlight shifted as they rounded a corner, bathing Bess in golden light once more. His bear surged with fierce protectiveness and desire. She belonged here, by his side. She would make a magnificent queen—strong yet compassionate, capable yet kind. He would give her all the time she needed, but he would also show her, in every way possible, that her place was here with him.

Before long, Charov watched as a group of orphaned children swarmed around Bess. Their small hands reached for hers, their faces alight with curiosity about the beautiful Earth woman. His chest swelled with pride as she knelt to their level, answering their eager questions about her home planet with patience and warmth.

“How do humans know when someone is your mate?” asked a small girl with braided hair, her eyes wide with innocence, looking back and forth between Bess and Charov.

Charov tensed, his bear alert for Bess’s response.

“Well,” Bess said, her voice gentle, “humans have to figure it out the old-fashioned way—time, conversation, and listening to our hearts.”

Charov’s bear rumbled with sudden recognition and understanding. His mother and Torborn were indeed right. Bess just needed more time. What happened yesterday wasn’t a rejection of him, she just wasn’t ready.

As the day wore on, Kynon’s words from yesterday echoed in Charov’s mind like an unwelcome ghost. A growing petition to have him removed... set Kynon on the throne instead... The suggestion had landed like a blow to his pride. He’d barely worn the crown for a month, and already his people supposedly wanted someone else?

Yet as he surveyed the room, all he saw were faces filled with respect and admiration. The staff members bowed deeply when he passed. The children gazed up at him with awe reserved for living legends. The head matron had tears in her eyes when she thanked him for continuing his father’s legacy of support.

“Your Majesty is so like the late king,” she’d said, her voice thick with emotion. “He would be so proud to see you here today.”

Those words had pierced straight through to his heart, settling there like a warm ember of validation.

His bear preened beneath his skin. This was his territory, his people. No one, especially not Kynon Nuele, would take them from him.

But doubt crept in like a shadow. Kynon had always been loyal during his father's reign—a trusted advisor and friend to the crown. Why would he lie? It made no sense.

Charov's thoughts were interrupted when a small boy tugged on his tailored jacket. "King Bear," the child said, using the affectionate nickname the orphans had given him, "will you show us your bear? Please?"

His bear surged forward eagerly at the request, always ready to show off for cubs.

"Not inside, I'm afraid," Charov replied with a wink that sent the children into fits of giggles. "But I'll tell you what—next summer festival, I'll arrange for all of you to visit the royal hunting grounds where you can see not just me, but many of our royal guards shift. How does that sound?"

The children's cheers nearly shook the rafters.

As they made their way back to the transport after their fourth visit, Charov caught Bess studying him, her eyes thoughtful.

"What?" he asked, his hand settling possessively on her back as he guided her into the vehicle. She didn't respond, just gave him a warm smile over her shoulder that made his heart skip a beat.

Once seated beside her, close enough to inhale her intoxicating scent, he turned to face her fully. His bear demanded he pull her into his lap, but the man exercised restraint—barely.

"I'm still considering Kynon's suggestion," he admitted, watching her face carefully. "About stepping down."

Her eyes widened, and he caught the subtle scent of her distress.

“But I don’t want to,” he continued, his voice dropping to a rumble that made her pupils dilate. “I’ve always known I would be king someday. It’s not just my birthright—it’s who I am.” His fingers found hers, engulfing her smaller hand. “Yielding my crown would mean failing my father, throwing away his legacy. And I’m not convinced it’s what my people truly want.”

“It isn’t,” Bess said firmly, surprising him with her certainty. “I’ve been watching them too, Charov. The way they look at you—with respect, with hope. That’s not something that can be manufactured or faked.”

Her words soothed something primal in him. His bear preened under the validation from their mate.

### THIRTY-EIGHT

His eyes locked with hers as if searching for answers. His intense gaze sent warmth cascading down her spine. She knew she should let him make his own choices, but she couldn't stand by while Kynon manipulated him with lies.

"There's something you should know about Kynon," she said, licking her suddenly dry lips. "I've been asking around—Emesyn and some of Oberon's sources have been... illuminating."

Charov's eyebrow arched. "And what exactly have they illuminated?"

Bess shifted in her seat, the leather creaking beneath her. "Remember at the ball, how you mentioned Kynon's hunger for power? It goes deeper than ambition. Apparently, he's had his eye on your throne for years."

"That's hardly surprising," Charov grunted, his thumb tracing circles on her hand.

"No, but this might be—he's not the benevolent leader he pretends to be." She leaned closer, lowering her voice though they were alone in the backseat. "Behind closed doors, he's abusive to his staff, even his family. The public face of compassion? It's all fabricated."

Charov stiffened, his shoulders squaring. The bear inside him seemed to rise to the surface—not in a shift, but in the dangerous gleam that entered his eyes.

"Explain."

“His household staff rotates constantly because he fires them for the smallest infractions. Sometimes worse.” Bess shuddered. “Emesyn’s cousin works there. She says he threw a solid gold paperweight at a maid for moving his desk items while cleaning.”

The temperature in the transport seemed to drop. Charov’s fingers tightened around hers.

“And Nya?” he asked, his voice deadly quiet.

Bess swallowed hard. “She wears high collars and long sleeves for a reason, according to several sources.”

A growl rumbled in Charov’s chest, vibrating through the space between them. The sound was primal and protective—entirely bear.

“If he’s put his hands on anyone—” His free hand clenched into a fist.

“That’s not all,” Bess continued. “The petition he mentioned? If it exists at all, it’s nowhere near as widespread as he implied. Oberon has connections throughout the territory, and no one’s heard anything substantial.”

Charov leaned back, his eyes flashing with something dangerous. The sophisticated royal veneer slipped, revealing the apex predator beneath.

“He’s manipulating you,” Bess concluded, her heart hammering. “Using your grief and uncertainty against you.”

“And you’re certain of this information?” His voice was controlled now, but barely.

“As certain as I can be without seeing it firsthand.”

His jaw set in a hard line. She watched the doubt cloud his eyes. His broad shoulders tensed beneath his tailored suit, and he shook his head with a skepticism that stung more than she expected.

“These are serious accusations, Bess.” His voice was silk over steel. “Kynon has been a trusted advisor to my family for years. My father considered him a close friend.”

Bess bit her lower lip, tasting the remnants of her berry-flavored lip balm. “I understand how it sounds?—”

“Do you?” Charov’s eyes narrowed, sending shivers down her spine despite the heat of his gaze. “You’ve been on Nova Aurora for mere weeks, and you’re accusing one of our most respected nobles of abuse and manipulation.”

The air between them crackled with tension. Bess’s heart hammered, but she refused to back down completely.

“I’m only sharing what I’ve heard,” she said softly. “But I get it—you’ve known him your whole life. Your father trusted him.”

His expression softened slightly, but the doubt remained. “Exactly. My father was an excellent judge of character.”

Bess recognized the insurmountable wall before her. Challenging Charov’s perception of his father’s judgment while he was still grieving would be cruel and futile.

“You’re right,” she conceded, squeezing his large hand. “Let’s drop it for now.”

Relief relaxed the hard lines of his jaw. He nodded once, the authoritative gesture of a man accustomed to having the final word. “Thank you.”



The transport pulled up to their final charity destination—a children’s home on the outskirts of the territory. As they exited the vehicle, Charov’s arm possessively claimed her waist, sending delicious heat spiraling through her body.

“Stay close,” he murmured against her ear, his breath tickling her neck.

The staff greeted them with reverence, sweeping them on a tour of the facility. Bess half-listened to the director’s explanation of their programs while her mind raced. If Charov wouldn’t believe her about Kynon’s ill intentions without evidence, then she’d have to find some.

When they reached the recreation room, a swarm of children surrounded them, their excitement palpable. Charov transformed before her eyes, his regal bearing giving way to playful energy as he dropped to one knee to speak with them at eye level. The children hung on his every word, completely enchanted.

“Your Majesty,” the director touched Charov’s shoulder, “would you mind saying a few words to our benefactors in the next room?”

Charov glanced at Bess. “Will you be all right here for a few minutes?”

“Of course.” She smiled warmly. “Go be kingly.”

His eyes crinkled with slight amusement as he rose to his full, imposing height. “I won’t be long.”

The moment he disappeared through the doorway, Bess slipped away from the children and out a side exit. Her heart pounded with both exhilaration and trepidation as she flagged down a passing shuttle. This wasn’t like her—the responsible, reliable Bess Campos would never sneak away to investigate a powerful nobleman.

But perhaps that Bess belonged to Earth, not Nova Aurora.

“Nuele Estate, please,” she told the driver, sliding into the back seat. “And hurry.”

She felt a rush of reckless determination course through her veins as the shuttle carried her swiftly toward the Nuele estate. She knew Charov would be furious when he discovered her absence, but she couldn’t shake the conviction that Kynon was manipulating the situation.

The shuttle pulled into the curved driveway of the imposing stone manor. Bess smoothed her dress and squared her shoulders.

“Quite unexpected, Lady Bess,” the butler intoned as he admitted her to the grand foyer with its soaring ceilings and gleaming marble floors. “The Duke and Duchess are taking afternoon refreshments on the terrace.”

Bess followed him through corridors lined with ancestral portraits, their eyes seeming to track her movement with suspicion. The terrace overlooked meticulously landscaped gardens where exotic plants from across Nova Aurora bloomed in vibrant profusion.

“Well, well,” Kynon’s silky voice sent prickles down her spine. “What brings our future queen to our humble home without her king?”

Nya rose from her chair, her high-necked dress concealing her throat despite the warm afternoon. “Please, join us. Tea?”

Bess accepted the delicate porcelain cup with a gracious smile that belied the hammering of her heart. “Charov is completing his royal duties. I wanted to speak with you both privately.”

“How intriguing.” Kynon’s blue eyes narrowed, calculating behind his pleasant facade.

### THIRTY-NINE

Bess took a deliberate sip of tea, then placed the cup down with a gentle clink. “I came to inform you personally that Charov and I will be announcing our engagement formally next week. We’re quite excited to start a family right away.” She placed a hand on her abdomen with meaningful emphasis. “I’ve always wanted a large family—perhaps three or four children.”

The effect was immediate. Nya’s fingers tightened around her teacup until her knuckles whitened. Kynon’s smile froze, becoming brittle at the edges.

“How... wonderful,” Nya managed, her voice strained. Her eyes flickered with naked envy before she masked it.

Bess pretended not to notice, leaning forward with practiced enthusiasm. “We’re hoping you’ll help us celebrate by publicly announcing your support for Charov as king. And perhaps clarifying that you have nothing to do with this peculiar petition I’ve heard whispers about.”

Kynon chuckled, but the sound held no warmth. “My dear, I’m afraid you misunderstand politics on Nova Aurora.” He crossed one leg over the other, his posture relaxed but his eyes predatory. “The royal succession isn’t guaranteed simply by birthright. The people must believe their king is capable.”

Nya’s lips curved into an unpleasant smile. “And while we wish you both... happiness... we cannot in good conscience support a king who prioritizes pleasure over duty. The petition exists because the people have concerns.”

“Concerns you’ve manufactured,” Bess countered, abandoning pretense.

“We will do no such thing as withdraw our objections,” Kynon stated flatly. “The territory deserves leadership from those who understand sacrifice and duty—not from a reluctant ruler and his Earth bride.”

Bess felt cold certainty settle in her stomach. Her suspicions confirmed, she rose to her feet with newfound resolve. She had gotten exactly what she came for—the truth behind their saccharine facade.

“I see,” she said calmly. “Thank you for your honesty, at least.”

As she turned to leave, Kynon’s voice followed her, smooth as silk and sharp as a blade.

“You misunderstand the situation entirely, Lady Bess.” His footsteps approached behind her. “Not only will we not withdraw our objections to the petition, we’ve decided that to ensure Charov doesn’t succeed, we’ll need to remove his one advantage.”

Bess froze, the hair on the back of her pale neck standing up. “What are you talking about?”

“You, of course.” Kynon’s voice dropped to a dangerous level. “His true mate. The one thing giving him legitimacy in the eyes of the people. A rather inconvenient problem for us.”

She backed away, her gaze darting toward the exit. “I think I really should be going now.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.” Kynon lunged forward with surprising speed, his

fingers digging into her forearm.

Bess wrenched her arm away, knocking over the tea service with a deafening crash. “Get your hands off me!” The newfound boldness that had brought her here alone suddenly felt like terrible foolishness.

“Nya! The door!” Kynon shouted as Bess made a desperate dash toward the terrace exit.

Nya appeared in the doorway, her face twisted with malice that had been hiding behind her practiced smile. “Where do you think you’re going, Earth girl?”

Bess pivoted, heading for the garden stairs, but Kynon caught her from behind, his arm wrapping around her waist with bruising force. She stomped on his instep with her heel and jabbed an elbow into his ribs.

“Feisty,” he hissed, loosening his grip just enough for her to twist away.

She made it three steps before Nya tangled a hand in her hair, yanking her backward with stunning force. Pain exploded across her scalp.

“Should have stayed on Earth,” Nya spat, producing a cloth from her pocket.

The sickly-sweet smell hit Bess’s nostrils just before Nya pressed it against her face. She held her breath, thrashing wildly, but a sharp blow to her stomach forced her to gasp. The chemical invaded her lungs, and the world began to blur at the edges.

Charov, she thought desperately, hoping against reason that somehow, their mate bond would alert him. I’m sorry. I should have listened to you and stayed close.

The world faded to black.

When Bess regained consciousness, cold stone pressed against her cheek. Her head throbbed, and her wrists burned where coarse rope bit into her skin. The musty smell of earth and dampness filled her nostrils as she forced her eyes open to near-complete darkness.

“Hello?” she called, her voice echoing in the cavernous space. “Is anyone there?”

“Finally awake?” Nya’s voice preceded the click of heels on stone steps. A light flared, revealing a basement filled with wooden crates and ancient furniture draped in sheets.

Bess struggled to sit up, discovering her ankles were also bound. “You won’t get away with this. Charov will come looking for me.”

“Will he?” Kynon emerged from the shadows. “Or will he believe you’ve returned to Earth? After all, we have this.” He dangled her comm device before her. “A lovely message about how you couldn’t handle the pressures of royal life is all it will take.”

Cold fear slithered down Bess’s spine, but she refused to let them see it. “You clearly don’t understand what being true mates means.”

“Oh, we understand perfectly,” Nya said, circling Bess like a predator. “That’s why we need to decide how to permanently remove you from the equation.”

“He’ll sense I’m in danger,” Bess bluffed, hoping it was true. She had read mate stories in her free time here to know there was supposed to be a connection, but she and Charov had barely begun to explore their bond.

Kynon laughed. “Perhaps. But by the time he figures it out, if he ever does, we’ll have implemented our plan.” He crouched beside her, his sour breath hot against her face. “The better question is whether we make it quick or take our time.”

### FORTY

Charov smiled and nodded appreciatively at the benefactors. These people had donated generously to the children's home, and as king, it was his duty to express gratitude. But mid-conversation, a sharp, electric pulse of fear shot through him. His smile faltered.

The sensation wasn't his own emotion—it was Bess's. It coursed through his veins like ice water, setting off primal alarms in his bear's consciousness.

"Are you all right, Your Majesty?" The elderly benefactor touched his arm.

"Yes, just—" Charov straightened his shoulders. "Please excuse me for one moment."

He stepped away, scanning the area for his mate. Bess had been playing with the children in the adjacent recreation room when he'd last seen her. Now, she was nowhere in sight. His bear growled, demanding to find her.

He caught Oberon's eye at the doorway and motioned him over with a sharp jerk of his head. His bodyguard approached immediately, his expression already wary.

"Something's wrong with Bess," Charov said in a low voice, his fingers curling into fists. "I can feel it through our mate bond. Where is she?"

Oberon's hesitation lasted only seconds, but to Charov it felt like a betrayal. His bear's protective instincts surged forward.



“She left through the side exit about fifteen minutes ago,” Oberon admitted. “I followed her outside to make sure she was safe. She boarded a public shuttle and requested transport to the Nuele estate.”

Charov’s body went rigid. His eyes flashed with fury.

“And you didn’t think to tell me this immediately?” His voice lowered to a dangerous growl. Several nearby staff members edged away, sensing the shift in his demeanor.

“I assumed she was acting on your instructions.” Oberon kept his voice steady despite Charov’s rising anger. “Given your recent discussions with Duke Nuele?—”

“No way in hell would I send Bess anywhere alone. Especially not to the Nueles.” Charov leaned forward, his voice barely contained. “You know what she’s been saying about them. You know what she suspects.”

Oberon’s eyes widened with awareness. “I’ll get the royal transport ready immediately.”

“You’ll do more than that,” Charov snarled, his bear pushing dangerously near the surface. “You’ll get to the Nuele estate now. I’ll follow as soon as I can make a graceful exit here.”

The benefactors were watching him curiously from across the room. Charov forced his shoulders to relax, though his entire body hummed with the need to shift and tear through the city to find his mate.

“Understood.” Oberon nodded sharply.

Charov turned back to the benefactors, smoothing his features into a mask of royal pleasantries while his heart thundered with fear and rage. The mate bond pulsed again

with Bess's distress, stronger this time.

"My apologies for the interruption," he said, his voice controlled despite the war raging inside him. "You were saying about the new playground equipment?"

He nodded and smiled automatically, while inside, his bear roared with one thought only: Protect what is mine .

Several minutes later, Charov stalked away from the charity house with furious purpose, his jaw clenched tight enough to crack stone. The instant he reached the tree line, his hands flew to his crisp dress shirt, tearing at buttons with no regard for the expensive fabric. The bear inside him was already clawing its way out.

"Damn it, Bess," he growled as his skin prickled with the beginning of his shift. "Had to play detective, didn't you?"

The transformation was violent and swift – his bones cracked, his muscles expanded, and dark fur erupted from his skin. Within moments, a massive dark brown bear stood where the king had been with intelligent blue eyes that retained their humanity even in this form.

Charov's bear lunged forward, powerful limbs eating up the distance as he crashed through the underbrush. His senses expanded exponentially – smelling the rich earth, hearing every rustle for miles, and feeling the vibration of distant vehicles through his paws. But something else overshadowed all that: the mate bond, pulsing with Bess's fear like a beacon.

Each pulse of terror sent a corresponding surge of rage through him. His bear roared internally, demanding blood if anyone had harmed what was his. He hadn't even acknowledged how completely she belonged to him until this moment – facing her potential loss.

If Kynon has touched her...

His bear growled, the sound echoing through the forest and sending small creatures skittering away in terror. Political consequences be damned. If her suspicions about Kynon proved true, no amount of diplomatic maneuvering would save the man.

As he bounded over a fallen tree, Charov's thoughts raced through the implications. He'd have to explain why the King of Mavac Territory had torn through the estate of a prominent nobleman. He'd have to justify any violence. The petition against his rule would gain momentum.

Let them petition. Let them try to take my throne.

The realization struck him with absolute certainty. He wanted the crown. Not just for his father's memory, but for himself. For his people. For the future he could build – the future he wanted to build with Bess at his side.

The Nuele estate came into view through the trees, sprawling and ostentatious. Charov slowed his pace, instinct pushing him to approach with stealth despite his urgency. The bond pulsed stronger now, almost painfully, confirming Bess was inside.

Wait for me. Your mate is coming.

He circled the perimeter, scenting the air. Guards patrolled the grounds, but they were focused outward, watching for conventional approaches. None looked up at the forest's edge where a massive bear shadow moved with surprising silence.

Charov's lip curled in a silent snarl when he caught Kynon's scent – arrogance and expensive cologne masking something rotten underneath. And there, mixed with it, the sweet floral and warm citrus that was uniquely Bess.

His mate. His queen.

Charov's decision solidified with crystal clarity. He would keep his throne. He would make Nova Aurora better. And he would do it with his true mate by his side – assuming she'd still have him after he rescued her and apologized for his stubborn pride.

First, though, he needed to get to Bess. Charov crept closer, the bear's massive form impossibly silent for its size, blue eyes fixed on the estate. The mate bond pulled him forward like a physical tether.

I'm coming for you, mate. And Goddess help anyone who stands in my way.

The scent of Oberon—pine mixed with that distinct leather-and-gunmetal smell—reached his sensitive nostrils before he spotted him. His bodyguard crouched on the opposite side of the Nuele estate, concealed among the dense foliage, watching the mansion with predatory focus.

Charov approached, deliberately snapping a twig to alert Oberon to his presence. The bodyguard's head whipped around, his hand instinctively moving to his weapon before recognition flashed in his eyes.

“Your Majesty,” Oberon whispered, relief evident in his voice.

Charov moved behind a broad tree trunk and shifted back to his human form. The transformation was quicker this time, fueled by urgency rather than rage. His skin felt raw, his muscles ached, but none of that mattered. Only Bess mattered.

Oberon pulled out clothing from a bag around his shoulder—a tailored charcoal suit that would pass royal inspection.

“The situation?” Charov demanded, dressing swiftly.

“They closed all the curtains ten minutes ago.” Oberon’s voice was tight. “Movement inside suggests multiple people, but I haven’t spotted Bess through any windows.” He hesitated. “Something’s wrong, Charov. My instincts are screaming.”

“Mine too.” Charov buttoned his jacket, every movement precise despite the tempest brewing inside him. “We need to get in there without revealing what we know.”

“A frontal approach might be best,” Oberon suggested. “They won’t expect it.”

Charov straightened his tie, his jaw a sharp line of determination. “I’ll handle this. Stay out of sight but close.”

### FORTY-ONE

The walk to the front door seemed endless. Charov kept his pace measured, fighting every instinct that screamed at him to tear through doors and walls to find his mate. That wouldn't help Bess, it would only put her in more danger.

He knocked on the ornate door, three precise raps. His heightened senses caught shuffling movements inside and hushed whispers. He forced his face into a mask of casual pleasantries, though his eyes remained winter cold.

The heavy door swung open, and Nya Nuele stood there, her smile too wide, her eyes too bright. "King Charov! What a delightful surprise."

"Duchess Nuele." Charov inclined his head with practiced regality. "I was in the area and thought I might check if Bess was still visiting you."

A flicker of something—panic, calculation?—crossed her face before her smile reasserted itself. "Oh, I'm afraid you've just missed her, Your Majesty."

Kynon appeared behind his wife, his hand possessively on her shoulder. "Indeed. She came to wish us well regarding the petition. Said she'd be returning to Earth, actually." His smile didn't reach his blue eyes. "Something about not being cut out for royal life."

Charov's bear roared silently, recognizing the blatant lie. His mate would never leave without speaking to him directly. She had promised him, and she kept her promises.

“How strange,” Charov remarked, his voice dangerously pleasant. “Bess and I had quite a different conversation just this morning.”

Kynon’s fingers tightened on Nya’s shoulder. “Women can be so fickle, Your Majesty.”

The dismissive comment made Charov’s blood boil, but he merely smiled, showing just enough teeth to remind them that he was, at heart, a predator.

“Actually,” Charov said, adjusting his cufflinks with deliberate nonchalance, “I’ve been wanting to discuss this petition business with you. Might I come in for some refreshments? Royal matters are best discussed over a good drink, don’t you think?”

The Nueles exchanged a look of barely concealed panic.

“This... isn’t the best time,” Nya began.

“We’re in the middle of—” Kynon started simultaneously.

“I insist.” Charov’s voice dropped an octave, his authority filling the space between them. “After all, if you’re going to be king, Kynon, you should start getting used to unexpected royal visits.”

The mate bond pulsed painfully, and Charov fought to keep his expression neutral. Bess was close—and terrified.

“Of course,” Kynon finally relented, his smile strained. “Please, come in, Your Majesty.”

Charov remained on the threshold, deliberately not crossing yet. “Excellent. I’ve also been particularly interested in discussing the lower levels of your estate. I hear

they're... quite remarkable.”

The flicker of panic that crossed Kynon's face confirmed everything. Charov stepped inside, the scent hitting him like a physical blow—Bess's warm citrus and floral notes, tinged with fear and something metallic. Blood. His vision sharpened, his bear rising dangerously closer to the surface.

“Your Majesty, you seem unusually interested in architecture today,” Kynon attempted, positioning himself between Charov and the corridor leading deeper into the house.

Charov smiled, all teeth and no warmth. “Cut the shit, Kynon. I smell her.”

He brushed past the duke with deliberate force, knocking him off balance. Nya made a small, strangled sound.

“She left! She's returning to Earth!” Nya's voice pitched higher as Charov stalked down the hallway, following his mate's scent.

“Try again,” Charov growled, not bothering to look back. “My mate would never leave without saying good-bye. And she certainly wouldn't leave me for you two backstabbing opportunists.”

The scent grew stronger, leading him toward an ornate door at the end of the hall. Locked. Charov felt a predatory satisfaction at the obstacle—as if a mere lock could stop him from reaching what was his.

He felt movement behind him and spun, catching Kynon's descending arm mid-strike. The man had pulled a ceremonial dagger from a wall display.

“Really?” Charov twisted, forcing the blade from Kynon's grasp. “You thought you'd



stab the king in the back and get away with it?"

Kynon's eyes flashed amber. "I would have been a better king than you'll ever be."

"You're welcome to keep believing that in the afterlife." Charov slammed his fist into the door, splintering the ancient wood around the lock. One more blow and it gave way completely.

A staircase descended into darkness. Bess's scent pulled him down, each step fueling his rage. At the bottom, another door—this one reinforced steel.

"She's going to die down there anyway," Nya called from the top of the stairs, her voice trembling with defiant fear. "And so will you."

The locks on the steel door were formidable, but Charov was beyond finesse. His skin rippled as his bear pushed forward, demanding release.

"You first," he snarled, whirling to face the couple.

They shifted in unison—two massive bears, smaller than Charov's form but dangerous in the confined space. Nya's bear was sleek and pale, Kynon's a muddy brown. They blocked the stairway, trapping him.

Charov let out a low growl. "Perfect."

His own shift was explosive—bones cracking and reforming, muscles swelling and expanding, dark fur erupting along his massive frame. The corridor was barely large enough to contain him. His bear roared, the sound shaking dust from the ceiling.

Kynon lunged first. Charov caught him mid-air, using the smaller bear's momentum to slam him into the wall. Stone cracked under the impact. Nya darted in, catching

Charov's flank with her claws. He bellowed in pain but twisted with impossible speed, his massive paw connecting with her head in a sickening crack.

Nya staggered, clearly disoriented. Charov seized the moment to ram his shoulder against the steel door. The hinges groaned but held. He roared in frustration, the sound drowning out Kynon's growl as the duke recovered.

The two male bears collided in a blur of teeth and claws. Charov fought with cold precision despite his rage, each movement calculated for maximum damage. When Kynon exposed his throat, Charov didn't hesitate. His jaws closed around the vulnerable flesh and tore.

Blood sprayed across the stone floor. Nya screamed—a horrible sound, half-human in her bear form—and charged blindly. Charov caught her with a brutal blow that shattered her skull against the wall.

Silence fell, broken only by Charov's heavy breathing and a muffled sound from behind the door. Bess.

He shifted partially back, keeping his enhanced strength but regaining opposable thumbs. Blood dripped from his hands as he tore at the locks, metal shrieking in protest.

The door finally gave way. Inside, Bess lay bound to a chair, her eyes wide above a gag. When she saw him—half-shifted, covered in blood—she didn't recoil in fear. Instead, relief flooded her expression.

Charov crossed to her in two strides, gently removing her gag.

"Took you long enough," she gasped, a tremulous smile breaking through her fear.

“Next time you decide to go detective hunting, take your bear with you,” he growled softly.

### FORTY-TWO

The air in the basement crackled with the aftermath of violence. Blood splattered the walls outside the room she was locked up in, and the scent of copper mixed with the musky, wild odor of shifter combat. Bess watched in wonder as Charov's massive bear form rippled and contracted, bones and muscle rearranging themselves until the man she knew stood before her, completely naked and splattered with evidence of the brutal fight.

His chest heaved with exertion, his blue eyes wild with primal energy that hadn't yet dissipated. Despite everything, Bess couldn't help but notice how magnificent he looked—his powerful muscles slick with sweat, his dark hair tousled, and his expression fiercely protective.

Charov didn't seem to register or care about his nakedness as he worked at the ropes binding her body and ankles, his fingers still trembling with adrenaline.

The moment she was free, she threw herself against his chest, not caring about the blood or sweat or anything else. She buried her face into his neck, her entire body shaking with sobs she'd been holding back during her captivity.

"They were going to kill me," she choked out, clinging to him as though he might disappear. "They said they'd make you think I went back to Earth. I thought—I thought I'd never see you again." Her voice broke as she pulled back just enough to look at his face, needing to confirm he was really there. "I'm so sorry I went off on my own. I just—I needed proof. I needed something concrete so you'd believe me about them."

Charov cupped her face in his large hands, his thumbs brushing away her tears. The tenderness of the gesture contrasted sharply with the carnage surrounding them.

“I should have trusted you,” he said, his voice a deep rumble that she could feel through her entire body. “You were trying to protect me and my kingdom while I was too stubborn to see the danger right in front of me.”

Bess shuddered, remembering the cold calculation in Nya’s eyes as she’d discussed precisely how to dispose of her body. “They had it all planned out. They were going to tell everyone that I couldn’t handle the pressure of being queen.”

“I would have never believed that.” Charov’s arms tightened around her, sheltering her from the gruesome scene behind him. “You promised you’d talk to me first. And I know my mate’s heart.”

My mate. The words sent a warm flush through Bess despite everything. She had come to this planet as a stranger, yet somehow this powerful man—this king—saw her as his equal and his partner.

“How did you find me?” she whispered, her hands clutching his shoulders.

A dangerous smile curved Charov’s lips. “The mate bond, of course.” His expression darkened. “And no one takes what’s mine. Especially not my queen.”

She clung to him, her body still quivering when the thundering of footsteps announced Oberon’s arrival. The bodyguard burst into the basement, weapon drawn, only to stop short at the sight of his king completely naked amid the carnage.

“Your Majesty!” Oberon’s eyes widened before he quickly averted his gaze, focusing on Bess’s tear-streaked face instead. “My lady, are you injured?”

Bess shook her head, suddenly aware of how she must look—disheveled, rope burns, mascara surely streaked down her cheeks. She realized she was still pressed against Charov's naked form and felt heat rush to her face despite everything that had happened.

Oberon, ever practical, shrugged out of his jacket and handed it to Charov. "The transport's ready upstairs when you are."

Charov slipped the jacket on, which covered him just enough to be decent. "Oberon, I need you to contact the royal council immediately. The Nueles attempted to murder both the king and his intended queen. I had no choice but to defend us." His voice was calm but carried the unmistakable edge of authority. "The petition will be nullified. Make sure the council understands the situation fully."

"Of course, Your Majesty." Oberon bowed slightly, his eyes flicking to the bodies before returning to Charov. "I'll handle everything."

The ride back to the castle passed in a blur for Bess. The plush leather seat of the royal transport felt unreal after the cold concrete of the basement floor where she'd been certain she would die. She stared out the window at the alien landscape of Nova Aurora, still unable to believe that this was her life now—political intrigue, murder attempts, and a bear shifter king who had torn apart her captors to save her.

Charov, now dressed in clothes Oberon had retrieved from the vehicle, took her hand in his. "You're safe now," he murmured. "I won't let anyone hurt you ever again."

Bess turned to look at him—this man who had risked everything to save her. "I was so afraid," she admitted. "Not just of dying, but of never seeing you again."

Charov's eyes darkened. "Bess, I need you to know something." He scooted closer, taking both her hands in his. "I don't care how long I have to wait for your answer to

my marriage proposal. A day, a month, a year—it doesn't matter. There will never be anyone else for me but you."

The raw honesty in his voice made her heart stutter. This wasn't the polished king speaking, but a man laying his soul bare.

"You've shown me what I've been missing all these years," he continued. "I thought adventure was about skydiving or fighting or traveling the world. But it's not." His hands squeezed hers gently. "Love is the greatest adventure—building a life with your mate, facing each new challenge together, and experiencing the worlds with someone who makes everything brighter just by being there."

Bess felt tears gathering again, but these were different—warm and full of possibility rather than fear and despair.

"Yes," she whispered.

Charov stilled. "Yes?"

She nodded, a smile breaking through her tears. "Yes, I'll marry you. I'll be your queen."

The look that crossed his face was worth every terrifying moment she had endured—pure, unbridled joy and triumph. He pulled her into his lap with a growl that was more bear than man, his hands spanning her waist.

"My queen," he rumbled against her lips before claiming them in a kiss that promised forever.

They finally arrived at the castle, its towering spires and ancient stone walls a stark contrast to the chaos they had just left behind. Charov guided her through the grand

entrance, his hand firm in hers. The staff bowed as they passed, but Charov didn't pause to acknowledge them. His focus was entirely on her, his piercing blue eyes dark with a mix of relief and something far more primal.

"Let's get cleaned up," he murmured softly as they ascended the sweeping staircase.

When they reached his royal chambers, he closed the heavy wooden door behind them with a soft click, sealing them off from the world. The space was as opulent as she remembered—the massive four-poster bed, the rich tapestries, the scent of cedar and something uniquely him that lingered in the air. But tonight, it felt different. More intimate. More theirs.



### FORTY-THREE

Charov didn't waste time. He led her straight to the en suite bathroom, a sprawling space of marble and gold that could have doubled as a spa. He turned the shower on, the sound of rushing water filling the room as steam began to rise.

"Let me take care of you," he said, his voice leaving no room for argument. His hands moved to the straps of her yellow sundress, his fingers brushing against her shoulders as he slid them down. The fabric pooled at her feet, leaving her standing in nothing but her bra and panties. His gaze raked over her, hot and possessive, and she felt her cheeks flush under the intensity of it.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice rough with admiration. His hands moved to the clasp of her bra, and she held her breath as he unhooked it, letting it fall away. His eyes darkened as he took her in, his hands skimming down her sides to her hips. "Every inch of you."

Her heart pounded as he stepped back to undress himself. His borrowed clothes were gone in moments, revealing the powerful, sculpted body she'd come to know so well. His muscles rippled as he moved, his skin marked with faint scars that told stories of battles fought and won. The sight of him made her knees weak.

He took her hand and led her into the shower, the warm water cascading over them both. Bess gasped as the heat hit her skin, the tension in her body beginning to melt away. Charov reached for a bottle of soap, pouring a generous amount into his hands before lathering them up.

“Turn around,” he instructed, his voice soft but commanding. She obeyed, her back to him as his hands began to move over her shoulders, kneading the tight muscles there. His touch was firm but gentle, and she let out a soft moan as he worked the knots out of her back.

“Just relax,” he murmured, his lips brushing lightly against her ear.

She closed her eyes, letting herself sink into the sensation of his hands on her skin. He moved lower, his fingers tracing the curve of her spine before sliding around to her stomach. His touch was electric, sending sparks of pleasure through her body.

When he reached for the shampoo, she turned around to face him, her hands resting on his chest. “My turn,” she said softly. She took the bottle from him, pouring a dollop into her hands before working it into his dark, wet hair. His eyes never left hers as she massaged his scalp, her fingers moving in slow, deliberate circles.

“You’re good at that,” he said, his voice husky. His hands settled on her hips, pulling her closer until their bodies were pressed together. The water streamed over them, but Bess barely noticed. All she could focus on was the heat of his skin against hers, the way his breath hitched as her fingers moved through his hair.

When she was done, she reached for the soap, lathering her hands before sliding them over his chest. His muscles tensed under her touch, and she could feel the rapid beat of his heart beneath her palm. She moved lower, her hands gliding over his abs, and he let out a low growl that sent a thrill through her.

“Bess,” he warned, his voice thick with desire. But she didn’t stop. She wanted to explore every inch of him, to memorize the feel of his body under her hands.

When her fingers brushed against the hard length of him, he groaned, his hands tightening on her hips. “Careful what you’re doing,” he said, his voice a rough

whisper.

She looked up at him, her eyes meeting his. “I know exactly what I’m doing. I want you, Charov,” she said, her voice steady despite the heat coursing through her.

Charov’s eyes darkened, and before she could blink, he had her pinned against the shower wall, his body pressing into hers. The water streamed over them as he claimed her mouth in a searing kiss, his hands roaming over her body with a possessiveness that left her breathless.

“You’re going to be completely mine after tonight,” he growled against her lips.

His hands slid down her back, gripping her hips, and he lifted her effortlessly, pressing her up against the tiled wall. Her legs wrapped around his waist instinctively, her breath hitching as she felt the hard length of him press against her.

His mouth left hers, trailing hot, wet kisses down her neck, each one sending a jolt of electricity through her. When his mouth found her breast, a gasp escaped her as he began circling her hard nipple with his tongue. “Charov,” she whispered, her voice trembling with need. Her fingers tangled in his wet hair, pulling him closer, needing more.

He pulled back just enough to meet her eyes, his gaze dark with hunger. “You’re mine, Bess,” he breathed. “Say it.”

“I’m yours,” she whispered, her heart pounding. The words felt like a vow, one she was more than willing to make.

His lips crashed back onto hers, fierce and demanding, and she moaned into his mouth as he positioned himself at her entrance. He entered her slowly, achingly so, and her nails dug into his shoulders as she adjusted to the feel of him. He was big—so

big—but the stretch was delicious, filling her in a way that made her gasp.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and she nodded, her breath coming in short, uneven pants.

“Yes,” she managed. “Don’t stop.”

He didn’t. His thrusts started slow and measured, but as she began to move with him, meeting him stroke for stroke, he picked up the pace. His hands gripped her hips, holding her steady as he drove into her, each thrust deeper, harder, and more primal. The sound of their bodies meeting filled the steamy air, mingling with her soft moans and his guttural growls.

“You feel so good,” he said, his voice strained.

Her head tipped back as pleasure coiled low in her belly, building with every movement. Her legs tightened around him, urging him on, and he groaned, his forehead pressing against hers.

“Bess,” he breathed, “I’m going to mark you. My mate mark. Are you ready?”

She nodded, her heart racing. “Yes.”

He shifted ever so slightly, his thrusts becoming harder, faster, and more urgent. She could feel the tension building in him, in her, and then it happened—her body clenched around him, pleasure exploding through her in waves. She cried out, her hands clutching at him as she spiraled into bliss.

Seconds later, he roared, and his hips jerked as he climaxed, his nails digging into the soft skin of her hip. She felt the sting of his mate mark, a sharp, possessive scratch that she knew would leave a scar—a permanent reminder that she belonged to him, body and soul.

When the waves of their pleasure finally subsided, Charov pressed his forehead to hers, his breath coming in ragged gasps. “Mine,” he said, his voice soft, almost reverent.

“Yours,” she whispered back, her fingers brushing against his cheek.

For the first time, her heart was full.

### FORTY-FOUR

Two weeks later, Bess stood in the royal bridal preparation room, her hands shaking slightly as Emesyn adjusted the glittering tiara atop her carefully styled waves. The transformation from Earth insurance clerk to Nova Aurora's queen seemed impossibly swift, like something from a fairy tale that shouldn't happen to ordinary women like her.

"Stop fidgeting," Gerri commanded, appearing suddenly at her side in a stunning cobalt blue designer suit that made her white bob gleam even brighter against her petite frame. "You're going to make Emesyn stick you with those pins."

"I can't help it," Bess admitted, catching a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror. The wedding gown was unlike anything she could have imagined—shimmering white fabric that reflected the light of Nova Aurora's dual suns in a way Earth fabrics never could, hugging her curves before cascading into a train that would trail behind her through the royal gardens. "Six weeks ago, I was processing insurance claims."

Emesyn smiled, sliding another pearl-tipped pin into Bess's hair. "And today you're marrying the most eligible bear shifter on Nova Aurora."

"Most insatiable, too, from what I hear." Gerri winked, her blue eyes flickering briefly to gold. "Those scratch marks on your hip healing nicely?"

Heat flooded Bess's face. The mate mark had indeed healed into a faint silvery scar that tingled pleasantly whenever Charov was near. Though she had quickly learned

that the mate bond had other, more intense effects—like being able to sense his moods, his desires, and most disturbingly, when he was thinking about her in particularly carnal ways. Like right now.

“He’s thinking about you, isn’t he?” Gerri placed a knowing hand on Bess’s arm. “I can always tell when mates are communicating.”

“Not exactly communicating,” Bess murmured, feeling her core tighten at the wave of possessive hunger that swept through the bond. “More like...projecting.”

“Bears,” Gerri rolled her eyes. “No patience. Especially on their wedding day.”

A loud knock at the door made all three women turn. Emesyn opened it to reveal a royal messenger who bowed deeply.

“His Majesty wishes to know if his bride requires anything before the ceremony.”

Before Emesyn could answer, Bess felt another pulse through the bond—this one so explicit that her knees nearly buckled.

“Tell His Majesty,” Bess said, finding her voice suddenly husky, “that his bride requests he keep his thoughts decent until after the ceremony.”

The messenger’s eyes widened, but he nodded and retreated.

Less than thirty seconds later, Charov’s deep laughter echoed through the mate bond, followed by: Never .

“He’s impossible,” Bess sighed, but couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her face.

“He’s yours,” Gerri corrected, adjusting Bess’s veil. “Forever. How does that feel?”

Bess closed her eyes, allowing herself to truly feel the connection that pulsed between her and Charov—warm, vital, and as necessary as breathing. “Like coming home to a place I never knew existed.”

“That’s how it should feel,” Gerri nodded approvingly. “Now, let’s get you married before that bear of yours decides to skip the ceremony and just carries you off to his den.”

Emesyn gasped. “He wouldn’t!”

Bess laughed, feeling another wave of impatience through the bond. “He absolutely would.”

Bess soon stepped onto the petal-strewn aisle, her breath catching as the assembled crowd rose to their feet. The royal gardens blazed with color—flowers from both Earth and Nova Aurora arranged in breathtaking harmony, just like the union they had come to witness. Through her delicate veil, Bess saw hundreds of faces turn toward her, but she only had eyes for one.

Charov stood at the altar, tall and absolutely handsome in his royal regalia. His deep blue eyes locked onto hers with that familiar intensity that sent ripples of heat through their mate bond. His jaw tightened, his nostrils flaring slightly—the bear within him recognizing its mate. The raw possession in his gaze caused her knees to weaken.

Breathe. Just breathe. Bess commanded herself as she took the first step forward. The mate mark on her hip tingled as Charov’s emotions flooded through their connection—pride, desire, and something deeper that made her heart race.

She had expected nerves, but with each step toward her future, she felt only certainty.



Six weeks ago, she was unfulfilled and unseen. Today, she was claiming a kingdom—and a king.

When she reached him, Charov extended his hand, his large fingers engulfing hers. “Mine,” he growled, low enough that only she could hear.

“Not yet,” she whispered back, a teasing glint in her eye. “There’s paperwork to file first.”

His lips quirked in that smile that transformed his regal features into the playful man she had fallen for. “Always the proper clerk,” he murmured.

### FORTY-FIVE

The royal officiant began the ceremony, but Bess barely registered the words. She was lost in the way Charov looked at her—like she was the only star in his sky.

When the time came for vows, Charov's deep voice resonated through the gardens. "Before my people and my ancestors, I claim you, Bess Campos, as my queen, my mate, and my heart." His fingers tightened around hers. "I vow to protect you, to honor you, to challenge you, and to adventure with you until my last breath."

A single tear escaped despite her best efforts. Charov wiped it away with his thumb, the tender gesture belying the powerful intensity in his blue eyes.

"I choose you, Charov Mavac," Bess said, her voice steadier than she had expected. "Not because fate decided, but because my heart knows you. I vow to support you, to stand beside you, to remind you to have fun when duty weighs heavy, and to love you—the king, the man, and the bear—for all of my days."

When they exchanged rings—his a heavy band of Nova Auroran metal that gleamed like captured starlight, hers his grandmother's ring—his hands trembled slightly. The mighty bear shifter was nervous. The realization made her heart swell.

"By the power vested in me," the officiant proclaimed, "I now pronounce you husband and wife, King and Queen of Mavac Territory."

Before the words had fully left the officiant's mouth, Charov pulled Bess against his chest, one hand cupping her face with surprising gentleness while the other pressed

possessively across her lower back.

“My queen,” he whispered against her lips.

“My bear,” she answered just before his mouth claimed hers.

The kiss was both a promise and a claiming. His lips moved against hers with authority, but when she responded with equal fervor, he growled his approval into her mouth. Through their bond, Bess felt his joy and desire twining with her own—a perfect harmony of emotions that left her breathless.

When they finally separated, his eyes had darkened to midnight, and Bess knew hers reflected the same hunger. The crowd erupted in cheers.

Before long, the grand doors of the royal ballroom swung open, and Bess felt Charov’s hand press possessively against her back as they entered. Though she had expected the grandeur, nothing had prepared her for the overwhelming spectacle that greeted them—crystal chandeliers dripping from ceilings that soared at impossible heights, tables laden with delicacies from both Earth and Nova Aurora, and hundreds of guests who rose to their feet as they entered.

“My queen,” his voice rumbled against her ear, “this is all for you.”

She swallowed hard, taking in the sea of faces staring at them with reverence. “Half of these people probably wanted you to marry a bear shifter princess six weeks ago.”

His laugh was low and heated against her neck. “But my bear wanted you. Only you.” His fingers traced possessive patterns against her back, each touch sending sparks through their bond.

“Your Majesties.” Queen Zyre approached, her black mourning dress exchanged for a deep purple gown that highlighted the strength in her shoulders. Though grief still

outlined her eyes, there was a genuine smile on her face as she embraced Bess. “My son chose wisely.”

“He had some help,” Gerri piped up, appearing as if from nowhere. “Though I’ll say this match was one of my easier ones. These two practically screamed ‘compatible’ from the start.”

“We did not,” Bess protested, remembering their awkward first dinner.

“Oh please,” Gerri waved dismissively, her golden eyes sparkling with mischief. “I saw the way you looked at him when you thought no one was watching. And he was worse.”

Charov’s fingers tightened possessively on Bess’s waist. “I knew from the first moment.”

“Lies,” Bess countered, enjoying the heat that flared in his eyes at her challenge. “You thought I was a boring paper-pusher.”

“I thought you were my boring paper-pusher,” he corrected, his voice dropping to that register that caused her heart to race. Through their bond, she felt the primal satisfaction of the bear within him—pleased that his mate understood her worth now and wasn’t afraid to claim it.

The royal announcer tapped his staff three times, calling for attention. “King Charov and Queen Bess will now lead the first dance.”

Charov swept her onto the dance floor with unexpected grace, his massive frame moving with fluid precision. Music swelled around them—a Nova Auroran melody that seemed to sync with the pulse of their mate bond.

“Nervous?” he asked, his eyes darkening as he pulled her closer than royal protocol

likely allowed.

“Terrified,” she admitted, feeling hundreds of eyes upon them. “Everyone’s staring.”

“At you,” he affirmed, spinning her in a move that made her wedding gown flare like captured starlight. “My beautiful queen.” His hand dipped slightly lower on her back, just skirting the edge of propriety. “Do you have any idea how difficult it is to keep my hands honorably placed right now?”

Heat pooled in her belly. “Behave. We have hours of this reception ahead of us.”

“Hours,” he growled, the word a complaint. He leaned closer, his breath blazing hot against her ear. “When all I want is to take you to our chambers and show you exactly what being mated forever to a bear king means.”

A jolt of desire shot through her so intense that she missed a step, and he steadied her with a knowing smirk.

Their first dance soon ended, and the ballroom filled with applause, but all she could hear was his whispered promise in her ear:

“Our adventure begins now. And it will never end.”