



The Sea Dragon King's Pirate (Dragons of Serai #14)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Im a pirate. I value only one thing more than treasure—my freedom. When I first saw King Vaxarion of Morilren, I knew that he was dangerous. All Sea Dragons are dangerous. But this one threatened me specifically. My freedom. All it took was one night with him and I knew he would enslave me. I knew if I stayed with him, all three of my hearts would soon be his. So, I left.

But he came after me. He saved my life. And instead of claiming it as was his right, he let me go. Now, Ill do anything to get him back. Give up everything for him. Even the one thing I value most.

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“Dragons!” the lookout cried.

I didn't jump up like the rest of the day crew aboard the Lu-Ken. I just swung my head toward the shore. We had been docked for a few hours now, and the Captain was out with the First Mate and a few others, looking for buyers for our latest take. And I do mean take. Everyone thought the Lu-Ken was a merchant vessel, participating in an honest trade. The truth was that we were pirates, just really good at hiding it.

Frowning at the docks, I sat up out of my lean. There weren't any Dragons there. Only whores and fishermen. Slightly more of the latter, since it was so early in the day. I looked back at Shu, up in the nest. He was pointing at the water, not the land. That got a reaction out of me.

Sprawled as I was on the broad forecastle railing at the bow of the ship, propped against a stack of crates, I didn't have to move much to look into the water. But I couldn't help leaning over the side. Because there, just a few feet away from me, were dragons—sea dragons.

It hadn't been so long ago that the Sea Dragons had been hibernating, forced into slumber by the entrapment of their god. But then some land Dragon freed the God and a shitstorm of divine proportions hit Serai. The Dragon Goddess displeased by the God's release since she was the one who trapped him in the first place. They fought, the God won, and now, the oceans were ruled by the Sea Dragons again.

Not that I minded. Things had been getting a little wild under the waves without the Sea Dragons to keep the peace. And that says a lot coming from a pirate. But we're

nice pirates. We don't like bloodshed. Most of the time, we leave the ships and crew we target afloat and alive, wearing masks to protect our identity. We only kill if we have to. Some of the things below the surface were not so agreeable. Plus, the Sea Kings didn't give a shit about pirates. They let us do whatever we wished above water. As long as we didn't fuck with the sea folk below, they left us alone.

Back to the sea dragons. And I mean lowercase sea dragons because they were in their beast forms, making them even more fascinating.

Sunlight glittered on scales of green, blue, and violet. Long whiskers and fins trailed around the serpentine bodies like ribbons spinning through the air. They were massive, each one about the length of our ship, but as they passed by, they shifted, bodies condensing into those of men. Beautiful, naked men.

Another part of me came to attention.

I watched avidly as the men climbed up a ladder attached to the dock—the same dock the Lu-Ken was moored at. Each of them had remarkable physiques, with long, dark hair. And that hair flowed freely as soon as they exited the sea, their Water Magic pulling every drop of moisture from their skin and out of their hair. Waterproof satchels were slung across their chests, and when they reached the dock, they removed clothing from those satchels and got dressed. All but one of them. He waited by the ladder with a set of clothes held before him, all folded and nice. When the last Sea Dragon emerged, the waiting man bowed and offered the clothes to him.

“A king,” I whispered.

Even had the other Sea Dragon not bowed to this one, I would have known he was a king. The man had a regal air that didn't require clothes or a crown. His hair hung past his hips, teasing me with glimpses of an amazing, plump ass, dimpled at the sides. Once on the dock, he swung that wealth of hair aside. No shits given about his

nudity. The really shocking bit was that even when he turned, giving me a mouthwatering view of his front, I focused first on his hair. The Sea Dragon King had hair that shimmered like a Neraky's eyes. Iridescent. Jewel tones of emerald green, sapphire blue, and amethyst highlighted the rich black of those thick tresses, made all the brighter by the sun.

The crew often teased me about my hair, saying it was the loudest thing about me. But my purple locks had nothing on this man's brilliant mane. I sighed, actually sighed at its beauty. Like a priceless black pearl. And that body. Dear Gods, he had a body made for sex. Tight abs, powerful chest, lean hips, and a cock that, even limp, made my balls clench. I licked my lips, imagining how he would taste.

And then I saw his face.

Did I think his hair was the most glorious thing about him? I was so wrong. The Sea Dragon King had a face that would haunt me forever—both waking and asleep. Strong and yet soft features. His lips were full, the most kissable lips I'd ever seen, but his jaw was hard, unyielding. His cheekbones looked sharp enough to slice a man's throat, and his brows were two blades above his . . .

“Holy fuck, his eyes are purple,” I whispered.

Yes, that's how close the Sea Dragon King stood to me. I could see the color of his eyes. And they matched my hair. He was also close enough to hear me. As he slipped into his pants, he looked up, and our stares collided. Clashed. Fucking slammed into each other. It was like a hull hitting rocks. I splintered. Came apart in seconds. My chest ached, my throat went dry, and my hand clenched on the railing. A creak came as my nails dug into the wood.

The Sea Dragon King froze halfway up, then stood slowly. He held my stare as he fastened his pants. Then he licked his full, kissable lips as if his thoughts had also

collided with mine.

I did the only thing I could; I smiled at him.

And the Sea Dragon King smiled back. No, he grinned. Smugly. Yeah, he knew exactly what I was thinking.

Then he turned away.

As my hearts slowed down, I couldn't help but feel a measure of disappointment. I wasn't sure what I expected from the interaction, but I must have been hoping for something because that disappointment was bone-deep. I continued to watch the Sea Dragons as I rubbed at the ache in my chest. I couldn't rub at the other ache yet, not in public, but I would. I'd rub it while thinking about him.

The Sea Dragons finished dressing, then went to a waiting carriage. A waiting royal carriage. How had I missed that thing rolling up in all its golden grandeur? So, the King of Gavemor was expecting the Sea Dragons. Interesting.

Then the Sea King said something to one of his men. The man looked back. At me. No. No, he had to be looking at the Lu-Ken. Not me. Surely not me. But even if he was looking at the ship, it was odd. As the Sea Dragon King climbed into the carriage, his knight loped back to the docks, right to the edge in front of me. I gaped at him as he pointed at me.

“Me?” I asked and tapped my chest.

The Sea Dragon nodded.

The rest of the day crew gathered around me as I briskly walked—not ran, mind you, that would be shameful—to the gangplank. My fellow pirates stood at the railing and

watched like a pack of wolves as I left the ship, hands on the hilts of their daggers—Gods love them. They would have taken on a Sea Dragon for me, and I for them. That's how we lived. Fuck, it's how we survived. But I didn't think their bravery would be necessary today.

With my three hearts racing once more, I smoothed a hand over the top of my head and the braid that ran down the center there, to my shoulders. The sides of my head were shaved to show off the intricate tattoos there—one side adorned with coral and fish and the other with vines and birds. With the remaining hair braided, there was nothing out of place, but I couldn't stop the nervous movement. I kept glancing at the royal carriage.

“How can I help you, sir?” I asked the Sea Dragon when I got close enough.

“King Vaxarion of Morilren sends his regards,” the Sea Dragon said. “He will also send a carriage for you tonight at six o'clock precisely, if you are amenable to spending the evening with him.”

“I . . . he . . .” I cleared my throat. “Yes, I'm amenable.”

“Very good. It will be here at six .” He pointed at the road. “Your name?”

“I'm, uh, Zixin, Sir.”

“Zixin, you are one lucky Neraky,” the Sea Dragon said with a smirk. Then he turned and hurried to the royal carriage.

I watched him nod at someone just before he jumped on the back ledge, and then the carriage pulled away. I thought I saw movement inside, the flash of teeth from a smile, but I could have been imagining it.

As soon as I turned around, the crew started cat-calling, blowing kisses, and thrusting their hips at me. I grinned and strutted back onto the Lu-Ken.

“Fuck off, all of you,” I said with my grin locked in place. “I’m having fresh Sea Dragon for dinner.”

“Royal Sea Dragon!” Wei whooped. “Well done, Zix!”

“He hasn’t done anything well yet,” Joo said. “Don’t blow it, Zix.”

“Yeah, don’t blow it, but blow him,” Feng added, then motioned with his hand before his mouth as if he were sucking a shaft. “Blow him good.”

I chuckled and went back to my spot on the railing. The crew continued to tease me, but my thoughts were already on the coming night. I was going to tease and please that Sea Dragon until his purple eyes rolled back in his head. And then I was going to do it all over again. All night. He’d be swimming home with a smile, and if it went really well, I might even tell the crew about it. In great detail.

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I checked my reflection again. For like, the sixth time. Or sixtieth. I had showered—cleaned better than usual if you catch my wave—and shaved. Down there. Neraky don't have a lot of body hair, so I didn't have to worry about shaving my limbs or my chest, just my bits—all around the mainmast and the full nets below. They were silky smooth and ready for royalty. I smelled pretty good too and had on my best garments—all of them stolen. The pants and hip scarf were taken off a Zaruian vessel and were made of the finest silk in deep cerulean. My tunic was cotton, but nearly as thin as the silk, stolen from the cargo hold of a ship out of Racul. My vest was leather from Kasitan—black, supple, and with a braided trim. I'd taken that off the First Mate of a Levahan ship. I had a gold earring in my left ear—just a small hoop, but it was from my first take and always brought me luck. I had found it in the Captain's cabin after the place had been ransacked by the rest of the crew. Your first take meant you were the last to pick your prize. Even my boots, made of waterproofed leather, were stolen. They were my newest pair, and I thought they made me look dashing. The black leather came up to my knees, where they folded into a short flap.

Usually, I'd have knives hidden in several locations, but I didn't think the Sea King's guards would appreciate that. I did keep one in my boot because—pirate. It was the only thing on me that I hadn't stolen. I preferred Rasokai steel. They made the best blades up there, using a technique in which they folded the metal hundreds of times. Fucking hundreds. And those blades were hard to come by. I only had a couple that I'd been lucky enough to steal. The dagger, however, I'd paid for, and it was worth it.

I smoothed a hand over my hair. I'd left it down to cover my tattoos but was having second thoughts. Would King Vaxarion prefer it up, out of the way, so he could watch me suck his cock? I shuddered as the image of doing that very deed came to

me. It was ten minutes to six. Soon, I'd be on my way to him. I had to decide. Up or down?

“Fuck,” I growled and tied a leather cord around my hip sash. “If he wants it up, I can put it up.”

I looked at my coin pouch but didn't think I'd need it. Still, I didn't like the idea of getting stranded somewhere with no money to pay for a carriage. I grabbed the pouch and tied it onto my sash as well. Then I straightened my shoulders and stepped out of my room. As one of the higher-ranking sailors on the Lu-Ken, I had a cabin beneath the Captain's, just a door down from the First Mate's. The corridor outside took me to a short set of steps going up to the main deck.

Things were strangely quiet up there. The day crew was off duty and were probably in the city, looking for ways to spend the fresh coins in their pouches—distributed by Captain Teng that afternoon. But the night crew never let duty sway them from having a good time. The Captain didn't mind them carousing a bit, as long as they didn't get drunk (a few tankards were all right) and did their jobs. But I didn't hear a peep from them, even as I approached the stairs. I started to get worried and my steps quickened.

I burst out on the deck with my dagger in hand.

With my appearance, music started to play, men cheered, and someone popped the cork on a bottle. The whole crew was there, even the day bunch, and they were shouting my name.

“What the fuck is this?” I asked, dagger lowering.

I didn't raise my voice. It's not something I do unless absolutely necessary, so only the Captain heard me.

“We're celebrating your big catch!” Captain Teng, who was like a father to me, smacked my back. “A fucking Sea King! Well done, Zix.”

“I haven't done him yet,” I muttered and bent to replace my dagger.

“Oh, but we've seen your lovers line the docks, waiting for you,” Ry, the First Mate said. “You'll do just fine.”

I shook my head and pushed through the crowd of pirates intent on smacking my back, shoulders, and ass while offering me advice. Sexual advice. I loved them, but at the moment, I was on the verge of stabbing them all in their salty balls.

Luckily, the carriage hadn't arrived yet. I reached the gangplank to find that the dock was clear. With a wave at the crew, I left the ship, my footsteps hollow on the wood. I knew they were all watching me as I went to stand by the street and wait for the carriage. I didn't look back, but when a carriage rolled up, they all cheered so loud that the driver had to ask me twice.

“You Zixin?”

“Yeah, that's me,” I said and opened the door. I had to wave one last time, or they'd be upset.

So I turned, bowed, and waved before climbing in. I could still hear them cheering a block away. If the Sea King had been there, or even one of his knights, I would have been embarrassed. But as it was, I started to grin. Those crazy morons had thrown a party because I was about to fuck a king. How could I not love them for that?

Under the sea, it was an honor to be selected as a tribute to one of the Sea Dragon Kings. So, I guess the party wasn't so silly. Tributes weren't selected by the Kings, so it was even more special if the King chose you from among the tributes to be his. I

didn't want to be anyone's bed slave, not even temporarily. And not even a Sea Dragon King. Still, I couldn't help but feel honored to have been chosen by one of them. Especially that one.

“Calm yourself,” I whispered as I looked around the carriage.

It wasn't a royal carriage, but it was really nice, with plush velvet seats and curtains over the windows. I had to stop myself from stealing one of the crystals that hung from the lanterns. Just for a memento, you know? Clenching my hands to keep them from doing just that, I sat back and pretended I was honorable, or at least respectable.

I snorted. One look at me and anyone would know I wasn't either of those things. Even without my tattoos showing, only sailors dressed as I did, with a collection of styles. And sailors were rarely respectable, even the ones on real merchant vessels. Still, I could pretend. I leaned against the wall so I could stare out the window without looking as if I were gawking.

The neighborhoods got nicer and nicer as we rolled through the city. I started to frown. I expected to be taken to a hotel. A nice one, of course, but a hotel nonetheless. But we passed by the nicest hotel in Renris and kept going. I'd scoped the city with a few of the crew, so I knew that the only thing beyond this neighborhood was the castle. It made sense that a visiting Sea Dragon King would be staying with the Dragon King of Gavemor, but would he really bring some unknown Neraky sailor into the King's house to fuck in his pretty guest bed?

The carriage pulled up to the gates of the castle.

“Holy fuck,” I whispered.

“I've got that visitor I mentioned,” the driver said to the guards.

The guards snickered and sauntered over to the window to have a look at me.

Putting on my best pirate leer, I leaned out and winked my nictating membranes. “How's it going, fellas?” I drawled.

“Shit!” one of them exclaimed.

“Fishfucker!” the other said.

I don't think he meant it to be an insult. It was just an automatic reaction. More an expletive than a slur.

Still, it annoyed me enough to say, “Care to repeat that? I think the Sea Dragon King—you know, the guy I'm going to fuck tonight—might be interested in hearing what you think about his choice of bed mate.”

“Uh, I didn't mean anything by it, sir,” the guard—a big Hulfrin with beautiful face stripes—stammered. “I was just startled to see a pi—uh, I mean, a sailor. We don't get a lot of sailors visiting the castle.”

“No, I imagine you don't,” I said with a smirk. “Relax, boys. I'm from a merchant vessel, not a pirate ship. I haven't brought any weapons with me tonight. You know, beyond my dick.”

The other guard, a Deldin with long silken ears, snorted a laugh before smacking the side of the carriage. “Go on in.”

“Thank you kindly,” I said and sat back.

Honestly, I wasn't the kind of man to say things like to strangers. But there was a certain image that needed to be upheld when a Neraky was on land. We didn't have

large physiques as a whole—I was much smaller than both guards—but we could be vicious. If necessary. Maintaining our fierce reputation ensured that we rarely had the need.

The carriage stopped before the main doors of the castle.

“Holy fuck, they're taking me in through the front?” I whispered.

The driver jumped down and opened the carriage door for me. “Just go on in, sir. One of His Majesty's knights is waiting for you in the entry hall.”

“Thank you,” I said and jumped out, then climbed the steps to the Royal Castle of Gavemor.

Holy. Fuck.

Two guards stood outside, one on either side of the enormous double doors. They opened the doors for me without a word. I smoothed a lock of hair back behind my ear and glanced up. The castle loomed over me and, for a second, it felt as if it might fall on my head. I hurried in before I lost my nerve.

“There you are,” a man said. It was the same Sea Dragon who had spoken to me earlier. “This way.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said. That whole reputation thing wasn't meant for Dragons—not land or sea. Neraky were smarter than that. Attitude with Dragons only got you killed.

I followed the Sea Dragon knight through magnificent corridors full of wealth I'd never dreamed existed, my jaw threatening to drop every few seconds. I'd seen grandeur before, but this shit was on another level. There was enough treasure strewn carelessly about to set me up for life. My hands itched to take something. Anything.

Courtiers and servants alike gawked at me. I was glad I'd worn my hair down. Up and those gawks would have turned into gasps.

Yeah, sure, Zixin, it's your tattoos that would have been the problem, I thought to myself.

We walked deeper and deeper into the castle, then traveled upstairs in one of those lifting boxes the land-dwellers use to carry them from floor to floor. We came out into yet another corridor and walked another ten miles or so. Maybe a hundred feet. Whatever. I was about to ask how much further it would be when someone stepped into our path.

“Your Majesty!” my escort sounded surprised, so I knew even before I looked that he wasn't speaking to the King who had sent for me.

I met a dark stare and went still. All three of my hearts stopped beating. This guy was seriously scary. His hair was even the color of fresh blood. Two thin braids framed his face, but it looked as if the hairstyle was more about keeping his hair out of his way than any attempt at fashion. No, this man didn't give a fish's lip about fashion.

He did, however, like to fuck. I saw that seconds later when that black stare heated and swept over me. His deep voice vibrated with lust when he asked, “Have you brought me a present?”

“He's my guest,” a new voice drawled, this one with swagger in it.

Both the tone and depth of the voice affected me. It wasn't as deep as the Land Dragon King's, and I liked that. But what I really liked was the humor in it. I could tell that he enjoyed playing—with his friends, lovers, and food. It had to be King Vaxarion.

Sure enough, the Sea King sauntered down the hall and over to us with a smirk on his handsome face. “So that makes him my present. To myself.” He held an elegant hand out to me. “Come, Zixin.”

I took his hand, but even as the Sea King pulled me toward him, the land King grabbed my free wrist. I stared at the King of Gavemor in shock. But he wasn't looking at me. He stared at King Vaxarion.

“Where did you find such a jewel?” the land King asked. “In my city? If so, that makes him mine.”

“No, I found him in my kingdom,” King Vaxarion said, still smirking. “He was aboard his ship, in the waters of Morilren. And that makes him mine.” He pulled, and I fell into his arms, my wrist slipping free of the other King's grip.

The land King snorted, his vicious face softening. “Fine. Keep your plaything. I'll find another for tonight. And maybe I'll snatch this one up when you're finished with him. I do enjoy a colorful dessert.”

King Vaxarion's grin widened, becoming a baring of teeth, and his fingers dug into my side. “Look at him. I may never be finished.”

I blinked. What the fuck was happening? I wasn't that attractive. Was I? Was I Dragon bait and didn't know it? Holy shit. Were they going to fight over me? This was fucking spectacular! Wait until I told the crew. They were going to think I was making this shit up.

“You're leaving tomorrow,” the land King said, his expression shifting too. But where King Vaxarion's features had gone feral, the King of Gavemor's went smug. “I doubt Zixin's ship is leaving so soon. Isn't that right, sailor?” He leaned closer. “Or are you a pirate?”

“I'm from a merchant vessel, Your Majesty,” I said. “We're respectable.”

“Not tonight you aren't.”

I grinned. “Very funny, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, you're amusing,” King Vaxarion was back to his slow drawl. “And yes, I'm leaving tomorrow. But you never know what the morning may bring. Now, if you excuse us, King Lyrandir, we'll be making use of that enormous bed you've so generously provided me with.”

King Lyrandir nodded. “Enjoy your evening, King Vaxarion.” His gaze slid to me. “Both of you.” That stare seemed to imply that come morning, I'd be switching beds.

Surprisingly, I wasn't game for that. The land King scared the shit out of me, and that wasn't something I looked for in a lover. I didn't care if he could shower me with riches. I didn't want to worry about making it out of his bed alive.

Thankfully, King Vaxarion hustled me along. As we went, several Sea Dragons fell into place around us. I hadn't even noticed them before that. I'd been too distracted by the Dragon Kings and the potential fight between them. I glanced at the grim faces of King Vaxarion's knights and then at the Sea King. His smile was gone, but when he caught me staring at him, it returned. He even winked at me.

I chuckled and smiled back.

Then we were entering a massive suite, and King Vaxarion's men split up, two staying in the hallway to guard the door while the other four came into the suite with us. They swept ahead of the King, moving rapidly through the sitting room to the bedroom beyond. By the time King Vaxarion and I entered the bedroom—a huge space full of velvet, gilded wood, and silly paintings—they had secured it and were

headed out to the balcony.

As soon as the balcony doors clicked shut, the King pulled me into his arms. No, hey, thanks for coming. Not even a hello. His lips went straight to mine, and his body pressed forward, letting me know how ready he was for me.

Fuck it, that's what I was there for.

I wrapped my arms around King Vaxarion and went for it, putting all I had into that first kiss. And it did the trick. The Sea King growled and started yanking at my clothing. I helped him, kicking off my boots before untying my scarf. He shoved down my pants, then tore free of me. Panting, his purple eyes practically glowing, King Vaxarion watched me remove the last of my clothes. He was still fully dressed. And didn't that make it all the more sexy?

I palmed my cock and stroked it for him.

“Very nice,” the King said and started to undress. “Get on the bed. Face up.”

I eagerly crawled onto the behemoth of a bed and plopped down amid the pillows and down comforter. It billowed around me so much that I slammed it down with my fists, making annoyed sounds.

The King paused at the foot of the bed and started laughing.

“It's so fluffy!” I chuckled.

“Push it off the bed,” he said.

I got up to pull the comforter up, then shoved it off the bed. When I laid back down on the pale blue sheets, I found the King watching me with a soft smile and a hard,

long, delicious cock. I stared at it. Couldn't be helped. It was beautiful and nestled amid dark curls that shone with iridescence.

“Wow,” I whispered.

He nodded as if that were the proper response.

I snorted. “So I don't have to tell you how handsome you are?”

“Oh, you absolutely must,” the King drawled as he crawled onto the bed, his veil of hair trailing around him. “Over and over while I fuck you.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I smirked and grabbed my knees. “Shall I start by telling you how delectable your body is?”

“You are delectable as well, Zixin.”

“You can call me Zix, Sire.”

“Pull your legs out further, Zix,” he said as he positioned himself between them.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Very good,” the King murmured and reached out.

A ribbon of water carried a bottle to him. The casual magic didn't surprise me. Sea Dragons were masters of Water. I licked my lips as he opened the bottle, then shuddered when he poured a slick substance over his cock. And that's what surprised me. I smelled the scent of hress nectar, something only undersea fold used for lubrication. Which meant he had brought it with him. Which meant he expected to have sex. I mean, fair enough. That shouldn't have surprised me, either. Just look at

the man. He was sex personified.

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered. “You have a glorious cock, Your Majesty.”

“Wait until it's inside you, Zix. Then you will find it even more glorious. I will make sure of it.”

“I have the greatest faith in you.” I paused. “I should have sucked it first. Damn it. I've been fantasizing about sucking it all day.”

“Have you?” King Vaxarion paused, his hand on his shaft. “All day?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then I must do right by my subject and fulfill your fantasy. You may suck my cock later tonight, after we bathe together.”

My legs started to drop in shock. “We're bathing together?”

“Yes.” He flicked his hand and water gathered around my knees, taking their weight from me. “I like to bathe after sex, especially on land. You will wash me in the shower, and then you may kneel and suck my cock.”

My eyes went wide. A king with a plan. Well, who didn't like that?

“I would love to, Your Majesty,” I said. Then I yipped as the water solidified and yanked my legs even further outward.

“Relax, Zix,” the King purred and pressed the head of his cock against me. “I will take you now.”

I relaxed as much as I could for him. There hadn't been as much foreplay as I preferred, but I was happy to get to the main act, if that's what he wanted. The pressure came, making me groan, then he withdrew. Back and forth the Sea King pumped, his cock breaching me and stretching me more every time. And then, with a moan from both of us, he sank in to the hilt.

“Oh, fuck!” I cried and grabbed his broad shoulders. “Oh, yes, Your Majesty! Fuck me deep! Fill my channel!”

The King's hand went to my throat. Not to squeeze, but stroke. He ran his fingertips over my gills—gills most people didn't know were there. I wasn't surprised that he, a Sea Dragon, knew about them, but it did surprise me that he knew they were an erogenous zone. Maybe he had a Neraky bed slave, one who was waiting eagerly for his return. But bed slaves were meant to please their masters, not the other way around. The fact that the King had learned what Nerakies enjoyed in bed made up for the lack of foreplay. It also made me like him even more. Considerate lovers were hard to come by.

My eyes rolled back as he rubbed me right, both inside and out. “Yes,” I murmured. “Oh, Gods, yes. Right there.”

King Vaxarion bent down and replaced his hand with his mouth. His hot tongue slid over my slits.

“Oh, fuck!” I cried and clutched him to me, trying my best not to claw his back.

The tip of his tongue flicked over that sensitive flesh, and I couldn't hold back any longer. I embarrassed myself by coming all over him. Damn. What was that? Twenty seconds? And without foreplay. Shit. Motherfucker. He was a gods damn master.

Despite my humiliating prematurity, the King wasn't upset. Instead, he growled in

pleasure and pushed against me, rubbing my cum into our chests as I writhed through my climax. My whole body shuddered while he continued to thrust into me, stars appearing behind my closed lids. I came and came and then clawed at him for more. Yup, I rolled from an orgasm into an erection—something I'd never done before.

King Vaxarion pulled back to look down at my hardening shaft, then lifted his brows.

With a cry and a will I didn't know I possessed, I pushed up and rolled him onto his back. The Sea King made a surprised sound as I got to my knees and began to ride his long shaft. Hands on his hard belly, I pumped my ass up and down. Slammed and ground on him, passion driving me to madness. I don't know what I said, some raunchy shit, no doubt, but I know I rode him as I'd never ridden another before.

I didn't recognize myself. Who was this man who wildly rode a king, his cock bouncing with abandon? I paused only to bend forward and suck at his nipples, moaning at their taste. Then I went back to my savage slamming, one hand stroking my cock as the other went behind me to cup his balls.

“Beautiful,” the King murmured as he swept his hands up my flanks, then twirled his fingertips over my nipples. “That's it, Zix. Take your pleasure. Ride me like you would a storm at sea.”

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned. “I can't stop. I need more!”

My body clutched at his, milking him with every upward movement. And the slams down jostled him. But the Sea King loved it. He grinned viciously and grabbed my hips, shooting his cock up into me to meet me halfway. I cried out, amazed that I could feel even more pleasure. The scales on my hands gleamed with sweat, and I had to stop myself from digging my nails into his belly.

“You're so fucking handsome,” I panted. “Never seen anyone as glorious as you. And

you tongued my gills. You're fucking perfect. I'll do whatever you want now. Anything."

Yeah, that whole thing about me not saying much? It didn't apply to bedsport.

And it was a good thing too. My words summoned a roar from the King, and he shoved up, driving as deep as he could go as he released a hot gush of cum inside me. It sent a shiver up my spine, and I grabbed my cock, intent on joining him. Pumping like a madman with hand and hips, I came at the end of his orgasm, crying out just as he went still. With extreme satisfaction, I striped His Majesty's belly with milky ribbons, then fell forward onto his chest to rub them in again.

Strong arms wrapped around me, holding me sprawled atop him. With my head tucked in beneath his, I sighed deeply. His cock slipped free of me, making me twitch, but then I went still.

"I feel your hearts beating," the King whispered.

"Mmm," I murmured.

His hands slid down my back and grabbed my ass. "Keep that blood pumping, Zix. I want to see you come at least six more times tonight."

"Six?!" I jolted up.

King Vaxarion's eyes were full of laughter. "You did promise me anything I wanted."

"You . . . you are . . ."

"Yes?" he prompted.

“Wonderful,” I whispered. “You're fucking wonderful. I'm going to worship you all night. I'll suck your cock and balls, tongue your ass, and even lick your entire body if you want. You want to face fuck me? Do it. Gag me with your cock. I'll only beg for more. You want to spank me? I'll call you daddy. You wanna bridle me and lead me around the room? I'll neigh like a horse for you. Just tell me what you want, and I'll do it.”

“Damn it all,” the King huffed and sat up.

“What's wrong?” I asked as I slid off him.

“You've stirred my desire,” he said as if this were a crime. “Now, we must bathe sooner than I intended.”

“We must?”

“Yes.” The King picked me up and carried me into the bathroom. “We need to get clean so you can suck my cock, and I can suck yours.”

“You want to suck my cock?”

“It's not something I do often. So feel honored.”

I chuckled and then nuzzled his cheek before saying, “I've felt that way since the first moment you looked at me.”

The Sea King smiled and set me on my feet. “Are you really a respectable sailor?”

“No.” I grinned. “I'm a very disreputable pirate.”

The Sea King burst out in delighted laughter.

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After I bathed the Sea King, I knelt on the tile and sucked his cock as commanded. But he didn't let me do it for long. Vaxarion picked me up and carried me back to bed. His magic drew the water from our skin and hair to form solid ribbons of it. Those ribbons lifted me from his arms and held me above the mattress. Taking his time to enjoy the view, King Vaxarion crawled into place beneath me, with his head at my cock, and lowered me.

I opened my mouth as he lowered me, but just as I sucked his beautiful dick into my mouth, he drew me past his lips. I cried out, then eagerly sucked him deeper, gagging myself on him. The pleasure of Vaxarion sucking at me made me wild again, and I bobbed over him as the water continued to hold me in the perfect position—just above the King without resting on him. It gave me enough of an angle that I could go from sucking his cock to licking his balls and even pushing my tongue past them.

The King groaned and angled his hips up. With a groan, I bent further and tongued his tiny ring of muscles. In seconds, he came, the water carrying it away. But even though his pleasure had been reached, he didn't stop sucking at me. The Sea King worked me with hands and mouth until I screeched and writhed within my water hammock. And he kept us clean, using that water trick to collect my release as well.

After we recovered from our second round, he called for some refreshments. What I thought would be a snack ended up being a feast that had to be brought in by three servants. We ate in bed, the platters strewn about us. It was so decadent, so hedonistic, and yet also playful. Both of us were naked and anything that “accidentally” fell on one of us was promptly licked off by the other.

It was the best night of my life.

I didn't want it to end, but our third time was a doozie, and we were both exhausted afterward. I knew it was time to leave, and I wasn't a man to draw things out. So, with a sigh, I got out of bed and started gathering my clothes.

“What are you doing?” Vaxarion demanded.

“Leaving,” I said. “You can barely keep your eyes open. It's time for me to go and let you get some sleep, Your Majesty. I don't want to overstay my welcome.”

“I'll say when it's time for you to go, Zix.” He slid beneath the covers, then pulled them back. “Come here. I want you to spend the night.”

I dropped my pants and grinned. “Really?”

“Yes, you silly pirate. Come back to bed.” Then he reached to the side of the bed and pulled the light cord.

As the room fell into darkness, I raced back and jumped onto the mattress, jostling the Sea King. He chuckled and eased me in against him—my back to his front. With a sigh, he curled around me.

“Zixin,” the King whispered.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“I want you to come with me tomorrow.”

“Where?”

“I'm visiting the land kingdoms that border Morilren. I have three more and then I'll return home.”

“And you want me to what? Be your bed buddy while you visit the land kingdoms?”

“Yes. And, depending on how we feel after that, perhaps you could come back to Shasenai with me.”

Shasenai. The crown city of Morilren. Holy fuck.

My hearts raced. My loyalty lay with my captain and the crew. They were my family. But they'd understand if I took off for a while to be with a king, especially a Sea Dragon King. I started to smile, ready to follow him wherever he might lead, but I was a pirate, and I never took anything at face value.

“What would I be to you?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You'd be taking me with you, a member of your entourage, right?”

“Yes.”

“And what would you tell people about me?”

“My knights won't require an explanation and I doubt the Land Dragon kings will say anything about your presence.”

“So I'd just wait in your room until you wanted to fuck me?”

“If I was busy with a king, you could explore the cities we visit. Whatever you wish. But I'd like to explore them with you.”

“All right. That sounds great.”

“Then why do I hear hesitation in your voice?”

“I don't know. Something feels off about this.” I rolled over to face him. “Would I be the only one keeping you company?”

The Sea King frowned. “For now.”

“For now?”

“I cannot promise that I won't take another lover. I'm a Sea Dragon.”

“Right,” I murmured. “There it is.”

“What?”

“The reason I'm not going with you.”

“The chance that I might find another?”

“Yes.”

“That's ridiculous, Zixin. Every relationship is like that. People grow tired of each other and move on.”

“Yes, and I was happy to have one night with you,” I said. “But then you invited me on your tour and you hinted that you might want me even longer than that.”

“Isn't that a good thing?” The King stroked my belly.

A shiver raced down it, straight to my cock. He grinned to feel my reaction and, even in the dark, his eyes glittered.

“It's amazing,” I said as I took his hand, moving it away from my shaft. “I'm very flattered, Your Majesty.”

“But?”

“But I don't want to be one of many. And if I stay with you much longer, I won't want to leave. I may follow you home if you allow it.”

“I still fail to see the problem.”

“You won't even guarantee that you'll be monogamous with me temporarily. That means you have lovers waiting at home.”

He stiffened.

I chuckled sardonically. “How many bed slaves do you own, Your Majesty?”

“They have nothing to do with us.”

“How many?”

Vaxarion sighed and said, “Twenty-six.”

“Ah. And if I go home with you, what will I be?”

“If we get that far, it will be because I continue to desire you. So, I'd make you a concubine. You'd have status in my court. But this is only a possibility. The future is uncertain. I can't promise you anything, nor can you make any promises to me. But does that matter? You're a pirate. Don't you live your life precariously?”

“Yes. I gamble with my life all the time.”

“Then again, I ask, what is the problem?”

“I gamble with my life, but never my hearts. I know better.”

“I see,” he said stiffly.

“Be flattered.” I kissed the tip of his nose. “It means that after one night, I'm worried that you could become precious to me.”

“But you can't allow that to happen.”

“Not if I won't be precious to you.”

“You could be.”

“Not enough, Your Majesty. Not nearly enough.”

“Very well, Zixin.” He pulled me in close again. “I understand, and I respect your decision.”

“Thank you.” I snuggled back against him. “I'll still spend the night, if that's all right.”

“I insist, my beautiful pirate. I insist.” The Sea King pulled me into his arms and desire bloomed again between us.

Knowing this would be all we had brought on an almost desperate arousal. From both of us. Our exhaustion vanished, and we spiraled into an even more intense bout of lovemaking.

It was going to be a long night, but I would treasure every second. And pirates don't

joke about treasure.

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I always sleep lightly. It's something you learn when you're part of a ship's crew. That and to sleep anywhere. But laying beside King Vaxarion made me restless on top of that lightness. I kept waking to listen to the sound of his breathing and feel his arm still slung tightly around me. It was hard to slip out of that embrace when dawn arrived. One of the hardest things I've ever done. As I tucked the blanket around the Sea King, he sighed, and it made my chest ache.

Shaking my head at this odd sense of need and familiarity, I determinedly turned away and gathered my clothes. I got dressed as I watched Vaxarion, telling myself that I didn't want to wake him. But I knew it was simply my need to make as many memories of the Sea King as possible. At last, I was dressed and couldn't put it off any longer. I slipped out of the bedroom.

One of his guards stood outside the bedroom door. He lifted a brow at me, and I nodded at him. There was another Sea Dragon outside the suite's main door. He opened it for me as soon as I touched the handle.

“Thanks,” I said. “And good morning.”

“Good morning,” he said. “Well done in lasting that long.”

I chuckled, nearly telling him I could have lasted far longer. His King had invited me on their tour of land kingdoms. The thought put another ache in my chest, but I ignored it and focused on the pride it brought me. Vaxarion really liked me. King Vaxarion—a man accustomed to having an army of bed slaves attend to his every desire. He had wanted me to go with him. If I had, he may have even kept me awhile.

If only I was the kind of man who wouldn't balk at sharing. I mean, I didn't demand a relationship from my lovers. But if I couldn't take other lovers—which I'm certain would have been the case with the Sea King—then I wouldn't want to share him either. That's just fair.

Not that a pirate cared much about fairness, but still.

I knew I'd made the right decision. If I already felt so attached to him, I'd be clingy by the time we headed back to the sea. And then I'd do anything to keep him. I might even put up with him taking other lovers. Nope. I wouldn't allow myself to become that man. It was better to part ways now and return to the ship with a great story.

I grinned broader and put some swagger into my stride. It had been a grand night, and I would think about it for the rest of my life. I had a feeling I'd be imagining the Sea King whenever I had sex in the future. And not just because he was handsome. The man was also funny. He had a wit as sharp as a cutlass and could fuck with the strength and unending vigor of the sea. Oh, and the things we had done together. To each other. On each other. I liked a man who was inventive in bed.

I reached the front of the castle and paused, worried that the guards might stop me. But they only nodded at me when I passed by. I had nearly done a little looting on my way out, but I decided it wasn't worth the risk. If I got caught, it wouldn't be just me who got in trouble. King Vaxarion would be drawn into it, and so would the crew. Nope, wasn't worth it. Especially not if I had to face King Lyrandir. I had a feeling he was a no-mercy kind of guy.

Shops were just starting to open as I made my way through the city on foot. The sun rose quickly, warming me enough that I could ignore the chill in my chest. Yeah, I'd be pining for the Sea King for a while. But that was better than losing all my self-worth to him. Or all of myself.

“Damn,” I muttered. “Why'd he have to ask me to join him?”

It was a huge compliment that he had, but it made leaving him even more difficult. Memories of the night before kept circling. I think the most erotic, despite all the unique positions he'd put me in (Water Magic has its perks), was that of him going down on me the second time. I had lain on my back and he sprawled across me to languidly feast. I'll never forget the way he groaned and his eyes closed in bliss as he moved up and down my length. His lips had been as tight as a fist, and his glorious hair draped my thighs. I had to use all of my control not to come in three seconds.

I shook my head to clear it and stopped at a bakery that had just opened. The scent of sugar and baked bread made me moan as deeply as the Sea King had. My stomach rumbled. Maybe I should have stayed for breakfast, but I knew it was easier this way. He would have tried to convince me to stay, and I don't know how long my will would have held out against his.

“Good morning, sir!” the baker said as I walked in.

He didn't even flinch at my ensemble, and that made me grin. I loved people who didn't judge me by my looks. I mean, yeah, it was probably an accurate assessment, but still.

“Good morning,” I said to him as I pulled out my coin pouch. “It all looks wonderful. What's your favorite?”

The baker beamed at me. “The almond moons. They're flaky, buttery, and filled with sweet almond paste.”

“Then I'll try one of those, please. And do you have anything filled with cream? I love a cream filling.” I smirked at him.

He chuckled, proving I was right to like him. “I do indeed. Would you prefer something fried or baked? And chocolate, vanilla, cherry, lemon, or strawberry cream?”

“Dear Gods!” I exclaimed. “I think I've just fallen in love with you.”

The man burst out laughing—a booming sound that shook the chill right out of me. This was life. This freedom to stroll into a bakery and laugh with a stranger, then eat all the sweets I wanted. I doubted that I'd be so free if I had gone with the Sea King. No, he would have ruled my life because that's what kings do. And I would have let him because my cock would have insisted on it.

“I'll take a chocolate fried, a strawberry baked, and whatever you recommend for the third option.”

“Yes, sir!” The baker started popping pastries in a little box. “I think you'll very much enjoy a lemon cream fried cake along with these other flavors. It's filled with vanilla cream but topped with lemon curd.”

“Yum! How much do I owe you?”

“A copper apiece, but since you bought so many, the almond moon is a gift.”

I bowed to him. “Thank you for your generosity. It will not be forgotten.”

“You're very welcome, sir.” He handed me the box, and I handed him three coppers.

“Are you a merchant?”

“I am indeed,” I said as I fished out the almond moon. “I'm from the Lu-Ken.”

“Ah! I've heard of your vessel. Very reputable indeed. And here I thought you might

be a pirate.” He winked at me.

“And yet, you didn't balk at my patronage?” I lifted a brow, then bit into the moon . . . and groaned. “Oh, fuck! This is fabulous!”

The baker laughed. “Thank you. And no, I don't mind pirates. As long as they don't steal from me. And you know what? I've never known of a pirate who steals baked goods.”

I chuckled. “I think they would if you started exporting these things.”

He laughed again, that same soul-lifting laugh. “Thank you. You've made my day.”

“And you've brightened mine.” I waved the almond moon at him as I left.

Happier than I had been before, I strolled through the city, eating my breakfast as I went. People thought Neraky only ate raw seafood, but we eat any type of food. Some of us—and by “some” I mean me—especially loved sweets. I could eat them all day. And a good sweet could make me feel sweet.

I hummed a tune as I continued to eat. But then I came into view of the Lu-Ken. There was activity all over the deck. Activity like that could only mean one thing—we were pulling anchor. After only a day in port. The Captain must have gotten wind of a target.

I shoved the rest of my lemon cake into my mouth and ran for the gangplank.

“There he is!” someone shouted.

I waved as I got aboard. “I'm here!”

Whatever the Captain was after must have been a big target indeed because as soon as I was on deck, someone pulled the plank and stowed it. I hurried to my cabin to change and hide the remaining pastries from the crew. By the time I got back up to the main deck, we were already moving. I didn't have time to pine for the Sea King and lament the fact that I was sailing away from him. I had to help with the rigging.

But several minutes later, I did lift my head and stare back toward land, all three of my hearts racing. I could have sworn I had heard the roar of a dragon.

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“He did not!” Tai said.

“He did,” I insisted, my chest aching only a little to talk about King Vaxarion. “He came all over me.” I motioned at my chest. “I mean all over me—my arms, my legs, my back, my ass, even my face. And then he fucking rubbed it in !”

“No fucking way. Why would he do that?” Feng demanded. “That's bizarre.”

“Maybe it's a Sea Dragon thing,” Rel suggested.

“Dunno.” I shrugged. “It was after our fifth time. He just kept spurting.” I motioned upward from my crotch with my hand. “I'd never seen a man come that much. Fuck, I've never seen that much cum. Stream after stream of the stuff. I don't think he left an inch of my skin uncoated.”

“Un-cum-ted!” Rel hooted.

“Sounds like a fruit,” Feng said. He grinned and added, “A juicy fruit.”

“Hold on,” Wei said as he strode over. “Did you say it was after your fifth time? How many times did you fuck?”

“Dunno. Lost count. We fucked until we couldn't move, then we talked a bit, then we fucked until we passed out.”

“Shit, Zix!” Wei exclaimed. “Well done.”

“It was an incredible night.”

“Incredible or not, I'm glad you took off when you did. We should just manage to intercept the Tiger's Claw. And they're rumored to have Rasokain swords, surma from Rosrae, and Zaruian brandy aboard. A take like that could set us up for a year.”

“Yeah, but there's the small matter of the Tiger's Claw being a Hulfrin ship,” I said, a shiver of unease going through me.

Hulfrin were as fierce as Neraky were rumored to be but you could multiply that by ten when it came to their possessions. And it was a safe bet that they'd consider their cargo their possessions. Unfortunately, that would be the only safe thing about attacking a Hulfrin ship.

“It'll be fine,” Wei said. “We'll defeat them before we set foot on their deck. As usual.”

“Don't tempt Jingtin,” Rel said. “Our god has a perverse sense of humor.”

A shiver ran down my spine. Rel was right. It was never a good idea to make such statements before a take. And Jingtin, though known to be a generous god, could never resist smacking down the prideful.

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We did not defeat the Tiger's Claw before we set foot upon it. Nothing usual about it. Fucking Hulfrin are barbaric fighters and surprisingly good sailors. They had amazing balance and were skilled with swords and claws. Just like us. But on average, they weighed a good eighty pounds more than a Neraky. And they used that weight to their advantage.

A Hulfrin snarled at me, baring his sharp teeth, and swung his curved sword at my belly.

Spinning out of the way, I met his sword with mine. The collision sent a vibration up my arm that nearly made me drop my weapon. The bastard followed his sword swing with a slash of his claws and caught my shoulder. I grunted and fell back further. I knew he was driving me across the deck, away from the rest of the crew and the Lu-Ken, but I had no choice. To either side of me were more Hulfrin sailors, their sleek golden fur striped with black and white, and their horns tipped with golden barbs that glinted in the sunlight. That wasn't a common adornment for Hulfrin. These guys had prepared for battle.

A roar echoed, the captain urging his men on. I glanced up to see the man on the quarterdeck, body hunched forward, mane whipping in the breeze, and chest bare. When he straightened, I got a good look at the magnitude of muscles that even fur couldn't hide. His pectorals were things of beauty, tipped with dark nipples that seemed as dangerous as the rest of him. Yup, even his fucking nipples looked deadly.

I spun again, avoiding my opponent while searching for a way past him. I could tell where this was going. Already, some of the crew of the Lu-Ken had snatched crates off the deck and tossed them over to our ship. We only did that when we were losing.

Sort of take-what-you-can-and-run thing. Make the most out of the loss. But I couldn't grab anything. I was too busy fighting for my life.

Then I heard it. The sharp blast of the horn. It's signaled our retreat. Get back to the ship now or get left behind. We didn't like leaving men behind, but when it became a choice of that or the whole ship going down, we did it. I just never thought I'd be the one left.

I dashed for the side of the ship.

The Hulfrin bashed into me, chuckling wickedly. “Going somewhere, boy?”

The ropes attached to the grappling hooks were being cut. I had seconds. I leapt, going straight for the Hulfrin in a desperate bid for freedom. It almost worked too. His green eyes went wide, and he automatically ducked. But as I sailed over him, he reached up and snatched me out of the air. A moment later, I slammed onto the deck. As I gasped, the Lu-Ken's main mast came into view—a dark line against the blue sky. Sails snapped, and the mast moved away.

They left me.

Hulfrin snarled at the railing, watching the pirates escape. In horror, I watched Herru, one of my friends, get lifted above a Hulfrin's head and torn apart, his head slashed and snapped from his body. His body was tossed at the retreating Lu-Ken. Then his head.

Oh, fuck.

I looked up at the grinning Hulfrin and tossed aside my sword. Surrender was my only chance.

“Captain!” the man called without taking his eyes off me. “I’ve got a live one.”

“Keep him that way!” the Captain shouted. “We need him to help us find his friends.”

“Yes, Captain!” The Hulfrin grabbed me by my shirt and hauled me to my feet. “It’s your lucky day, Neraky. You get to spend some time with the Captain. You’re going to have a nice, intimate chat.”

As I stared into the Hulfrin’s green eyes, the oddest sensation hit me. Not fear, but regret. I should have stayed with the King Vaxarion. And not just because it meant I would have been safe. There was a knot in my belly that had been growing larger and larger the further away I’d gotten from him. All I could think about was getting back into Vaxarion’s arms. Yes, even then, while faced with tortures I couldn’t imagine. Or rather, didn’t want to imagine.

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The Captain's cabin was luxurious. Almost as nice as Captain Teng's. All right, it was nicer. This guy was wealthy. He hadn't just stolen all this shit. I looked around at the crystal decanters that matched the chandelier—a fucking chandelier on a ship!—and the fine fabric covering his seat cushions. There was a massive desk covered in knickknacks that each cost more than I'd made on our last take and an even bigger bed with four posters. Who the fuck had room for a four-poster bed on a ship? Well, he did.

The Hulfrin who had caught me bound me to a chair by wrapping ropes around my waist, but he didn't bother to restrain my arms or legs. I didn't take that as a good sign. When he finished with the rope, he untied my mask. We all wore masks when we targeted a ship. To maintain our cover as merchants, we either had to hide our faces and any identifying marks on the Lu-Ken or we had to kill everyone. And we didn't like the second option. Plus, our half-masks were Neraky demon masks with big tusks and jutting chins made of metal. They were intimidating on top of protecting our identities and our faces from injury.

The Hulfrin wasn't intimidated by my mask. He chuckled as he looked it over. “I think I'll hang this on my . . .” he trailed off as he stared at my face.

“What?” I asked warily.

He just grunted and lifted a broad, clawed hand. I jerked back when it went to my cheek, but then his claws retracted and he traced my cheekbone with the pad of his finger. My breath caught.

Oh, fuck. Oh, please, no.

The door swung open, and the Hulfrin straightened, yanking his hand away from me.

“Well done, Baellius,” the Captain said. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Yes, Captain.” Baellius cast me one last grin and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

The Captain went to the sideboard first, without looking at me. He poured himself a drink, then unbuckled his swordbelt and set it aside. Turning toward me, he lifted his glass in a mocking salute. Then paused. Lowered it. He strode forward, head cocking. As he stared at me, I stared back. He was even more beautiful up close. Hulfrins resembled tigers, but they weren’t animals. Their faces didn’t have the same protrusion as a beast and their bodies were all man. Well, his was all man. The women would be all female. You get what I mean.

Those eyes weren’t bestial either, even with that icy shade of blue. The cerulean ring around them kept him from looking blind, and the dark lashes kept the color from looking too cold. Or maybe that was the way he was looking at me, his stare traveling over my face as if I were something to be treasured instead of tortured. What was with these men lately? First, the Sea King, then the land King, and now these Hulfrin. Had Jingtin hit me with some lust magic? I did mention that the Neraky God has a perverse sense of humor, right?

The Captain licked his lips, reminding me that although Hulfrin weren’t animals, parts of them were closer to beasts than others. Like his lips. Hulfrin didn’t have the protruding jaw, but they did have thin, tiger lips and the teeth to go with it. His tongue looked kind of rough too. I didn’t know for sure; I’d never kissed a Hulfrin.

Maybe I should try it. If I could seduce the Captain, I might last long enough to make it off his ship. With that in mind, I let my stare wander over him appreciatively, traveling over his bare chest, caressing those dark nipples, and working my way

down to the waist of his pants. When I looked back at his face, those tiger lips were parted and the tip of his tongue was visible.

“What's your name?” I asked.

“I ask the questions,” he growled.

“My name is Zixin. But you can call me Zix.”

The Captain chuckled. “I'm Captain Aras.”

“Aras,” I murmured and looked him over again. “Suits you.”

The Captain growled and grabbed my throat. He did not retract his claws. “Be careful, pirate. Or I'll be questioning you in my bed. As I pound my cock into your ass.”

“Maybe I'm hoping for that,” I whispered.

But even as I said it, a pair of eyes swam over his. Purple eyes. My cock whimpered and my asshole clenched. Not in a good way, either. It tightened up as if to say, “No one but Vaxarion may pass.”

The Captain's thumb lifted to direct the tip of his claw beneath my chin. It punctured my skin, but I didn't make a sound. I just held his stare.

“Giving me your body won't save you from my claws,” he said. “I'll fuck you and then fuck you up. Unless you tell me the name of your ship and captain.”

I swallowed, pushing his claw deeper into my skin, and blood dripped down my throat. “That's not going to happen. No matter what kind of fucking you do to me.”

“Your crew stole from me,” Aras snarled. “No one steals from me and gets away with it. I will take back what's mine and claim the life of your captain as well.”

“You're going to have to satisfy yourself with me, big guy,” I drawled. “Because I'm not giving him up.”

He leaned closer. “Is he your lover?”

I snorted. “No, but I'm loyal.”

Captain Aras made a pensive sound and straightened. He strode slowly around me, drawing his claw over me as he went. It sliced through my clothes but only grazed my skin. As he came to the front, my shirt and vest gaped, and then flopped over the rope. My sleeves parted similarly. I hadn't moved my arms, not an inch. I knew the skill it took to cut like that. A little shift from me would have resulted in a terrible wound.

Suddenly, Aras tore the fabric away from my shoulders and arms. Bare from the nipples up, I shivered. His stare moved over my chest. He set a single claw over my left nipple. “This is your last chance to save yourself. Tell me the names I seek and where the ship is headed, and I will let you live.”

Oh, this was gonna hurt.

“I can't do that.” I lifted my chin and set my stare on the far wall. “Bad news for us both, I'm afraid.”

“Us both?”

“Yeah. You shouldn't have done this here. My blood will stain your rugs.”

The Captain blinked. His lips twitched. “Oh, what a shame it will be to slice up such an amusing and pretty boy. I'll have to focus my attention below the neck. Then maybe you'll still be pretty enough for me to enjoy later.”

“Do what you have to do, Captain Aras,” I said. “But I won't talk.”

That claw sliced down.

I wouldn't talk, but I certainly screamed.

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I don't know how long Captain Aras sliced me up, pausing only to lick my wounds. Yeah, that's right. He licked the wounds he made. I can now confirm that a Hulfin's tongue is rough. And that roughness caused even more pain as it ironically helped to heal me. There's something in a Hulfrin's saliva that stops bleeding and speeds up healing. Plus, I think he liked the taste of blood.

There he went again, purring happily as he lapped at my wound. This one was on my thigh. The Captain had run out of space on my shoulders and arms. So now, I was bare from the waist down too, only a few bits of fabric caught under the ropes. And the ropes weren't there to restrain me but to hold me up. Without them, I would have fallen to the floor.

I looked down at that big head between my thighs. Aras had a black mane, thick and glossy. When he rolled his stare up to mine, it looked erotic. But my cock didn't so much as twitch. Wasn't possible with the rest of me in so much pain.

Aras gripped my thighs, claws digging in as he pushed himself up. With a half-lidded stare, I watched him lick his lips. I swallowed past the dryness in my throat. I'd lost a lot of blood. I'd survive thanks to my immortality, but the more blood I lost, the more I needed to get into the water. Neraky needed to submerge themselves every few weeks under normal conditions. But with blood loss like this, I'd start to wither in a few hours. Then my body would start to draw in the moisture to my torso to protect my organs. I wouldn't be so pretty after that.

“I commend you, pirate,” Captain Aras said. “You've lasted longer than anyone I've tortured. Well done.”

He stood up, and I was a little surprised to see that he wasn't sporting an erection. With all the moaning he'd been doing, I thought he was getting off on the torture. I guess he was just enjoying the taste of my blood.

The Captain went to the door and opened it. "Baellius!" He watched me as he waited.

A few minutes later, Baellius appeared. He glanced at me, eyes widening, then focused on the Captain. "Yes, Captain?"

"He's a tough one," the Captain said. "But he's still a Neraky. I don't have to touch him to torture him. He's already drained. Take him to a cell. He'll be talking by the end of the week."

"Yes, Captain! Uh, we make land tomorrow."

"I know. If he lasts that long, which I suspect he will, we'll take him with us."

"Yes, Captain!" Baellius grabbed the back of my chair, picked me up with it, and carried me out of the cabin.

Captain Aras grinned as he stood in the doorway and watched me get dragged away. "I'll check on you later tonight, Zix." Then he shut the door.

Baellius chuckled. "That was impressive, Neraky. Most don't last an hour with my captain."

My head lolled and my breath came in ragged pants. Spots appeared in my vision. Still, I saw the worn wood pass beneath me. Things grew darker. We went lower. The clang of metal came.

"You hear me, pirate?" Baellius said as he set my chair down.

I looked up. I was in a cell. He sliced away the rope. I crumpled to the straw-covered floor, the strips of my clothes falling away until only my undershorts remained. At least the cell was clean. And I was the only prisoner. No, these weren't men who kept prisoners. Not for long.

“Pirate?” Baellius toed me.

I grunted. “I'm a little busy healing right now, Baellius. Can we have this conversation later?”

Baellius chuckled. “Damn. Still fighting, eh?” He crouched and rolled me onto my back. His stare moved over my body, taking in the sealed wounds—sealed but not completely healed. He poked at one, and I hissed. “You'll heal by tonight. Then the Captain will be back. Think about that, pirate. What good is your loyalty if you die?”

“I believe dying for someone is the highest form of loyalty.”

Baellius grunted and stood up. “Fair enough. It's a shame that your loyalty is misplaced. I may have liked you if we'd met under other conditions.”

“Really? Because I think you're a prick.”

Baellius burst into laughter and strode out of the cell. He closed the door, locked it, and left, still laughing.

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The Captain was right. He didn't need to torture me further. All he had to do was leave me in that cell, naked and suffering from blood loss. As a Neraky, I could handle extreme cold, so the blood loss didn't bother me as far as body heat was concerned. It did, however, deplete my precious moisture. Which hurt. And I knew it would only get worse.

When the Captain came by that night, I ignored him. It wasn't so hard to do, what with the dryness of my mouth. Would have been harder to speak. He went away after a while. I can't even recall what he said. Maybe he hadn't been there at all. It was very possible that I was hallucinating. But if that were the case, my mind chose a poor subject. I would have been happier to see Vaxarion. Or maybe not. Maybe seeing him would have been another form of torture.

Hours passed. The ship stopped moving. My only comfort was that my friends—most of them—were safe. Poor Herru. He'd been a good guy. Always smiling. But that described most of the crew. Just thinking about them solidified my will. I'd die to make sure they continued to be safe.

Shouldn't be long now.

“Come on, pirate. Are you giving up already?” Baellius was back. He tossed something at me. “Get dressed.”

I didn't move.

“Are you dead?” He pushed me with his boot.

I groaned and even that hurt.

“Good. Get dressed.”

I didn't move.

“Fuck,” he grumbled as he sat me up and dressed my floppy body like a doll. “The Captain took too much blood. He gets carried away sometimes. He does enjoy fresh fish.”

I didn't rise to the bait.

To the bait. Oh, that would have been good if I'd been up to laughing. As it was, I could barely think. My blood was like mud in my veins. My heartbeats were so slow. Like the drumbeat of death. The pain was far worse than anything Aras had done. I fell backward onto the ground as Baellius pulled some pants on me.

“Your skin is healed. Come on. You'll be fine.”

I didn't even open my eyes.

“Fuck. All right.” He propped me up against his chest, sitting down to hold me like a child. “Drink, damn you.”

Something pressed against my lips. I smelled water. With a groan of need, I pushed past the pain and opened my mouth. Dried-up flesh tore, but that cool liquid was a salve worth the pain. Instantly, my body sucked up the moisture, drawing it from my throat and mouth before it even reached my stomach. I gasped and gulped more. Flesh mended and plumped. Water sank into my blood. My hearts leapt back into action, pushing the refreshed blood through my body.

“All right. Easy now. That's enough.” He took it away. “I can't have the Captain seeing you in good health. This is just to keep you alive for questioning. Get it?”

I groaned. “One more sip. Please.”

“No. You have to look pitiful or I'm in trouble.” He stood up, yanking me with him, then tossed me over his shoulder. “You gonna live?”

I grunted.

“Good.” Baellius strode off with me.

My nictating membranes fluttered over my eyes, spreading the precious moisture. I was able to see for the first time in what felt like forever. Slowly, I let light penetrate my sensitive eyes. I couldn't lift my head, but I could see the change in the floorboards. We were going up. Then there was more light. Sunlight. I smelled the sea. Oddly enough, that meant we were at the shore. The sea doesn't smell when you're out on open water. Not like that. It was only where it met the land that things got a bit rank. Because the sea was sassy. She liked to shove her shit onto land.

I managed to lift my head once Baellius left the gangplank. I wanted to see what shore I was going to die on. I knew most of the docks in the world, though it was harder to recall them in my fucked up state. And they all look similar. But then I spotted a few landmarks that triggered my memory.

Holy fuck, we were back at Renris. The very same port where I had met the Sea King two days ago. Yeah, two days. That's all. We had left Renris, attacked the Tiger's Claw, and then the damn thing had brought me right back here like a piece of flotsam. Hope bloomed in my chest. Would he . . . ? But no. King Vaxarion was supposed to leave the day before. And even if he hadn't left, and was still there, he wouldn't think to look for me like this. It was foolish to even think it. But hope is always a bit

foolish.

“We're taking that piece of sea shit with us?” someone asked.

“Captain's orders,” Baellius said. “He doesn't want this fucker out of his sight.”

“But we're going to the castle. We can't take a pirate to the castle.”

I started wheezing through a sardonic laugh.

“Is he fucking laughing?” the voice turned horrified.

“Been there already,” I whispered. “So take that.”

“What he say?”

“I think he said he'd been there already.”

“Met the King.” I panted. “Two of them. Only fucked the one, though.”

“He's delirious,” Baellius said with a snort. “Ignore him.”

I laughed again, unable to stop despite how painful it was.

Baellius carried me to a cart that was being filled with crates. He carelessly tossed me atop some of them.

“Hey!” someone growled. “Easy with that asshole. That's the crates of porcelain you threw him on.”

“Sorry,” Baellius grunted.

I felt the cart shift as more crates were loaded. The back of Baellius's head came into view. I shifted my head to look up at the clear blue sky instead. The rectangle of sky was edged by the buildings of Renris, Crown City of Gavemor. Unbelievable. I had never returned to a port so quickly.

“You gonna leave him like that?” someone asked.

“Like he's gonna make a run for it?” Baellius laughed.

I laughed too—that pathetic wheeze. It made Baellius laugh harder and shake his head.

“You gotta hand it to him,” Baellius said. “The fucker is as tough as one of us. He's nearly a piece of fish jerky and he's still laughing.”

The other man grunted and then we were moving.

If only Baellius had known how very tough I was—what I had survived in my youth. There was a reason I was loyal to Teng and the crew of the Lu-Ken. Especially Captain Tengven. As a child, I'd been captured by a band of rebel Gashi. Gashi are one of the larger underwater races. They have thick, dark skin and fully black eyes. Most of them are nice enough. They generally obey the laws of the sea. But these Gashi, as mentioned, were rebels. There were more rebels back then when the Sea Dragons were hibernating. All sorts of otherwise peaceful people ran amok. It's easy to break the rules when no one enforces them.

The Gashi rebels enslaved me, keeping me collared and chained constantly. I was only ten years old, but they had me doing hard labor that would have strained grown men. And I did it. Because if I didn't, I got beaten. It toughened me, but beneath my thick skin, it left an ocean of fear. That fear was one of the reasons I didn't go with King Vaxarion. I knew the Sea Kings only took willing slaves, but I couldn't be a

slave again. Not even willing. The thought of a collar around my throat made chills race down my spine. No, never again. I'd rather die like this, withering to death on land, than live in a slave collar. Even if that collar was made of gold and I was chained to a king.

No. I know that's a leap. Vaxarion hadn't threatened to enslave me. But the possibility existed. He could have changed his mind once we reached Shasenai and collared me instead of making me his concubine. Kings do whatever the fuck they want. And there's more than one type of slavery.

Not that it mattered anymore. I was about to get my wish and die on land. I knew it, knew that fleeting hope was just my mind's way of trying to keep me sane. But down deep, the fact was that I had been caught, and I had to pay for my crimes. Fair enough. I was a criminal. That was the truth. It didn't matter that I became one because Tengven saved me.

Captain Teng and a few members of his crew had been on a necessary submergence, taking some time to refresh themselves but also to sell some of their latest take to the undersea folk. They came across the Gashi rebel camp and saw me and the other slaves, chained and wounded. They didn't even hesitate. They attacked the Gashi, killed them all, and freed us. The other slaves scattered, going home, but I had no one to go home to. The Gashi had killed my parents. I was fourteen by then, had spent four years as a slave, and never thought to be free again. But I was tough, as I said, and Teng saw potential in me. He took me under his wing, showed me how to be a pirate, and I found freedom above the water. I'd been with him ever since. Sixty-three years. Long enough to work my way up the ranks. I'd be First Mate if Ry hadn't earned that title long before they found me. But I didn't envy him. Frankly, I didn't want the responsibility. I was happy as I was. Or I had been. The crew of the Lu-Ken was my family, and Teng, though we never spoke of it, was like my father.

I would gladly give my life for him. For all of them.

The cart came to a stop all too soon.

“What the fuck? Is that a Neraky?” someone asked.

“Yeah. Our slave,” Baellius said. “We wore him out.”

The man chuckled. “Don't let the King see him.”

“He doesn't approve of slaves?”

“He might think he's a present and take him from you.”

“He already tried that,” I muttered.

Oblivious to me, the men laughed, and the cart rolled on. Oh, yes, it's all very amusing, talking about a slave getting used. At least I wasn't a slave. They could call me one all they wanted, but I wasn't. I was a prisoner, but I wouldn't be slaving for them. Nope. I'd die first. Pretty soon, actually. Baellius had bought me a few hours at most.

Then I was being carried again. I didn't get to go in through the front door this time. Nope, I got carted around back. The sound of voices came, then faded. Someone escorted Baellius to the Captain's guest quarters, and then I was tossed again, this time onto a stone floor. I sighed and stretched out on it.

“You comfortable, pirate?” Captain Aras drawled.

I cracked open my eyes. “Aye, Captain!”

Aras snorted. “Baellius, give him some food and a few sips of water. I don't want him to die yet.”

I jerked upright at the last word.

“Oh, that got your attention, did it?” Aras crouched before me.

Meanwhile, Baellius went to a tray of refreshments atop a low table between some couches. He tossed some things on a plate. The food would be welcome, but mainly for the additional moisture it would provide. It was the water I craved. Like a starving beast, I watched Baellius pour a little water into a glass. Then he brought it all to me.

“Thank you,” I said and took the water. I gulped it without even looking at the food.

Baellius set the plate beside me, then went to make another for his captain. Captain Aras took a seat nearby, then accepted the plate. He watched me as he ate, but I didn't watch him back. The time for flirting was past. Even if I'd wanted to, I wasn't in a state to tempt anyone. Flesh still sunken, dressed in old clothes that threatened to fall off me, and probably as rank as the shoreline. I was not at my best.

Once I finished the water, I fell upon the food, gobbling it up before Aras could change his mind and take it away. Then I sighed as more of my flesh plumped and the remaining pain receded.

“You healed well,” the Captain noted. “Still a bit sunken in the cheeks, but not as bad as I expected.”

I didn't even glance at Baellius. I don't betray people who do me a good turn, even if they're my enemies.

“I'm not going to give you those names,” I said.

He nodded. “I'm a stubborn man. But not to the point of stupidity. I see that your loyalty won't be shaken. That's admirable. But it leaves me in a quandary. How do I

make my money back?" He popped a tiny bit of food in his mouth and chewed. "I'll have to sell you."

A shiver ran down my spine.

"Interesting," Aras murmured as he leaned forward. "You looked terrified, Zixin. You faced torture with a grin and death with a joke, but slavery terrifies you?"

I lifted my chin. "Of course not. Do what you gotta do."

Aras narrowed his eyes at me. "I know just where to sell you. Zaru. They have a booming sex slave trade there, despite their King's distaste for it. And you're a pretty fish. Perfect for someone's aquarium. You might even fetch more than the goods your friends stole are worth."

A sex slave. How ironic. That was the very fate I was trying to avoid by turning down the Sea King. But I wouldn't let these men see how the possibility frightened me. Sex was the greatest part of life for me, second only to freedom. And they were threatening to take away one and taint the other. I had never been raped when I was a slave. That was the one thing my age saved me from. The one line my captors wouldn't cross. But now, as an adult, I'd be valued as a slave for that alone.

I lifted my chin and smirked. "Sounds fun. I love to fuck."

Captain Aras grinned, seeing right through my ploy. "All you have to do is give me the information I want, and I'll let you go, Zixin. After I verify that information by finding them, of course."

I got onto my hands and knees, then licked my lips. "How about I start now? You can sample the goods, Daddy. I could suck you off if you'd like." I snapped my teeth at him.

Baellius snorted as the Captain grinned.

“You're very amusing,” Aras said. “I'm glad I've decided to sell you instead of killing you.” He stroked a hand over my head and into my hair, threading his fingers in my braid, and yanked my head forward. “Enjoy sucking cock, do you? Good. You'll have plenty of dicks to drain in Zaru. Maybe you'll be bought by a pleasure house. Then you'll have new cocks to gobble up every day.”

Another chill went down my spine. No. They could sell me, but that didn't mean I would obey. All this meant was that I got to live a little longer. I kept that thought in my head and used it to steel myself.

“No?” Captain Aras asked. “Still not talking?”

“No, Captain,” I said. Then I licked my lips and looked at his crotch. “But my offer still stands. I've never had a Hulfrin. Is it true that your dicks are more pointed than others?”

Aras made a rumbling sound in his chest and shoved me away. “Tie him to the foot of the bed.”

Baellius lifted his brows at that—the thick black stripes above his eyes going up with them. But he still said, “Yes, Captain.”

And oh, look at that, Baellius had come prepared. He went to one of the crates stacked against the wall and opened it. Out came a length of chain and a shackle. Not a rope this time. Oh, fuck.

I began to tremble. Ropes weren't a problem, but chains reminded me of the Gashi. At least there wasn't a collar, but the chains were worse. Without the chains, I could convince myself that a collar was merely a necklace, but the chains couldn't be

denied. Chains meant no escape. They meant no freedom. They meant I was a slave.

I shot to my feet, then swayed and nearly fell. Baellius grabbed my arm and hauled me into the adjoining bedroom. He tossed me onto the floor near the gigantic bed, then, as I struggled to get up, slapped a shackle around my ankle. The chain attached to it got wound around the bedpost, then locked in place.

“No,” I whispered.

“What was that, Zixin?” Aras asked casually.

“No.” I yanked at the chain. “No!”

“Shut up!” Baellius hissed.

“Let me go!” I cried. “Let me go! Get it off me!” I lost my composure. All my precious calm gone. The mask destroyed. With strength I didn't know I had left in me, I pulled at the chain and knocked into the bed with my shoulder, trying to crack the wood. “Get it off! Take it off now, motherfuckers! Not again! Never again! I'll fucking kill you all! I'll kill you! Let me go now!”

“What the fuck?” Aras whispered.

“Shut up, pirate!” Baellius backhanded me.

I snarled at him and slashed out with my claws. Baellius jumped back.

“Fascinating,” Aras murmured as he watched me.

“Let me go!” I shrieked. Then it sank in that I was truly trapped, and I whimpered.

“Please, take it off me. Please!”

Captain Aras crouched beside me again. “You know what you have to do to get free, Zixin. Give me the names.”

I made a broken sound and curled into a ball.

“What do you want me to do, Captain?” Baellius asked.

“Nothing.” Captain Aras said. “Leave him as he is. I think we've stumbled upon the perfect form of torture. But stay here with him. Make sure he doesn't chew off his own leg like a fucking animal. I have to meet with King Lyrandir.” His tone went grimmer, “And find a way to mollify him.”

“Yes, Captain.”

It was the last words I heard before I sank into the past, drowning in it. Pulled under by flashes of white teeth against dark skin. A raised fist. The pain of overworked muscles combined with fresh wounds. Knives sliced into me. Blood in the water. So much blood.

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“Zixin,” someone called.

I whimpered. It was one of them. My captors. Would I be beaten again this morning? I covered my head with my arms and curled in to protect my organs.

“Zixin,” the voice went sharper.

I knew that voice.

“Get up, Zixin,” Captain Aras said.

Shaking off my memories, I lowered an arm to warily peer at him. I wasn't fourteen anymore, nor was I held captive by Gashi. I focused on his face and used it to pull me back to reality.

“Aras,” I whispered.

He grinned. “Ready to talk?”

A tear slid down my cheek. “You don't understand. I can't betray him.”

Aras nodded. “I do understand that. But you need to understand me, pirate. You are a criminal and you tried to steal from me. Your friends did steal from me. One of the crates they took was very valuable. The item in it belongs to King Lyrandir, and he now expects me to retrieve it. I'm rightfully being held accountable. So, I will not stop until I get it back.” He stroked my cheek, brushing away my tears. “Unfortunately, this means I'm back to torturing you more proactively.” His claw dug

into my skin, slicing me open.

I cried out but didn't move. I simply didn't have the strength for it. I'd wasted all my energy on trying to break the bedpost and fighting my memories. My chest quaked as Aras pushed me onto my back, then straddled me.

“Know that I don't enjoy this,” Aras said. “But your crew has put me in a terrible position with King Lyrandir.” Another slice came, opening a wound on my chest. “If I don't get that item back, I will be the one in chains. Or worse. This is now beyond pride for me. It's life and death.”

Fuck. We were deadlocked. Literally. Neither of us would yield. I shuddered and went limp, accepting what was to come. Welcoming it. I prayed for a fast death, that maybe my weakened state would strain my hearts.

“Tell me the name of your captain,” Aras said.

I closed my eyes.

“What is the name of your ship?” Another slice.

Pain. Terrible pain. But I stayed silent. At least it distracted me from the chains.

Aras kept going, cutting me up as badly as he had the day before. Draining me again. He probably thought he could keep repeating the process by letting me heal in between torture sessions. Just give the Neraky a glass of water and he'll be fine. But what Aras didn't understand was that without a full healing, the damage would be cumulative, building up until I broke down. My hearts would shut down, one at a time, and I would give up immortality for my captain.

“Captain,” I whispered. It wasn't a cry for help but rather a battle call to give me

strength. To remind me of who I endured this for.

Aras leaned in closer. “Tell me.”

I just grinned at him and passed out.

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I was so thirsty. So fucking dry. Aras had left me in a puddle of blood and hadn't indulged this time. Meaning, I had bled more than the last. No Hulfrin saliva to stop the flow. My flesh was withering. My vision clouding again. Soon, I wouldn't be able to see at all. I'd be a dried husk.

Then I heard the roar.

It came from far away. At least, I think it was distant. Maybe my hearing was going too. But then Baellius growled, and I heard that just fine. So, the roar had to be far off. There was something about the sound that comforted me. It shimmered through me like water, easing my pain and giving me hope. I took a shaky breath and focused on hearing. There it was again.

My eyes popped open.

Could it be? No, that was my foolish fantasy, not reality. That couldn't possibly be King Vaxarion. But then the roar came again. Closer. The castle shook. Stone dust fell from the ceiling. My head turned instinctively toward the window.

“What the fuck?” Baellius went to the window. Then he cried out and jerked back. Without even a glance at me, he ran.

As Baellius bolted past me, the window burst inward, along with a good portion of the wall. I cringed, but then turned toward it again. A claw appeared—one covered in iridescent scales that shifted from black to blue to green. I sighed to see such beauty, so stark against the bleak stone.

Then that beautiful, enormous talon reached through the hole in the wall and closed around me. Pulled. My ankle jerked. The talon pulled harder. I shouted, the metal biting into me. A head appeared in the hole. Well, part of one. One massive dragon eye peered at me. I stared back in amazement.

“Your Majesty?” I asked.

I don't know how I knew it was Vaxarion. Maybe it wasn't. But what other Sea Dragon would be coming to my rescue? And what other Sea Dragon had eyes like sunshine through amethyst?

The sea dragon, who may or may not be the King of the Morilren Sea, growled and let go of me. One claw struck out, and the bed crumbled, shards of wood raining down. I started to laugh as it came down on me. I continued to laugh as I crawled toward the dragon. My strength gave out, and I collapsed, but I kept smiling.

His claws closed around me again and this time when he pulled, I went freely. Limp and grinning, I lay within the dragon's grasp as it drew me out of the castle like a cat digging a choice morsel from a carcass. With another roar, we fell. The sound of sliding stones came, but then water rushed around us. Great big streams of the stuff swallowed us whole. It formed a channel, a river, and the sea dragon swam up it.

As he escaped with his prize, I sucked in that glorious substance, my withered cells rejoicing in so many ways. I felt complete. Oddly complete. And it had nothing to do with the water. It was this man. This Sea Dragon. My king. In his keeping, I could finally rest. And I did. I closed my eyes and fell into a blissful oblivion.

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I woke up underwater. Not just surrounded by water, but also in the sea. I recognized the salty tang of the ocean immediately. My body breathed it in with relief, sucking in great drafts of it through my gills and pores. I was resting on something smooth that coiled around me, cradling my body. Confused, I opened my eyes and swiveled my head. Another much larger head lifted and angled an enormous eye at me.

Entranced, I reached out a hand. The face drew closer, close enough to touch. Smooth scales pressed into my palm. Like glass, but stronger than steel. He was the first dragon I had touched. The only one I ever wanted to.

“Your Majesty,” I projected my thoughts to him. If he was open to hearing me, he would. I was certainly open to hearing him.

But King Vaxarion—it had to be him—didn't respond. He just nuzzled me and curled his strong body more tightly around me. Then, as I stroked his cheek, he closed his eyes and let out a sweet rumbling sound that vibrated through the water. It healed me as nothing else could, banishing the lingering past. I got to my knees and laid my torso against his cheek, arms extended in a hug.

“Thank you for saving me. Thank you. I don't know why you came or how you knew I was in trouble, but thank you, Your Majesty,” I projected my thoughts again.

That happy rumble slid into my mind. And then came, “Zixin,” in Vaxarion's deep, velvety voice.

“It is you!” I leaned back. “How did you know I needed you?”

“Zixin,” he repeated.

“King Vaxarion?”

“Stay.” His long, massive body unwound, and he swam away.

“Where are you going?”

“Stay!”

I stayed. King Vaxarion left. As he did, I noticed where we were. A cave. He had brought me to an undersea cave. But it had sea lanterns in it, sitting on ledges. So he must have been there before. Was this where he brought all his lovers? How strange. But who gave a shit? I was free! I was alive! I was with Vaxarion! And I was nearly strong enough to get up and do a happy dance. Not quite, but nearly. The sea revived me much faster than fresh water.

A disturbance in the currents alerted me to Vaxarion's return. I sat cross-legged on a rock shelf with a grin on my face, eager to see him again. He appeared in seconds, swimming faster than the Lu-Ken could sail, even with the strongest wind filling her sails. He came to a graceful stop, the water swaying me, and laid something before me. It drifted up from the sand.

A fish. He had brought me a fish.

Gleefully, I grabbed the dead thing and chomped into it. In my mind, I sent him a, “Thank you, Your Majesty. I was starving.”

“Vaxarion,” came his response.

I went still, pausing my meal to stare at him. “Thank you, Vaxarion.”

“Zixin. Eat.”

I ate but also frowned. What was up with the clipped answers? What was wrong with him? A Sea Dragon had the same intellect in their beast form as they did as a man, but King Vaxarion sounded as if he'd lost some brain cells.

Then I noticed the shackle. It was still on me, a length of chain coiled nearby like a snake. I jumped, dropping the fish, and yanked at it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Vaxarion pull back, then come closer. But I was losing myself again. All I could see was that fucking iron. I needed it off. Inside my head, I whimpered.

“Zixin,” the Sea King's voice calmed me. “Cease.”

I went still but stared at him balefully. “Help me. Please. I can't be chained. Please.”

Suddenly, the water shimmered. Bubbled. The sea dragon shifted, shrinking into a Sea Dragon man. And there he was, more glorious than ever. Vaxarion's long hair streamed around his nude body in the currents created by his dragon, the lantern light turning those dark strands into a dark rainbow. He bent, grabbed the shackle at both sides, and yanked it apart. Effortless. As if the thing were made of paper. He tossed it away, the chain trailing after the broken metal, then cupped my face in his hands.

In a daze, I stared at him. Vaxarion drew closer. I rocked forward, taken to him by the water. My hands pressed against his bare chest. He continued to hold my face, but it felt as if he surrounded me. His presence was still the size of his beast, wrapped around me so tightly that I'd never get free of him. I never wanted to. Closing my eyes, I lifted my lips to his in offering.

And he accepted.

Groaning, we came together, tongues weaving, telling a story of loss and recovery.

Of near death and reconfirmed life. I felt Vaxarion's joy through his kiss, and that both amazed and excited me. He wanted me. He wanted me enough to tear down a fucking castle for me! I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him closer. Fell back with him.

We drifted down, then spun, floating just above the sand, our buoyancy and his magic holding us aloft. The baggy clothing I wore was drawn away, then drifted out of reach, and the King's hands slid over every inch of skin that was revealed. He touched and stroked and grabbed, but it was all slow, with a surprising tenderness. Reverence, even. I could only touch him in the same manner, my body not allowing me to reject his offer. Not this time. So when I moved against Vaxarion, it was in an undulating brush—a roll of my chest, nipples dragging over his, then my abdomen, a graze of my shaft on his thigh, and then our legs entwined.

“Zixin,” he spoke in my mind again. “Need you.”

“I need you too, Vax.” The nickname slid easily from my mind and into his, and he made a delighted growl, accepting it.

The King's mouth found my throat, his tongue flicking over my open gills before moving down. As I shivered, he closed his teeth around my flesh. Still, it was tender. Sweet. Gentle. Things I didn't expect from a Sea Dragon. His hand tugged at my braid, unbound it, and slid through. The locks weren't nearly as long as his, but with them loose, they reached for him, and his hair spun with mine. We were entwined. He wove me into his fabric. A part of his weft. Just another piece of the Sea King. But a happy piece.

“An integral piece,” Vaxarion said.

Had I sent that thought to him? I was so lost in this man that I couldn't keep my private thoughts to myself. But I didn't care. Not when he said things like that.

Integral? After one night? Had we connected so brilliantly? Yes. Yes, we had. I'd felt it as much as he did. This was right. I needed him too. Should never have walked away.

I clutched at Vaxarion's strong shoulders as he worked his mouth down my chest, lapping at my nipples and nibbling my flesh. He nosed the line between my muscles, sending me into a backward arch that had us rolling again. His hair billowed around us, hiding pieces of him from me. It didn't matter. I could feel all of him. See him even with my eyes closed. Touching Vax was like worshiping a god. It sent a low vibration through my body, forming a holy union.

And then Vaxarion's hot mouth was on my cock, and I cried out, my shout lost to the water. So hot. So tight. That fucking suction. The vacuum of his desire. He felt as if he'd draw all of me into himself. I shuddered, my sacs drawing up and my thighs tightening, but Vax drew away before I came. And down he went, lifting me so that I spun backward again. Weightless, I couldn't tell which way was up. It didn't matter. The Sea King was my up and down. My everything. All directions led to him.

Vaxarion's tongue flicked over my entrance. A finger prodded, then a slick shaft. Not his. No, I knew the feel of his sex well, had been craving it even as I'd been tortured. That wasn't it. It was water. His magic spreading me gently. Opening me. Patiently. Coating my channel in a thin layer of moisture. I moaned as Vax pulled me into position, my hands knowing where to go—his shoulders. Those strong, broad shoulders that would serve as my anchor. I held on as his flesh finally slipped into me, the water inside me easing his way.

With that first thrust, I opened my eyes. I needed to see Vax as he entered me. And what a sight it was. The Sea King was glorious. No surprise there. But what shocked me was the adoration in his eyes. The way he stared at me as if he had searched all the seas of Serai for me and found me at last. I cupped his cheek and pulled him down to me. The pleasure of him pumping into me became a background to the

delight of his wondrous kiss.

“More,” Vax growled.

“Yes. More. All of me,” I said. “Take everything. Leave nothing behind.”

Vax's pleasure shimmered into me, pure emotion without words, but I still felt it. He was blissful. So was I. I wanted to be like this with him forever. Just rolling in the sea, our bodies joined along with our minds.

“My Zix,” Vax said as he sped up. “Mine. I will take all of you. You belong to me now.” He was finally giving me more than a few words.

“There you are,” I spoke even as we continued to kiss. “I was wondering what was going on with you.”

“I merely spent too long in dragon form,” he said, though it felt evasive to me.

It was harder to hide such nuances when you spoke like this. But I didn't press him. It didn't matter.

“How did you find me?”

“Not now, Zixin.” Vax thrust deeper, making my head fall back. Seeing the results of his prowess, he rumbled happily and claimed my throat, his jaw closing around the bend. “Need you. I need to come inside you. Over you.”

“Yes, please.” I shuddered, my cock responding with a need of its own.

Then he surprised me by asking, “Are you all right? If you're hurting, tell me. I'll stop.”

“Hurting? Why would I be hurting?”

“Your injuries have just healed. You were . . .” He paused, and I felt his fury. His . . . fear? For me? His hips thrust harder against me. “You were badly wounded, Zix. And depleted. You needed the sea.”

All three of my hearts melted. “I’m well. It was nothing.”

“No, it wasn’t. And as soon as I have you safe in my palace, I’m returning to kill everyone who hurt you.”

Physical pleasure merged with the deadly sexiness of his vow to send me over. I clutched at Vax as my body bowed back and my cock jerked forward, releasing my desire into the water. Vax kept pumping as I came, his delight rippling through me and his mouth on my throat, kissing my muffled cries.

As soon as I trickled down from satisfaction, Vax shot up into it, his hips jerking against me. The heat of his seed was unmistakable with my body cooled to the temperature of the ocean. It filled my channel and its warmth spread, sending erotic shivers through me. And then he came again. And again. I was so full of him, my channel clenching to hold it all in even as he withdrew.

The Sea King held onto my waist and spun with me, streamers of cum shooting from his cock to spin with us. In utter awe at the sensual beauty, I watched the shimmering liquid twine about me, the milky ribbons splitting apart to turn into diamonds. Then the oddest thing happened. Even as we gently spun, the ribbons and droplets rushed to me as if my skin sucked them in. As if I were a magnet, pulling them to me. Everywhere they hit became sensitive and sent zings of ecstasy along my nerve endings until my cock rose and I ejaculated again.

Vax turned me away from him, still coming, those ribbons continuing to twine about

me and sink into my skin. They floated down to my back, and I arched into the pleasure. Rapture took control. My mind swam in it. My body steeped. The only thing that kept me from floating away was Vax. His strong grip. The feel of him moving against me. And the deep satisfaction I felt from him.

It was too much for my freshly healed body. I trembled into oblivion. One word followed me into the darkness.

“Mine.”

I woke to a wondrous sight.

We were moving rapidly through the water, my body cradled in a giant dragon talon and held against Vaxarion's scaled chest. Ahead of us lay an underwater city. It had been many years since I'd been to one, and that had been before the Sea Dragons came out of hibernation. It had been beautiful, but nothing like this. Shasenai, the Crown City of the Morilren Sea, was a jewel among jewels.

So many lights shone from the towering buildings and the streetlamps that the glow penetrated the depths of the sea, turning the blinding darkness into daylight. The glow extended hundreds of feet before trickling off into darker and darker blue until it was swallowed by indigo. Within that light, architecture unknown to land-dwellers rose in domes and arches adorned with coral, shells, and pearls. Despite those differences, Shasenai was very similar to the land cities. Mainly because it existed under a ward of air.

Everything within the city walls lived in a bubble. A ward formed that bubble, continually providing fresh air by drawing it from the surface, through the water. Filtered as it was, it was probably fresher than what you'd find up top. But beyond the city walls and the ward, the sea reigned. And the residents relied on it. Ocean vegetables grew in huge beds, tended and harvested by citizens who stopped their work to stare in awe at the King as he swam by. There were also pleasure gardens of sea flowers so beautiful that I had no words to describe them. Colors that would have been hidden in the depths came to life under the city's light.

Vaxarion didn't go to the gates like everyone else who entered Shasenai. As the King, he had special access. It was his ward, cast by his magic. He swam above the ward,

heading across the neat spokes of the city streets and wedges of neighborhoods that radiated out from the center of the circular city. Ocean dwellers walked down the streets, enjoying the gravity and dry air, knowing they could leave it at any time. I sighed to see such luxurious living. Every building was adorned. Every street was spotless. It was a far cry from how I had lived as a child, even before I'd been abducted. And pirates, well, we don't live like that, not even after a big take.

Suddenly, Vax dove. We passed through the ward, and a tube of water coalesced around us as we hit the air. Below us was the royal palace—a thing of delicate beauty that nonetheless radiated vast power. Pearlescent towers spiraled up from tiered rectangular buildings, and terraces adorned the upper levels, many covered in plants. Vaxarion headed for the largest of these terraces, transforming into his man body as he swam. The claw around me shrunk and slid down my arm until Vaxarion's hand clutched mine. As we landed on the flagstones, the water disappeared.

Vaxarion's long hair settled around his naked body, covering him like a cape. My hair was still loose, but I had my Hulfrin tunic and pants on, so I didn't have to worry that it wasn't long enough to hide me. And we weren't wet either. The Sea King's magic had sucked the water away, drying us instantly.

Around us, several other Sea Dragons alighted onto the terrace, all of them naked. Vaxarion's King's Guard. They'd been swimming alongside us the entire way. I assumed they'd even guarded us while we'd been in that cave.

One of them stepped forward and withdrew a pair of pants from a satchel. He handed it to King Vaxarion.

Vax nodded his thanks and pulled them on. “Get some rest, all of you. You deserve it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you,” the knight said, not even glancing at me. Then all

of them marched off, entering the palace through a door on our left.

A blond Sea Dragon man came through the same door seconds later. “Your Majesty!” He raced over to us even as Vax drew me in that direction. “Welcome home! How did your tour of the land kingdoms go?” The man's sharp, dark eyes swung my way and then his nostrils widened. “Is he . . . ? Oh, Your Majesty!”

Vaxarion slashed a hand through the air to silence the man. “Yavess, this is my consort , Zixin. Zix, this is Yavess, the Palace Steward. If you need anything, anything at all, he will procure it for you.”

“It will be my pleasure.” Yavess bowed to me.

A fucking Sea Dragon bowed to me!

“Uh, thank you,” I stammered.

“My consort is recovering from injuries,” Vax said as he led me inside the palace. “He needs meat and salt. Stews would be best.”

“Uh, I could go for something sweet,” I said.

Vax paused to grin at me, then nodded at Yavess.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Yavess said. “I'll see to it immediately. Would you wish to dine as well?”

“Yes.”

“Very good. I'll have your meal delivered to your suite.” Yavess bowed again and hurried down the hallway we entered.

The Sea King drew me in the opposite direction.

I stayed silent for several hundred feet as he navigated us through a labyrinth of corridors, past open doors that gave glimpses of luxurious rooms. Give me five minutes in one of those rooms, and I'd steal enough to be set for life. Except I wouldn't, would I? Not as the King's . . . hold on. Had he really made me his consort? I had assumed that was just a lure to get me to go with him.

“Uh, Your Majesty?” I tugged on his hand.

“Yes?” Vax flicked a glance my way. The tightness around his eyes startled me. He looked as if he were barely holding onto his control.

“Nothing,” I murmured. Now was not the time to question what I was to him. I had a feeling he'd see it as questioning his honor too.

He grunted, his steps becoming larger and faster as we went until we were practically running through the palace. At last, Vaxarion slowed. We approached a pair of double doors guarded by two Sea Dragons. They saluted the King, welcomed him home, and opened the doors for him. We sailed through and as soon as the doors were closed, Vax picked me up and started to run.

“What's the rush?” I asked as I clung to his shoulders.

“Need you,” Vax growled.

Oh, fuck. He's gone feral again. What's going on with him?

We passed many rooms, none of them up to his standards evidently. Vaxarion's shoulder hit a golden door. A spiral staircase waited on the other side. He swooped up it in seconds, taking me to the top. A vast, round room waited there, its vibrant

furnishings and fabric popping against the glossy, black coral walls. An enormous round bed ruled the center of the room, branches of the same black coral forming a bower over it. Instead of plants, this bower supported lengths of red silk that wove through the branches like vines before spreading into a canopy and pooling on the floor. More of that red silk covered the bed and the wealth of pillows perched atop it. I had a glimpse of crimson and gold furniture set around the bed as Vaxarion laid me down. But then I had to focus on the Sea King.

Because he demanded attention.

How? By simply dropping his pants.

I licked my lips to find Vax hard and long. Ready once more to fill me with flesh and his magical Sea Dragon cum. I couldn't wait. But then my stomach growled.

Vax paused, hand reaching for me.

“Ignore that,” I said and yanked him to me.

He fell forward but braced himself on his forearms. Lines of strain formed around his eyes and lips. “No. You need to eat.” He pushed back, arms trembling.

“Vax,” I whispered and cupped his cheeks. “I don't know why you want me, but I'm not about to let a little thing like hunger ruin it for me. My belly can wait. The rest of me needs you just as badly as you need me.”

Vaxarion shuddered and closed his eyes. “Only until the food arrives.”

“All right.” I grinned and pulled him back down.

“Zix,” he groaned and gave in. “My beautiful Zixin.”

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We spent a week locked in Vaxarion's bedroom. A fucking week. Literally. All we did was fuck, eat, sleep, and bathe. I'd never been with a man who could fuck so much. Or come so much. His recovery time was ridiculous. What was most amazing was my recovery time. Despite the hell I'd been through, I handled the Sea King's appetite with ease. Even met it with a hunger of my own. I couldn't get enough of him. But I knew it wouldn't last. How could it? He had a kingdom to run.

And I had a ship to return to. A ship full of people who thought I was dead.

One morning, I woke in Vaxarion's arms to find him staring at me strangely. It was a soft look, his lips turned up, and if I were another man, I'd swear I saw love in his eyes. But he couldn't love me. Not me. Not Zixin the pirate. The ex-slave. The broken man. A king would never love me. But I'd take that tenderness. I'd grab it and keep it in my heart—a treasure to never be sold.

“It's time, isn't it?” I whispered.

“Time?” Vax lifted his dark brows. “For breakfast? Yes. And then maybe we can leave this room. I think I'm finally sated enough to share you.”

“Share me?”

“With my court.” He kissed my forehead, sat up, and stretched. “Yes. I am satisfied.”

Satisfied? Share me? What the fuck?

Shaking with fury and fear, I climbed out of bed and then turned to face him, not

bothering to clothe myself. “If you're satisfied, Your Majesty, I'll return to the surface. I'm not going to be one of your palace slaves, serving you and your courtiers when the whim strikes you.”

Vaxarion blinked. “Zix, that's not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

He got up and came around the bed, reaching for me.

I stepped back.

Vax dropped his hands with a frown. “I don't want you to serve my court. How could you think that after . . .” He waved at the bed.

“So, you don't expect me to fuck your courtiers?”

His eyes flashed, and a growl rolled from him. “You will not allow anyone but me to touch you. Understood?”

I let out a shaky breath and nodded.

“You're my . . .” Vax hesitated.

“Your consort?” I asked. “Vax, I'm honored that you gave me the title, and I want to accept it, but you know I can't stay.”

The Sea King's voice went cold. “What do you mean?”

“This won't work.” I held up a hand before he could say anything. “I'm so grateful to you for saving me. It was romantic and so fucking sexy. I will remember it forever.

And what we've shared since then has been amazing. I don't ever want to leave.”

His shoulders relaxed a little. “Then why can't you stay?”

“I'm a pirate. I need to feel the sea below me, not just around me. I need the thrill of adventure. And I have friends up there who are like family to me. My captain saved my life too. He found me—” I cut myself off, shocked that I'd been about to tell him about the Gashi. I never talked about that time of my life. “He saved me. I owe him. I can't leave him up there thinking I'm dead.”

“He found you where?” Vaxarion demanded.

“It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago.”

“Tell me, M—my Zixin,” he stuttered strangely over the word my. Maybe he realized that I wasn't his. Not as he wanted me to be. Not as I wanted to be, either.

“No,” I said. “No, that's a part of my past I don't talk about. Just know that I'm not an acceptable consort for a king. As much as I'd like to stay here, basking in what we've found together and forgetting that the rest of the world exists, I can't. I can't do that knowing the day will come when you realize I'm unfit and lose interest in me. Better for me to leave now while this is still beautiful.”

“I will not lose interest in you, Zix,” Vax said firmly. “You are my—”

“No,” I cut him off. “Don't lie to me. Let's just appreciate what we've had and not tarnish the memories. I want to go before that happens. Someday, you can look back and remember me with a smile instead of bitterness.”

“I will never feel bitter toward you.” He grimaced. “Except for this moment. Frankly, I want to shake you.”

“Vax, you have twenty-six other lovers. What about them? I know you're a king, but I don't want to be one of the throng who beds you.”

“I will release them.”

I went still. “What?”

“I'll release my slaves.”

“You will?” My hearts exploded with joy. But I reined them in. “You said you couldn't promise to never take another lover.”

“That was before. I can now. Don't go, Zix.”

Oh, how I ached. My whole chest seemed to pulse with the need to stay with him. But I knew all about men promising you something to get you to be with them, then turning around and changing their minds. I couldn't let him sway me. Still . . .

I went to Vax and took his hand. “Maybe you wouldn't get tired of me. Maybe we could have something special.”

“Yes,” he said urgently. “That's what I'm trying to explain to you.”

“But even if that were true, I still have other people to think about. Myself included.” I sighed. “Vax, I can't stay here, living below the sea with you forever.”

“We don't have to. I can take you above whenever you wish.”

“Will you join me on the Lu-Ken too?” I grinned sadly at him.

“Can you not give that up for me?” Vax cupped my cheek. “I am offering you a life

that most would kill for. And you would never have to kill again. You would never have to risk yourself or steal to survive. I will give you everything. All you have to do is embrace this life and let go of your old one.”

I stared at him, my chest aching with the rapid beating of my hearts. I wanted him. I wanted this badly. A new life? No piracy? Only pleasure with the Sea King? Maybe I could have it. Just forget about the men who were like brothers to me. Forget the captain who had raised me like a son. Forget the life I had forged for myself. I hadn't chosen it anyway. Did I really need adventure? Wasn't Vaxarion enough adventure for me?

“This is crazy,” I whispered. “We barely know each other.”

“What does that matter? What we have is beyond time and such knowing. Don't let go.” His hand slid down my throat, then my arm, to take my hand.

“Vax, I . . . can't. I want to, but I can't.”

The Sea King's expression shifted suddenly, going from tenderness to barbaric fury. I gasped as bones moved in his face, his dragon emerging. His hand tightened on mine and he yanked me into his arms.

“Vax?” I pressed my hands onto his chest, trying but failing to push him away.

“You can't?” he growled. “You want to, but you can't ? Well, let me make this easy on you, Zixin. I claim your life as mine.”

“What?” I whispered in horror.

“You know the laws of the seas. I saved your life. Now, it belongs to me. You belong to me.” Vax leaned down to growl in my face, “And I am never letting you go.”

Shivers raced through me, and I couldn't figure out if they were born of excitement or fear. Both, I think. Because as much as Vaxarion's declaration scared me, I also rejoiced in it. I didn't want to leave him, and he had just taken the decision away from me. But then I realized what this meant. I wouldn't be his consort now.

I would be his slave. Forever.

“No,” I begged. “No, please, Vax. Don't do this to me. Don't take my freedom.”

“It's done.” He pushed me back toward the bed. “Now, get on your hands and knees. It's time to serve your master.”

I was right about him. Had been all along. This confirmed all of my fears. I could have had status in his court. I could have had his respect. Now, I was his toy. And the laws of my world demanded I accept it. I was a pirate. I broke the rules every day. But some laws were ingrained in me as a man of the sea. They were in my very blood. A life for a life was one of them. Tengven had never used that law on me. He offered me a new life out of kindness, without any ties, and I had taken it. Vax had made me a similar offer, but unlike Teng, he had no intention of letting me refuse.

Hearts sinking in my chest, I climbed onto the bed and got on my hands and knees. Vaxarion's harsh breath was the only sound in the room. I waited, but he just stood there. A tear trickled down my cheek, so I lowered my face and pressed it into the mattress. Never let them see you cry.

The sound of footsteps finally drew my head up and around. Vax had left.

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Still trembling, I got up and shifted to sit on the edge of the bed. Where the fuck had he gone? Why say all that shit and then leave? I was baffled. After steadying myself, I pulled on the clothes and boots Vax had given me and went to find him.

I entered the stairwell and leaned over the railing. On our way up, we passed other doors. All of them were open. I heard a strange sound coming from one of them. Weeping? No. It couldn't be.

I crept down to the landing below. There were two entrances to this floor, the doors right beside each other, but only one of them was open. Only one of them emitted that sound. It was clearer there. Someone was definitely crying. No, not crying—sobbing. Great, gut-wrenching sobs. I stepped through the doorway and into a luxurious bathroom coated in pale blue marble streaked with swaths of cerulean. It was like stepping into a tidal pool; the water swirling around my feet. Except the only water in the room was streaming down the Sea King's face.

Holy fuck.

“Vax?” I whispered.

He'd been hunched over, sitting on the floor, his back against the low marble wall that encased the enormous, round bathtub. At the sound of my voice, he flinched and turned away. I saw his hands swipe up and over his eyes as he cleared his throat.

“Vax, I—” I headed for him, hand outstretched. My chest was tight with something I couldn't name. He wept for me? For me ? Had he wanted me so badly that he'd done something abhorrent to keep me?

“Stop,” the King growled, cutting me off.

“Vax, it's all right.”

“Do not call me that!” Vaxarion roared as he surged to his feet. Even naked, he looked intimidating. Deadly. Maybe even more so. Naked, his powerful body was completely revealed, and the rapid rise and fall of his chest didn't bode well. “I'm your king!”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I whispered. “I understand.”

He stomped forward and pointed a finger in my face. “You don't understand anything, Zixin. Now, go. Leave.”

“Leave? But you just claimed my life.”

“I renounce my claim. Go.”

“I'm not leaving.” I lifted my chin. “We need to talk.”

Vaxarion's hands shook at his sides. His eyes twitched. His lips pressed tightly together. Oh, fuck. There were still tears in his eyes. I reached up to touch his face. For a second, he softened, but then he slapped my hand away.

“Get out!” Vaxarion roared. “Go now, Zixin. The Lu-Ken is moored in Rasc. Yavess will get you passage there.”

“What?” I whispered. “How do you know where the Lu-Ken is?”

“Go now,” he snarled, getting in my face again. The tears were gone. All that was left was a cold determination. “You have five minutes before I put a fucking collar on

you.”

I blanched. How did he know? Maybe he didn't. Maybe it was a guess. But it was a good guess. My greatest fear, even worse than being a slave. To be a collared and chained slave. My throat closed up, only a squeak of sound emerging.

The King's expression cracked, and he spun away. “Five minutes. Now, four.”

Terror filling me, I ran from the room and stumbled down the stairs to the bottom floor of the King's apartments. I ran down the corridor toward the entrance. On my left, a door opened. Men of many undersea races peered out at me. They were barely dressed, only loincloths covering their bits and golden chains hanging everywhere. They all wore golden collars.

“Fuck,” I muttered and put on speed. That could have been me. Just one of the Sea King's many bed slaves. And to think I'd been falling for the guy. I was lucky he changed his mind. Lucky he—a sob escaped me as I burst through the doors.

“Hey!” one of the guards tried to grab my arm.

“Fuck off!” I snarled at him. “The King sent me away.”

The guard drew back, more out of shock than anything, and I ran. I needed to find Yavess before the King changed his mind. Four minutes. I only had four minutes before he came after me. Four minutes before I was collared again. Chained. I almost threw up, but I managed to keep running.

“My lord Zixin!” someone called.

I stumbled to a halt and turned. “Thank fuck! Yavess!” I grabbed the guy's arm. “The King said you'd get me passage to my ship. The Lu-Ken. He said it's docked at Rasc.”

“You're leaving?” Yavess sounded horrified.

“Yes. Now! He gave me four minutes, Yavess. Please! It's more like two now.”

Spurred on by my anxiety, Yavess took my wrist and rushed me through the palace, past the shocked courtiers and servants. We reached the main doors just as a roar echoed behind us. Yavess went still.

“Come on!” I shrieked. “Help me!”

“I can't,” he whispered. “The King will want you to—”

“The King is the one who told me to leave. He told me where the Lu-Ken is anchored. Now, hurry!”

Yavess shook his head, his expression one of fear and sorrow, but he called out, “Guard!”

“Yavess, please!” I begged, thinking that he'd called the guard to restrain me.

But when a Sea Dragon appeared, Yavess said, “See this man safely to the port of Rasc in Vix. Orders of the King.”

Another roar came, and then the sound of things breaking. The soldier looked up toward the King's tower.

“Go!” Yavess growled. “Now!”

“Yes, my lord!” the man said and hurriedly stripped, tossing his weapons, armor, and clothes onto the palace steps.

Then the man leapt into the air, shifting into his sea dragon form as he went. Water gathered around him, forming a tunnel. A very large tunnel. It spanned the entire courtyard, as did his body. An enormous talon reached out of the water and snatched me up.

“Thank you, Yavess!” I called just before I was yanked into the water.

The water distorted Yavess's face, but I could still make out his expression. It was all sorrow now. Deep sorrow. And it would haunt me nearly as much as my last sight of the Sea King.

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I nearly wept when I saw the hull of the Lu-Ken rising before me. It was right where Vax said it would be, docked at the port of Rasc, a coastal town in the Kingdom of Vix. Her sails were down and her crew looked grim, those on duty staring vacantly off toward the sea. It hurt to see their pain, but that was minor compared to the joy I felt. And the relief.

I had made it. I escaped slavery again. This time, I'd done it on my own. No. That's not true. Vax had let me go. Why? Why had he done it? Why had he cried? Why send me away? And how the fuck had he known where the Lu-Ken was?

After setting me on the dock, dried by his Water Magic, the sea dragon left without a word. I had already thanked him for the ride, so I didn't look back as I strolled down to the dock where the Lu-Ken was moored. Up the gangplank I went, the sound of my footsteps instantly drawing the attention of the day crew. At first, they started to reach for their weapons, but then they just gaped at me.

“Zix?” Grei called out. Then he shouted, “Zixin! Holy fishballs, it's Zix!”

That jerked them all out of their trances and sent them running for me. I grinned as we hugged, then swiped at my tears as secretly as they did.

“What's going on out here?” the Captain's voice interrupted us.

The men parted, and I stared up at the man who was like a second father to me.

“Zixin?” Teng whispered. Then he leapt over the railing, down to the main deck. He was before me in three seconds. “Fuck! Zixin!” He embraced me, clutching me

tightly. “He found you. He fucking found you and saved you. Holy shit!”

Wait. What?

I hugged Tengven, but when he stepped back, I asked, “Who found me?”

Teng frowned. “King Vaxarion. He's the one who found you, isn't he? He saved you from the Hulfrin?”

“Yes, but how did you know that?”

“The morning after that failed take, King Vaxarion came swimming up. He had his knights with him, though they were a bit behind.”

“He was after you,” Ry, the First Mate, said. “And a in bad state too.”

“Yeah, you must have given him the fucking of his life,” one of the others joked, but then went quiet under Teng's glare.

“He demanded to see you,” Teng went on. “And I wasn't eager to tell him you'd been taken. But then I realized that he might be your only hope. So, I confessed the truth. I told him we're pirates, and you got left behind—” his voice cracked. “Zix, I'm so sorry we left you.”

“No. I know what the horn means. I just couldn't get back. They had me surrounded. And you had to go or everyone would have died. I—I saw what they did to Herru. That bastard tore him apart.”

The men went grim and muttered as Teng nodded and said, “I thought they might have done the same to you. But I had to try. A fucking Sea Dragon wanted you. If anyone could save you, it was him. So, I told him the name of the ship.”

“I don't think he needed the name,” Ry said. “He had tracked you across the fucking sea. He could have tracked you to the Tiger's Claw.”

“I think he did,” Teng said. “He certainly didn't waste any time on us. As soon as I told him you'd been taken, King Vaxarion snarled and jumped overboard, shifting back into his sea dragon form midair. It was the most amazing sight I've ever beheld. But honestly, I thought you were already dead. I shouted after him that we were headed here, just in case you survived.” He yanked me back into a hug. “Thank the Gods you did. You are one lucky kid.”

“Not so lucky. They tortured me,” I whispered.

“What?” Teng growled and stood back, his hand still on my shoulder.

“They wanted me to give you up. Their captain is a tenacious fucker. He wants whatever you took back. Said it's really valuable.”

Ry snorted. “It's just a few crates of Zaruian brandy.”

“What?” I scowled. “No, that can't be right. He was anxious to get it back. The motherfucker sliced me to ribbons twice and left me to wither.”

“What?!” Teng roared.

“Fuck, Zix,” Grei whispered. “And you held out?”

“I would never betray any of you,” I said proudly. “You're my family.”

Teng swallowed visibly and pulled me into another hug. “I love you, kid. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, Teng. I love you too.”

“You're a fucking badass!” Ry smacked my back. “Well done, Zixin!”

“Yeah, thanks for not giving us up, buddy,” Wei said.

Something still bothered me about the take. I stepped back from Teng and asked, “Where are those crates?”

Teng grinned and jerked his head. “This way.”

I followed Teng through the doorway under the poop deck and into the corridor that led to his quarters. But instead of going straight, we took the stairs down toward my cabin. Just before my room, there was a storage room. That's where Teng went.

“There they are.” He waved a hand at three crates stacked to one side. “All we got for that fucked up debacle.”

I went to the first one and opened it. There were indeed bottles of liquor inside. And in the next and the next. No false bottoms on the crates, and nothing unusual about the bottles.

Ry, who was leaning against the doorframe, said, “See? Nothing worth torturing you over. That fucker is either insane or mistaken.”

“Maybe one of his crew took this special thing and blamed it on us,” Teng said.

“Maybe,” I murmured and looked at the bottles again. “But there was definitely something more than brandy in the crates. He said it belonged to King Lyrandir and implied that the King would kill him if he didn't retrieve his property.” I took every bottle out of the crates and inspected them. It wasn't until I reached the eleventh

bottle that I found it. “Ah, there you are,” I said.

“What?” Ry lurched forward and peered at the bottle.

Teng just chuckled and shook his head. “Of course, you would find something we missed. What is it, kid?”

I handed the bottle to Teng. “Look in the brandy.”

Teng peered at the bottom of the bottle, then his eyes went wide.

“What is it?” Ry demanded.

“Get a mug, Ry,” Teng said as he went to the table in the center of the room. “Three of them.” He looked at me. “I have a feeling we're going to want to celebrate.”

“But what is—”

“Ry!” Teng growled.

“Fine, fine,” Ry muttered and left the room.

“How did they even get it in there?” Teng mused as we continued to stare at something that did not belong in a bottle of brandy.

“They must have blown the glass around it,” I said. “That's a lot of effort to go through to hide a single jewel.”

“It's a jewel?” Ry asked excitedly as he returned with three mugs. “Holy fuck. How big is it?”

“Big,” Teng said as he drew his dagger and used the flat of the blade to pop the cork off the bottle. “Too big to get through the neck.” He poured the brandy out into the mugs until the bottle was empty. “But there's no sense in making a mess and wasting good brandy.” He grinned and bashed the bottle against the table.

The glass shattered, shards scattering across the tabletop. In their midst was a gem the size of my thumb. Almond-shaped, it was faceted and shone a deep, blood red. We went silent as Teng picked it up and held it to the light sphere in the ceiling. Glittering and glowing, the jewel cast bloody rainbows everywhere.

“Holy fishsticks,” Ry declared. “A ruby?”

“No,” Teng whispered. “This is no ruby. I can feel it vibrating. This stone holds magic.”

A shiver ran through me and I said, “Now that's something to torture a man for.”

Teng lowered the stone and looked at me. “It's something to kill for. We've got to unload this thing fast.”

“We don't even know what it is,” Ry said.

Teng nodded. “I think I know someone who will. And he just so happens to live in Vix.” He slipped the stone into his vest. Then he lifted his mug. “To our fortunes.”

“Fortune!” Ry and I repeated.

But as I sipped the finest brandy on Serai, my thoughts turned away from the jewel. It was beautiful and probably worth more than the Lu-Ken, maybe even more than ten ships. But the only treasure I could think of, the only jewels that could hold my attention, were King Vaxarion's eyes. And one thought kept circulating through my

brain.

He had come for me.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

Since I was the one who had found the gem, I got to accompany Teng on his quest to discover what the fuck it was. Luckily, we didn't have far to go. The historian lived only one town over, in Yusa. Thankfully, it was inland. I needed to get away from the Morilren Sea. Even the water seemed to call to me, summoning me back to the man who ruled it.

Riding horseback helped. The speed. The feeling of freedom. Power. Distance. I was a man of the sea, but I could still appreciate the joys of land. You could ride sea creatures, and it was enjoyable, but this was a completely different feeling. For one thing, if you fell off a sea mount, you wouldn't hurt yourself. The element of danger in riding a horse added to the exhilaration. But I had faith in our rented mounts. They were strong and sure, carrying Teng, Ry, and me rapidly down the cobbled road to Yusa. We reached the town by nightfall. Still, the historian's bookshop was already closed.

Teng knocked anyway.

Knocked again.

Peered in the windows.

“Klen!” he called. “It's Tengven. Come on. I know you're in there. We have something very interesting for you to examine. I promise you'll want to see this.”

Nothing.

“I've also got a bottle of Zaruian brandy as payment for your help.”

The sound of footsteps came, and Teng chuckled. Soon, the door was opened by a hunched human, his hair gray but tidy, pulled back in a braid. He had a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles on his nose and wore striped pajamas.

“Teng, you bastard,” Klen grumbled and grabbed the bottle Teng held out like a shield. “You have the worst timing. As usual.”

“You won't care about my timing in a few minutes, my friend,” Teng said. “Now, let us in.”

“Yeah, yeah. Come on in.” He turned and pulled a light cord.

A modest space filled with shelves, both on the walls and in rows across the floor, appeared in the golden glow. Those shelves were filled to the top with books, some of them crammed horizontally atop others and a few locked behind glass panels. We went inside, closing and locking the door behind us, then followed Klen past the books to a little room with a desk and three chairs. The old man sat down behind the desk, set the bottle down, and drew a brandy snifter out of a drawer.

“Allow me,” Teng said and pulled the same maneuver with this bottle as he had the last, using his dagger to pop the cork. Then he poured a little into Klen's glass.

Klen waved him on.

Chuckling, Teng poured a bit more. “This is my First Mate, Ry, and my son, Zixin.”

I jerked in shock. Teng had never introduced me as such before. He glanced at me, a soft grin flashing over his face. I grinned back.

“Son, eh?” Klen peered at me. “I didn't know you had children.”

“Just the one,” Teng said. “Adopted when he was a teenager.”

“Ah.” Klen sipped his brandy, sighed, then said. “All right, you rascally pirate. What have you stolen this time?”

Teng pulled out the stone and set it on the desk before the old man.

The old man flinched. Sat forward. His breath rasped over the jewel. Hands shaking, he picked it up and held it at eye level. “Dear Gods,” he whispered. “It can't be.” He jerked his hand down but didn't let go of the jewel. “Where did you get this?”

“Off a Hulfrin ship,” Teng said without hesitation. Which meant he trusted this man. “You recognize it.”

“Maybe.” Klen stood up and pushed past us, back into the shop. “Just maybe.”

We followed him out and stood to the side as he wandered along a shelf, muttering to himself. At last, he pulled out a book and flipped it open. Still gripping the stone, he took the book to the counter and set it down. Pages sped by. Then stopped. Klen held up the stone. Sat it down on the page. Stood back.

As if it might explode.

“Great fuck,” Klen whispered. “Teng, you've really fucked up this time.”

I froze. So did Ry.

But Teng only grinned and asked, “How badly?” Everything was an adventure for Teng. The only question was how great of an adventure.

“Whoever you took this from isn't going to stop until they have it back,” Klen said.

“Look for yourself.”

Teng went to the book and scanned the page. His expression went blank. “Ensarena's Eye? I thought that was a myth?”

“Evidently not,” Klen said. “That jewel was made by the Goddess. It's the only physical object she ever gave her children. It is pure Fire Magic.”

Teng read aloud, “Ensarena's Eye, although created for Dragons, can be used by anyone brave enough to risk its allure.” He looked up. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Klen shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. I know that it grants Fire Magic to those who don't possess it, but for those who do, it magnifies and focuses their power. In the hands of a Dragon, it's the ultimate weapon. A Dragon could become a king with it.”

“What if he was already a king?” I whispered, things clicking into place.

An image popped into my head, that of a sharp-featured man with blood-red hair. Hair to match that fucking jewel. This was why King Lyrandir was putting so much pressure on Captain Aras to retrieve his property. He couldn't let another Dragon get it first.

“A Dragon king could rule all of Serai with this stone,” Klen said. “I can't imagine why a Dragon would want to rule all of Serai, but you never know. Even if he didn't, just possessing the stone would make him untouchable. No one would stand against him, not even another Dragon king. Certainly not his dread. Any trouble in his kingdom would be instantly quashed. Instantly. If he was an honorable man, it might not be so bad. But if he wasn't.” Klen shook his head. “He would have the impunity to do whatever he wished.”

“Dragon kings already have that impunity,” Ry said.

“No, they don't. Not completely. Their dreads can still remove them from their throne if they deem it necessary. Dragons respect power, but they won't allow a madman to run rampant over their kingdoms just because he won a crown tourney. They'll remove him.” Klen paused to grimace. “But not if the King is in possession of that. With that, he could destroy any and all who stood against him. He would be like a god.”

“Fuck,” I whispered. “This is why King—”

“No! Don't tell me which king is after this stone!” Klen nearly screeched. “I'm at the end of my life and I'd like to enjoy the few years I have left.” He grabbed the gem and shoved it at Teng. “Take that godforsaken thing out of my shop and as far from me as possible!”

“All right, easy now, Klen,” Teng said. “No one knows we're here. No one even knows we have the Eye.”

“Only the Hulfrins we stole it from,” Ry muttered.

Klen shook his head rapidly, frizzy gray hair puffing about him. “I don't care. Get out!” He shooed us. “Go!”

“We're going.” Teng slipped the jewel back in his vest and ushered us out of the shop. “Thank you for your help.”

“Don't come back!” Klen slammed the door on us. The sound of the lock clicking was ominous.

“Captain,” Ry said in a grim tone.

“I know.” Teng glanced around, finally showing some wariness. “It's time to leave. We need the safety of the sea.”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

We left the shores of Vix that very night. Where were we headed? To the other side of the world—the Kingdom of Racul. Specifically, the crown city of Mhavenna. Teng was friends with the Duke of Mhavenna—an ex-assassin human who had mated the King. That connection was a huge bonus, but mainly, we wanted to get as far away from Gavemor as possible. Because, from my one brief interaction with King Lyrandir, I knew he wouldn't give his prize up easily. If Aras failed, the Hulfrin was dead, and the King would hunt us himself.

“Thank the Gods you never gave us up,” Teng said to me.

We were sitting on the poop deck, lounging on the bench behind the helm as we sipped mugs of coffee and stared at the stars. Or, in my case, the sea. It would take several weeks just to cross Morilren, but I dreaded leaving these waters. Dreaded and hoped. Maybe the distance would thin my memories of Vax.

“Huh?” I asked.

“If you had given that Hulfrin our names, he might have had a chance of finding us,” Teng explained. “But you were too strong for him.” He punched my shoulder playfully. “I'm so fucking proud of you.”

“Thanks.” I looked back at the dark waves.

“But what the fuck are you doing here, Zix?”

My gaze jerked back to him. “What do you mean?”

“Stop pretending.” Teng sighed. “Fuck, it's been rough watching you. I've never seen you like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“What did I just say?” he shot back. “It's me. I know you better than anyone. You're in love with him, aren't you?”

I gaped at Teng. “No. No, I . . .” I trailed off. “Oh, fuck. Is that what's wrong with me?”

“Yup. You've got it bad. So tell me why you're here and not with him.”

“I'm a pirate, Teng. I can't be the consort of a king.”

“He offered to make you his consort?! Shit, Zix! That's a big deal.”

“He was high on sex. He would have come to his senses and changed his mind. No king wants a pirate for a concubine.”

“That's ridiculous. Being a king means you can have anyone. You make the rules. Fuck, Lock mated a Dragon king, and he was an assassin. And a human.”

“Is he not human anymore?”

“Nah. He's still human. Just immortal.”

I shook my head. “That's insane.”

“Yup. Way crazier than a Neraky becoming consort to a Sea Dragon king.”

“I can't,” I whispered. “I need this.” I waved at the open water. “I can't live down there.”

“Yes, you can. You were born down there. It's where you belong,” Teng said gently. “And don't act as if he'd never bring you to the surface. It would be a relationship, not a prison sentence, Zix.”

“If it even lasted,” I muttered.

“So what if it doesn't?” Teng shrugged. “Live it up while you can. Love him while you can. Sometimes, that's all we get, kid. A few moments of love to treasure through eternity.”

“But I'd have to leave you.” I stared at him.

Teng grinned. “I'll always be here. And unlike our Hulfrin enemies, you know how to find me. If you want to come back, I'll welcome you with open arms. That's what family does.”

“Teng,” I whispered. A tear trickled down my cheek.

“Aw, come on. Don't do that. You know you're family.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “But I can't go back to him now. It's so fucked up. I think I fucked up.”

“What happened?”

“He asked me to stay. He . . . said similar things to what you just did. He wanted me.”

“Of course he wants you. So, what's the problem?”

“I said 'wanted' as in past tense. I don't think he wants me anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because I told him no.” I bit my lip. “I told him it wouldn't last. I said I needed adventure. I fucking rejected him.”

“Fuck,” Teng muttered. “I suppose he didn't like that.”

“He said he was offering me something most men would kill for. He asked me to give up my old life and embrace a new one with him.”

“Romantic. Sounds like he loves you too.”

“No.” I shook my head violently. “No, he can't.” But then I saw Vax again, huddled on the bathroom floor, miserable because he'd made me a slave for refusing to become his consort. “No,” I whispered.

“Yes, Zix.” Teng laid his hand on my shoulder. “You should have seen him. Bursting out of the sea to land on the deck in his man body, furious and anxious. His stare wild. All that hair.” He snorted. “All those muscles. And every one of them was dedicated to finding you. King Vaxarion was the most glorious man I'd ever beheld, but he was also desperate. I've never seen a desperate Dragon before, not of land or sea.” He frowned pensively and added, “It was rather terrifying.”

“But that was after only one night together. One night and he was desperate? That doesn't make sense.”

“It must have been a glorious night.”

I swallowed roughly, then said, “It was.” I shook my head. “He asked me to stay with

him.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. Said he was going on a tour of the land kingdoms that border Morilren. He wanted me to go with him.”

“And you said no because of us?”

“That and the fact that he flat-out said he couldn't promise to be true to me.”

“What?” Teng scowled. “That's not the way to win a man.”

“No shit,” I said. “That's also when he told me he has twenty-six bed slaves.”

“Well, he is a Sea Dragon king. All the undersea races toss slaves at the Sea Dragons like flower petals. Willing slaves. And the kings get the pick of the bunch. You can't blame the man for taking what's offered. Besides, it sounds as if you benefited from it.”

“Excuse me?”

“The guy is obviously experienced. It's no wonder you had an incredible night.”

I snorted a laugh and shoved him. “Twenty-six, Teng. And guess what reason he gave for being unable to promise me fidelity.”

“What?”

“That he's a king. He said it as if it explained everything. Sorry, sweetheart, I would be faithful to you, but I'm a king. It's just not possible.”

He snorted. “Well, I mean . . .”

“Teng!”

“No, I understand how you feel. I wouldn't want to be one of many, nor do I want that for you. But I think something has changed since then. He offered to make you his consort, Zix.”

“And he offered to release his bed slaves,” I admitted.

“Wait. What? You just said—”

“That was the first night. He offered to release them this last time,” I cut him off.

“Before I left Shasenai. He said he'd release them and that he'd be with only me. That he could offer me monogamy now.”

“Zix,” Teng huffed. “Why didn't you lead with that?”

“Because it doesn't matter. You know how men are when they want something. We promise whatever we have to. It doesn't mean we'll keep our promises.”

“That's ridiculous. I mean, yes, for some men it's true. But in light of all he's done, I don't think it's fair to say that about King Vaxarion. He followed you, Zix. He saved you when I couldn't. I fucking owe him. But I also saw the truth in his eyes. He's a king with everything, but all he wants is you. I can't believe you didn't see it too. You shouldn't have left him.”

“I had to come back to my family. To my real life.”

“Zix,” Teng paused, then said, “Your loyalty humbles me. That day I found you, when I decided to take you with us, I swore to your dead father that I would raise you

as best I could. Look after you. I know we never spoke about what we are to each other, but I hope you think of me as a father.”

“Teng, of course, I do. You're my family. I have wonderful memories of my first father. He gave me a good childhood and loved me. And I think he'd be grateful to you because you did the same. You're my father too. I have never been more proud than the moment you introduced me as your son.”

“Shit,” Teng muttered. “I should have said something sooner. I just . . . I didn't want you to think I was claiming something I had no right to. But then you came back to us, and I heard how you—” his voice broke.

“Hey. I'm fine. And what happened isn't your fault.”

“Yes, it is,” Teng said. “I chose to go after the Tiger's Claw. As your captain, it's my fault that you were taken. But as your father, I feel doubly responsible.”

“Don't do that to yourself. I'm not a kid anymore, no matter what you call me. I know the risks of living this life.”

“You will always be that skinny kid I found chained to a rock,” Teng said. “I gave you this life because it was all I had to give. But I've always hoped—” He cleared his throat and started again. “I've always hoped you'd find something better. You're not meant to be a pirate, Zixin. You're too good for this.”

“No, I'm not. And there's nothing wrong with being a pirate.” I clutched his hand. “You gave me freedom and adventure. Love and a family. You saved my life but never tried to claim it. Not like . . .” I trailed off.

Teng stared at me. “No. He didn't.”

I nodded.

“Oh, fuck.” Teng shook his head. “That's why you're here. You ran. You escaped him. Shit, kid. I'm shocked that you would break that law. I mean, I get it. But shit! Now, he'll be after—”

“He let me go,” I cut him off.

“What?” Teng gaped at me.

“I think he knew. I didn't tell him, but I—when he saved me, I was chained. He looked after me as I healed, and when I came to, I saw the chains and had a bad reaction.” I grimaced at him. “As I do.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. So, I think he knew. But I was going to leave, and I think that made him desperate. So, he claimed me under the law. Claimed my life.”

“And then?”

“And then I begged him not to. He said it was done. I was shattered, but I accepted it. Then he walked away. Just left me. I found him . . . he was upset. He obviously regretted his actions. I was going to forgive him. Seeing him like that wiped away my hurt. I would have stayed after that. But he was . . . I don't know. Past that, I guess. He shouted at me. Told me to leave. Renounced his claim. Then he told me where to find you. I tried to speak to reason with him, but he yelled at me to get out or he'd collar me. He gave me four minutes to leave the palace.”

“Holy fuck,” Teng whispered.

“Yeah, so now do you understand why I can't go back?”

“Are you fucking crazy?!” Teng shoved my shoulder. “He did it for you! If I wasn't sure about the way he felt before, now I am. He's in love with you, kid. A fucking Sea King. He sent you away instead of hurting you. That's honorable. Admirable.” He smirked. “You know, all the stuff I'm not.”

“I admire you more than any man on this planet, Teng.”

His smirk shifted into a soft smile. “I love you too, Zix. Which is why I'm kicking you off the ship.”

“What?” I gaped at him.

“Go get your shit and leave. Go back to him. Grovel. Do whatever you have to do to gain his forgiveness. Because a love like that doesn't come around every day. That's a once-in-a-lifetime love, kid. And I'm not going to watch you throw it away. Now, go!” He shoved me toward the stairs.

“Teng.”

“Go!”

I launched myself at him and hugged him tightly. “I love you . . . Father.”

Teng shuddered and made a sound that was suspiciously similar to a tearful sniff. Then he shoved me away again, turning his face so I couldn't see it. “Go.”

“All right, all right.” I headed for the stairs. “What the fuck is it with men I love telling me to leave?”

Teng snorted a laugh.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

The crew was confused when I made my goodbyes, but then Teng announced that I had only returned to make sure we were safe and now I was going home to my lover, the King of Morilren, where I'd live in luxury's lap—and the King's—for as long as I could milk it. The crew cheered. There's nothing a pirate loves more than sex and treasure. Combine them and they just about come in their pants.

I shed a few tears on my way to the railing. Everything I owned was packed in a waterproof satchel, and not a very big one at that. I had my blades strapped to my body, so they weren't taking up room in the bag, but other than weapons, my treasures were small. A pirate generally values experiences more than trinkets. Don't get me wrong, we love shiny, expensive things, but that's because we know how much they're worth. We sell them and buy what we really want—good food, strong liquor, nice clothes, fine blades, and sex. I would hopefully get most of those things for free from King Vaxarion.

After one last look at my family, I grinned at Teng, then I dove overboard. I had worn skin-tight shorts and a slim tank top without shoes. My boots were in my bag along with the rest of my clothes. I knew the journey was far, and I didn't want leather or heavy fabric hindering me. Nerakies are fast swimmers, very agile both in and out of the water. But we weren't as fast as Sea Dragons. Where it had only taken hours for that guard to swim me to Vix, it would take me a couple of days to get back.

But I faced the journey with a smile, my hearts lightened by the thought that I was returning to him. Vax. My king. I would make him forgive me. Teng's advice rang through my head, and I knew I would take it. I would do anything to get Vax back. Anything. I might even tell him I loved him.

I put on speed and headed for the center of the Morilren Sea, where I'd find the city of Shasenai and the Sea Dragon King who now ruled my hearts.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

I spent the entire journey thinking about Vax. Going over our last minutes together again and again. I noticed details now that I had missed before. Like the way his hands shook when he claimed my life. The way his eyes flashed with need and fury. He'd been battling his dragon. Did his beast need me too? Was there a separation between them? I just didn't know enough about Sea Dragons to be sure. They'd been hibernating my entire life. Then the Dragon God had been freed, and so had they. But their rule was still new. The seas were still adjusting to their return. And people like me were getting to know them for the first time. Some of us a little more intimately than others.

And then I saw it. Shasenai. It looked even more glorious than it had that first time. A beacon still, but now that beacon was leading me to Vax. I dropped down to the seabed before the city gates with a smile on my face. There were guards on duty there, but they didn't stop me. People of all the sea races went through the ward and entered the city through that gate. All were permitted to pass. If war ever threatened, the gates would be closed, but they wouldn't be as useful as the ward. The very ward that kept water out and air in would condense under the King's will and keep out everything. Nothing would pass through without his permission. It made the position of gate guard rather superfluous. Still, they seemed pleased to do it, holding their chins high and nodding to people as they passed. Even me. But then I didn't look all that piraty in my swimming clothes.

The ward wrung the water from my clothes, so I stopped off to the side of the foot traffic to pull on more layers and get into my boots. Feeling more like myself in my loose pants and vibrant vest, I grinned and sauntered to the sidewalk. Not the street, mind you. Even underwater, there were carriages rolling down the streets. And yes, they were pulled by horses. Don't ask me how they got the poor beasts down there,

but they didn't look all that bothered by their precarious position under billions of tons of water.

I considered hiring a carriage to take me to the palace, but I was enjoying the anticipation too much. And the city.

When Vax had first brought me there, I didn't have the chance to see much of Shasenai, swimming over it as we had. Then he'd kept me sequestered in his apartments. And when I left, I was in a bit of a rush. But now, I could enjoy the sweet and savory smells coming out of bakeries and restaurants. I could take in the stone carvings on the delicate architecture and the flowing clothes of the residents. It was another world down there, with its own style and culture.

But the closer I got to the palace, the more antsy I became. I was there. Vax was near. I had to get to him. I started to walk faster and faster, nearly breaking into a run. Just before I reached the palace, I paused to collect myself.

The guards at the city gate may have been welcoming, but the palace guards were not. As this was a palace, not a castle, there were no fortifications around it, only a golden fence. But when a palace was full of Sea Dragons, a fence was all that was needed to keep out the riffraff. Except for this bit of riffraff. I just sauntered up to the gate, expecting to be allowed in. The Sea Dragon knights took one look at me and crossed their pikes across my path.

“Turn around, Neraky,” one of them said.

“I'm here to see King Vaxarion. I know it sounds crazy, but he'll want to see me. My name is—”

“I said turn around!” the knight growled.

“And I said I want to see the King!” I shouted.

The man jerked back in shock but then narrowed his eyes at me. “Get the fuck out of here before I stick you like a fish.”

“King Vaxarion!” I shouted. “It's Zixin! I've come back, Your Majesty!”

“Who the fuck is this guy?” the other guard muttered.

“Hey, shut your mouth!” the first knight said. “The King isn't seeing anyone right now.”

“He'll see me,” I said and settled into a wide-legged stance. “And I'm not going anywhere until he does.”

“I will spear you.”

“You can try. And that's going to really make your king mad. He generally doesn't like people spearing his consort.”

The knights looked at each other, then burst into laughter.

I grimaced. “Don't believe me? Send for Yavess.”

At the mention of the Steward's name, they both went still.

“How do you know that name?” one of them demanded.

“Yavess!” I shouted. “Yavess, I need your help out here! Yavess!”

I saw the doormen scramble inside and grinned to myself.

“He can't be,” one of them said.

“How does he know Yavess then?”

“Because the last time I entered this palace, it was from above,” I said. “Held in the talon of your king.”

“You're that Neraky?” one of them asked.

“Yup,” I said. I mean, how many Neraky men had Vax brought home that way? It had to be me.

Then an image popped into my head—all those men dressed in barely anything, housed in a room within the King's quarters. His bed slaves. There had been a lot of them. Twenty-six, to be exact.

Shit. What if Vax was on a fuck-bender to get over me? He could, at that very moment, be balls-deep in another Neraky ass. The thought made my cold blood run hot.

“You look like a pirate,” one of the guards said.

Irritated by the mere possibility of Vax fucking another guy, I started to snap at the guard that I looked like a pirate because I was one. But then someone shouted.

“Let him through!” It was Yavess.

“Fuck!” one of the guards said.

“Go on through, my lord,” the other hurried to add, lifting his spear. “Sorry about the misunderstanding.”

But I wasn't looking at him. I was staring at Yavess and his anxious expression. What was I doing? Come to grovel? I didn't want to grovel. I was not a groveler. I may have confidently thrown the word consort in the faces of these two Sea Dragons, but I didn't feel that confidence. I had turned Vax down. I was most definitely not his consort. But I had come all that way to see him, and my luck was about to get me through the gates. I couldn't lose my nerve now. I loved Vax. He was worth groveling for. Fuck, he was worth dying for. I stepped past the guards and headed for Yavess.

Yavess met me halfway across the courtyard. He clutched at my wrist as if he'd sooner break it than let go. "My lord! You've returned! Thank the Dragon Gods! You've returned!"

I blinked. "Uh, I was hoping to speak to the King."

"Oh, you will!" Yavess yanked me toward the palace. "You will indeed."

"What's going on, Yavess? You seem upset."

Yavess shook his head. "I shouldn't have let you leave. But the Gods have smiled upon me. They've sent you back to him. Thank you!"

And he wasn't thanking me. Yavess was looking up when he offered his thanks. What the fuck?

"Yavess!" I jerked him to a halt just inside the palace. "What's going on?"

Yavess collected himself and faced me, though he still didn't release my wrist. "The King. He, uh. You left and he . . ." He looked around at the courtiers who were staring at us. "Come with me, and I'll explain." Yavess jerked on my wrist again, racing down the corridor.

We were getting close to the royal apartments. I recognized the paintings. But before we got to the doors, Yavess pulled me into a sitting room and slammed the door.

Finally releasing my wrist, Yavess spun to face me and said, “He is not himself. The King went into a rage when you left. He tore apart his bedroom, burned his pleasure garden, and now refuses to eat. He won't let anyone up to see him. He even sent all his bed slaves away. The royal apartments are empty of all but him.”

“He sent all of them away?” I grinned.

“Are you fucking listening to me?!” Yavess shrieked. “He burned his garden! He lies among the ashes in his beast body, snapping at any who dare approach, even those who bring him food. I fear for his sanity.” He paused to glare at me. “And it's all because of you!”

“He told me to leave!”

“Why? Why would he do that if he so desperately wants you here?”

I pressed my lips together.

“Something happened,” Yavess concluded. “He felt compelled to send you away, didn't he?”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

“It's fine. Doesn't matter.” He held up his hands. “You are here now. Everything will be fine.” He grabbed my wrist again and flew back into the corridor.

“All right, ease up,” I said.

Yavess did not ease up. He raced down the final corridor, up to the doors of the King's apartments, and shouted, "Open the doors!"

The knights looked at each other, then at Yavess.

"Open them now! Do you not recognize this man? Open the fucking doors!"

The knights opened the doors, and Yavess practically tossed me into Vax's apartments.

I stumbled, righted myself, and looked back at him with wide eyes.

"The garden is at the end of this hallway and to the right," Yavess said. "May the Gods be with you." He nodded at the knights.

The doors shut on my gaping face.

I turned around slowly. There, on my right, was the door to the slave quarters. I had to know. So, I went there first and poked my head in. It was empty. Abandoned. I went inside. Every room was empty, no clothes in the closets. The beds made. I left the slave quarters.

The other rooms didn't matter to me. I left my satchel in the corridor and strode down it, my footsteps and soft breaths the only sounds to be heard. But then I drew near the archway at the end, and I heard it. The whimper of a beast. A pathetic sound that pierced my chest. Fuck, it was all my fault! My hearts ached as I raced through the opening and out to the terrace where the King's pleasure garden once grew.

There he was. My glorious lover in his sea dragon form, curled up on a pile of ashes. Everything around him blackened. The color brought his iridescence to life, making him shine with deep blue, green, and purple. Like a priceless jewel. So beautiful. And

yet his head drooped over his forepaws, eyes closed, and his chest rose and fell raggedly.

“Vax!” I cried and rushed forward.

Those huge eyes blinked open and focused on me. For a moment, joy shifted over his dragon face, his whiskers lifting in delight. But then something chased the joy away, turning it into a glare.

“What are you doing here, Zixin?” Vaxarion's sexy voice rolled out of the beast.

“I've come back for you. I don't want to be without you, Vax,” I said. “Please, forgive me for leaving.”

Another twitch of joy, but then fury entered his eyes. “I would have given you everything.”

Would have. Oh, fuck.

“I know,” I said. Then I grimaced. “No, I didn't know. I didn't know anything about us. I was confused. I thought your desire would wane. I thought it wasn't possible that you could want me for more than a little while. I didn't understand how powerful what we have is. But I feel it now. You've haunted me.”

“What about the adventure you crave, pirate?”

“You are the greatest adventure of my life.”

A soft sound escaped him, but then he turned away and lowered his head to face the city. “You're too late. I don't want you anymore.”

“I don't believe that.”

Suddenly, King Vaxarion rose to his feet and loomed over me. Curling his head down, he shouted, “I don't care what you believe, you perfidious bastard.”

“Perfidious? Damn. That's a big word.”

“It means treacherous. False. Disloyal.”

“Yeah, I got the gist of it,” I muttered.

“Get out!”

I held up my hands and backed out of the garden. Not that I'd give up that easily. I just sensed that I shouldn't push him. He knew I was back, and I had made my speech. Now, Vax needed time to think it over. I'd give him all the time he wanted.

But I wasn't going anywhere.

I strode down the corridor, a plan forming. One that would cost me dearly.

“He's worth it,” I said and headed for the slave quarters.

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I got what I needed and headed up to the King's bedchamber. Up the spiraling staircase I went, then stopped short on the threshold.

“Holy fuck,” I whispered.

Yavess had mentioned this, but I thought he had exaggerated. Even after seeing the garden, I didn't expect this. The beautiful room was destroyed. Every piece of furniture had been smashed to bits—coral chunks, pearls, and jewels littering the marble floor. The mattress was the only thing that survived, but I suspected it was only because it was covered in a pile of coral branches that used to form a canopy above it. Even the floor hadn't gone unscathed. There were broad cracks where impacts had occurred.

Was all this for me?

I should have been horrified, but I wasn't. Quite the opposite. I was thrilled to see the destruction. It meant Vaxarion cared about me. He wanted me so much that he'd gone savage when I left. All those beautiful things destroyed. For me. I felt all warm and tingly just staring at the mess.

But I couldn't leave it as it was.

I left the items I'd brought on the floor and hurried back downstairs. At the end of the corridor, I yanked open one of the doors, startling the guards.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just need some cleaning supplies.”

“Cleaning supplies?” One of them scowled at me as if he didn't know what the words meant.

“Yeah, you know—a broom, dustpan, bags for trash, cleaning fluid, stuff like that.”

“I know what cleaning supplies are.” The Sea Dragon rolled his eyes. “I don't know why you'd need them.”

“Uh, to clean. His Majesty's bedroom is wrecked.”

“He allowed you in it?” The other guard gaped at me.

“He's in the garden.” I shrugged.

They looked at each other, then back at me.

“We can have some servants come in to clean.”

“No, I want to do it. Just get the stuff, please.” I shut the door before they could argue. I didn't have time for that shit. Then I went back to the slave quarters to wait.

Why wait there? It was the closest room to the main doors, and I was also curious. I'd done only a cursory inspection before. Something inside me itched to see it all. So, I strode through the apartments, frowning at the amount of space delegated to Vaxarion's bed slaves. There were over forty bedrooms even though he only had twenty-six slaves. I guess he needed space to add to his collection.

In addition to the bedrooms, there were public spaces, including a bathing and swimming area with a large pool of seawater, little bubbling pools of warm water, and showers around the edges. There wasn't a kitchen, but there was a huge wardrobe that I assumed the slaves shared. There were lines of shimmering loincloths in several

sizes, transparent tunics, glittering pants, and enough golden accessories to make me wealthy beyond my dreams. And this was for his slaves. His fucking slaves!

The really fun room was the one with the, uh, sexual aids. It wasn't enough for His Majesty to have twenty-six men ready to service his every desire. Oh, no. They also had to get creative to keep his interest. Shelves stood in lines across the space, reminding me of Klen's bookstore. They were neatly stocked with restraints, little metal balls on chains, leather devices, and more. There were dildos that felt like real dicks, embedded with magic to thrust on their own (the first one I touched scared the fuck out of me). I found clamps of all sizes that glowed and buzzed. And then there were all manner of things to keep legs stretched apart, part ass cheeks, and hold mouths open for the King's pleasure.

I found a little basket and went shopping, humming happily to myself.

“Oh, my.” I held up an item that resembled a tongue, and it started twirling. “Yes, you're coming with me.” I stuck it in the basket.

Then a knock echoed in through the hall.

I raced back to the main entrance with my basket and threw one of the doors open. Outside, a couple of Kaikeyo women stood beyond the guards, holding the things I'd requested. Their eyes widened on the basket I held, the tentacles around their chins curling up.

I put down the basket and reached for the broom. “Thanks.”

The women handed everything over, their gray skin taking on a more pink hue. They murmured something, but I didn't hear them.

“Hey, could you have some food delivered in like two hours?” I asked the guards.

“Whatever His Majesty likes.”

“He won't eat,” one of the guards said.

“If he doesn't, I will. But I'm pretty sure I can get him to eat.”

“Oh.” One guard looked at the other, then said, “All right.

“Thanks.” I nodded at the Kaikeyo. “Thank you, ladies.” Then I shut the door.

Getting everything upstairs was a bit of a juggling act. I ended up slinging the baskets of sex stuff and cleaning stuff on the broom, then carried that over my shoulder. That would have been fine, but I had to navigate that damn spiraling stairwell. At least it was a wide stairwell.

Finally, I got to the top floor of the King's tower and went to work. There was a lot of clearing up to be done before the cleaning, and I didn't want to cart things up and down the stairs. Nor did I want to throw things down the stairs. They might damage something. So I took the broken pieces of furniture to the balcony and considered tossing them over the railing. Peering down, I saw the garden of ash directly below me, Vax still curled up at the far end. He wasn't as peaceful as when I first found him. Now, he was making angry sounds and shifting constantly. In the ten seconds I watched him, he lifted his head and peered over the railing four times.

Looking for me? Here I am, baby.

I grinned to myself and tossed two giant pieces of coral over the railing. They fell onto the charred ground, making a loud thud and sending up a cloud of ash. Vaxarion's head shot up, but I was gone before it started to turn. I had to fetch more pieces, and I didn't want him to know I'd been watching him.

By my fourth trip to the balcony, Vax was sitting up and watching me. He didn't say a word, just watched. At last, I had the room cleared of the largest bits and could move onto sweeping up the dust. But before I started on that, I changed my clothes. Off came everything, including my shoes. I put them neatly aside and pulled on the clothes I'd found in the slave quarters. If you could call them clothes.

I'd chosen a purple loincloth to go with my hair. It was actually very comfortable since I'd gone with the all-cloth version instead of the one with chains. On top of that, I pulled on a transparent tunic that shimmered with pale opalescence just like the scales on my hands and feet. The tunic stopped just before my waist, leaving the loincloth free to display the bulge it cradled. Then I undid my hair, letting it flow around my shoulders as Vax preferred. I didn't bother with accessories. This was enough for me. Although there was one piece that I intended to put on later. If necessary.

I hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

Properly dressed, I began to sweep. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the balcony. Sure enough, after a few minutes, a sea dragon head appeared over the railing, one enormous eye peering at me. I ignored him—although I barely held back my grin—and finished sweeping. When that was done, there wasn't a lot left to do except tidy the bed. Well, the mattress. The frame was gone. It was just the mattress on the floor, but all the linens and pillows were intact. I took my time changing the sheets, making sure to bend over a lot, then I got on all-fours to smooth the silk.

A soft whimper came from the balcony.

I bit my lip. Soon. Anytime now.

Movement out of the corner of my eye. Shimmers of shapeshifting. And then Vaxarion appeared, walking across the nearly empty room in all his naked glory. Still

on my hands and knees, I turned my head to watch him stalk over to me, staring at him through the fall of my hair. His hair clung to his body, concealing too much for my taste. But it couldn't hide the long, thick piece of flesh that betrayed his interest.

“What are you doing?” Vaxarion demanded, his voice rough despite the evidence of his desire. He cleared his throat and added, “I told you to leave.”

“I'm not leaving, Your Majesty.” I got up and went to him.

He jerked to a stop, keeping his distance. “I don't want you here, Zixin. Go back to your ship and your precious pirate's life.”

Immediately, I dropped to my knees. “Forgive me for saying that. Please, Your Majesty. I didn't understand what we had. And I had to go back to them. They're my family. I needed to let them know I was alive, and I wanted their blessing before I gave them up.”

“Gave them up?”

I nodded. “For you. I've come to accept your offer.”

For a second, Vaxarion's expression went joyous, his eyes glittering with emotion, but then he shut that down and glared at me. “The offer no longer stands. I renounced my claim on you, remember?”

“That claim wasn't a part of your original offer.” I took a deep breath and confessed. “You scared me when you tried to make me a slave. I think you know that. Even though I never told you, I think you understand how much slavery terrifies me. Especially the chains.”

“I saw your reaction to the chain on your ankle,” he said stiffly. “And then you said

your captain saved you. You wouldn't tell me from what, but I assumed it had something to do with being restrained.”

I had to trust him if this was going to work. And I did trust him. I could do this. I could talk about the past with him.

Swallowing my anxiety, I said, “I was taken as a child.”

“Taken by who?” Vax asked.

“By a group of rebel Gashi. I was ten. They collared me, chained me, and made me do work that was beyond my little body. When I failed to perform as well as an adult, I was beaten. I was beaten a lot the first year, but I got stronger, and the beating lessened. Still, it wasn't an easy existence. Every night, I listened to them rape the older slaves. I knew it would be my turn one day.”

“Zix,” Vax whispered in horror.

I shook my head. “No. I was never raped. Thank the Gods. I was their slave until I turned fourteen. That's when Teng and some of the crew happened upon us. They killed the Gashi and freed me along with the other slaves. But I had nowhere to go. The Gashi had killed my family when they took me. So Teng offered me a new family. A new life. He raised me. He's like a father to me.”

Vaxarion's throat worked roughly. He stared at me, his expression like stone. Finally, he said, “The fucking Gashi are lucky they're already dead.”

Hope sparked in my chest. “Why?” I whispered and stepped forward. “Would you have killed them for me, Your Majesty?”

“Of course,” he growled. Then his stare softened, and he reached out to cup my

cheek. He sighed and said, “My Zixin.”

“Vax,” I whispered.

The Sea King suddenly jerked away. “No! I knew this wasn't a life for me! I knew focusing on one man was idiocy.” He looked me over scornfully. “And still, I tried. I would have given you everything.” He leaned forward to snarl, “And you threw it in my face!”

“I'm sorry.”

“Not good enough.” He glanced around. “Thanks for the cleaning service. I can start fresh now. I think I'll find someone to fuck in the bed you made. Someone who will give me the proper respect and adoration that I deserve.”

“Vax, please! Let me make it up to you. Let me prove to you that I'm here to stay. My loyalty was with my family, but I'll give it to you now. Even if it means staying under the sea forever.”

Vaxarion blinked. Swallowed. Started to reach for me. Then he dropped his hand. “No. No, I can't do this. I'm not meant for this. I loved my life before I met you. I loved the freedom in it. I fucked whoever I wanted whenever I wanted. No ties. None of this emotional shit.” He shook his head. “Leave, Zixin. And don't come back this time.”

I walked away, but not to leave. Instead, I went to the basket of sex stuff and lifted the thing perched on top. Trembling, I went back to him and sank to my knees.

“What are you doing?” his voice was a mere breath of air.

I held up the slave collar with both hands—an offering. “I give myself into your

keeping, King Vaxarion of Morilren. Without a term set. I am your willing slave for as long as you want me.”

I kept my head lowered and my hands up. Waiting. Hoping he'd accept me. The Sea King didn't make a sound. I resisted the temptation to glance up at him. I'd wait forever on my knees if I had to. He was worth it. I knew that now.

Finally, I heard the rough exhale of his breath. Vaxarion snatched the collar from my hands and growled, “Now, you want to be my slave? Very well, Zixin. I accept your service. Lift your hair.”

I lifted my hair out of the way but kept my stare down. Slaves don't meet their master's eyes. When Vax fastened the golden collar around my neck, my will shook. My whole body shook. I fought back images of the Gashi collaring me. Chaining me. This wasn't them. This was Vax. He wouldn't abuse me. He would care for me. I was safe with him. I kept repeating those things in my mind until the trembling stopped and the screams sank back into my chest.

“Look at me,” Vax said gently.

I lifted my stare to his face.

The Sea King cupped my cheek. “I will never hurt you, Zixin. My very acceptance of your offer is a vow of that. You are mine now. I will protect you.”

“Thank you,” I said. Then, shoving the word free of the pain that still lingered inside me, I added, “Master.”

Vaxarion's expression shivered. “You want to prove yourself to me, Zixin? Go on then. Do it.”

I got to my feet and went to the basket. Vax watched me avidly as I emptied the selection of sexual devices and aids onto the floor at the foot of the bed. A large bottle of hress nectar was the last to emerge. Then I put the basket aside and knelt on the bed.

“What is Your Majesty's desire?” I asked, lowering my stare again.

A shiver ran through me as Vax strode up to inspect the items. With enormous shock, I realized that the horror of slavery had vanished under the excitement of being with him again. My cock swelled and pushed at the loincloth.

“I see you haven't brought me a cock cage,” Vax noted.

Shocked again, I forgot my place and looked up at him. “A what?”

Vaxarion chuckled. “You'll find out soon enough. For now, remove your loincloth, but leave the shirt on. I like it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I untied my loincloth eagerly, my dick bursting free, just as eager. Yeah, I was back to calling him Your Majesty. Master was a hard word to say, and I was hoping he wouldn't make me use it often.

Vax grunted in approval. “Get on your hands and knees.”

Breath coming faster, I got on the mattress and went into position.

“Spread your ass for me.”

With a shudder, I bent forward, putting my face in the mattress, and reached back to pull my ass cheeks apart. Cool air hit my entrance.

“That's a good slave,” Vax said as he knelt behind me.

I waited. Heard the glug of nectar being poured. Then I felt it coat my hole.

I waited again. At last, I felt him prod me. I sighed and closed my eyes in pleasure.

“You may release your ass now,” he said.

I let go and pushed myself back up onto my hands, bracing myself for his virile thrusts. But then he went deeper and it didn't feel right. That wasn't Vaxarion's cock. He was longer and a touch thicker.

I looked over my shoulder at Vax. He had the dildo in his hand—the fleshy, realistic one. But my ass knew its true master.

Vax lifted a brow at me.

I jerked my head forward.

Once the thing was wedged inside me, Vax let go of it, and it fucked me on its own, magic fueling the thrusting. The mattress shifted as he got up again, and I peeked beneath my arm to see him pick up another item. I lifted my head before he stood up and came around to my front. I kept my stare lowered, but I knew he watched me. It didn't matter that it wasn't his flesh in my channel. His gaze on me was enough to spark my lust, and I couldn't hold back my moan.

Then the gleam of metal caught my eyes. Vax was holding one of the devices—the jaw spreader. My breath caught as he knelt before me. He raised the thing. Obediently, I opened my mouth. At my rear, the dildo thrust on, tirelessly keeping its steady pace. I lowered my eyes to his taut belly. The hard muscles rippled as Vax bent forward, slipping the leather-coated metal into my mouth. He fastened it around

my head, careful not to catch my hair in it, then tightened it until my jaw stretched open even further.

Then Vax sprawled back on the pillows and went back to enjoying the show.

Saliva gathered in my mouth, but it was hard to swallow. Some dripped down my chin. Vaxarion licked his lips and spread his legs around me, putting his magnificent cock on display, right at the level of my down-turned eyes. I would have licked my lips too if I could have. Instead, I just moaned. The slick sounds of that dildo entering me blended with the Sea King's sighs and sent shivers down my spine.

“Suck me,” Vax said.

Crawling forward awkwardly, I panted and reached for his shaft.

“No! No hands.”

I dropped my hand and sought his shaft with my stretched mouth. I must have looked ridiculous, but I didn't care. If this was how he wanted me, so be it. And it certainly seemed to please him. Vax laid back and watched me struggle to get his cock in my mouth, not helping me at all. I tasted the sweet nectar on him and tongued him, needing more. His flesh filled my mouth, but I couldn't tighten my lips around it. So frustrating!

Casually, Vax reached around my head and adjusted the device until it my jaw closed into the perfect fit. Then he laid back again.

I kept my stare down as I bobbed over him, but I saw his belly tighten, felt his thighs close around me, and I knew he was enjoying it. That increased my enjoyment, and I started to shudder, reaching for release.

The dildo stopped pumping.

I looked up at Vax as it slid out of me using a ribbon of water.

“Keep sucking my cock, slave,” he said viciously. But I heard the undercurrent in his voice. He was softening. How long would he last?

At this rate, he'd be mine in a few hours.

Almost as if he could hear my thoughts, the Sea King growled and rose to his knees, his pelvis thrusting me back. I choked on his flesh, and he withdrew, but only for a moment. Then Vax's hands gripped my head, and he started face-fucking me like a land animal, grunting and panting.

Should I have been scared? Upset? I wasn't. Instead, I was delirious with joy. My eyes rolled back in pleasure as he took me. To feel that passion from him again was ironically a type of freedom for me. It was as if I'd been wrapped in wool until that moment, everything stifled without Vax. But now, back in his bed, with his flesh joining us, the wool fell away, and I could feel again. I could feel everything. See everything clearly. Taste it all. Even as I gagged, I pushed my tongue on him, needing more. I wanted him even deeper.

A click came, and the clamp fell away as Vax pulled free of me. I whimpered and licked my lips.

“Please,” I groaned.

“Please what?”

I looked up to find his stare wild and shining. “Please, fuck me. In any way you want. Just take me.”

Snarling, Vax shot to his feet and left the bed. I hung my head, hope crashing. Was he too furious to forgive me? Was I doing this for nothing? Would he grow tired of me now that I belonged to him? I held back the sobs that rose in my chest. To debase myself like this for nothing would crush me.

But then I felt him crash onto his knees behind me. Rough hands spread my ass and a real cock pressed into me. A joyous cry left my lips as Vax slid home, filling my channel as no fake shaft could. He went deep with the first thrust, his passage eased by that toy. Still, he stretched me. Went deeper.

“Vax!” I cried out, my back arching.

“Put your head down!” Vaxarion commanded. “And get your ass in the air.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I groaned and lowered my head. My ass shifted up, giving him deeper access, and Vax made use of it. “Thank you. Oh, fuck. Thank you.”

“Shut up!” Vax growled. “You want to be treated like a slave? Fine. That's what you'll get, Zixin!”

And then the Sea King was beyond words. His hands held my hips in a vise and his pelvis slapped my ass with every thrust. It was sheer bliss. My muscles clenched again. Getting ready.

“No!” Vaxarion said and grabbed my cock, squeezing the head. “Don't you dare come. You're not worthy of coming. Do you fucking understand me?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I gasped. Using all of my willpower, I pushed down my climax, even as he sped up, his breath coming as fast as his thrusts.

With a victorious cry, the Sea King erupted inside me, filling me with three heavy

spurts. At last, he settled, his grip loosening and his cock slipping free. But before I could lift my head, something replaced him. Something cold, like metal.

The plug. He had corked me like a bottle. I would have laughed if I hadn't still been in need.

With a pleased smack on my ass, Vax moved aside and sprawled back on the pillows. "Come here, Zix."

I looked up hopefully. The King had one arm outstretched. I crawled in against him and hesitantly laid my head on his chest. He sighed, pulled me in against him, and kissed the top of my head.

Vax started to speak, but then someone called up the stairs, "Your dinner, Your Majesty! May I bring it up?"

"No!" Vaxarion roared as he bolted up, bouncing me off him. "Leave it there!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!" the man's voice trembled. Then came the sound of running feet.

"I'll get it," I offered.

"No, you wait here." Vaxarion got up and strode across the room, giving me the most spectacular view of his ass.

I sighed and nestled into his pillow, breathing in his salty, spicy male scent. I was home. I knew it in my bones. Coming back had been the right thing to do. And even if Vax kept me as a slave for the rest of my existence, I wouldn't regret it. Because I could only be happy when he was in my life. Without him, I was . . .

My thoughts trailed away as I saw Vax come striding powerfully through the doorway. He held the dinner tray, laden with platters heaped with food. But he also had something hanging from a finger.

Vax set the tray down on the bed and sat beside it. “Come here, Zix.”

Swallowing my apprehension, I crawled over to him. He lifted the strange item. It was a delicate thing made of gold spacers and rings. I frowned at it, unable to process what it was. Then Vax slid the golden cage over my cock.

Luckily, the length of his absence had softened my erection. If I'd still be hard, it would have been impossible for me to fit in that thing. But I think Vax would have found a way to get it on. His expression was grim when he slid my balls through the ring at the base and locked it in place. Literally put a tiny lock on it. That's when I noticed the key that hung around his neck.

What the actual fuck?

But I didn't protest. Didn't make a single sound as my sex was caged for the King's amusement. With that cage around me, I wouldn't be able to get an erection. Or if I did, it would hurt. As annoying as that was, I understood what Vax was doing. I had betrayed him, and it was bad enough that he was taking pleasure from me. To give me pleasure in return was too far.

Confirming my suspicions, Vax said, “You will only come when I allow it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Now, you may feed me. I find that I'm starving.” With a feral grin, Vax sprawled back against the bed pillows and waited.

I brought the tray of food to him, setting it beside him. When I started to sit down, he smacked my thigh.

“Don't you know how a slave sits in his master's presence?” Vax growled. “Kneel. And make sure your cock is properly displayed.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I said and knelt, adjusting my cock and balls to sit on my thighs.

Vax stared at my sex, then reached out to tap the cage. “Very pretty.”

“What would you like to sample first?” I asked.

Vax grinned, his gaze still on my cock, then lifted his stare to meet my eyes. “I'll leave it up to you. Just be sure to select the best bites for me.”

I cut the grilled fish and offered him a morsel. Vaxarion's lips closed over it, then he pulled back, sensually sliding his prize from the fork. I got a forkful of sea asparagus next. He ate that in just as erotic a manner. Within minutes, my cock ached, pushing at the cage. Hands trembling, I lifted the fork again, but couldn't hold back my moan.

Vax grinned before snatching the bite. “Comfy?”

“Not in the least.”

“Good.” He tapped my cage again. “Keep going.”

I somehow managed to finish feeding him. By the end of the meal, both my cock and stomach ached, the latter rumbling with hunger.

“Hungry, slave?” Vax asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Vax pushed the tray aside, and I sadly watched it go, taking the leftover food with it. Then I looked back at the Sea King. He spread his legs, and I finally allowed myself to look at his sex. I couldn't while feeding him. It was hard enough to watch him lick and suck and moan his way through the meal. If I had looked at his cock, I would have been in ten times as much pain.

But now I did.

It was gloriously erect, standing straight up with a glossy bead of moisture welling atop it. My mouth watered. Then Vaxarion's hand slid between his pectorals and down his belly. Slowly. He gripped the base of his cock and squeezed. The dewdrop on his tip grew.

“Oh, fuck,” I panted.

“If you're hungry, I will feed you,” he said. “But first, you will have me as an appetizer. Get to work, slave. And pray that I find your ministrations pleasing. If I don't, cum is all you'll have to fill your belly.”

Oh, dear Gods, why does that excite me? I'm a bad, bad pirate boy who needs a good spanking. Oh, fuck. Maybe he'll spank me if I disobey him. Should I dare it?

I reached over and scooped some whipped cream off what was left of the King's dessert and topped his cock with it. It was a minor disobedience. I wanted to start small. And I even paused a moment to see if he'd stop me. But all Vax did was lift a brow at me as if to ask if I was sure I wanted to proceed.

Fuck, yes, I was sure.

I crawled between the King's legs and went down on him, gobbling up the cream and his cock. So sweet. So hard. The salt of him went well with the cream. I groaned and got comfortable, leaning over his thigh to angle down on him. And Vax loved every second. He groaned and growled and grabbed my hair. But then I think he realized he was being too lenient with me.

That's when Vax pushed me down, choking me on his cock. I relaxed my throat and took him deeper.

“Well done,” Vax said. “But don't think I didn't notice how you got around my command to have me before your meal. You will pay for that.”

I shivered, anticipating the punishment.

Vax chuckled. “Oh, you think you'll enjoy it, do you? We'll see about that.” And then he lost his words to deep groaning.

The King's hips lifted, and he held my head pressed down as he emptied himself into me. I drank him greedily, shuddering as my cock pressed painfully against the cage, then shrank back. No, I wasn't into pain with my sex.

When Vax finished coming, it seemed as if he'd forgotten about punishing me. Sated, he laid back and waved his hand at the tray. “Eat.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I said and rushed to the food.

“Take it to the floor, slave.”

I grunted and shifted off the mattress, taking the tray with me. With the mattress being on the floor, it wasn't much of a journey. But there was a divide between Vax and me suddenly. There, sitting cross-legged on the polished coral and bent over my

food, I was a pet while he, sprawled on his comfy bed, was the master. His stare added to that unspoken declaration.

Fine with me.

I stuffed myself, then pushed away the tray and laid down. Curled on my side toward Vax, I watched him watch me. He had softened during sex, but now the coldness was returning to his eyes. Fuck.

He rolled over and went to sleep. To sleep!

I lay there a while, listening to Vaxarion's even breathing. Then, when I was sure he was asleep, I slipped a pillow and blanket from the bed and laid back down on the floor. Staring up at the ceiling, I processed my day. This wasn't where I wanted to be with Vax, but I was confident that he'd eventually forgive me. Then we could move on. And maybe we'd have a little fun on the way to forgiveness.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

I woke up in the middle of the night to movement. As in, someone was moving me. Moaning sleepily, I opened my eyes. Vax had me in his arms. He shifted me onto the bed beside him.

“Go back to sleep,” Vax said.

My eyelids fluttered shut again with a sigh. But I didn't go back to sleep. I couldn't. Not with him touching me. And oh, Gods, was he touching me.

Vax tenderly trailed his hands over my face, smoothing back my hair before tracing my eyebrows. Then he was fascinated by my cheekbones. My jaw. My lips. I knew if I opened my eyes he'd stop, so I kept them closed and pretended to be asleep. I let my breathing go deep and even. My limbs loose.

“My Zixin,” the King murmured, then his fingertips were replaced by the brush of his lips. “Zix.”

Vaxarion's head lifted, but he didn't stop touching me. He must have been sitting up, kneeling beside me, because his adoring hands swept down my neck and over my shoulders. They outlined my pectorals but didn't flick my nipples. No, this wasn't about sexual pleasure. It was deeper than that. More intense. I knew it because he touched me as I longed to touch him. Reacquainting himself with my body. No. Reclaiming it.

His deep sighs made my chest ache. I wanted to go into his arms. To hold him and touch him in the same adoring way. But I remained still, my chest rising and falling steadily. I had no idea I possessed such strong willpower. But for him, to keep him

touching me like that, my will was as strong as the Gods.

His hands branched out, tracing the line of my arms. Trailing over my fingertips. He cataloged every inch. Every scale. Down to the tips of my nails. Inward he went. Over my belly. He dipped into my navel, then brushed the bones of my pelvis. After outlining my hips, the King wound his fingers through my nether-curls.

My cock, a far worse actor than me, twitched to have him so near. The King's hand moved away, and I nearly groaned. With that cage around me, I wasn't sure if my groan was out of frustration or relief. But then Vax was back to stroking me, and I didn't care. I wanted this far more than sex. It almost felt like a ritual. He worshiped me with his broad palms, skimming them over my thighs. The way he cupped my knees, then trailed his fingers down my shins became something sacred. It awakened my soul, drawing it to the surface to follow Vaxarion's path. My body tingled until I felt both detached and irrevocably bound. I floated, but a tether held me to him.

Interspersed with those holy touches came the brush of lips and cheeks. The Sea King nuzzled me like a cat scent-marking its owner. By the time he got to my feet, I was completely his. Scent-marked, claimed, branded, whatever you want to call it. There wasn't a single doubt left in my mind that we were meant to be. Whatever he demanded of me, I would do it. Because I knew how much I meant to him now. And I wasn't giving this up. Not for anything or anyone. Not even Vaxarion himself.

Finally satisfied, Vax snuggled in against me and pulled me into his arms. Pressed my head to his heart. I pretended to nestle closer in my sleep, and this won me a rumble of pleasure that vibrated through his chest. He covered us with a blanket and curled around me, his arms both a shield and a cage. But I found that I craved the Sea Dragon King's cage.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

A foot nudged me awake. “Get up, slave!”

I groaned and stretched out the kinks I'd gotten from sleeping on the floor. Wait. Why was I on the floor? Vax had carried me to bed, hadn't he? My brain was fuzzy at first, but then it cleared, and I was certain. He had definitely carried me to bed in the middle of the night and touched every inch of me. Well, nearly every inch. He hadn't touched my sex, but that made it even better. Didn't it? I looked up at Vax. He was standing over me, still nude, his arms crossed, wearing a cold, almost cruel expression. I hurried to my feet.

Maybe his secret touch session hadn't included sexy stuff because he needed to keep it a secret from me. Because he wasn't ready to be nice to me. All right. Fair enough. But it wasn't a secret. I knew what he had done. I would treasure that memory forever and it would give me the strength to get through whatever torment he had planned. Yep. I'd face them with a smile. Starting now.

“Good morning, Vax,” I said and grinned. “I had the strangest dream that you picked me up and carried me to bed in the middle of the night.”

“What did you call me?” the King snarled.

“I mean, Your Majesty.”

He narrowed his eyes at me.

Oh, he was feeling particularly vulnerable today. Vax may think I was unaware of what he'd done, but that didn't matter. He still knew what he'd done, and that was

enough to annoy him. My teasing him about carrying me to bed—and then putting me back on the floor—didn't help. His annoyance would find its release soon. On me.

So be it.

I tried again, using the hated word that I knew he wanted to hear. The only word that would assuage his anger at himself and me. “Good morning, master.”

Vax grunted and turned toward the door. “Come!”

I followed him downstairs to the landing below. The one with the two doors side by side. Vax opened the one on the right and went into the bathroom. Over the tidal pool marble we went, passing a shower large enough for ten and a length of pale blue counter with two white sinks. We stopped before an enormous bathtub set into the curve of the wall. A window curved with the wall, presenting a lovely view of the city and a horrid view of the blackened garden.

Vax plopped into a white coral chair beside the tub and waved at it. “Run me a bath and make sure the water is the perfect temperature.”

I didn't dare ask him what temperature that was. I just hurried to the golden faucets and turned them on. “Would you like me to add anything to the water, Your Majesty?”

“No,” he said and got up.

He let the title slide, and I breathed a sigh of relief. If I had to keep calling him master, it was going to sour things for me.

I watched Vax head to a door at the back of the room. He opened it and revealed a small room with a toilet. As he shut himself inside, I realized that I needed that room

too. Especially with the water running. By the time Vax emerged, I was pressing my legs together around the metal of the cage.

“May I use the toilet, Your Majesty?” I asked.

“Yes. Go ahead.” He waved toward the door.

“Uh. Could you, uh, release me?” I waved at my cock.

“The cage is formed so that you may urinate through it.”

I stared down at it, then at him. “Please, Your Majesty. It hurts.”

“No! Now go relieve yourself before I change my mind and make you hold your water.”

Grimacing, I went to the toilet room. He was right. I was able to pee through the cage. It didn't even get on the metal. But I was still annoyed that he kept it on me. How long would he make me wear the damn thing?

I trudged out, more comfortable than before but dreading the discomfort to come. Because while I'd been busy, the Sea King had submerged himself in the tub. With his head leaning back on the rim, his shimmering hair spread over the marble encapsulating the bathtub and onto the floor. His chest was wet, nipples like glossy candies begging to be sucked, and with the water free of soap, I could see past the surface to his tight belly and flaccid cock. His lean, long legs stretched out across the bottom of the deep blue marble basin, his skin seeming to glow against the darkness.

Movement caught my eye—the twitch of his cock. My stare shot back to it, eyes widening as the length grew and thickened. Had I ever been so fascinated with the hardening of a cock before? I couldn't remember. I only knew that I was obsessed

with this one. Even that basic response seemed to be divine.

The water kept rushing into the tub, going higher and higher. It reached Vaxarion's nipples before he asked, "Are you going to just stand there and gawk at me or turn off the faucets?"

"Sorry, Your Majesty!" I hurried to the faucets and turned them off. "Do you want me to bathe you?"

"Later. First, get in here and give me my morning orgasm."

"Your what?"

"I want you to suck my dick, slave," Vax growled. "Do it. Now!"

"Oh! Yes, Your Majesty!" I practically dove into the tub, groaning when the heat of the water sank into my tight muscles.

The basin was so deep and wide that it was more like a pool than a bathtub. Which made it perfect for me to give an underwater blow job. As I sank below the surface, I grinned to myself. This was why Vax didn't want me to add anything to the water and why he didn't want me to bathe him yet. With the water pure, I could breathe it. I could stay submerged until he came.

The water closed over me and my gills opened, drawing it in. It comforted me even though it was almost too warm to breathe. I sighed, drawing it deeper, and settled between Vaxarion's legs. There, underwater, with him, I was home. The thought eased me even more, and I happily nuzzled his shaft.

With my body floating out behind me, framed by his, I anchored myself with a hand on his hip and wrapped the other around the base of his cock. The separation of air

and water gave me the confidence I needed to thoroughly enjoy him. I took my time kissing his shaft, then licking it before I finally sucked the length into my mouth. Up and down I went, fighting the weightlessness of the water as the hollow sounds of Vaxarion's groans filtered down to me. I loved the way even the curls around his cock shimmered with jewel tones. And how he filled my mouth. And how he tasted. And how his sacs tightened. I was in sheer ecstasy except for one thing—that fucking cage!

But I kept going, kept working Vax until he locked up against me—hips arched up and both hands on my head to hold me to him. With a deep, primal grunt, he filled my mouth, and I eagerly swallowed. Only then did the King release me. I spread my hands on his belly and stayed there a moment, pressing my cheek against his thigh. I craved his affection. Especially after the way he'd touched me the night before. But Vax wasn't ready. He grabbed me by the ring on my collar and pulled me up.

I got to my knees between his legs and wiped the water from my face. “Would you like me to bathe you now, Your Majesty?”

“Yes.” He waved at a line of bottles set on the tub's ledge.

The crystal decanters held liquid soap that could be used for the body and hair, then there was a jar with thicker cream to add silkiness to the hair after the cleansing. I opened the decanters and smelled them, finally selecting the one that smelled like orange blossoms.

“Is this one all right?”

He nodded.

After snatching a cloth from the pile beside the decanters, I wet it and poured soap over it. Straddling the Sea King, I rubbed the soapy cloth over his chest, taking it in

slow circles from one side to the other before heading down to his stomach. Vax leaned back, propping his arms on the marble ledge around the tub, and stared at me. I lowered my gaze and focused on the job.

But as time passed, and I moved from one hard group of muscles to another, it became increasingly difficult to focus on the act of bathing instead of what I was bathing. Vaxarion's smooth skin. The curve of his biceps. The corded muscles of his thighs. I lifted his left leg, propped it on my shoulder, and washed the long length, then repeated the process to his right leg. After laying them back in the water and rubbing them free of soap, I finally moved inward and went for the treasure.

Vax continued to watch me, his expression unreadable.

“Could you turn around, please?” I asked.

Vax rolled over and folded his arms on the rim. His hair trailed into the water, so I gathered it up and set it on the ledge, out of the way. Then I washed his shoulders. His waist. Oh, fuck, his ass. I couldn't help slipping a finger between his firm cheeks and prodding his tight hole.

Vax sighed.

That got my attention.

I pushed harder. My finger breached the ring. He was hot and soft inside, but that outer ring squeezed me. I slid deeper, then pumped.

“I don't like the thrusting,” Vax said. “Massage me there instead.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I said breathlessly.

I hooked my finger and rubbed at him in widening circles.

“No. Not good enough.” Vax got to his feet, water sluicing from his body and raining down on me. He set one foot on the rim of the tub and looked at me over his shoulder. “Tongue me, slave.”

“It will be my fucking honor,” I groaned and pushed my face between his cheeks.

I gloried in the sensation of being smothered by the King's flesh for a moment before I spread his cheeks and bared his tight, pink hole. My cock pressed painfully into the cage, but I didn't care. I kissed his hole, then licked it.

“Do better than that,” he growled.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I moaned, but it was muffled.

Flicking my tongue over Vax was fun, but I needed more. So I speared him with it and groaned as he closed around me. I was tongue-fucking the Sea King! Oh, the delight. The shivers that ran down my spine. The pride that he allowed me to do this to him. It was glorious. I groaned in pain and pleasure, the pressure on my aching cock becoming sweet. This was why men raved about getting scratched during sex. This confusion of the senses. I was past the point where I could separate the pain from the bliss of slipping my tongue into him. I groaned and massaged the globes of flesh I held as I thrust as deep as I could.

“Enough,” Vax said without inflection.

I blinked and backed away, confused by the detached sound of his voice. Had he truly not enjoyed that? “Did I do something wrong, Your Majesty?”

“No,” Vax said. “But it's time for your punishment. Get out of the water and kneel on

this step.” He pointed at the top step beside the tub.

I got up, shivering when the heat of the water left me, and knelt on the step. It wasn't comfortable. As I got in place, Vax lowered his leg and widened his stance so that he stood before me. I licked my lips, assuming he would fuck my face and hoping he'd be savage about it.

He did not.

Instead, Vax took his cock in hand and stroked it. He stared at me as he did, his gaze sliding over my face, my chest, and then my caged cock. He remained there, watching my sex struggle against the restraints as he quickened his pace. I whimpered, wanting him so fucking badly.

“Please,” I whispered.

“No,” he said.

I made a wordless cry and gripped the tub rim. Vax worked faster. His muscles rippled. He was close.

“Oh, fuck. Please, Your Majesty. Release me.”

“Never!” Vaxarion roared and came. He angled his cock so that the cum streaked my face.

I closed my eyes and moaned, opening my mouth to catch a few drops. When the hot lashes stopped, I opened my eyes and found him glaring at me. With a rough hand, he rubbed the cum into my face, then shoved his thumb in my mouth. I sucked at it, cleaning it, and held his stare.

“Lower your eyes, slave!”

I looked down at his flaccid dick.

“You are supposed to be appeasing me, Zixin. And yet you keep pushing me. If you want my forgiveness, you had better start acting like it.”

I bowed my head. “You're right. I'm sorry. I'll try to do better.”

Vax grunted and returned to sprawling in the water. “You may wash my hair now.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

Over a week later, after the King's daily bath and underwater blow job, he finally uncaged my cock. We had returned to bed where he laid me down and began a campaign of pleasure on my body. But no matter what he did, my cock refused to respond to his touch. Not that I didn't enjoy him sucking at my nipples or biting my belly. I enjoyed it very much. It was sheer ecstasy to lie beneath him and be the recipient for once. I writhed and moaned, but my cock remained flaccid. Instead of being upset by this, Vax grinned.

“Well done, slave,” Vax said as he played with my flaccid flesh.

It twitched but then went still.

He chuckled. “Maybe I can leave the cage off.”

I released a breath and dared to ask, “Why?”

“Watch.” He lowered his head and sucked my cock into his mouth. Moaning, he tongued my limp dick, playing with it.

A jolt went up my spine, and I cried out, hands itching to grab his hair. But then I flinched, and the pleasure withdrew, pooling in my belly. It stayed there, just behind my balls. Waiting. I wasn't sure for what.

Then Vax lifted his head and said, “You may harden now.” He went back to sucking me.

Instantly, my cock swelled, and the King made a rumbling sound of pleasure around

it. The vibration intensified the sensations, and I arched off the bed, rapture unlike any I'd known before running through me. The motherfucker had trained my cock to obey him. I wanted to be angry, but the way it magnified my pleasure couldn't be denied. Getting angry would be hypocritical.

Vax drew back and sat on his heels. "Don't come yet, slave."

"Yes, Your Majesty," I panted, cock aching and bobbing.

"Good boy." He tapped my balls approvingly. "Pull your legs back."

"Yes, Your Majesty." I grabbed my knees and pulled them back.

Vax usually preferred to fuck me from behind. This change heartened me. He was going to allow me to look upon his face as I came. If my dick hadn't been so well trained, I would have erupted right then, with the mere thought of what was to come. Ha. To come. That would be me! Finally! I'd never been so sexually aroused without having an orgasm for so long before. It was worse than getting cut up by that Hulfrin.

"That's a good slave," Vax said.

I knew he was trying to be scornful, but the words came out tender. I hoped that meant he was on the verge of forgiving me.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

A ribbon of water brought a bottle of hress nectar to Vax. He poured a little on my entrance, then rubbed it in. Watching me for any sign of climax, he played with my hole, teasing me with gentle prods before slipping a finger inside. I pulled my knees back further and begged him with my eyes.

Gods, he was beautiful. Even when Vax was trying to punish me, even when he denied me, my desire for him didn't wane. It only grew stronger. There was something between us that I didn't understand. It was a testament to my loyalty to Teng that I'd left Vax at all. The Sea King was magnetic.

I remembered the way I'd found Vax when I returned. Curled up in the ashes like some tragic beast from a story. He had mourned me. Torn apart his home for me. Knowing he felt as much for me as I did for him gave me the strength to keep this game going. And yes, it was a game. I knew it, and Vax knew it. The longer it went on, the more anxious I should have become. Worried. Frantic, even. But I wasn't. I knew this wouldn't last. He was a king. A man of pride and power. He needed this to move forward. Because in his mind, I had committed the greatest sin—rejecting him when he offered me everything.

So, yes, I continued to play the part of his bed slave. Shit, it was starting to feel normal.

“Do you want me to fuck you, slave?” Vax demanded.

Yup, this was part of our routine. Vax needed constant reassurance that I still wanted him. That I hadn't sunk into true slavery and was merely obeying. That, too, gave me hope. Vax cared about me despite his anger. Either that or he didn't want to be a rapist, not even an accidental one. I wasn't a normal slave, after all.

“Yes,” I said. “Please fuck me, Your Majesty.”

Vax made a satisfied grunt but didn't withdraw his finger. Instead, he shoved it deeper. Harder. Harder still. My body shook as he pounded his pointer finger into me, the rest of his fingers balled up to punch my ass. My cock bounced, my ass jiggled, and I think I saw the face of Jingtin, the Neraky God. He wasn't as beautiful as Vax.

“Beg for it,” Vax said.

You want me to beg? No problem.

“Please!” I shouted. “Oh, please fuck me. Let me come! Please!”

Suddenly, the motions stopped, and Vax slipped his finger out of me. He rubbed my hole again, making delighted sounds. Then, at last, he got into position on his knees and held his cock to my entrance. Gently, he pushed forward. The tip breached me.

Why is he taking so long?!

“Oh, fuck,” I whimpered. “Please, Your Majesty.”

“How much do you desire me?” Vax demanded.

“More than anyone. There is no one else for me.”

This was another of his favorite questions.

“Will you ever take another man's shaft into your body, Zixin?” He pushed halfway in, then withdrew.

“No, never!”

“Swear it again. On your god.”

I paused. Now, this was new.

“Swear it!” Vax shouted.

I let go of my legs, draping them over his powerful forearms, and reached for Vax. His hard expression faltered, and he bent into my touch. My hands slid up his chest, then around his neck. He watched me warily. At last, I took his face in my hands.

“Vax, you're all I want. All I will ever want. If you cast me aside, I may take comfort in another man. I would need it to survive. So, I can't make you that vow. But I will promise you this; if you keep me, I'm yours forever.”

The King's breath hitched and his eyes trembled, the lids flickering violently. The muscles in his throat worked as if swallowing was painful. I let go of his face and gripped his shoulders, lowering my stare as well so he could process without the weight of my eyes on him.

Slowly, Vax slid into me, going deeper this time. I sighed and gripped his shoulders tighter. With a grunt, he lifted my legs, bending me into a curve, and undulated in and out. In and out. Until he was as deep as he could go. And then, steady as a drumbeat, he pumped.

“Say it again,” he growled.

I looked up, my chest bursting with joy to see Vax above me, his hair wild around his shoulders, and those shoulders in my hands. His purple eyes shone with emotions that I prayed he'd confess to.

“Gods, you're gorgeous,” I said.

His lips twitched. “That's not what I want to hear.”

“Isn't it?” I grinned.

Another twitch of his lips. “Say it, slave.”

“I’m yours for as long as you want me. And I hope that’s forever.”

Vax bent over me and kissed me for the first time since I had returned. I groaned into his mouth, my hearts racing with joy. Hands clutching at him, I sank into our kiss. The bliss of it rivaled the feel of his cock in my channel. This was the connection I craved, and it did more for my arousal than anything else.

Groaning, I came, my body exploding in ecstasy and happiness. Back arching and muscles clenching, I refused to break our kiss. I held on and stroked his tongue with mine as the Sea King gave me the greatest orgasm of my life. It made my head spin. My eyes roll back in my head. My toes curl. All the things. And so much more. My chest seemed to fill with light and that light burst through my body, casting out the darkness. It tingled and awakened parts of me I didn’t know were dormant. In short, it was magical. Neraky don’t possess magic beyond our ability to breathe underwater and project our thoughts. But Vax had shown me what it felt like to have magic.

The King kept thrusting through my orgasm, kissing me as passionately as I kissed him. But then he pulled back and stared at me. Looked down at my release. Eased back. Hands on my hips, he anchored me and started a savage pounding.

“I didn’t give you permission to come, slave,” the Sea King snarled.

“Oh, fuck,” I muttered. I cleared my throat to say, “I’m so sorry, Your Majesty. I thought—”

“Shut up!” He pounded into me, getting more and more savage until he locked up and his back arched.

Vax looked away from me as he came, his stare going to the ceiling. Nor did he roar or cry out my name. He just grunted and held me against him tightly, filling me. Only after his orgasm faded did he look at me. And then his expression was one of disgust.

“Vax?” I whispered.

He pulled out and shoved me away in one maneuver. Vax stood up on the mattress and stared down at me, more distant than ever. I just lay there, at a loss for what to say. He stepped off the bed and onto the floor. Hearts sinking, I watched him leave the bedroom.

“Fuck!” I hissed and pounded the mattress with my fists.

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While Vax was gone, I went down to the bathroom and showered, then dressed. The dressing room was next to the bathroom, through that second door. But Vax wasn't there either. I went downstairs and searched the rest of the apartments. No Sea King. That stung.

In all the time we'd been playing this game, he hadn't left the apartments without me. Vax had been focused on me. Leaving me alone only when one of us had to see to our private bodily needs. We ate together, bathed together, and he even dressed me. After that first night spent partially on the floor, I had slept beside him. Sometimes in his arms, sometimes next to him, and once between his thighs, under the covers. That had been a fun night. He kept waking me up and commanding me to suck his cock.

But he had never left like that.

I tried to see it as an improvement. A sign that Vax was close to forgiving me. But that was difficult to do with the memory of his cold expression haunting me.

When I went back up to the bedroom, I was shocked to find that it had been returned to its former glory. The bed frame had been replaced, this one formed of crimson coral. I liked it better than the old black. Matching bedside tables held vases of fresh flowers, a group of chairs and a couch stood near the balcony, and the bed linens had been changed. There was even a display cabinet full of . . .

“What the fuck?” I went closer to the black-lacquered cabinet and ignored the beautiful shell inlays decorating it to stare at the items on the glass shelves. “Did he really put his sex toys on display in a fucking cabinet?”

Yup. The shelves held sexual aids. They were beautiful, even artistic, but still. What the fuck? Who did that shit? I gaped at the glass dildos and the gold mouth stretcher that shone under the cabinet's light, then gawked at a long gold bar encrusted with jewels. There were straps at both ends to secure someone's ankles and hold their legs apart. My legs. Colorful gems were strung in increasingly larger spheres, the biggest making me cringe. There was something made of leather strips bound into a bundle and secured in a handle. Crystal, gold, and silver butt plugs in various sizes were lined up like soldiers, some with jewels embedded in the end and some with tails attached. There were also more phallic objects, but in odd shapes.

“What kind of dick is that?” I muttered.

“It's based on a Frellen's cock,” Vax said as he stepped up beside me.

I flinched away from the cabinet and stared at him. “You're back.”

“Take off your clothes and get on the bed,” he said.

“Vax, we need to talk.”

“I didn't tell you to get dressed, slave!” Vax snarled. “Now, take off your fucking clothes and get on the bed!”

“No!” I shouted back.

He narrowed his eyes at me.

I sighed. “I'll do whatever you want. If you want to fuck me again, fine. But I'd rather talk to you. I want some conversation beyond sex talk. Don't you want to talk to me? Or am I really just a bed slave to you now?”

Vaxarion's eyes twitched. He jerked open the cabinet and selected one of the items—that fucking Frellen dick.

I shook my head at it. Frellen were nasty creatures, more animal than man. They had a habit of abducting people, raping them, and eating them. Why anyone would make a dildo based on their cocks was . . . yeah, all right. It was an impressive dick with fascinating ridges and a spear-shaped tip that would penetrate an ass nicely. So maybe there was one good thing about Frellen.

“It's been almost two weeks, Vax,” I said. “Please. Just talk to me. We can work this out without all this nonsense.”

“You can say no,” Vax said. “There is no contract between us. You can say no and leave right now. Or you can take off your clothes and get on the bed. What's your decision, Zixin?”

“Fuck,” I muttered. “You know I'm not leaving. I want to be with you, and I'm willing to do anything to make up for leaving you. But I want more than this from you. I need more.”

“Choose now.”

“Son of a sea urchin,” I growled and got undressed. Then I saw the tension leave his face. His body. And I sighed. It had been a test. Vax was afraid I was going to leave him again. Fuck. “I'm not going anywhere, master .”

Then I climbed up on the bed and knelt, facing him, waiting for his next command.

Vax briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked calmer. He put that stupid dildo back in the cabinet and took off his clothes. His dick was hard. It seemed as if he was always erect, his hunger insatiable, though not as bad as it had been when

he'd first brought me to his palace. Or maybe I should say, not as good as it had been.

As always, seeing his bare body made me shiver and ache. I wondered if I would ever get immune to his beauty and then doubted it. I'd had some very handsome men and some very powerful men, but Vax was both of those and more. He was everything.

“Lie down,” Vax said.

I lay back on the pillows.

“No. Flat,” he said.

I shimmied down the bed, off the pillows, wondering where this was going. My eyes widened as Vax climbed up on the bed and strode up my body, straddling it. He turned around and knelt over my head, his knees on either side of my arms. Then he sat on my face.

I gasped. He shimmied, splitting his cheeks with my chin, then leaning back.

“Spread my ass and tongue me, slave,” he said.

I groaned and reached up to grab his cheeks. Pulled. Licked my lips as that perfect hole was revealed. It twitched. Then I was being smothered in the best way possible. I closed my eyes and found my way home, licking and thrusting as the Sea King moaned.

His hands went to my chest to prop himself. The weight felt amazing. My cock ached but wouldn't rise. It obeyed only one man, and that man wasn't me.

“Please,” I begged, my voice muffled.

Vax undulated over me, then drew back as he bent over. The motion brought his cock to my mouth. I sucked it in without being told. He pumped, then withdrew to drag his balls over my lips. I sucked on those too. Meanwhile, the Sea King stroked himself, using my saliva as lubrication. I groaned and drew both of his sacs into my mouth.

Vax drew back and angled his dick into my mouth again. I eagerly took it. But then he bent forward and sucked on my cock. Crying out around him, I whimpered. I knew it was another test, and I would pass it. It was impossible for me not to. Because Vax had trained my cock to obey him above all else. The pleasure he gave me didn't matter. The way he moaned as he rolled my limp flesh in his mouth didn't matter. All that mattered was his command.

He sucked free of me and gave me an approving tap. "That's a good slave. Now, get hard for your master."

Instant erection. Instant. Blood filled my member so fast that it made me lightheaded. I groaned around Vax as he gently pumped into me, still lying on me, propped over my cock. His tongue flicked at me. He grabbed my base and shook me for his amusement. He jiggled my balls. All while I sucked him eagerly.

"You will not come until I give you permission. Understood?"

"Yes," I mumbled around his dick.

"Good. Disobey me, and I will cage you again."

I whimpered.

He chuckled and proceeded to give me the best blow job of my life. Except for the fact that I couldn't come.

I whimpered and shuddered and sucked at him desperately. Every muscle in my body clenched. I was hard everywhere. I couldn't think beyond one thought: I need to come.

Suddenly, Vax yanked out of my mouth and stood up. As I stared up at him in a daze, panting, he went to stand between my feet and face me. He grabbed my knees and yanked. I yipped as my back left the mattress. Vax had me nearly vertical, with only my upper shoulders and head still on the mattress. Then, in a casual show of strength, he let go of one leg, letting it flop out to the side, and held me aloft with one hand. He needed his other to angle his cock into me.

I sighed as he sank past my ring, then started to pump. As soon as Vax was wedged deep, he grabbed my dangling leg and steadied his hold on me. Then, going straight down, he fucked me.

It was the oddest sensation, the angle so strange. But that meant it hit parts of my channel that were normally neglected. And the sight of the Sea King standing there like a fucking conqueror, driving his dick into me, was breathtaking. I couldn't look away.

Then he grabbed my cock and pumped it.

“Oh, fuck!” I cried. “Please, let me come, Your Majesty.”

“You may come.”

The words released a torrent of an orgasm, my whole body experiencing pleasure—from my fucking hair follicles to my feet. But as I came, Vax angled my cock so that my release splattered across my face.

With the first hit, I cringed, then I closed my eyes, unable to stop myself from coming

hard. But shame also hit me, causing the oddest feelings to swirl in my chest. When it was over, I opened my eyes and stared up at him. Vax pumped wildly into me, his stare locked on my face. I felt my cum dripping down my cheeks and chin. It was humiliating, and yet the way he looked at me lessened that feeling. Because it made Vax come.

Giving me the roar I'd been craving, Vax pulled out and came on me, his seed smacking my chest and face, blending with mine. And he didn't close his eyes. He watched it happen. Took great pleasure in it.

When the last shudders left the King, he dropped me, leaving me to flop to the bed, and turned away. He leapt off the bed like a predator cat. I panted as I watched him, not daring to wipe the cum away. I knew him too well.

Vax looked back at me and said, "I want a bath. You will attend me. And do not clean yourself."

I groaned as I got out of bed and followed him down to the bathroom. This was a new and unusual form of torture.

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After that, I grew quiet. I'd answer Vax's questions but that was all. The shame affected me. It made it feel less like a game. Yeah, he had come on my face before, but that felt different. He had rubbed it in and been all sexy about it. This time, he made me come on my face, then added his to it. Double cum all over my face. No rubbing. No sexiness. And he made me leave it there throughout his bath. Only after he was clean did he wave me off to shower.

I'd known it would be difficult to win Vax back, but I didn't think he'd be so cold about it and for this long. I didn't think he'd revel in my humiliation. Where was the man who had touched every inch of my body as if to reassure himself that I was really there? Would he never return?

“You haven't said much today,” Vax noted.

Yeah, it had been a day since that whole coming-on-my-face thing. It had taken Vax that long to notice that I was giving him the slave version of the silent treatment. Not that it was a plan or anything like that. I was simply too hurt to speak to him. Ironical since that had been all I'd wanted the day before.

But now it was dinner time, and we were sitting at his low dining table. He was sprawled out like the king he was while I knelt beside him to feed him. He'd point, and I would select the best pieces to present him with.

I didn't respond to his comment since it wasn't a question.

Vax didn't like that. He grabbed my chin and turned my head to face him. “Why are you silent? I thought you wanted to talk to me?”

I glanced at him, then lowered my gaze. “I have nothing to say, Your Majesty.”

With my gaze down, all I saw was his hand clenched into a fist. I wondered if he would get violent with me. And then I wondered if that would be what finally tipped the scales. I don't let my lovers hit me. Not ever. Not even if I deserve it. Fuck that.

“You are supposed to be earning my forgiveness, Zixin,” Vax said. “This is not how you do it.”

I looked up and met his stare. “Then how? Tell me what to do, Your Majesty. Would you like me to suck you off as you eat? Or maybe I could bend over the table for you to use as a plate before you fuck me. Oh, I know. I could bend into an awkward position and you could throw food at me. Or would you prefer to piss on me?”

Vax jerked back at the last suggestion, his expression horrified.

“Well, thank the Gods I won't have to deal with that at least,” I said. “But I'm sure you'll think of something just as humiliating for me to endure.”

“So, that's what's upset you?” He lifted a brow. “Did you think this would be fun, Zixin? Did you think appeasing my anger would be exciting and even pleasurable for you?”

“I didn't think it would be humiliating.”

“Humiliating? That was sex, not humiliation. Do you know what true humiliation is? It's when you crave someone above all others, you offer them everything—things you've never offered another, and they throw it all in your face.”

“That's not—”

“I'm not finished!” Vax roared. “Humiliation is when you can't rule your kingdom because you're pining for one man like a pathetic youngster. It's when you tear apart the home you offered him because every beautiful thing reminds you of him. And that breakdown, that utter destruction of your sanctuary, sanity, and your pride, is seen by all the people who you need to respect you. And those people—your dread—pity you. That is humiliation, Zixin.”

“Oh, Gods,” I whispered. “Vax, I didn't know you felt embarrassed. I didn't know my leaving was such a big deal for you.”

Vax made a disparaging sound. “Do you know why I demand sex from you constantly, Zixin? Because it's all I can think about when you're near. I can't allow myself to feel anything else for you. If I did, I would be even more humiliated. So, all I have is this base need, and it consumes me. It fucking consumes me!” he shouted. Chest heaving, he took a few seconds to compose himself, then went on. “I'm supposed to be your master, but I feel enslaved by my need for you. So, I fuck you. A lot. I take you hard and in the most demeaning ways possible because it's the only way I can bring myself to punish you.” He grabbed my throat and pulled me close. “And the dragon inside me demands that you pay for what you did.”

“Why?”

“What?!”

“Why, Vax? Why did my leaving hurt you so badly? You had twenty-six bed slaves to comfort you.”

“I offered to give them up for you!” he snarled. “I offered you monogamy. I offered you me!” He slammed a fist to his chest. “All of me. Do you think I've ever offered that to anyone else? Do you think I've ever begged someone to stay with me?”

“You never begged me,” I whispered. “It wasn't like that.”

“Yes, it was!” Vax closed his eyes, calmed himself, and opened them. “It was. I offered to give up so much for you, and I asked you to give up one thing—your old life. And you refused.”

“Vax, please. Try to see it from my perspective. As you said, you're a king. You have everything. What you offered was incredible, and I wanted to accept, but I couldn't leave the man who saved my life and raised me as his son. And your offer was too good to be true. I couldn't fully believe it. Why would you want me enough to give up your freedom and twenty-six lovers who obeyed your every command? It just didn't seem possible. There was a good chance that you made those offers not because you wanted me but because you didn't want to lose. I was afraid you were trying to hook me like a fish. Once I was in love with you, you'd go back to your slaves, and I would become one of them.”

“Now, you doubt my honor?” Vax asked, his expression horrified.

“No,” I huffed. “Not exactly. I did, but I was wrong. Don't you understand? Those fears came because you are so fucking incredible. And I am not. That you'd want to be with me was simply unbelievable. It felt like a scam. And a pirate doesn't fall for scams.”

Vaxarion's jaw clenched. “So, you left me because you thought I was running a scam on you?”

“Yes.” I grimaced. “Sort of. I was scared, bound to my family, and uncertain of our future. But I never thought you'd spend more than a minute mourning what we had. I thought you'd shake it off and go back to your wonderful life. While I returned to an unstable existence of piracy and a possible early death. I faced a bleak future without you, and yet you were the one who raged and burned. You were the one who

withdrew from the world. And I still don't understand why.”

“It's simple, Zixin,” Vax said softly. “Figure it out yourself.”

I paused, gathered my courage, and asked, “Do you love me, Vax?”

He looked away.

My chest clenched. “Very well. I won't ask again. And I won't try to talk to you beyond what's required. You tell me when you're ready to talk and then we can try this again.”

“And what if I'm never ready? What if I only want this from you forever?”

“I told you the term of my slavery was open and I meant it. If this is all you want from me, then this is what I will give you. Forever.”

Vax shuddered and bent forward. “Go to bed, Zix. I'll join you later.”

I stood up and left the dining room, my hearts so heavy, I could barely lift my feet.

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I lay awake in bed, waiting for Vax. I wanted to cry, but not because of the humiliation. That didn't bother me anymore. I understood it. More than I wanted to, truth be told. I felt guilty for what he'd gone through. But that guilt was buried beneath the weight of the things he said. His words were barbarically beautiful. They bound me to him tighter than any chains could have. I loved him. Deeply. And I knew he loved me too. Vax just wasn't ready to admit it, not with the pain still so fresh and his pride salting the wound. And that's why I wanted to cry. I was just so damn frustrated.

But I had vowed forever. I had sworn to do whatever he wanted to gain his forgiveness. So, I would do it. No matter the cost; be it to my body or my pride. And I would pray that one day it would be enough.

“For fuck's sake!” I pounded my fist into the pillow. “With anyone else, this would be ridiculous. It's too much. He's demanding everything from me for one mistake. And it hurt us both. Why can't he see that? Why won't he forgive me?”

That's when the tears came. I shuddered as they tore through my body and shredded my composure. I couldn't remember crying before I met Vax. Not since I was a child. He made me suffer like no one else, but he also made me happier than anyone else. So happy that an existence without him would be bleak. Which made the suffering worth it. Nothing this good came for free.

Still, this was a fucked up relationship.

Warm hands coasted over my back, and I flinched.

“Shh,” Vax whispered as he drew me in against his chest. “It’s just me.”

“Of course, it’s you. Who else would it be?” I muttered. “You just startled me.”

His soft laugh warmed my shoulder and then he kissed me there. “I will take your tears too, Zixin. All of them. They’re mine. So, give them to me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I growled and turned to face him. “You want my tears? Here they are. Here’s proof that the punishment you demand is painful.” I waved at my face. “Take a good look. I hope it pleases you.”

“Cease.” Vax grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me into an embrace. “I am the one who rages, not you. You are not allowed anger with me. Now take the comfort I offer. It will not be given often.”

The King’s words should have sounded cruel. Harsh. But I heard the worry beneath them and crumbled. Just fell into his arms. Against his chest. His heartbeat. A single heart, but strong. Stronger than all three of mine. I surrendered to that strength and laid my cheek against his bare chest, directly over that powerful organ. It beat steadily in my ear—a soothing round. Then Vaxarion’s hands stroked my hair. He wouldn’t let me braid it anymore. It was always loose in case he wanted to stroke it. As if I was a pet. But his touch told me I was more than that. What did I need with words and all their hidden meanings? He could keep them, never say that he loved me, as long as he touched me like this. Vax’s love was right there, in every stroke.

But Vax had given me other words, hadn’t he? Those sweet, savage words. Words that bled humiliation but also a deep, wild desire. There was nothing hidden in those words. They bared all. How he craved me above all others and destroyed the beauty around him because it reminded him of me. How I consumed him. That was as good as a confession of love, wasn’t it?

I sighed and nestled closer.

“Better?” he whispered.

I stiffened. Oh, Gods, it was going to start again. Of course, it was. Vax had given me too much emotionally. Now, he'd have to reassert his status as my master and rebuild that barrier between us. He'd pull away and punish me. Yeah, I was a fast learner.

“I'm not going to demand anything more of you tonight, Zix. Relax. Go to sleep. I will hold you through your dreams and protect you from your nightmares.”

Instead of soothing me into slumber, his tenderness brought on another round of tears. But Vax held me through them, stroking my hair and shoulders, until I was finally drained enough to fall into an exhausted sleep.

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I woke to an empty bed. Sighing, I stretched, then looked around. There was a pile of clothing folded on the foot of the bed. I got up, out of bed, and went to inspect it. I was naked except for my collar. It was how I always slept with Vax. He didn't like anything between us in bed, even if we were only sleeping. And during the day, he dressed me in sheer tunics and wispy loincloths.

These were not that sort of clothing.

Hands trembling with hope, I pulled on the soft undershorts and then the silk pants. An embroidered tunic went over that, then a long vest. On the floor was a pair of leather boots.

“Good, you're dressed,” Vax said as he entered the room.

I turned to smile at him, thinking that we were finally leaving the royal apartments. Maybe he'd take me into the city for breakfast or to a park. And that meant that I'd gotten through to him the night before. Our fight had helped. Progress!

But then I saw what he was holding—a length of golden chain. Fear shot through me.

My collar had a loop on it. All slave collars did. That was where the chain would attach, probably locked in place similar to the cock cage. Maybe it even had the same lock, so he wouldn't need another key. It was a luxurious chain, with small golden rings that wouldn't weigh me down. I'd barely feel it. But it was still a chain.

“What's that for?” I asked breathlessly.

“I want to take you out today.” Vax stepped up to me.

My stare remained on the chain. “Uh-huh.”

“Slaves are chained when they leave the palace.”

I swallowed roughly. I started to tremble. In my mind, I heard a Gashi laugh. And with Gashi laughter would inevitably come pain. It became harder to breathe. I wanted to run. Get to the sea. Breathe it in. Freedom wasn't too far away. I just had to make it to the surface. But I wouldn't be going anywhere if I let them chain me again.

“Zixin,” Vax said. “Zix, look at me.”

I looked up at him. Vax. Not a Gashi. I took a breath.

The King stared back grimly. “I will allow you to say no to this. But I want you to submit. This will prove your loyalty to me more than any amount of sexual deeds. I know what it will cost you, but so does my beast. It will appease him. Seeing you accept a chain for me will break through my anger. I'm sure of it. I'll be able to forgive you. We'll get past this faster. And, Zix, I do want to get past this. I want more than your submission and sex. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Make your choice. We can go on as we were or we can try this.”

My mouth went dry. The collar had nearly made me scream. What would the chain do? Could I handle this? For him, I would. I had to. “Chain me,” I said.

Vaxarion let out an almost rapturous sound and lifted the chain to my neck. I froze. My eyes blinked rapidly, the nictating membranes going crazy. He connected the

chain onto the loop with a fastener, then padlocked it closed. Suddenly, it wasn't a game. It was real. I was a slave again.

With the click of the lock, my mind went blank. Just fuzzed out for a second. When it began to work again, I wasn't with Vax anymore. I wasn't in a palace. All that luxury and safety had been replaced by kelp fields and rough stone. I felt the chain pulling down my collar, the heavy baskets of harvested kelp on my back, and the pain of a fresh claw cut on my chest. Laughter came, and I knew I'd be in the cage soon—bait to lure the undersea creatures. The Gashi would wait nearby, and if I was lucky, they'd spear whatever came for me before it got through the bars. Most times, I wasn't that lucky. They liked to watch me squirm. Took delight in my screams. Dinner and entertainment. Only after they had a few laughs, would they kill the creature and have themselves a fine meal.

I saw the monsters again. The things large enough to see a Neraky as a snack. Rows of needle teeth, black eyes without emotion, and massive bodies that could crush metal. I'd rather work in the fields all day than sit in the cage.

First came little sounds, like those of a wounded animal. Then great shudders wracked my body. Screams rose, clawing at my throat. Dark shapes loomed. The Gashi were coming for me. I'd be sliced open and thrown in the cage, my blood the draw for their dinner. I wanted to run, but the chain made that impossible. No running for me, and fighting would only make it worse.

But I could scream.

I shrieked and tore at the collar. Yanked at the chain. “No!” I thrashed, shoving the hands away from me. “No, please! No!” I rolled, the chain pulling me down. “Not the cage. Please, don't put me in there. I'll double my harvest tomorrow. I swear. Just not the cage.” I burst into tears as someone strong grabbed me. Restrained me. I was no longer a strong grown man. I was a child again, easily dominated. They'd do what

they wanted with me. “Please, no more,” I whispered. Then I just screamed.

Someone held me down. They spoke to me. I couldn't hear him. It didn't matter. I cringed and cried in between ragged screams until my throat went raw. My will was breaking. Soon, I'd be no one. I'd lose all that I was under those chains. They would crush me. My spirit ground to sand. I'd be forced to submit to all their demands. Bait to predators of all kinds. My future stretched before me, every day worse than the last.

Suddenly, the collar slipped away along with the chain. Weightless. Free. I gasped in a breath and shuddered. Was I truly free? Or was this a game? Were they going to toy with me for entertainment?

“Zixin!” someone said. “Zix! Oh, Zix, forgive me. My beautiful Zixin. Shh now, sweetheart. It's all right. No one's going to hurt you. It's me. Vax. I've got you. You're with me now. You're safe.”

He pulled me into an embrace, and I shuddered, my stare fixated on the wall as I tried to process and put my shattered mind back together.

“Zixin.” Warm hands stroked my face. My hair. My chest. “Zix, come back, baby. It's me. It's your Vax. Come back.”

“Vax?” I whispered, my voice rough. I blinked and focused on his face. “Vax, are you crying?”

“No, my sea butterfly. I never cry.” He kissed me gently. Tenderly. “Are you well now?”

It hit me then. I had failed. A crushing weight returned even though the chain was on the floor, halfway across the room from me. I hadn't proved myself to Vax. Now, he

might never forgive me.

“I'm sorry, Your Majesty,” I said. “Can we try again? Please? I can do better. I wasn't prepared. Now, I am. Put the collar back on. I promise not to scream. I'll do whatever you want.”

Vax yanked me closer and buried his face in my hair. Strange, wounded sounds came from him before he said, “No, sweetheart. You are never going to be chained again. You will never wear a collar. You are no one's slave. You never were.”

“But I can do it. For you. I'll do it.”

Vax made a broken cry and clutched me tighter. “Damn you, Zix! Why did you leave me?”

“You know why. I told you. I left because I was scared. I didn't trust your offer. It was too good for someone like me. I left because my loyalty to Teng has always come first. I left because I didn't know that I was in love with you.”

Vax went still. He lifted his head and met my stare. “You love me?”

“Do you think I'd go through all of this if I didn't? I mean, you're good in bed, but not that good.”

Vaxarion snorted a laugh. But then his expression went soft. “I love you too.”

“I know.” I smirked. “I figured it out.”

“You little shit,” he growled.

I yanked Vax into a kiss and that stopped his ire. Transformed it into something

wonderful. Loving. Holy shit. I had just told the Sea King I loved him. And he said he loved me in return. He had forgiven me at last. Now, we just had to find a way to make a romance between a king and a pirate work. But I suppose stranger things had happened.

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Once freed, I realized how fun it was to be Vaxarion's slave. So, I kept it up a little longer. It was so much better to pretend that I had to obey him than actually have to obey him. And the lack of a collar helped.

We decided to stay in his apartments for one more day. Vax sent for breakfast and we ate in bed. I fed him as usual, but this time, he also fed me, taking delight in holding the food to my lips and letting me suck it from his fingers. We were both blissful, smiling non-stop. We kissed in between bites and swigged cool water, sweetened with the juice of sea berries. The food was fit for royalty, but we ate it like pirates. Here was the merging of worlds I worried about. So far, so good.

Vax smoothed my hair back and said, "I didn't know it would hurt you like that. I didn't fully understand what I asked of you."

I sighed. "Because I didn't tell you all of it. I guess I assumed what I did tell you was enough. That you would know how much the thought of being a slave again scared me. It was why I offered myself to you in that way. It was the biggest sacrifice I could make."

"I know that now." He kissed my cheek. "And I should have known it before. I mean, I assumed it would be uncomfortable for you, but you'd been wearing the collar without issue. I didn't think the chain would make that much of a difference."

"I knew," I muttered.

"You could have said no."

I held his stare as I said, “No, I couldn't have.”

“Zix,” Vax's tone went tender. “I'm so sorry.”

“So am I. I never intended to humiliate you.”

He pressed his forehead to mine, breathing with me, then eased back. “I can't see you like that again. Your pain nearly broke me.”

“No problem. Just don't chain me.”

Vax snorted. “I vowed it, didn't I? No one will ever chain you again. I'll make sure of it.”

“So your anger is appeased?”

“My anger died in the flames of your past. You burned away those stupid walls I'd built between us and showed me what was important—that you had come back to me. I'm so sorry I didn't welcome you as I should have. I wanted to. But I was so hurt.”

“Let's not linger on our pain. It's over.” I smirked. “And that's a relief. Cause, babe, your anger is epic. I can't believe what you did to this room. And that poor garden.”

Vax sighed and set the tray aside. “There's something I need to tell you.”

“First, let me say one thing.”

“What?”

“I saw the slave quarters. You have enough room for fifty slaves, maybe more. And there's a pool in there. I mean, come on! What did you even do with all those men?”

“A lot.” He grinned. “And they weren't allowed to leave the quarters unless it was to be with me. So I had to make them as comfortable as possible.”

“Unbelievable,” I muttered.

Vaxarion's grin softened. “But I released them. The day you left, I gave them back to my court.”

I smirked again. “Yeah, I know that too. I told you I saw the quarters. Where do you think I got the collar and all that sex stuff?”

“Ah. Yes, of course.”

I kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“You don't have to thank me. I couldn't be with anyone else. Even having them in my apartments, knowing they were that close, upset me.”

I lifted a brow. “All right, you don't have to exaggerate. It's romantic enough that you sent them away and burned your flowers.”

“You don't understand. There's something I need to tell you. Something important. I know you think my behavior has been strange. You're attributing it to my love for you, and that is partially true. But there's more.” Vax took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. “Zixin, you're my mate.”

I blinked. “Huh?”

Vaxarion scowled. “You're my mate. My only love for the rest of my life. The one person chosen for me by the Dragon God.”

“I thought mates were a Land Dragon thing, given to them by the Goddess?”

“They were. But then Karadas returned, and he found his mate. He wanted us to experience that joy as well. So, he blessed us with mating magic.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “But isn't there like a ceremony or something? Some kind of mating ritual?”

Vaxarion rolled his eyes. “Did you not find it odd that I couldn't stop coming? Or that I rubbed my ejaculate into your skin? Or that your skin absorbed it?”

“I thought it was a Sea Dragon thing.”

“Zix, you're a beautiful moron,” he huffed.

“Yeah, all right. You don't have to be an ass about it.”

Vax snorted. “You're being an ass too. I just told you that we're bonded forever, that I will always be true to you, and I'll love only you for the rest of my life. Your response was to question it. This feels like another rejection.”

“It's not! I . . . I just . . .” Suddenly, I grimaced and smacked him. “Why didn't you tell me?!”

“I did. Just now.”

“I mean sooner, you asshole! Why didn't you tell me when it happened?!” I lifted my hands and shook them at him in a what-the-fuck gesture. “Or maybe before I left you!”

“I tried to tell you before you left, but you kept interrupting me.”

“Oh,” I whispered, vaguely recalling him trying to say something to me while I just spoke over him. “I’m sorry I didn’t give you a chance.”

“And I’m sorry I reacted so poorly. My dragon was already half-wild from hunting you after you left me in Gavemor. That’s when I mated you, Zix. That first night we were together.”

“You could have told me then. Instead, you told me you couldn’t be faithful to me.”

Vax grimaced. “I didn’t mate you until after that. And then I thought we’d talk in the morning. I didn’t think you’d sneak away while I was sleeping.”

“I couldn’t risk facing you again. I was afraid I might go with you, even knowing that you wouldn’t be true to me.”

“I went wild when I woke to an empty bed,” he said in a grim tone. “I lost all reason. All I knew was that I had to get to you. So I hunted you. I found your ship, but you weren’t on it. Then I tracked you back to Gavemor. If you hadn’t been in such desperate need of the sea, I would have destroyed the whole castle for finding you in such a state. But you were more important than my fury.”

“Is that why you took me to that cave to heal? Because your dragon had gone wild?”

“Yes. I needed you safe and healed before I could take you around others. Even my knights had to keep their distance.” He shook his head. “I’ve heard tales of Land Dragons going savage when they mate, but I wasn’t prepared for how I reacted. I could barely speak.”

“I remember.” I took his hand. “I knew there was something wrong with you, but I never could have guessed it was this.”

“The urges that come with a mating take several days to satisfy,” Vax said. “You left before I could appease those urges, and once I had you back, I had to wait for you to heal.”

“Vax,” I whispered.

“It was only after I brought you here that I was able to fully indulge my primal instincts and make you mine.” His eyes twitched. “But then you left me again.”

“Why did you let me go if . . .” I gaped at him. “Holy fuck, Vax. I've heard stories about Land Dragons too. I've even seen it firsthand with the King of Racul. Mated Dragons need their mates. They're especially volatile when freshly mated. If you take their mate away, they'll go mad.”

“Yes. It's the same for us.”

“How did you do it? How did you let me go?”

“I almost didn't.” Vax stroked my cheek. “It's why I resorted to claiming you. By then, I was sated, but the mating bond was still so fresh and my beast had been through a lot. It was anxious. I would have done anything to keep you by my side. Anything. And the only option I saw was to claim you as a slave instead of a mate. I thought that once you understood that it was only to be you and me, you'd accept me, and I could release you. But then I saw your face. I saw the fear and the sorrow. And it crushed me. The instinct to keep you paled beneath your pain. I knew then that I couldn't love you as you deserved to be loved, not if I could hurt you like that. I had to let you go. I wanted you to have your freedom and adventure.”

“But you didn't hurt me. You stopped yourself and set me free.” I took his hand. “You overcame your dragon and the magic of a god for me. Fuck, Vax. I can't even comprehend the amount of strength that took.”

“I would do anything for you, Zix. Battle anyone, even myself, to keep you safe.”

My eyelids did double time, trying to blink back the tears. “I fucking love you so much. Gods, I was an idiot.”

The Sea King smiled. “I love you too.” He paused, then pointedly added, “Mate.”

“Holy fuck!” I leapt to my feet and whooped. “I’m mated to the fucking Sea King!” I spun in a circle as Vaxarion laughed. “I’m royalty! Ha! Take that you stupid fucking Hulfrin!”

Vaxarion's laughter ceased abruptly.

I went still, then slowly looked over at him. His eyes were glowing.

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered. Now that I knew who I was to him, I realized all the mistakes I'd made. Especially the current one. I shouldn't have reminded a mated Sea Dragon of someone hurting his mate.

Still growling, Vax got to his feet. “Tell me what they did to you.”

“It was nothing. I deserved it, Vax. We attacked their ship. And uh, we stole something precious.”

“What did they do to you?” he asked again, more slowly.

“They just tortured me a little.”

“They tortured you?!”

“Just a little. A little torture. Just a tor really.”

Vax didn't find that humorous. "They will die screaming. I'll skin them alive and wear their fur as a fucking loincloth. No! I'll wipe my ass with it."

"Whoa. That was both sexy and disturbing. But truly, Vax, I'm good now. And I don't hold a grudge against them. We took something really big from them. Well, not physically big. But big. Important. So important that the Lu-Ken is currently on its way to the other side of Serai to hide from those Hulfrin."

Vax finally focused enough to cease his threats. "You were sailing that far away from me?"

"No. That's the point, love." I kissed the tip of his nose. "I left them because I couldn't sail that far away from you. I couldn't be parted from you at all. Well, I was going to try, but Teng saw how miserable I was. He told me about you coming to find me. I wasn't going to come back here because I thought you didn't want me, but after he told me all that, I knew I had to try. Fuck, Teng knew you loved me before I did. He said it, but I didn't believe him."

"Teng told you to return?" He narrowed his eyes at me. "That's why you came back?"

"Hey, asshole!" I snapped my fingers in front of his face. "I was the one who decided to return and do whatever it took to get you back. Teng just helped me see that it was possible. And he gave me his blessing. That's what I needed, Vax. He released me so I could commit to you."

"Oh."

"Oh?" I snorted. "Now, who's the moron?"

"Still you." He smirked. Then he frowned. "What was the important thing you stole

from the Hulfrins?”

“I didn't steal it personally. And the crew didn't even know what they took. The thing was hidden in a bottle of brandy.”

“What thing? Get to it already.”

“Sheesh, have some patience, Mr. Curious.”

Vax chuckled. “You are perfect for me. You know, I'm normally a lighthearted man.”

“That's a load of crap.”

“No, it's the truth. I love to tease people. To play pranks. But then I met you, and everything became so serious. I mated you the first time we were together and then—”

“Fourth,” I said.

“What?”

“It was the fourth time we had sex that you started doing the wild coming thing.” I grinned. “See? I pay attention. I remember because it was after you asked me to go on tour with you, and I said no.”

Vax rolled his eyes and went to sit down on the bed again. He popped a piece of buttered bread into his mouth and chewed. I went to join him and grabbed a sea grape.

“You remember because I mentioned it earlier,” Vax said. “And it was our fifth session, but all of those sessions were part of our first time together,” Vax said.

“No, it was the fourth.”

“The fifth,” he said in a tone that said the argument was over. “I remember because, before that, I didn't want a mate.”

“Wait. What?” I growled.

“You heard me. I didn't want a mate. Maybe later in life. But I was having too much fun. I had just woken from a hibernation that had lasted centuries. I didn't want to bind myself to one man for eternity.”

“Well, fuck.”

“It's why I couldn't promise to not take other lovers. Like you, I wanted to be free.”

“That's a different kind of freedom.” I grimaced.

“But then the mating magic took me, and I claimed you. As soon as the magic burst between us, I felt how wondrous it was.” Vax took my hand and kissed it. “And I was grateful. I knew that no other man could satisfy me like you. None other could lift my heart and make it sing. It would be wonderful to be mated because my mate was you. I fell asleep in a state of bliss.” His expression dropped into annoyance. “And then I woke up to find that my mate had fled.”

“Because we had talked about staying together, and you told me you had twenty-six bed slaves! You said you couldn't be faithful to me.”

“I'm a king.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

Vax frowned. “What just happened? You're the one in the wrong. You ran from me, but I still saved you, protected you while you healed, and brought you home to my palace. Then, after I offered you everything, you rejected me again.”

“You said I'd be your consort. You didn't tell me I was your mate.”

“As I said earlier, I tried to.”

“You should have tried harder, Vax. If I'd known I was your mate, I never would have left.”

“Are you sure?”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that I truly don't think you were ready to hear that you'd be bound to me forever. You denied my first offer because you wanted freedom. Then you denied me again for adventure. Those were the very things I treasured before I claimed you. The reasons I didn't want a mate.”

I sighed. “You shouldn't have let me walk away.”

“I did what I thought was best for you. I gave you the freedom I could no longer have.”

I went still, just staring at him as my hearts melted, all three of them. “I fucking love you, Vax. But don't you ever assume you know what's best for me.”

Vaxarion chuckled. “I love you too, my sea butterfly.”

“Yeah, that's really cute and all, but what the fuck is a sea butterfly?”

The Sea King burst out laughing again.

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When I strode out of the King's apartments holding his hand, his guards first gaped at us before fumbling to attention. He nodded at them as we passed by, then winked at me.

Vax wanted to show me around the palace, so we slowed to a stroll and paused to peer into every room. Whenever we happened upon something he enjoyed, he pointed it out and gave me its history. I was surprised to find that many of the things in the palace were his personal treasures, not just things bought to adorn the place. Vax had a huge collection that he'd hidden when he felt his magic dwindling.

“I didn't realize the Sea Dragons knew what was coming,” I said.

Vaxarion's expression tightened. “We heard about Karadas's imprisonment. Many of us tried to free him, but it was impossible. The magic of our goddess trapped him. But we didn't know that her magic would cut us off from his—that without the connection to our source, we would dwindle until we fell into hibernation. Then we started to weaken. Once that happened, it wasn't hard to guess what was coming.”

“So, you prepared for it.”

“Yes. The strongest of us built secret fortresses within caves. I made one for my entire dread, and we sealed ourselves inside it with the last of our strength, casting a ward over the entrance.”

“You took care of your people,” I murmured.

“I always take care of what's mine.” He lifted my hand to kiss it, but then his

attention caught on something behind me. “Ah! Look, Zix. You wanted to know what a sea butterfly is. Here they are.”

I turned to see the aquarium perched on a solid cabinet, its frame adorned with gold and jewels. Inside, among anemones and coral, swam delicate little creatures that appeared to have wings. They were fins, of course, and they rippled more than they fluttered, but they did resemble butterfly wings and the bodies they were attached to were slender and black, strengthening the illusion. They were beautiful things, and every last one of them was purple.

“So, it's because of the color of my hair?” I lifted a brow at the King.

“And the way it shimmers.” Vax motioned to the butterflies. “You see? Look at how the light catches on their fins.”

“Your hair does the same thing.”

“No, it doesn't. My hair is too dark for that. Yes, my darkness shines with many colors, but not like you, Zixin.” He lifted my hand and kissed it right over my scales. “You are light. You shine like nothing else.”

I gaped at him.

“Like their cousins on land, sea butterflies go through a transformation. They are born as lowly worms but then build tubes to hibernate in. During that hibernation, they transform into these lovely little creatures. I keep aquariums full of them because just looking at them brings me such joy. That's what you do for me, Zix. You make me happy. And you've transformed me too. I am not the same man who came out of hibernation. You have carried me with you, born me upon your beautiful wings to fly my soul to heights it has never known.”

“Holy fuck,” I whispered. Then louder, “Stop saying shit like that! I can't compete. I don't know how to speak like that.” I waved at myself. “Pirate.”

Vax laughed boisterously. “This isn't a competition, Mate. I don't need pretty words from you. You've told me you love me and that's all I want to hear.”

“Thank the Gods,” I muttered. “Because . . . fuck. That was the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“So?” He lifted his brow at me.

“All right,” I huffed. “You can call me your butterfly.”

“My sea butterfly?”

“Fuck, Vax. Call me whatever you want, as long as I can call you mine.”

Vaxarion's smile was incandescent. Even more beautiful than his words or those damn sea bugs. “You see? You do just fine, my sea butterfly.”

I shook my head and wrapped my arms around his waist. “How have I never heard of those things?”

He stroked my hair back. “Not even I know all the creatures of the sea.” Then he leaned down and kissed me.

“Your Majesty!” Yavess came running into the parlor.

Or was it a sitting room? A living room? Fuck, I couldn't remember what Vax had called it. It was a room full of his stuff and it had some seats in it, too. All the better for His Majesty to sit and watch the butterflies.

Vax broke our kiss slowly, then looked up. “Hello, Yavess.”

“Oh, Your Majesty!” Yavess clasped his hands before his chest. “I’m overjoyed to see you outside of your apartments.” He paused to look us over. “So, you have . . . ?” He lifted his brows.

“I’ve told Zix that he’s my mate, yes,” Vax said.

“Thank the Gods,” Yavess muttered.

“You knew?” I glared from Vax to Yavess. “You told him, but not me?”

“I didn’t have to tell Yavess,” Vax said. “He scented the mating.”

“Scented it?” I scowled. Then I realized what he meant. My stare shot back to Yavess. “You could smell his cum on me?”

Vax snorted a laugh as Yavess went red.

“It wasn’t cum,” Vax said. “That was my essence. Mating essence. Zix, it held a piece of my soul.”

“It did what now?” I whispered. Then I remembered Lock. He was immortal now because the King of Racul had shared his Dragon immortality with him. I just hadn’t known the King had shared it through cum. I mean essence. “Wow. No wonder it was the best sex of my life.”

Vax chuckled, then said, “Yavess, I’d like to celebrate our mating as soon as possible and introduce Zixin to the dread.”

“Yes, Your Majesty! I’ll plan a feast for tonight.”

“Wonderful. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Your Majesty.” Yavess bowed and hurried off.

“They truly love you, don't they?” I asked. “Because you cared for them. You made sure they were safe while you hibernated.”

Vax shrugged and led me out into the corridor. We headed after Yavess, but at a much slower speed.

“Are you going to explain how you infected me with your soul?” I asked.

“I don't believe it requires an explanation. Within my mating essence were little pieces of my soul. The magic merged those pieces with your soul when you absorbed my essence, and we were united for all time.”

I blinked at him.

He smirked. “I suppose it did need an explanation.”

“You . . . your soul is really in my soul?”

“Yes.”

Memories rose. The ache in my chest when I left him. The sorrow. The longing. That feeling that I'd never be happy without him. I stopped walking and stared at Vax.

Vax stopped and turned toward me. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I whispered. Then, in a strong voice, I repeated, “Nothing at all. Everything is finally very right.”

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There was no subtlety when it came to the Sea King. Wherever he went, he was recognized. He was hard not to notice with all that shimmering hair, shifting through the colors of an opal. Darkness? Please. His hair was black, but that's all the darkness to him. King Vaxarion was a glorious, shimmering creature. His smiles set men and women to swooning and he took great delight in teasing people into smiling in return. He was as lighthearted as he'd said, which I hadn't believed until I witnessed it. Now that he had me, he could return to his old self. Just without the multitude of lovers. And I'd never have to worry about that changing. A mated Dragon didn't stray. I assumed it was the same for mated Sea Dragons.

“And this is the theater I designed.” Vax waved his hand out the carriage window.

Yes, we had left the palace. Vax was eager to show me everything. All his accomplishments. The things he'd built and inspired to be built. It felt as if he were wooing me, trying to impress me, but I was already his. He didn't have to go through all of this. And that made it even sweeter. Most of the ride I spent staring at him instead of the things he pointed out.

“Zix, are you listening?” Vax asked.

“Yes, you designed the theater,” I said and finally looked at it. “It's stunning, Vax.”

“Thank you.” He beamed, drawing my attention back to him. “I'll take you there tomorrow night. Tonight we have our mating feast.”

“Yes.” I grinned. “I remember.”

Vax took my hand. "I should have asked earlier, but do your people have a mating ceremony?"

"We don't call it mating, but I think there's a ceremony for committing your life to another's."

"You think?"

I cleared my throat and looked away. "I was ten when I was taken, and Teng didn't talk about that kind of stuff. It's not really what pirates do. We commit ourselves to the ship."

"I'm sorry." He slid his arm around me and pulled me in against his side. "I would hunt those Gashi down if they lived. As it is, I will have to appease myself with the Hulfrin."

"Vax, don't," I said. "Leave it be. Leave them be."

"You think they're hunting your friends. Killing them would eliminate their threat. Your family would be safe."

That sank in. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Then it's decided," Vax said gleefully. "I will hunt down those Hulfrin bastards and punish them for daring to hurt my mate."

"It feels wrong," I whispered. "We were in the wrong. I would have done the same as Captain Aras."

"That's the dead man's name? Aras?"

“Vax, I'm serious. He was in his rights.”

“To take you? Maybe. But not to hurt you.”

“Vax, you need to understand how pirates see the world. We're thieves and we know it. We don't hold grudges against people who try to defend themselves or retrieve what we've taken. We see it as part of the adventure. We know the risks. I know the risks, and I don't blame Aras for doing everything he could to get his property back. What we took is very valuable, so I—”

“You never did tell me what it was that you stole from them.”

“Didn't I?” I frowned, trying to remember.

“No, you started to, but never finished.”

“Oh.” A shiver ran through me as I remembered the old man's face. The stark terror in it. “Uh, have you ever heard of Ensarena's Eye?”

Vax went still. Not in a frightened way. More like a predator who had scented his next meal. “Yes, I am familiar with the gem. Why do you ask?”

“That's what we took. Teng still has it. He's going to try to sell it.”

Vax leaned out the window and shouted, “Stop the carriage!”

We came to a halt.

As I gaped at him, Vaxarion jumped out of the carriage, then reached in to help me out. I climbed out as he said to the driver, “Go back to the palace and tell Yavess that I'm leaving the city for a while. And send the rest of my King's Guard after me. Tell

them to track us. I can't waste another moment.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

The two Sea Dragon knights who had come with us, climbed off the back of the carriage as it turned around. They came to stand before the King without a word, just waiting for his command.

“Vax, what are you doing?” I sputtered as he started to strip.

“Hold my clothes for me, Mate.” He shoved his royal garments into my arms.

He glanced at his guards and nodded. They began to strip too. Right there, on the sidewalk.

“What's happening?” I demanded.

“We need to find the Lu-Ken,” Vax said. “Immediately.”

“Why?”

He just kept shoving clothes at me.

“Vax, you're scaring the fuck out of me!”

“Be calm, Mate,” Vax said. “I will get us to your family with all haste. And then they will be safe.”

“And then? And then they will be safe? That means they're currently in danger.”

“Of course, they're in danger. You knew that when you left.”

Before I could respond, he shifted. Horses shrieked, not because he became a sea dragon but because he took up the entire road, halting a carriage on its way toward us. People exclaimed and pointed as water gathered around my lover and he swam upward, into the stream, his talon closing around me as he did. In seconds, we were bursting through the ward, the King's manifested river dissipating into the sea. Behind us, two other sea dragons swam.

“Which direction did they go?” Vax asked in my mind.

“Northeast,” I said. “They'll go through Bosrae, along the eastern channel, so they can come down closest to Racul. Teng has friends there, one of whom is the Duke.”

“Good. But I hope to reach him before he gets that far.”

A shiver went down my spine, and I was filled with regret for not telling Vax about the Eye sooner. I didn't know what he thought would happen to my family, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that it wouldn't be good.

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We found the Lu-Ken a few hours later. The trip was both surprisingly fast and excruciatingly long. When I spotted the bottom of the hull, looming above us like a whale, I went limp with relief. And then we were rising out of the water, a stream of it coming with us, and Vax shifted into his man form to place us both upon the main deck. The rest of his guards had caught up with us along the way, so shortly after Vax and I landed on deck, we were surrounded by twelve more naked Sea Dragons.

“It's me!” I called out even as the crew scurried to defend themselves. “Stand down!”

“Stand down!” Teng repeated as he ran down the steps from the poop deck. “Zix!”

I shoved Vaxarion's clothes at him just before Teng embraced me. “Hey.”

“What are you doing here?” Teng stepped back.

Around us, the crew drew closer, warily watching the Sea Dragons get dressed (some of them watching with more interest than others).

“I told King Vaxarion about our haul,” I said.

Teng's eyes widened. “Oh? Are you an interested buyer, Your Majesty?”

“I'm interested in protecting my mate's family.”

Teng froze.

“Did he say mate?” one of the crew asked.

“Do Sea Dragons have mates?”

“Karadas gave the Sea Dragons mating magic,” I said loudly. “I’m his mate. Which makes all of you very fucking lucky bastards. Because now you have King Vaxarion’s protection.”

“You’re his mate?” Teng asked me.

“Yes,” Vaxarion answered for me. “And you’re his father, are you not?”

Teng lifted his chin. “I am.”

“Then you’re my family too. If you need payment for the Eye, I will provide it. But we cannot allow it to fall into the hands of a Land Dragon. Serai will not survive that.”

“Serai?”

“Imagine a Land Dragon in possession of the Goddess’s Fire? Pure Fire Magic. Even if they were honorable, the power is not meant for one of them. It’s why the stone was hidden in the sea. It seduces its master and makes them believe they’re a god too. And no good comes of it. The last Land Dragon to possess Ensarena’s Eye incinerated an entire city. Fortunately, he burned himself to ash along with everything else.”

“Dragons are immune to fire,” Teng said.

“Not the Eye’s fire. Not at the level it was channeled. And that bitch goddess didn’t care that her magic had fallen into the hands of one of her children. She didn’t stop him.”

“Maybe allowing him to burn to ash was her way of stopping him,” I said.

Vax grimaced. “Perhaps. But if so, that is nearly as bad as doing nothing. That Eye belongs with the Sea Dragons where it will be safe. Only we can ensure that no Land Dragon gets its claws on such power.”

Teng considered this. “But that also means a Land Dragon would pay immensely for it.”

“Teng!” I snapped.

He grinned at me. “I’m just teasing, kid. Come with me, Your Majesty. We can talk about suitable recompense. I’ll give you the family discount.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes but just before we reached the door, a roar echoed above us. I spun to see a crimson dragon on the horizon closing in fast.

Vax narrowed his eyes at the dragon and grinned. “It appears there’s no time for negotiations.”

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Vax started stripping again. “Stay here, Mate.”

“What are you going to do?” I demanded.

“Handle this.”

“Vax!” I grabbed his arm.

Meanwhile, Teng asked, “Who the fuck is that?”

“That is King Lyrandir,” Vax said with a glance at me. “You didn't mention that he was involved.”

“Why do you think you found me in his castle?” I shot back.

Vax grunted.

King Lyrandir roared again and fear shot down my spine.

“Do not be afraid,” Vax said and kissed my cheek. “I will not let him hurt you or your family.”

And then my mate was rising into the air through a column of water, shifting as he went. His guards did the same until a line of sea dragons hovered behind the stern of our ship, facing off with the solitary dragon. The sight was something to behold. The Water Magic of the sea dragons joined, creating a long cloud of water like a floating aquarium. Within it, their beautiful fins undulated while the sun brought out the

vibrant colors of their scales and whiskers. Colors that the depths of the sea normally muted. So stunning, but also fearsome. Teeth bared, claws spread, and tails lashed. These men weren't about to let anything pass them. And their king was front and center.

I gazed up at Vax in awe. This was the man I would spend the rest of my life with. A man who could become a magnificent beast and defend me. I wouldn't have to fight anymore. I wouldn't have to fear. But I did fear. Just not for myself. Even seeing how outnumbered King Lyrandir was, I was afraid for Vax. Because in our brief encounter, I'd seen the savagery of the land king and his determination.

Sure enough, King Lyrandir didn't turn back when he saw what awaited him. He kept coming. Although he did stop and hover. That's when his King's Guard caught up to him—a flight of dragons in V formation like a flock of birds. Seeing them confirmed that my fears were justified.

“Give me the Eye!” I said urgently to Teng.

He didn't hesitate, just spun and ran for the door. I followed him into the shadows of the corridor, even as the rumble of dragon voices filled the air. My hearts stuttered to leave Vax out there, but I knew I had to secure Ensarena's Eye. If I didn't, King Lyrandir would keep pursuing my family.

Teng and I rushed into his cabin. He went to the secret compartment below his bed and kicked it. It popped open to reveal a stash of treasure. Among his valuables sat a plain black pouch. He snatched it up and tossed it to me.

“He'll protect you?” Teng asked urgently.

“Yes, of course. You're the one I'm worried about.” I hugged Teng. “I have to be seen with this. Maybe we can draw them away.”

He nodded. “Zix, be careful.”

“You too.” Then we hurried back out to the main deck.

The dragons, both land and sea, were arguing. Vax had his head out of the water so he could speak aloud, and it was indeed loud.

“You had my mate!” Vax roared. “Your people tortured him!”

“They are not my people. And how were they to know he was your mate?”

“Regardless, he is, and I will avenge his suffering.”

“Fine. I will forgive the damage to my castle. But your mate stole something that belongs to me. I will have it now.”

“Yes, Ensarena's Eye,” Vax growled. “That does not belong to you. It is not for any Dragon. I have taken it into my keeping and will secure it somewhere beneath the sea, back where it was before it was stolen from us. ”

“That is a Land Dragon's gem! You cannot hope to use it. Your people took it from mine!”

“No. One of your kind nearly destroyed the world with the Eye. The power consumed him, fooled him into believing he was a god, and he burned for it. After his death, my people took the Eye into their keeping, urged into doing so by Karadas himself.”

“That was thousands of years ago,” King Lyrandir said. “We have grown stronger since then. I can handle the Eye.”

“I don't know if that's true, but I'm unwilling to take the risk.”

“Hand it over or I shall burn that ship with your mate aboard.”

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered.

“You dare to threaten my mate?!” Vaxarion roared. “You are the lowest of scum! And now I am certain you are unfit to wield the Eye.”

Vaxarion's guards joined him in roaring, though theirs was without words. Every sea dragon up there was prepared to defend me. But it was my family who I worried about. I looked at Teng.

“Zixin,” Teng said in a warning tone.

“I'll be all right. Don't worry about me. Just get everyone out of here when you have the chance.”

Teng nodded, then raced to the helm. “Rigging!”

Power gathered in the sky. The sea surged. Land dragons drew in their breaths. And through it all, the crew of the Lu-Ken scurried to secure the sails.

“I have the Eye!” I shouted.

Every dragon in the sky looked at me. My mate was the only one who didn't seem surprised.

I held the Eye aloft, letting King Lyrandir get a good look at it, then said, “And you will never have it!” Clutching it in my fist, I dove overboard.

As I entered the water, the land dragons roared. Sea dragons roared back. I swam deeper and deeper at an angle. A current hit me. I looked back. The Lu-Ken was

moving at an impossible speed away from the dragons. It had to be Vaxarion's magic. He was protecting my family.

Love shot through me. Vax knew I'd worry about them, so he saw to their safety first. Only when they were on their way, moving faster than a Land Dragon could fly, did he dive in after me.

Claws closed around me and drew me in against a scaled chest. Glorious fins of turquoise and green wafted around me for a second before shooting back, driven straight by our speed. Going still in my mate's grasp, I looked up at the surface. Flares of orange shone through the rippled water. Fire. The land dragons were not happy. Then my eyes widened as one of them dove after us, the water parting around him to form a bubble.

“He's chasing us! I forgot that they have Water Magic now.” I shrieked into Vax's mind.

“Yes, but this is my kingdom, and their Water Magic is only half of what mine is.”

With those words, a powerful current shot behind us, sending King Lyrandir shooting back into the sky. His enraged roar followed us, but he couldn't. Because a geyser guarded our backs and with magic giving us speed, we were out of his sight within seconds. And land dragons can't track through water.

“Are you still propelling the Lu-Ken?” I asked.

“No, not consciously,” Vax said . “But I sent the magic with them, directing it on a course for Racul. They will not stop until they reach that shore.”

“Thank you.”

“I am relieved that we reached them in time.”

“Just in time.” I paused. “How did he even find them? Land Dragons can't track across the water.”

“That may be different now that they have Water Magic.”

“Shit.”

“Yes. But I don't believe King Lyrandir will pursue the Lu-Ken. They don't have what he's after. It's a waste of time for him.”

“Unless he thinks he can exchange them for the Eye.”

Vax didn't respond immediately. Then he said, “Let us hope that they seek sanctuary with their royal ally. King Lyrandir will be less inclined to go after them if he must fight another Dragon king for them.”

“Yeah. Let's hope.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

We didn't go to Shasenai. Instead, we went north of it and into a deep crevasse. I clutched the Eye, hoping, as instructed, that King Lyrandir would give up on the Lu-Ken. But I knew he wouldn't stop chasing us. What would he do? I hadn't considered that Land Dragons could come to the sea kingdoms. King Lyrandir wouldn't be able to bring his army, but he could bring his dread. The idea of Shasenai under siege made me shudder. But, as Vax had said, this was his kingdom. His world. Attacking him here wasn't wise.

At last, Vax dove and spun, coming to a rest on a ledge before a dark cave. It looked familiar. He set me down, shifted into his man body, and strode into the darkness. I followed without question, and he took my hand. As an undersea man, I had great eyesight, even in such conditions, so I didn't need Vax to lead me. But I wouldn't have been able to go much further without his magic parting the ward that met us.

Beyond the ward, the tunnel opened up and branched out. Vax continued through the winding passage, lights in coral cages coming on as he approached. The walls were rough stone, and the ground was sandy, nothing unusual in the tunnels beyond the lights. But I recognized this place.

“This is where you brought me to heal,” I said.

“Yes. I knew you'd be safe here,” Vax said.

I processed that as we passed the cave we had stayed in, then I asked, “Is this where you hibernated?”

“Yes. And where I stored my treasures. The Eye will be safe here.”

I didn't respond, but he must have sensed my concern because he said, "Don't worry, Mate. Everything will be all right."

"We just made an enemy of a Dragon king whose kingdom borders yours. This is not good, Vax. Not good at all."

"But today is also the day we have become true mates and declared our love for each other. That makes it very good indeed."

"Oh, no! We're going to miss our celebration."

"No, we won't. They will wait for us."

"Yeah, I guess they have to."

Vax sent a chuckle into my mind before saying, "This will only take a moment, and then we'll go home."

"Home. I like the sound of that."

"And I like that you like it." He squeezed my hand. "Ah, here we are."

Vax came to a wall. It was seamless, with no door or even a line of demarcation. Then he placed his palm on the stone. The stone shimmered and vanished, revealing another passage. He drew me into it, but his guards remained behind, taking posts to either side of the archway and down the corridor.

"Nice trick," I said.

"Thank you. It's a ward connected to me. Only I can open it."

We entered a huge space. A few shelves stood along the rock walls, but nothing else. It was utterly empty. Probably because all of Vaxarion's treasures now resided in his palace. Wait. There was one thing on a shelf. A tiny black box.

I went to it and held it up. “Did you know this was here?”

Vax smiled as he took it from me. “Yes. It's the only thing I wanted to protect more than I wanted to enjoy.”

He opened the box and angled it toward me. On the glossy black coral surface inside sat a necklace. Its thick, gold chain was coiled neatly, and a pendant rested atop. My gills widened, sucking in more water as I leaned closer. The jewel was round and faceted, gleaming even in the low light. But then, diamonds always shine brighter in the shadows.

“Holy shit,” I said. “That's the biggest diamond I've ever seen.”

Vax lifted it from the box and held it before me to dangle on its chain. It swayed gently in the water, making rainbows on our skin. “It belonged to my mother. This is all I have left of my parents.”

“Oh.” I looked up at him. “Fuck. I'm sorry, Vax. I never thought to ask about your parents.”

“Don't be sorry. I had many years with them while you had only a part of your childhood. I was lucky. And so were they. They lived long lives before an accident took them. And I'm glad they died together instead of one having to mourn the other.”

“I barely remember my parents now.”

“Your time with them was too short.”

“I thought all the Sea Dragons were made by Karadas? I didn't know there was a second generation.”

“We lived here for over a thousand years before Karadas was imprisoned. Although we didn't reproduce often. I believe there are only three generations, but there could be four. I'm from the third.”

“Then you're younger than I thought.”

He grinned at me. “Yes. I'm considered young by my people.”

“That explains your personality.”

“Oh?”

“How playful you are.”

“So, you thought I was an old man who acted like a child?”

“Stop twisting my words.” I shoved at his chest.

His grin widened. Then he lifted the necklace and slid it over my head.

“What are you doing?” I asked even as I stared at the diamond, enraptured.

“It belongs on your neck. My father once gave it to my mother, and now, I want you to have it.”

“What?” My stare jerked up to his face. “I can't take your—”

“My mother would be overjoyed to know that we have mates now, and that I've given

her favorite jewel to mine.” He laid his palm over the diamond and one of my hearts. “It will bring me great joy to see you wearing it.”

“Well, if it makes you happy.” I smirked.

Vax pulled me into his arms, and I eagerly lifted my lips to his. Our groans were more vibration than sound, rippling through us and the water, but nonetheless powerful. They spoke of all the love that had grown between us and how it would grow even more over the years to come. It spoke of longing fulfilled and unwanted happiness that was all the sweeter for the surprise of it. And above all, it spoke of lust. Pure, powerful lust.

I ground against Vax, and he pulled me closer. With him naked, I couldn't resist gripping his shaft and pumping it.

“We shouldn't do this here,” he said.

“Just let me suck you off.” I dropped to my knees.

“There's my pirate.” Vax grinned and shook his head, but not to say no. “Well, if you insist.”

His hand slid possessively but tenderly over my loose hair, smoothing it back so he could watch me take him into my mouth. I stared up at him, the heat in his eyes making it so much better. I did that to him. Me. And it would only be me who did that to him for the rest of our lives. Vax had given me his greatest treasure. Because I was now his greatest treasure. I knew it in my bones. And I wanted to show him how much I treasured him in return. No, a blow job doesn't sound so romantic, but I made it so.

I moved over Vax slowly at first, then tightened my lips and sped up. My cock

strained my pants, but this was about him. I wanted to focus on Vax. Let him see that he was more important to me than my needs. I tongued his tip and took him deeper.

“Zix. Oh, fuck. Zixin. My sea butterfly. Just like that. Soon, Mate. Will you drink me?”

“Will I swallow? Fuck, yes, Your Majesty. I want to taste you.”

His hand clenched in my hair. “I love it when you drink me. I love knowing that you have more of me inside you.”

“Oh, fuck. Vax. You're going to make me come before I make you come.”

“Let me see it. Take your cock out of your pants.”

Urgently, I freed myself. My dick sprang forth into the cold water, but my body was made for the sea. The temperature made my balls clench in the best way. My hips canted forward, and Vax made a happy rumble as he started to pump into my mouth.

“Stroke yourself,” he said.

“No, this is about you.”

“And I want to see you stroke yourself, Mate.”

“Fuck.” I grabbed my dick with one hand while I kept a grip on his base with the other. Then I stroked. Twice. It was all I needed to come.

Cum spurt into the water, spiraling out in a ribbon before gently falling to the ground. Vax locked up against me as soon as he saw it, and even as I shuddered through the end of my climax, he emptied into my mouth. I expected him to tighten his hold on

my head and hold me pressed tightly against his pelvis, but he didn't. His hands did clench in my hair, and he locked up against me, but there was no anger in him anymore and it gentled his actions. His salty flavor heightened my pleasure, sending me into a spasm. But I held still around Vax, taking all he offered until there was nothing left. For now.

Sucking him clean, I moved away and tucked my cock back in my pants. My mate helped me to my feet and kissed me again.

As we kissed, he said, "If that is how you react to presents, I will shower you in them."

"Oh, it is! It is!" I said eagerly.

He smiled in peaceful joy and stroked my cheek. "We must go. Give me the Eye."

I stepped back and pulled the Eye out of my pocket. It gleamed in a darker way than my diamond. A way that made me shudder.

Vax took the jewel and put it in the coral box that had held his mother's necklace. He closed it, then bent to dig a hole in the sand. I widened my eyes at that. Even his treasure room didn't feel secure enough for him. He had to hide the Eye in the warded room.

When Vax had a hole deep enough for his liking, he dropped the box in, then covered it up and smoothed the sand so there was no hint that it had been disturbed. Nodding to himself, he took my hand, then led me out of his treasure room.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

We made it back to Shasenai in time for our celebration feast. All right, we were a little late, but, just as Vax said they would, they had waited for us. We walked into an enormous dining hall to the sound of applause.

Low, black, glossy tables of the sort preferred by undersea folk sat in rows to either side of an aisle that led to a space used either for dancing or entertainment. I've only been in one other royal dining hall, that of the Royal Castle of Racul. Our whole crew had gone, invited by Duke Lock, ex-assassin and close friend of Teng. King Tarocvar's dining hall had a similar setup to this one, though the tables were higher and had chairs instead of the cushioned backrests the Sea Dragons used. Again, similar to that other dining hall, Vaxarion's table was set on a dais and he actually had a seat. Though higher than the others, the King's table wasn't as tall as those found on land but was the perfect height for his wide, low, heavily carved, black-lacquered throne.

Nodding and smiling at his court, Vax led me down the aisle and up to the dais. The applause died down as he let me go and waved at his throne. It was more of a daybed than a chair, with a broad and deep seat surrounded by a low railing. A railing, not an armrest. The frame was to rein in the cylindrical pillows that bordered the main cushion and served as armrests. There were additional pillows to support the King's back, all of them made of silk and embroidered by hand. The perfect fodder for a pillow fight.

I restrained the urge to pick up a pillow and whack the King. Instead, I sat down on one side of the seat, leaving a good five feet for Vax to settle in. He chose to sit in the center of the throne. I wasn't sure if it was simply where he normally sat or because he wanted to sit pressed up against me. Then he slid an arm around me.

Yup, it was the latter. And I was good with that.

With another nod from the King, servants rushed out of a door on our left, the first of the group streaming up to the dais, all smiles as they deposited platters of steaming delicacies before us. I thanked them before they hurried off and then reached for one of the serving spoons.

“Allow me,” Vax said and snatched up the spoon before I could.

I chuckled. “Oh, you're going alpha on me?”

“I have always been the alpha.”

“You know, just because you're a top, it doesn't make you the alpha.”

“Of course not,” he huffed, as if that were an offensive suggestion. “It's because I'm the King.”

I rolled my eyes. Mainly because he had a point, and I couldn't think of anything to say. But then Vax was filling my plate with mouth-watering food and I didn't give a fuck about alpha shit. Buttery shellfish, grilled vegetables, crispy fried fish, hot bread, and even pork stew from the surface. Actually, there were a lot of delectables from the surface served, including the wine he poured for me. I was shocked by the spread, and I'd been prepared to be impressed.

“Are those sesame balls?” I reached for a little bowl heaped high with deep-fried balls covered in sesame seeds.

Vax grabbed the bowl before I could and brought it closer to me. “Yes, I hired a chef from Rasokai, and he often prepares treats from his homeland. Do you like these?”

“I love them!” I grabbed several and popped one into my mouth while I held onto the others. The dough was sweet and chewy, filled with a lightly sweet custard. “So good!”

“I’ll have him make them more often,” Vax promised.

“Not too often,” I said. “I don’t want to get sick of them.”

“Unlike me, who you’ll never get sick of.” He winked at me.

“No, I’ll never get sick of you, Your Majesty.”

“You’re permitted to use my first name in public now, my sea butterfly.”

“Well, fuck. If you’re calling me that in public, you can bet your fine ass I’m calling you Vax.”

Vaxarion laughed boisterously, and the sound made several members of his court smile. I saw some relief in their eyes too. They must have worried endlessly for their king while he fought his need to be with his mate. Shit. He had done something most Land Dragons deemed virtually impossible, and he’d done it at the worst time in our mating. Dragons were supposed to be savage directly after mating. Primal. Lost to their beasts. If something happened to keep them from their mates, they went bonkers. As in, run-for-your-lives bonkers.

Sitting there, finally having a moment’s peace to think it all through, I found myself reeling in wonder. Not just over what Vax had been through, but also the fact that I was mated to a Sea Dragon! A king. Vax. He was mine forever. We were bound in a way that no one could break, not even us. It was astonishing. A pirate and a king. Wow!

“What are you thinking, my sea butterfly?” Vax asked.

I snorted. “I can't take you seriously when you call me that. You sound like a bard.”

Vax chuckled. “Very well. What's on your mind, Mate?”

“You, of course.” I shook my head. “I can't believe you chose me.”

“I didn't.”

“Excuse me?” I scowled at him.

He leaned down to kiss me. Just a quick peck and then a nuzzle before he said, “I did choose you for bedding, but the magic chose you for me. And I'm glad it did because it knew better than I what I needed.”

“Yeah, all right. You turned that shit around.”

Vaxarion's hand slid down my back to rest just above my ass. “I should have kept you my slave for longer. Maybe it would have taught you some respect.”

I snorted. “I respect you. But I'm your mate now. That means I can call you on your shit.”

“Call me on my shit?”

“Yes. I can point out when you've said or done something wrong.”

“Ah. Yes, you have that right. You're a duke now, outranked only by me.”

“Thanks, but I knew that.”

He nodded. "Because you have a duke friend."

"That's right. Well, he's more Teng's friend, but yes. Lock's union is even more shocking than ours."

"How is ours shocking? Sea Dragons take lovers outside our race all the time."

"But I'm a pirate."

"No one down here cares about that, especially not me."

"True." I slid my hand on his thigh. "Maybe it's only shocking to me."

"Why?"

"Because I never thought I'd get anyone as incredible as you, much less form an eternal bond with him."

"That is an excellent answer," Vax said with a happy rumble.

"At least I'm not a human."

"I only know of one other Sea Dragon king who has mated, and he mated a human."

"No, he didn't," I scoffed.

Vax beamed at me. "Yes, he did. A human from another world."

"Shut up! Now, I know you're teasing me."

"No, it's the truth. When the Dragon Gods fought, it opened rifts through space and

pulled two men here from another world. Both men mated Dragon kings—one on land and one in the sea.”

A shiver ran over my arms. “You're serious.”

“Yes.”

“Two men from another world?”

He nodded. “Both human.”

“There are humans in other worlds?”

“Yes. Their world only has humans as the higher life-form.”

I snorted. “That can't be true.”

“It is. Unless both men were lying, which I doubt. They gave their tales separately. And both described the same type of world.”

“And one mated a Land Dragon while the other mated a Sea Dragon?”

“Yes.”

“Doesn't that seem strange to you?”

“That is most definitely strange. But then, it was caused by the Gods.”

“No, I mean with who they mated. That two men were brought to our world is amazing enough, but then for the mating magic to bind them to Dragons—one of land and one of sea—makes it seem less random.”

“As if they were pulled through those rifts because of the mating magic?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“Interesting theory. Especially since it was divine Dragon magic that created the passages.”

“Your Majesty and Your Grace!” Yavess interrupted us.

Vax and I looked over to find Yavess standing in the space before the dais.

“On behalf of the Morilren Dread, I congratulate you on your mating. We are delighted that our king is the second Sea Dragon king to find his mate!”

The court cheered and applauded.

Vax nodded and grinned at them.

“To celebrate, I've prepared some special entertainment,” Yavess went on. “I hope it thrills, inspires, and delights you.”

Yavess clapped his hands and a group of half-dressed men and women from several of the undersea races came streaming up the aisle to line up before us. Yavess stepped back, then turned and went to his table, just to our right. As soon as he was settled, music started to play. The musicians came up the aisle and stood along the left wall while the first group began to dance.

Lithe bodies twirled and bent. Undulated. Hands tipped in claws trailed along dark indigo skin. Frilled ears twitched as lips brushed them. Tentacles clung to muscular thighs.

I cleared my throat and shifted my shaft into a more comfortable position. As a pirate, I'd seen many erotic and exotic performances. I had even watched them with my chosen lover for the evening. But those performances had been in dark taverns or around campfires, once even on the deck of the Lu-Ken. They were not in a royal dining hall while I sat next to my mate.

I swallowed past the dryness in my throat as a Kaikeyo's hand adhered to a Leeya's pale pearlescent stomach, locked in place by the suction cups on his fingers. The Leeya—a woman—moaned and bent backward, her beaded nipples poking through the wispy fabric of her top. The Kaikeyo bent his head to brush his cheek against one of those nipples. While he did that, one of his chin tentacles reached out and wrapped around the Leeya's other breast. And squeezed.

What the fuck? How far was this going to go?

As I gaped at the “dancing” couples who were beginning to moan and lose some of the clothing they couldn't afford to lose, Vax's hand slid around my waist. My stare shot to him. He was smiling softly, and that smile distracted me long enough for him to undo my trousers. But when his hand found my cock, I jerked out of my daze.

“What are you doing?” I hissed as I shoved his hand away.

Vax chuckled and whispered in my ear, “Look around, Zix. It's acceptable.”

Other couples were stroking each other as they watched the dancers. Even Yavess had pulled one of the Kaikeyo slaves onto his lap and was sucking on her plump breasts absently as he watched the performance.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “I've heard stories about Sea Dragon courts, but I wasn't expecting this. Are we going to fuck right here?”

“We could if you wished to.” He shrugged. “But most people choose to take the final act elsewhere. This is just the appetizer.” His hand went back into my pants and gripped me. “Is this all right?”

My breath came faster. I barely got out the, “Yeah.”

His thumb circled the head of my cock, spreading the liquid that had gathered there. “I’d like you to straddle me, Mate.”

“You would?” I glanced around.

Most of the court was busy with their partners, though they still watched the dancers as they, uh, got busy too. No one was watching us. A thrill raced down my spine. How fun would it be to celebrate our mating by actually mating in front of the court? All right, maybe not that far, but perhaps a little oral?

I licked my lips and straddled the Sea King. Vax growled happily and transferred his grip to my ass. Without his hold, my cock flopped against his belly. But then I shifted back so I could undo his pants. The King’s cock burst free—a thing of elegance and primal power. My mouth watered.

Grinning at him, I yanked the pillows out from behind him and put them to either side of us. Facing him, with those pillow walls up, it almost felt as if we were alone. But then I heard the soft sounds of sex, and I looked over my shoulder. It was the dancers. They were naked now and going at it. I’d call it fucking, but they were too gentle about it, turning what could have been base into something as beautiful as their dancing. Groups of two, three, and more came together, their nude bodies shining under the floating lights. The curve of tight asses, lush breasts, and muscular thighs made me suck in some air, but my breath came shooting out when I spotted a thick, dark, Gashi cock slamming into a pearly Leeya ass.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned and spun back to my mate. “I don't think I can do this.”

Vax sat up and wrapped his arms around me. “You don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with, Zix.” He tucked me away and buttoned my pants.

I let out another breath, this one of relief. Then I put his cock away and fastened his pants. “I think I'd prefer to not share what we do with others.”

He grinned. “I think I'd prefer that too. I don't like the idea of other people seeing your nude body and coveting it.”

“You're a shapeshifter. Nudity shouldn't bother you.”

“It doesn't. But your nudity, viewed by lusty eyes, does. And you are not a shapeshifter.”

My lips twitched. I had to bite the lower one to keep from grinning. “I don't want other people to look at you like that either.”

“That pleases me.” He grabbed a sesame ball and held it up to my lips.

“This pleases me,” I said before gobbling up the ball.

“Have you had enough to eat, Mate?”

“Yes. I think I have.”

“Good. Then get up. I may not want to share you with my court, but I do want you. Now.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” I stood up and held a hand down to him.

Vax lifted a brow at my hand, gripped it, and stroked his thumb over the scales there.

“Stop teasing me,” I grumbled and pulled him to his feet.

“It's a promise, not a tease.” Suddenly, Vax snatched me up and tossed me over his shoulder.

We left the hall to the sound of scattered applause and cheering. Oh, and some deep moaning.

It was the best party I'd ever attended and all the better because we left early.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

At my urging, the Sea King set me down outside the dining hall, and we walked the rest of the way to his apartments hand-in-hand. Our apartments, I mean. It was starting to sink in that his home was now my home. I had a home. And not one that floated around on top of the sea. Not just a single room either. I lived in a palace.

But Vax didn't take me to our beautiful bedroom. Instead of heading up the stairs, he went out to the garden. The garden of ash.

It had been cleaned; the ashes gathered and the black stains scrubbed away. New trees, bushes, and flowers had been planted. But they would need time to fill in and flourish into what the old garden had been. It had a feeling of rebirth to it, all that freshly tilled soil and trimmed foliage, but under that was a lingering sorrow. The kind of pain Vax had suffered there couldn't be scrubbed away with soap and water. It had seeped into the stones.

“Vax,” I whispered. “I don't want to be here. I keep remembering you curled up among the ashes.”

“I as well,” Vax said as he lifted his chin and drew me down the bright stone path around the plants. “But I need to reclaim this place, Mate, and you're the only one who can help me do that.”

He took me to a grassy circle surrounded by trees. The sod was as fresh as everything else, doubtless imported from the surface. It was also surprisingly soft when he drew me down onto it. I looked up at the branches bowed over us and then past them to the sea. It lay against Vaxarion's ward, thousands of pounds of pressure, maybe more, all held back by the King's will. It was humbling to think about. As a whale passed over

us, I stared at its pale underbelly and shivered. To think that my lover could become a beast even larger than that whale was mind-blowing.

It had been many years since I'd spent so long underwater. I'd forgotten about the beauty down there. The lights of the city had been dimmed for the night, mimicking what was happening above the surface. But dim light was different from moonlight, and even without the whale of a reminder, I wouldn't have been deceived. I had a moment of anxiety and had to remind myself that I wouldn't be there constantly. I wasn't a prisoner. I was a duke. I had the freedom of the sea and the land.

I smiled as I looked down and found Vax staring at me, his eyes gone tender and his lips slightly parted.

“You are so beautiful, my sea butterfly,” Vax whispered as he reached for my hair. In seconds, he had my braid undone and was combing his fingers through it. “So very beautiful.”

I shook my head. “It baffles me that you think I'm the beautiful one.”

“Oh, I know I'm glorious,” he said in a teasing tone. “But your face was seared into my mind from the first moment I saw it.”

“Vax.” I took his hand from my hair and held it. “I'm so sorry you suffered without me.”

“Never apologize for that again, Mate.” He pulled me up to him.

I rose onto my knees and yanked off the fancy tunic I'd worn to dinner—courtesy of my royal mate. Then I surged to my feet and kicked off my new boots. My silk pants. My silkier undershorts. All gone. I stood before my lover nude, with him still fully dressed, and my cock hardened for him. It was also chest-level on him. Vax couldn't

resist grabbing it and giving it a few strokes.

“You're helping to banish those dark days already, Mate.” Vax took my hip and drew me closer so that I straddled his lap, then lowered his head to suck my cock.

As my mate twirled his tongue around me and massaged my sacs, I grabbed handfuls of his thick hair and steadied myself. With a groan, Vax took me deeper, his lips closing around me like fingers, then his tongue pressed up to add its velvety heat.

“Stop!” I cried. “I'm going to come!”

Vax growled but pulled away. “As much as I want to taste you, I think I'd prefer to see you consecrate the new garden with your desire. The sight of your cock streaming over the grass will be a strong memory to replace what happened here.”

I groaned. “Fuck. Stop talking or you'll make me come anyway.”

Vax stood up and grinned at me. “Then focus on undressing your mate.”

I grinned back. “That, I can do.”

I took my time removing the Sea King's clothing, enjoying the feel of his muscles beneath silk, velvet, and leather before pushing them away. A pile of clothing and shoes grew to our right. And then he was as naked as I, and I started to feel the thrill of being outside without being observed. This place was ours. Vax had been sad here, but that sadness had been for me. It was mine. I could claim it with him and turn it into something wondrous. Use all that shit to fertilize the soil.

I pulled Vaxarion's head down to mine and kissed him with my beautiful intentions bubbling forth. He seemed to feel it, maybe through our bond, because Vax shivered as he kissed me, then ended the kiss by sinking to his knees, his lips moving from my

mouth to my throat and down my chest. He laved at one of my nipples before resting his cheek on my belly and just hugging me.

A wave of contentment washed over me as I held Vax pressed against my stomach and stroked his hair. That silken wealth of shimmering darkness pooled around his powerful body. Talk about memories to replace the past. I would remember him like this forever. The sight of his dragon, curled up in despair, started to fade. And then Vax looked up at me and everything faded except for him. I fell into his amethyst stare and drowned in him.

It's impossible for a Neraky to drown, but the Sea King didn't believe in impossibilities.

“I love you,” Vax said.

I fell to my knees, sliding down through the ring of his arms, and kissed him again. I could have kissed him forever, just reveling in all he was and what we were together. But there were two hard cocks weeping between us, and they wouldn't be ignored. The heart could only overpower the body for so long, even when you had four of them beating in harmony. I canted my hips forward, and we groaned together, our flesh clashing in the best ways.

“I love you too,” I finally replied. “Always, Vax. No matter what happens, you have my hearts. All of them.”

He laid his palm on my chest to feel those three heartbeats, all working together to adore him. “I accept your offering and give you my heart in return. I only have one, but it's completely yours, Zixin.”

“It's all I need.”

And then we were kissing again, our hands moving over each other slowly at first, then more desperately. I sank onto the grass with my lover and rolled until he was beneath me. I needed to taste him, but I couldn't get to his cock without sucking at his tight nipples first. They were too luscious to pass by. And then I had to nibble at his belly and lick the line coming inward from his hip. At last, I was there, his hard flesh hitting me beneath the chin. I angled down to catch it in my mouth and grinned around it when I heard Vax suck in his breath. Oh, the power of giving a good blow job. Was there anything that felt so glorious?

Yeah, riding the cock that you got dripping wet. That would feel phenomenal.

I may have rushed the long, wet strokes after that thought hit. An urgent need to have my mate inside my channel was overtaking me. My mouth wasn't enough. Oh, but he did taste amazing. I ran my tongue up his length one more time before I got to my knees and straddled his waist.

“Lift your cock and sacs for me, Mate,” Vax said. “I want to see my flesh join yours.”

“Oh, you want to see it?” I grinned and turned to face his feet.

Another groan came from Vax, along with the feel of his broad hands on my ass. They spread me and earned me a third groan. Gripping his base, I angled myself down onto him, pushing and prodding until his plump tip breached my ring. We cried out together, and I shoved down, taking a few more inches. Then I rose and dropped again, going further. Once more and I pressed my ass into his pelvis. Firmly joined, I leaned forward and gave my mate an even better view.

“Great Gods,” Vax growled and pushed my cheeks apart again. “Look at you, stretched around me. So pink and wet. Ride me, Mate. Take all of me into your tight channel.”

I sat up, glanced at him over my shoulder, found his stare locked on where we were joined, and faced forward to grab his thighs. “Oh, I'm going to ride you hard, Mate. I want to hear you roar while you fill me.”

I began to pump and grind, pushing down and forward to drag my balls over his. Seeing our sacs together, I couldn't resist massaging them as one, my hands lifting and plumping as I continued to ride the Sea Dragon. His hands kept me spread and his breath came faster.

“Soon, Mate,” Vax growled. “I'm sorry. I can't last much longer. I've needed this all day.”

“I'll join you,” I promised, lifting one of my hands to stroke my cock.

“Oh, fuck.” He pulled me down with his grip on my ass and lifted his hips to drive even deeper into me.

But I didn't give up control. I kept riding, dropping to meet the King's passion, and it turned our sex into something wild, every drop a slap and every lift a slam. Vax let go of my ass and it jiggled. He slapped it. And that was what sent me over.

“Vax!” I shouted as my seed spurted over the grass, just as he wanted.

The Sea King always got what he wanted.

“My Zix,” Vax groaned. “Just a little more.”

“Don't worry, baby,” I panted as I shuddered. “I won't stop until you give me every last drop.” I looked over my shoulder to meet his stare. “Fill my ass with your cum.”

Vaxarion roared, his hips lifting one last time. So much power came with that final

thrust that my knees left the ground and it truly felt as if I was riding a beast. His cock drove deep and gave me what I was after. The heat of him filled me. No tingling absorption this time, but I liked the feeling of fullness too. His heat. After I ground my ass on him, making sure that I squeezed it all from him, I slid off his cock, and that fullness remained.

With a smile on my face, I nestled in against my mate on the grass. He gathered me close, kissed me, and fell asleep. I was right behind him. And so was the garden. It drifted off to dreams with us, the pain that had tainted it now transmuted into a pleasure so great, nothing could stain it.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

“Was that a normal celebration?” I asked Vax the next morning while we ate our breakfast in his private dining room.

A huge spread of food sat before us on the glossy, low table. His dining room was large enough to comfortably seat ten, and it felt as if his chefs were feeding the table's potential diners instead of the actual amount of people who were eating. But I knew nothing went to waste under the sea. Either the staff would finish our meal or it would be tossed into the water to feed the sea creatures.

I leaned against the enameled back of my floor seat—a sort of legless chair set on the ground to provide firmer back support than cushions alone. Vax was next to me, flowing into my space and around me. And I loved it. Loved him. Wanted to be as close to him as possible. Was it the mating magic? I didn't give a fuck. I was happy sitting there, giving him bites off my plate while he did the same for me. Blissful.

“No,” Vax said with a smirk. “That was a special celebration. You must remember that Sea Dragons are new to mating. Yavess probably thought there was no better entertainment at a mating celebration than actual mating.”

I snickered. “I suppose it makes sense. But I'm relieved that we won't have to flee dinner every night.”

“I'm relieved that you made us leave last night.” He lifted my hand and kissed it. “I was getting carried away by the moment and would have regretted my actions this morning if we'd gone any further.”

I lifted a brow at him.

“I told you that I don't want to share you. Not in any way.”

“Maybe tell that to Yavess.”

Vax burst out laughing. “As I said, we are still new to mating. I'll explain things to Yavess. He will learn. They all will.”

“That being said, I was excited by the show,” I whispered.

“You were?”

“Shouldn't the mating magic stop that from happening?”

“I don't know. I think it may be different with non-Dragons.” He thought about it. “Yet, I felt arousal as well. My desire was for you alone, but it was inspired by the dancers.”

“It was the same for me. I didn't want to have sex with the dancers, but I enjoyed watching them.”

Vax nodded. “That is the difference. We can be stimulated by outside influences, but love binds us and ensures that we only experience satisfaction with each other.”

I grinned. “And that's what matters. I don't care who stimulates you as long as you seek your release with me.”

He leaned in and kissed my cheek. “Exactly. Now, let's finish our breakfast. I want to take you out today.”

“Out where?”

“To the crab races.”

“Crab races, eh?” I chuckled. “It's been a while since I've seen one of those.”

“Then you've been to one already?”

“Many years ago, and it was just a small one in my old village. My parents took me.”

“Ah.” Vax smirked. “Then you haven't been to a true crab race. I'm glad to be the first to take you.”

“That good, huh?”

“They are very entertaining.”

“Hopefully, not as entertaining as the dancers last night.”

Vaxarion burst out laughing again. “I doubt it, but we'll have a private box in case such a need arises.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

“Very entertaining?” I asked and looked at Vax with wide eyes.

“Is this not what you expected?” Vax lifted a brow. “You said you'd been to one before.”

We were seated on padded thrones near the golden railing of the King's balcony box. It overlooked the arena where the races took place. In short, they were the best seats in the place. And the place was huge. An amphitheater capable of holding hundreds, if not thousands, it was packed to the top tiers for the crab race. The underwater folk, including many Sea Dragons, cheered and waved wildly as crabs ran the tracks.

“Yeah, it was a track maybe ten feet long and crabs no bigger than my hands. There were low walls to keep them in their lanes, and their handlers prodded them on the back to keep them going. It was nothing like this.”

I got up and leaned on the railing to watch the contestants scurry by. Three seconds at most and then they were past. Crabs could move quickly, but it helped that these were fucking monsters. The crabs, if you could even categorize all the shelled sea life down there as crabs, had pincers the size of a ship's anchor and protrusions sticking out of their shells that resembled horns. And they were massive. Large enough that if they were hollowed out, they could be used as carriages. They came in a variety of shapes, some oblong, some more square, and some were indescribable nebulous combinations. As if these crustaceans weren't deadly enough, metal tips had been fitted over their horns, and serrations added to their claws. Why? Because this wasn't a peaceful race.

There were no walls between the racing crabs. Just one broad lane. They were simply

set loose to scamper. And that meant a big cluster fuck of crabs running along the sandy track, bashing into each other to get to the end first. They didn't seem to know that there was no end. The track was an oval.

I winced as a bright crimson crab cracked the shell of a mottled blue crab. “Where did they get these crabs?”

Vax came up beside me. “They tend to stay in deep sea ravines. Their owners catch them and bring them here to race.”

“Wow. And how do they train them to run?”

“They get taught that at the end of the race, they're fed.”

“So, they're running to eat?” I looked at him.

“That's right.”

“Do they starve them before the race?”

“I'm not sure. But I would imagine it would help.”

“That's kind of cruel.”

Vax lifted a brow. “Do you think so?”

“Look at them.” I waved at the running crabs who bashed each other out of the way to get ahead. “I've always heard the Sea Dragon cities were places of art and culture. Refinement. Peaceful sanctuaries. Not this.” I looked around at the vicious crowd. “They're bloodthirsty.”

“There's no blood shed here, Zix.”

“Only a few shells broken.” I looked at him. “And what does that matter when they're just a bunch of crabs, huh?”

“You're truly upset,” Vax said in surprise.

“I expect to find shit like this on one of the pirate islands or in the worst parts of the land cities. Barbarism. You may have shined it up a bit, but that's still what this is. Cruelty for the sake of being cruel. A bunch of higher life forms forcing lower ones to do terrible things for their entertainment.”

“Zix, they're crabs,” Vax huffed. “We eat them.”

“Does that make it all right to torture them first?” I shoved away from the railing and walked away. “You're no better than the Frellen.”

“Frellen?! What the fuck?” he growled. Then he called after me, “Where are you going?”

“I need some space. And don't fucking follow me. Let me cool off.” I glared at Vax's knights who stood guard at the door. “And don't send them after me either.”

“Zix, you're a duke now. My mate. You need—”

“Don't!” I pointed at him. “I'm really angry right now, Vax. Angry and sick to my fucking stomach. Just fucking disgusted! Let me cool off before I say something I'll regret.”

Vax grimaced, but nodded—first at me, then at his guards.

One of the Sea Dragon knights opened the door for me. I rushed out into an empty hallway. The roar of the crowd was dulled in there and it helped to calm my racing hearts. Still, it wasn't enough. I loved Vax, but I was realizing that I didn't know him. I knew his soul. I knew what a good man he was. But I didn't know him . His likes and dislikes, what he did for fun, how he drank his fucking tea—all the little things that created a personality. I wasn't upset that I didn't know those things. The knowledge would come in time. I was upset because I'd just seen one of his likes that I didn't like.

“And I call myself a pirate,” I muttered as I left the private corridor and passed yet more guards, these assigned by the theater.

They nodded at me as I passed, and I nodded back. It was all the politeness I could manage. Frankly, every person in that place disgusted me. They lived their peaceful lives, never having to worry about starvation or fighting for survival. And then they went to watch others fight.

As a pirate, I shouldn't care. Violence shouldn't bother me. But Teng and his crew were different from other pirates. We didn't kill unless we had to. We looked at what we did as a job. And we never stole from people who couldn't afford to lose something. There was honor in how we lived. And you know what? Even vicious pirates, those who enjoyed killing as well as stealing, were at least honest about themselves. They lived barbarism. I imagine it became hard to separate it from their free time. If they participated in violent pastimes, it was expected. Not acceptable, but expected. They were who they were and didn't pretend to be otherwise. But these people were charlatans and cowards. They craved violence but were too weak to go out and commit it themselves. So, they came to places like this and forced it on others. Then they cheered and bet on the fucking outcomes! Pathetic.

I looked around at the employees manning the betting booths and food carts. A few people were lined up to spend their money and support this terrible place. I wanted to

shout at them that they were all a bunch of gutless bastards who needed the thrill of watching weaker creatures fight to live because they'd never faced a day's hardship in their entire lives. I was just so fucking furious!

Unfortunately, that meant I was also distracted.

“Well, well, well. Here we were, trying to form a plan to get you away from the Sea King, and you just sauntered over to us.”

I spun toward the sound of the voice, but it was too late. Something pierced my skin and a cold rush shot through my arteries. My muscles gave out, and I fell into a pair of muscular, furred arms.

“Whoa, Zixin! You've had too much to drink, my friend,” the Hulfrin said. “I've got you.”

My head lolled as the drug sank deeper. I couldn't speak, much less cry out for help. All I could do was watch the few people there back away and shake their heads. As if I was the shameful one! The motherfuckers. But it wasn't time for that shit. It was time to fight. I had . . . to . . . what was I doing again?

The arch of the amphitheater entrance passed over us, and I stumbled. The Hulfrin picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder. I watched in a daze as the sidewalk stones passed below me. A broad back covered in sturdy black cotton was under my hands. I caressed the fabric. It was so soft.

A chuckle came. “He's stroking my back.”

“I think I may have given him too much oppulen,” someone else said.

“I hope it doesn't kill him. The Captain will hang us up by our toe claws if he dies.”

“Nah. He'll be fine. He's Neraky, not human.” A snicker. “Just don't let him near your junk.”

“Why not? A mouth is a mouth.”

More laughter followed me into oblivion.

“Vax?” I groaned as I rolled over.

I was on a bed, but not the one I'd grown used to. There was no coral canopy over it and the mattress was too hard. It was more like my old bed—narrow and tucked against a wall. I felt the swaying of the sea and knew it wasn't just a wall. It was the hull of a ship.

“Fuck.” I sat up abruptly.

I was in a ship's cabin. Small, so not the Captain's, but still, it was private, which meant it belonged to one of the officers. There were no personal items in the cabin, nothing to tell me who normally bunked there. Or who I'd been kidnapped by.

Then I remembered.

“Oh, great Gods,” I whispered. I'd been taken by Hulfrin and there was only one group of Hulfrin who wanted me enough to snatch me out from under a sea king's nose. How the fuck had I managed to get captured by them twice?! Then I looked down and saw that my diamond was gone. “Fucking bastards!”

The door opened and Captain Aras strolled in. Perfect timing. It was as if he'd been standing outside, waiting for me to wake up. But I doubted that. This wasn't a guy who waited outside doors for anything or anyone. He was the guy who stormed in, killed everyone, and took exactly what he wanted. Aras grinned at me as if he could hear my thoughts, showcasing those damn Hulfrin canines.

“Welcome back to the Tiger's Claw, Zixin,” Aras said. “Don't worry. I won't hurt you

this time. You're too valuable now. A Sea Dragon's mate! And a king, no less. Well done."

"How the fuck do you know that?" I growled.

"How do you think I know that?" he growled back. "King Lyrandir. Remember him? He's the Dragon who wants what you stole. He told me all about your new status and how you swam off with his property. Do you know why he was so chatty about you?"

I grimaced. "Let me guess; it's me or you, right? You bring me to him or he kills you."

"Something like that." Aras crossed his thick arms. "My men spent some time in Shasenai. They're very welcoming down there, especially to landers. My boys were a hit. Everyone was eager to talk to them. That's how they learned about your visit to the crab races today. People were excited to see their king's Neraky mate."

"Unbelievable," I muttered. "As if I wasn't already furious with them."

"Oh? You're not happy with your subjects, Duke Zixin?"

"They're nearly as bloodthirsty as you." I lifted my chin. "I don't know where the Eye is."

"That doesn't matter. Your mate does, and he will trade it for you."

"No, he won't. He can't. And you shouldn't want him to. If King Lyrandir gets his hands on that stone, he will become consumed by it. The magic will overwhelm him and he'll burn all of Serai."

Aras snorted. "I think you've severely underestimated Ly."

I went still. “Ly?”

Aras's face went blank, then hardened. “King Lyrandir. He's stronger than you know, especially his will. Ensarena's Eye will not conquer him.”

“Are you seriously willing to risk the entire planet to give your boyfriend a power boost?”

“He is my client, not my boyfriend. I was hired to deliver the Eye, and that's what I'm going to do.” He opened the door and waved someone inside.

“Whatever. I know a pet name when I hear one.”

A Hulfrin came in with a tray of food. He set it on the tiny round table near the porthole. Then he grinned at me, looked me up and down, and left.

I scowled at the man, then at the food.

“I assure you, neither he nor the food will harm you,” Aras said with a glare at his sailor. “As I said, you're valuable now.”

“Your men drugged me.”

“Just to get you out of the city quietly.” He bowed. “I apologize for the mistreatment, Your Grace.” With a smirk, he stepped out. As he closed the door, he said, “Best eat up. You'll need your strength to face King Lyrandir.”

“Yeah, we've met,” I muttered, but Aras was already gone.

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I had barely finished my stew before the entire ship rocked and a roar rent the air. Grinning, I shot to my feet.

“Hey, baby,” I said with a glance out the porthole. “Took you long enough.”

The door to my cabin burst open, and Captain Aras strode in. “Don't look so smug, Your Grace. We were expecting this.” He grabbed me, his claws closing around my throat, and shoved me into the corridor.

Aras marched me out to the main deck, his grip never wavering. Up there, I found my mate in his sea dragon form, gripping the bow of the ship, half of his body on the forecastle deck. He wasn't destroying anything yet, but violence frothed in the air around him. Vax only controlled himself because wanted something more than murder—me. He was demanding my return even as I stepped out on deck. As soon as I appeared, enormous dragon heads peered at me from all sides, more claws clinging to the ship. It was a miracle the thing stayed afloat.

“Here he is, Your Majesty,” Aras said as he stopped me near the mainmast. “But you can't have him.”

“If that's what you think, you're wrong. Dead wrong,” King Vaxarion snarled.

“Vax, I'm so sorry. I was distracted, and they grabbed me,” I said. “You were right. I should have taken guards with me.”

“It's all right, love,” Vax said. “Are these the men who took you before? Is that the Hulfrin who tortured you?”

I glanced at Aras. One word from me would end his life, but I couldn't lie to Vax.
“Yes.”

Vaxarion roared. As the echoes of it still rang in my ears, he said, “Release my mate now, and I will make your death quick! Hesitate, and I will tear you to pieces and force you to eat each one.”

“Shit,” I whispered.

Even more impressive was Captain Aras's lack of fear. He actually grinned at Vax.
“Threaten me again, Your Majesty, and it's your mate who will be losing a piece of himself.”

Vax growled but then went still. “You will pay for that.”

Aras transferred his grip to my wrist, lifted my hand, and set his claws over my wrist.
“Shall we start with his hand?”

“Stop!” Vax roared.

Aras dropped my hand and went back to holding my throat. “Good. I see that you understand the situation now. So let me explain what's going to happen. You are going to fetch Ensarena's Eye and meet us at the Royal Castle of Gavemor. There, we will exchange your mate for the Eye.”

Vaxarion took in a deep breath and stared at Aras. I knew exactly what he was doing, and it wasn't seeking calm. Rather, the opposite. He was committing Aras's scent to memory so he could find him no matter where he went. The Captain was a dead man. I almost felt sorry for him.

“Harm my mate in any way, and I will sink your ship with all your men aboard, then

let my men feast,” Vax said.

“I will allow that threat because I understand how difficult it must be for a king to admit defeat,” Aras said. “But you have lost, Your Majesty. I hold what's most dear to you. That being said, I swear to keep him safe. I know he's valuable, and I never destroy treasure. He will be waiting for you in Renris, unharmed.”

Vax grunted. “I will see you there.” Then he fastened his stare on me. “And I will bring you home, Mate.”

“Vax, no!” I said. “You can't give him that stone.”

“I can't live without you, Zix.”

“He'll burn the world down!”

“Let the world fucking burn!” Vaxarion roared.

The echo of it shivered over me and through every person on that ship. They all went still, staring up into the furious eyes of the Sea King.

Vax's great chest puffed out, then dropped. Now he was trying to calm himself. Finally, he said in a tender tone, “Only you matter, my sea butterfly. Only you.”

“What about Morilren?”

“I can defend my kingdom against Lyrandir, even if he possesses the Eye. Let the Land Dragons deal with him. Fuck, let Ensarena look after her children for once. I'm done protecting them from themselves. They don't care. Look at this fool holding you, doing Lyrandir's bidding even though it will ensure the end of his race. I won't risk you for him. Not for any of them. So, again, I say, let them burn.”

“Vax.”

“I’ll see you soon, mate.” And with that, Vax slid back into the water.

Moments later, his guards growled and snapped at the Hulfrin sailors before doing the same.

Aras snorted. “You see? You're valuable.”

“And my mate's right. You are a fool.”

Instead of growling, Aras just laughed and escorted me back to the cabin.

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“Hello, Duke Zixin,” King Lyrandir drawled.

I stood before him in his throne room. He was, of course, seated on his throne—a massive thing that screamed overcompensation to me. Did he really need it to be that big? And all those tiger heads on it. Sheesh. Wait. Gavemor's symbol was a tiger. Huh. I looked at Captain Aras and wondered how he felt about that. I mean, Hulfrin weren't tigers, but they shared some similarities. Enough that the tiger imagery scattered around the room was hard not to see as Hulfrin imagery.

“Hello, Your Majesty.” I bowed to King Lyrandir because even dukes must bow to kings. And because I didn't want to anger the crazy motherfucker.

“You're so polite now.” Lyrandir got up and came down the dais steps. He took my chin in his hand and looked me over. “It looks as if mating a king gave you manners. Civility by injection.”

Again, I didn't want to upset him, so I stayed still and silent.

He ran his thumb along my jaw. “I'd call King Vaxarion a lucky man if I wasn't the one currently in possession of you.”

Captain Aras stiffened. I looked back and forth between the men. Aras was glaring at Lyrandir, but the King was staring at me. Oh, yeah, they were fucking.

“Well, now I know why King Vaxarion was so protective of you from the start. He had found his mate.” Lyrandir finally glanced at Aras and let go of my face. “What terrible timing for him. But brilliant timing for me. And well done, Captain. You

didn't bring me the Eye, but this will do.”

“My pleasure, Your Majesty.” Captain Aras bowed.

“You will, of course, stay and continue to guard Zixin until the exchange is made.”

Aras's lips twitched. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good. We must treat our guest well. See to it that he remains unharmed.”

“I will.”

“And I will prepare for a royal visit.” Lyrandir looked me over again. “So pretty. What a shame that I didn't get to sample you before you mated.”

A growl startled me, especially since it came from Aras. My stare shot to him. His stare was locked on the King. I looked back at the King to find his lips twitching now. What the fuck was going on with these two?

“After you see him settled, come to my apartments, Captain,” the King said. “I need to speak with you.” He spun and strode off, his robes flapping behind him.

Aras glared after him.

“You know he's fucking with you, right?” I asked.

Aras blinked, then looked at me. “Come here.” He grabbed my arm and pulled me along, out of the throne room and through the castle.

Aras remained silent through the walk, as did his men. We finally arrived at our destination. He opened a door and ushered me into an opulent room. Then he shut the

door on his men and shoved me into the center of the room.

“What did you mean by that?” Aras demanded.

“Come on. I know you're fucking him.”

His eyes twitched.

I went on as if he had confirmed it. “It's classic relationship shit. He's trying to make you jealous by complimenting me.”

Aras scowled.

“You've done it before, haven't you? You want someone to notice you, so you act interested in someone else. Works every time.”

“Then maybe I should act interested in someone else too,” he murmured.

“I wouldn't.”

“Why not?”

“Because you're dealing with a king. He's a different type of fish. Just play it calm. Act as if his interest in other men doesn't bother you. That will make him think he's just a fuck to you. And that will fuck him up.”

“Yeah?” Aras sat down on the couch near the window. “And then what?”

“Are you seriously asking me for relationship advice?” I crossed my arms.

“What else have you got to do?” he shot back and sprawled against the back of the

couch.

I snorted. “Fair enough.” I took the chair set at a right angle to the couch. “I’m not the best at relationships. I nearly fucked up things with Vax beyond repair. But I’ve watched a lot of people interact and I’ve heard things.”

“What things?”

“It all boils down to how you respond. If someone is trying to make you upset, they’re craving a reaction from you. They’ll enjoy your jealousy or rage or whatever they’re trying to pull out of you. If you want to turn the tables, just behave in the opposite of how they want. Don’t give them a reaction. When he confronts you, which he probably will, point out that his interest in another man has made you realize that he’s not interested enough in you. So maybe you should move on. No hard feelings, that sort of thing.”

“What if he agrees?”

“Would that crush you?”

Aras grunted.

“Isn’t it better to be crushed now, rather than later, after you’ve really fallen for him?”

“But maybe he’ll fall for me if I hold out a little longer.”

I shook my head. “He doesn’t respect you enough for that.”

“Yes, he does.”

“He won’t if you fall for this fish shit. You’ll just be another easy conquest that he

makes dance to his tune.”

Aras cracked his neck and then leaned forward onto his knees. “Maybe you're right. I'm a fighter. I fight for my lovers if they're worth it. And I think he's the same. If he won't fight for me, he doesn't want me as much as I want him.”

“And you don't want that,” I concluded.

“No, I don't.” He sighed and stood up. “Well, I'd better not keep the King waiting.” He walked away.

“Captain Aras?” I called after him.

He looked back at me.

“Good luck.”

Aras stared at me for a second, then grinned. “Thanks, Your Grace. Good luck to you too.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

Vax arrived that evening. I wasn't surprised. He only needed a few hours to fetch the stone, and then he would have sped after us. And sea dragons swim faster than any ship.

Captain Aras came for me and escorted me to the throne room. We entered from a side door next to the dais. Vax stood before the dais with his guards. Even though King Lyrandir was seated on his throne, my mate looked more like a king. His chin was lifted at the perfect angle—not too high but enough to convey superiority and disdain. His hair flowed behind him like a cape, and his eyes sparked with power. That powerful stare started to glow when it landed on me.

“Ah, here he is. Just as promised,” Lyrandir waved at me. “Let's not waste time. You will pass the Eye to Captain Aras while he releases your mate to you, King Vaxarion.”

Vax grunted and stepped toward us. In his hand was Ensarena's Eye.

“Wait!” I shouted.

Everyone looked at me.

“I want my necklace back,” I said.

“What necklace?” Aras demanded.

“Oh, that's cute. You know what necklace. The diamond. I was wearing it when I was taken. Now, I'm not. Give it back or I'm not going back.”

Vax growled, “You stole from my mate?! That jewel belonged to my mother!”

“Did you?” King Lyrandir demanded of Aras.

“I did not.” Aras looked over at his men. “Hand it over! Now!”

The two men who had abducted me winced, then looked at each other.

“Now!” Aras growled again. “Don't make this any worse for yourselves.”

“We didn't think he'd miss one necklace,” one of them muttered as he came over and pulled my diamond necklace out of his pocket.

Aras snatched it away from him. “We are not thieves!”

All that drama was just what I was hoping for. I jerked out of Aras's grip and dove for Vax. Vax reached for me. But I wasn't going for him, not really. It was the stone I wanted.

I don't know what I was thinking. I wasn't. The plan had popped into my mind, and I acted on it. It didn't occur to me that I could have simply run to Vax, and he could have fought our way out of there. Or maybe it had. Maybe I didn't want him to have to fight. I don't know. Honestly. I just felt as if the best choice, the safest route, would be for me to grab the Eye. Again.

But this time, I was going to use it.

I snatched Ensarena's Eye and shouted, “Everyone stay where you are!”

Vax gaped at me. Then he said, “Zix, give me the Eye.”

“No, babe,” I said. “You can't use it.”

“I can if necessary.”

“Let me rephrase: you won't use it. And I don't want you to risk yourself. I, however, am not a Dragon of any kind.”

“And that only means that using the Eye will destroy you,” King Lyrandir said.

“Will it?” I lifted a brow at him as the Eye began to glow. “Or will it destroy you?”

King Lyrandir, who was now standing, went still.

“Leave,” Aras said to me. “Just go now.”

“No!” Lyrandir roared. “The Eye belongs to me!” He looked at Aras. “Get me what you promised, Captain!”

“Fuck you,” Captain Aras said.

The room went silent.

“What did you say to me?” Lyrandir hissed.

“You heard me, Your Majesty,” Aras said. “Fuck you. I'm done with this. As far as I'm concerned, I've fulfilled my end of the bargain. There is the Eye.” He pointed at it. “If you're not strong enough to take it, that's not my problem.”

Lyrandir shrieked with fury, then dove for me.

Everything slowed down. I don't know if it was that way for everyone, but I

suspected not. Because in my hand, Ensarena's Eye was pulsing. Responding to my desire. Heat ran up my arm, then down it, gathering in the stone. In my hand. I could direct that power. I knew I could. The stone wasn't a slave to Dragons. It was a mercenary. A fucking assassin for hire. Assassins demanded payment, but I couldn't worry about that now.

I felt Fire rush through me and gasped. If this was the payment, it was worth it. I barely felt the burn. And if I did this right, Lyrandir would never come after us or the Eye again. But what to do? How exactly should I direct the Eye?

That's where the slowness helped. Everything moved at a snail's pace except for me. In fact, my mind seemed to speed up. I saw Lyrandir's eyes widen on my hand, heard Vax call out to me, and then watched Aras leap between his lover and me. Lyrandir's shock turned into fear. For Aras. I saw the love in his eyes and my plans changed.

I pulled back on the Eye, drawing its magic back into me. Instead of blasting Aras with the full force, I shared it with him. We were thrown apart. Time returned to normal for me, and I was welcomed back with the sound of screams—Aras's and mine. Then there were shouts from the two Dragon kings.

“Zix!” Vaxarion cried and gathered me in his arms. “Damn you! What have you done?”

“Aras wasn't my target,” I gasped.

Vax snarled and glared at Aras. The Captain was severely burned, injured far worse than I, but he was alive. Sure, his fur was gone and his skin charred, weeping blood and other fluids, and he whimpered pathetically, but it was better than the alternative. As I said, I fared better. The Eye had sucked back most of its power. But like a petulant child, it had struck out at me for denying it. My arm was charred and bloody up to the elbow.

“I'm all right, Vax,” I said. “Don't take it out on Aras. He was just trying to protect his lover.”

Meanwhile, that lover wept.

“Aras,” Lyrandir moaned as he cradled the Hulfrin carefully. “Oh, my love. Why? Why did you do that? I'm immune to fire.”

“Not that fire,” Aras said in a gurgling voice. “It would have killed you.”

“No, it wouldn't have. You beautiful fool.”

“Uh, yes, it would have,” I said as Vax helped me to my feet. “It would have incinerated you, and you know it. That's why you want the damn thing. Not even Dragons are immune to its fire.”

“Then how did he survive?” Lyrandir growled at me.

“My mate pulled back the magic!” Vax shouted. “You fucking moron! You pathetic asshole! My beautiful, kind, generous mate protected your barbaric lover, and your only response is to snarl about it. He risked himself for the man who once tortured him.”

“Then who is the fool?” Lyrandir demanded.

I snorted. “He's got you there.”

Aras wheezed a laugh, shocking us all.

“My love?” Lyrandir looked down at the Captain.

“You are a fucking moron,” Aras said.

“Healers!” Lyrandir shouted. “Bring me healers now!” He looked back at Aras to say, “Shh, now. You're delirious. It's the pain, but don't fret. Help is coming.”

Aras snorted and, as we watched, his skin turned pink, wounds healing, and his fur regrew.

“Dear Gods,” Lyrandir whispered.

“It looked worse than it was,” Aras said and sat up. “He truly did pull back his strike. Unfortunately, fur burns faster than skin.”

“No. Don't move.” Lyrandir pulled Aras back onto his lap. “Move slowly. Just relax here for now.”

“Ly, I'm fine.” He pushed the Dragon King's hands away and stood up. “And I'm leaving.”

“What?” Lyrandir gaped up at him.

“No one's leaving,” Vax growled. “Not before I fucking slaughter them. Then they can be carried out.”

“Shh!” I hissed at Vax. “I wanna hear this.”

“What?” Vax scowled at me, then followed my stare to the drama unfolding between the land king and his lover. “Oh. Huh.”

“Shh!” I hissed again.

Vax rolled his eyes, then took my hand, using the motion to take Ensarena's Eye from me. I grimaced at him, so he knew he wasn't fooling me. But then I was drawn back into the turbulent romance between the Hulfrin Captain and the Dragon King.

“—don't respect me,” Aras was saying. “You're not as invested in our relationship as I am. And I deserve better. I fucking demand it. So, I'm leaving. Get one of your pretty courtiers to fuck you. Just know that no one is going to drill that ass like I do.”

“Oh, shit,” I whispered.

“He's a bottom?” Vax asked. “Didn't see that coming.”

“What? Like a bottom can't be a king?” I asked.

“No, that's not what I meant. He just acts like a top.”

“Didn't you say something about kings being alphas?”

“Acting like a top and being an alpha are two different things.”

“In what way?” I lifted a brow.

“Are we seriously arguing about this?”

I chuckled and looked down. “My arm is healed!”

“Yes, you have Sea Dragon healing now.” He lifted my hand and kissed my forearm.

“But you will never risk yourself like that again. Understand me?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I winked at him.

Vax shook his head, but before he could say more, we were interrupted.

“Don't go!” Lyrandir shouted as Aras strode away. “Please, love. I'm sorry. I was so focused on gaining the Eye that I didn't see how poorly I was treating you. Forgive me.”

Aras spun to point a finger at the King. “Don't fucking use that stone as an excuse! You were trying to control me. You wanted to make me jealous. Well, I may not be a king, but I'm the captain of one of the fastest ships on the sea, and I don't fucking get jealous. I don't need you. I don't need anyone. You were a great fuck, that's all.”

“You don't mean that, Aras.”

“Yes, I fucking do!”

“Then why did you save my life?!”

The question echoed through the room and everyone in that room stared at Aras, eager for his answer. Aras looked at me.

“When you spend your life fighting, it can be hard to know when it's time to lay down your arms and walk away,” I said. Aras started to scowl, but then I went on, “Or when to pick them up again and settle in for a good battle.”

Lyrandir looked from Aras to me and back again. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means you should fight for the man you love,” Vax snapped.

“I am!” Lyrandir shouted.

“No,” Aras said as he strode back to Lyrandir. “It means I should.” He grabbed the

back of Lyrandir's head and yanked him into a savage kiss.

King Lyrandir grabbed him back, locking his arms around Aras. The Hulfrin sailors and Lyrandir's Dragon knights all started to cheer. As the men kissed, I grinned at my mate.

Vaxarion grimaced. "These men tried to take you from me. One of them tortured you. I vowed to kill him. You have no idea how the urge to fulfill that vow claws at me."

"But you're not just my mate," I said. "You're also a king. And you know that it would be better to foster an ally here than gain the animosity of an entire dread. Aras is the King's lover. You can't kill him."

Vax sighed deeply. "King Lyrandir will not form an allegiance with me."

"Yes, I will," Lyrandir said.

Vax and I looked over at the Dragon King. He held Aras's hand, both of them looking delighted with themselves.

"What did you say?" Vaxarion asked.

"I will be your ally," Lyrandir said. "I renounce my claim on the Eye, and I'll even help you protect it if need be."

"Why the change of heart?"

Lyrandir chuckled. "That is it exactly." He looked at Aras, then back at my mate. "I see what's truly important now. I don't hear the Eye's call anymore. Even though it's right there."

“It was calling you?” Vax asked.

Lyrandir nodded, his expression going grim. “Day and night. It was driving me mad.”

“That explains a lot,” Aras huffed.

“What happened to not blaming it on the Eye?”

“That was when we were fighting.”

“You're an asshole.”

“Yeah, but I'm a sane asshole.”

“True.”

“You're all insane!” Vax shouted. “And I've had enough with you fucking landers! Let's go, Mate!” He tugged on my hand as his knights gathered around us.

“Vax, come on. At least accept his offer of friendship.”

“We will not be friends,” he grumbled.

“Allies,” I amended.

“Fine.” Vax looked at Lyrandir over his shoulder. “I accept. But come at me or mine again, and I will fucking demolish you and your entire kingdom.”

Lyrandir chuckled. “My kind of man.”

“Hey!” Aras growled.

“Oh, please.” Lyrandir rolled his eyes. “He's mated. Do you know nothing of Dragons and their mates?”

The question seemed important, and so even as Vax dragged me away, I watched the couple.

“No,” Aras said. “I don't know shit about Dragons and their mates. Why would I?”

“As I suspected.” Lyrandir glanced at me, saw that I was watching, and did a double-take. Then he winked.

Smiling from one Dragon king to the other, I left the throne room of Gavemor. Or rather, I tried to leave it. On the threshold, I faltered.

“Zix?” Vax grabbed my upper arm to steady me.

“Vax,” I whispered as I looked up at him, eyes gone wide. “Something's wrong.”

That's when I started to scream.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

I was on fire. Burning. No relief, no matter how I writhed. My flesh sizzled, blood evaporating, and muscles turning into meat.

And yet, when I looked down at myself, I was whole.

“Vax,” I moaned.

“Mate!” Vax had me cradled in his lap. Tears gushed down his cheeks. “What's happening? What's wrong with you?”

“I'm burning inside,” I gasped. “Fire.”

“This is why only Dragons should use Ensarena's Eye. Land Dragons,” King Lyrandir said. “It was made for us.”

“What does that mean?” Vax snarled. “What's happening to him?”

“He's paying the price for the magic he stole.”

Paying the price. Those very words had occurred to me when I used the Eye. I thought payment had been made, but it was only a taste of what was to come. A warning. Fire now demanded I fuel it. And not just for a second. By its very nature, it consumed. Ravaged. Destroyed everything it touched. And it had touched me.

“Vax, I'm so sorry,” I panted, knowing this wouldn't just kill me, it might take him down with me.

“No, Mate,” Vax said. “There's nothing for you to be sorry about. Just stay with me.”

“I don't think I can.” I sucked in a breath and even that burned. Moaning, I added, “I want to.”

“No! You're not doing that shit to me again. Do you hear me, Zixin? Don't you leave me! I will fucking follow your soul into the beyond. I'll hunt you down and pull you back into your body!”

“I love you so much,” I said, using all of my strength to lift my hand and touch his face. “Don't tear apart the palace again. We loved a lot in the time we had. That's a gift. But don't let the gift become a curse. Let me go. Move on, Vax. Know that I want you to.”

“Shut up!” Vax roared. “You're not dying!”

“Uh, he is,” Lyrandir said.

“Shut up!” Vax roared again.

“Is there nothing you can do?” Aras asked.

“Me?” Lyrandir seemed baffled. “What could . . .” he trailed off, then cleared his throat. “Maybe.”

“What?” Vaxarion's voice went desperate. “You can help him? If you can, do it!”

“I don't know if this will work,” Lyrandir said.

“Ly, you have to try,” Aras said firmly.

“There's great risk involved. For me. I could burn with him.”

“Great risk involved in what?” Aras asked. “What would you have to do?”

“I'd have to coerce the Fire out of him and back into the stone. But it will need to go through me.”

“Name your price!” Vax said. “I'll pay it. Whatever it is. I beg you! He's my mate!”

“Vax,” I whispered. “It's all right.” But then the pain increased, and I screamed.

“Help him!” Aras and Vax shouted together.

“Fine. Just know that I'm doing this for you, Aras,” Lyrandir grumbled. “And I'll need the Eye.”

Vax didn't balk or even hesitate. He handed the Eye over.

Lyrandir knelt beside me, placed one palm on my chest, and held Ensarena's Eye to his chest with his other hand. The stone began to glow. The expression on Lyrandir's face hardened. Flames licked over his fingers. That dark, deadly stare locked on me. I couldn't close my eyes or look away. It felt as if Lyrandir had chained me with his stare. And then he poured himself down that connection.

I shuddered, past the point of screaming, as Lyrandir's soul entered my body. Absently, I heard Vax cry out as well. I felt our bond jerk. Flinch. Then it shone, blasting its light into the invader.

“Ease back,” Lyrandir growled, his voice strained. “I can't help him if I have to fight you.”

The bond between my mate and me softened.

And then everything went red. I sank into myself. I was falling. Falling forever in a red sky. No. I fell through flames. No. A jewel. I was in Ensarena's Eye. Trapped. Dropping from one point to the other. Crossing the view of the Goddess. And she was not happy with me. I had used a power that didn't belong to me.

But then her son dove through the shining point. Hair as red as the stone streamed behind him. Eyes as dark as the deepest part of the sea locked on me. A clawed hand extended. Lyrandir looked like my death personified. But I knew he was the opposite. If I ever wanted to get free of the Goddess and return to my mate, I had to take his hand.

Ensarena had no compassion for me, and certainly not for my mate. Vax was a child of Karadas, not hers. But her child sought to help me. His determination and strength appeased the Goddess.

His hand closed around mine.

The burning stopped. The pain vanished. No, not vanished. Traveled. Fire moved out of my chest, down my arm, and through my hand. It left me and entered Lyrandir. His grip tightened. His lips parted to bare his teeth. Burning light traveled up his arm and into his chest.

Our freefall through Ensarena's Eye slowed. We came even with each other.

“Lyrandir,” I said, reaching for him with my other hand.

“No!” Lyrandir growled and let go of me. “You need to leave. Now!” With a punch to my chest, he expelled me from the Eye.

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Back in my body, I opened my eyes to see Vax leaning over me.

“Zix!” His hand stroked my face. “Love, are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, my throat raw. “I’m good. He saved me.” I looked over to the left.

King Lyrandir stood up, then swayed.

“Ly!” Aras steadied him.

“I’m all right,” Lyrandir said gruffly. He met my stare.

“Thank you.” I sat up with Vaxarion’s help. “I don’t know what that was, but I saw you in there. You pulled the fire out of me.”

Lyrandir grunted.

Vax helped me to my feet but took most of my weight as he faced Lyrandir. “I’m in your debt. What price do you demand?”

Lyrandir looked down at his hand. In it, Ensarena’s Eye glowed.

“Ly,” Aras said in a warning tone.

“I could rule Serai,” Lyrandir whispered. He looked up and met Vax’s stare. “You told me you’d pay anything.”

Vax stiffened. “I did. And I'm a man of my word. Is it the Eye you demand?”

“Lyrandir!” Aras shoved the King.

Lyrandir stumbled, but his grip didn't loosen on the stone. He growled and faced off with his lover.

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered. “It's got him.”

“Stay back, Mate.” Vax eased me away from the brewing battle.

“Let it go, Ly,” Aras said.

Lyrandir bared his teeth.

Aras dove for the King's stomach.

The men rolled across the floor, snarling and snapping at each other. All the King's guards and Aras's sailors stared at the two helplessly.

“Vax, help him,” I said.

“I cannot, love. This must be settled between them.”

“The Eye is influencing him!”

“I know that. And the might of another Dragon won't help. Only love can save him now. Love and the mercy of the Goddess.”

I let out a breath and turned my attention back to the men.

Aras was wrestling Lyrandir, trying to get the Eye away from him without hurting him. Lyrandir had no such hindrances with Aras. He slashed out, and Hulfrin blood flew in shining arcs. Aras only growled and punched his lover in the face.

“Ly, fight it!” Aras said.

Lyrandir knocked Aras's legs out from under him. Then he launched himself atop the Hulfrin. Aras was a huge man, big even for a Hulfrin. But Lyrandir was a Dragon. Nothing could beat a Dragon. The wimpiest, scrawniest Dragon would kick the ass of the best fighters from any race.

I winced as Lyrandir bashed Aras's head onto the floor.

“That's love?” I asked Vax.

“Yes, it is,” he said firmly. “And it's Lyrandir's only chance.”

My mind spun. I saw the Dragon King in that spiritual realm, reaching for me again. His mind had been clear in the Eye. And he had saved me. He did that not for me, but for Aras. Now Lyrandir was tearing his lover apart. The guilt I felt was overwhelming.

“Stop!” I shouted.

It did nothing. The men kept striking each other.

“Aras, you have to stop,” I tried again. “Only love will reach the King now. Show him love, not violence!”

Aras glanced at me and it cost him. He took a punch to the face. But he shook it off and faced Lyrandir. “I love you, Ly.”

Lyrandir snarled and clutched the stone tighter. Blood seeped from between his fingers. In a moment, he'd realize that he didn't have to physically fight anyone. He could use the Eye.

“Kiss him!” I cried.

Aras shot forward, grabbed Lyrandir's face, and planted one on him.

At first, Lyrandir fought, tearing at Aras's arms and trying to move his head. But Aras held tight, keeping their lips together even though Lyrandir's were tight in a snarl. He didn't budge even when blood poured down his arms. And through that trauma, love sprouted. It bloomed, sucking up the King's madness like nutrients. Love sought love. Called to it. Summoned it forth to bloom with it. One flower became two, but they bloomed on the same stem. And love's dual-bloom was so beautiful that even the power of a goddess couldn't detract from it. No one could look away.

With a groan, King Lyrandir let go of the Eye and gripped his lover instead. The stone clattered to the floor, and Aras kicked it in our direction. Vax snatched it up and pocketed it.

The kiss went on and on, but no one made a sound or looked away. We watched, every last one of us wearing expressions of joy, relief, and compassion. This wasn't just their celebration. It belonged to all of us. The entire world. They had saved Serai with their love.

When they drew back from each other at last, Lyrandir's first word was his lover's name. “Aras,” he said. “I'm so sorry, my love.” He looked down at Aras's arms and made a broken sound. “Oh, Gods. Did I do that? Fuck. Aras, I'm—”

“Look at me.” Aras grabbed Lyrandir's face. “It's nothing. You're a fucking hero, Ly. You saved Zixin for me. You risked yourself because I asked you to.”

Lyrandir stared at Aras for a long heartbeat. “I risked the entire world for you, Aras. Not just me. If the Eye had taken control of me, I would have burned Serai until it was mine. And it nearly did take me. But you were stronger than the magic.”

“Not stronger. Just more determined. I wasn't going to stop until I had you back.”

“That is strength, Aras. You conquered the Eye for me.” Then he smirked. “You truly love me. And for your love, I would do it all again. Anything you want, you will have. Even if your whims destroy the whole fucking planet. I will get you the moon if you desire it.”

Aras chuckled. “I don't want the moon, Ly. I want something much harder to get—you.”

“You have me until that unwanted moon falls from the sky.” Lyrandir took Aras's hand and headed out of the room with him. But he paused at the side door and looked back at us. “Don't think I've forgotten that you owe me, King Vaxarion. One day, I'll collect.”

And then the lovers left, followed by the King's Guard.

“Now, we're leaving,” Vax said, as if daring the Gods to deny him again.

“Not yet,” I said.

“What?” Vax growled.

I ran over to where my diamond necklace lay forgotten on the floor and snatched it up. Holding it aloft like a prize, I declared, “Now, we can go.”

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It felt as if I returned to Shasenai a different man. A weight I hadn't realized I carried was gone. Vax and I had stopped at his treasure room to rebury the Eye, but that wasn't what gave me relief. It was walking through the palace with Vax and feeling as if I was home. It was being home with him and knowing that no one was after us. No one would try to tear us apart. I was the Sea King's mate, and he was mine. This was it. Him and me. Forever.

As we entered our bedroom, I looked around and finally saw it as mine. Because Vax was mine. Everything he had was mine now. But all I wanted was his heart. No, that's a lie. All I needed was his heart. I wanted all the other stuff too. I can't help it. I'm a pirate.

“Come here,” Vax whispered and pulled me into an embrace. “It seems as if we've been parted for years.”

I squeezed him tightly. “It does. And I never want to go through that again.”

“You won't.” He eased back, but only to bend down and kiss me.

Forever tingled on his tongue, teasing me. The future was no longer uncertain. It was ours. No collars or chains or goddess stones. Just us and our love.

All right. Us, our love, and a little magic.

Vax nuzzled his way out of our kiss and stood back. With a grin, he said, “Take your clothes off.”

“ You take my clothes off,” I shot back.

His grin widened. “It will be an honor and a pleasure, Mate.”

With gentle hands, Vax removed my clothing. While he worked, I did the same for him. We laughed when we got tangled up in each other and had to lean back or step out of our boots so we could then step out of our pants. Those smiles stayed in place until we were finally nude. Then they turned savage.

Vax picked me up and carried me to bed. Eyes on fire, he laid me down and then lay down atop me. When he held himself up on his forearms, I pulled him fully onto me, needing to feel his weight. The pressure comforted me, and my arms tightened around him.

Vax chuckled in my ear. “I won't be able to enter you like this.”

“Just stay here a moment.” I sighed.

His body relaxed, and he nuzzled his face into my neck. “Yes, you're right. We need this more.” He breathed in deeply.

“I love you,” I said.

“With all three of your hearts?”

“Yes, of course, you brat. With all three of them.”

He grinned against my neck. “We are never leaving this city again.”

“Yes, we are. And do you know why?”

Vax pushed himself up to look at me. “Why?”

“Because I know you will protect me from anything that might hurt me.”

His stare went tender. “Yes, I will.” Then that tender look turned into a grimace. “As long as you don't do foolish things like storming off without me or using magical stones not meant for you.”

“I was trying to save us.”

“I know, Zix,” he gentled his tone. “But leave the heroics to me.”

“Heroics, eh?” I frowned, then chuckled. “Oh, I get it. You're jealous that Lyrandir saved me, and Aras called him a hero for it.”

“I saved you first!”

My chuckle turned into a full-blown laugh.

“I did!” Vax sat up and pointed at me. “You can't deny that.”

“I'm not trying to.” I sat up, grabbed his pointing hand, and kissed it. “You're my hero.”

He grimaced. “You don't sound convincing.”

I got to my knees and straddled his lap. As I wriggled my ass over his cock, I said, “You're my hero, Vax. Now, fuck me with that heroic cock.”

Vaxarion grinned. “You're a foul-mouthed pirate.”

“But I'm also your sea butterfly.”

“Yes, you're also my sea butterfly.”

“And you love me just as I am.”

“I do.” Vax nipped my chin. “Although I might love you more if you were riding my dick right now.”

“You are such a horny Dragon!” I tried to climb off his lap.

Vax held me in place, his hardening cock splitting my lower cheeks. “That is all your fault, mate.”

“Is it?” I drawled.

“No one tempts me but you. And your temptation is astronomical.”

“Ass-stronomical?” I teased.

“That too.” He grabbed my ass and pulled me open as his cock sought entrance.

The bead of moisture on his tip slicked me, but it wasn't enough. So, my mate summoned a bottle of hress nectar to us on a ribbon of water. I grabbed it before he could and poured some over his cock. As I worked the slick, sweet stuff over him, Vax groaned and then groaned again when I licked the remainder from my hand.

“Ride me, Mate.” Vax pulled me down.

“Easy, Sea King. Let me get you into position.” I reached back and gripped him, then rolled myself over him before pushing down.

Bliss. Rapture. All the feels. Shivers raced up my belly and turned my nipples into diamonds—a perfect match to the stone that hung above them. I looked down at that precious rock and grinned. In the low light, it glittered as if it were alive. And it felt that way to me. This was the only magical stone I wanted. For me, it was more

powerful than Ensarena's Eye.

“Are you seriously admiring your jewelry as I fuck you?” Vax drawled.

“First, I'm fucking you. And second, I was admiring what it meant.”

“Oh? And what does it mean?”

“That you love me.”

“You don't need a jewel to tell you that. I tell you all the time.”

“But I still like to see a symbol of your love.”

“You like it because it's priceless.” He bucked up into me, making me gasp.

I gripped his shoulders and slammed down on him. “That too.”

“I will buy you more diamonds. As many as you want.”

“I don't need any more. This one is special.” I paused so I could cup his face. “It's us. I look at it and know that I'm your family now.”

“You are more than family, Zix,” Vax said and then turned into my hand to kiss my palm. “You are life.” He turned to kiss my other palm. “You are beauty.” He lifted his face to kiss my lips. “You are everything.”

“Good,” I said.

“Good?” He scowled at me.

“Yes, good.” I set my hands back on his shoulders and started riding him again.

“Because you are everything to me too.”

Mollified, the Sea King grinned. “I know.”

“Don't ruin it, my love.”

Vax lifted me and lowered me onto my back. He started thrusting into me faster than I could ride him. I wrapped my legs around his waist and angled up to meet him.

“I'm shutting down the crab races,” he said.

“What?”

“The races. I'm shutting them down and transporting the crabs back to their homes.”

“Vax,” I whispered.

“You're right, Mate. It's cruel. And I cannot abide such cruelty when my heart is full of love.”

I cupped his face and kissed him. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, my sea butterfly.”

“Can't I just be your pirate?”

“No. You weren't very good at it.”

I barked a laugh, and he laughed with me, but he didn't stop thrusting. Soon, our laughter became moans of passion, and then passion clawed its way up into release. My mate saw to mine first, pulling out to suck me into his mouth when he saw the signs of my orgasm. Feet in the air and hands in his hair, I screamed my pleasure to

the Gods, thanking them in my own way for bringing us together.

After he had every drop from me, my mate surged up and back into me to pound savagely into my channel until my muscles wrenched his climax from him as well. As Vax locked up against me, filling me with lust and love, I stared up into his glorious face, framed by all that glorious hair, and saw a glorious future unfold. Every day with him. His body filling mine, giving me pleasure whenever I desired it. His strength protecting us against anyone who would dare to challenge the mating magic of a god. And his love always supporting me, steady and true until the end of time.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” my mate said as he lay down beside me and pulled me into his arms. “I invited your family for a visit.”

“My . . . you invited Teng and the crew here? To Shasenai?”

“Yes. To stay with us in the palace.”

I sat up and looked down at him. “And what did they say?”

“They’ll be here next month.” Vax folded an arm behind his neck and smirked at me. “You may thank me now. I recommend using your mouth but applying it to my cock instead of speech.”

I snorted and laid back down to snuggle in against him. “Thank you.”

“Did you not hear the part where I told you to—”

“Don’t ruin it.”

Vax chuckled. “Later then.”

“Yeah, that's what I meant.” I lifted my head to kiss him, then said, “I love you.”

“With all three—”

“Yes!” I growled. “With all three of my hearts! For fuck's sake!”

Vax kissed my forehead. “I will never tire of hearing that.”

My hearts melted. Yes, all three of them. “Well, since you put it like that, I love you with all three of my hearts, Your Majesty.”

“I love you too, my pirate.”