
FEED AND FEAST
MM Monster Romance
Book Three
TEMPT
E.M. LINDSEY & CORA ROSE

tempt

FEED AND FEAST

BOOK 3

E.M. LINDSEY AND CORA ROSE

OceanofPDF.com

Tempt
Copyright © 2026
Cora Rose and E.M. Lindsey
All rights reserved.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

EM Lindsey and Cora Rose do not use or consent to any Artificial Intelligence (AI), generative AI, large language model, machine learning, chatbot, or other automated analysis, generative process, or replication program to reproduce, mimic, remix, summarize, or otherwise replicate any part of this creative work, via any means: print, graphic, sculpture, multimedia, audio, or other medium.

Editing: Angela O'Connell
Proofing: MT Editing and Jenn_Reads_Books
Cover Design: Breathless Lit
Hand drawn cover art: Felipe Bracioli

Content information: Ableist language, on-page injury from car accident, references to past torture, sexual humiliation by monsters against humans (not between MCs), and heat induced by "sex pollen"

OceanofPDF.com

contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Epilogue

Cora Rose
E.M. Lindsey

OceanofPDF.com

one

LUCA

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED Las Vegas, mostly because I'm Deaf and I love all the colorful lights. I can just stand on a busy street corner and be awash in the visual noise. It makes my heart race and my skin tingle. This must be what hearing is like.

Overwhelming sensory overload.

Whenever there's a Deaf expo here, I always sign up. My brother has no interest in attending, even if it would be good for business. It has a lot to do with Dante's pain issues, but he's also not a big fan of crowds. This is one of the many ways we've always been complete opposites.

And frankly, seeing him and his new Vyastil roommate creeping toward something I've wanted for a while now and haven't been able to find, it's nice to get away. I'm happy for Dante, of course, and my heart breaks for Cielo and everything he's gone through.

But seeing them together—circling each other in a way I don't think Dante fully understands yet—is a harsh reminder that I'm lonely.

It's hard living in a small place where hardly anyone speaks my language. Where everyone expects me to meet them on their level. Where I am expected to adapt to a world I wasn't really born for.

At the Deaf expo, at least for a little while, I'm surrounded by people who get it—who get *me*. I'm not as culturally Deaf as a lot of them. I haven't had the opportunity because I haven't wanted to leave home to live

in a place that has a strong Deaf community. But it's nice, for once, not to feel like such an outsider.

Everyone here is signing. I don't need to struggle to read lips or switch my brain to English. I don't need to worry that I won't be understood, or that the noises I inadvertently make will make someone uncomfortable.

I stare down at my table; one half is full of the dick cookies I spent all week baking, and the other half is displaying some of the prototypes for the sex toys Dante has come up with over the last year. I'm not sure I'm going to get any contracts this year, but I'm going to try.

Vegas is an easier place to peddle these wares. The entire vibe is a lot less pearl-clutching and a lot more piqued curiosity as people stop by to snag a cookie and a business card. It makes me feel useful in a way I don't often feel at home.

And I know part of that is my fault. I haven't exactly thrown myself into passions or hobbies. When we got our inheritance from Nonna Giulia, it only enabled me to continue not working.

I don't regret renting my commercial space out to the Vyastil couple for their coffee shop, but it wasn't like I went to bed as a kid dreaming of becoming a landlord. And while baking the dick cookies for Dante has allowed me to feel somewhat creative, there's still a piece of me that feels unfulfilled.

I just don't know what to do about it. I feel like something is missing—something I'm searching for. But I have no idea what it is.

For now, I am lost.

A moment later, a tall man with dark hair and bright metallic-purple cochlear implants approaches. He has a very model-esque look, with a chiseled jaw, five o'clock shadow, and very straight teeth when he smiles. He nods in greeting, and I fire one back.

His badge around his neck reads Asher, and I flash him mine, then offer my name sign before he does the same.

I don't like to assume that everyone's fluent in ASL, but I still ask with my hands, 'Looking for anything specific?'

Asher grins and shakes his head. 'Your booth seemed more interesting than the one with all the pickled fruit.'

I burst into laughter. 'Why does that guy insist on pickling everything?'

He grins wider. It's not uncommon for Deaf across the country to know each other. Especially the ones who have haunted the expos. But I'm with

him. Pickled corn, I can probably deal with. But strawberries? Absolutely fucking not.

‘Are you here alone?’ I ask. I haven’t seen him before, and I definitely would have recognized him.

He nods. ‘My brothers usually come with me, but they were all busy this year. We have a couple retail shops in Detroit.’

‘So, probably not able to stock vibrators or dick cookies?’ I ask.

His whole body moves with his laughter. ‘Probably not, but it might be worth considering expanding. Did you make all of this?’

‘The cookies,’ I tell him. ‘My brother does the other stuff. He’s got the only sex shop in our town.’

Asher blushes a little harder. It’s kind of cute. He’s not necessarily my type, but I try not to be super picky when I’m at these things. It’s definitely expected that people who aren’t tied down hook up.

And it’s also expected that people who are tied down sometimes do too.

What happens in Vegas, and all that.

‘Is this making you uncomfortable?’ I ask. It feels nice to be straightforward and not have to dance around hearing people’s polite social requirements and tender feelings.

He shrugs. ‘No, not really. Is your brother Deaf too?’

‘No. I’m the only one in the family,’ I tell him.

He grimaces, and it’s not the best feeling in the world. As much as I hate when hearing people feel sorry for me when they find out I’m Deaf, it gives me the same twitch when Deaf people act like my upbringing wasn’t as good as theirs because I stand alone.

I have a good family. My dad was the first one to become fluent after Dante, and while sometimes they forget to sign, they’re better than most. They’re the reason that, as much as I’d love to live closer to a bigger Deaf population, I also never want to be too far from them.

‘My brothers all are, but my parents are hearing,’ he says. ‘Recessive gene or something. My mom got kind of obsessed with figuring it out.’

I’m tempted to ask if they all got CIs too, but as much as he’s probably used to invasive questions, I just can’t be fucked. Mostly because I’d rather *be* fucked.

I think I need to shoot my shot. I watch him pick up one of the butt plugs—Dante designed it for people with limited arm and hand mobility.

When Asher looks back up at me, he sets the toy down and plucks one of the free condoms we have on the table.

‘You gay?’ I ask, and he shakes his head, his cheeks turning redder.

‘You?’

I shrug and then fingerspell pansexual. Listen, why discriminate when there are so many options out there?

Hell, I’d even go for a Vyastil if one was interested in me. I’ve seen the way Cielo looks at my brother. I wouldn’t mind a big dick to ride and a long Vyastil tongue to wrap around my cock and suck.

The guy’s lips smack. ‘Are you looking to hook up? I could be your wingman.’

I grin at him. ‘If I fail tonight, maybe I’ll text you. Got a number?’

He pulls a card out of his wallet and pushes it toward me, and I grab one off the table to do the same. ‘My older brother’s bisexual, so I’ve done this before.’

It feels a little patronizing, but considering I’m on a months-long dry spell, I might actually need the help. ‘Thanks. I’ll let you know.’

The moment gets still and awkward, but only for a second. Asher pulls the bowl of condoms toward him. ‘Have?’

‘As many as you want,’ I tell him, so he shoves a handful of them into his pockets. Someone to the left, a tall woman with very dark hair, starts waving at him, and he bites his lip.

I tap him on the shoulder. ‘Go.’

He leans in for a hug, and I give one right back—a tight, one-armed squeeze. ‘Wish me luck,’ he whisper-signs between us.

‘Good luck,’ I offer back.

As I watch him go, I feel only the slightest tinge of jealousy because damn it, that’s what I want. Maybe not her. I’m not about to step on his toes, but damn it, I wouldn’t mind a little something.

A little someone.

But I’m starting to think this trip to Vegas is going to be as dry as I spent my entire summer.

I take a sip of water from my bottle, the one that says *I Like It Wet.* It’s warmer out here than it is in Michigan. It’s still cold, but it’s hella dry, which I’m not used to at all.

My throat has been so fucking parched, and I’ve gone through a full tube of lip balm and am working through my second.

Swallowing all the water, I scan the busy scene, people meandering around, hands flying, captions on screens flashing. I wonder if it's loud here. I think it has to be. My interpreter friend, Seth, came last year and said it was a cacophony of hearing-aid whistles, Deaf mouth smacks, loud coin noises from all the slot machines in the main casino, music blaring from speakers, and the overwhelming chatter from the Vegas tourists.

I don't envy him having to deal with all of that.

I inhale deeply as I peer over at the table listing all the food options that are in the back parking bay. There's a Deaf taco truck I've had my eye on for a while.

My stomach rumbles as I debate closing down my stall for a minute to go over there and grab something to eat. It's not like I've had a flood of customers, so why not?

I reach for the sign I have under the table, but as I'm unfolding it, my eyes snag on someone across the room walking toward me. A very tall someone who is very much not a human.

A Vyastil steps out from behind a massive rolling cart, and two other Vyastil trail behind him, their eyes alert, their tails wrapped tightly around their waists.

My eyes go back to the Vyastil in the front with sea-green hair braided in an intricate pattern down his back. He's not naked like most of them are. He's wearing a linen shirt hanging low to his knees like a tunic and a belt cinched around the middle.

His feet are bare, of course. I've never seen a Vyastil wear shoes, and I would be surprised if they make anything to cover those massive claws.

There's a single pause, and then he looks up at me. He has those rainbow eyes they all seem to possess. They're so fucking intriguing. Hypnotic, almost. Like a kaleidoscope of color.

The Vyastil continues toward me, his tail wrapped around his shoulder as if to keep it out of the way of the humans moving around him. He looks regal, like someone of importance, and I can't turn away, can't move. I just watch as he glides through the crowd.

My stomach tightens as he grows closer, and I feel something very much like lust move through me as his eyes catch mine.

My breath hitches in my chest, then my lungs fill with air.

His steps falter for a moment, and then he comes to a complete stop a foot from my table. The Vyastil behind him do the same, but my gaze is

focused only on him.

The lust that was curling up my spine moves down to my groin and twists around my cock. I feel it jerk between my legs, and I bite back a soft moan lest he hear it.

He doesn't move. He doesn't open his mouth to try to communicate with me. He just watches as I stand here, his eyes taking in every inch of me.

People move around him, but he stays still, the breeze from the fans whipping his linen tunic around his legs.

And then he takes a step toward me, closing the distance between himself and my table, his eyes holding mine.

I let out a shaky breath as he presses his clawed hands to the white tablecloth next to the pile of cookies I have left.

I manage to lift a shaky hand and fingerspell, 'Hi.'

I don't know if this Vyastil knows ASL, but I do know that they pick up language pretty quickly. At least Cielo does, and Quilliyn has become conversational with me in ASL over the last few months.

The monster inclines his head, a lock of sea-green hair falling over his forehead before he pushes it away with impatient fingers.

I feel something odd then, like a slight pressure nudging at my brain. It's almost like a flash of light when the doorbell rings, but I push it away, unable to focus on more than one thing at a time. Right now, I want my gaze totally focused on the Vyastil in front of me.

'What's your name?' I ask, hating that my fingers get tangled up with each other from nerves.

The Vyastil inclines his head once more, and then his hands move, assured and prompt. 'Eissa. You?'

Shit, he really can sign. He even gets the facial expressions right. *Fuck. Me*.

My heart is thundering in my chest as I respond. 'Luca.' I give the name sign my parents gave me growing up, a movement up my face to signify my freckles.

His eyes graze those for a long moment, almost as if mapping them, and then he lifts them to meet my gaze once more.

I wet my lips, and his gaze dips down to my mouth before darting back up to my eyes. He holds me there, something crackling between us.

'How did you learn ASL?'

‘I took lessons,’ he explains with his still-very-formal signs. ‘Vyastil are quick learners. I have mastered most languages humans use.’

I swallow and nod. Of course he has. Fuck, what do I say now? It’s not like interacting with another Deaf person. This guy is from a different dimension altogether, and something about him makes me feel incredibly small and wildly inadequate.

He doesn’t say anything else, and I can’t think of anything, so after a beat, his eyes begin to take in what I have on the table. His delicate claws touch the cookie packages, and then they hover over the sex toys.

I feel something odd in the air. Something charged. Like several heartbeats all at once. The sensation is overwhelming, and I don’t know what to do about it, so I panic and ask, ‘You interested in sex?’ Fucking hell. Way to go, dude. ‘I mean…’ I wave my hand across the table and end up knocking over a few dildos as I go.

Eissa’s lips curl up, and I see a hint of fang.

‘I mean sex toys. I know the Vyastil,’ I use the most common sign for them, ‘aren’t big into anything but…’ My fingers still, then I think, *fuck it*. He’s at a Deaf expo for some reason. He gets full blunt. ‘…blow jobs and cum. But my brother has a shop, so he could probably make you something.’

His lips stretch into something like a smile, and he lets the moment settle between us for a beat before he answers. ‘I am not here for sex toys.’

I bob my head and frantically struggle to find something else to say to keep him here a little longer. For some reason, I am desperate to keep him from walking away.

‘You want condoms? Free lube?’

More fang appears, and he inclines his head. ‘Our Vyastil cocks produce our own lube, and I doubt your condoms would fit what I have.’

My mouth waters at the thought, and my hole clenches around nothing. God, how big are they? ‘I see. Cookie?’ I gesture to the dick cookies, and he stares at them.

‘What flavor?’

‘Vanilla and orange.’

He bites his lip, then his long fingers curl around the package, and he picks one up. I watch with some fascination as he unwraps it, takes a sniff, then bites the head clean off.

My own dick twitches. It should freak me out, but watching his full lips and throat move as he chews and swallows is…a lot. In a hot, heavy kind of horny way.

His forked tongue darts out to clear up crumbs from the corner.

‘You like?’ I ask, and his eyes meet mine. I see that tongue dart out again, licking up a crumb.

‘I don’t like most human food,’ he tells me as he sets the rest of the cookie down on the table. ‘But that was good.’

My heart’s racing. ‘What flavor would you enjoy?’

His lips spread in a smile that’s both hot and playful. ‘I don’t know. Maybe cum.’

The way those fingers sign that makes my cock perk up, and I shift so he can’t see it.

‘But I will keep this and eat the rest later,’ he adds.

‘Glad you like,’ I reply, my hands shaking.

‘I wouldn’t mind sampling your flavor though,’ he signs, and it takes me a second to make sure I’m interpreting that in my brain correctly.

My mouth sputters, and I find myself opening and closing my lips like a fish. Eissa’s eyes twinkle, and then he swallows, straightening his shoulders and glancing off into the distance.

‘I must go, but thank you. I am sure you will find many customers. Your products are…interesting.’

I don’t want *many customers*, I want him. Mostly to patronize my dick. Or my ass with his self-lubricating cock. But I don’t get a chance to say that because he starts walking off and I’m left to just stand here, watching him go.

Fuck. I lost my chance. The first Vyastil that I have ever been interested in, and I’m watching him walk away.

I curse at myself as something twinges in the back of my mind, but once more I brush it off, trying to focus.

The taco truck is quickly forgotten when a few more customers approach. Most of them are from the West Coast—one is interested in Dante’s prototypes, and one is interested in the cookies. I give them all the commercial information we have, and then set up a meeting for the sex toy guy tomorrow.

‘I’m opening a shop in San Francisco,’ he tells me as he gathers my card. ‘I really like what I’ve seen here. I would love to offer a large section

of adaptive products.'

I start to smile, but then my gaze catches on bright blue hair across the room. It's not Eissa, but it is one of the Vyastil that was with him earlier.

'Yes, shoot me a text tomorrow, and we can discuss the contracts,' I tell the guy hurriedly.

He glances behind him and looks at the Vyastil, then back at me. 'You do business with them?'

I bristle at the expression on his face. 'I will do business with anyone who has the money.'

His expression changes, and he nods. Business respects business, I guess. I'm not sure I want us to get into bed with a bigot, but I also know that Dante doesn't have the largest market for his stuff, so I can't turn this down.

'See you tomorrow,' I tell him. He takes the dismissal for what it is and wanders off, making room as the unfamiliar monster approaches.

The Vyastil doesn't look at me as he steps up to the table. He keeps his eyes downturned. It's kind of rude to do this in Deaf culture, but as soon as he hands me a piece of paper and I take it, all of that is forgotten.

The hotel name and what must be a room number are written neatly on that piece of paper.

Eissa, I think as I crane my neck to where he disappeared, but he's gone.

And when I turn back to ask the Vyastil about it, he's walking off as well.

I definitely shouldn't go to meet with this guy. It's bad news and far too complicated. He seems like he's of a high station, and I'm just a Deaf dude who sells sex toys with no real aspirations, but as soon as the day ends and I'm done cleaning up my station, I find myself walking in that direction.

It seems I'm going, despite my better judgment.

OceanofPDF.com

two

LUCA

MY HAND LANDS ROUGHLY on the hotel door, unsure if I knocked hard enough. But a moment later, it opens, and I see Eissa there. He's no longer wearing the tunic, just a piece of fabric around his waist, the rest of him bare. His tail is no longer wrapped around his shoulder, but is curled around his thigh.

And his hair. It's down, out of those braids and falling in waves across his shoulders and chest. I want to run my hands through it, but I don't know what I have permission to do. I don't even know why I'm here.

He nods to me and takes a step back, letting me enter the room. It's large, and much nicer than the room I have, but I don't have a chance to really look at everything because Eissa steps beside me, and I feel his tail slide across my back.

My breath hitches, and I peer over at him, and our eyes lock.

I feel something electric pulse between us, need and lust slithering up my spine as he steps in front of me.

'So, what did you want to see me for?' I ask stupidly.

His lips curl, showing those fangs, and I see the flutter of his long, pierced ears.

'I thought it was clear,' he replies, his eyes sliding down my chest to my groin. My cock perks up.

Hell, who am I kidding? It's been hard since I got off the elevator. I want this. I want him to wrap that tongue around me and get me off. And

then maybe if I'm lucky, I'll get to ride that big dick too.

Self-lubricating.

Hell yes.

'I think maybe you should tell me,' I reply, my signs steady and clear.

His ears flutter again, and he reaches out, dragging a finger up the bulge in my jeans. I buck my hips forward, wanting more, but he pulls away.

'I want to suck,' he signs, and the way he does that…it's lewd, far too sexual. It makes my dick jump between my legs.

I start to step toward him, hands out. I want to kiss him first. I'll give him anything he wants, but I want to taste him before we do this. He stands stock still, but right before I reach his body, he holds up a hand, and I freeze.

'Wait. I have one rule.'

"Okay," I whisper aloud, waiting on a knife's edge. I will do just about anything at this point.

His eyes are almost hard. 'You can't touch me. You will sit and take what I give you, and you must keep your hands at your sides.'

Disappointment floods through me like a tidal wave, but I quickly swallow it back. I take a breath, then find the courage to ask, 'Why?'

He leans back, and his tail flicks free of his thigh and whips between us, almost like it's reaching for me. But it stops just short of curling beneath my waistband.

He shakes his head, and I realize then that he's not going to answer me. 'No touching. Yes or no?' Eissa asks again, his eyes piercing mine.

I can tell by his body language, by his face, he won't be moved. And I can tell by a quick flicker in his eyes that he's been hurt. I know the feeling well. I know what it's like to be used. To be an experiment. To be mocked.

A human hurt him.

And I suddenly feel an intense desire to prove to him that it won't happen again. That we're not all the same.

I swallow heavily, then straighten my shoulders and nod my fist. 'Yes. I want you. Tell me what you need from me.'

His chest hitches with a sharp breath, then his tail moves behind us, pointing to the bed. He would probably put me in a chair if there were one in the room, but there isn't.

I walk toward the bed, then his tail taps me on the shoulder, and I turn sharply. Just that little graze was almost too much. I lift my eyebrows at

him to ask what he wants.

He flicks his thumbs from his pointer fingers. ‘Undress.’

That is an easy command to follow, and I quickly attack my jeans, shoving them down to my feet and kicking them away before I work on my shirt. Why did I choose this one? There are so fucking many little buttons.

My fingers shake as I undo them, one by one, and I can feel his gaze on me like a heavy weight. It’s almost physical, like a caress over every inch of skin I’m exposing.

When I look at him, there’s something about him that seems almost… regal. Snobby. Arrogant. But he also looks so fucking enthralled and enamored by me.

Plain little ol’ useless human me.

When my fingers tuck into the waistband of my boxers, he shakes his head. ‘Stop.’

I freeze.

‘I want to do this part.’

My hands fall away, and I watch as his tail curls beneath the elastic and drags them down my thighs, my cock appearing and bouncing between my legs.

It’s dripping, and I see Eissa’s nostrils flare.

The boxers are flung to the other side of the room as he steps closer to me.

And a second later, he shoves me to the edge of the mattress, my legs all but collapsing at his touch as he drops to his knees, my cock right at his mouth.

I groan, and without thinking, my hands reach for him, eager to dig into his hair and guide him. But I don’t get the chance. Right before I make contact, his tail moves up behind me and wraps around my wrists, bringing them together.

I let out a soft moan as I look down at him, and he glowers up at me. ‘Don’t touch. Remember?’

I don’t struggle against his hold. The feeling of his velvet-soft tail pinning me in place is more erotic than anything I have ever felt in my life. I never want this to stop.

And right before he opens his mouth to take me, I think, *I will do anything in my power to convince him to do this with me again.*

That’s all the time I have for anything coherent. His lips part, and his breath hits my cock. Then his thin, forked tongue slides from between his lips and wraps around my pulsing dick, wet and warm. I gasp as I thrust my hips forward, wanting more—to be fully inside of him.

And he obliges. His mouth takes me into him, his head bobbing as he hollows out his cheeks and sucks.

Fuck. I’ve never been allowed at the clinic because I’m Deaf, so I’ve never had the mandatory blow jobs we’re supposed to give. But hell, I’ve imagined it.

And now I’m getting a famous Vyastil blow job, and sweet mother of Christ, it is better than I could have ever imagined. I see why there are addicts. I see why there are people who sign their lives away to everything and anything the Vyastil ask from them.

He pulls me into the back of his throat, and my eyes roll into the back of my head, feeling the way his tongue piercing rolls up and down my shaft.

I’m close. I’m not going to last long at all. Which is really fucking embarrassing, but it’s not my fault.

This is so fucking good. It’s erotic in all the ways my quiet fantasies have ever been. No, it’s more. It’s better.

Something pushes at the boundary of my mind, and I’m too focused on this to fight it off. I succumb just as he starts to hum around me, making my entire body shake. I’m lost to it, my mind trying to make sense of how good this feels, all while something inside of me flares to life.

Something different, something foreign.

It’s almost like I’m feeling his pleasure too.

It’s overwhelming and intense, making my orgasm rush forward. I struggle to be released from the bonds of his tail, needing to hold on to something as I cum, but he doesn’t allow it. Instead, he only seems to tighten his grip on me, sucking harder, faster.

Luca. My Luca.

A voice in my mind. Not my own. Something different. A language I don’t know. And the sensation of it is different. Hearing, maybe? It’s not the way thoughts usually form in my head—a mixture of words I know and the impression of hands shifting through signs.

This is something else. It’s a rhythmic buzzing, like music I can feel coming from a heavy, thumping speaker. It’s the edges of sounds that I can hear if I press my ear very close to something very loud.

Except it’s also more than that. It is beautiful.

It makes my entire body shiver. It’s wholly erotic and frightening, and god, I want more. The combined sensations are enough to make my hips buck up, my cock shuddering in his mouth as I come.

His eyes flick up to meet mine, and I stare down at them as my release washes down his throat. He swallows it, taking every last drop, his lips stretched wide around my cock as I’m wrung dry.

And when he’s done, he pulls away, sitting back on his haunches, his tail slowly unwrapping from my wrists.

We stare at each other, a bit of my cum lingering on his bottom lip. He swipes it away as I try to make sense of what just happened. That wasn’t just a blow job. That was…different. It was more.

I let out a shaky breath, but Eissa still doesn’t look away, his eyes dazed and confused.

Something draws me to my knees, and I reach out to cup his face. His eyelids flutter, and I feel him tremble against me. I’m not supposed to touch, but I can’t help myself, can’t stop.

Instead, I lean forward and let my lips meet his, a graze, a promise.

He holds himself still, letting me taste, touch, lick. He does not reciprocate, and when I pull away, his eyelids are closed, his chest heaving.

His hands find mine, claws digging into my skin as he shoves his fingers between my own to hold my hands. He lifts himself up, his massive body pinning me to the mattress as we fall backward.

He begins to rock, to move, and his tongue laves over the side of my neck before he sucks against my pulse point. I groan loudly, feeling the rumble in my chest, and I feel one coming back from him.

He turns my head, claws pricking into the sides of my jaw as he slides his tongue into my mouth, over and over, a mimic of a fuck. I writhe against him and realize the feeling of lust I was getting before, the one that wasn’t my own, is rising again.

And so is mine.

My cock is still hard, kicking against his lower stomach as he uses the friction of his body against mine. I feel him exhale, warm and heavy against my cheek, and then he pushes up on one elbow and stares down at me.

My hands are pressed against his sides, and I tense, but he shakes his head, then lifts one hand. ‘Beautiful.’

I don’t know if anyone has ever called me that and meant it. Not the way he means it. I see it in his eyes, in his face. He’s staring down at me like he wants me. Like I’m something.

My heart twists in my chest, and I rock my hips up against him. ‘More? You want?’

His eyes shutter, and his tongue wets his lips. His fangs poke out just a little, and he stares at the side of my neck. Dipping his head low, he runs his lips over my tendon, then scrapes his fangs over it.

For a moment, I think he might bite me there.

And for a moment, I want that.

Then his massive body slides down mine, and once more, his mouth engulfs my cock. I cry out, hips arching up, and his tail pushes between my legs, the thin tip sliding up to my hole, pulsing a touch there that nearly sends me over the edge.

I’m seeing stars as his tongue wraps around my cock once more, and then I’m coming on a sharp cry that scrapes against the back of my throat.

This time, my hands fly into his hair, holding him there as I pulse into his mouth. I feel every lick, every suck as he takes me. My fingers twist around his impossibly soft strands, and when I’m finished, he collapses against my thighs.

I feel his rough breaths puffing along my oversensitive skin. He laps his tongue over my spent cock, taking every drop I have left to give.

I lie there boneless, unable to move, one hand still in his hair, the other resting over my rapidly beating heart.

Exhaustion is tugging at me, and I can’t imagine he wants me to stay. Not after telling me that I wasn’t allowed to touch. Not after letting me break his one rule.

I tap him, and I feel him turn his head. I can barely see him from where I’m lying with my head flat against the mattress, but with one weak hand I sign, ‘You want me go?’

There’s a beat of silence and stillness, then, against my thigh, he shakes his head. I feel another pulse against my temple. This time, instead of lust, it feels like confusion, affection, and fear. But it’s gone before I can examine what it truly is.

My fatigue is taking over. Darkness is creeping along the edges of my vision, and the thousand questions I have for Eissa are fading.

We will talk in the morning, I think. I will find out what all of this means after I get a little rest. Today was a long day, and two orgasms thrust me over the edge.

If only I knew, in that moment, what my sleep was going to rob me of.

He's gone.

I can feel it before I'm properly awake. I'm in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room, and there's a presence here that isn't Eissa. I sit up with a gasp, naked, half-covered by a sheet, and a woman with wide eyes is staring at me.

Her lips are moving far too quickly for me to catch any words, and I groan, holding up a hand for her to stop. I feel like I have a hangover. My balls were sucked dry, and my body is wrung out.

'Deaf,' I sign, mouthing along with exaggerated mouth movements.

She gets the look most hearing people get when I do that—a little fear, a little embarrassment.

"Sorry," I watch her say. I can tell she's shouting. I don't know why they always do that. I mean, it actually does help some of my friends with more residual hearing than I have, but for me, it's pointless. And annoying. And it's too fucking early for all of this.

Except, oh god, it isn't. My eyes catch the archaic little alarm clock on the nightstand, and I see it's almost noon.

Fuck.

I start to scramble from the bed and realize I'm still naked. I clutch the sheet and give her an apologetic smile. "Sorry," I say aloud. She also gives me the face most hearing people give me at the sound of my accent, but I'm too wrecked and tired to care. "Give me two minutes, and I'll be out."

She hurries for the door, and I glance around, realizing that if there was any evidence Eissa was staying here, there isn't anymore. I hadn't been able to give the place a good look when I first arrived, and I imagine the Vyastil travel with some kind of luggage, but there's none now.

He packed up and left, probably in the middle of the night, with the way my luck always goes.

I swing my legs over the bed, and then I see my clothes are folded neatly on the dresser. For some reason, that pisses me off. How fucking dare he. How fucking dare he tidy up, not wake me, and leave me here to be humiliated by housekeeping.

I get dressed quickly and furiously, shoving my feet into my shoes, then patting my pockets for my phone. It's in there, but it's nearly dead, so I grab my room key because I still have three more days in this place before I can go home.

Marching to the elevators, I ride it down to the fifth floor, then dart into my room and plug it in before grabbing the little hotel-branded notepad and pen from the desk in the corner.

I'm not really thinking straight as I head for the lobby, and there's a short line at the front desk, so I wait, trying to make sure I'm not making huffing, angry noises as the agent checks guests out.

By the time I get there, the blonde woman is still smiling. At least, until she sees the expression on my face.

'You sign?' I ask.

She grimaces and shrugs.

Of course not, but I came prepared. I hold up a finger, then yank the notepad out of my back pocket and scribble on it: Vyastil name Eissa, check out already?

She reads it, lips moving through the words, then she looks up at me and speaks. I hold up my hand, shaking my head, then gesture to the paper.

Now she looks frustrated, but she takes the pen from me and begins to write.

I can't give out that information, but we currently have no Vyastil staying here.

I snatch the notepad back and tip my fingers from my chin. 'Thank you.' I try to mean it. None of this is her fault. Eissa is the one who wham, bam, thank you ma'amed me. He's the one who allowed me to break his rule, who left me wanting more.

Who left me feeling like there's an empty space inside of me in the shape of him.

Which is not something I should be feeling over a single one-night stand. And that makes me even angrier. And not because I'm actually angry, but because I'm hurt.

For a moment—for a single moment last night—I thought I was more. I thought I wasn't some experiment or a walking curiosity. I thought maybe he wanted me for me.

That he meant it when he said I was beautiful.

That the way he touched me after giving me that rule meant something more.

That I was more.

Walking past the buffet, I see several groups of people from the convention, one hand signing, the other shoveling food into their faces. It's not as much of a comfort as it was before, thanks to Eissa.

But I force myself to take a breath. I'm catastrophizing again. I'm assuming the worst.

Maybe he didn't leave me on purpose. Maybe he tried to wake me. Maybe he left me a quiet, soft kiss on my temple before an emergency took him away.

I can't let myself assume that I mean nothing to every person who touches me the way Eissa touched me. And hell, I live near a major portal, so there might be a chance I'll see him again.

And if I do—no, when I do—I will ask him if that night meant anything at all to him.

Because right now, it feels like it means everything to me.

OceanofPDF.com

three

LUCA

I HAVE zero desire to attend the expo today, but I need to. I have dick cookies to sell and products to push. Usually I love doing this. I love how useful it makes me feel, and I'm damn good at it. And more than that, I love how much it helps Dante.

And he deserves the world.

But today feels more exhausting than usual. There's a continuous push and pull on my attention, and my eyes keep wandering around the large space, looking for the regal Vyastil who sucked me off twice last night.

Who made me feel alive…

Then left me like I meant nothing.

I hate that I let this happen to me again. That I allowed myself to be vulnerable. That I allowed myself to want.

I fucked up, which is something I'm quite good at. A master, really. But it doesn't change the heaviness I carry around with me all day as the expo comes to an end. I don't really know what I'd say or do if I saw Eissa again, but I keep fantasizing about it.

Maybe he'd corner me in some alcove and shove his clawed hand down my pants and make me cum. Maybe he'd appear at my table with a look of sorrow on his face and an apology on his hands for how the night ended.

Maybe he'd show up with absolute regret and beg me to give him another chance.

None of those things happen.

By the time the event is over and I've packed everything up, there's not even a whisper of the Vyastil group at the casino. He's like a ghost. Or worse. It's like he never existed in the first place.

By the end of the afternoon, I've declined several offers to go out with friends. I have zero desire to talk with anyone, and along with my emotions, my body is aching and exhausted. I just want to walk along the Strip, drink a Yardie, and disappear into the crowd to look at the lights flashing around me.

This whole thing is both humbling and grounding, and I think a bit of time with both my own silence and some solitude is what I need.

I give myself an hour in my hotel room to shower and change clothes so I don't smell like that faint boozy casino-floor smell, then I head out and take a right.

There's a liquor kiosk that sells shots in a test tube, and I hold up one finger to the tired-looking man behind the counter. He doesn't attempt to make me speak. He swipes my card, hands it over, and doesn't watch as I tip the whole thing down.

The sugary-sweet strawberry flavor hits my tongue, and I sigh. It doesn't bring me any real peace or joy. It's not even enough booze to get me buzzed, though I'm not sure being drunk is what I need right now. I've never been the most responsible person on earth, and alcohol has never helped me make good decisions.

I fight the urge to go back and get another one, just to test my theory that getting shit faced will make this whole thing worse, and instead, turn my attention ahead of me. Everything is alive out here. Bright and loud and probably overwhelming if someone had to add sound to all of this.

I appreciate that I can exist without having one extra sense to weigh me down, and my gaze catches on a couple of people in brightly sequined outfits. They look like they've come from some kind of cabaret show, so I decide following them won't be the worst decision I've made since getting here.

I'm not sure where they're headed, but I decide to trust them. We cross a few streets, and I can see some of the more famous strip casinos coming into view when all of a sudden, something flashes in my mind. Fountains, massive white jets of water arcing through the night sky. And then there's a European-looking palace.

It's almost like I'm looking through someone else's eyes.

My steps falter, and I'm knocked into as I come to a complete halt in the middle of the busy walkway. Turning my gaze backward, I can see the Bellagio hotel in the distance, and I know immediately that it was the image in my head.

My heart thumps loudly in my throat. Why do I feel like I need to go there? Why does it feel like if I don't, my entire life will be thrown into disarray?

Ah hell, I'm probably just tired. I'm definitely hungover from those two Vyastil blow jobs, which isn't helping matters. But my exhaustion doesn't seem to matter in this moment, and I find myself making my way toward the casino. My eyes catch on the water shooting from the fountains, and I feel a little odd skitter up my spine as the colors light up the night sky.

But I don't linger. Something is still pulling me forward, and as much as I want to ignore this strange, almost terrifying sensation, I keep walking. I feel music thumping under my feet as I head for the doors—a kind of soft vibration different from the ones that run their place like a nightclub.

And I don't mind that. I need a bit of softness right now.

I follow the signs for the casino, making my way through the conservatory and botanical gardens, and eventually I hit the casino floor. I'm stopped two feet in by a server holding a strange tray with long glasses and colorful liquid inside.

"What's that?" I ask.

He flinches the way most hearing people do the first time they hear my accent. I zero in on his lips as he says, "Yardie."

I'm not a hundred percent sure I read that off his lips right, but whatever. I select the blue one and then dig into my pocket for cash. He waves me off, and I frown at him. "Pay you?"

"Free," he answers back. I can definitely lip-read that word.

One good thing about Vegas and casinos is the free booze. The test tube shot earlier has hit me harder than I expected, but I also haven't eaten in a while. And it's that slight buzz I didn't know I had that prompts me to take a long pull off the even longer straw, then shove a wad of cash at him.

"Tip," I say.

He doesn't look bothered by my voice now. He shoves the money into his apron, then puts his fingers under his chin and signs, 'Fuck you.'

I know he means thank you, and I'm going to let that one slide because this Yardie thing is very, very good.

And a bit stronger than the one before. The alcohol burns as it races down to my stomach, and between a couple of breaths, I feel that floaty, buzzy feeling get stronger. Yes, this is what I need. This is what will take the edge off.

Glancing around, I see the vast casino floor fanning out before me. It's broken up into sections with clusters of tables and machines. The slots pulse softly in the dim lighting, so I find a seat, wedge my Yardie between my feet on the carpet, and feed a few bills into the little mouth begging for cash. Credits blink on the screen, and I hit the button to start.

The wheels spin, and my eyes follow as I lose, so I hit the button again and win a few dollars more than I spent. Button pushing and wheel spinning are oddly hypnotic, and I find myself lost in the rhythm for so long that it takes me a little too long to realize I'm about to go broke.

Right as the little fruit comes to a stall and I prepare to make myself stand up and walk away, something pulls my gaze across the room. It's a heavy, heady feeling—a demand I can't quite make sense of.

For a moment, I don't notice anything except the crowd milling around, talking with mouths, hands usually still as they hold liquor glasses and casino cards. It's an entire world that I've always been outside of, and I don't even know why I'm watching until suddenly a flash of bright color catches my eye.

I blink several times as a small crowd of tourists parts, and then he's there in all of his well-muscled, blue-skinned glory.

Eissa.

He's in the far corner of the room, speaking with several humans I don't recognize. He seems very much in his element, standing tall, his linen shirt and pants clinging to his body as though they were tailored just for him.

And it's obvious he doesn't know I'm staring. He's facing me, but his eyes are everywhere except on mine. I watch as his shoulders rise with a long breath, and then he begins to speak, gesturing with his hands as he does.

I feel his words like a pulse in my chest, like if I push a little harder, a dam will break and I will suddenly understand the flood of speech gently falling from his lips.

And almost as if he feels it too, suddenly his shoulders tense and he turns his head. His eyes land on mine and hold my gaze, just for a moment

before he looks away. It's a simple catch and release, but I find myself standing up, everything else in the world forgotten except for him.

I feel a sudden, burning want for answers. I want to know why he left me all alone in that hotel room. I want to know why I feel this way—why I can't seem to allow myself to move on from that single, pointless rejection.

I already know I'm worth more than that, so why did this one creature shake me so badly? Why do I feel like his refusal to see me will shred my heart into a thousand tattered pieces?

As I start to make my way across the wide casino floor, he doesn't look at me again, but I know he's aware of my movements. I can feel the tension in the air, thick and bitter, and for one single second, I doubt myself. But no. I'm not going to give this up.

I need answers.

I refuse to let him convince me that I'm worthless.

You are not worthless.

Those words ring clear and crisp in my head, and I stumble, trying to make sense of the way those words formed in my mind and how Dante once tried to describe hearing. There was sound, and there was meaning, and it was almost instinctive how I just knew what it all meant. I don't understand how this is happening to me. God, am I so drunk that I'm hallucinating?

Or maybe something else is terribly wrong with me. Is this what happens when people become schizophrenic? Or maybe it's a brain tumor. Fuck, I need to get out of here, but somehow I'm still walking toward the monsters.

As I approach Eissa, two of the Vyastil males with him step toward me, chests puffed out like they'll kill to protect him. Eissa's shoulders tense when they move, but he doesn't look over at me.

I come to a stop and meet their eyes, holding my ground. Eissa still hasn't turned, but that thickness in the air is almost suffocating. I need him to turn around. To acknowledge me. But he remains in conversation, though I know he's aware of my presence now. I can see it in the nervous way his tail shifts and his skin flutters.

Fuck me, I should turn around and leave. I have pride, and I can still save it if I go now before Eissa finally has no choice but to face me. And yet, something inside me keeps me right where I am.

Screw this. I'm done playing this game with him.

I want him to look at me and tell me that night meant nothing. That he lied when he said I was beautiful. Or the desperate way he kissed me was nothing more than a ploy to drink my cum.

I feel something in my head again, almost like a tender caress trying to soothe me, to tell me that all the ugly thoughts in my mind aren't real. But before I can probe further, it's gone.

Eissa turns, his gaze moving over me, heavy enough I can nearly feel it. I see the way his eyes shift restlessly from my feet all the way to the roots of my hair. He's staring at me like I was staring at him, like this moment means something.

I take a step toward him, but the two guards stop me from getting too close.

I wave my hand to get his attention, but he ignores me, instead turning his head to speak to the Vyastil beside him. It's cruel in an underhanded way. He's deliberately excluding me from his conversation even though he knows my language perfectly well.

I find myself wondering why the fuck I feel the need for closure. He's a total stranger, after all. He means nothing to me. I've had longer club hookups than this. So why the fuck does it feel like it matters?

The guards nod just as I meet Eissa's gaze again, and they shift to the side so he can take a step closer. I can feel the warmth radiating off of him. I can smell the sweetness that seems to be exclusive to the Vyastil, though Eissa's scent is so much better than any other monster I've met. His tightly done braid falls over his shoulder as he leans in, and I swear in that moment, he sucks in a breath.

But I'm not going to let him have this. I can't. Not after he's been such an epic asshole.

I glower at him and then slowly lift my middle finger, a scowl lining my lips.

The human he was speaking to earlier steps up to Eissa and claps him on the shoulder, almost like he's holding him back. And the gesture is tender. For the first time since arriving, I really notice this stranger. He's handsome in an effortless way. His hair is perfectly coiffed, stubble lining his jaw that looks intentional.

From just the way he stands, I can see he's the same status as Eissa, and I suddenly feel like a complete and total nobody.

But I’m not going to let him have that, either. I meet Eissa’s stare and then lift my hand and let the letters curl through my fingers. ‘F U C K. Y O U.’

Eissa blinks slowly at me and his lips thin. He’s irritated. The man beside him asks a question I can read perfectly well on his lips: “What did he just say?”

An ugly, hot feeling rises in my chest, and I turn to him, tilt my head to the side, and offer a nasty smile. ‘Are you fucking him too?’

The chances of this man knowing ASL are slim to none, which makes me feel better about the petty question…and then I see that Eissa is interpreting and I feel my face heat.

The man grins wider and runs his fingers along his jaw, then he takes a step toward me and holds out his hand. My gaze lands on his lips, and I feel something slide through me as our palms connect. Something almost like jealousy, but I don’t know where that’s coming from.

“I’m Dorian. What’s your name?” Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Eissa interpreting, and I can also see he’s doing it very, very grudgingly. That gives me a sense of satisfaction I didn’t expect to feel.

I pull back and twist my wrists before answering him. ‘My name is Luca.’

“Nice to meet you, Luca.” The way the words shape on his lips tells me he’s intrigued by me, that he likes the way I look. I’ve seen it before—when rich older men are on the hunt for pretty people like me who live at the gym and won’t put up a fuss about how much time they have to spend on dates.

And I might have even been interested if I wasn’t standing next to the monster who seems to have rearranged my entire world. But a part of me wants to lean in. To smile. To flirt. To make Eissa jealous. Would it matter to him?

I feel the slightest, almost angry twang in my head and I know it’s him. But the feeling is gone before I can do anything about it.

My shoulders tense as I prepare to sign something else, but before I get the chance, there’s a heavy, inhuman hand on my shoulder. I glance to the side and see Eissa’s gaze boring into mine. That heavy feeling in my head is back—him. His presence. And I’m nearly overwhelmed by the way he refuses to let my attention be on anyone else but him.

A far fucking cry from the way he left me.

“Come,” his lips say, and I feel the pulse of the word in my head. When I refuse to budge, he lifts his other hand and repeats himself in sign.

I tense and attempt to pull away, but his hand lands back on my shoulder, claws digging into my skin. It’s not enough to make me bleed, but if I put up any more of a fight, I will. And I get the distinct feeling Eissa might like that.

And fuck me, but I might too. In spite of everything, I want to be his.

‘Come,’ he signs, and this time, I obey.

We move away from the floor, the glow of the machines fading until there is almost nothing, just a corridor I hadn’t noticed before. The walls are dim, lit by a few sconces with low-burning light.

He stops the moment we’re far enough away from the casino floor that I can no longer feel the rumble of machines beneath my feet, and he withdraws his hand, leaving me shuddering at the absence of his touch.

I blink up into his rainbow-colored eyes, my body unable to move. I want to lift my hands and cuss him out for being such an asshole, but I can’t. The moment stretches between us, silent, still, sharing breath and nothing more. For just this second, it’s peaceful.

And then he shatters it.

‘Why are you here? What do you want from me?’

‘Do you remember anything from last night?’

He stares for so long that I think, for just a second, maybe I really was nothing to him. And then he lifts one hand and nods his fist. ‘Yes.’

The word might be short and sharp, but the way his hand trembles just a little tells me that it wasn’t nothing to him either.

I take a breath, and on the exhale I can feel some kind of noise rattling the back of my throat. ‘I didn’t follow you here. I was playing the slot machines, and you happened to be here too.’

His head cocks, his face unreadable.

‘I’m glad we ran into each other. Your friend, Dorian…’ I fingerspell his name slowly, letting each movement roll off my fingers with a purpose, ‘is very good-looking. Do you think I could get his number?’

His gaze narrows. ‘He doesn’t sign.’

Yes. Jealous. Just as I’d hoped. So why doesn’t it feel as satisfying as I thought it would? ‘I could teach him a few very useful phrases. Enough to get by. What do you think?’

‘He is not interested in you.’ He shows fang when he signs.

I smile. ‘I didn’t get that impression.’

His tail unwinds from his leg and whips out from behind him, almost as if he lost control of it for a moment. After a deep breath, he straightens his shoulders, and it curls back around him, tighter than before.

Neither of us says anything, the two of us facing off for a long, drawn-out moment. And this time, I’m the one who cracks and breaks the peace.

‘Why did you act like you didn’t know me?’

His eyes widen just a fraction before he shrugs. ‘I do not know you.’

‘Liar,’ I sign sharply. ‘Are you ashamed that I’m human?’ He gives me no answer. ‘Or that I’m Deaf?’

It’s barely noticeable, but at that, he flinches.

My face scrunches up, and my chest fills with a rush of white-hot anger. ‘Fine. I guess since we don’t know each other, and I’m some weird, Deaf stranger, I’ll go finish my chat with Dorian. He looks like he has a big dick, and I could use that after last night.’

I turn to leave, but before I can move forward, Eissa’s tail curls around my waist. It’s tight and immovable, and the hold is something more than possessive.

It’s dangerous.

I let out a gasp as it clenches even tighter, and then I’m lifted off my feet and pulled against the wall of his chest. My hands land against him to steady myself, and even through his linen, I can feel the curves of his muscles beneath, and the way his skin seems to flutter.

I tilt my chin up to stare at him, and his eyes flash, his ears flicking in irritation as he meets my gaze. He says nothing, and I can’t seem to uncurl my fingers from his shirt, so we stand there, breathing even, his two hearts hammering against my one.

I inhale deeply, and for just a moment, I indulge in this. Leaning forward, I take in his sweet, floral scent as I let myself relax in his grasp. His eyes close, but I can tell it’s not in surrender. He’s trying to resist this.

But it doesn’t last long.

A second later, his hands are in my hair, yanking my face up, his tail holding me off the ground. Our lips collide in a clash of teeth and fangs, and I groan loudly as I open myself to him and take what he’s offering.

His tongue pushes into my mouth, rolling against my own, and lust pulses through me as my cock hardens. I feel it pressing against his stomach as he tilts my head, angling his mouth more firmly over mine, and then he

pushes his tongue down my throat. I swallow around him, and I feel something between us flare to life.

It’s hot and needy.

God, I want him to get on his knees for me again.

I want him to suck me, to take me over and over again until I’m mindless with lust.

My cock throbs, leaking in my pants, and I can feel the rumble he’s making in his chest. He wants this as much as I do. Last night wasn’t nothing to him. *I* wasn’t nothing to him. Even if he’s ashamed, he can’t deny he needs this just as much as I do.

But before either of us can give in and risk getting arrested for indecent exposure, his lips rip from mine, and he lets me tumble from his grasp. I nearly fall to the floor, but somehow my legs manage to hold me steady, and I don’t embarrass myself as he takes a single step away.

My hand finds the wall behind me, and I stare up at him in disbelief. Why is he doing this?

Why did he kiss me like that and then toss me aside?

I can feel regret rolling off of him in waves, but before I can call him on it, his face hardens. His tail curls back around his thigh, and his heaving chest stills. After what feels like forever, his hands lift in a sharp cutting motion as he cuts a wound into my chest. ‘Stay away from me.’

I flinch at those words, but before I can form a retort, he’s striding off. And he doesn’t look back.

I don’t see Eissa again. I don’t feel his presence lingering in my mind. Whatever connection we had, the way I could sense him when he was near, is completely gone. I’m not even sure it was real now that my mind is completely free of him. I’m not sure any of it was.

Luckily, I have a lot to distract me.

Dante sent me several designs while I was busy making a fool of myself with Eissa, and they’ve given me a lot to think about. Like about the things a Vyastil could do with them. About what might be under that sheer tunic that Eissa wears around, and…

Fuck. I have to purge him from my head. I'm not going to be able to focus if everything keeps coming back to him. This is a serious problem, and I don't know how to solve it.

I stuff my clothes into my suitcase without folding them. I fully plan to wash everything I own at least twice just to make sure nothing still smells like Eissa after I get back to my apartment. I have a red-eye flight out of here tomorrow, and I can't wait to head home.

I've been here a week, and I'm ready to be back in my own bed, in my own space with people I can trust. There are monsters in my life that I care about. Quilliyn and I have always been good friends, and as rough around the edges as he is, Rathyn is someone I've come to enjoy.

And then there's Cielo, the sweet, injured monster currently living on Dante's couch. My heart aches for him, and I realize I've been so caught up in this bullshit, I haven't bothered to check in on him.

I grab my phone and hit my brother's number, hoping it's not a weird hour to call. Time zones always fuck me up, even when they're only a couple hours apart. Flopping onto the side of the bed, I stare down at the screen and wait for the FaceTime to connect.

My heart twists when Dante's face appears. He looks worn down and tired, like he hasn't slept well in days. 'You look like shit.'

Dante flips me off with a roll of his eyes. 'Love you too, asshole.'

I can't help but laugh as Dante leans forward, his eyes taking me in. I know I look like shit too. I haven't slept well since the night with Eissa, and it most definitely shows.

'You look like you've been busy,' he says. I know what he's implying.

I scrub a hand down my face and make a noise as I shrug. 'Whatever. It's been fine.' I hope the short, sharp signs convey that I really, really don't want to talk about this.

'When is your flight back?' God bless my brother. He's one of the few people who gets me.

'Tomorrow night. Red-eye. Gets in at five a.m.,' I reply. I hate overnight flights, but this time I don't mind it. I just want to get the hell out of here.

'Need me to pick you up?'

I snort. 'Yeah, right. You won't get up that early.'

He shrugs and leans back a little more, the phone jostling as he sets it down. I can tell from the shelf behind him that he's in his sex shop, sitting at the front counter.

‘Did everything go okay?’ he asks. ‘Any big orders?’

I nod. ‘A lot of sales and interest in the cookies. And I have several surveys you can go through.’ I start to tell him about the expo while adding in some Deaf gossip, but the glazed-over, faraway look in his eyes tells me he’s not paying any attention.

I make a sound in the back of my throat, and Dante jumps, his face flushing.

‘Sorry,’ he replies quickly. ‘Been a long week.’

I lift my brows, waiting for more information, and he finally gives it.

‘Pain,’ he replies, and my entire body sighs.

He’s been dealing with this unexplained nerve pain for as long as I can remember, and it only seems to be getting worse. I fucking hate that he has no answers, and that not one treatment the doctors have prescribed him has given him more than a few moments of relief.

‘You need to hire someone to help at the store,’ I tell him.

His face brightens at that. ‘I did! Everest,’ he says, using the name sign I gave him. ‘He’s starting today.’

Relief filters through me. Fuck, I’m so glad he found someone. While I love helping out, it’s not what I want to do with my life. I want something more, something bigger, but nothing’s ever been very appealing, and I know I’ve been coasting.

But if Dante doesn’t need me anymore—if he’s got help and he’s taking care of himself—maybe that’ll be the push I need to focus on myself. Maybe I’ll move. I could go somewhere with a bigger, thriving Deaf community where I can meet someone who isn’t a tall, hulking, callous, hearing monster who—

‘Customer. I have to go,’ Dante interrupts, and my swirling thoughts fizzle into nothing.

I wave him off, and the phone call disconnects, leaving me alone once more.

When I blink, Eissa’s face appears behind my eyelids again, and I fight off a heavy sigh. There’s no escaping him here. I need to get home—to the place where I didn’t know he existed. Even though our town is the hub for monsters, Eissa wasn’t a part of my social circle. I’ll be free of him there.

And then I can forget.

I take a breath, and for a single second, I remember what it was like when his mouth was around me. My dick threatens to take interest, so I

breathe through it, and then my phone starts to vibrate and flash again.

Fighting off a heavy sigh, I pick it up and see it's an email to Dante's business account:

Funding Opportunity

That's…new. We get them from time to time, and they're usually spam, but something about this tells me it's not. The email address is from a law office, not some random Gmail trying to sound official.

I click on it, and it takes me a moment to process everything, but after a beat, my heart leaps in my chest. It's an anonymous financier who might be interested in Dante's products. And not just human products. They're interested in him doing research and making a few prototypes that Vyastil might use.

For a moment my mind goes to Eissa, but this wouldn't be him. Not a fucking chance.

I send back a quick message letting them know that I need to discuss this with my business partner and I'll be in contact soon.

So long as they're not weird about me being Deaf, this might be the miracle Dante was hoping for.

And it might be the catalyst that finally gets me out of my small town and away from all the mistakes I've been making.

OceanofPDF.com

four

LUCA

FUCK, I should have switched to a day flight. In spite of drinking myself into a stupor last night, I didn't sleep for shit. Then I ended up taking a cab to the airport far too early and sat in the empty terminal for hours before we were allowed to board.

Luckily I can pre-board every flight thanks to being Deaf—one of the few social perks of existing in the hearing world—so I was in my seat before everyone else and half-dozing as I scrolled on my phone.

I tell myself to rest, to shut my brain off and let Vegas disappear behind me. And of course, I do the opposite. I hop online and type *Eissa*, *Vyastil* into a search bar and pray I find nothing.

Instead, I find him everywhere. He's apparently an ambassador for Vyastil-human relations. He's on far more news channels than I expected, though most of the time the sites use auto captions so I miss half the stuff he says. But even so, I get lost in the movement of his mouth, the way he stands so fucking regal and—god help me—gorgeous.

He is far more important than I realized. But maybe I should have known. In Vegas he was constantly surrounded by guards, and he stands like he's used to addressing large crowds and giving commands. How did I not realize he wasn't just some random Vyastil visiting Vegas for fun? No, he's more than that.

He's a goddamn leader of his people.

Fuck, I feel so stupid.

I stare back at the video of him that's playing. He's beside our mayor, and he looks just as commanding as he did looming over me in the convention hall. It's in the set of his shoulders and the careful way his mouth finds each English word. It's the way he forms speech… almost as good as the way his hands move to create signs.

I don't see any of the desperate, needy Vyastil I saw for just a few moments in the hotel room or that dark corridor.

Half of me feels special for seeing those parts of him, and the other half is angry all over again. I don't want to think about this anymore, so I shut my phone, close my eyes, and hope that the next time I open them I'll be back in town and never have to see him again.

Jet lag nips at my heels as I trudge from the rideshare to my front door, but there's a restlessness in my limbs that tells me I won't be able to crawl into my bed and sleep for the next two days. I throw my things in my room and start to pace, but the longer I'm alone with my thoughts, the more I think about Eissa.

We were both far from home when we met, but that doesn't mean he doesn't live here where most of the Vyastil officials live. He probably has an apartment at the Foundry. Hell, he probably knows Rathyn.

I feel a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach and realize that if I continue to wallow here, I'm going to do something I regret. So, in spite of the ache in my bones and fatigue in all my muscles, I grab my gym bag and head out the door.

It might be early, and my mind might feel a little foggy, but I think a long workout will help keep me distracted. Or, at the very least, cause enough burn that I think about that instead of Eissa.

This isn't the first time someone has fucked me and fucked off. I don't know why this feels worse than before.

As I'm marching to my car, I hear a high-pitched sound, and I turn to see my brother waving at me from his front door.

I arch an eyebrow at him. 'You're up early.'

He rolls his eyes and shrugs. 'Can I get a ride to the gym?'

Now that question is startling. My brother never works out, and if he does, it's usually because I'm dragging him there so he can get some steps in. But as much as I don't really want company right now, I've never been able to say no to Dante.

'Come on. Hurry,' I sign.

He's already dressed and ready to go, so all he has to do is shut the door behind him and jog over to where I'm leaning against my car. His movements are more sluggish than usual, but I don't think they're from pain.

He looks like he's been up all night pacing. His hair, which is normally styled to perfection, is in a messy bun, and he's wearing mismatched socks. It's so unlike him, and worry immediately floods my brain.

We say nothing as we climb into the car, and the drive over to the gym is weird and tense. I don't like it. This isn't how it usually goes with Dante, who never shuts up. He's the reason I can converse so well and have perfected keeping one eye on the road and the other on him.

But this morning it's different.

The tension in me finally snaps when I pull into the gym parking lot and turn the car off. He climbs out after me, but I'm not going inside until I get some kind of answer.

I knock my knuckles on the roof of my car to get his attention. 'Okay. Enough. What's going on?'

His lips turn down, and he shakes his head. 'What? Nothing? Why would something be going on? I'm fine. Everything is great!'

The look on his face tells me he's lying through his fingers. 'Bullshit.'

He drops his forehead to the side of the car for a second and then peers back up at me. I know he's going to tell me. He always does. Sometimes it just takes a bit of prodding.

Our eyes meet, and he lifts his hands. 'This whole thing with Cielo is… weird. Different. I'm happy to have him, but I don't know if I'm good enough for him.'

My brows rise in surprise. What the fuck does that mean? 'Not good enough for him? How?'

'I'm a mess. I can barely take care of myself—'

I scoff, cutting my brother off as I round the car and tug him into a one-armed hug. 'Did he say something to you?'

Dante quickly shakes his head. 'No.'

I can’t tell if he’s lying or not. I like Cielo, but not enough to allow Dante to be in pain. ‘Anyone hurts you, I hurt them,’ I remind him.

It’s something I’ve always told him because I’m bigger than him and fuck knows my brother needed someone to defend him. He might be older than me, but I’ve been his protector for a long, long time.

He elbows me in the side and pushes me away. He only gets away because I let him. ‘Thank you. But it’s not that. I’m just…’

‘Hurting yourself?’ Now that would be very much like him.

He doesn’t answer me. He just nods toward the gym doors. I know he needs a moment, so we walk inside in silence. While Dante scans his card, I see a cute dark-haired guy working the counter. I haven’t met him before, and I can’t help but give him a flirty wink. It feels like a giant fuck you to Eissa.

I don’t know why that gives me satisfaction considering Eissa isn’t here to see it—and he told me to stay away from him, so why would he care? But I feel the barest pulse of annoyance in my head. It’s that strange echo I felt in Vegas—here one second, gone the next.

I shake my head out of it as Dante waves his hand in my periphery to get my attention.

‘I’m going to go work out,’ Dante says, then takes off before I can respond.

My gaze turns back to the guy at the counter. Xander, his name tag reads. I file that away. I like that much better than Eissa.

I meet Xander’s gaze and offer a flirty smile, and he blushes, fumbling with the stack of papers he was trying to sort. I can’t tell if he’s interested in me or if me being Deaf has gotten him all flustered.

I bite my bottom lip and pull my phone out, typing on it quickly:

Want to meet up after you’re off work?

Dating a hearing person while Deaf is complicated, but fucking a hearing person is simple. It’s just bodies and movement. Nothing more to it. As long as consent is obvious, understood, and enthusiastic, no more words are needed apart from yes, more, harder, and please. And I can teach him that while sucking his dick at the same time.

Xander’s eyes scan the words on my phone, and he blushes even harder, nodding as he drags his lower lip between his teeth. Taking my phone from

my hand, he punches his phone number into it.

When I take it back, I wink at him, enjoying the way the pink on his skin gets all mottled and patchy.

He holds up a finger for me to wait, then picks up a piece of paper and scribbles something on it.

I'm off work in an hour. Sound good?

That makes my heart race, and something tugs and pulls inside my head. It feels like guilt and anger, and I can't make sense of it. This isn't cheating, I remind myself. Eissa and I are nothing—a one-time…well, one-and-a-half-time thing in Vegas, forgotten as my plane crossed state borders.

He's nothing to me because he *wants* to be nothing to me. I'm allowed to meet a cute guy at my favorite gym and have a little fun.

And goddamn it, and goddamn Eissa, but I'm going to.

'You are mine.' The words ring through my head, and suddenly the fire of my determination and lust for poor Xander fizzles out like it was doused with a bucket of ice water. 'You are mine,' the words repeat.

I refuse to believe it's Eissa. It can't be. This is my guilt talking, though I don't know what the fuck I have to feel guilty over. I don't owe him anything, least of all my loyalty. I take a breath and smile at the man standing across from me.

'Text me,' I sign, which is clear even to hearing people who don't know ASL, and he nods. He smiles, which shows off half a dimple in his right cheek.

I allow myself to picture the two of us kissing, then him spinning me toward the wall and spreading my ass cheeks with his big, thick fingers, but the mental image doesn't go past that. It's almost like there's a wall in my head that won't let me go further.

I push against it, but it starts to give me a headache. This is getting to be too much. If I don't walk away now, I'm going to ruin this one good thing that might offer me a chance to get past Eissa, so I smile at Xander and then turn to find my brother.

God only knows what he's up to, and I have a feeling it's not working out.

The last time I left him on his own, I found him sitting cross-legged on the gym floor, eyes closed, doing absolutely nothing. He called it

meditating; I called it a waste of a perfectly good mat.

This morning I want to make sure his gym experience involves actual movement since that will also keep me distracted from whatever the hell is going on with my head.

It takes me a bit, but eventually I find Dante on the other side of the room, on an actual treadmill, talking to someone vaguely familiar. I rack my brain for a name but come up short. Not that it matters. As soon as Dante clocks me, he switches to SimCom and introduces his new friend.

I give the curly-haired stranger a nod and a small smile.

‘This is my brother, Luca,’ Dante signs and then adds, ‘He’s Deaf. Luca, this is Zane.’

Surprisingly, the blond-haired stranger lifts his hands and signs, ‘Nice to meet you. I know a little sign. Everest and I took a class.’

His signs aren’t great or even fluid, but I fucking love it when people try to bridge communication gaps by giving it their all. Even if their all is pretty bad. I’ll take that any day over someone asking me to lip read.

‘Nice to meet you,’ I offer. It’s a conscious effort to make myself sign slower, but it’s worth it when I see that Zane understands me.

He jerks his chin up at me in understanding, and his pace slows a little. ‘You come here a lot?’

I shrug, but Dante bursts into laughter. “All the time,” he SimComs. “He lives here.”

I drag my fingers under my chin in both the Italian and ASL way to say, ‘Fuck you.’

Dante grins and looks unapologetic, but then it’s obvious his gaze catches on something, and I look over to see Quilliyn coming our way. I’ve always liked him. He’s different than most Vyastil I’ve met.

They’re all pretty jacked, but Quilliyn has put on muscle since taking over the gym, and he’s always walking around in very tiny shorts with no shirt, showing off all his piercings. He flashes fang with his grin, and that’s when I feel Zane tense beside me.

The look on his face is definitely not the same kind of expression he had when he met me. He catches me staring and looks away, but Dante doesn’t notice as he hops off his treadmill and jogs over to say hello.

‘Your family know a lot of monsters?’ Zane asks when he catches my gaze. His fingers and face are full of derision.

‘I know some. They are really friendly.’

Zane's face changes, something dark passing through his eyes. He tries to cover it up with a smile, but I can tell it's forced. He can't hide that from my Deaf and Italian eyes. I've spent my entire life reading strangers through their facial expressions and body language. It's in both sides of my DNA.

'So…you know Ceelo,' he spells Cielo's name wrong, and that makes something uncomfortable curl around my stomach and squeeze.

'Cielo,' I correct, probably too fast for him to get. 'Yes, I do. He's nice.'

'What about Rathyn?'

The way he's rapid-firing questions at me makes me feel like I'm being interrogated. It's bizarre, and that's the moment I realize there's more to Zane than I originally thought. And it's not good. 'I met him,' I answer very cautiously. 'He seems nice too.'

'You know how they get in and out of the portals?'

My hackles are up. 'What the fuck is this about? What are you asking for here?'

His brows furrow. 'Sorry. Don't understand.'

I don't know if I believe him or not, but I had been signing at Deaf speed so it's very likely he's telling the truth.

I shrug and refuse to repeat myself, instead turning my gaze to the row of machines to decide which I want to use first. In my periphery, I can see him staring at me like he's debating if he wants to get my attention to grill me more, but in the end, he gives up.

He turns off his machine, but instead of stepping off, he twists his body and stares at where Dante and Quilliyn are still chatting. I'm on edge now. I don't like the look he's giving either of them, and I will kill him if he even thinks about going anywhere near Dante. I'll extend that protection to Quilliyn too.

Finally, he stalks off, heading for the free weights, which gives him the perfect view of Quilliyn and my brother, so I take a few steps to the left where a pull-down bar isn't being used. I set the weight without really taking my eyes off Zane and begin a few reps, but I catch a wave in my periphery a second later and glance over to see that Quilliyn's gone and Dante is standing beside my machine.

'Going to shower. Leave soon?'

Normally I'd give him shit about wanting to leave so soon and getting nothing done, but with this Zane guy acting weird and Dante lower than he

normally is, all I can do is nod.

‘Tell me you’re okay,’ I ask as he pulls his hair out of his hair tie.

Dante’s shoulders rise and fall with his sigh. ‘I’m fine,’ he signs once his hands are free.

I can tell in this moment, his fingers are lying.

After finishing some reps on the pulldown machine and grabbing my gym bag, I find Dante outside, pacing back and forth, his attention on his phone. I don’t move out of his way, so he smacks into me, and I make a sound, steadying him with my hand on his shoulder.

‘You okay?’

He nods, looking a little frantic. ‘You ready? Can we go? I’m going to be late.’

I frown. ‘For-for?’

His mouth drops open for a second like he forgot he needs his hands to talk to me, then he shoves his phone into his pocket. ‘Nothing. Never mind.’ He blinks like he’s just waking up from a bad dream. ‘Do you want to keep working out?’

‘No. I was finished.’

Dante looks concerned. ‘You never leave the gym early.’

‘Today is different. Your friend in there. Zane?’ I say, hesitant to bring this up when there is already so much on his mind.

‘Everest’s friend,’ he corrects.

I make a movement with my lips, letting him know I understand, and then ask, ‘You know him very well?’

Dante’s mouth is drawn in a frown. ‘No. Why? Did he say something rude?’

‘He was asking me a lot of questions about the Vyastil we know,’ I reply. ‘About Cielo.’

He bristles. ‘What did you tell him?’

‘Nothing. But he was persistent. It was weird. It made me worried he might be up to something.’

He shakes his head as he chews on his bottom lip. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing. He’s Everest’s best friend. Trust me, Everest wouldn’t be friends with him if

he was a bad guy.'

I believe Dante believes that, but I've always been more social than him, and I have seen the worst of people. I know how good they can be at pretending like they care when all they want is to see someone hurt.

It's not worth pushing it though. Dante's clearly still on edge, and I don't want him to crack because I'm being paranoid. 'Okay. And you?'

'Me?' His finger shakes when he points to himself.

'You're more tense than usual. What's wrong? Tell.'

His shoulders slump, and I can see the dread in his eyes, and the way he finally breaks. 'I have to go to the clinic.'

The confession sits heavy in his signs, making them look weighted, but I don't understand the problem. He's been to the clinic before. It's never been a thing. 'What's wrong with the clinic? You used to enjoy.'

'I know, but…' he hesitates a moment and then adds, 'I really don't want to go this time.'

A curious sound rattles in my throat. 'Something happened?'

He takes a step back and shrugs. 'It's just…never mind. It's nothing.'

Then suddenly it dawns on me. He's making the same face I was making when I was hitting on Xander at the desk. It's guilt resting in his eyes.

'Cielo,' I sign a C tapped near my chin.

My brother looks like he's going to cry, his eyes glassy, his nose turning red. 'Yeah. I like him.'

That makes me snort. 'I know.'

'You don't understand. I *like* him.' He signs like twice, so I know he means he wants to climb Cielo like a tree.

I can't help but roll my eyes. 'I know,' I reply again. But then, of course, it makes sense. He wants Cielo, so the idea of letting another Vyastil touch him must be killing him. 'Can you tell them you can't do it? You're in a personal exchange with a Vyastil?'

He shakes his head. 'They'll ask for documentation, and I think part of Cielo's punishment is that he's not allowed to have cum. He won't even take mine.'

My face screws up. 'Why not?'

'He's afraid to break the rules,' he repeats. 'No cum. No humans.'

'That's bullshit.' I feel a white-hot surge of anger in my chest. Cielo has already been through hell and back, and from what Dante's told me, it was

for no reason other than helping to save Rathyn's life. It's monstrous that they're punishing him that way, and it makes me feel furious all over again to think that Cielo's been conditioned to follow their rules, even here on Earth.

'Yeah,' Dante agrees. 'And I don't think anyone will notice or care, but he seems terrified, and I don't blame him. You saw what he looked like when they were finished with him.'

I give a stiff nod in response.

'I can't tell the clinic I want to be with him because he might get arrested or something. And I have no other excuses to get out of it.'

'Lie. Pretend Deaf,' I suggest. 'They'll fire you like they did me.'

'I should have tried that years ago,' he replies, then says, 'I need to go. I need to open the shop. You should stay and work out more. I'm sorry I asked you to leave.'

I reach out, squeezing his shoulder. 'No. Let me drive you.'

'It's okay. I already ordered a car. Dinner tonight. You can tell me what happened in Vegas.'

The reminder makes me want to punch a wall. 'Maybe.'

He waves at me as I start to move back, and he asks, 'Are *you* okay?'

I should tell him, let it all spill out, but instead I just let my hand push forward from the side of my face.

'Will-will.'

Dante seems to understand and just nods. 'Get some sleep when you get home. If you need me, I'll be at the shop until close.'

My head bobs just once as we say goodbye, then the Uber pulls up, and Dante climbs inside, casting me one last wave before he's gone. The silence and stillness settle around me, and I glance back over my shoulder at the gym doors, debating if I should go get a proper workout in.

But I'm tired.

And if I run into Zane again, I'm not sure I'll be able to keep my mouth shut. And the last thing I need right now is a fist fight in public on my record.

OceanofPDF.com

five

EISSA

I DON'T OFTEN FEEL SETTLED in the human world, so it's not a unique experience for me to feel entirely unsteady as I stare around the open space of my home by the lake. It's my sanctuary away from both the humans in public office and the royals who have spent more moon cycles than I can count forcing me to do their bidding.

I know I'm a pawn to them. I've always known. For so long, it was a simple matter of fact. I was hatched and reared to do their bidding—to better the Vyastil population so we do not lose our status on Erethar.

Our position is precarious as it is. We have pushed the Tarek deep into the Outerlands, but anyone willing to admit the truth knows that if they want to fight us, the war will not end in our favor. Not without human help.

And it is only because the Vorthex prefer to live in the sky that they show no interest in our lands.

So why shouldn't I do my duty to protect who we are?

But I was young—younger than Rathyn, even—when I got my first taste of disillusionment. When I watched a young soldier who had done nothing wrong be carted off to the bowels of the castle, only to return a shell of himself.

That Vyastil never looked another one of us in the eye again. The scars were both inside and out, and every time I asked for an explanation, I was told it was none of my business.

And then *he* came.

My human.

A reward for being a loyal servant to the crown. He was one of the first, pulled through the portal on the promise that he would be given many gifts and treated with the highest honor.

That's how they sell them: the companion contracts. They promise the humans everything in exchange for something so little—something that brings them pleasure. And too many of them are willing. They fall to their backsides and spread their legs. They dissolve herbs on their tongues that allow them to forget who they are, and they give and give. The Vyastil who have them grow stronger and more intelligent…

And more dangerous.

And, of course, I was the naïve fool who thought every time Kori put his hands on me in tenderness, it was a reflection of our future together. I loved him in a very human way. And while I understood my duty to my people, with Kori, I could forget for a little while that I was a tool.

A means to whatever it was those above me were working on. A project I willfully turned a blind eye to because I did not want to live with the guilt.

We had already perverted who we were. Those in power had spent eons corrupting our biology, destroying what came naturally to us. There were no Vyastil alive any longer who had a mate—who knew the unique feeling of being connected by heart, by mind, by soul to their VySytheh.

That was a word of mythos now. Of legend.

Of shame, reflecting the barbaric society we once lived in.

But I knew the truth. I swallowed it down and soothed myself with Kori's cum, his soft hands, and the way he would lie in my arms and show me what it was to be different—how good and perfect it could feel.

Then I grew bold. I grew tired. And I spoke out of turn in front of Prince Jyrion, who'd had his eye on my human for far too long. My possessive nature and reluctance to live for a future I didn't want clouded my judgment.

"Perhaps it is better if you find someone else for the next breeding cycle," I said when I pulled Kori away from his wandering hands. "Perhaps it is better that I step down."

His eyes grew cold, his claws long, his fangs sharp. Guards were on Kori, putting him in shackles before I could speak a word, and then I was on my knees with a knife at my neck.

“You need to be reminded of your place.” His words weren’t cold. They were full of glee. “I will handle your human. You will go for reeducation.”

Like Cielo, I am now intimately familiar with what happens in the darkness beneath the city. That pain and I are old friends, and the physical scars left behind on my skin are a reminder of that.

I cover them with my tunics to avoid questions and knowing glances from other Vyastil, but they are not the most painful part. The pain came from the realization I was a fool. I believed that if I suffered long enough, screamed loud enough, I would return to my post a better Vyastil, ready to soothe whatever scars Jyrion left behind on Kori.

I was not expecting to receive his final vial of cum, and the knowledge that his life was forfeit for my mistakes.

I will never forgive myself for his death, and I will never, ever allow myself to become weak for a human, ever again.

At least, that is what I believed.

And then I met Luca, and now everything is upside down.

Pacing the room, I ignore my internal alarm as I dissolve a bit of zitha on my tongue. I have several injuries from my time beneath Erethar that will never heal, and taking zitha once every fourth-moon cycle helps. It’s harvested fresh, delivered from Sabik, who cultivates it in exchange for free passage through the capital’s tunnels.

It’s a worthy, personal treaty, though I know what the consequences will be if either one of us is ever caught. But I have no one to worry about but myself now. At least, so long as no one knows what happened when I was in Vegas.

The portal scientists have been attempting to find other places on Earth where the veil between universes—as they call it—is weakest. We know that rips have occurred before, but they were natural and healed before we could study them.

We also know that another race on Erethar has opened their own portals. The Vorthex have theirs, where they take holes—the Vorthex word for humans—kept for their own survival. But they have mostly stopped taking humans and have been breeding them in their sky palaces for eons now.

They have shared their technology with us from the moment they realized the Vyastil were in need of something from humans just like them.

But they did not anticipate how far the Vyastil would go to control that technology, and from what I know in council meetings, it's possible we are close to taking over what the Vorthex have created.

Right now, our portals are limited to one small area, but deep in the desert nearly two thousand miles from this little place I call a second home, there was a blip. I was sent to investigate with my team and found nothing.

At least, I found nothing to do with the portals.

But I did find *him*.

Luca. His name was whispered in my mind before I saw him. He was a heavy weight across the room, and I had no idea what I was looking for until he came into view. Tall, pale, dark hair, a constellation of freckles over his nose and cheeks.

So beautiful.

So *human*.

It took me some time to feel the tug in my head—the pulse of his own heartbeat and the rapid-fire images that shot through his mind.

His thoughts, I realized after a moment.

I didn't understand at first why it felt like shapes were pressing against my fingertips until I understood those were his thoughts.

And his language moved from his hands instead of being spoken on his tongue.

I, of course, know several dialects of signed language. I spent several second-moon cycles preparing for my liaison role by absorbing as many languages as I could, and the signed American language was high on the list.

It was easy—simpler than a lot of spoken languages. It was intuitive in some cases, and when it wasn't, it was still easy to learn. Speaking with expression and body language is instinctive for Vyastil, and I found it almost a relief when I was able to use it.

But I had no time to enjoy the conversation with him. Not when he was invading my mind. Not when he was branding himself on my soul in a way I could not allow.

There was nothing I could have done to stop it, of course. I wanted him as I wanted nothing ever before. And even after rejecting him and sending him away, he is all I have thought about. When I close my eyes, he is there.

When I breathe deeply, his thoughts are probing at mine. He has not stopped trying to climb into my head, and it has taken every single resource I possess to lock him out.

Eventually, I will crack.

It is why I've sought the comfort of my home beside the lake. The wide expanse of surface water has the most calming effect, and my little cottage is surrounded by beach and trees with only a narrow, unmaintained road that connects me to town.

For a little while, I can ignore my duties at the Foundry and at the clinic.

For now, I can breathe.

BZZT BZZT!

I jolt as my phone begins to vibrate on the table. It's a horrific little human device. Allows no space. No peace. Humans are so fixated on being in contact with each other all the time. I do not know how their minds withstand it. The Vyastil have communication tablets we use for messages, but when we are not expected to be working, we are allowed peace.

Earth seems to refuse that small luxury.

Reaching for the buzzing phone, I stare at the screen, and my heart sinks. It's Everest.

I don't know that I can deny him anything. Not only is he a good and kind human who has managed to change Rathyn in ways I never thought possible, but he has done so by taking a punishment of humiliation that would have broken lesser men.

And he's doing it not just for Rathyn, but for our people.

"Hello, Everest," I say when his face appears on the screen.

He looks frantic. "I need your help."

My brow furrows. "Are you in trouble? Is Rathyn?"

His breath tumbles out of his chest in a rush. "No, no. It's Dante."

I repeat his name in confusion.

"Dante Barducci," Everest says. "He's my friend. He owns a sex shop. Cute guy with pink hair?"

Ah, yes. The human who gave Cielo sanctuary. And, if I read his thoughts correctly, Luca's brother. My hearts fall out of sync for a moment. "Is he injured?"

"No. He has a clinic appointment today."

"I fail to see the problem." My brow furrows. "Was he harmed there?"

“No, but…” Everest bites his lip, then says, “He hasn’t said anything about it yet, but I’m pretty sure he and Cielo are VySytheh.”

He speaks our word so bluntly, so human. His accent makes it almost impossible to understand, but even garbled with his tongue, the word sends something racing through me.

Hope and fear: an overwhelming combination.

“You’re certain?”

“No, but…” He hesitates. “I swear he was having a conversation with Cielo in his head. And I don’t know, it’s weird, but I can almost sense it on him. I don’t know how to explain it.”

It takes me a moment to process what he’s saying, but it hits me like a bolt of lightning when it does. If Cielo and Dante have bonded fully, then Dante being touched by another Vyastil would destroy them. If the old stories are to be believed, it could put both their lives at risk.

I might normally think that protecting a banished Vyastil and his human is not worth destroying everything we have worked so hard to hide, but Dante is Luca’s brother. He is precious to him, and as much as I wish to deny it, that makes him precious to me.

I hate the feeling. I hate the thought of it.

I cannot be vulnerable again.

But what choice do I have? I have tasted Luca. I have touched him. Kissed him in the human way. He has crawled into my mind, and I have seen into his. Our three hearts beat in sync, and the bond was formed.

When I allow myself rest, I dream of sinking my teeth into his neck and making our bond permanent.

Making him mine forever. For good. Destroying what little chance I have to hide my station as a breeder for my people.

“Eissa,” Everest begs. “Are you still with me?”

I blink and return to him. “Forgive me. I will contact the clinic and see what I can do. It may only lead to a temporary leave of absence for now.”

Everest’s face falls. “Is there anything that can discharge him without, you know, prison or whatever? I mean, it’s fucking bullshit he’s not allowed to quit if he wants to.”

I don’t disagree. The Vyastil and human leaders have painted this service to the public as though everyone has a choice. But they do not. And not every Vyastil is offered what the elite are allowed to consume.

“I will look into it,” I tell him quietly. “His brother—does he have appointments?”

Everest frowns in thought. “I don’t…know, actually. I haven’t really talked to him much. My signing is still kind of crap.”

I would be surprised if Luca does have one. Vyastil view anything outside of the status quo as imperfection, and they loathe imperfection. Luca is perfect to me, but to the others…

“Give me a little while.”

“His appointment is today. You have to do something quick,” Everest begs.

I nod, then end the call and log into the clinic portal. It doesn’t take me long to find Dante’s records. The surname pulls up both him and Luca. As suspected, Luca was immediately discharged from service due to his deafness, but Dante has been serving for several years now.

His appointment is not just today, but now. His Vyastil has not checked in yet, but there are very few minutes left. I immediately cancel the session and put a hold on his name, which means he won’t be booked again for some time.

While we wait, I will do some digging and find a reason to discharge him. If he is touched by another Vyastil, there’s no telling what Cielo will do. He will catch the scent, and it’s very likely his instincts will take over.

He will track down the offender who touched his VySytheh, and he will become feral. Once that happens, the others will look into why he behaved this way, and they might learn the answer. They might realize Vyastil can still bond. That we can still feel.

And that we can do it with humans.

It won’t take long after that for someone in power to realize the relationship between Rathyn and Everest is not what it seems, and it won’t take long after that to trace the deception back to me.

Everything will be in ruins, and if that happens, we will never break free.

“Health records,” I mutter to myself when I realize that’s the first place I should look. All of Dante’s medical records—past and current—are connected to his profile. It’s obvious no one has been through this in some time because there are dozens of appointments and dozens of prescriptions that occurred after he was through with his orientation.

The diagnosis is inconclusive, but this is enough to discharge him without looking suspicious. It feels far too easy—too unsafe—but I'd rather take this risk than allow Cielo to ever scent another Vyastil on his VySytheh.

I press the button to have Dante's account permanently suspended due to health reasons. It will take a while for it to process, and they will need a few more documents from Dante to approve it, but the whole thing is automated, and unless it triggers an audit, which hasn't happened in…well, ever, Dante will be free to never visit the clinic again.

I breathe a sigh of tentative relief as the request begins to process, then I rub a hand down my face before clicking over to Luca's profile.

I stare at him for a long moment. He is much younger in his file photo. His cheeks are fuller, eyes brighter, hair a little longer. He's wearing massive hearing aids which did not adorn his ears in Las Vegas, and his grin is more carefree than it was when I saw him last.

I breathe in and remember his scent. My cocks stir behind my sheath, and I stroke my hand down my stomach. It has been so long since I've chased pleasure. So long since I've been able to feel it.

With Kori, the moments were rare, and only when he consumed oyen. But as much as my body reacted to the breeding scent he gave off, I never felt the urge to bite him, to mount him, to claim him.

I never wished to see him fat with my egg.

With Luca, it's different. He and I will never be able to breed, but I want to. I want to push my cocks deep into his body and fill him with my seed. I want to see him round and marked by me.

My slit grows wet, and I push two fingers inside, hiding my gasp against my palm as the tips of my claws stroke over my cock. It pulses deep inside me. It won't come out. Not on its own, but I can touch it like this.

I can pretend these are Luca's hands as I retract my claws and let blunt fingertips explore the shape. Pleasure races through me, and I hate myself for not allowing Luca to explore me further when I had him.

When I was weak and let him close.

My hand pushes deeper into my slit, and I'm able to grab my cock, squeezing and pulsing against my palm. A trill races up my throat, and it's with a gasp in the shape of Luca's name that I let go.

I don't cum like a human—there is no rush of fluid, no climax that takes me down. Not like the way it would be if Luca were here. It's more like a

steady warmth of lust and need that wraps around me, making me more desperate for him.

I don’t know how I will manage to survive not touching him when I see him. I don’t know if I’ll want to.

Without even realizing it, Luca has ruined me.

Just as I pull in a full breath, my phone buzzes, and I pick it up to see that the request to have Dante terminated from service has gone through without an issue.

He is safe for now. I have bought us more time to go undetected in an attempt to save my people from themselves. Still a little breathless, I turn my gaze out toward the water. It’s early, which means I have time to do nothing.

To sit and think.

Tonight, I will find Everest so he can pass along the news to Dante.

For now, I will stay in my little home and pray that I can get through the next long while without Luca destroying all of my carefully laid plans.

OceanofPDF.com

six

LUCA

I FIND myself tempted to keep online-stalking Eissa, so I try to keep myself busy and distracted. I do everything I can to keep myself away from my phone, social media, and anywhere else his name might pop up.

My small condo has never been so clean, nor my yard so spotless, and my calendar has become fuller and fuller by the minute. This morning I found myself pulling weeds that don't even exist yet, and that's how I know it's a problem.

But what I'm not busy doing is fucking other people, which is a shame because that normally keeps me happily distracted. I found myself fantasizing about the cute guy behind the counter at the gym, the two of us pressed against each other in the gym showers. And then halfway through the mental image, I felt a crawling sensation move through me, a buzzing in my mind, and I couldn't focus. My dick, that was hard, softened at a rapid rate.

I wasn't into it.

At all. So I dropped my limp dick, wiped the lube off my palm onto the sheets, and rolled over, hating Eissa even more for being so annoying that he's ruining my fantasies.

I wake up feeling damn near hungover after a fitful sleep, so I head over to the small café that I lease to a Vyastil and a…well, I'm not entirely sure what Hepyn is. He looks a little different than the other monsters in town.

It has to do with the way his skin ripples with translucent scales, almost like a dragonfly's wing, the sharp upward slant of his eyes, and the way his ears are smaller with tips that almost look like feathers.

His tail is also different. It's shorter and more blunt than Vyastil I've known. His piercings are also nothing like Eissa's. He has them all over his body. In his nose, his lips, and between his fingers.

Maybe he was born different. He's living on Earth for a reason. Maybe his differences made him an outcast on Erethar, but I haven't been brave enough to ask.

Either way, he doesn't normally work in the front of the shop. He's usually in the back prepping food. Zinni, the Vyastil, is more than capable of managing everything alone.

But things have gotten busier at their shop in recent months. Especially after Creature Comforts started offering Eretharian drinks for the Vyastil who live nearby. It's one of the few places in town where the monsters can feel like they have a piece of their home, and I know what that feels like a little too well.

Every time I'm away from my family for too long, I feel an ache—an almost pull to bring me back. I can't imagine what it must be like for the Vyastil to be in an entirely different universe.

Taking a breath, I pull the café door open and the scent of coffee beans, cinnamon, and something that reminds me of Eissa hits my nose. I bask in it for a short, indulgent moment, then make my way inside.

Zinni and Hepyn are both behind the counter, which probably means it's been a busier day than usual. Zinni catches my eye as I slip into the line, and he offers me a quick, flashing smile and a welcoming flick of his ears. He motions for me to come back and skip ahead, but I rarely ever do that.

I can wait just like everyone else.

Hepyn catches that and rolls his eyes a little, shaking his head, which causes his long, thick, silver braid to flop over his shoulder. He shoves it back impatiently and gets back to work, and Zinni shoots me another grin as he hip-checks Hepyn on his way to the register.

He's such an interesting contrast to his companion with his darker blue skin and bright orange hair he's currently wearing on top of his head in a messy bun. He smiles a lot more than Hepyn, but the two of them move in tandem like they were made for each other.

As far as I know—as far as Zinni has protested—they're just friends, but I wonder if maybe being on Earth and seeing how we love here will change things for them. Maybe they'll find some kind of happiness together.

Blinking out of my thoughts, I see a completely unfamiliar and very human person pop up from behind the counter, and I startle. Zinni and Hepyn had been very insistent they didn't want help at the shop, but they must have cracked with how busy they've been.

The human is shorter than me by at least a foot, his thin frame dwarfed under the shirt he's wearing. His hair is black with a streak of blue, and his lip and eyebrow are pierced. On his nose are thick-framed glasses, and when I get closer, I can see tattoos trailing up his neck and down one of his arms. It takes me a second to see what they are: ladybugs, moths, and beetles.

Kind of weird, but then again, I sell dick cookies at Deaf expos so who the fuck am I to judge?

When I step up to the counter, he offers me a shrug as if he couldn't care less about me, but I see a subtle blush on his cheeks, his green eyes almost translucent as he looks at me and then glances away.

I see his lips moving as he talks, and I can read some of what he's saying, but it's all out of context, so I point at my ear and shake my head.

His eyes widen. "Deaf."

The one word I will probably always recognize on any lips. Well, that and fuck you. Or fuck me. I smile and nod, and for whatever reason that seems to make him even more nervous because he reaches to the side and almost knocks over a stack of cups.

Luckily Hepyn's tail catches them, righting them before a long-suffering sigh leaves his chest. I can't hear it, but I can see the way his chest heaves then falls as he does.

Leaning my elbow on the counter, my eyes find his name badge pinned to his apron. Syl. I have no idea how that would be pronounced, and I'm not even going to try. I'm bad enough with common words, and considering how nervous he is by my existence, my Deaf accent with the hint of Ukrainian I picked up from my speech therapist would probably make it worse.

'You're fine,' I sign, mouthing the words so hopefully he'll follow.

Syl takes in a breath, looking almost embarrassed by his clumsy arm, but when his green eyes meet mine again, he looks resolved.

Bratty even.

He doesn't say another word to me. Instead, he rests his wrist on the counter and begins to drum his fingers.

'Sorry about him. He's new,' Hepyn signs, a scowl on his face. 'More trouble than he's worth. Useless. But Zinni wanted a helper, so here we are.'

'That's rude to sign right in front of him.'

'He doesn't know ASL. Another lazy human.'

'Hey, we aren't all lazy.' I puff up my chest, though I'm not sure I have any real business saying that. I don't have an official job besides landlord, and the only thing I do in my free time is hit the free weights.

Hepyn peers over at Syl, his ears flicking, and then turns back to me, his lips curling up in a small smile. 'You are lazy too. Otherwise you wouldn't let us be late on rent.' I flip him off, and his grin widens. 'Stop making me smile. I do not like the way it feels on my face.'

'Awww, hurts to feel happiness,' I tease. He doesn't look amused.

'Tell me what you want today,' he signs, and turns to the right a little, making the light glint off of all his piercings.

I take a quick glance at the menu, though not much has changed since the last time I came in. The board behind Syl's head has all the traditional drinks that you can find at any other coffee shop in town, and the one on the far left has the Eretharian blends.

There's the Duskroot Latte, which has an herb that Zinni brings back from Erethar that I haven't tried, but apparently tastes like vanilla and cinnamon. There's also a Kirrashev Matcha Mist, featuring the moss-like leaves that I've seen Rathyn and Cielo munch on. I've never tried it, so I point to it and fingerspell the one I want to Hepyn.

His eyes light up, and he gives me a nod. He always likes it when humans order monster drinks. 'A good choice, lazy human.'

That makes me laugh. This fucker never calls me by my name. Last week it was *short shirt*, and the week before that it was *dirty shoes*. It used to bother me, but I've come to accept it now. It reminds me of sign names, and I wonder if maybe he thinks of me like we're friends.

And I have a feeling Hepyn doesn't have many of those.

I move to pull out my phone to pay, but he shakes his head. Syl stares at him in disapproval, his face screwed up in frustration as he speaks, but I

have no idea what he's saying. It's only when Hepyn dismisses him with a flick of his tail to go back to the register that he vents to me.

'That human is also obstinate and annoying. I do not like him. He thinks he can tell me how to run my café. His brain is small, and his mouth is far too wide.'

I bite back a smile as Zinni rolls his eyes. 'Don't listen to Hepyn. Syl is fine. He's just young.'

'I wish he would quit. I do not want the frustration of firing him. I do not think he would go easily,' Hepyn adds as he begins to make my drink. When he turns, my eyes catch on something along his back—two raised lines pushing against the fabric of his shirt. Not his shoulder blades…but something else.

I want to ask, but I don't. I have my own secrets. Nothing scandalous, but I try to give what I want to get, and I have a feeling the reason that these two are here to stay isn't a pleasant story, and the last thing I'm sure they want is to relive the details with some human.

Before I can get too deep in my thoughts, a crowd of businessmen moves into the shop, nearly shoving me aside as they step up to the counter.

I watch Syl curiously as he attempts to take their orders. Hepyn's right; he's not very good at what he does, but Zinni seems to have more patience than most people. He steps over and assists him with a kind smile on his face, fangs poking gently at his lower lip.

When Zinni puts a hand on his lower back and points to something on the register, Syl's cheeks flame bright pink. I see his throat bob as he swallows, and he peers up at Zinni, their eyes catching for a long moment.

It's almost as if they've forgotten there are other people in the room.

One of the men in front of me must make some kind of noise because Zinni flinches, and Syl quickly gets to work as the monster steps away from him to make the drinks.

Hepyn waves his hand in my periphery to catch my attention, and I glance over. 'Zinni is infatuated with the human. Says he is cute. I do not see the appeal. He looks like a gryblin.' He spells that last word. I have no idea what that is, and Hepyn does not offer an explanation.

Instead, he snags the drink Zinni just made and slides it toward me with a look of expectation.

I take a long sip, pleased by the way the Vyastil plant tastes. It kind of reminds me of the way that Eissa tasted when I licked into his mouth.

It sends a flare of longing through me, but I push it aside as I get Zinni's attention. 'Love this drink.'

He grins widely. 'I'm so glad you do.'

'Why you roll eyes?' I ask with a smile when Hepyn does.

'We know it is good. He does not need to indulge you with thanks.'

That makes me snort. I do love a good blunt person, human or not. 'That's just customer service. Anyway, I have to go.'

Zinni leans on the counter. 'Big plans?'

I shake my head. 'My cousin have birthday party tonight.'

'Weird human traditions,' Hepyn says, and it's Zinni's turn to roll his eyes.

'Ignore him. He has never enjoyed anything.'

I feel a laugh rumble out of my throat. 'It's fine. Stay the way you are. I like.' I give a small attempt to wave at Syl, but he avoids eye contact, wiping down the counter instead.

It's just as well. It's not like I need any more human friends anyway. Besides, these three clearly have something going on—I don't know what, but I do know that it's better if I stay out of it.

I enter Gia's condo without knocking. Mostly because I wouldn't hear them if they yelled at me to come in, and no one ever gets up to answer a door around here. It swings open without a problem, and I can immediately feel the vibrations of people moving around, music playing, and there's the scent of spices in the air from whatever's cooking.

Kicking off my shoes, I make my way past the foyer and into the living room where I see Cielo lounging on the sofa.

'What's up?'

He smiles at me, looking a lot better than he did before I left. His blue and violet hair is pulled into two long French braids, and he's wearing his pink jacket. He's gained some weight, and most of the vicious, violent wounds on his body have now healed into faint scars, stretched across his blue skin.

He sweeps his long fingers around the room, 'Decorating,' he signs. 'Many colors, balloons.' His cheeks puff out as he signs that, and I feel a

flutter of affection for him.

I tilt my head and look up at the balloons sitting against the ceiling. ‘Yes. Bright.’

Cielo’s hand sweeps out, and he adds, ‘It is impressive.’

That makes something inside of me burst. He’s just so fucking cute. His curiosity and innocence are things most of the world is missing these days. The fact that he was hurt fills me with rage, but the awe in his rainbow eyes eases that burning sensation. I can’t help but pull him into a hug, and for a sharp second he freezes, almost unsure, and then he squeezes me back.

When we pull away, he looks over at Dante, who looks much happier than when we had our video call, his face not nearly as strained and stressed.

I bet he didn’t have to go to that appointment at the clinic.

I bet it all worked out in the end. I have a feeling that if it hadn’t, things would not be as light and airy as they are now.

“Frennnnd.” Cielo says and signs. I can see the way his lips move as he draws out the consonant.

‘Yes. Friends.’ Cielo’s ears flutter in happiness, and I ask, ‘So, how can I help?’

As those words leave my hands, Gia and Amara finally notice I’m here and bring me in for a long hug.

‘You were gone *forever*!’ Gia says, her sign exaggerated before Amara interrupts.

‘How was the expo? Meet any hot guys while you were selling dick cookies?’

And yeah, that’s the last thing I want to talk about, especially with Cielo here. There’s a damn good chance Cielo knows Eissa, and I don’t think I can handle him knowing how well I was fucked, then how badly I was rejected.

‘Nothing interesting. How’s work?’

Amara launches into a very dramatic retelling about Carol, the co-worker who keeps stealing her lunches. She’s always been very good at that. I could see her in an ASL theatre if she ever wanted to get into performing.

‘…so I walked over to her desk, and I was like, bitch—’ her sign freezes in the air as she pops it off her chin, and I realize something’s happening behind me that I can’t hear.

I turn around, my gaze on the front door where I see my parents stepping into the house.

“We made it! The party can get started!” They are signing and speaking at the same time, their signs large and swaying.

They’ve never let me not be included. When the doctors told them that I was Deaf, they learned ASL quickly. Even my dad took classes, which is remarkable.

They don’t always get it right, but it’s more than most Deaf kids born to hearing families get.

Cielo takes a step back, almost trying to make himself invisible, which looks a bit ridiculous considering he’s a huge monster in this small space.

“*Amori miei—ah mamma mia!*” I read off my mom’s lips when she catches sight of him in the corner. “Why is there a Vyastil in your apartment?”

Dante steps forward, replying in both ASL and voice, “This is Cielo. He’s my friend. He’s staying with me for a bit.”

Cielo blinks at them as my father shakes his head and steps forward, his hand outstretched.

“Hello, Cielo. Nice to meet you.” He’s not using signs right now, but I can read his lips well enough to know what’s going on. Cielo stares down at the outstretched hand, almost as if unsure what my dad would like him to do with it, and eventually he unwinds his tail from around his waist and lays it in his palm.

My dad stares down at it, and his shoulders shake with a laugh as he squeezes the tail gently.

“Ah, *sì*. This’ll do. I’m Paolo, and this is my lovely wife, Maria.” This time he lifts his hands and signs while he speaks.

Cielo nods, trying to mimic those words, but from the way his lips are moving I know he is not getting it right.

My mom’s lips are curled up in a laugh as Dante turns around and subtly spells what Cielo called them. ‘Meeereeea. Peeeepoooo. Frennnnds.’

I glance over at the monster, and he must see the smile in my eyes because his shoulders soften and he grins back.

‘Amore,’ my mom signs at me. It’s a home sign since I never did learn any sort of Italian sign language, but we both know what it means. ‘I need you to get some things from the car. Your brother can help you.’

Cielo sees this and steps forward, placing a finger on his chest. ‘Me. I help.’

My mom hesitates a moment, but then her gaze flickers over to my brother, and it’s obvious right then what’s wrong. Dante’s in pain again and hiding it. He does this a lot. He pushes through it, pushes it aside, and then it rears its ugly head and keeps him in bed for hours.

‘Of course, I bet you can carry all of it at the same time. Yes, you go with Luca,’ my mom replies.

Dante looks frustrated, but he gives Cielo a nod, and I turn to make my way down to the bright red van parked on the street. Opening the sliding door, I immediately see large amounts of food stacked in aluminum containers.

Considering the Vyastil are much stronger than me, he can probably carry all of this in one go. ‘You can carry?’ I ask, gesturing to the food.

He eagerly holds out his arms. I set each warm container in them until they are tucked under his chin. I grab the white cake box and close the van door, leading Cielo back to the apartment. It’s still busy, but everyone gives us space as we make our way into the kitchen, and I set the cake down before helping Cielo unburden his arms.

I feel the weight of his stare as I pull open one of the foil tops, and I glance over my shoulder to see his wide, curious eyes staring down.

‘Italian food,’ I say, making a cross sign across my forehead. Then I fingerspell it so he understands what I mean.

He mimics me.

I point to everyone in the room and explain, ‘Italian family. This is our food.’

Cielo looks confused, and I find myself wondering if the Vyastil have cultures like this. Are there other races besides whatever Hepyn is? Are there class divides beyond just the wealthy who live in the Foundry, and the ones who escaped Erethar to make lives for themselves here?

‘You understand?’ I ask.

He doesn’t get the chance to answer me. My mom comes into the kitchen, then pulls me down so she can kiss my cheeks before she turns her attention to Cielo.

‘You Deaf? Like Luca?’

Cielo shakes his head. ‘Not speak English well.’

She lifts a brow but nods, then taps her chin in thought before her gaze darts down to his feet, then back up to his eyes. ‘I may be overstepping, but I noticed you don’t have any shoes.’

He glances down at his bare, clawed feet and blinks.

‘You don’t wear very many clothes either,’ she adds, and oh my god. ‘Vyastil always naked.’

My mom. I swear to god, she has no filter on the best days. ‘Mom, stop. It’s normal for them,’ I try, but she ignores me.

‘I have my knitting needles in my bag and some yarn. Would you like some socks? I always have to have something to do with my hands when I’m around this many people.’

Cielo looks confused, staring back down at his feet again, then at me.

I point down at my socked feet and wriggle my toes, then sign, ‘Socks,’ for him again. It makes sense he doesn’t understand it. I’m not sure there’s anyone on earth who has the skill to make shoes for the Vyastil. And I’m not sure the Vyastil would ever need them.

I expect him to say something along those lines, but instead he opens his mouth and speaks as he signs, “Yes. Pleeeeas.”

She grins and winks at Cielo, making his ears flutter. I wonder for a moment if Eissa would wear socks. If it would make him both pleased and embarrassed the way Cielo seems to be right now. Would he like it if I touched his feet? Or maybe his fluttering ears? Or his lips, or…

I shove that thought away.

If I want to fuck a Vyastil, I’ll find someone else. Like Quilliyn. Or maybe Zinni.

Eissa made it clear he and I would never happen again, and I intend to hold him to that. My pride doesn’t need any more beatings.

Another half hour goes by before the door opens again, and I see two familiar faces. Everest and Rathyn stroll past the foyer, Everest looking content like he always does, and Rathyn, well…he looks like this is the worst thing that has ever happened to him.

Rathyn goes around the room, diplomatic as ever as he shakes everyone’s hands, though there’s a hint of disdain in his eyes and a curl on

his lips. He only looks more relaxed when he sees Cielo and moves over to greet him just as Everest finds my brother.

The party is clearly lively and full of conversation, but like always, people tend to forget what I need if I'm not directly in their sightline. And I'm not unreasonable. I don't expect a room full of hearing people to sign every conversation, especially when I'm not part of it, but this is also why I do these things sparingly.

It's lonely sometimes. And that feeling has been getting heavier with each passing day, it seems.

Taking a breath, I make my way through the kitchen where Gia and Nonna are arguing over something in one of the food containers, and I slip through the sliding glass door to find my father leaning against the railing. He looks up at me when I close the door, and in the dim light, I catch his smile.

'Why you out here?' I ask.

'Hiding from Nonna. And it's loud in there.'

'The one lucky thing about being Deaf. I don't have to hear it.'

My dad's mouth lifts in a small laugh, then he pulls out a joint and lights it. He doesn't smoke often, but he has a prescription for his migraines, and he always uses it at family gatherings like this. My mom makes fun of him for being the least like an Italian in these moments. He loves his family, but he's more introverted than most.

'Want some?' he asks, holding it out to me. I shake my head, inhaling the bitter scent of marijuana floating through the air.

'What has Nonna done now? She nagging you with her to-do list still?'

'Yep, still haven't gone over to her place to hang her pictures.' His hand wobbles with his signs a bit, a subtle reminder of his age, and it makes my chest ache when I think about how he won't be with me forever.

We've always been close, the two of us relishing the silence and stillness of the escape. I know my dad felt guilty about me being born deaf, but after this many years, I think he's learned to appreciate the peace it can bring. Granted, I was probably the loudest child in the house thanks to not being able to hear the sounds I was making, but I was also a lot like him.

I preferred these moments to socializing, and I like that we have this together.

'Luca,' he signs after he stubs the glowing cherry out, then tucks his half-smoked joint into his carrying case.

I lift my chin in acknowledgement.

‘Are you okay? You seem…’ His hands hesitate. I don’t know if he’s searching for the right words, or if he’s just stoned. After a beat, he shrugs. ‘Quiet lately.’

I know what he means, and I bow my head, gathering my thoughts. ‘I wish I was a more productive person. Like Dante. Even with his pain, he does so much. I feel useless. Unloved.’

My dad’s face falls. ‘You’re not useless. Never useless.’ His signs are fierce. He’s told me this before.

More than once. When I was little and people would mock me, or when hearing teachers at the mainstream school would imply that education was pointless because no one would ever hire me. My parents worked their asses off to make sure I never internalized those things.

And I don’t think that’s what this is. My life has been a short series of bad decisions, and now I don’t know what to do with myself.

‘If you need me, you know where to find me,’ he says when it’s clear I’m not going to answer him.

I lean in and kiss the top of his head, and he pats me on the back. ‘I love you.’ I use the three-fingered sign at him, then glance back over my shoulder, through the window toward the party.

Rathyn’s in the corner of the room with his long nail poking at a balloon. I don’t want him to pop it, so I push my way back inside and skirt Amara, who tries to get my attention.

‘Those pop,’ I tell him when he looks up at me, and he cocks his head, carefully pulling his hand back.

‘I do not like these orbs,’ he signs stiffly, and I hide a grin. ‘And everyone speaks at loud volumes here. Everest does not do this.’

‘That’s my family. Luckily for me, I can’t hear it.’

‘You are blessed.’

I nearly laugh. ‘Yeah, I am. We call it Deaf gain.’

Rathyn repeats the sign neatly, with claws out. ‘On Erethar,’ he starts, but he doesn’t get the chance to finish his sentence because Dante appears, interrupting our conversation.

‘I need Rathyn,’ he says, and I nod, letting him pull the Vyastil away from me.

‘Talk more later?’ I ask him, and Rathyn gives me a nod before a clearly anxious Dante pulls him to the side.

Dante's speaking, so I don't understand much of it, but I do see words like Nonna, drunk, and alcohol. I'm assuming Nonna did something she wasn't supposed to, which is typical. If she's not bitching at my dad, she's wreaking havoc on social situations.

Rathyn's nodding quickly, and his lips are moving in a way I can't possibly understand, but whatever he says to Dante, my brother immediately relaxes and presses a hand to his chest. Rathyn looks satisfied and turns, probably to find Everest, and I quickly slide back up to my brother.

'Hey, you feel okay?'

He nods. 'I'm going to be in pain tonight.'

I jerk my chin toward Rathyn's retreating back. 'What happen?'

Dante rolls his eyes. 'Oh, Cielo's drunk. Rathyn said he'd be fine, but I was scared for a minute that human alcohol would hurt him.'

My eyes widen. 'He get drunk *how*? Where alcohol?'

'Nonna gave him grappa.'

I fucking knew it. I slap a hand over my face and groan. 'Oh my god,' I sign with my other hand. 'Where is he?'

Dante grimaces. 'Passed out in the girls' bedroom. I wanted to carry him back to the apartment and put him to bed, but I don't think I'm strong enough.'

I pull up my arm and flex, showing off my bulging bicep, making him scowl. 'I can carry him. I'll make Gia help me. This is her fault. I told her to hide her liquor better.'

'Thanks,' he says, using both hands to emphasize how much he means it. He looks more relieved now.

I ruffle his hair, and he shoves me off before I snag Gia's hand. 'Come help.'

I love her for not asking what I need, and she follows me to the bedroom where I clock a passed-out Cielo on the bed. His chest is rising and falling evenly, and his eyes are tightly shut, though his mouth is open and he's probably snoring.

'What the hell?' Gia demands.

'Nonna,' I sign. 'Grappa.'

'I'm going to kill her,' Gia says, looking at the monster sprawled out on the bed. 'She is seriously deranged.'

'She is. Dad is hiding from her on the patio.'

‘Smoking weed?’

I grin and nod.

‘I’ll need some after carrying this one home.’ Gia leans over the bed, then hefts his arm over her shoulder, and I do the same with the other as we hoist him upward. Cielo’s head lolls forward, almost completely dead weight, but as we move, I can tell he’s regaining some consciousness. His feet attempt to hold some of his weight, but I can tell the liquor has made him weak in the knees, and all he does is make it a little harder.

And a lot heavier.

Luckily we don’t have far to go, and the two of us make it next door, panting and sweating. I point at Dante’s room, and Gia kicks the door open as I heave him past the narrow door frame, and as we drag him to my brother’s bed, he falls like a dead weight. His arms sprawl out above his head, and his tail hits the ground with a thunk I can feel in my socked feet.

We stare at him a moment, and I swipe at my forehead, trying to catch my breath. ‘I need a fucking drink.’

‘And weed.’ Gia grins at me and takes my hand, pulling me back next door.

The party is exactly as it was when we left, except I realize after a second it isn’t. Something has changed. The air has shifted. And there’s a familiar scent in the room that brings back a visceral memory of a hotel room, and sharp claws, a long tail, and a tongue piercing.

I sense him before I see him, but as soon as my eyes land on him, I feel myself grow faint.

He’s here. Across the room. And then his eyes catch mine.

Fucking Eissa.

Eissa glances around the room full of humans, looking just as regal as before, and my skin heats as I take him in. His sea-green hair is in a long, neat braid, his sheer tunic covering his body in a way most Vyastil aren’t covered, and how he carries himself is annoyingly regal. It’s like he thinks he’s better than everyone else.

He doesn’t acknowledge me, but I watch as he crosses the room and touches foreheads with Rathyn, a greeting I’ve grown used to with these

monsters. Then he turns to Everest and offers a bow.

A helpless noise of protest dies in my throat.

I tell myself to stay back—to stay away—but I can't. My feet carry me forward, right next to Dante, my gaze meeting Eissa's. I can feel something shift between us as our eyes lock.

"Who is this?" Eissa asks in the tense silence. He uses his voice, but beside me, Dante interprets, and I feel like those words have stabbed me right in the chest.

Who am I?

"My brother," Dante replies before I can lift my hands and demand that he acknowledge me.

Eissa blinks at me as if he's never seen me before. For a second, it makes me feel like I dreamt it all, but I'm not that far gone.

He kissed me. He sucked my cock. He and I both felt things we had no business feeling.

And right now, he's a fucking liar.

"May we speak in private?" Eissa says, cutting me out once more by not signing. Luckily, Dante's still interpreting, but the fact that I can tell he's doing it on purpose stings.

I take a breath, and then I feel a strange pressure in my head, and for a second, I swear the words, 'Don't, please,' ring through my mind. But they're gone before I can wonder if I imagined it all, just like Vegas.

I try to catch Eissa's gaze, but he's looking at my brother, and I know that it's deliberate.

"Yes, come," Dante tells him, looking concerned. "We can go into the bedroom." He points to me. 'You can come too, if you want to be nosy,' he adds in sign.

Eissa glances at me, derision in his gaze, and I feel my cheeks flush. I hate that he can see how I feel. That I'm so transparent. I want him to think I don't think of him, that he matters to me even less than I matter to him.

But I've always been shit at hiding my emotions.

Dante waves us all down the hallway to the guestroom, holding the door open as Eissa sweeps through first, and then I follow with Rathyn and Everest at my heels. Dante closes the door behind us all, and I lean against the shelf where Gia and Amara have a small collection of knickknacks collecting dust.

I fight the urge to sneeze as Dante positions himself so he can interpret effectively, though I have no plans to add my two cents to this conversation.

“Thank you for having me,” Eissa says, of course without signing for my benefit.

Ugh. *Fuck* him.

“It is an honor to be invited to a birthday party,” Eissa goes on as Dante signs his words.

I can’t help but slash my hands through the air angrily. ‘You weren’t invited.’

Eissa’s brows lift, and Dante looks startled, clearly unsure if he should repeat my words aloud. It’s probably better that he doesn’t. It’s clear after this, he’s going to want a conversation, and I don’t think I’ll be able to get away by deflecting back to him and Cielo this time.

‘Sorry. Never mind,’ I tell him, then sigh and fold my arms across my chest, trying to keep myself under control.

“I won’t keep you, as the celebration for the impending death is still ongoing…” Eissa says after he’s sure I’m done.

I can see Everest biting back a laugh, and the way Dante interprets this makes my lips twitch, but I swallow the laughter down.

“…but I have come to tell you that I have found a way around Dante’s service at the clinic. Permanently.”

My heart leaps. Dante is falling hard for Cielo, and I know it was killing him to think he was going to have to be sucked by another Vyastil. My eyes find my brother, who looks pale all of a sudden, and he swallows so thickly I can see it catch in his throat.

“What is it?” Everest demands. It takes Dante a second to gather himself so he can repeat the words in sign.

Eissa nods toward him, regal and respectful. Something he does not do for me. “Dante, your medical records indicate that you have a pain you do not have a cure for…”

“Yeah,” Dante replies, his signs soft. It probably matches his voice.

Eissa leans forward and meets Dante’s eyes. “It is a shock that we have no cure. Does no one know what’s wrong with you?”

Those signs fall heavy from my brother’s hands, and I can’t help but push off the wall and move toward him, losing control of my vow of silence. ‘Nothing is *wrong* with him.’

My words are angry, and I see Dante's lips moving. He has no idea Eissa knows ASL, and I have no desire to tell my brother why I know about Eissa's language lexicon.

Eissa freezes for a moment, then bows his head. "I apologize if I offended you. I am just surprised you weren't offered an effective treatment. We have found a cure for most diseases with our herbs. I wonder if the Tarek would know more about this…" His words seem to trail off, and then he shakes his head. "In any case. For now, you have a condition that makes you unfit for service. Just as your brother was able to be removed for being…" he hesitates and then adds, "Deaf."

I say nothing as I watch Dante's hands flow through Eissa's words.

"All I need is for you to authorize a release of your medical records. I can enter them into our system, and you should not be contacted again."

I can see the relieved exhale Dante gives. "And that's it?"

"Yes. That is it."

The relief is so profound that, for a moment, it overwhelms the anger I'm feeling. I smile at my brother even though he's not looking at me.

"I can do that," Dante says, his signs on shaking hands. "I can fill out the medical release and have my doctor send everything over as soon as they get it. This is a huge weight off. I don't know what to say." He stops, then he brings both hands to his chin and signs, 'Thank you,' without speaking.

"You are very welcome," Eissa responds with his lips. I recognize every word, but I'm not sure if it's because I can lip-read him, or if it's because I still feel the odd pressure of language in my head every time I'm around him.

Dante turns to face me, his eyes wet with tears. 'Finished.'

I nod. I know he means the clinic, not the pain. The pain is still obvious on his face. 'Finished.'

He turns back to Eissa. "Will you stay for dinner?"

"If you do, I would not recommend consuming the blood worms," Rathyn says, and Eissa gives a high-pitched trill that even I can hear, his face pulling in disgust.

I can't help but laugh now, but then Eissa looks my way, and I feel something heavy in my chest. Something that doesn't quite feel like it belongs to me. The moment stretches out as the laughter dies, and then

Eissa turns and leaves the room without looking back, just like the way he left me in Vegas.

I hate him, I think viciously, even though it feels like a lie.

But fuck him for placing my emotions on an unruly rollercoaster. I'm fucking sick from all of it, and I just want it to stop.

Running a hand down my face, I feel just a little off-kilter, like I'm going to cry. I slip into the hallway and come to a sudden stop when I realize he's standing there on his own, staring back at me.

No one is looking, so I lift my hands. 'You're an asshole for pretending like I'm nothing.'

'You're not nothing,' he responds. 'But I meant what I said before.'

Of fucking course he did. Without looking back, I shoulder him out of the way and head for the back door. With any luck, my dad's still outside smoking. I don't think I can be sober for the rest of the night and not lose my mind.

Not when I know that Eissa is here—that he knows my friends and my family—and try as I might, there's a good chance I won't be able to escape him.

OceanofPDF.com

seven

EISSA

IT WAS A RISK, coming to this human party. It's a strange Earth tradition meant to be joyful, but all it does is remind me that the human lifespan is short. It's tragic, really, though I don't think they realize it.

But the only chance I had to speak with Dante in person was at this party, and because it is for family, I knew Luca would be there. I had no choice but to take the risk.

And, if I was willing to be honest with myself, I wished to see him again. He was my folly, and yet he was also meant for me, and it was damn near impossible to follow my own orders to be anywhere he wasn't.

The moment I arrived at the building, I sensed him. I could feel his heartbeat like it was my own—that single, fragile, rhythmic thudding in his chest. I could scent him, even from outside. He smelled like fresh kirrashev, and the olystir blooms on the night of the full third moon.

The only way I could survive being this near to him and not touching was by pretending he didn't exist. It was the only way to keep myself from pinning him to the wall and marking him as mine in front of all those other humans and Vyastil. I had to focus on Dante alone and act as though Luca was nothing.

And it nearly killed me.

Walking away from the building, I'm breathing heavily, claws extended, fangs long and digging into my lower lip. I can taste my own blood, and I

wish it were his. My Luca's. I have no business thinking that, but I can't stop it now.

Each time I think I am safe from him, he's there.

Each time I think I can run from this, I realize he has a chokehold on me that I cannot break.

I've parked my car down the street from the condo, and the walk does little to calm my head. I think I'm a bit more focused as I reach for the door handle, but that's quickly proven wrong when a strong grasp takes me by the wrist, spins me, and pins me to the cold metal.

It only takes the beat of one of my hearts to know who it is, and the rush of want and need is damn near overwhelming.

I growl loudly, but I know there's no point to it. Luca can't hear the rumble from my chest. Or…can he? His gaze flickers down to my sternum, then back up into my eyes. I'm well aware that some Deaf humans can hear some sound, but I am unaware of where Luca's range is.

It was not in his records.

The clinic didn't care how Deaf he was in order to dismiss him.

And perhaps that's a blessing because the thought of him being strapped to a chair and touched by another one of my kind makes my vision darken and my claws itch to sink into tender flesh.

I take a moment, breathing him in before breaking his grasp on me. He's strong, but I'm stronger, and he makes an irritated noise as I ease him away from my body.

'Enough,' I sign sharply. 'You said what you needed to say upstairs.'

His brows fly up. 'I want to know why.'

I stare at him. He's beautiful in the worst way, in a way that makes my chest ache and my heart sing.

'Tell me,' he insists, his finger thumping against his chest. 'Was it so bad that you're desperate to forget me? To act like it never happened?'

I want to say yes. I want to tell him that it was the worst moment of my life—if only he could not sense the lie. Perhaps if I hurt him enough, he will run from me and stop seeking me out.

But I know he's feeling the same pull I am. I've worked myself to exhaustion keeping him out of my head, but I can't block him entirely. I know he catches glimpses, feeling me at my weakest.

Perhaps he felt it when I had my fingers deep inside myself and I was bringing myself pleasure to the memory of his soft, human lips and the taste

of his cum.

I swallow heavily. There's no point in lying. He'll be able to sense it.

'One night,' I remind him. 'That's all it was.'

He scoffs loudly and takes a step back. 'Liar. You want me right now. I can feel it.'

My breath trembles as I shake my head. It feels so wrong, but I can't help it. I know he's been trying to chase away the thought of me. I felt it when he was flirting with another human. I felt his lust, though it wasn't for that man.

It was for me.

In that moment, I was a selfish coward who crawled into his head to stake my claim, knowing full well I would not go to him. I would not give him relief from the pressure of lust that's been building within him.

He steps in closer, and my breath catches. His body sinks against mine. He's not nearly as tall as I am, but somehow, he feels overwhelming.

Powerful.

Perfect.

I'm unable to stop myself from lifting a shaking hand and pressing it to his cheek. The moment I make contact, his eyes close. I know the trust he must put in me to do that. His eyes are his everything. To close off his awareness of the world around him opens him up to danger.

But he must know I would rip out my own throat before letting anything hurt him.

"Luca," I say aloud.

He doesn't respond. He keeps leaning in until his nose is pressed against the crook of my neck. He's on his tiptoes now, and I've bent down without realizing it—accommodating him on instinct.

The need to hold my human, to take him, to taste him, to savor each second is far too powerful. I should not be doing this, but I'm helpless at the sound of his spontaneous, unchecked moan.

His face turns into my neck and his lips part, tongue darting out. He licks along the tendon of my neck, and perhaps he's unaware that he's scenting me, but he is. He's ensuring that any Vyastil that comes within a hundred feet of me will know he's been here.

That I am his.

I can't allow it. I have not taken a companion since Kori was ripped from me. I'm allowed to attend the clinic once a month—if I should choose

to partake. And I have, in the past.

But it's been some time.

And never now that I've had Luca. I will likely meet my end weaker than the others, but it will be worth it. My lips will not part for another.

"My Luca," I murmur.

This time he must feel the vibration of my voice because he pulls back, eyes searching mine. His own are red—not from crying. He smells like human herbs that are used to combat pain and anxiety. They do not work well enough—I know this much.

But he is less angry now, so that must mean something.

I lift my hand again, fingers brushing over his lips, which are shiny with his spit. He parts them, tongue darting out to taste me there, and I allow him to pull them all the way into his mouth.

He swirls his tongue around the tips, then in between. My cocks stir inside my body, and my hunger rises. I can smell him…his want for me making the first spurts of his human seed dribble into his clothing.

It's heady, tempting me in a way that I don't think I can resist. I have tasted him before, and it has made me yearn for him ever since.

Glancing left to right, I see no one, and Luca gives the smallest laugh.

'Nervous-you?'

I bare my teeth with a growl. 'No, little human.'

His eyes widen in offense. 'Little?'

I straighten up, towering over him, and when he lets out his own growl, that's when everything snaps. My predator drive takes over, my need to claim overwhelming me. With one hand, I rip the car door open; with the other, I take him by the throat. At the barest pressure, he goes pliant for me just like I knew he would.

I hold back the trill, though it wants nothing but to fill the night sky with his name. Instead, I back him into the seat, laying him against the console. It can't be comfortable, but he doesn't seem to care.

When I put the slightest pressure against his knees, they spread, and I see the thick outline of his cock against his tight pants. Dropping to a crouch, I bend down, breathing heavily over where I want to taste him. He lets out a loud moan before slapping a hand over his mouth.

Yes. We cannot be found.

This is too dangerous. If human authorities found us, he would be arrested for indecency, and I would be under scrutiny for taking what does

not belong to me.

Because I would not be able to go before the council and explain this.

But I want him and will not wait any longer. This must be the last time—I cannot let myself indulge anymore. If it means locking myself in my office and never setting foot outside again, I will do it.

But for now, I will have him. One last time.

‘Unzip,’ I tell him in a sharp downward gesture.

His hand shakes as he follows my command, then he presses his palms to the seat and lifts. His jeans slide down his thighs, exposing his hard, thick, pink cock wet with his need to be sucked. It is perfect in every way—the shape, the color, the taste.

It takes everything in me to keep quiet.

He looks panicked, so I offer him a hand, and he guides it to his mouth. My fingers fill him—three along his tongue, keeping it pressed down and blocking most of the air from his throat so he can’t make a sound.

The look of gratitude he gives me almost makes me drop to my knees. Fuck, he is perfect. He is made for me.

He is my everything in a way he may never fully understand.

I will live with that pain of him never knowing. He is human. It will eventually fade for him…I think.

It must.

After all, they are not like us.

Our eyes lock for a moment, and then I feel him in my head. *My Eissa.* It’s not words; it’s a feeling. It’s the impression of signs on hands, and the vision of what I look like, half-feral, crouched between his legs, starving for his cum.

And I will not deny myself what I want any longer. This, after all, must be the final time I taste him. Licking over my fangs, I take a breath, then dip my head down.

His cock jumps as I curl my tongue around it, then draw him deep into my throat. I suckle at first, listening to his soft, muted whimpers, feeling the way he mimics the sensation on my fingers.

This isn’t just a hunger now. It’s not just a want. It’s a need that lives deep in my soul. I suck harder, deeper, drinking down the first pulses of his precum, waiting for the rest to explode.

If I had him in my home, I would place ruenox on his tongue and watch his balls fill over and over as I drank from him again and again.

But I cannot.

This little temptation, this little taste, will have to be enough.

As my thin, pierced, forked tongue skates up and down his dick, I hear him start to whimper, and I can tell he's close. He sucks on my fingers harder, his hands searching and finding my hair. He grips it tightly and thrusts his hips hard, and I take him as deep as my throat will allow.

"Eissa," he moans.

He says my name one more time, like he is praying to the ancient gods of Erethar. His whimpers are begging as he writhes beneath me. It is almost too much for me to bear.

I tug on his balls. They're small in my palm, and he bites down on my fingers, sucking harder.

I do the same, my head bobbing, my tongue dancing around his shaft.

He doesn't last.

He spurts once into my mouth, and I swallow it down, feeling the bond between us deepening. And then he explodes, his hips arched up, his hands grabbing onto my ears, his back bowing from the console. His head tilts back, and he gives a low, desperate moan as he spills, and spills, and spills.

My fingers slip from his mouth, trailing wetly down his neck as I drink him down.

He collapses moments later, satiated, but I am not. I am left wanting more. I want all of him—body, heart, and soul.

As much as it would be wise, I cannot bring myself to rush away. I let my head rest on his bare thigh, feeling the tickle of his coarse hair brush against my cheek. His hand strokes the tip of my ear, and it sends affection fluttering through my body.

I let myself breathe. Once. Twice.

And then I know I need to pull away. I have no choice. I cannot choose between my people and Luca. What good will I be to him if I cannot free us all from the oppressive chokehold the rest of the council and Prince Jyrion have on us?

So, I gently rise, peeling myself away from him, taking several steps back so even if he tries, he cannot reach me.

When he sits up, I see the questions in his expressive eyes. Why, they ask. Why again? Why now? What have I done wrong?

I want to kneel at his feet, to bury my face against his little human cock, breathe in the scent of him, and beg him for forgiveness. He deserves a

better monster than I can ever be for him. I must find a way to let him go.

He watches as I adjust my tunic, trying to hide the evidence of my own desire for him. I force my face to become emotionless and my hands to stop their trembling.

His eyes catch it all, as I knew they would. He arches his hips and hides his beautiful cock from me, zipping himself up with an angry yank of his wrist.

I can see the flutter on his fingers, talking to himself. I do not know what he is signing, but I can feel his fury.

He regrets this. He regrets succumbing to me.

And I hate myself for giving him hope, for taking, once more, what I cannot have, knowing that I would have to hurt him again.

He pushes himself up and takes several steps forward until his chest brushes past my own. I can scent myself on him, and it makes me almost reach out and pull him into me.

But he is still angry. I can feel his swirling thoughts, unchecked and unaware that I am listening in. He feels rejected, tossed aside, and worthless.

I loathe that he thinks he is not worth a thousand worlds. I loathe myself for making him feel this way, but I have no choice, and I don’t know how to explain to him the terms of my punishment and what it would be risking if I gave in.

This moment here has placed us both in danger, and he has no idea how bad things could go if Jyrion caught even a whisper that I was enamored with another human. He would ruin Luca far worse than they ruined Kori, and I would not be able to live with myself.

I would take his broken heart over watching him die.

So, I stand there and watch as he holds his middle finger up—a silly human gesture but it stings all the same—without even turning to look at me as he disappears back into that small, human house.

The taste of Luca lingers on my tongue long after I feasted on him. I try to remove it, but it is there, just at the back of my throat, leaving me humming with need and desire.

I think of him far too often.

The weeks pass at my lake house where I am sequestered, but it is no use. He has seared himself onto my soul, and I cannot be free of him.

I use my human phone to look him up online, my fingers finding my slit and pressing inside just at the sight of him. If he only knew what he does to me. And how much I wish it could be different.

He wouldn't hate me then.

He would pity me.

I have been a broken, pathetic Vyastil for far too long, and there is no changing that now.

I know I can't keep wallowing at the lake house. As much as I may never get over the wonder of seeing so much water on the surface of their world, it's not doing me any good to sit and stare out at the horizon. There's little for me to do, of course, now that the council is at recess and my job as liaison keeps me with the humans.

It's easy enough to get in my car and make my way back to town. There is still much to be done, and with my breeding time coming up, I need to discuss a few things with Rathyn. He and Everest are still playing their part every time they visit Erethar, and their visits have been growing in length on Jyrion's orders.

I feel a measure of guilt for that as well. I did not fertilize the egg Rathyn hatched from, but I reared him as my own, and I feel responsible for him. Rebellion is dangerous, and many Vyastil will likely die if there is a full uprising.

Rathyn and the other Vyastil—the one I raised who no longer speaks to me unless he has to—are the only two I truly care about. But I cannot let myself be weakened by my need to protect them. It's the same reason I cannot give in to Luca.

The heavy thoughts plague me as I park at the Foundry and make my way to Rathyn's floor, but as I approach the door, I catch a heavy whiff of human cum. With their moans echoing down the hallway, I realize they're deep in a session, likely with ruenox, which means it will be hours before they're done.

I turn to leave as quickly as I can. I cannot allow myself to be tempted by the scent of human cum. It makes me think of one human, and one human only, and Luca is a sharp reminder of my own failures.

The cool air outside allows me to breathe deeply, but it's too late. The knowledge of what Rathyn and Everest are doing has allowed my mind to wander too far—toward Luca. Toward the human who is my…well, I'm not allowing myself to give it the word this connection deserves.

I can feel him, though, buried deep within me.

Every time I am tempted by him, every time I allow myself to collapse and break, I find that his presence in my mind grows even stronger.

I can hear him calling to me now. He is thinking of me. My Luca. My clawed toes curl into the cold pavement beneath me, and I wrap my tail tightly around my thigh.

I cannot go to him.

I cannot.

I cannot put this on him. It is my burden to carry.

Not wanting to go up to my own quarters, I start walking, my head in a tailspin. I do not know what to do with myself in this moment and despise not being in control of my emotions. It is not how we are expected to behave. Vyastil society would have us suppressing every single emotion apart from the desire to grow in power, at the expense of anyone we might care for.

It's why Vyastil no longer care for their own eggs. It's why we're never told which hatchling belongs to us. To sever the most fundamental connection—between parent and child—allows that rift to grow to other relationships.

It is not true to our nature, though. Rathyn has shown me this. I almost forgot what it was like to want someone as profoundly as Rathyn wants Everest, and there is a grief with that because I had it, and then I lost it.

And now I have Luca, and I cannot allow myself to take that risk again.

I'm several miles down the road when my eyes take in my surroundings and I realize I am downtown. I did not intend to come this way, but my stomach sinks when I notice I can scent him in the air. I cannot help that my very being is drawn to him. I cannot seem to outrun him, no matter how hard I try.

I turn to walk back the way I came, but then something catches my eye.

Creature Comforts.

I don't know it personally, but it's one of the few Vyastil-run businesses in town. Along with the gym that Prince Quilliyn runs, it's one of the places

Vyastil can go and feel at home—unjudged and welcome, the way many human spaces are not for us.

Without really thinking, I walk toward the door and pull it open, my ears flicking and a thrymm rising in my throat when I smell the familiar scents of home. Vyastil do not eat much by nature, and it has been generations since we indulged in things like food and drink for fun, but these Vyastil are clearly trying to bring something back to us that was lost.

I take a deep breath as I walk toward the counter and immediately spot a Vyastil wearing nothing but an apron and a wrap around his waist. He's leaning against the coffee machine, head tipped down as he speaks to the human employee who looks very irritated.

When he catches my eye, his own widen, and I can tell in this moment he knows my station. His head bows in respect as I approach and glance toward the Eretharian menu.

"Greetings," the Vyastil says in our language.

"Greetings. What is your name?"

"Zinni. And you?"

"Eissa."

He must recognize the name because his nostrils flare and he gives me a deep nod of reverence, maybe even fear. I do not want it. I do not want to feel the shackles of my burden right now. I just want to be an average Vyastil.

"There is no need for that. I am here as a customer." I wave my hand toward the menu above the small human's head and hear a sigh. "I see that you have combined a mix of Earth and Erethar."

Zinni perks up. "We have. It was the owner of the building's idea. He is…unique for a human."

"Ah, and who is this unique human? The one beside you?"

Zinni laughs. "No, that's Syl. He's our employee. The building owner is named Luca Barducci." Even as my entire world is shifted sideways, Zinni says quietly, "He cannot hear. Deaf, they call it on Earth. I understand how most Vyastil feel about imperfections, but he is very brilliant."

"Ah, I see," I manage to say. The truth is, I know Luca is brilliant. He is more than that. His lack of hearing has never once made me doubt him.

"Do you know him?" Zinni asks, clearly studying my reaction.

I lie. I have no choice. "I do not. But I should like to meet him."

Zinni’s ears droop. “He was just here. He has been trying the different drinks he suggested we make. Would you like one?”

I nod, and I hear the small human beside Zinni huff. I glance down at Syl, and he blinks up at me before looking away. He seems like a very interesting human with the tattoos on his arms, and it’s clear Zinni is protective of him by the way he keeps close and seems always at the ready to jump in should the human need assistance.

A small part of me wonders if Zinni has discovered the connection possible between Vyastil and humans. Perhaps this Syl is VySytheh as well. But I cannot risk asking.

“Do not mind him,” Zinni says, mistaking my frown for irritation. “He is upset when he is left out. He is tiny, but he has big emotions.”

I eye Syl as he pushes his glasses higher on his nose, and he makes a face at me, his cheeks flushed.

“Good day, Syl,” I say, and he startles.

He blinks up at me, wetting his lips. “Hello.”

“I am sorry we were speaking in a way you could not understand. We were just discussing the drinks.”

He stares, his eyes full of uncertainty. “Yeah, alright. Do you want something?” His voice is unusually soft for having such strong emotions.

“I would like to try the Duskroot Latte.”

“Alright.” He murmurs something under his breath as Zinni insists I not pay for this, but I refuse.

I must support those who are trying to make their own way here on Earth. There is much wrong with Erethar, but Earth is much kinder to the Vyastil than I expected it to be.

“Syl, can you go grab some more milk from the back? We are out,” Zinni says, his voice kind despite the stare Syl gives him.

“Fine. Be right back,” he bites back.

I can tell by the way he walks that he does not like doing what he’s told. Zinni must understand this as well because he sighs and says in Eretharian, “That human has much to learn. He is still young. My partner does not enjoy his presence. He finds him unhelpful.”

I nod as he pulls out a bag of herbs that are grown on Erethar, and the scent of them brings back memories of home. I need to return there soon.

Perhaps it will help with this urge I have to see Luca, to simply be where he has been.

A commotion comes from the back room, and then my breath catches in my chest as I see him. There's a tall Vorthex, his blunt tail prodding Syl in the back as he stalks forward. Our eyes catch, and he abruptly stops, his eyes widening for a moment before they narrow. I scent fear on him, and I understand why.

He should not be here, and the scar seared into the side of his neck tells me he bears the mark of a prisoner. The Vyastil do not release Vorthex prisoners, so he must have escaped. He's poised to run, but I quickly tilt my head in surrender.

"Greetings," I say in Eretharian. "You are safe."

His feathered ears flutter, and after a long moment, he offers me a curt nod. He does not like that I know what he is. He has done well to disguise himself, but I know what he is. Even if he is missing his wings.

I peer around him in an attempt to see how much of them were taken, but all that remains under his tunic is the echo of what was.

"Hepyn had both wings removed at the joint," Zinni says, answering my curious gaze.

"Enough," Hepyn bites out, his voice raspy like the wind. "It is not his business."

Syl slams down the container, and everyone stares at him. "Could you speak in English, please? Fuck, I feel left out and I fucking hate it."

Zinni bites his lip as he tries not to smile, obviously finding the human's behavior charming while the Vorthex closes his fists in frustration. He does not like the obstinacy of this human.

And Syl is right to be careful. The Vorthex are fierce creatures who live in the skies above Erethar, content to be left alone and do as they please. But when they are bothered or threatened, the creature within them comes out, and they are ferocious.

I do not want to see this.

I have before and would like to spare the gentle humans milling around the store from any trauma. "We will speak in a language you can understand."

"Awesome, thanks," he murmurs. "And sorry. I just…I don't like to be left out. It's rude."

I incline my head. "The Vyastil are not used to such strong feelings but will consider them in the future."

Syl snorts at my comment, but he bobs his head and then waves me aside as a customer strides in.

The Vorthex releases his fists and gives a curt nod of deference and then disappears into the back. I do not know why he made an appearance, but I am glad to know one of their kind is here. I would like to one day sit down with him and hear his story.

I move to the counter to wait for my drink and speak with Zinni as I do. We do it in English, and I can see Syl peering over at us as we do. His cheeks are still flushed, his finger moving to push his glasses up his nose again.

He is very different from Luca in almost every way.

The muscles under Luca's skin far exceed what Syl has. The way they flex and bunch as he's letting me suck him is like art. The color of his hair, the freckles on his face—an entire constellation on his skin…I want to memorize each one. I want to name them, to keep them secret between us.

I swallow past the lump in my throat as Zinni slides my cup over toward me.

"Here you go, Eissa," Zinni says. "Tell me what you think. The humans quite like it, but a lot of the Vyastil haven't been brave enough to try the hybrid drinks."

I put the cup up to my lips and take a sip. It is warm, and the duskroot mixed with the milk makes for an interesting combination. I do not hate it.

"It is good."

He lets out a sigh of relief and beams at me, so unlike the Vorthex who stormed out here earlier.

"Tell your partner as well. You two are an interesting love match."

When I say this, Zinni shakes his head. "Oh, you misunderstand. We are friends."

My head cocks at that word. Vorthex and Vyastil are not friends.

"We are partners in this business. We met…back on Erethar," Zinni says, like he's too afraid to give a Vyastil of my station too much information. I don't blame him.

"I am intrigued."

"If you would like to come back another time, we will tell you our story, if you can be trusted."

"On Aelvorn's horns, I swear it."

He beams again and then gives me a low nod.

I do the same and then let myself out of the small coffee shop, finishing off the latte quickly. I find the more I drink, the more I like it.

If I keep this up, I shall become like Cielo and consume several of these a day.

A car drives past, and I see two humans on a bicycle pedal across the street. I close my eyes and inhale, smelling the scent of him on the wind.

The coffee shop was a nice distraction, but now I am back to thinking of him. Of sensing him.

And I know that try as I might, I will not be able to stay away.

OceanofPDF.com

eight

LUCA

I FIND myself at The Anvil, my head foggy, my skin clammy. Maybe I'm coming down with something, but I don't feel sick. I just feel tired.

I haven't seen Eissa in weeks, but I feel him all the same. It's infuriating. I can't even get it up anymore, not for another man, not for porn.

I'm just…I'm fucking miserable.

I feel like he's taken years off my life with the simple act of laying me out on the seat of a car and sucking my brains through my dick.

God, fuck him so much. I was perfectly happy before Vegas. Or, at least, I was content. Now it feels like I won't ever be able to find peace without him, and considering he seems to be sticking by his decision to keep me out of his life, this might be what destroys me.

I attempt to shake myself out of the melancholy, nodding at the girl behind the counter of the gym, and I make my way to the locker room. I've already clocked the usual gym bros I hang with—Tyler, Brody, and Chadwick are working out with the free weights, and I think I'll join them soon.

I need to feel something other than this odd sensation that has taken over me. I can't seem to shake it. It's like a hollow pit in my stomach telling me I'm missing something, but the only thing that's disappeared from my life was Eissa, and he wasn't even really in it to begin with.

God, maybe this is what the monsters do to humans. Maybe that's why all those suck zombies are waiting in long lines all day every day, even when they're never chosen.

I stuff my bag into a locker and then grab my water bottle and make my way out to the floor, nodding at Tyler first. He gives me one back as I slap hands with Chadwick and Brody.

They don't know much sign, but they know enough.

'Join?' Tyler asks, using one finger instead of two, which makes me snort.

He smiles good-naturedly as I step up next to them. I see them talking, their mouths moving, and none of them attempt to sign. Normally I'd feel left out, but right now I just want to exist around others, to feel my muscles burn and ache as I lift.

Maybe it will make some of this brain fog I've been living with dissipate.

I grunt, the vibration deep in my throat as I get started. I should have warmed up first, but I can't be fucked. I feel like my heart has been racing for days. I feel like every morning I've run a marathon.

I grunt louder, turning the head of Brody, who asks, 'Ok?'

I give him a clipped nod, keeping my gaze on the mirror and the movements my arms are making. I could hurt myself, but I don't really care. At the very least, physical pain would distract me from all this internal shit I've been dealing with.

And it's not just Eissa, though he's a huge part of it. It's also watching the people I love suffer and being unable to do anything about it. Just like I can't help being Deaf and struggling when opportunities slip through my fingers, Dante can't help his chronic illness.

The pain he's in motivates him to create accessible toys and tools so everyone can enjoy sex however they want, but people like him are always an afterthought. And that afterthought is threatening to kill his business. We've had one email from an anonymous financier, but I haven't heard back after letting them know we're interested.

It's starting to feel bleak, and I can tell it's weighing on my brother.

It makes me sick to my stomach because Dante deserves better. He deserves the world. He's not like me—unfocused, unmotivated, and too quick to overreact before thinking.

I haven’t told him I’m worried, though. He’s so busy trying to help Cielo heal and manage his pain, all while trying to act like everything’s fine. And it’s something I hate. I’m not sure if he realizes just how much I see because of how many people don’t, but the last time I tried to sit and talk to him about it, he shut me out.

He told me it was fine.

He lied to my face, and that hurt more than anything.

So, for now, I let him have this fantasy, but I’m going to do everything in my power to fix this for him.

I just…don’t know how. Especially when I can’t fix myself. Especially when, every time I close my eyes, I feel Eissa in my head watching, wanting…

And denying everything.

Fuck. My muscles give a violent jolt, and I almost lose my grip on the weights. I see Tyler’s mouth open, probably crying out. He lunges, catching the weights before they tumble from my hands and crush my feet, and I stumble back a few steps.

Setting them down, Tyler quickly grabs a towel and turns my wrist over. Fuck, the tender surface skin on my palms is shredded. I’m not bleeding, but it does sting.

Tyler frowns up at me and licks his lips before slinging the towel over his shoulder and then making a Y shape with his hand and tapping his chin. ‘What’s wrong?’ he mouths with the sign.

Tyler has the most basic ASL vocabulary. He signed up for the first-level ASL class at the university after he got sick and tired of texting with me during sessions, but he’s only two-thirds of the way there, which means he communicates like a nine-month-old baby—but it’s something.

I take a breath and nod, then glance down to pick at a few flecks of torn skin. I hate hurting my hands more than anything. I need them. ‘I’m fine.’

Tyler does not look convinced. ‘Tell me.’ His finger thumps on his chest, and I sigh.

I would actually love to tell him. I’d love to lift my hands and emotionally dump all my problems on him, but it wouldn’t matter. He wouldn’t understand any of it, and I’m not breaking out my voice for this.

I doubt he’d make fun of my weird, Ukrainian-influenced Deaf accent the way kids at school did. He’d understand I speak the way I was taught by my SLPs. But I don’t want to keep bending for other people.

Eventually I’m going to break.

I take another breath, then sign, ‘I’m fine. Trust.’

He bites his lip, then lifts his hands, but I immediately miss what he’s trying to say. There’s a weird sensation in my head that takes over all my senses, and when I blink, I’m suddenly standing in front of Quilliyn.

He’s speaking in what I can only assume is Eretharian, and I can’t understand it, except…

Strangely, I can?

I’ve been able to hear music a few times in my life. When I bother with hearing aids, I can pick up some melodies so long as the music is loud enough and the notes are in the exact right range that I can process them.

And that’s kind of what it reminds me of. A rising and falling of tones and pitches, and it’s…god, it’s kind of beautiful. I can understand that Quilliyn is worried, and though it’s over too quickly for me to process individual words, I know that someone might be in trouble.

And then suddenly I’m back in my body, holding on to the weight bench as I sway, and Quilliyn is nowhere to be found. God, what the fuck just happened? What just—

Oh no. Eissa…

He’s *here*.

I can feel him like he’s breath in my lungs, or the heart beating in my chest. My skin prickles, and I feel an odd sensation on the side of my neck, like…I want to be bitten. Like I want to feel his long, pointed tongue lapping at my blood.

I have no idea where the fuck that’s coming from, but I can’t stop it. And because I’m not as delusional about myself as Eissa, I also can’t deny it.

I turn without thinking, and my eyes scan the room. It takes me five seconds to find him. He’s at the front counter, leaning over to speak with Quilliyn, who’s both talking and gesturing with his hands.

The moment my gaze settles on him, he stiffens. Then his head turns slowly.

His rainbow eyes find mine, locking my gaze to his, and for a moment I can’t move. I’m utterly trapped by him. It’s hard to breathe. All I know is the visceral, profound need to have his arms wrapped around me, gripped so tight his claws sink into my flesh.

And then he looks away and the moment shatters.

Fuck you, I send in my head.

I see him stiffen, then suck in a breath and let it out, but he doesn't look over again.

A growl threatens to rise in my throat, and suddenly everything in me feels reckless. I will not be ignored, goddamn it. He will not continue to move in and out of my own personal bubble—ruining what little progress I've made getting over him—whenever he fucking feels like it.

My gaze catches on Tyler, and I wave at him. 'Can I ask question?'

His brows shoot up. 'Yes, yes, yes.'

'You ever kiss man?'

He blinks at me then signs, 'Sign again.'

I do it slower, hoping that Eissa is watching, that he can understand me.

I know he can.

Fucker.

Tyler just blinks, and his mouth forms a small *O*. After a second, he shrugs and signs, 'Drunk, parties, sometimes.'

Good enough for me. 'Will you kiss me?'

He swallows, then licks his lips, gaze flickering to my mouth, then back up to my eyes. I see him say aloud, "Uh…now?"

Luckily he's very easy to lip-read. 'Yes.'

His cheeks go mottled pink. 'Gay. Not me.'

I fight the urge to burst into a tense, hysterical laughter. 'I know.' Hesitating, I step up and reach for him, turning his back to Eissa and Quilliyn, then I cup the side of his neck tenderly. "Pretend," I whisper. Well, I think I whisper.

He swallows heavily again. "Why?"

I shake my head. I don't want to tell him. I just want Eissa to see. I want him to hurt. I want him to feel the same kind of pain of rejection I feel every time he moves into my space, takes what he wants, then tosses me aside.

'Trust,' I sign again. My hand moves to Tyler's cheek, and I stroke it carefully. Tyler's breath trembles as it comes out. He might eventually want to analyze the way I'm making him feel right now, but that's a problem for a future Tyler. 'Please?'

"Okay," I can tell he's whispering from the way a rush of breath hits me in the face, and luckily, he smells like mint.

It’s enough for me. I’ll apologize for using and teasing him later. For now, I lean in and let my lips graze over his jaw. My eyes close, but only for a moment. I feel white-hot outrage crawling up my spine, and I know that feeling doesn’t belong to me.

I look over Tyler’s shoulder as my lips move to his ear, and I see Eissa has turned away from Quilliyn. He’s watching me from across the room openly, with abandon. His face is a mask of pain and fury, and I almost smile because it’s exactly what I want.

What he’s showing on the outside is what he’s left me with inside.

How does it fucking feel, asshole?

There’s no response because of course there isn’t. So I cup Tyler’s jaw again, close my eyes, and lean in. My lips pucker seconds before I make contact, but just as our mouths connect, Tyler’s suddenly gone.

My hands close around empty air and my eyes fly open to find Eissa’s fangs out, clawed hand wrapped around a flailing Tyler’s throat as he shoves him against the window.

Before I can react, Quilliyn’s there. He puts one hand on the back of Eissa’s neck, the other wrapping around his wrist, and I see his mouth moving. I have no idea what he says, but after a second, Eissa lets Tyler slide to the ground, and Quilliyn drops to his knees, gathering him close.

I fucked up. I know it immediately.

I played with fire, and someone else got hurt.

Eissa turns to me, anger in his eyes, fangs long, claws extended further than I’ve ever seen. He takes a step closer to me, and while instinct tells me I should run, logic tells me that maybe acting like prey in front of a feral Vyastil is the wrong move.

Eissa takes a moment, breathing steady, then his claws begin to retract enough for him to sign, ‘With me. Now.’

I follow like I have no choice, and hell, maybe I don’t. We have the attention of the few people in the room, but I’ve lost sight of who they are. I’ve lost the ability to care as I follow my monster down the hall and into an empty room.

It looks like a place they used to hold classes, but now it’s full of boxes of protein powder and gym T-shirts. Eissa slams the door so hard I can feel it in my chest, then he turns and stalks forward.

My breath catches as he shoves me hard against an old weight bench. For a moment, I think maybe he’s actually going to hurt me. Especially

when his hand closes around my throat.

But he stays gentle. His claws prick the skin, but instead of tearing my throat out, he leans in and rubs his nose over my jaw, then his tongue follows. It licks across my cheek, my mouth, my neck. He lifts my hand and laves at my fingers, and the more he does, the calmer he gets.

It takes me far too long to realize he's going over all the places that Tyler's skin touched mine.

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. Now that the situation's calmed down, my fury is returning. The second I have full control over my faculties, I take him by the shoulders and shove him backward.

I think because he wasn't expecting it, he actually stumbles a few steps away from me. And I know he isn't acting because the look on his face is pure surprise.

If I weren't feeling the way I am, I might have laughed in his face. Instead, I clench my jaw and raise tense hands. 'What the fuck is your problem?'

'He touched you,' he fires back with angry, sharp signs.

'And?'

His eyes go wide with disbelief, like he can't understand why I signed that.

'You don't get to threaten people who touch me!' I snap at him. 'I'm not yours!'

I can see the war on his face. I can see the battle in his soul. I know he feels the way I do—an inexplicable pull toward me. A desperation for something he could have if only he reached out to take it.

And then his expression shutters and I lose him. His mind, which was open for just a second, is closed again.

'Forgive me.' He signs sorry, but mouths the English words, and I let out a barking, angry, bitter laugh.

"No."

He seems startled by the sound of my voice. 'Fine.'

I shake my head. 'No. It's not fine. It's not *fine*! You don't get to walk into my life whenever you feel like it. You don't get to destroy my dates. You don't get to let me finally start to move on, only to pin me to the wall and make me want you all over again. It's not fair! You people say you're not monsters, and then you act like this!'

My hands are shaking and oh…so are his.

He looks devastated. ‘Luca.’ He uses the sign name Dante has for me.

I shake my head again. ‘No. I don’t want to hear it. You came to me first. You wanted me first. You sucked me off and crawled into my head, and now I can’t get you out. You have no idea what I’m going through.’ The dam has cracked, and it’s all pouring out now. I couldn’t stop this if I wanted to, but there’s something about him that makes me so fucking vulnerable.

I don’t know if I hate it or love it.

I don’t know if I want less or more.

‘My life is falling apart. My brother’s company is going to go under unless I find a financier, but no one wants to care about people who need accessibility. Just like me, his visions are a joke to them. A gimmick. I spent an entire week in Vegas trying to make contacts and found nothing but people who want to laugh at dick cookies.’

Eissa’s eyes are on me, unwavering. I wish he would say something, but his hands remain still.

‘And then there’s you. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you. You’re in my head, and I’m in yours. I don’t know why, and fuck, even if I don’t understand it, I can feel what we have—what it means—and it’s killing me every time you wall me off. I can’t sleep, I barely eat. I dream of nothing but you.’

His lips part and his chest contracts like he’s sucking in a breath. I give him a moment to see if he’s going to say anything at all, but again, he remains quiet. I push into his head, but there’s just darkness waiting for me.

Baring my teeth in a grimace, I shake my head. ‘Either take me or let me go. But you can’t storm into my life and scare off people who want to be there for me, then turn around and ice me out. That’s not how it works. You say leave you alone, fine. But you leave me alone too.’

I don’t wait for an answer. I turn on my heel and storm out the door, waiting to see if I feel the vibrations of his clawed feet on the floor chasing after me.

But just like everything else, the only thing that follows me is his continued silence.

Being drunk is awesome.

Well, okay, it's not awesome. Alcohol and I have been good friends in the past, but it always leaves me hungover and feeling like I want to die. My body doesn't process it well, so the momentary reprieve I get from booze is rarely worth it the next day.

But right now, I deserve this. Not just the way I feel all floaty and nice, but also for the pain I'm going to feel tomorrow because I shouldn't have done what I did at the gym.

I don't really care if I hurt Eissa…

Well, no. That's a lie. I don't want to care that I hurt Eissa, but I do. I can't help that.

But it's mostly Tyler I'm worried about. I sent him half a dozen texts with half a dozen apologies, and he replied to each one telling me it was okay. Insisting it wasn't my fault. But it was.

I knew I was provoking Eissa. I wanted him to feel the kind of pain I did. I wanted him to be jealous. I wanted him to step in and stake his claim. I didn't think about what it would do to Tyler.

Quilliyn also sent me a text promising that Tyler was fine. Eissa didn't actually hurt him, and if he had, he had herbs to fix it. But that doesn't make me feel better. I shouldn't have put my friend at risk like that just to make someone jealous. It was petty and wrong.

And immature.

I'll make it up to Tyler later. For now, I'm going to keep getting drunk until I hopefully pass out and forget about all of it for a little while.

It sounds simple, but it's not when I keep getting flashes of Eissa in my mind. I don't know where he is. He doesn't let me see through his eyes anymore, but I'm getting pulses of feeling. Anger, envy, regret, sorrow.

Want.

I wonder if he's like the other Vyastil—untested, untouched before me. No concept of how good a body can feel.

How pleasure works.

I have no idea because I don't know him. I take another swig of my drink, straight from the bottle.

I hiccup and for a moment wonder how it sounds. Is it loud? Can others hear me? No one is around right now. Thankfully Dante hasn't come outside, and Gia and Amara are out of town, so it leaves me with plenty of time to wallow.

“Fucker,” I say aloud, wondering how my words settle into the cool air around me.

I move to take another swig, but before I can, a hand pulls it from me. My eyes take in the Vyastil’s clawed feet, and for a moment I wonder if Eissa found me. If he’s coming back to apologize, but they don’t look the same as Eissa’s feet, and as my crossed eyes move up the scaly skin, I realize it’s not a Vyastil after all.

Someone similar, but not the same.

Hepyn.

‘You are drunk,’ he tells me.

I scoff and nearly roll forward, but he reaches out and steadies me.

‘It is cold out. You are weak; you must go inside.’

I flip him off, but use the wrong finger and almost poke myself in the eye.

It’s better to stop trying to sign, so I give a small nod and let him heft me up into his arms and carry me through the front door.

It’s kind of nice to be carried around like this. I’ve never experienced it before because I’m always the bigger partner.

But Hepyn carries me as if I weigh nothing.

Something prods at my head, but I force my mind to go blank, unopened, and locked down.

The prodding stops momentarily as Hepyn sets me down on my sofa. I fall backward, staring at the ceiling, the paint swirling and bobbing above me.

In my periphery, I can see the monster is rummaging around in the kitchen, but I don’t bother watching what he’s doing. Instead, I close my eyes, and my vision turns black. I allow myself to relax, my mind conjuring up visions of Eissa, and as if calling to him, I see him clearly behind my closed eyelids.

He’s angry at me this time, his mouth downturned, his eyes narrowed.

I just stare back, daring him to do something about it.

But just like I asked, he does nothing, and a moment later he is gone, vanished from my head.

I blink my eyes open, seeing Hepyn standing over me. He holds out something to me, and I smell a strong odor coming from the cup.

‘What is that?’ I ask, wrinkling my nose.

‘It will help.’

I glance down into the mug, the warm water silver and almost glittering, like a cloud in a cup.

‘Safe?’

He stares at me like I’m an idiot.

Fuck it, I think. I have nothing to lose at this point. I push the mug to my lips and consume the entire thing. It’s an odd flavor, almost like drinking rain straight from the sky, mixed with something earthy, slightly floral, and then it’s gone, my head clearing in a matter of moments, my body loosening.

I don’t even feel like I’ve had anything to drink at all.

As if whatever I just consumed cleared it out of my system entirely.

What kind of magic is this? These monsters and their fucking cures.

I purse my lips and peer up at Hepyn, who is looking smug.

‘What the fuck did I just drink?’

‘Ossivora.’ He fingerspells the word to me. ‘It comes from an island in the sky.’

My eyes widen. ‘Wait…so you *are* different from the Vyastil, aren’t you?’

His head inclines, and he lowers himself down next to me. ‘I am.’

‘What are you?’ He hesitates, looking almost afraid, and I sit forward, closer to him. ‘I promise I won’t say anything.’

His lips part on what I assume is an exhale, then he nods. ‘Vorthex. We live above Erethar.’

‘So you…fly?’ I wonder.

His face does something complicated, then he swallows thickly, and I realize I’ve touched on something tender. ‘Some of us do. And…some don’t.’ He takes another pause, then shrugs and signs, ‘The Vyastil rule the surface; we rule what is above it.’

‘I’d like to visit one day. It sounds magical.’

He makes a face. ‘You would not like to visit. It is beautiful, but there is much beneath that is vile. Trust me. Humans, to the Vorthex, are merely things to be used.’ The way he signs that, word for word, makes me flush.

‘Like, just sex toys?’

‘Yes. Objects for survival. Nothing more. Humans are not valued. The Vorthex have no idea how…’ His hands hover, like he’s searching for the right signs, ‘…important and complex they are.’

To me, it’s not any different than the Vyastil going to the clinic for cum. We’re just vessels for their use, but I don’t say that.

Instead, I swallow and ask, ‘Is that why you’re here? To find yourself a human?’

He bites his lip and shakes his head. ‘No. I came here to escape.’

My brows fly up. ‘Escape?’

His gaze cuts down for a moment. ‘The Vorthex view anything outside of what they consider normal as a disgrace. Anything less than perfect is weakness. The Vyastil and the Vorthex do not interact, and while we are not enemies, we are not friends. But my people have a treaty with them, and it allows us to send the traitors down to Erethar to…work.’ He signs work, but the expression on his face tells me that he doesn’t mean voluntary, paid labor. ‘I was sent to the mines.’

My heart skips in my chest. I can tell just by his body language that the mines are not a good thing. ‘What? You were a traitor?’

‘I was accused of aiding the Tarek.’ He spells the word, and it’s entirely unfamiliar to me, but it’s easy to assume it’s another Eretharian species. ‘My real crime was that I did not kill indiscriminately. The Tarek was harming no one, and I couldn’t bring myself to harm him. The same way the Vyastil believe the only thing worthy is perfection, my people believe the only thing worthy is honor to our people. Above anything else. And for failing to kill the Tarek, I was charged and sentenced as a traitor to be grounded and live the rest of my life beneath the dirt.’

I swallow heavily. ‘A death sentence.’

He nods. ‘We are not made for underground. We cannot survive. I would be dead by now if it weren’t for Zinni. He had been there nearly three second-moon cycles, and he had a plan to escape.’

My brow furrows. ‘Zinni was there? As a prisoner? What for?’ I don’t know how that could be possible. Zinni is so kind—so nice. And he’s just as gorgeous as all the other Vyastil I’ve met.

Hepyn’s mouth flickers into something like a smile. ‘I very much like that you have not noticed his imperfections. It is an interesting thing about humans.’ He stares intently at me. ‘You are so…curious about others but miss so much.’

I can’t tell if I’m being insulted or not. Probably the former. ‘He doesn’t seem different from anyone else I’ve met. But if you don’t want to tell me—’

‘No, I am willing to tell you. I have no secrets from those I consider friends.’

That warms my heart.

‘Zinni was a soldier in the Vyastil army at the border of the Outerlands.’ Hepyn is careful to spell words there are no signs for. ‘There was a skirmish, and he was injured. It took too long for his injury to heal, and when infection set in, he lost his tail.’

I absorb that for a second, then my eyes go wide. ‘He was sent to the prison mines because he lost a tail?’

Hepyn’s eyes flash, and his ears flicker the way I’ve seen Eissa’s do when he’s irritated. They really are a lot alike despite being different species. ‘Yes. It was a cruel fate for someone who was injured in service to his people. But that’s how the Vyastil are. And they would have you believe otherwise.’

Letting out a puff of air, I sit back. I knew there was something shady as fuck about the Vyastil in charge. I don’t trust them as much as I don’t trust the human government. But it’s wild to think that they’d send their own people to prison mines all because of a fucking amputation.

I thought I had it rough being Deaf in a hearing world—and I do. History has had moments where people like me were imprisoned in deplorable conditions because of deafness, and sometimes we were even killed. So, maybe we’re not all that different after all.

Hepyn waves to get my attention. ‘I’m sorry if I upset you.’

‘No, no. I understand. Humans can also be cruel.’ I rub my hands together, then ask, ‘So he saved you?’

Hepyn nods. ‘The Vyastil did not take kindly to a Vorthex working with them. They thought I was a drain on their resources, though my sentence was to work without food, water, or medicine. The only space I took from them was air.’

I wince. Hard. ‘Fuck.’

Hepyn doesn’t really react. ‘Zinni was…kind to me. He offered me friendship, protection, and shared his rations when the guards weren’t looking.’ His eyes glaze over for a moment as he remembers. ‘Eventually, when he knew he could trust me, he shared his plan to escape and asked me to come with him.’

My eyes blink at him. ‘And obviously you said yes.’

He grins, and I see his shoulders move in what I assume is a small laugh. ‘Yes. With some convincing. He had to drag me from the mines, with great risk to his own life. But he found access to a portal that led to Earth, and he knew the Vyastil wouldn’t chase us here. They believe a fate with the humans is worse than a fate in the mines.’

That hits me like a blow to the chest. That’s why they let Cielo go. That’s why his sentence was banishment. It’s hilarious only because I’ve seen Cielo. He’s healing. He’s thriving. And he and my brother are definitely falling in love.

‘Do you hate it here?’ I can’t help but ask.

His face does something complicated, then he twitches his nose. ‘No. Humans are…strange and confusing sometimes. I’m not sure if I’ll last long. I don’t think Vorthex are meant to live outside of our skies.’ His shoulders twitch for a second, reminding me of a bird ruffling their wings—but he doesn’t have wings. ‘I will live as long as I can here, and you have been kind. I am lucky to know you.’

Something in my chest burns, and my eyes start to water. I’ve been feeling so fucking rejected by Eissa lately, and watching my brother fall for someone when I have no one at all…

The words he just gave me—watching them on his hands and seeing the honesty in his expression—I hadn’t realized how much I needed it before now.

I touch both hands to my chin. ‘Thank you. This makes me feel a lot less…alone.’

Hepyn nods, acknowledging a shared pain we have, and then reaches out and touches my hand. It’s only for a moment, but I feel the coolness of his scaly skin and a small tremble beneath it.

‘Thank you for always being kind to me. Now, do not drink that poison anymore. Humans are fragile, and I do not want to see you injured. The herb I gave you is rare, and I cannot spare it every time you are upset.’

I huff, and he sits back.

‘I’ll try not to act like that again.’

He nods his appreciation.

I don’t tell him that it’s a Vyastil’s fault, Eissa in particular. Instead, I wait for Hepyn to stand and follow him to the door.

He doesn’t look back or say goodbye. My Deaf side revolts, but I hold the snarky comment back and let him disappear outside.

Then I sink against the wall and place my head in my hands.

OceanofPDF.com

nine

EISSA

IT'S THE STRANGEST SENSATION, but since returning from Vegas, Erethar does not feel like home anymore. It will always be the place where I am from. It gave birth to my people. It is our universe. We were made for our air, our skies, our moons, our sun.

But when I'm here now, it feels like half of me is missing, and I can no longer pretend I don't understand why.

Pressing my hand to the cool stone, I stare out the window at the rolling hills. I see specks moving in the distance—Vyastil condemned to work the fields. They're the ones with lesser sentences who will eventually rejoin society, although the scars of hard labor will linger for many moon cycles. My eyes flick to the horizon, toward the border of the Outerlands and the entrance to the mines.

Most Vyastil who are sent beneath will never see our moons again. My heart aches for them, and it's one more thing I wish to change because the cruelty is unwarranted. A single flaw—a single imperfection—and I could be removed from my standing.

Which may happen even now.

Those scars on my body were left on purpose. To remind me that if anyone sees…if anyone finds out, it could be the end of my comfortable life on Erethar. They wanted me to remember how close I am to ruin.

And Luca just complicates it.

The incident at the gym would have been glossed over if I attempted to paint it as a human who caused me offense. But should the council learn that the reason I put claws on a stranger was that he was touching a human that was mine, I would be standing before them fighting to retain my title.

There is a rut on the horizon, and while I have had only two—both unfulfilled—this next one will be well within the breeding cycle. It will be my duty to find, mount, and fill a female's egg with my seed. We will fertilize the next generation of Vyastil, and then my duty to my people will be over.

But I know this will not happen. Even if I wished to pretend my Luca didn't exist—that he is dead or missing—it wouldn't matter. I am bonded to him. His mind and mine are the same now. My VySytheh.

My beloved.

My everything.

Vegas destroyed everything I have worked so hard to build, and I don't know how much longer I can maintain my seat of power before I have to confess that even deep in a rut, if they put me into a circle full of females in heat, my cocks could not descend. They would not fill them.

There will be no knot. No seed. No fertilized egg.

And then I will be killed. Banishment will not be fitting enough. The council has worked for generations to create the perfect line of breeding Vyastil, and to remove even one from the line is detrimental to their work.

But perhaps this can be my one, single moment of rebellion.

After all, sometimes it only takes a single act of disruption to topple the entire tower.

"Eissa?"

My hearts skip a few beats as I spin, then my breath leaves my body in a quiet exhale when I see it's only Rathyn, and he's alone. He's not on Erethar without Everest very often. After nearly losing him, Rathyn doesn't like to leave him alone for too long.

It also doesn't help that here, Everest must play the dutiful, docile pet. Rathyn has taken to leaving him with the other human companions to see if he can overhear anything that will help our cause.

So far, it's yielded nothing and put Everest in more danger of being discovered by some of the elite. But if they're willing to take the risk, who am I to stop them?

Rathyn crosses the room, and his head dips to touch mine. Our foreheads linger together a moment, and I feel a quiet affection for the one I reared from such a young age. It's only because I have seen the change in him that I don't hate myself for creating a monster.

He could have been my worst mistake.

Instead, he is my greatest pride.

"You seem troubled."

I let out a sigh and walk over to the counter, pouring us both cups of erien. It's a rich, opaque yellow—something that would likely terrify a human. I don't think their bodies are capable of processing the full taste of it, but it soothes my frayed nerves as I take a sip and hand his over.

"Thank you." He takes a polite drink, but I can sense his disinterest in social niceties.

"Has something happened?"

He waits for me to sit, then does the same. "I…may be investigated by human authorities soon for violence against a citizen."

Blinking at him, I attempt to read his body language to see how serious this is. "Was a human killed?"

He shakes his head once—a sharp motion from side to side. "He attempted to put hands on my Everest."

I sip the erien again, then lean back and try not to feel annoyed. I know Rathyn can't help it. He's fully bonded with Everest now. It's in his nature to protect what is his. It's the same mistake I made with Luca.

"Tell me what happened."

He bows his head and takes a breath before he speaks. "Everest attempted to introduce me to a human ritual. A double date."

My lips twitch, fighting off a grin. I did not engage in activities like this with Kori. He was confined to my quarters as my companion. But I had done my research and once attempted to surprise him with a candlelit dinner for our anniversary.

It did not go as anticipated. He hated the food, and the candles, and made me feel like a fool for trying. I gave up on human rituals for him after that.

"He introduced me to the…cinema." Rathyn's Vyastil tongue struggles with that unfamiliar human word. "Movies. Popcorn. All repulsive."

I can't stop a small laugh this time. "I see."

He scowls at me, though I can tell he's not upset with my amusement. "He exchanged words with a human sitting near us. It…escalated. I was unable to control my instincts. I damaged property at the cinema."

"And that is all?" I press.

He nods once.

Waving him off, I finish my drink, then set my hands over my thighs. "I wasn't given a report, so it's very likely the authorities have handled it. We have a department to take care of those expenses. It's not worth getting upset over."

"I know, but…" He hesitates again. It's so unlike Rathyn to be at a loss for Eretharian words. He never used to speak much, but when he did, it was with purpose.

He is a very different Vyastil now. Everest has made him better.

If I allowed him in, Luca would do the same to me.

"You can speak to me," I assure him. "You know your words are safe here."

He meets my gaze, then his ears flick forward, a sign of respect. It warms me just a little. "I'm worried I will not be able to maintain this much longer. It's hard when I bring my Everest here. It goes against everything I feel to treat him the way the others treat their companions. It angers me to see the other humans in chains and collars."

I was once a Vyastil who kept a human in a chain and collar. And the shame still sits with me. Even when I realized I cared for Kori, when my small mind opened, and I knew he was far more than the supplier of the cum my body craved. I did not understand what it meant to truly feel for a human until I lost him.

"The more people get close to my Everest, the more I wish to tear their throats out. And he is…far too attractive. People do not leave him alone, and it is becoming harder to resist the compulsion." He pauses, then says, "I fear I will go into a rut and then everyone will know who he is to me."

Vyastil like Rathyn are not meant to have a rut unless they have taken herbs to induce one. Our breeding scientists have been attempting to eradicate those pieces of our nature for generations now, and it has been far too long since a Vyastil had an uninduced, unscheduled rut.

If it happens to Rathyn where other Vyastil can see, he will be taken into custody, thrown into the dungeons, and interrogated.

And Everest…it doesn't bear thinking about what they will do to him. His fate will be the same, if not worse than Kori's.

"I understand," I eventually tell him.

His gaze meets mine again. "How can you understand this? Your human was not your bonded."

The words hurt in their honesty, and as much as I want to tell him about Luca, I cannot. Rathyn does not know that I am a breeder. And that it is happening soon. He cannot know. He's safer without that information.

"If you feel like you are losing control, I will attempt to remove you from service," I tell him.

He straightens, fury washing over his face. "You would punish me with dishonor?" His growling song booms through the room, rattling the walls.

"Rathyn," I tell him softly.

He sits back a little, though every muscle in his body is tense. "I do not deserve such a fate."

"No, you do not. But it will be worse for you and Everest if you are found out."

His tongue skates over his lower lip. "And what use will I be for any of this—for any kind of change—if I am removed from service? I will never be trusted again."

He's not wrong. Ideas flit through my mind, but I need time to parse them out. And help. I cannot do this alone. "Let me come up with a solution. I may be able to speak to our friend—" He knows I mean the Tarek prince, and he winces. "—and see if perhaps he has something you can take that will dull your urges."

The choices fight him inside for dominance. He is a proud Vyastil. He was raised and trained to be a warrior. Asking him to dull his nature is like asking him to remove a limb and be sent to the mines. But he knows what's at risk. He knows this is for the greater good.

And perhaps he also realizes that being a warrior is not everything.

"We will speak about it soon. I have several meetings to attend today, and you are needed at the north village to investigate a portal breach." It was an alert I received two days ago, and I knew Rathyn would be called in for it.

Portals pop up every so often—some are natural and temporary, some by the Vorthex, some by the Tarek. According to our treaties, we are meant

to have the locations of portals not controlled by the Vyastil mapped and documented.

Rathyn nods, but something flickers through his gaze, and I recognize it immediately as guilt.

“Is there something I should know?” I press.

His ears flick back, then he stands. “No.”

It’s not worth it for me to insist on knowing what he’s up to. He will come to me if there’s trouble, and it is still his nature to attempt to protect me as much as he protects his Everest.

I rise and approach, setting my hands on his shoulders, and we press our foreheads together. The piercings I gave him glint in the faint light, and I feel another burst of pride that should have been driven out of me so long ago.

But I am tired of being unfeeling. I am tired of being told the only thing that matters to the Vyastil is perfection. The concept itself is flawed and impossible, and I want freedom for my people.

I want to go back to our roots.

I want to remove the clawed foot that sits collectively on all of our throats.

I just don’t know where to begin, and I feel very alone in this.

If only Luca were in this with me—but I could not put him in danger like that. As of right now, I can’t think of a single force on Erethar or Earth that would make me cross that line and take him the way I want.

We will have to suffer alone.

And I will bear the consequences.

My rooms at the Foundry are my least favorite place on Earth, but I do appreciate that they’re so close to the clinic. It makes the orientation appointments easier, and it allows me a space to shake off the nerves I feel every time I sit in front of a human and explain what they’re getting into.

The lies I feed them taste like ash on my tongue. I feel like a true monster when I see them soothed, knowing that soon enough they will be strapped to a chair and have pleasure forced from their bodies.

Some love it—that cannot be denied. Everest had been nervous and a little afraid, but he also seemed so eager. I could tell he was sheltered. Not all humans are like him.

Some could tell that everything their government and the Vyastil leaders were saying was mostly a lie.

Yes, we provide cures for disease. Yes, we have solved their energy crisis. Food has become less scarce, and droughts and blights are becoming a thing of the past now that we have this exchange.

It was the same offer we once made to the Tarek: our knowledge for the herbs they cultivated. And the moment our leaders found the Tarek's weak spots, they attacked. The Tarek were more formidable opponents than the Vyastil anticipated, and before this fragile treaty, I think we were losing the fight.

At the time, I was not privy to that information, but I know how to read between the lines. I know how to hear lies couched in carefully cultivated truths.

I do not know that the humans would fare so well if we went to war with them. It's easier to fool them into thinking that they are acting in their own best interest. But it cannot last forever. The bubble is growing, and eventually, it will pop.

I pass by a few of the guards who nod at me in deference as I make my way out of the Foundry and slide into the backseat of the very large SUV that will take me to my office. My linen coverings hide the worst of my scars, but even today I still get strange looks from the other Vyastil who I know cannot stand the feeling of fabric against their skin.

It took me far too long to get used to it, but the moment I'm alone, I strip myself of each burden and allow myself to languish in my natural state. And perhaps someday I will be able to walk around with my imperfections and not be at risk of losing all respect from those beneath me.

Or, perhaps, there will no longer be anyone beneath me at all.

The thought makes me smile, though I hide it as the SUV pulls around through the back alley of the clinic. I swipe my card at the door, then take the long walk to my office. I take only a moment to collect my thoughts as I pull up the profile of the man who is waiting for me in the conference room.

Zane Brooks. He's twenty-three years old and comes from independently wealthy parents. His father has never served. He is an only

child, and his profile has been red-flagged for inflammatory statements made online about the Vyastil.

He's not the first red alert case we've had. It's not an automatic worry for me. But we monitor them more closely than others because we will not allow violence in the clinic. Too many humans have figured out how to escape the restraints, and Vyastil have been hurt.

With the human rebellion and anti-Vyastil sentiments growing, we must be cautious. We cannot afford a war.

Not yet.

Taking the tablet with me, I push open the door to the small orientation room where Zephin is overseeing Zane's exam. He is a very pretty human—a head full of very tightly coiled blond hair and a face that looks much younger than he is.

He glances up at me, his blue eyes wide and staring, then he goes back to his tablet. His brows are furrowed in concentration, and when he bites his lip, both of his cheeks form deep dimples.

"I think I'm done," he says after a moment. His voice is low and smooth. "Just hit submit?"

I nod, then turn to Zephin. "You may go."

Zephin's tightly braided orange hair barely moves as he dips his head in deference, then he turns and leaves, the door closing with a soft click behind him. Now Zane and I are alone, and my tablet pings.

He scored one hundred percent.

"Did you study before you came here?" I ask.

He meets my gaze, and I can tell immediately he has worked hard at hiding his intentions from us. There is very little to read in any of his movements. "Something like that."

I take a seat across from him. "And do you have any questions?"

He scoffs. "It's not that complicated. I get stripped down, tied to a chair, and sucked off. Your people get fed, then I go on my merry way and try to forget it ever happened. At least, until they call again. Isn't that how it goes?"

"Do you wish for a truthful answer, or one that will make you feel better?"

His carefully placed mask slips for just a second, and I see his genuine surprise.

"You're not like the others I've talked to."

“No.” I let that word linger between us for a moment. Then I give him my canned response—the response I used to use in order to make myself feel better. It no longer works, but for the moment, it’s helpful. “You humans have what we desperately need. We have done our best to compensate for it, and someday—if we’re all lucky—there will be enough eager volunteers that service is no longer required.”

“Nice answer. *Very* believable.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. He’s dangerous, but I’m not quite sure how yet. And…in spite of all this—in spite of all the alarm bells—I kind of like him. I understand him. “That is very astute.”

His eyes widen again. “Why are you being honest? Everyone else has been blowing smoke up my ass.”

I choose not to answer him. I can’t tell him the truth but lying is pointless. “We have herbs to make this process easier, if you think that might help.”

“No, thank you.”

I take a breath, then say, “If ever you feel ill, you may say so at any time before your appointment. Vyastil have a particular…aversion to humans vomiting. So, please be sure to tell your nurse at any time that you are going to be sick before your Vyastil arrives.”

He stares at me, then his eyes widen just a bit. “You’re telling me the truth. Why?”

I shrug, then stand and beckon him to follow suit. “I prefer all humans to be as informed as necessary. I hope you have a good first session, Zane.”

He nods sharply, then turns and heads for the door before freezing and looking back. “Do you know Rathyn?”

My entire body goes cold. “Why?”

“He’s, ah…got a contract with my friend Everest.”

He’s searching for something, but I don’t know what, and I do not want to feed him any information. I must protect Rathyn and Everest at any cost. “We are acquainted. He is a high-ranking officer.”

“Commander, right? Of, like, the entire army?”

“That is an over-simplification of his duties,” I tell him.

He stares another beat, then nods. “Okay. Well…tell him I said hi, I guess.”

I say nothing as Zane lets himself out, and I carefully file all of this away for later. I need to speak to Rathyn about this man. He may be

Everest’s friend, but I want to know who he truly is, and if he’s a risk we need to be aware of and possibly remove.

But that can wait. As I take a single breath in, I get a quick glimpse of Luca’s thoughts. I’ve been doing my best to shut him out over the last few weeks, but every now and again, he’s there.

The warmth of him presses against the inside of my skull. He’s safe at home. And right now, he’s sad. I would give anything to reach out to him, to offer him even a drop of comfort, but I can’t take the risk.

Instead, I sit back down and process Zane’s test before clicking into his profile. He’s not checked into the clinic. He’s listed as rescheduled due to a stomach ailment. I smile. I knew he would not be sitting in the clinic today, and I have a feeling he won’t be coming to his next appointment either.

I tap in my code, then move Zane’s next clinic visit to two weeks from now. The tablet pings as the request is accepted. I will be in trouble if I am audited, but I know we have plenty of cum flowing. No one will notice this one little thing.

And that will buy me time to look into this further.

For now, I have other things to focus on, and a human to attempt to forget.

If only letting Luca go were that easy.

OceanofPDF.com

ten

LUCA

IT'S BEEN FOREVER since I've seen Eissa. Since I've felt him.

The absence is making me feel like I'm going crazy. My mind and body have been trying to conjure up things to do to keep myself occupied. I work out like it's my job. I bake like I've never baked before. My apartment's freezer is filled to the brim with dick cookies and a few experimental breakfast bars that I haven't been brave enough to offer to any of my friends.

It doesn't help that amidst all of this, Dante had a terrible flare and scared us all half to death. Cielo included.

It sent my anxiety spiraling out of control.

I'm a fucking wreck, which is probably one of the reasons I've become so fixated on Zane. I tell myself to let it go, that this is all just in my head, but something feels off. I caught him looking through Cielo's bag the other day at the gym, and while he tried to play it off like he was confused and in the wrong locker, I didn't believe him.

It's only gotten worse since then, which is why I'm watching him now. Or stalking, though that seems like such a strong word.

I'm not exactly well-equipped to be a stalker. I understand the concept of sound. I can hear some things if they're the right pitch, but I don't really understand how sound travels. And far too often I forget that some things make noise. But I can't let this go.

Something in my gut says that Zane is up to something, and it's about to threaten the people I care about. He's been hanging around Dante's lately because of the opossum Cielo has apparently adopted, and while, on the surface, it looks innocent, I see more than most people. I see the deception in his smiles, and in the way he moves.

I tried to mention it to Dante, but he brushed me off. He thinks that because Zane is Everest's best friend, his intentions can't be bad.

I love my brother for his innocence and his willingness to see the best in people, but he's also been hurt because of it. I don't want that to happen again. He's finally starting to find some happiness in his life, and I'll be damned if I let anyone take that from him.

That is why I'm at the gym. It's why I'm smiling at Quilliyn as he's attempting to mess with his espresso machine, though it's clear he has no real idea what he's doing.

He doesn't notice me at first, which is what I want because Zane is across the hall. I can see him through the windows on all fours, working out his core. If he weren't such a red flag trying to mess with the people I love, he might be attractive.

I can see why Quilliyn keeps stealing glances at him.

Which is exactly how he notices me.

"Oh, Aelvorn!" I see the words form on his lips. It's getting easier for me to read what Vyastil are saying, even with their fangs. He lifts a hand and circles his fist over his chest. 'Sorry. I didn't see you.'

I wave him off. His ASL is better than most humans but not nearly as good as Eissa's or Cielo's. They have put so much time into refining it.

'You're fine.'

Quilliyn nods and smiles, but I can see his gaze shift over to the window again, almost like he's being drawn in. Like Zane is tethered to him in some way. I know the feeling a little too well. Any time Eissa is anywhere near me, I can't seem to stay away. No matter how hard I try.

He blinks rapidly after a second, then turns his full attention to me. 'No coffee today. It's still broken.'

'Don't want coffee.' Rocking back on my heels, I peer out of my periphery. Zane's on his back now, doing crunches. 'How long have you known Zane?'

Quilliyn cocks his head. 'Several months. He comes in often.'

I see his ears flutter and I frown. 'I'm worried about him.'

Quilliyn's brow furrows. 'Worried? Do you think he's in trouble? Sick?'

'Dangerous.'

His eyes go wide, and he starts to shake his head, then he stops. 'Why do you think that?'

'He wants to be friends with Cielo. Suspicious.' I emphasize that sign with my expression. 'He hates Vyastil.'

Quilliyn's shoulders sag. 'Maybe he's learning. Cielo is nice. He can be friends with anyone.'

Quilliyn's not wrong. If anyone can change someone's mind, it's the sweet monster in the pink jacket whose tongue is most definitely licking the bottom of a latte cup right now. But people like Zane don't change easily. And they don't change just because someone is nice to them.

I've known people like him.

People who got to know my brother and realized he was good and kind, and still ended up throwing slurs around like they meant nothing. They didn't give a shit when hearing them broke Dante's heart.

'I don't trust him. I don't want anyone to get hurt.'

'I don't think he's capable of hurting anyone.' Quilliyn looks concerned, though, and I appreciate he's not completely dismissing me.

'I don't know. I just…' I tap my stomach with bent fingers. 'A gut feeling.'

Quilliyn lifts his hands, then lets them fall to the top of the counter. 'I'll keep an eye on him. I promise. No one will get hurt.'

I think he will keep his promise, but realizing Quilliyn might possibly feel the same way about Zane as I do about Eissa tells me that he might not be the most helpful in protecting the people I love.

After leaving the gym, I head over to the café to check on Hepyn and to apologize for being such a messy drunk the last time we talked, but he's not in.

Zinni's behind the counter, smiling and chatting with Syl about something I can't quite read off his lips. When he twists around, I take notice of his missing tail. Zinni wears long, thin, opaque linen robes most of the time, and now I understand why.

I can see the round stump of what he's hiding. A shame on Erethar, but not something people would care about here. I still can't believe he was sent to the mines for something so fucking superficial. It makes me want to track down Eissa and demand to know what the hell is wrong with their people.

But I don't want to see him right now.

Hell, I couldn't find him even if I wanted to. I don't even know where he is, and I'm not going to humiliate myself by knocking on his door at the Foundry. That odd connection I can't explain between us is eerily silent too, and that makes me feel worse than ever every time I think about it.

'You okay? You want order?' Zinni asks with quick fingers.

I shake my head. 'Hepyn here?'

Zinni's face falls, but I can't totally read his expression. 'No. Sorry. Not feeling well today. I can call him in if you need him.'

'No, thank you,' I sign quickly. I cast a quick glance at Syl, who has positioned himself almost between me and Zinni, as though I'm some kind of threat. I fight back a sigh. 'Tell him I will talk with him later.'

Zinni frowns. 'Will do. Want drink to go?'

I shake my head again. 'No. But here.' I dig into my pocket and use my Deaf gain to ignore Zinni's protests as I shove a wad of cash into the tip jar, then turn and head back in the direction of the gym. I probably need to stop spending every waking hour there, but without conversation with Hepyn to distract me, my mind keeps wandering back to Zane, and I can't shake off the feeling something bad is going to happen.

Logic tells me I need to stay out of it, but I've never really been great at listening to reason when I think people are in trouble. And Zane is someone who can and will cause trouble. I knew guys like him at school, and they always grow up exactly the way you think.

Slipping through the side door, I wander down an employees-only hall, keeping an eye out for anyone. It's empty for a moment, but then I come to a stop when I see Cielo in the gym café with Tyler, Chadwick, Brody…and *fuck*…Zane's hovering a few feet away.

My favorite gym bros are being sweet to Cielo, and Zane is watching them intently. I narrow my gaze and lean forward. No, he's not watching them. His attention is focused solely on Cielo. There's an expression on his face—something I don't like. Something that sends my hackles up.

Zane's eyes cut toward the door, and I duck away before I'm caught. There aren't many places for me to go, but I push into a supply closet.

Leaving it cracked open, I shove my eye into the open space, and as predicted, Zane appears a second later, his phone pressed to his ear.

I squint, trying to catch words on his lips.

"…in a second…place…alone."

He's moving too quickly to notice me spying on him. And the moment his back is turned toward me, I open the door and do my best to sneak after him. I'm either being much quieter than usual, or he's too distracted to notice me behind him, but either way, I manage to follow him to the room with all the water massage beds.

I give him a moment to slip inside, then I peer through the half-open door. He's standing in the doorway of the first room with his back to me, so I sneak behind the welcome desk and crouch down. It's empty right now because the massage area doesn't open until three, which gives me enough time to try to figure out who he's talking to.

I can't see what he's saying. Not entirely. Only something does catch my eye.

"…portal key…"

It's not enough for me to go on, but there are no human portals, so clearly I was right about him being suspicious.

With trembling hands, I pull out my phone and hit record, then lift it so the lens is above the desk. I hold my breath as I zoom in, squinting as I try to understand what he's saying. I don't have enough context for most of it, but I catch, "Eight o'clock…car…if we can."

It's enough for me to know I can't just let him go. Not after this. He ends the call, and I duck down lower and end the recording. When the door shuts after him, I open a text to Dante and type as quickly as I can. He's the only one who will be able to help me figure out what Zane's saying.

With any luck, the fucker spilled his guts where he thought no one could hear.

Sending video, need u to listen, tell me what it's saying.

I attach the file, and it starts to buffer, so I hit send, knowing it'll upload as soon as I have better service. Shoving the phone back into my pocket, I head out of the room and start down the hall, but my heart sinks when I realize Zane is nowhere to be found.

Fuck, this is not the day to lose him. Panic rushes up my spine. It's hours before eight o'clock, but I don't know where the hell it's all going

down, or what any of it means.

I probably should let this go. I should walk my ass to the Foundry and show the video to Rathyn, let him handle it. But I need this in my life. I need something to give me purpose, so I'm not sitting around jerking myself half-blind to memories of Eissa.

I can't keep waiting for the nothing he plans on giving me. I'm not going to change his mind. It doesn't matter how much he wants me or what we shared. Once again, I'm not good enough, and I suppose when I think about the Vyastil, it makes sense.

If Zinni was sent to the mines to work himself to death over a missing tail, it's no wonder Eissa finds his attraction to me absolutely repellent.

It hurts. No, it more than hurts. It aches in a way I can't describe, but it is what it is, and it's better that I accept the reality of it now. So I take a breath and stride back onto the gym floor, a loud noise of relief escaping me when I spot Zane running on the treadmill. Luckily, he has headphones on, so he didn't hear me. I collect myself before jumping on an elliptical and beginning a leisurely pace.

For now, I will wait.

I will be patient.

And once Dante gets the video translated for me, I'll make sure Zane can't enact his plan—whatever the fuck it is.

Dante does not get the video translated. It shows delivered on my end, but there's no response from him. I do my best not to panic. I'm sure he's fine. He's on a new treatment, and he's safe at home with Cielo.

But it means my only option at this point is to follow Zane. It's almost seven now, and the weirdo actually spent the entire day at the gym. I've never done that before, but I managed to seem inconspicuous. Now I'm following behind him in the parking lot as he heads toward his car.

It's only when he starts wandering around that I realize he seems lost. Like his mind was so focused on something else that he forgot what he'd been doing all day. He's pale, and I can see his fingers shaking as he pulls his keys out of his bag. He opens his back door to toss his things inside before climbing behind the wheel.

These are not the actions of someone who's behaving rationally. This is someone on drugs or someone up to no good.

Or maybe both. With Zane, I can't be sure.

Checking my phone one last time, my heart sinks when I see there's no response from Dante. So really, this is the only choice I have. I hop in my own car, which isn't parked too far from Zane's, and follow him as he pulls onto the street.

He's driving erratically, but there are no cars or cops around to do anything about it. All I can do is keep my distance so he doesn't realize I'm following him. We're nearing the edge of town when he finally makes a sudden, sharp right turn, and I pass him, making the next right on the other side of a massive apartment building.

When I come around the other side of the street, I see his car is parked. And when I blink, I catch a quick glimpse of him hurrying into the building. I snag a parking spot across from the building, turn off my car, then sit back. Then I lift my chin and look up at what has to be at least sixteen floors.

Damn.

This place is nice. It's one of those luxury buildings with a little market on the ground floor that only residents are allowed to shop in. It doesn't seem like a place people his age could afford, which probably means he has rich parents.

Or connections.

Or both.

Not that I care. The only thing that matters now is proving I was right about him. Or I was wrong. So long as no one gets hurt, it'll be fine.

And I can do this all night. I think.

Maybe.

As I sit there, time starts to feel like it's slowing down, and after a while, I feel like I'm losing it. I run a hand through my hair and sigh. Maybe I should head home. Zane could just be having a bad day, or a bad week or something. Maybe I'm just projecting my bullshit on him because I'm avoiding everything with Eissa.

Shit, if I have to owe this gym bro douchebag an apology, I'm going to scream. I'm going to—

My thoughts cut off when he appears again. He's cloaked in a hood and dark pants, but I know it's him based on the way he walks. The moon is

high in the sky, stars hidden behind the smog and the clouds. And even so, his gait is evident.

This is confirmed as I watch him glance over his shoulder, his hands fluttering near his sides as he slides into the car he was driving earlier.

So, I follow again. I'm not fucking wrong about this.

It's in that moment I feel Eissa in my mind, the adrenaline pulsing through my system, a warning to him. I push him out, push him aside. How dare he show up when I'm neck-deep in a…mission?

Yes, a mission. A personal one.

He's not allowed here. Not now. If he cared, or was concerned, he could have shown up earlier. But he didn't. He left me alone for ages, and so here I am. Spying on some shithead.

Or someone I really think is a shithead.

Fuck. I doubt I'm in any danger, but still.

The car swerves around another and then jerks to a stop, half on a curb. I slow down and park farther away, hopping out and walking on foot, sneaking into storefronts and hiding in shadows as I move. I don't want to be seen, to blow my cover. But Zane is easy to follow.

He seems desperate, and when men become desperate, they become sloppy.

He isn't making sure he isn't being followed. It makes this so much easier.

That's when I see it.

A car pulls up, and Zane looks to his right and left before leaning down and handing something to them through the window. I don't know what it is, can't make it out, but with the way he's been acting, it must be important.

Portal key rings through my head once more, and I step backward, knocking into something behind me. It must fall to the ground because I see Zane's head turn, catching sight of me.

I see my name on his lips, his mouth screwed up, his eyes angry.

I can't wait. I have to leave.

Turning on my heels, I run.

My lungs ache as I do. I can feel my blood pumping through my body.

And then something enormous hits me, jolting me forward. Pain screams up my side as I crash to the ground. My head hits it, pain shooting

through my cheek and nose, the taste of copper on my tongue. I try to lift myself up but then feel something crushing my thighs as it rolls over me.

I cry out, my fingers clawing at the pavement.

I can't breathe. I can't fucking breathe. Everything hurts, and I'm pretty sure several bones are broken.

I almost give up. The pain is so intense, I want to give in and collapse on the street, but then there's a voice in my mind. Maybe I conjured it up, maybe it was my survival instinct, but it works.

Run, my Luca. Run.

I push myself up and move, my body cursing at me as I do. I can feel the pops and groans of my bones as I hobble as fast as I can, adrenaline pushing me forward. I glance behind me and see the headlights of the car. They want to kill me.

I turn right, knocking into a wall and wheezing, then I slip down an alley. I don't know how I make it, but I manage to limp toward a door, my bloody hand landing on the doorknob and turning.

It's open.

I tumble in, seeking safety.

And then I realize he's there.

My Eissa.

He stands up, his eyes wide, his hands reaching for me, and the moment I'm in his grasp, I give in to the fear and pain, and everything around me goes dark.

I don't know how much time has passed, but I know it must have been more than minutes. Hours, possibly?

There is pain in my body, pain I've never known, but there's something else too. Relief, I realize. It's almost like I can feel my skin and bones knitting back together. My eyes peel open, and I glance around the room. There are no windows in the small room. I'm on a couch next to a desk—this must be Eissa's office—and Eissa is hovering over me, hands flailing and kind of panicked as he assesses my battered body.

I can't quite hear his thoughts, but I keep sensing waves of anxiety pouring from him, and it's making it very difficult to stay calm.

‘Ok,’ I sign with bent knuckles. God, are my fingers broken? They must be. They’re numb and swollen, and with every little bend I feel a slight popping sensation.

It doesn’t hurt like it should, though.

What the fuck is going on?

Eissa looks down at me, then drops to his knees and presses his thumb to my chin. My mouth opens, and then he shoves something violently bitter onto my tongue. A cough rips up my throat, making the pain worse, but whatever he’s making me eat dissolves quickly, and the bitterness fades into something else.

Herbs.

Monster herbs.

That would explain it. He must have given me some while I was going in and out of consciousness because I’m not in as much pain as I probably should be. I blink at him with wet eyes and take a deep breath before lifting my hands again.

‘I need help.’

He nods stiffly, just once. His claws are long, and I think it’s probably from his raging emotions. He taps his temple. ‘I know. Hospital?’

I shake my head so hard the entire room starts to spin, and it takes me a moment to catch my breath and center myself. ‘No hospital.’

I was almost murdered tonight by one of Zane’s friends. I don’t even know what the fuck I saw, but I know whatever it was means my life is now officially in danger. If anyone’s watching, they’re going to be keeping an eye on the emergency rooms.

The only reason they haven’t burst in here is because this is the clinic. It’s run by the Vyastil.

I’m hopefully safe here.

I feel safe with Eissa.

‘Call my brother,’ I tell him. My arms are starting to feel heavy, and it’s hard to keep my eyes open, which will make communicating very difficult. I struggle to open them after a slow blink but fail.

Shit.

It’s okay, comes a voice in my head. It’s a combination of phonemes and semantics, but it makes sense. *I’ll call him. You rest.*

I attempt to lick my lips, but my tongue gets caught halfway out and just kind of…stops. I feel a pulse of amusement from Eissa, and his gentle

fingers push it back into my mouth.

Sorry, he tells me, his words clear in my mind. *What I gave you was strong, but you need it. Sleep now.*

I want to. I can feel myself drifting, but I need to know what my brother is saying. I need to make sure he's okay too because what if someone went after Dante and Cielo? What if Zane's first stop was to hurt them to tie up any loose ends?

Fear races through me, but then I feel Eissa's hand pressing against my forehead. I fight the herbs, but after a moment, I realize what he's doing. Suddenly, I can hear Dante—or what I know is Dante.

It's not his voice exactly, but it's his words.

He's making the phone call and letting me listen in.

"Sorry I didn't call you before, but there's an emergency with your brother. He's injured. Badly." Eissa's voice is much calmer than my brother's.

"Oh fuck, oh my god! What do you mean? What the fuck happened?"

"I'm still attempting to figure that out, but Luca hasn't been in any condition to speak or sign. I've given him plenty of zitha and a few other things I had on hand. He's alive and is healing, but I think it would be best if you came to see him."

"Where are you?" I feel my brother's desperation as my brain processes the words Eissa is feeding me.

"I'm at my office, but I will be taking him to the Foundry soon."

The Foundry. Where all the other high-ranking Vyastil live. I don't know that I want to be there, but I also don't know what choice I have.

"Okay. Okay, yeah. Send me the address. We'll be right there. Yeah, alright. No, you go ahead and call Rath and Everest. Thanks again. See you in a few."

The call ends, and Eissa sinks down beside me. I feel him shifting closer, and though I can't open my eyes, I can almost sense his expression of worry and fear. Then his forehead touches mine, and I feel something else—affection.

Relief that I'm okay.

A desperate desire to stay near me because staying away only ended with me being hurt.

I want to tell him I'm okay, but I can't seem to lift my hands or make a sound, so I push that thought from my head to his.

His sigh wafts across my face, his breath sweet. *My Luca. You are in danger.*

I know.

He sends me images of his place at the Foundry, along with the feeling that it’s the last place in the world he wants to be. But at the moment, I’m safer with the Vyastil, with Eissa, than I am with humans.

OceanofPDF.com

eleven

EISSA

FURY BURNS THROUGH ME, a foreign feeling that has long been suppressed. But seeing Luca injured, feeling the pain he went through, something inside of me unraveled. I feel like the Ryvek, the untamed, hybrid nomadic group who travels around Erethar. Long ago, when the Vorthex first opened portals to steal humans, their giant Zyeli ancestors snuck into the human villages and stole them for breeding.

The hybrids now exist, somewhere between humans and monsters. They show so much emotion it makes us twitch with discomfort. They do not hold back; they rage and cry and laugh. They have been exiled to the farthest places for generations.

Not even the mines can contain them, though their population now is so small I sometimes wonder whether or not they've gone extinct.

But I feel emotions like theirs now. That bubbling feeling inside my core, the way my skin feels hot, the way my ears twitch in anger.

I am unhappy. Deeply so.

No, it's more than that.

I am *angry*.

I want to burn this world down as I watch Luca twitch and hear him moan in pain. They did this to him. Those violent, vicious human rebels. His skin is torn, bones broken, blood leaking from his body, threatening to take his life.

I will not let that happen—I will not let him die. But I also cannot stop his pain. I can only think ahead to ensure this will never happen again.

I want evidence so I can bring it to the council and there can be retribution. So someone can burn. But the thought is irrational. Humans have done this to him. What will the Vyastil council care for one single human hurt by his own kind?

Luca's life does not matter. He does not contribute cum. He is considered defective and useless to our kind, and it doesn't matter if the people who hurt him will be looking for him to finish the job.

I cannot let the council know what he is to me—what he could be—so my hands are tied. I am impotent when it comes to protecting him.

Except…

It only takes me a second to realize I do have one method to protect him. It's going to ruin what little progress I've made in keeping away, because in order to save him, I must protect him from humans. I can allow him safety amongst my people where he can roam as free as possible…but there is only one role he can play, and I'm not sure he will like it.

A contract will be simple enough. It is my job to oversee them. It's my job to enforce them. No one will question if I take one for myself. My punishment for Kori has long since passed, and my choice to not have a companion and to not visit the clinic has been my own.

Prince Jyrion might look at me sideways, but it won't matter. I still have power, and I will use it for as long as I am able. Yes, if I can convince him, I can protect him from the other humans who wish him harm.

The only thing I need to do now is find out who attempted to harm Luca and why.

He is not involved in politics, but he is close to several Vyastil. I have a feeling I know who's behind it. I just need confirmation. Luckily, I have many human contacts on Earth who can assist me.

I pull out my phone, and with extended claws, I try to punch in a number. It is difficult. I try to breathe, to retract them, but it is no use. I cannot help how I feel.

And Luca, he makes me *feel*.

My finger finally manages to hit a familiar name.

He's a human I occasionally work with in law enforcement. He's someone who connected with me when I first arrived.

Davis Roan. A human with wide shoulders, thin legs, and a mustache.

I did not like the hair on his lip when I first met him. The twitching, bug-looking thing bothered me more than I cared to admit. Those who educated us about humans did not warn us about this phenomenon before we arrived.

But despite the *mustache*, Davis proved himself to be a helpful ally. We have worked together for many years, and I know I can trust him to do what I ask without question.

He owes me that much.

"Eissa," he says when he answers, his voice curt and yet warm. "I haven't heard from you in a while. I'm assuming this isn't a friendly call?"

I sigh softly into the phone. "I'm afraid not, Davis. I am sorry."

He laughs. "It's fine. What can I do for you?"

Humans. It is very rare to find one so straight and to the point. I appreciate it.

"I need some security footage from traffic cameras near the clinic. Can you assist me?"

I hear something clacking over the receiver, and I know he is typing something on the computer.

"Give me every detail you have. Time, date, and any landmarks."

I rattle off what I was able to take from Luca's head as he collapsed in my arms. I can feel the echo of it now: his bones crushing, his cries of pain. I do not want to relive this. But if I'm to find any type of justice for Luca, I must dig into every detail that I can.

"There was a car—something older, small. It was almost an hour ago, maybe a quarter mile from the alley that links to the back service entrance of the clinic. There was a man running and the car hit him."

"You witnessed this?" Davis asks.

"In…a manner of speaking. I have the human with me now."

He makes a startled noise. "Is he conscious?"

"No."

"Alive?"

There's a punch of relief in my gut when I am able to say, "Yes. I have given him zitha, and he is healing."

Davis hums in thought, and I can hear his keyboard clacking. "Alright. I'll see what I can find and send it over. Is this going to be used in a legal capacity?"

“I’m not sure yet.” At the very least, it will be for me to document who did this. To know who will pay for harming my Luca. I will relive each scrape and bruise and broken bone that Luca has suffered and ensure they feel that same pain a hundred-fold.

My hate grows, a twining vine that wraps around my chest and squeezes, and I breathe through it.

“I’ll give you what I can, but it has to be for personal use. If you want to have someone arrested, the rest will have to go through official channels. Just so nothing gets fucked up during trial.”

“I thank you for your help.”

I can hear his smile as he says, “Anytime. And feel free to call just to say hello.”

I make a noise of agreement, though it’s unlikely I will do this. My focus is now on one human, and one human alone. He’s quietly moaning in agony as the herbs I placed on his tongue stitch his wounds together.

Ending the call, I turn my attention back to Luca, and I see that several of his gashes have started to close. His eyes are still shut, and I’m not sure he knows who he’s with or where he is. But it doesn’t matter. I will take care of him and ease him back to consciousness with as much tenderness as I can manage.

Snatching the velvet sack from my desk, I drop to my knees and gently pry his mouth open. He gasps, then swallows as I lay several more of the dried herbs on his tongue. They’re stronger zitha than most humans get, and were a gift from the Tarek the last time I aided them.

They still don’t work as well on Vyastil biology, but they have been helpful to keep around in the past, and now I have never been more grateful that I’ve kept a supply. I owe Sabik a life debt for this.

Luca’s lips tighten, then one hand lifts. His fingers were broken before, but the knuckles have straightened, and he forms a fist with a single finger sticking up. He gently shakes it from side to side. ‘Where?’

His eyes are still not open, so I push the answer into his head. *My office. With me, my Luca.*

His entire body stiffens, then he forces an eye open. His pupil is dilated, telling me he likely has a head injury, but I know it will be healed before the night is over. He focuses on me, then, in spite of himself, he relaxes.

I breathe a little easier and reach out, using my claws to push a few locks of hair off his forehead. Human hair is so thin and fragile, but it feels

so soft against the pads of my fingers. I could do this all night if he would only allow me.

I could spend my life at his feet, worshipping every inch of his body.

"No." He speaks the word aloud, tongue thick, but it doesn't matter. I understand him.

You are injured, I tell him. *Severely. What do you remember before you were hit by the car?*

A long moment goes by, then his hand lifts before falling back to his chest. He's still too weak to sign, and I feel when he gives in and allows images to flow from his mind into mine. It's strange—there is no sound with them, and I understand the world silently the way Luca lives in it.

He shows me Prince Quilliyn first, standing in his gym beside a large machine that makes lattes. And then there is Cielo and his friends. And then Zane, the blond. I feel a pulse of suspicion and irritation coming from Luca.

And then he's following Zane, attempting to understand a phone call he cannot hear. He takes a video and sends it, and then there is waiting.

Images flash like a flipbook until suddenly Luca's in an alleyway. Zane is speaking to someone in a car, and then Luca is noticed. He runs, but he doesn't get far enough when he's struck. I feel the pain again, profound enough that it leaves me gasping.

Bones are shattering, his lungs too tight to draw in air, mouth open in a silent scream. His skin scrapes across the asphalt, and then suddenly he feels a burst of energy. He hears a voice that gives him strength.

My voice.

The moment I felt that he was in danger and drew him to me.

He escaped into the clinic…and then the vision ends, and he's here with me.

I press a palm to his cheek as his other eye opens, and I see his pupils have normalized a little. He's watching me intently, feeling the weight of my touch against him, and for once he's not pulling away.

He's not furious with me for drawing him close and then turning from him. I have been such a…a bastard, as the humans say. A monster, as they like to call us. I have bonded with him, wanted him, taken him, toyed with him…

…and rejected him.

I deserve the pain he's in now.

Don't do that, Luca says into my head. *Not right now, please.*

I nod and take a breath as I process everything I've just seen. I did not recognize the person driving the car, but it won't take me long to go through the records of known extremists that both offices have been keeping track of. I don't know that I will find a match, but I will try.

Zane, on the other hand, is a bigger problem. He is Everest's best friend. He works at Prince Quilliyn's gym. He could potentially have access to the Foundry, and there's a good chance he knows about the portal keys.

If he has connections to the extremist group, that will be a problem, and I must ensure he's taken into custody for what he did.

I glance down at Luca, whose breathing has evened out. I feel him pressing into my head, trying to see what I'm thinking. For once, I don't push him away, but instead of giving him my thoughts, I sign.

'There are multiple problems we need to take care of tonight. The first is Zane. He can't be allowed to walk free after what he did.'

Luca's jaw tightens, and he nods, then winces in pain. 'The second?'

'You.'

His eyes go wide. 'Me?'

'If Zane is with one of the extremist groups, then you are in danger. You lived, which means they will likely send someone to…' My hands hesitate as I search for a softer turn of phrase, but then realize that Deaf value direct communication more than anything. 'Kill you.'

He swallows heavily. 'You have a plan. I can tell.' His fingers begin to shake again, so he lays his hands back down on his chest.

I nod. 'There is one solution. It is temporary, but I don't think you will like it.'

Run away, he says in my head.

I nod, but then lift my hands to add, 'With me, to Erethar. As my official companion.'

On the drive to the Foundry, I explain to Luca what a companion is meant for, and he doesn't seem as bothered by it as Everest did when he was first presented with the option. Of course, unlike Rathyn, my contract does not include fifteen cum deposits per day.

I added five—otherwise the contract would seem suspicious—but Luca didn't seem bothered by that either.

'I won't actually require you to give me anything,' I say when he looks up at me.

He's sitting up in the front seat of my car, reading through the tablet as I hold his door open, ready to help him up to my rooms. We can't linger in the parking lot. Dante is on his way here to the Foundry to meet up with us, and I want to ensure that Luca is situated and comfortable before Dante sees him.

It's very likely that Luca's brother is going to protest violently and loudly against Luca being collared to me. Especially when he learns that Luca's only option for the moment will be to remain on Erethar, in my quarters where Dante cannot go. But I'm hoping reason will win and he will understand this is the best way to protect his brother.

Luca's breath is slow and even, and I can see by the way his eyes are still that he's not reading anymore, but his gaze is fixated on the screen in the spot awaiting his signature. He lifts the stylus, then sets it back down and shifts to face me better.

'What about what I want?'

I blink at him for a moment. 'What *you* want?'

'From this. It only benefits you. Vyastil,' he spells the word slowly. Deliberately. He's making a point, but I don't fully understand what it is. It doesn't matter how long I've lived amongst humans; they're still so…alien sometimes.

I kneel down, hoping my larger body is enough to shield our signs from the cameras. 'What do you want?'

He takes the stylus and taps it on the screen, and my eyes follow to where he's pointing.

Five cum sessions per day.

'I want you to actually take them.'

"No," I say aloud before I can stop myself.

He winces like my word wounded him, and I hate myself for it. But I can't change my answer. He has no idea why, and I can't endanger him by explaining my purpose in this life and what I must attempt to do to protect everything I've been building to make real change.

The moment someone like Prince Jyrion finds out that Vyastil are capable of making a human their VySytheh…well, the gods only know what

will come of that knowledge.

Luca is unmoved. He taps the screen again, and once more I shake my head.

“Yes,” he says aloud.

I want to slap my hand over his mouth because I don’t want anyone overhearing this, but that feels cruel when he gives his spoken voice to so few. I close my eyes in a long, slow blink, then open them again.

He’s ready for me.

‘You want me.’ His signs are sharp, pointed, no room for misinterpretation.

‘Yes.’

‘I want you.’

I bow my head and tap my temple. ‘I know.’

‘You want my cum.’

I feel a growl rippling up my throat, and for a moment I’m grateful he can’t hear it, but he must sense something because his hand shoots out and presses right up against my chest. The growl immediately turns into a thrymm. I can’t stop myself. There is no greater pleasure, no greater comfort, no greater need than to feel the touch of my VySytheh.

‘Fine,’ he signs after my thrymm starts to fade. He pulls back, his fingers lingering for a moment. ‘But you’ll change your mind.’

‘I won’t.’ I can’t.

He smirks at me, then shrugs. ‘We’ll see.’

It’s a challenge. It charges the air between us, and before I can stop myself, I have him by the throat, pressing him against the seat of the car. His eyes go wide, but he’s not afraid. I scent desire on him. Want. That same need I feel every time I set eyes on him.

Leaning in, I lave my tongue over his neck, over his jaw, taking affection and pleasure the Vyastil way. And then I make my way up to his mouth and give him a very long, desperate, and very human kiss.

By the time we’re in the bedroom with Dante kneeling at Luca’s side, the contract is signed, and there’s no going back. I’ve already received

messages from Davis confirming the identity of Zane Brooks, but currently, the driver is still unidentified.

Davis said in his message that a warrant for Zane had been issued and it won't be long before he's taken into custody. I have a feeling Zane won't give up the name of his co-conspirator, or any information as to what they were doing and why they hurt Luca, which means he'll take the fall.

Everest is devastated and angry, Rathyn is trying to calm him down, and Dante is furious that Luca is still hurt.

It's a good thing he didn't see me before, Luca sends to me.

Yes. But you shouldn't hide your pain.

I'm fine, he sends back. I can feel his scoff.

He's going to notice we're speaking this way, I warn him, and then the connection between us goes quiet. *I must speak with Rathyn for a moment. I will be back.*

I know the brothers need some time together, so I beckon Rathyn onto the balcony while Everest paces and makes frantic phone calls in an attempt to find his friend, though I doubt he will. Not yet, anyway.

"I hope Everest recovers from this betrayal," I say once Rathyn and I are alone.

He nods once. "Yes. You are certain it was him?"

"I am. It is…unfortunate."

"I've suspected him for some time," Rathyn says. "My Everest has confessed that Zane's parents belong to one of the fringe groups who have protested the clinic, the portals, and the presence of Vyastil in town. I was afraid it went deeper than just the protests."

I digest this information, but I'm not surprised by it. I understand the human hatred of us. How they feel used and coerced into things they don't want to participate in. Vyastil do not understand pleasure—not really. We have not for centuries. Not the way humans do.

But any Vyastil who is still pretending they don't understand intimacy is lying to themselves. And to others.

We won't be able to keep up that excuse forever.

"What is the plan?" Rathyn asks.

I glance up at the sky. I love the human world at night. We cannot see stars from Erethar. Our universe exists in another realm, and our atmosphere is too thick and most stars are too far away for us to see with the naked eye.

This is a sea of lights that I cannot get enough of, and it pains me that I will be giving them up for a long while.

"I have taken Luca on as a companion."

Rathyn makes a startled noise. "I don't understand. Your former human—"

"Yes." I don't want to invoke Kori's name here. Not when Luca is so different from him. When he's so much more. "But it's the only way to protect Luca. If my suspicions are right, then he is in danger here, and I don't think there's anywhere else we can take him that he'll be safe from these rebellious humans."

Rathyn growls deep in his chest. "Dante will not be pleased."

"No, but he will have to understand the choice that my—that *Luca*—made." I nearly slipped, and the way Rathyn's eyes fix on my face, I can tell he heard it. But he does not draw attention to it.

It is a kindness from him I don't expect.

"He is aware of what he must do? Of how he must present himself in front of others at the capital?" Rathyn asks. "Of what Jyrion might ask him to do in front of a room full of strangers?"

"I have given him as much information as I can. Whether he will comply remains to be seen. But at the moment, this is all we can do."

Rathyn nods again. "Then please let him know I will ensure he spends time with Everest whenever we're given leave to be on Erethar for extended periods."

"Thank you," I tell him.

He leans in to press his forehead against mine, and then I feel a familiar tug. Luca needs me, and it takes no effort at all to head back into the room and be by his side as he tries to get Dante to understand why he made the choice he did.

It all feels like a disaster, but I have to trust that for the first time in a while, I'm doing the right thing.

OceanofPDF.com

twelve

LUCA

I'VE NEVER BEEN through a portal before, so it's scary from the moment Eissa and I step up to it. My brother said it's loud, like a low hum, and he put my hand to his throat, and I felt the vibrations there as he mimicked it.

I feel the same things right now beneath my bare feet.

I'm clothed in nothing but the sheer tunic Everest left for me, and it leaves nothing to the imagination. When Eissa told me I needed to wear this as his companion, I scoffed, but then I remembered the five cum deposits and how unwilling he was to negotiate on allowing himself the pleasure.

So I put it on and wore it as confidently as I could.

My body is not fully healed, still bruised, battered, and aching, but I feel much better than I was. I don't think anything is broken anymore, and the dizzy spells I was getting before we left have finally dissipated. The only thing hanging heavy on my shoulders is the fact that I'm leaving my family behind.

I didn't get the chance to say goodbye to anyone except for Dante, and while I did my best to put on a brave face, I'm not sure I can do this. Without any idea about when I'll be able to return home and see them, I feel fear for the first time in a very long time.

But I am going to do my best to make myself useful here. And if I can't make myself useful, then I will do everything in my power to make myself wanted. It's not like Eissa can really hide it from me. Not anymore.

I see the way he looks at me.

Or the way he tries not to.

Right now, his eyes are turned away, his ears fluttering as we stand side by side, but I catch him eyeing me in his periphery. I tug on the necklace around my neck, and the chain that extends down brushes against my stomach.

On the end is a large ring, but there's nothing on it, and I wonder what it's for. When I asked, Eissa didn't explain. But the flutter of his ears and the tightening of his tail told me I would probably soon find out.

'Are you afraid?' he asks as he activates the portal, and I scoff, forcing myself to look like I don't care about anything. But then I feel the pressure of his tail touching my lower back, and I glance down, seeing his hand extended toward me.

I stare at it long and hard, telling myself not to touch him, that it would be a detriment to my mental health, but then he signs, 'For your safety.'

That makes my heart jump in my chest.

'Are portals dangerous?' I ask, and Eissa shakes his head.

'No. Humans and Vyastil travel through them all the time. They can just be…disorienting.'

The sign he uses for that is different than what I'd pick, but I can tell what he means by the movement of his lips.

I turn my gaze away and extend my hand.

It takes a moment before he moves, and then I feel it—his soft skin against mine, the brush of his thumb against the back of my hand. There's a slight movement in his skin, a whisper of a thing, and then it's gone.

His fingers curl around mine.

I swallow nervously and hear him in my head.

It is okay, my Luca. It is safe.

I am not yours.

I flip him off in my mind, and I can feel the amusement emanate from him. I don't like that, not at all. But then he's stepping forward, and that leaves me in a rush to follow. Tingling tears through my body, my ears popping as I step through. It's cold and then hot and then something spins, and I fall forward before I even know I've moved.

And now, I'm in his arms, my stomach twisting, nausea moving up my throat. I heave and feel his tail wrap around me protectively. I want to move away from him, but the world is still spinning.

Then something presses against my lips.

It's that herb again. Zitha.

I don't refuse it, letting the bitter taste dissolve on my tongue. I feel the rush of comfort as it hits my system, and peace moves through my body. My roiling stomach settles, and the dizziness dissipates.

Standing up straight, I step away from him, and my eyes finally take it all in.

I've heard from Dante what Erethar looks like. The way he used classifiers to describe it…it was almost like I was there, touching it, tasting it on the edges of my tongue. It's crisp and light and floral, and I swear air moves through my lungs so much easier.

I glance around, seeing the large purple trees bursting up from the ground, blue and silver leaves waving in the breeze. The bright orange sky shines in the background, several moons hanging on the horizon. I see a creature float past, its long, sharp amber-and-jade wings fluttering as it soars, like a gemstone in the sky.

It twists and dips, a long tongue flicking out and catching something from one of the trees.

I inhale deeply again, steadying my hands when something deep and earthy hits my nose. It's warm and tight, like the feel of a mother's hug when you're sick or absent for too long.

'This is where you live?' I manage to ask.

'Yes. Well…' he hesitates, almost like he's nervous. His ears flicker, and he gestures in front of me. 'My house is just up there.'

I glance down at the gray rocks beneath my feet, seeing one move and scurry to the other side. I jump and feel Eissa's amusement drift off him. Only this time it doesn't annoy me. I'm too overwhelmed by it all to be anything other than amazed.

I have no idea why he lives on Earth when he can live here.

'No,' Eissa says, his hands lifting in that beautiful dance they do. 'It is beautiful, but Earth is more…free.'

I don't know what he means, but I am too distracted by what I see as we continue to traverse the path. There are bright flowers popping up from the ground, roots clinging to the ground like fingers digging into the earth. And then I see it: the petals changing colors.

I gasp, almost stumbling as I stop to take it in.

'That is so cool.'

‘Yes, but come. You are still not fully recovered, and you need to rest.’

I don’t want to rest. I want to explore, but Eissa’s right. I’m still exhausted from the beating my body took, and while I did heal quite nicely, I can still feel the weakness in my bones.

We turn a corner, and I see a structure sitting before us made of something that isn’t like the concrete we have on Earth. It’s strong, and shines in the light, almost iridescent, like geodes or gemstones. The orange of the sky hits it as we move, and it almost glows. As we get closer, I can practically feel the vibration of it humming beneath my feet, like the feel of someone’s chest as they sing.

The roof is pointed, almost like a witch’s hat, the door not rectangular, but hinging on just one point, like a triangle. There are large what I think are windows until we get closer and I see that there is no glass, just open air, with a soft film floating around it. It looks like a fog or mist. I can’t help but reach out as we pass, and my hand touches it.

It’s freezing, and I draw my hand back, curling my fingers into my palm.

‘It is to keep the wind and creatures out while allowing air to come in,’ Eissa explains.

I nod as he pushes against the side of the door and it twists open, like a top tilting on a table. I hold my breath as I stop on the threshold, then I place my foot inside and look around. The first thing I notice is the light. It doesn’t come from torches or some kind of bulb, but the space seems to be illuminated by the gemstones in the walls. I glance upward and see a cone-shaped roof spiraling above me.

I gasp as it gives the illusion of going on forever.

My eyes cross, and I force my gaze back down, taking in the angled walls and the smooth, slick floors. And that’s when I notice it.

The mess. It is not what I was expecting from someone like Eissa. I expected cold and orderly, but what I see here is oddly shaped furniture pushed this way and that, as if something shoved it out of the way on purpose.

I can feel frustration moving off of Eissa as he stalks forward, his body bent as if looking for something. Or someone.

My heart is still racing, and I feel lightheaded, so I lean against something that resembles a table. On it are a few scrolls, a tablet, and I

assume a book from Earth since it's written in English, though I don't recognize the title or the author.

I reach down to pick it up when there's a sudden movement to my right, and my head whips over to see this strange…well, it must be an animal, but it's nothing I've ever seen before. It looks like a cross between a tortoise, an armadillo, and a boulder. I think it peers over at me, but I don't see eyes, just a pair of antennae that swivel like it's feeling me out.

I'm contemplating reaching down to pet it when it bursts forward, and I jump, letting out a small scream as it darts toward me on its six legs. It knocks into what I was leaning against, and I scramble up onto a chair, trying to get out of its way.

But it doesn't follow me. It lumbers forward instead, pushing the table to the other end of the room as if it wants to rearrange the furniture.

Eissa appears at my side, his brow furrowed at the creature. "I told you to stay in your cage, but you never do as you're told," Eissa says and signs, and the antennae on the animal twist this way and that.

It ignores him for a moment, then it headbutts his leg, a long spiked tongue sliding from its mouth and poking at Eissa's skin.

Eissa doesn't seem bothered by this at all. He just reaches down and pats its head, then his gaze moves up to meet mine. 'You do not need to be afraid. This is my pet,' he tells me. 'A kradun.' The word is unfamiliar, spelled swiftly but slow enough that I can catch it and memorize it. 'He's harmless, but he's an awful and stubborn creature who won't leave my furniture alone.'

His words and the despondent way he signs them turn my anxious fear into uncontrollable laughter. I squat down on the chair and hold my stomach as I wheeze. Perfect, controlled Eissa has his place torn apart by a monster boulder tortoise with a spiky tongue and antennae.

It's too good to be true. And absolutely what he deserves. I flop down and let my feet hit the floor again as the kradun ambles over toward me and starts to push my chair.

I let it, feeling the scrape of the legs across the ground.

'So, you just let him do this every day?' I ask as I continue to slide across the floor. It's so fucking weird, and somehow that takes the edge off the heaviness of my being here instead of back home with the people who want me around.

Eissa sags onto his couch, the fibers of it wrapping around him as he does, almost as if to cushion him.

‘Yes. There is nothing I can do to stop him. When I am away too long, I come home to this.’

Finally I hit a wall and the kradun ambles off into a different part of the house, and I can no longer feel the vibrations of its movements under my feet.

‘I have tried to give him away,’ Eissa goes on, ‘and set him loose, but he comes back each time. It seems his presence in my life is non-negotiable.’

The look he gives me…I can’t help but wonder if he’s talking about his kradun, or if he’s talking about me.

Eissa’s eyes meet mine, and something snaps between us. My hands fist the arms of the chair, and my feet push firmly against the floor. I force my gaze away in an attempt to distract myself from his presence, but looking at the little things in the house isn’t helping.

There aren’t many knickknacks, but that’s not really a surprise. The Vyastil I have known like clean lines and sharp features. Every one of them —except maybe Cielo—has been neat and orderly, like a row of soldiers ready to take orders.

This house is different from his neat and crisp Foundry apartment, though, and I wonder if Eissa built it or if it was given to him like this.

A movement in my periphery has me peering to my right, and I see Eissa stand, his tunic billowing out around him. ‘Are you hungry?’

I shrug as my stomach barks. Eissa must hear it because he nods and disappears into another part of the house. It’s a place I haven’t seen yet, and I’m too curious not to follow.

When I turn a corner, I notice a small room, warmer than the rest of the house, with shiny countertops and a fireplace. It’s lit, and he puts something in a pot and hangs it over the blue flames.

‘It is soup. It…’ His hands hesitate as he searches for the words, ‘may resemble chicken noodle on Earth. I do not have the proper human appliances or food that you need to be comfortable here, but as you are now my companion, I will have them delivered as soon as I can.’

The way he’s addressing me is so…formal. He’s deliberately signing without emotion or heart, and it’s clear he doesn’t want to look at me, which pisses me off. The fury is soft at first, then it wells up to a thundering beat in my throat.

He must feel it because he peers over at me, his ears turning down as he takes me in.

He doesn't ask how I am, though, or what's wrong. Instead, he just blinks. Once, twice, and then turns around again. His hands are fisted at his sides, and he must realize I can see them because he tucks them into his tunic.

I don't like being shut out, so I use my voice.

"Eissa."

I've said it before, at night, when I had my hand down my pants, stroking myself to thoughts of him. It's the first time I've said it out loud to him, though.

His head twists and his mouth parts, his tongue flicking out.

'Don't ignore me.'

His eyes narrow.

'Or is this how companions are treated here on Erethar?'

His face shutters and he stands up straighter, looking very much like the Vyastil I met that day in Vegas. Then his hands make an appearance again.

'Companions are treated with the respect they deserve. They are here to serve a purpose, and they know it.'

My nostrils flare. 'But I'm not really your companion, am I?'

His ears flutter, and he tilts his head down. 'No. I suppose not. I will not touch you, will not take you. But there are times that you must act as though I have.'

I almost stand up and laugh in his face. He can go on pretending that he doesn't want me. He can pretend as if nothing happened before, but I know he won't be able to last, so I let my mouth fall into a smirk.

'And where will I sleep as your companion? Do we share a bed?'

The flick of his tail gives him away. 'No. We will sleep separately. I will show you your room and your wardrobe. More will be brought, but for now I have a few tunics that will fit you.'

He turns and storms away, so I follow him up a flight of stairs that's hidden behind a door and come to a short hallway. Two rooms are situated across from each other, and I can tell from the larger, ornate door that it is his.

I think about how it will feel at night as I lie there, knowing he's so close. If he'll hear me when I have a dream where he takes me with his

tongue and his mouth. Will he dip into my head to see it? Will he touch himself too?

I shudder, and he does the same, and though his eyes narrow in a glare, I don't relent. This is the least of what he deserves after toying with me, swearing to never see me again, and then somehow convincing both himself and me that this is the safest option.

Instead of answering the thoughts I know he's listening to, he steps past me and opens the door, showing me the way inside.

Inside is a large plush bed piled high with thick comforters and pillows. It looks so much like a room on Earth, and I wonder how his room differs.

Eissa steps up to a wardrobe and gently pulls the two front doors open. Three sheer tunics are hanging there, just like the one I have on, so I step forward and let my hand brush over the incredibly soft fabric. It's nice. It's a hell of a lot better than jeans and a T-shirt, even if I miss the comforts of home.

I turn my gaze to Eissa and see he hasn't moved. His nostrils flare as if he's scenting me, and when he steps back, I point to the necklace I'm wearing and then drag my tunic up. I show him my bare cock and the small chain that brushes against my abdomen.

'What's this for?'

'The chain is a sign of who you belong to.'

I roll my eyes. 'No. This.' I hold up the end of the chain, the one with the ring attached, and he glances away.

'It is for…adornment.' He signs the word decoration, but I see the English word on his lips and cock my head.

'Do I need to be wearing these now?'

His tail slides up my thigh and tightens. 'You do not need them unless we go out with other companions.'

I step closer to Eissa, and I feel his warm breath against my cheeks. I can feel the caress of his gaze against my bare skin. 'Show me what I'm meant to look like. I want to know.'

His rainbow eyes meet mine, and after a long hesitation, he gives a small nod. Reaching into the wardrobe, he sets a small wooden box on the nightstand. 'I will have some custom-made for you, but…' He flips the lid open and reveals several twined pieces of metal jewelry with gemstones attached.

My cock perks up between my legs.

‘Show me.’

Eissa shakes his head, trying to close the box, but I reach out and fist his tunic, pulling him closer to me and pushing into his head.

Show me, Eissa. I want to see it on me.

His eyes close for a moment and then he steps back, taking the adornment from my hand and kneeling on the ground. The sight of him there does nothing to help the state of my hard cock. When his tail reaches out and tugs my tunic aside, he wets his lips, glancing up at me with his eyes shining.

I want to reach down and thread my fingers through his hair and pull his mouth onto me, but I don’t. I just fist them by my sides and watch as his long fingers pull that thin jeweled string and wrap it around my cock, starting at the base and twining it up the length until the end sits right near my slit.

I don’t know how that’s going to stay on me, but then he reaches around me and pulls something out of the box.

A long, thin piece of metal. Fuck, it’s a *sound*.

I swallow, watching as his tongue wraps around it, wetting it, and then he glances up at me, asking permission.

I can do nothing but send my approval through this weird-as-fuck bond and watch as he pulls my slit open and carefully pushes the bar into me. I feel it move down, entering me, cold and unmoving. My lungs expand and constrict as I fight to find air.

I feel like I’m being edged, a bead of precum settling on the tip of me as the bar finally seats all the way inside of me and Eissa secures the end of the adornment on it. I see the drop of cum my cock released on the side of his finger, and I don’t miss when he rubs it against his lips, tasting me.

Then his chest heaves, inhaling me before leaning back and standing up. I see the tremor move through him as he takes me in, his tail still holding my tunic back, exposing my bejeweled cock. It twitches, and I bite back a groan.

I have to admit it looks fucking good and feels even better.

I lift a trembling hand and ask, ‘So, companions just walk around with this on their dicks?’

‘Yes.’

I let out a trembling breath, and Eissa’s skin ripples. ‘Can I come like this?’ The sign for this is explicit, and Eissa has to turn around for a

moment to compose himself.

‘Some can. Now I can take it out…’ He moves to reach for it, but I slap his hand away, and he looks up at me, eyes wide.

‘No. Leave it. I want to wear it.’

Then I reach for my shoulders and peel the tunic off, leaving me completely bare. I can feel the desperation and yearning coming off Eissa in waves, and I give him a smug smile, dragging a hand down my chest as I do.

‘I’m more comfortable naked.’

His tongue runs across his bottom lip, and I cock my head.

‘I’m hungry. I’m going to go eat, and when you finally break…’ I let my hands hesitate a moment, ‘You can eat too.’

And then I force myself to move, to brush past him toward the stairs.

OceanofPDF.com

thirteen

LUCA

EISSA TRIES to get me to put the tunic back on, but I ignore him. Instead, I slip past Eissa's room and wander down the stairs, seeing the furniture pushed into different spots now. The kradun has rearranged it again, but I don't see the creature in the room.

In the kitchen, I can smell the food cooking. My stomach grumbles as I lean against a cool countertop and spread my legs.

Eissa appears a moment later, and he tries not to look, but he can't help himself; his eyes drift across my bare skin as he walks toward the pot sitting over the blue flame. It looks hot.

He looks hot.

Fuck him for looking so good. And fuck him for ignoring me.

I lean back, and because he's staring directly at me, he runs into a chair that's been pushed into the middle of the room.

I let out a small laugh, even though I can feel irritation and frustration pulsing off Eissa. I bite my bottom lip as he moves around the chair, kicking it aside as he heads to the fire. He fumbles with the pot, grabbing it with a long pair of metallic tongs, but when he tries to set it on the counter across from me, he catches sight of me once more—legs spread, cock out—and he tilts it, splashing some of the soup onto the floor.

My breath catches in my chest for a second as the scalding hot liquid only just misses his clawed foot, and I regret doing what I'm doing for a second. But also, I don't.

I want him to look at me like I'm both dangerous and forbidden.

I want him to ache with how much he wants every part of me.

My hand drifts down to run a finger across the chain connecting my necklace to my dick, and Eissa's ears flutter.

'It is not safe for you to do this,' he finally says, his hands much less steady than they usually are when he signs.

I tilt my head and tug on the chain, gasping, making Eissa's skin darken. 'What do you mean? Do what?'

His nostrils flare, and he deliberately doesn't answer me. 'You must eat. You are hungry.'

As he reaches for a bowl, I spread my legs even further, and it slips from his fingers, hitting the counter in what I assume is a crash. He doesn't reach for it right away, and it wobbles for a long moment as his clawed fingers curl into the cold stone, his head bowed as he tries to compose himself.

I don't know why he doesn't just take me. Why he's pretending he doesn't want me. He's not denying that he does. He's just denying himself what I'm willingly offering, and I don't understand it.

So, until I do, I won't let up. It almost feels cruel, but I want to torment him the way he's tormented me all these weeks. I want him to feel the gnawing ache of an unexplained need in his gut. I want him to lose sleep the way he's losing concentration. Then maybe he'll understand that resisting me is pointless and he can end the torment for both of us if he just reaches out and takes.

Finally, Eissa rights himself, reaching for the bowl and dragging it toward the pot of stew.

I tug on my cock again, gasping as I give myself a long, hard stroke.

Eissa's tail tightens, his hand on the ladle trembling, and I can feel the heaviness of his restraint in the air. It would be admirable if it weren't so goddamn frustrating.

Please, he begs softly, but I ignore it.

"No." My voice is harsh, maybe too loud because it makes him stiffen, his shoulders rising and lowering as he breathes. I tug at the chain again.

"*Eissa*." The word comes out a ragged moan in the back of my throat.

And that's when he breaks.

He whips around, his eyes black as he takes two strides and is up against me, one of his hands at my throat, his claws digging into my cheeks

as he tilts my head back, the other on my ass, pulling me against him.

He's so fucking strong, so big. Nothing about him is human, and yet he fits against me like he's always belonged there.

I let out a puff of air, and it hits his lips. His rainbow eyes flicker, his hands tightening against me…and then his lips crash against mine.

It's a hard, angry kiss. His tongue slowly slides down my throat, almost choking me, but I don't resist. He licks up my moan and swallows around it. I feel the flutter of his skin against mine, the tremble in his hand as he holds me steady. His fangs bite at my lips, and his tail slides up the crack of my ass, pushing against my hole.

I groan when he tilts his head, and his tongue pushes down even further, my hands scrambling against him as I fight to breathe. It's only then that he retracts, allowing me to pull in desperate breaths. His lips are curled up in lust, his nostrils flared as he watches me gasp and pant. And just when I've mostly recovered, he kisses me again, tasting me this time, tongue curling around mine, sliding, caressing.

I allow my hands to travel up his arms to his shoulders, touching his pierced ears, and I feel the moan he makes. It moves into my mouth and rumbles around before I swallow it whole.

I'm so hard, I'm dripping. I want more. I want to get off with his mouth around me. I want to feel that tongue wrap around me and tug.

I can feel that he wants that too. He's crumbling more and more with each kiss he gives me.

But before he can get on his knees, Eissa pulls away, his lips wet, his skin flushed purple. He whips his head around, and I glance where he's looking. In front of us, I see the kradun pushing a table across the room, crashing it into a wall before meandering away.

Eissa sags against me, then his hips leave mine, his tail pulling away from my ass. And when his hand loosens on my face, he shakes his head several times, looking almost defeated. In that moment I feel bad for being such a temptation, for being more than he can resist.

But then he turns and walks away, leaving me alone, and I'm angry all over again.

Leaning against the counter that Eissa kissed me against, I eat my weird chicken noodle soup that has no chicken in it. He hasn't returned, and it makes me angrier than I have any right to be. I stare down into the light green liquid in my bowl and bring a spoonful up to my lips, sipping on the broth.

There's some kind of Eretharian vegetable in here that I've never had which tastes a little like kale, but I don't mind it. It satiates my hunger for now. I will have to have some kind of human food eventually, but for now I can tolerate this.

I finish the soup off and set my bowl down before staring at my adorned dick. I should take the jewelry off. To preserve my own sanity, I should cover myself in that sheer tunic he told me I needed to wear.

I don't want to, but I'm not sure it's safe to have something shoved in my dick for hours and hours. In the end, I reluctantly take it off, my cock aching after it's empty, and I walk it back upstairs, setting it in its wooden box.

I'd almost forgotten about the other pieces in there. They're not sounds, but they're just as ornate and probably worn just as intimately. I can't help but wonder where they came from, or how long he's had them.

Who did they belong to before me? Has Eissa ever had a companion before?

I don't think I want to know. Not with how it makes my stomach churn and my skin grow hot. Imagining him with another human sets a raging fire inside my gut because that means he's wanted someone else before. And maybe he didn't resist his last human the way he resists me.

Hell, maybe his last human is the reason he keeps turning me away. That has to be the reason. It would be foolish to think that I was the first one Eissa had ever chosen, and I know I have zero right to feel any type of way about it, but I can't help the ache it causes in the pit of my stomach.

God, what was his other human like?

Was he more attractive than me? More intelligent? Could he hear? Was he closer to the Vyastil definition of perfect?

I don't like the way my mind is spiraling, so I turn to the wardrobe and wrench the doors open. I let my fingers trail over the tunics hanging there. Did these belong to the one who came before me too?

Is the reason he keeps turning me away that he liked the other person better than me?

There’s no point in dwelling on what was—or what might have been. I close the doors and decide to stay naked. I’d rather wear nothing than dress up in someone else’s clothes.

I’m irritated to realize my cock is still half hard in spite of everything. My mind keeps reliving the kiss Eissa gave me against that cool countertop in the kitchen, and I know if I stay in this room any longer, I’m going to touch myself. And that feels too much like letting Eissa win. So I turn away, slamming the bedroom door behind me, and make my way through his oddly shaped house.

I hit the living room, stepping around furniture that the kradun has moved once again, and I can’t help but smile because I know that pisses Eissa off. It’s like a special kind of karma for someone who seems to like order and control.

But I’ve also seen what happens when he snaps. He’s done it each time he’s seen me, almost like I’m the one person who can test the impossible strength he has over his emotions.

If only it lasted. If only wanting me also made him want to stay.

I hope he’s fucking miserable right now.

I eventually find Eissa outside, on his knees, bent over as he tends to some kind of vine-like plant that keeps trying to curl up his arm as he works. It has little tentacles that stick to him like an octopus and bright orange flowers that open and close, almost like it’s speaking to him.

He flicks his tongue at it in disapproval, but it does nothing to stop the plant from continuing its journey up Eissa’s arm.

I can’t help but watch, happy to find that nothing in this house listens to him, not even the wild plants.

I must make a sound at some point, though. He startles, then tries to peel the vine from his arm as his eyes flash up to meet mine. His gaze lingers as he takes me in, his mouth parting as he tries to stand, but he can’t quite manage it without ripping the vine up from the roots.

In the end, he gives up and stays hunched over, his tail wrapped tightly around his waist. The tense moment between us stretches for what feels like an eternity, then he pushes into my mind, and I feel the desperation there.

Put on clothes, Luca. When I don’t move, he adds, *please*.

It’s quiet and begging, but I’m not going to give in. I fold my arms across my chest and widen my stance, my cock hardening at the sight of him. Part of me hates that I have this reaction to him. It would make this

moment so much better if I could pretend like I don't want him just as much, but I can't quite seem to help it.

The vine has now made it up to his shoulder, and those tentacles are sucking on the skin of his neck.

I stare at the plant and feel jealous at the way it's attached itself to him. A low point to be sure, but then again, my life has been a long series of low points in the last year.

I tilt my head and watch as Eissa carefully tries to pluck the plant from him. It's not easy, and I don't offer him any help. Why should I bother? But as I watch his frustration grow and watch the care he's taking not to hurt this possibly sentient vine, something in me starts to break.

'Do you need help?' I ask when another vine starts crawling up his leg.

'I'm fine.' His signs are small, like a murmur, his eyes raking over my body once more. I make sure to run a hand down my abdomen, and I see his chest heave.

The plant is near his ears now, and I can only imagine the irritated noise he's making, though it's obvious he's trying to hide it.

I watch a bit longer as the vine slowly starts to consume him, but considering I don't know the flora of Erethar, I think I should probably do something. It won't help keep me safe if he gets eaten by a carnivorous plant.

I step toward him and hold out a hand as an offer of help. He jerks as I get closer, and when my hands skim across his skin, I see him shudder.

'If I don't help you, this plant is going to murder you,' I sign when he finally looks at me properly.

'It won't,' he answers back, but he also makes no move to stop me as I begin to unwind him from the crawling stalks.

Eissa doesn't move, standing still as I slowly peel the flowers and leaves away, careful so as not to tear them. There are times I want to stop and stare, to run my hands across his body, to make him moan, but I don't. I stay focused, and if I do let my fingers brush against him more than necessary, well, that's what he gets for trying to run away.

When I've finally peeled the vines away from his arm, I kneel down onto the dirt and work on the one wrapped around his leg. It's wound its way up his tunic, and I have to push it up to get the tail end of it.

I half-expect Eissa to stop me, but as my fingers drift up his thigh, he doesn't move. He just stands there, his chin on his chest, his ears fluttering

as I work.

Something in me suddenly feels bold. I push the fabric up farther, wanting to see more of him, all of him, and he doesn't step away.

Instead, his free hand curls into his tunic and bunches it up above his waist. As more of his skin is revealed, I see small lines cascading over him —the skin is thicker and a lighter blue—and I realize that they're scars. My breath hitches in my chest, and I fight the urge to touch them. To ask what happened.

But I'm not distracted by them for long. He pulls his tunic up to his hips, and then I see it. His slit, and the tip of a cockhead trying to push through. I've never seen a Vyastil cock. I had no idea what lies beneath the clothes they wear.

I want to lean forward and brush my lips against it, to suckle on the tip, but I don't. I won't. Not until he's begging me to touch him. I turn my gaze away and peel the last bit of vine from his skin.

When I finally lean back on my haunches, he inhales deeply. I see it in the movement of his chest, in the way his cheeks puff out like he's relieved. Like he's angry it's over.

The fabric drops from his hands, and he steps back, far enough away from the rogue plant that was trying to weave its way around him.

I push myself up onto my feet and brush my knees off, my eyes finding his as I do.

The air is charged, thick with apprehension and tension. I want to lunge at him, to have him stick his tongue back down my throat, but he doesn't move, his clawed feet almost seeming to curl into the ground to keep him steady.

His fingers flex, his claws poking out before retracting. He looks almost nervous.

'What's that plant called?' I ask, not sure what to say to him. I worry that if I let my hands do anything else, they will beg him to take me. And I don't want to beg. I want him to. I want him to take what he wants from me.

'It is a thrassil, an invasive plant that won't die.'

I laugh at that, and his chest heaves again. 'Well, it seemed to like you.'

'They tend to like those that try to eradicate them. They are chaotic.'

'You seem to attract that kind of thing.'

'Yes. Much to my dismay.'

Our eyes clash, and he lets his gaze drag down me once more. ‘Please put on clothes.’

‘Am I a danger if I don’t wear them?’ I glance around. ‘There’s no one around to see me.’

His shoulders sag before he nods. ‘No, most companions are naked with their Vyastil. But for me…for our arrangement…you are a distraction when you are not clothed.’

I watch him, debating whether I should give him some peace, should put some clothes on to make myself less of a temptation, but then I just shake my head.

‘Well, if it’s not breaking the law and it’s what companions do, then I’ll stay naked.’

His tail tightens around him, constricting his waist.

‘I think you need more chaos in your life, Eissa.’ I use the sign name I gave him, and his eyes soften when he sees it.

‘I don’t need your chaos,’ he replies, but I’m already taking a step toward him, my finger brushing against his chest, dragging down his tunic, making him shudder beneath me.

Then I meet his gaze, our lips just inches apart, and I say with my voice, “Yes. You do.”

OceanofPDF.com

fourteen

EISSA

I HAVE NOT HAD proper rest since bringing Luca into my home. Each time I have tried, I find myself drifting into Luca's mind. It sits wide open, especially in his sleep, and it's there I'm drawn into his arms. His clever, perfect fingers find all the tender spots on my body I avoid acknowledging and yet can't help but notice.

The first night I attempted to rest, he was touching himself in his dream, his hand on his cock, his hips arching up as he stroked it. He was sitting at the table, legs spread, balls hanging heavy between his legs. And I stood like a stone across the room, unable to do anything except stare as he gave himself pleasure.

I could feel it as though it were my own, the rushing sensation as his cock jumped and his cum spilled from the tip.

Humans feel so much, and the way his pleasure cascaded up my spine and through my limbs was overwhelming. Have Vyastil ever felt like this? This all-consuming, overwhelming sensation? I did not have this with Kori, though I loved him very much.

But I did not feel him this way.

With Luca, he brings my body to life in a way I did not know was possible. I wake up gasping, pressure at my slit, my hips rocking against my bed, leaking a wet spot on my sheets. It is torturous and undeniable.

I ache for him.

It has been like this for several days, and tonight is no different.

Rolling onto my back, I stare up at the ceiling and reach for his beautiful body, but he's still asleep. He moans in his dream, and I know he's shifting restlessly in his sheets as he brings himself pleasure.

Without me.

Bitterness rises in my throat. I want that hand on his cock to be my mouth. I want the seed he spills to be for me to consume. He is mine—every part of him is mine.

Yours.

He does not know he's sending that to me, so I embrace it. I absorb it, letting it throb in my chest alongside my beating hearts. Gods, this was a mistake, bringing him here. I will never regret saving his life, but I don't know how I will survive it.

I don't know how I will manage to get through these long weeks—maybe even months—without giving in to the temptation of his body, his cock, his cum.

Swinging my legs off the bed, the xinhar clings to me as I move. But I do not stay in its warm embrace. Instead, I shuffle out of my room and pause beside his. Pressing my ear to the door, I hear him moan again—some version of my name, I think. My claws dig into the door, leaving faint marks of want.

My tail lands on the large doorknob, ready to push in. I can smell him here, the scent of his cum. It makes my entire body tingle with need.

I need him.

But then Kori's face flashes before me, and I rear back, the memory of him, distant and yet not faded entirely.

I cannot let what happened to him happen to Luca.

I cannot.

So, I pull back with a small hiss and make my way into the kitchen to refuel my body.

I must make a trip to Earth today. I have work to do, and I must speak with Davis, who should have news by now of Zane and the other unknown human in the car. I must also procure human supplies for Luca because there is still no telling how long he must remain here in order to be safe.

And there is work to be done that I can only accomplish while I'm not under the same roof as Luca. I trust him here in my private sanctuary to be safe. It will be better than bringing him to the capital where he would see the other companions. He is brave, but I don't know if he's ready for that.

I don’t know if *I* am ready for that.

My breath trembles as I exhale, and I do my best to tuck my anxiety deep inside me as I consume my meal for the day, then ensure that the kradun is fed. He’s rearranged all the furniture again, but I’ve come to find comfort in that routine.

“Watch over him,” I say, crouching beside him. I stroke claws along his shell and swiveling antennae. I found him as a hatchling—battered and half-dead—just after I was released from my punishment. It was he and a lone Vyastil that I raised—and as Dhoryn hates me, he wasn’t much comfort to me as my scars healed.

Sometimes I think the only reason I survived that pain of losing Kori was because of the kradun, especially after Dhoryn left. Keeping him alive meant keeping myself alive, and now I owe him everything.

So, I let him recklessly destroy my home.

Scratching under his chin for a moment, I push myself to my feet and head over to the counter. Taking a bit of paper, I scratch out a note for Luca to find—hoping he does before panicking—and then grab my tunic from the back of a chair and slip it over my bare arms and legs.

I will bathe in my capital apartment before slipping through the portal to Earth, and while time here will move slower and Luca will miss me far less than I will miss him, I know leaving him so soon after ripping him from everything he’s ever known is not the right move.

If only I had a choice.

If only I weren’t some pawn in the Vyastil council’s sick game. I know for a fact I only hold a position on the council for the illusion of power. It dawned on me three second-moon cycles ago that they wanted to keep me docile.

Willing.

Silent.

They wanted to ensure I wouldn’t dig too deep into the breeding program or ask why. Why only select Vyastil? And how did the others lose their breeding cocks? What have they actually done to us over the centuries to alter us so?

But realizing what Rathyn found in Everest—seeing it with my own two eyes that the myth of the VySytheh was more than just a story written on ancient walls—shattered every illusion I ever held. And by the time it happened to Rathyn, those illusions were already paper-thin.

Why they stole Kori from me now makes sense. If he and I were given a chance to connect strongly enough to tempt a bond to form, it would ruin the breeding plans.

But it seems ridiculous now. Luca simply existing in the same city is a detriment to their plans.

I must gather enough evidence to expose everything before they learn what happened to me. That is the only truly terrifying thing because I am not ready.

And there are not enough allies to back us up.

Taking a breath, I open the portal to my quarters in the capital and step through. When it closes, I feel the physical distance between myself and Luca like a pain in my side. It’s not agony, but it aches. Sleeping in another room from him is bad enough.

All I want is to be in his bed, between his legs, his hard cock spilling down my throat.

My slit stirs and throbs, and I’m grateful for the tunic that might hide any evidence of my arousal. I can, of course, blame it on my impending rut, but I am several first-moon cycles away from that, and Prince Jyrion would be the first to order an interrogation if he so much as suspected I was up to something.

Glancing out the window, I watch the movement of the capital. All the Vyastil moving about, no leisure time, no pleasure, no purpose other than to serve. They have no idea what it does to a Vyastil to kneel between a human’s legs and take from them.

They have been conditioned, trained, bred to think they feel the way they do because they are less than. That they are closer to animal than person. The cruelty is odd because humans don’t understand what they’re really being asked to do.

The system could be so much better. The exchange is necessary, but must it be like this?

I turn away from the window. There’s no sense in twisting myself into knots over it now. A change will happen, and I can only hope that I’m alive to see it when it does.

I am one of the few allowed to bathe in water drawn from our seas, though it is no more than a trickle coming from the singing stone faucet. The humming is more soothing than washing.

So many Vyastil will never know the unique pleasure of standing under a rainfall of warm water, and it makes me miss Earth more as I use what little of my water allowance I have this cycle to scrub the scent of Luca off me. It creates a deeper ache, and as I towel off, I search for him in my mind.

He's no longer asleep, but he's not in a panic. I would have felt it if he were overwhelmed with fear. No, I catch a glimpse of irritation and…it's something else.

Ah. He is sitting outside with the kradun curled up at his side, watching the falier blooms glow in the shadows of the trees. He's fascinated by our alien world. It's the same sensation I felt when I first set my claws on Earth.

I was terrified, overwhelmed, and unsure we could ever trust humans. That suspicion has never quite gone away, but it's different now. Now, I simply have an understanding that every being capable of vying for power and control can be a monster.

I pull back from Luca before he realizes I'm there and stand in front of my polished glass. My reflection stares back at me, and I blink. I am unchanged since finding my VySytheh. Another Vyastil could look upon my face for hours and never realize I am fundamentally different.

I am who I am: Eissa of the North Hills. Eissa, who raised Rathyn to be a warrior and Dhoryn to be a scholar. Eissa, the Earth liaison—the one who is sometimes far too human for Vyastil liking. Eissa, the imperfect, with pale scars shining against my blue skin.

The elite and the council tolerate me because I cover them. I am too high-ranking for the mines, but if I had been a lesser being, I would have joined so many simply for looking wrong. Yet another thing that must change, though I don't let myself think about that now.

There are too many fragile variables for me to get caught up in details.

Shrugging on my tunic, I tie it carefully around my waist, then step into my sitting room and freeze. I was too caught up in my own head to hear the portal opening, and my hearts jump as I see two beings standing there. One of them conjures up profound relief, the other profound dread.

Rathyn nods his head while Prince Jyrion smirks at me, showing a hint of fang over his lower lip. I quickly remember to bow, and then straighten

my shoulders as Rathyn approaches, tipping his head against mine in greeting.

“What brings you here?” I ask.

Jyrion’s lip curls up in the corner. “I received a report last night that you took on a human companion.”

We have been on Erethar for nearly a first-moon cycle, so I’m grateful that the paperwork was lost in processing for this long. But it was only a matter of time before Jyrion noticed.

“I have. He’s at my cottage,” I say.

Jyrion’s eyes narrow. “And you did not think to introduce him?”

“It was unnecessary, Your Grace,” Rathyn cuts in. “As you well know.”

Jyrion flicks his ears in irritation, but he doesn’t acknowledge Rathyn. That’s not uncommon. Not these days. Not after Rathyn openly defied Jyrion with Everest. We both know the prince is planning some kind of revenge.

He does not tolerate disrespect. Even council-approved disrespect. He was defied by nearly every member, and I know it’s only a matter of time before he finds a way to remove Everest from Rathyn’s care.

Everest will not survive the dungeons, and Rathyn will not survive losing his VySytheh.

We must make our move before that happens.

“I wish to meet him,” Jyrion says after a prolonged silence.

Rathyn’s shoulders tense, but I am not rising to the prince’s bait. “And you shall. He’s adjusting to Erethar at the moment, but he will attend with me at the next gathering at the capital.”

Jyrion gives me a slow up-and-down look, then flicks his ears again, this time a dismissal. “Let’s hope this one goes better than the last.”

The hurt hits me before I have time to hide it from my expression, and that makes Jyrion smile. The cruelty is not lost on me. It’s not lost on Rathyn, who doesn’t know all the details of what Jyrion did.

Watching the Vyastil smile—the one who gave the order for Kori’s last breath and for each striped scar laid on my body—sends a rage through me like I have never known. And it is only my many years honing my control that keeps me from taking my claws and ripping his throat out.

Though I suppose that would be one way to solve our problems. He is the worst of the family. Perhaps if he was gone, we would make progress without discord or violence.

But it’s not worth the risk. Not now. Not with Luca existing as my new, soft, vulnerable spot.

“I expect to see you and your new human soon,” Jyrion says, then he taps his portal key and steps through, closing it before Rathyn can follow.

We both know it’s not safe to speak openly here, so Rathyn simply meets my gaze and inclines his head once. “Will I meet your human?”

“Yes,” I tell him.

My cottage was a gift from the royal family, but since using it, I have ensured it is not observed by them. They believed that destroying my human companion and leaving me in an eternal public shame in the form of scars would keep me in line for the rest of my life.

They think I am broken, and perhaps I am so, but with this logic, there is no reason to observe me there.

“Tomorrow. Bring Everest.”

Rathyn nods once more, steps up, then presses his forehead to mine. “You are brave,” he murmurs in English.

I take comfort in his words because at the moment, I do not feel brave. I feel fury and defeat all at once. I want to believe I can do this—that I can find the allies we need and put an end to the madness the system has created.

But I have never been a particularly strong Vyastil. I am simply…long-lasting.

Rathyn pulls back and turns, opening his own portal and stepping out. Once again I’m alone, and I have two choices ahead of me. I can head to my office on Earth to work on the rest of my research, procure supplies for Luca, and stick to my plan…

Or I can open a portal to my cottage and fall into Luca’s arms, giving in to the hours of temptation he laid upon me over the last several days.

I know what I must do, but for the first time in so long, the want is almost more powerful than my obligation. If the entire fate of my people and Luca’s weren’t resting on my shoulders, my choice might be different. But I know that in order to save him—to protect him—I must do the right thing.

And perhaps when it’s all over, and assuming I survive it, then I will be able to give him exactly what we’re both craving.

Exactly what we both want to live for.

I detest being back on Earth without Luca, but the distance between us allows me to focus on what I need to at the office. I have a small collection of records on a human computer that the Vyastil can't break into.

Right now, I'm logging any suspected bonds between Vyastil and humans, and possibly between Vyastil and other beings as well. I have my eye on Hepyn and Zinni, though I have no proof just yet whether or not their relationship is superficial—born out of survival—or something else.

The human who works with them is involved in some way too, but I am not quite sure how to ask about this. I do not want to disrupt the Vorthex and his underlying rage. My very presence sets them on edge. They know I'm aware of where they came from—that they are escaped mine workers and should be sent back.

But that is something I will never do.

My only real question right now is how Hepyn is surviving. The Vorthex look enough like Vyastil that he can pass as one in the human world, especially since his wings were taken from him. But I know better.

And I know what he needs.

It's why I find myself walking into the shop after finishing my notes, my gaze searching the counter for him. He sees me and immediately snaps something at the human behind the counter that I can't hear before walking through the swinging doors.

I glance down at the human's badge to recall his name. Syl. He offers me a half-friendly smile, but it's filled with caution and a little sass.

"I would like to speak with Hepyn," I say as I lower my head in greeting.

Syl's shoulders straighten, and his jaw goes tight. I have seen this look of determination on Everest's face, and on Dante's. They would give their lives to protect their VySytheh. But surely that cannot be true for Syl.

Vorthex do not have VySytheh.

"Um, why?" he asks.

I keep my shoulders low, a posture of docility, in hopes he'll understand I mean no harm. "I just have a few questions."

"Yeah. No. He's busy," Syl replies, his voice hiding some derision within. He must know about Hepyn if he is being protective, but then again,

I do not fully understand why. He cannot be bonded to him, and from what I saw before, I do not even know if they like one another.

I hunch closer to him. “I do not mean harm. I promise.”

He snorts and rolls his eyes. He is a terrible human employee, but I do not say this. Instead, I murmur, “I wish for their freedom as much as you do.”

“Yeah, whatever, but like I said, I’m the only one available right now. You have to deal with me.”

My tongue darts over my lips, wetting them as Syl stares, those dark eyes behind his glasses taking me in. No matter how long humans are around others from my world, they are still fascinated by our differences. I understand that a little too well. I can’t seem to get enough of Luca’s fragile, human skin, and his short, blunt tongue, or his ridgeless cock.

“I understand. Perhaps you can tell me if he is well.”

Syl’s lips curl down. “What do you mean?” He cocks his head, and I see fire flare in his eyes. “Oh, do you mean, like is he better than when he was in the fucking underground prison your people threw him in?”

My face heats from embarrassment on behalf of my people, but that’s not what I meant. “Did he tell you this?”

Syl’s eyes flick away, and he shrugs. “Might have overheard it, but whatever. It wasn’t cool or nice to do that. Actually, it was shitty to do,” he hisses. “What the fuck is wrong with people…and…you know, monsters?”

I do not know the answer to that question because there is something deeply wrong with the Vyastil, but I do not say this.

“I just know his kind have unique needs. I am simply inquiring as to whether or not his needs have been met. That is all. If he does not get it, he might be in danger.”

Syl pales. “What do you mean danger? Like…”

“Like if he is not tended to, it is likely he will die.”

Sucking in a breath, Syl leans closer to me. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” There’s a faint tremble of fear in his voice now. “How do I help him?”

I take a breath. I’m not sure it’s my place to say. I do not know if humans will react kindly to this.

“His kind need something very specific in order to survive.”

Syl whispers loudly, “Like the Vyastil and cum?”

My mouth softens into something that feels like a smile. “Yes, but at the same time, it is very different. It’s important they have—”

“That’s enough!” Hepyn’s voice booms before I see him. I know if he were able, he would be spreading his wings to shield Syl from me right now. His eyes are blazing bright against his black sclera. “You are interfering in matters that do not concern you.”

“But I am concerned,” I tell him.

We stand there a moment, then he sinks down a bit and lays his hands on the counter. “This is no one’s concern except my own, Liaison,” he says in Eretharian. “This human does not need to understand the Vorthex.”

For a creature who defied his people—who dishonored himself to save another being—he is still very much a Vorthex. I try not to smile at that, but I’m not sure I’m able to help it.

“Perhaps if you explain—”

“No.”

Suddenly a small, pale hand appears, gently touching Hepyn on the arm. Hepyn freezes, his skin going just a little translucent as he tilts his head down.

“You know I hate it when you speak in that language. What’s going on?” Syl asks.

Hepyn’s eyes widen, then he swallows. “This is not your business.”

Syl doesn’t like being brushed off, his hand falling from Hepyn’s arm and curling into a fist at his side.

“It is my fucking business if you’re going to die. I need my fucking job, asshole,” Syl hisses. When he gets no reaction, he turns his gaze to me. “Tell me right fucking now. I want to know what’s going on…for job security.”

“No,” Hepyn warns, baring his fangs.

It takes everything in me not to bare mine back, to growl a melody that would cross continents because I do not take well to being threatened. But the moment is shattered when Zinni appears.

It’s like all the tension evaporates, replaced by something smooth and calm. The sun peeking out after a rainy day.

“Liaison,” Zinni greets me. He’s careful to keep his back away from me so I will not be reminded of what he is missing. It’s only fair he doesn’t trust that I’m not like the others. After all, he has not seen my imperfections

under my tunic. “I do not mean any disrespect, but would you please leave? We must handle this between us.”

I bow my head. “I apologize for causing a commotion. I did not mean any harm.”

Zinni bows his head in reverence as I take a step toward the door. I almost reach it when Zinni calls out for me. “Wait!” I turn and look at him. “Luca?”

My shoulders sag. Thinking about him all day is bad enough. Hearing his name now makes me crave his touch so desperately, it’s almost unbearable. “He is doing well.”

“Will he ever return?” Zinni asks.

“Aelvorn willing.” It’s the only answer I can give. I must solve the problem of whoever wants to hurt Luca, and I must ensure he survives any encounter with Jyrion. Both seem like impossible tasks.

Zinni nods, dismissing me, so I leave the shop, hoping that in the chaos I created, there will be some solution. I do not want Hepyn to lose his life simply because he was too proud to search for what his body requires. And while it is far more…invasive than what the Vyastil need, if he understands there are some humans who would be more than willing to give it, then he will be safe.

Maybe Syl will offer himself. Because despite the way he speaks to Hepyn, I know there is fondness there. He cares more about that Vorthex than his job.

And in that, maybe they can all find some happiness.

The thought makes me smile, but it doesn’t last when my phone begins to ring and I see Davis’s name on the screen. I can allow myself hope for good news, but the feeling in my stomach is too strong for me to believe it will be.

“It’s good to hear from you, my friend. Any news?”

“Zane has been arrested and charged,” he says, not making any small talk, which I appreciate.

My hearts sink. Everest will be destroyed to learn this.

“His hearing is being expedited. The Vyastil leaders want to put a cap on this as quickly as possible. His parents were taken into custody after they got a search warrant for his phone, computer, and apartment. They’re suspected of being high-ranking leaders of the rebellion against monster

occupation. The Breach Network, they call themselves. But as of right now, there's not enough evidence to charge them."

"Hm," I hum, not surprised by any of this.

"In Zane's phone, they uncovered plans for a bombing, and it seems as though that's what Zane was doing when Luca happened upon him. We were also able to uncover a hit put on Luca within their network."

I feel a growl creeping up my chest, but I manage to stop it before it gets too loud. "Were you able to apprehend anyone else?"

"Unfortunately, no. Zane and his parents are refusing to speak. I have it on good authority that Zane will be convicted, and it's only a matter of time before we gather enough on his parents to bring them in and charge them as well. There will be no jury trial, and every judge in the district tends to rule in favor of Vyastil interests."

That is both good and bad for us right now.

"So, Luca is still not safe," I breathe out.

"If he's on Erethar with you now, I wouldn't risk bringing him back to Earth. Not for a while."

"Do we know who was behind the wheel?"

"No, haven't tracked them down yet."

That is not the news I wanted. If we don't get this under control, Luca will be banished to Erethar forever. "Thank you for your help."

Davis sighs. "I wish I had some better news for you, but please rest a little easier knowing we're working on it."

I will not rest easier. Not only am I tasked with trying to take down the system that is ruining Vyastil nature and turning our society into something we may never recognize again, but now we must face the prospect of rebel humans inciting a war before we can make true change that will make coexisting something worth having.

Gods, it's too much.

I can't take it.

I have a lot more work here on Earth, but all I want is to be home. Davis ends the call, so I drop my phone into the pocket of my tunic and turn in the direction of the supermarket.

As the humans so eloquently say, "fuck everything else". I will get Luca everything he needs to survive on Erethar, and although I can't take from him what I want, being in his presence will have to be enough.

I just hope that he will let me, even if I can't give him what he needs.

OceanofPDF.com

fifteen

LUCA

I DON'T THINK the kradun has a name. Or if it does, Eissa didn't tell me what it was. So, I decide to bestow one on him, something simple and earthly. Something that Eissa will come to learn, so when I return home, and we are apart, he will forever have this name on his mind.

I watch as the kradun presses its head into the wall and attempts to move it. And even though it's not successful, it gives its all.

My fingers tap on my lip, and I sign in his general direction. 'You like the name Pete?' I use my voice, calling it out, but the kradun doesn't stop.

Must not like it. Or maybe he's deaf like me and can't hear shit.

But I try again anyway, calling out, "Mort?"

Still nothing.

I go through several names, each met with disregard, until I growl, "Gerald!"

The kradun stops and turns to look at me, its antennae reaching out, almost as if sensing me for the first time.

My heart picks up, and I hold my breath as I say it again. This time the kradun ambles toward me, quickly at first and then slowly, as if it's out of breath. And when it's close enough to me, its head pushes roughly against my leg, making me gasp.

I can't help but reach down and touch its oddly shaped shell.

"Gerald," I say with my voice, and when those strange eyes at the end of the antennae look up at me, I give him a sign name—a G hand shape on

top of a fist.

‘You like that name, don’t you?’

Gerald turns and walks away, disappearing around the corner of the house and leaving me alone once more. My fingers twirl in the tunic that was in that wardrobe. I’m only wearing it because Eissa isn’t here.

As soon as he returns, I’ll be naked again.

I like knowing my bare skin, my cock, and the muscles in my arms and chest are a detriment to him. I want him to miss touching me as much as I miss it.

I stand up and stare out the windows, the ripple effect something I haven’t quite gotten used to. I decide to step outside and get some fresh air, to explore the outside of the small cottage, to see if I can find any of those odd plants or see any more strange creatures.

Plus, Eissa said in the note he left me that as long as I didn’t wander far, I’d be safe.

I may be pissed that he’s gone, but I do understand the fact that I’m in a foreign place, somewhere I don’t fully comprehend. I’m not going to behave recklessly and get myself killed.

I make sure to stick near the cottage, my bare feet hitting the soft ground as I move around it. I see the vine that entangled Eissa and make sure to give it a wide berth as I move around a few trees, their colorful leaves waving in the wind as I pass. In the sky, I can make out the moons of Erethar and remember being in awe last night as I looked out the window to see them shining down on us.

It was glorious. It took my breath away.

In that moment, I felt Eissa, and I sent my appreciation through whatever bond we share. I know he likes to know how I’m feeling, despite not asking me outright. I think he’s too afraid to face me right now.

I think I make him weak.

After sending that through the bond, I felt him tremble before he disappeared, leaving me alone in the cottage again.

I scoffed and then folded my arms across my chest. I tucked myself into my bed and spread my legs before I wrapped my hand around my cock and stroked myself to hardness. I could feel him sneak back in, watching from my mind, so I made sure to send it all over—the lust, the need.

The want.

When I came, I made sure to call out his name in my mind, so he could feel it.

The vibration I felt in my body was not from me.

It was from him.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment and take a deep breath, needing to pull myself out of that memory. It's not going to do me any good out here.

I turn past a ring of life-sized mushrooms and come to an abrupt stop when I see a human leaning against an outcropping of rocks, tunic pushed up to his neck, cock out, and a red haired Vyastil kneeling before him.

I jolt to the right, tucking behind a tree before peeking out, unsure if this person is supposed to be here. I thought Eissa said that companions only spend time in the city, and that we were alone out here. That was the whole point: to keep me safe.

I feel my warm breath hit the back of my hand as I watch the Vyastil suck his companion. And the companion is in pure bliss, his head thrown back, his lips parted in what I'm sure are moans.

God, I'm jealous. I'd love to be the one standing there, Eissa between my legs.

Not that that's going to happen, I think sourly as I watch the human shiver, his hands gripping the rock behind him before slumping forward. The Vyastil doesn't stop, just continues to suckle as the human looks down at him, his hand moving to stroke his monster's hair before it curls into a fist.

I must make a sound because the Vyastil's ears twitch and he pulls off his human's cock and turns to glower in my direction.

My heart skips a beat in my chest, and I turn and run. Deep down I know the Vyastil aren't dangerous. At least, not any more dangerous than humans, but I know a little too well how badly it can go when I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And I also know how possessive Vyastil can get over the humans they consider to be theirs.

My breath catches in my chest, and pain lances up my side as I realize I'm totally lost, but I've made some distance between myself and the couple, so hopefully that matters.

Collapsing against the soft, pink trunk of a tree, I sink down and let my head rest between my knees as I attempt to catch my breath. Eissa's healing

herbs have done wonders, but my insides are still knitting back together, and going for a jog was probably the wrong thing to do.

Luca? Eissa floods my mind with concern.

I'm fine, I shoot back, short and clipped before walling him off. I hate the distance between us, but I'm not in the mood to chat in my head. It's too confusing—a mixture of words, signs, and images. It makes things easier sometimes, but I like my language best.

When I feel him stop pushing to get in, I stretch my legs out, and the moss beneath me almost curls around my calves. A startled noise rumbles against the back of my throat, but I'm not afraid.

Nothing here feels particularly frightening. The air is rich and fragrant, the woods almost comforting in a way that nothing is back home. I rest my head against the tree trunk and stare up at the light coming through the thick, purple leaves.

And then, out of my periphery, I catch movement. My head whips to the side just in time to see a very human face peering around the tree across from me. When it's clear I'm not going to get up, the man takes a step around and offers me an awkward wave.

He's very pretty. White-blond hair and dark blue eyes. He looks like an angel. He's wearing a sheer tunic, and beneath it I can see he has piercings in his nipples, belly button, and one on his cock.

For some reason, I know I'm not in any danger with him.

His Vyastil, on the other hand…I don't know, but I don't see him looming, which is not what I expected.

I give him a nod.

"Hello," I see his lips say.

For a moment I consider doing the *I'm Deaf* pantomime. But while that usually goes well, sometimes it ends up awry, and I'm not in the mood for that. I can voice. Especially when I probably won't see this guy again.

"Hello. Sorry I interrupted you."

His eyes go wide, and his head tilts to the side. He takes a couple of steps closer, and I can see him even better from here. He has faint freckles across his very pale skin—a lot like mine, but they're almost auburn instead of the rich brown I have.

He wets his mouth. "Are you Russian?"

I can read that perfectly off his lips only because I get that a lot. When people don't clock my Deaf accent, they notice what I picked up from my

speech therapist who was from Ukraine—and most people can't tell the difference.

I shake my head. "No. Sorry."

He blinks again, then suddenly raises his hands. 'Wait. Your accent. You Deaf?' he asks in ASL. His signs are fluid—loose the way native signers are—not as formal and stiff as someone who learned it in a classroom.

'Yes. You?'

'No.' He hesitates, then spells, 'SODA.'

Ah. He has a Deaf sibling. That makes total sense. Hearing parents of Deaf kids rarely learn enough to be fluent, but their siblings usually pick it up like it's their first language.

'Who?' I can't help but ask. Nosy-me, but if he has a Deaf sibling, he'll get it.

He grins. 'Two brothers.' He stops, then his shoulders shake, and I realize he's laughing. 'I can't believe I met a Deaf human while getting a blow job. This is so weird.'

I can't help but grin back. 'Yeah, sorry about that. I didn't think I'd see anyone around. Does your Vyastil live nearby?'

'No. We stay in the capital. Dhoryn,' he spells the name, and it takes me a moment to process it in my head, 'doesn't usually let me out…but I convinced him to take me to the forest today.'

I don't know what that means and want to ask, but he changes the subject before I can press.

'Anyway, my name is Lucie.' He spells it for me, then gives me his sign name.

My eyes widen. 'Lucie? That's different.'

He shrugs. 'Full name Lucius. I like Lucie better. Your name?'

'Luca.'

He grins and bites his plump bottom lip. 'I like that. Names same-same.'

It feels too good to be true, meeting him like this. 'Are you a companion?' I spell the word because I'm not sure how it even translates considering what we are. Part-time cum bank, part-time lover? It's hard to tell.

Lucie's Vyastil looked like he was enjoying himself more than just a transaction to get cum, but I don't want to assume all of them are like Everest and Rathyn. Hell, I'm proof of that.

Eissa could have all the cum he wants, but he won't stop refusing me.

Lucie waves at me when he realizes I've drifted off. 'Are you okay? Is your Vyastil hurting you?'

My eyes go wide. 'No, no. Never. He's on Earth. Big, important business. It's…lonely here.' I hesitate, then ask, 'Does yours hurt you?'

He lifts his hands to answer, but then he freezes, almost like an animal sensing something. And then a second later, the large Vyastil with red hair appears several feet away. He eyes us both, then marches over, a clawed hand landing on Lucie's shoulder.

Lucie stiffens, and his smile slips from his lips, his eyes shuttering. I can almost feel walls going up as his face transforms into something wary and almost cold.

I look up from Lucie's face to Dhoryn's. His dark rainbow eyes are watching me—intimidating, calculating. It's almost like he's waiting for some kind of fight. He doesn't look down at Lucie at all, but he steps in closer, and his tail snakes around Lucie's calf, wrapping around and around until he's clenching his thigh.

He's effectively trapped. Does he think I'm going to take Lucie and run? *Should* I take Lucie and run? I search the human's face, and he gives me a barely-there shake of his head, then his hand moves, just enough to form the sign, 'I'm fine.'

I swallow and allow myself to relax just a fraction. 'I should go.'

I hear a rumble from Dhoryn, and I see his mouth move, but I don't understand him. Lucie turns to say something, then holds up a finger for me to wait. I can't make out much of what he's saying, but I see him form the word Deaf, and then he taps his ear.

Dhoryn's eyes go wide, and he stares at me for a long moment, ears flickering, tail going tight on Lucie's leg. He says something else, and because his fangs are longer, I can't read him the way I can read Eissa.

Lucie turns to me. 'Sorry. He's…curious about you being Deaf.'

'I know he's not curious,' I fire back. 'I know the Vyastil hate what they think are imperfections.' I recall a little too vividly the way both Eissa and Rathyn spoke about me at Amara's birthday party, and it still stings.

And I know what happens to Vyastil who become imperfect. I've seen the evidence—the pain—on Hepyn and Zinni's faces when they think no one is looking.

Dhoryn says something else, and Lucie sighs, lifting his hands to interpret. ‘He wants to know why you are out here unattended.’

‘I live here.’ My fingers stumble over those words, and I point off in the direction I’m pretty sure I came from. ‘With my companion. Eissa.’

I make sure to fingerspell that slowly, so he understands.

Lucie speaks my signs aloud, and then Dhoryn stiffens and looks almost…frustrated. “Eissa,” he says. I recognize that word all too easily. His eyes fix on me, and I can see tension there. It’s clear he knows my Vyastil, and it’s clear Dhoryn doesn’t like him.

When he says something else, Lucie nods, his face still devoid of all expression as he turns to me to relay what his Vyastil said.

‘He didn’t know Eissa had a new companion.’

Something in me jolts. A *new* companion implies there was an old one. I suspected as much, but it’s a lot to have this stranger confirm it.

‘He apologizes for the inconvenience,’ Lucie continues to interpret. ‘We can’t be gone from the city too long, so we must go. But it was nice to meet you.’ I don’t think that last bit was from Dhoryn.

I nod. ‘Thank you for the conversation. And if you need anything, maybe you can stop in for a visit?’

Lucie nods and lifts his hands to answer, but Dhoryn doesn’t let him. He tugs with his tail, making Lucie stumble after him, and they walk a few steps before the human pauses and turns back. ‘If you’re in the city, find me? We can talk again.’

I nod quickly since Dhoryn isn’t looking, and before he does turn to see what his companion is doing, I hop up and hurry back the way I came.

It’s ridiculous that I’m disappointed to find the cottage empty apart from Gerald, who is busy rearranging the living room again. I can always feel when Eissa’s nearby, but I didn’t get that little rush up my spine as I made my way back through the woods and toward the place I’ll be calling home for who knows how long.

It’s lonely. My chest aches because I’m not used to being on my own like this. I’ve spent years avoiding my own thoughts like the plague,

distracting myself by bothering Dante at the shop, or helping him with contracts and cookies, or hanging out at the gym.

Now it's me…and only me. And I'm starting to wonder if maybe Eissa is doing this on purpose. Maybe I pushed too hard, went too far. I would lay off if I couldn't feel how much he wants me, but his desire to pin me down and swallow my cock is overwhelming to the point I can't be around him without getting hard.

It's like inhaling a constant stream of pheromones, and it's starting to make me feel like I'm losing my mind.

At least with him gone, I can think clearly.

Gerald nudges my leg, and I drop down to a knee, scratching over his shell. I feel a faint rumble coming off him. Is he purring? Do kradun do that? It seems to like it, though, so I drop down to my ass and let him rest against me.

I feel a few more rumbles, and it makes me wonder if they make noise. He looks a bit like a tortoise, but this is just a reminder that I'm not on Earth. I'm not even in my own universe anymore. I stepped through a rip between worlds, and everything I've ever known and everyone I've ever loved is so far away.

And I can't go home.

All because I couldn't keep my nose in my own business.

My chest starts to ache again, and my eyes get a little hot. With some embarrassed horror, I realize that I'm crying. Not that it matters. There's only Gerald here to see it.

Pressing my hands over my face, I let it out. Ugly, heavy sobs rip through my chest. Gerald nudges me a few times, but I can't really do anything to stop the grief crashing through me, and after a moment, he gets bored and wanders off.

For some reason, that helps ease the pain. I don't know why. Maybe it's the fact that he's so unbothered. Maybe it's because I want to give the same amount of fucks he does about anything other than rearranging the couch and tables.

The thought makes me smile despite the tears still rolling down my cheeks, and I swipe them away with an impatient hand as I stand up. I fill my lungs with the sweet, Eretharian air, then roll my shoulders back.

'Enough,' I sign to myself. Because it is. I'm allowed to be pissed about my situation. I'm allowed to want to head back to Earth and find Zane and

clock him square in his fucking mouth for being such an absolute piece of shit.

I'm allowed to miss my friends and my family because they're my everything, and being told I can't see them if I want to live is the worst punishment I can think of.

But I'm not going to let that ruin me. I'm going to get through it with as much patience as I can, and I'm going to figure out whatever the fuck this thing is between Eissa and me while I do.

Shaking off the last of the melancholy, I make my way down the hall and decide to snoop in Eissa's bedroom. He's never let me in there, but now he's gone and can't keep me away.

I push the door open and step inside, feeling his essence. My eyes swivel around the room, taking in a bed that is very different from mine. Mostly because it's covered in some kind of plant, like what is on the sofa. My hand runs over it, and I feel it reach out and coddle me, almost like a hug.

I gently pull my hand away and move over to his wardrobe, letting my fingers graze the carved wood. It's a faint pink, like the trees in the forest, and the stone knobs produce a slight vibration when I touch them.

It's odd.

Leaning down, I press my ear to the wood and touch them again to see if I can pick up any sound, but it's too low for me to be able to hear it.

When I pull the door open, I get a whiff of something very distinctly Eissa. I don't think that Vyastil use cologne, but their scents are very different. Or, at least, Eissa's is. I've never noticed that about Rathyn and Cielo, but I could be blindfolded and pick Eissa out of a crowd.

It's probably something I should give a long, hard think about, but my brain is too tired to really care. Instead, I paw through his linen tunics and eventually pull one out and wrap it around me.

It's pathetic, the way being surrounded by his scent is comforting, but I don't care. It's not like he's here to mock me for it. The fabric is light and also unusual because he's the only Vyastil I know who covers up most of his body.

All the others prefer to be naked if they can, or their tunics are short and sheer.

Hell, even Quilliyn, who seems to have developed a taste for Lycra, wears only gym shorts and nothing else.

It figures my monster would be as bizarre as I am.

I close the wardrobe, glance around one more time, and find nothing of interest, so I let the tunic sleeves fall past my fingers as I head down the hall, coming to a sudden stop when I realize there's a door I never noticed before. It almost blends into the wall. I touch the stone knob, and it vibrates like the wardrobe handles. I let my palm hold it for a moment, then I give it a twist, and to my surprise, it opens.

For some reason, it seems like a space that should be locked, but there's nothing special about it when I take it all in. It's large—a window letting in the natural, hazy Eretharian light. It looks like storage—several trunks stacked against the wall, and what I think is a human bed, though it's turned up on its side and covered by a long sheet.

Something about this room feels heavy. I don't quite know how to explain it. I should probably leave, but I'm bored and lonely, and I know Eissa isn't going to volunteer information, even if I ask.

So, I'm going to have to play spy. Again.

I close the door behind me so Gerald can't come in and start rearranging this space, then walk over to the first trunk to the right of the window. It looks old. Like the stuff people used in movies back in the nineteen-twenties. It has a leather strap over the top, and a buckle holding it shut.

I crouch down next to it and work the clasp. It opens with just a little pressure at the seam. Inside is a pile of human clothes. Jeans, T-shirts, a couple of mesh crop tops that I haven't seen in at least a decade at the clubs.

This must belong to him—the mysterious human who came before me. The one who likely made Eissa as reluctant to give in to me as he has been.

Everything smells a little like stale air and something else. Something I recognize but I can't put my finger on. I dig around a little more, but there's only a pair of shoes and then—wrapped in a pair of boxers—a bottle of something.

Cologne, I realize as I unravel it. It's a tiny, opaque bottle with a logo I've only seen on retro nineties Instagram posts. CK One. Something inside me shifts—a hard jolt because I had just graduated high school when the portals were first announced to the public.

And okay, maybe this person—this human who had once belonged to Eissa—was just really into vintage things, but I'm starting to think not. I'm starting to think what I know about the portals, the Vyastil, and human involvement is way off.

I take a breath and move to the next trunk. Inside is more clothing—coats and hoodies. I can't really date them, but beneath the pile this time is a blue folder. I flip open the top, and sitting in the little pocket is a stack of photos.

My eyes immediately fix on the person center frame in all of them. He has dark hair, honey-brown eyes with a dark ring around his irises, a full smile, and dimples in each cheek.

He's pretty in a way that I'm not. Delicate, kind of femme in his crop tops and the way he poses with his leg up and his hip out. He seems happy in every single one of the images. There's one of him with people at the beach—I recognize the wooden fencing at the lake near the spot my friends and I always used to go to drink when my parents thought I was at a sleepover.

There are a couple of him hiking, one of him outside a club which is blurry, but his smile is easy to see from miles away.

He looked like he had a full, rich life, and I can't help but wonder how he got into this. And when.

Was he stolen?

Was he in trouble, forced into this like I was, in order to protect his life?

A jolt hits me in the center of my chest, and it takes a moment to realize it's anger. And it isn't mine. It's Eissa's. When I turn my head, I realize he's standing in the doorway. His eyes are blazing, ears pulled back, and his claws are elongated further than I've ever seen them.

I swear they slice into his skin when he lifts his hands to sign, 'This room is not for you.'

A part of me is scared. His fangs are long and digging into his lower lip, and I'm keenly aware that he could rip into my neck and I'd bleed out, and no one would ever find out the truth.

He must read that thought because suddenly he looks smaller. His shoulders hunch, and I see him swallow thickly. 'I would never hurt you.'

I feel his pain—that I'd ever assume he'd hurt me. Not after everything he's risked to bring me here and keep me safe. But it's another moment of profound realization that we are different.

He's a Vyastil.

I am not.

'Who?' I ask, holding up the photo.

Eissa hesitates, then crosses the room. I feel the heavy thud of his clawed feet as he moves toward me, and his fingers gently pluck the photo from my hands. He stares down at it for a long time, then his arm reaches past me and drops it back into the trunk.

It closes with a thud I can feel in my chest, and I watch as he locks it up, takes the other trunk full of clothes, and sets it on top. It's almost like he's trying to keep the memories trapped.

When he makes no move to explain, I grab his arm, and he jolts. The contact between us is intense. Heat and want roll through me, coming from my own desire, but also from his.

I expect him to rip himself away and put distance between us, but all he does is stare at my hand.

After a short forever, I take pity on him and let go, but only to ask, 'You're not going to tell me, are you?'

His hands lift, then fall to his sides, then lift again. His fingers aren't trembling, but I can see the effort it takes him to reply. 'Not today.'

And then he turns and walks away, leaving me in the room with the knowledge that while he has me here in his space, I'm not welcome everywhere.

OceanofPDF.com

sixteen

LUCA

IT BOTHERS me more than I can articulate—the feeling of being present and yet unwelcome. It lingers in my bones, making an itch form under my skin, sinking deep into my muscles.

I want to work out, go to the gym, chat with Deaf friends, but I'm alone in this other world. Isolated.

It makes me angry. With Zane for being a shit, with Dante for giving in so easily, with Eissa for suggesting this as a solution in the first place.

But most of all, I'm angry with myself. For not minding my own business, for once again getting involved in something that never concerned me in the first place. And now here I am. In a strange world with a… creature who wants me and yet will never have me. Who watches me and yet never touches.

It's infuriating.

My mind goes to the human I met while wandering around Eissa's place. How open he was, how alive. I want to meet with him again, to find a friend here on Erethar. But I don't know if that's possible. The way that Vyastil curled his tail around Lucie's thigh, pulling him into his body… possessing him, owning him.

Eissa has done that once or twice, but always pulled away after. He's made it known that taking my body, sucking my cock, isn't what he really wants, despite me feeling his yearning when I walk into a room, or when I merely look his way.

But he never does anything more than spy, prodding into those places in my skull that make me ache for more.

I'm fairly certain the human things I found in the other room have something to do with the way he hides himself from me, but I know he won't tell me more than he's willing to give. And right now, he's given me nothing.

It's been at least two days of sitting alone in my room, watching the moons brighten and dim, watching the purple trees sway through the oddly shaped windows before I crack.

The night is warm, the air far too sweet. I can feel the faint thud of the kradun moving furniture below me.

And worse, I can feel Eissa in the room beside mine, his body pacing back and forth. I can feel that deep-seated sadness and loneliness from him pushing through my mind. It's not mine. I know that. It's deeper, more profound. The house is small, but the distance between us is gaping, wide, unfathomable. I want to crawl into his bed, slide my arms around him, and tuck my face into his neck.

To rage at him and scream.

To curl my hand around my cock and tug.

I turn onto my stomach and rut against the mattress before sighing loudly and sitting up in bed.

I haven't been sleeping well, my mind flitting from one thought to another. And they're not all about the Vyastil in the room opposite mine.

No, they are about my brother, Cielo, my parents, and my job. Or what I had of one anyway. I'm sure Everest is going to step in and take over the parts of my brother's business that I managed. Once again, I'm disposable. And as much as I know this isn't truly the case, it feels like it in this moment. Especially being so far away.

In another world. Literally.

I twist in bed, the sheets tightening around my feet and calves. I kick them off, feeling the slight puff of air as I do it. My eyes blink open and shut as I try desperately to fall back asleep. But it's impossible.

Everything right now seems insurmountable.

It's because when I'm alone in the dark, my body and mind not otherwise occupied, I can feel him the strongest.

Fuck him.

Fuck him for bringing me here, for kissing me like he needed me back in Vegas and again in his small little kitchen. And then both times, discarding me like I was nothing to him. Worthless.

My fingers curl into my palm, the nails biting into my skin.

The anger coupled with the intense feeling of loneliness is what has me pushing myself to my feet and striding to the door. I wonder if it makes a noise as I pull it open because I can feel Eissa stiffen, his words trying to push into my mind, telling me to stay in bed. But I don't listen to him.

I close that part of myself off to him. For now at least. The past two days I've let him in more than I care to admit, to let him feel and experience everything along with me—the frustrations, the anger, the lust.

It's all been from a safe distance, the two of us never in the same room when I do it.

But right now, I want him to see me when he feels it. I want him to really fucking look at me.

My hand twists the knob to his room, and I fling it open, Eissa coming to stop in the middle of the small space, his tunic fluttering around his ankles as he stares at me. I'm naked. I didn't bother putting on clothes. In fact, I haven't bothered to clothe myself since he arrived with some of my things. I just stuffed them in that wardrobe and strode around nude.

Not that he's around to see me, though. He's made himself scarce.

Except he's here now, and he's looking, his eyes trying not to move across my body but unable to help themselves. I feel pride well up in me and then resentment. Mostly for him, but also some for myself. For wanting his approval despite it all.

'What do you need?' he asks, his signs far too formal for my liking. It makes me feel small and out of place, just like I have my whole life.

'What do you think?' I respond, my words clipped and stiff.

His lips thin and his tail wraps around his upper arm, just the end, just tight enough that I feel like he's trying to restrain himself from reaching out to touch me.

I widen my stance, my cock growing hard in front of him. His eyes don't move. They bore into mine.

'Go on, watch. I know you want to.' He blinks and then looks away at the wall.

I hate it, so I shove the thought at him as hard as possible. The wince on his face tells me that it's been received.

My hands curl, and I step toward him, needing his eyes to communicate.

‘I can’t talk to you when you won’t fucking look at me.’ I get far too close, my hands in his face.

His gaze slides to mine, and I feel the intensity of it. Can feel his breath hit my fingers.

‘What do you need?’ he asks again, and I slap at his hands, frustrated by the way he keeps repeating himself. Cold. Calculating.

‘You spy on me all fucking day. You fucking know exactly what I need.’

He swallows heavily, then turns his gaze away from me once more. His large, clawed feet try to move back, but I follow, crowding him, forcing him to face me.

‘Admit,’ I demand.

His breath deepens, his ears fluttering.

I want to reach out and grab his face, to force him to look at me, but I don’t. For some reason, I want him to be the one to touch me. I want to feel him break.

‘What do you need?’ he asks again, his signs clipped, a slight tremble in his wrists as he moves.

‘Tell me. I want you to say it.’

He inhales, and then his rainbow eyes hit mine. I feel it like a punch to my gut, the despondency, the isolation, the agony I’ve been through since meeting him and more so since arriving here on Erethar.

My arms wrap around my torso, and I bend forward, trying to keep the agonized sound I want to make inside. My teeth sink into my bottom lip, and I groan as his hands move.

‘I don’t want to make it worse.’ My brow furrows in anger. ‘I don’t want to add to any of this…’

The wave of sadness pulses through me, and I lose the ability to breathe. It’s not me any longer. It’s him. I feel him.

Everything. The fear, the anguish. It tangles around my ribcage and tightens.

‘Stop,’ I manage to sign when I can’t take any more. It’s just a flick of my hand toward him, but it’s enough.

And then it’s silent, like all of the air has been sucked out of the room. My lungs fill with a deep inhale, and I stand, feeling jittery, like I just came out of the other side of a panic attack. My skin is cold, and my arms feel heavy.

I want to curl up and sleep.

But I don't want to do any of that alone.

'What do you need?' he asks me again, and this time my shoulders sag.

'I want to sleep with you. Just for tonight. I miss my family. I miss my friends. I'm tired of being alone…' My hands waver, then I add, 'and so are you.' Because he is. When he's not careful, that feeling comes off him in tidal waves.

I expect him to deny me, to turn me away, but instead, he moves toward the bed, his hand running along the cushioning plant he sleeps on. It reaches toward him, cradling his hand.

'Sleep and nothing more,' he replies, and my heavy legs carry me forward, the plant curling around me. Then he places a sheet over me, cool and comforting. This is like no fabric made on Earth. It's not what's on my bed.

Did the man in that picture in that hidden room sleep between the sheets I'm using? Was this his space too?

Eissa must feel what I am because his eyes are dark now, his gaze shuttered.

I wait for him to leave me once more, to sequester himself somewhere in this house, but instead, he tucks me in and then lowers himself down next to me, his large body pressed against mine.

I stiffen, unsure of what to do.

'No,' he signs, the motion small between us. 'After…'

Him. The word rushes into my head along with his image, but it only lasts a second.

I feel him shudder. 'They gave me this place as a gift.'

The sign is too general. *They*. I have no idea who that could be, or what that means. But I can tell from both the feelings pouring off him and the stiffness in his body that he's not going to tell me anything else. He's watching me in his periphery, and even with my keen, Deaf eyes, I know he sees better than me, so I let him watch my hands fall to my chest.

The moment settles between us, and after what feels like a short forever, his body begins to relax. I don't know if he'll sleep. Maybe he'll sit up and watch me. Maybe he'll wait until I'm out before leaving me again.

The thought sends a hollow ache burning in the center of my chest, and it almost makes it hard to breathe. I really do miss home. I miss my brother and Cielo. I miss my cousins. My nonna. My dad. My mom.

That last one has my eyes burning because if anyone would know what to say right now, it would be her. I swallow back tears because I don't want Eissa to see them, but it's a Herculean task to get it done because all I want right now is to roll over and scream-sob into my pillow.

Fuck, maybe I should go back to my room.

I don't get the chance, though. Eissa breaks before I do, and he rolls toward me, sliding his arm across my chest. He parts his legs and uses his clawed fingers to curl around my knee and slide my calf between his thighs before they close down around me. The weight of him is intense as I wrap my hands around his back.

He's so fucking huge, and I'm very much not used to feeling so small. But in this moment, I love it. My hands explore lower, my fingers tracing where his tail meets his back, and I feel his chest rumble with a growl.

After a tense moment, his tail shifts, wrapping around me and bumping up my spine. The end rests against the nape of my neck, and I realize he's cradling me. The urge to cry rises in my throat again, but before I can embarrass myself and let go, I feel another rumble, but it's not a growl.

It's something else. A rhythmic purring, almost like a cat. My fingers creep up, landing against the middle of his chest, and he stiffens for a second before his fingers curl around my wrist, and he guides them to his throat where I can feel that rumble.

Oh.

He *is* purring.

My eyes go wide as I glance up at him, but all I can see is the wide, blue expanse of his throat, and his gently pointed chin. He's so…alien. So different. So inhuman. And I can't help but want every inch of him.

The purring gets stronger, and his grip on me tightens, and I realize my mind is too open. Too vulnerable. But I don't know how to stop it. I'm so lonely and so fucking sad, and the only person who can make it stop has rejected me at every turn.

I understand his hurt, but I'm not sure he realizes how his pain has been killing me, the death by a thousand tiny cuts. And I will only bleed harder when he inevitably leaves me here in this bed, by myself, just like always.

Eissa's chest expands as he draws in a huge breath, and when he exhales, his arms and tail pull me even tighter against his chest.

I won't leave. The words erupt in my head, somewhere between the meaning of them and the sound I can only hear with him. *I will stay and*

keep you safe as you sleep.

Don't lie to me again, I send back.

He doesn't send words or pictures this time. No, the next thing I receive is a feeling—a vow. He means it. He won't let me go.

I'm not sure I'm willing to believe him, but in this moment, I'm too tired to fight. So, I let my eyes close and finally edge toward sleep, wrapped tightly in his arms.

OceanofPDF.com

seventeen

EISSA

I AM...DRIFTING. There is a warm body on my chest, and a contentment I am unused to. It is entirely alien. Entirely unexpected.

And then my eyes open and I see unfamiliar ones staring at me. Except they are not unfamiliar. They are simply…older. Just like the soft curls, and the sharp jawline, and the overly white, blunt, straight human teeth exposed by a smile.

"Eissa."

It is not Luca's voice. It is a ghost. An echo. A memory.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Vyastil do not dream, so I know this isn't real. It cannot be. But when his hand touches my cheek, there is warmth there.

"How are you here, Kori?" I don't say *my* Kori, because he was never truly mine. I never felt the need to claim him the way I do Luca. But I did care for him in a way I never experienced before.

His eyes fix on mine. "What are we doing today? Do you have council meetings? If you take me, I promise to be good."

Those words…how often he spoke them.

"No." My voice is a raspy whisper.

His eyes fill with tears. "Why don't you trust me?"

This conversation…it's not a dream. It's a memory. Those words unlocked my tongue, and I told him things no human had any business

knowing. And then they took him from me as though they knew he was my weakness.

I blink, and he's on his knees, bleeding from his nose and his mouth. I blink, and he's looking at me with reddened eyes and betrayal on his face. I blink, and he's blaming me, even as they put me in chains.

I am responsible for his death. I whispered secrets into his ear, and they ended his life, and all for what? My eyes are hot with unshed tears, and as I try to close my hands around Kori, suddenly there's nothing but air.

Why is this happening now? Why must I feel this all over again? What could possibly be the point when—

'Eissa…'

My name is not spoken aloud. It erupts in my head—more meaning than sound. Not just what I am called, but something else. Something important.

Bonded.

VySytheh.

My Luca.

OceanofPDF.com

eighteen

EISSA

I WAKE WITH A GASP, my breath hitching in my chest as a roll of anxiety ripples through me. My hearts are beating out of sync, and the only thing keeping me grounded to the bed is the weight of Luca's body pinning me down.

It is nowhere near morning, but I can feel the moons are low on the horizon. Luca has moved completely on top of me, his body stretched against mine, and if it were not for that very thing, I might have torn the mattress to shreds with my claws as I attempted to shake myself out of the old memory.

But my Luca is here. He is pressed against me, his single, fragile human heart beating against my chest, and that alone calms me. The memory begins to fade, along with all the pain that comes with thinking about Kori. Luca has questions about him, and he will want answers soon, but for now, I will avoid them in favor of this.

Of holding him. Of touching him.

It's the worst kind of torture imaginable. Because here I can feel him, can smell him. I can sense every part of him.

He is sleeping soundly, but I know he is dreaming of me. Of what he wants me to do to him. Of what he wants to do to me. It has made the urge to rut him, to breed him, almost painful.

I know my time is coming, that there will be nothing I can do to stop it when it does, but I want to protect him from it. From what my body could

do to his.

Even the idea of it, of his hole opening up and swallowing me entirely, makes something inside of me heat in a way I have never felt before.

He grunts and twists, his hard cock pushing against my stomach as he tries to get comfortable. He would be better off lying in the bed beside me, but he made his way up onto me while sleeping, and I did not have the hearts to push him from me.

So I let him, unable to deny this.

And it is excruciating. The kind of thing I have never felt. A desire to have but unable to give in. To want to take, but knowing it would result in something far worse than death.

It was never like that with Kori. It was never this soft, this tender. It was always a give and take—something he wanted for something I wanted. Luca has often presented it this way, but that's not how he feels deep down. He has tried to hide his innermost thoughts from me, but he can't.

We are bonded, connected. It takes so little prodding to slip into his mind and sift through everything he's been thinking since we met. And he wants me. He wants me as I am: a scarred, lonely, sad monster.

Every fiber of my being wants to give in. Every inch of me wants to pin him to the wall by his throat, sink my fangs into his pretty neck, and make him mine forever—permanently bonded and bitten.

I can't, of course. Not yet. Not until I figure out if the rebellion we're slowly building will be able to make a move before the council schedules a time for me to create a new Vyastil. But now that I have my VySytheh, my rut is unpredictable.

I should have had four second-moon cycles to figure out our next step and recruit others who understand that the Royal House and the council must fall in order to make real change for the Vyastil. But now that Luca has touched me, now that I have tasted him, I have lost all control.

My rut could come now. It could come tomorrow. It will not be easily scheduled like they expect. And I'm not sure if the Council will be alerted when it happens, but if they are, I will have to flee with Luca, and my cover will be broken. I will be known for what I am, and without strong leadership in our newborn rebellion, it will fall apart.

I can't risk it.

Not when too much of our future is at stake.

I have to be strong, but each and every moment he is here beside me, infiltrating my mind, tempting me…it is almost too much. I never knew what it was like to have a VySytheh. As much as I loved Kori, I never truly knew something like this. And now I do.

But I cannot have him—this sweet, luscious, tender creature against me.

My human.

Mine.

My clawed fingers touch the skin of his back gently, bumping up his spine. He's so fragile, his human skin, his human bones. I don't want to ever see them broken and torn ever again.

It nearly killed me when I saw him injured as badly as he was.

I felt his pain as if it were my own.

And now I can feel his desire as if it is mine as well. Only it's not just something he's transmitting through the bond. It is not one-sided. No, it is something I feel, something I need, and it is visceral.

His hand slides up my covered chest, brushing over my adorned nipples and up my neck. They only stop when they touch the braid pushed over my shoulder.

He grunts and tugs on it, pleasure sweeping through me as he begins to rock his hips. The motion is clearly involuntary. He's still asleep, and although I'm not peering into his head, I get flashes of his dreams.

In them, we are touching—my hands on his skin, my fangs grazing his neck, then kissing the human way, mouth to mouth. His odd, short, and blunt human tongue pulses against mine, and he moans as I wrap mine around his and…

I pull away from those images, but it doesn't help. His cock is stirring where he's thrusting it against me, and it becomes worse than torture when I catch the first whiff of his cum. It's the thin, clear, early spill that precedes a true orgasm, but it's no less sweet.

My mouth waters and the urge to roll him onto his back and take him deep into my throat is almost impossible to resist.

"Yes."

I startle at the sound of his voice. Luca is by no means a silent person. I did not understand that, with the inability to hear, he would be so noisy, but he vocalizes as he signs—sometimes loud and every bit as bright as his personality.

But he doesn’t speak often. Only when he wants assurance that he’s being heard.

And that is clear now.

Glancing down, I see him peering up at me through his very human eyes. It’s still strange to find the white sclera and the single-colored orb in the center. The iris, humans call it, and the black dot in the center, which provides light and the ability for humans to see.

We do not have this anatomy in our eyes. It is so alien but so beautiful. I reach up, tracing a line over his cheek, imagining for a second I can feel those little spots on his skin.

Freckles, I was told. His sign name, and that is very apt. He has so many dots on his skin, and like everything else about him, they are so pretty. How I lived so long without knowing him is a mystery. How I’ve been able to resist him this long is a miracle.

And that resistance is now being held together by a single thread, weaker than a strand of hair. And when he lifts his head, and his lips meet mine…that thread snaps.

I can’t contain it any longer. My mouth presses against his, a brutal kiss. He moans, his eyes fluttering open as he takes me in. I do not hesitate, my tongue pushing against his, licking, tasting.

He gasps as my fangs brush against his lips, bruising them, and yet I cannot stop. He does not want me to. His hips are thrusting against me, one of his hands tugging on my braid, the other touching my cheek.

Our tongues do not stop their mating dance. *I* cannot stop. My need for him is intense.

My cocks are pushing through my slit—not fully, just the tips. My tail is sliding up his warm body, seeking his hole.

He arches back, wanting to be breached, but he is not wet. He has not had the breeding herb.

And yet he wants it desperately. I have felt it for days now, have tasted his desire, and I want it. Every part of me wants it too.

My tongue, my hands, my tail, my cocks.

I feel them pressing out further, my slit dripping as he continues to thrust against me, making my nails extend, making the urge to bite him grow.

I am not in rut, but I am close. I can feel the need to have him growing more with each passing moment, and Luca must feel how much I want him.

I am in his head, our souls connected.

His lips rip from mine, his arms bracing his body above me. I am unhappy about the loss of his mouth on mine, but the way his cock feels against me, the way he continues to rock his hips back and forth, the way my tail is prodding at his tight opening…

His head falls back, exposing the long line of his throat, and my fangs extend even more, my nails digging into his bare hips.

He lets out a groan, and I know how close he is, how much he needs to come. I cannot waste it.

I roll us over, the sound coming from his mouth one of protest and urgency. I do not make my Luca wait. Instead, I pull his cock between my lips, and I suck.

His hips buck up, and I swallow his immediate release. The taste of it has my cocks pulsing with need, but I know I cannot.

I simply cannot.

So, I continue to suck, wishing he had taken ruenox so I could drink my fill, but this must be enough.

I let my mouth leave him, and I glance up at his heaving body. His arm is thrown over his face, his mouth open with soft gasps.

My head rests against his thigh, and I feel his hand come down and touch the shell of my ear, his fingers massaging the tip. They flutter against his touch, and I want to lie here forever.

And why can I not, a part of me asks. Why can I not have what I want? But I know why. It is too dangerous.

The thought has my cocks retracting, pushing back into my slit, my body stiffening.

I roll off of him, and his hand falls away from me, the gap between us widening. It is lonely here, watching and wanting, always beside what I cannot have.

He must feel it, the change in me, because he enters my mind, a soft flutter of hands, not pushing, but asking. Begging.

Hold me.

I want to, desperately. But holding him is what broke me. I failed to keep myself away. I cannot do that again. When I do not move fast enough, Luca sighs and turns onto his side, pulling the cover over his naked body, hiding him from me. I do not like this but, I understand.

I should get up and leave him, but I do not. Instead, I crawl up to the other side of the bed and watch as he falls asleep once more.

The line of tension between us is less by the time Luca emerges from his slumber. He slept more than most humans do—more than Kori ever did—but I also know that his body is still healing.

I have been putting fresh zitha in his food whenever he allows me to cook for him, but his injuries were so grave, I'm surprised he's as functional as he is. He is strong, my Luca.

He must sense that thought because he's halfway through a loud yawn when he turns and quirks an eyebrow at me. His head tilts to the side as he observes me, then he crosses the room, lifts his hands, and hesitates.

I feel a pulse from him. He wants to touch. I know that I should push him away. It doesn't matter that I gave in last night. I must be careful.

But right now, I want to indulge him a little. In his anger, he let loose all the ways he was suffering, and I could feel the ache of missing his home deep in my chest. I cannot give him what he needs. I cannot give him what he wants.

But I can give him something.

I step into his touch, letting his hands slide up my pecs where they come to rest on the tops of my shoulders. He gives a satisfied hum and turns his face up as though he means to kiss me, but before I can decide if I want to allow that, a heavy force hits him hard enough to knock us both to the ground.

He lets out a soft grunting cry as I catch him and wrap my arms and tail around him. I cushion our fall as my back hits the unforgiving stone.

Luca stares at me for a second, splayed out on my chest, before he turns his head. "Gerald!" he cries angrily.

My brows dip into a frown as he climbs off me, and it's only then I see the kradun toddling off to go rearrange the sitting area. Luca's fingers are snapping at him, but his back is to me so I can't see what he's signing.

When I tap him on the shoulder, he turns and makes a sharp sign I don't recognize.

'Don't know word,' I tell him.

“Gerald,” he repeats aloud.

He keeps saying this human word, but it has no meaning for me. ‘GERALD?’ I spell, then wiggle my finger in question.

He points to the kradun, uses the sign again, then repeats aloud, “Gerald.”

‘His name?’ He nods, and I quickly shake my head and spell, ‘MAYPHE.’

Luca wrinkles one side of his nose, then shakes his head. ‘He doesn’t want. GERALD,’ he spells again, then uses that name sign once more.

I copy him, and he gives me a satisfied grin before brushing off his tunic, then running fingers through his hair. It’s still a bit wild from last night, and I want to fix it myself. I want to pull him into warm, running water and clean every inch of him—first with my tongue, and then with a soapy cloth.

I want to dry him, dress him, then keep him pressed against my body where no one can touch him, his cock buried in my throat, his cum mine to drink as long and as often as I want.

But I do not have that luxury, even if I had the freedom for such things.

After leaving the bed, the first thing I found was a council summons waiting for me. They expect me to bring my new companion to their gathering, and it’s not something I can turn down without arousing suspicion.

Luca waves his hand at me. ‘What’s wrong?’ Such a delicate sign tapped lightly against his chin. He makes a questioning noise in the back of his throat, which makes my insides shiver.

‘I must attend the capital today.’

His face falls, then his eyes go hard. ‘Of course.’

He starts to turn when I realize he’s upset because he thinks I am leaving him again. My hand moves out before I’m consciously aware I’m doing it, and my claws snag his tunic, turning him roughly back to face me.

‘You will join me.’

His eyes widen in surprise, and he points at himself like he doesn’t believe me. ‘Why?’

‘Companions must attend their Vyastil during these gatherings.’ My throat thickens with anxiety and it takes conscious effort to keep my hands steady as I continue to explain. ‘There are certain expectations for companions.’

He rolls his eyes, reminding me that he knows this. I was very thorough when I explained it would not be easy for him. It would not be a quiet vacation deep in the forest where no one would ever bother us. I wield power within the Vyastil society, and considering my past with humans, I am not permitted to keep one in secret.

If I don't want my cover blown, if I don't want to put everything I've been working toward at risk, I must ensure Luca doesn't give me away.

He studies my face for a long moment, then he takes a step forward. 'You're hiding something from me.' I start to shake my head, but he makes a loud, irritated noise. 'Don't lie to me. I can feel it in your thoughts. Something is going on. Tell me.'

Bowing my head, I take a deep breath, then meet his gaze. 'No.'

Luca takes a firm step back. I can feel his offense like a blow to the chest, and for a moment, it steals my breath with how powerful it is. 'Why don't you trust me?'

The words are unexpected, too similar to the words Kori spoke right before everything in my life was turned upside down. I don't mean to react the way I do, but my claws extend, and I bare my fangs before I reel them in.

Luca, however, does not flinch. He does not fear me. He bares his own teeth in response and curls one hand in my tunic, the other lifting into my line of sight. 'Don't growl at me.'

I did not growl. I was close, but I suppose he wouldn't know that without feeling it the way I had him feel my thrymm. I take a deep, calming breath and gently pry his hand from my clothing.

'I am sorry.' My fist moves in a slow circle over my chest.

He licks his lips, then scoffs and takes a step back. 'Because of last night? You regret? I forced you—'

'No.' The word is too easy to sign because it is nothing more than the truth. 'I wanted you. I took you. Tasted you.'

'Then rejected me again.' A faint blush creeps into his cheeks, and he adds, 'Why?'

The why encompasses a thousand questions. Why didn't I hold him after? Why don't I trust him? Why keep myself so distant? Why close myself off? He deserves the answers, but right now, I can't give them.

'There are things happening. Dangerous,' I add.

His brow dips into a deep frown, and I can tell he's trying to figure out if I'm lying or not. I'm careful with my thoughts right now, but I open up a little in hopes he can feel that I am not lying to him.

'I need to protect you.'

From what, he wants to ask. I feel the question battering against the inside of my temple, but he reins it in after a long moment, then bows his head in a nod. 'Ok.'

Those two letters startle me. I was expecting more fight. More argument. More fury. But he gives in and takes another step back.

'What do you need me to do today?'

And that is the question that plagues me. My eyes flick down to his nipples, and my tongue peeks out, wetting my lips. It is something I have put off, but must do.

'I must mark you as my companion,' I sign, waiting for him to ask questions.

'And how do you do that? A tattoo? A bite?'

My hearts beat unevenly in my chest at the suggestion. I would love to mark him in this way, but I cannot.

Not yet, anyway.

Instead, I take a step closer to him and reach out, one of my sharp nails pressing against his nipple.

His eyes follow the movement and his cheeks turn red. 'Oh, I see.'

He does, his mind moving to the ones Everest has—Rathyn's mark.

'It will hurt, but only for a moment, and with the zitha it will heal quickly.'

He swallows, and I hear the click in his throat, then he squares his shoulders and his chin juts outward. 'Fine. Go ahead.'

His permission has my nostrils flaring, my ears fluttering. When I go to my room to get the needle and the silver bars, my hands shake. The last person I did this to was Kori, but this seems far more significant.

Maybe because Luca is mine in every way.

When I reemerge, I can feel Luca's eyes on my hands, the needle between my fingers, the rings in my palm. In the other is the small vial of zitha.

With how much he is currently consuming, I'm sure the healing will be almost instantaneous, but I will not risk it. I do not want him to be in any pain.

His nipples are puckered, his cock hard as I approach.

He doesn't look away from me as I reach out and tug on them, his lips rolling between his teeth as he moans low and deep. I feel that sound all the way inside of me; it slithers between my slit and stirs my cocks.

Ready? I ask, tunneling into his mind and finding only peace at what has to happen. I cannot appear before the council without him pierced and adorned.

He gives me a faint nod and everything inside of me roars as I bend down and press the needle against his nipple. His hands move up to my shoulders, squeezing gently as I flick my wrist to the side, watching as the needle pierces the skin, the ring following shortly after. When it is clasped together, he stares down at it, his pupils blown out. I can see his cock beneath, hard and dripping, and I wish I could suck him dry while I do this, but I cannot. He must be ready for the meeting.

So, I move deftly on to the other, piercing that one. This time, he gasps in pain, but I quickly place zitha on his tongue, and he relaxes as the pain fades.

It is done.

He is marked as mine.

I step back and admire him, those rings in his swollen nipples. They will return to normal by the time we arrive at the council meeting with the other companions.

His hands move up his stomach in what I perceive as a show, and he touches them gingerly, his head downturned. Then his gaze flashes up to mine, and I find the breath has left my lungs. He is gorgeous, and now he is fully mine. I do not know why I put this off for so long, but I do not regret having done it now.

I regret nothing about him.

Luca seems unbothered by the companion attire. He wears his jeweled sound and adornments well. The gold chain curls around his cock, then around his hips, traveling up toward his chest where it fixes to his nipples and then to his collar. There is a thin leash that hangs from the lock—one he could easily break with a single tug.

The point isn’t to keep him forcibly in this restraint. The point is to show that no matter how thin the leash and collar, he is trained well enough to never break it. I think he understands that. There’s an expression on his face I can’t quite read as I wrap him in the sheer shawl, but I can feel him watching my every move.

He’s studying all of this.

‘Obey,’ he signs once I step away.

I nod. ‘You will mostly be ignored. I will be judged on your obedience. All Vyastil with companions are.’

At that, he smiles. ‘People must think Rathyn is a terrible commander.’

Despite how close Everest came to being taken from Rathyn, I still find myself smiling. Everest does not conform to authority well. Even now, as he has sworn to help our cause by playing a dutiful pet, I see the struggle in his face.

‘Everest behaves better now. It is…like a play,’ I add.

Luca grins and reaches up to adjust his collar, but I quickly bat his hands away and do it myself. The flush in his cheeks deepens. ‘Sorry.’

Quickly shaking my head, I take his hand and press it to my lips, indulging for only a moment when I will not be able to later.

He lets out a small breath. ‘Will they speak to me?’

‘Unlikely. Most Vyastil have a good grip on spoken human languages, but they will not have studied signs, so interacting with them may be difficult for you. It is very likely they will all be speaking Eretharian.’

‘Will they ignore me because they would have thrown me into the mines if I were a Deaf Vyastil?’ He signs the quiet part out loud.

Shame creeps through my chest. Even with everything I have attempted to unlearn once the fog about who we were began to clear, I still believed Luca’s deafness to be a flaw at first.

I understand him better, but the other Vyastil will not.

‘It is something about us that I hope will change in the future,’ I tell him.

He’s still for a long moment, and then he lifts his hands again. ‘What if we don’t tell them?’

Reaching for the portal key, I freeze before slipping it into my pocket, then ask, ‘What do you mean?’

He shrugs. ‘Do they know I’m Deaf?’

‘It was included in your file, but most of the Vyastil we will meet with today won’t have access to that.’

‘So we don’t tell them. You can explain I’m trained not to speak to any other Vyastil than you.’

‘I don’t want you to feel lost,’ I tell him, pulling him close. ‘Or alone.’

I feel a rush of affection, then a quick succession of memories from him of all the times he’s been left out, even by the people who love him. It’s his curse of being Deaf in a hearing family and a hearing world.

‘I’ll be fine,’ he insists. ‘Maybe I’ll make a friend.’ There is something in that comment that makes me stare a little too long at him. But then he asks, ‘Can companions talk to each other?’

It is not encouraged but also not forbidden. All the same, I’m terrified to take risks with him. If Prince Jyrion is there, he will be watching, looking for any reason to steal this human’s life too.

‘Today, please stay by my side. If you see Everest, you may converse with him, but he will also be…’ I stop myself. I can’t tell Luca that Everest is on a mission to gather information while playing the role of docile companion.

Luca frowns. ‘More secrets.’

Placing a hand on his cheek, I hold fast even when he tries to shake me off. I push into his head until I’m wrapped in the warmth of his mind.

My Luca, I will do everything in my power to protect you, but you must help me too. I cannot lose you the way I lost Kori.

It hurts to speak his name, even in my head, and when Luca senses that pain, he softens.

“I’ll be good,” he murmurs aloud.

For that, I reward him with a single kiss before stepping back. I can’t encourage more. Not now. Not when so much is at risk. Reaching out, I curl the chain around my fingers and give it the gentlest tug.

He responds immediately, taking a step forward.

‘We must go.’

He doesn’t respond other than to give me a single nod, and then closes his eyes as I press the sequence on the portal key and prepare to step through.

OceanofPDF.com

nineteen

LUCA

WE MAKE our way into the city, walking part of the way, Eissa's tail wrapped around me. His hand holds the chain attached to my collar, and it feels…strange. Ever since he pierced my nipples, he seems more possessive of me.

Part of me thinks it is just the sight of the piercings, but another part of me believes that it is more. That he finally got to mark me as his, and now he can't stay away even if he tries.

He might resist me at every turn, but deep down he knows who I belong to.

I turn my gaze up to meet his, and he glances down at me. I can feel him prodding at the entrance of my mind, and I let him, practicing for when we arrive at the gathering for the Vyastil and their companions.

I need to practice being pliable and obedient. It won't be easy. I tend to push back when I feel threatened, but I can do this for Eissa.

'I am sorry I must ask this of you,' he signs softly in my mind. Having my language in my head instead of words I'm still struggling to get used to makes this a little easier.

I peer up at him and give a nod. It's not like I have a choice, really, but I'm not sure I'd care much if I did.

Right now, I'm wearing the thin, sheer shawl over my shoulders, but everything else is visible, and I find that I kind of like it. I know I look

good. I work hard for my body, and the way Eissa looks at me tells me he appreciates my efforts.

I'm still feeling okay about this whole thing as we approach the building. I don't want to fall apart in front of a bunch of important Vyastil, but Eissa seems to read my anxiety and sets a hand at my jaw.

You will do perfect, my Luca.

This time, I don't correct him on calling me his. I take a breath and wait for him to pass through the large door, and then I take a step over the threshold. We come into a small, bare entryway, accompanied by only one other Vyastil and their companion. He has dark red hair and is completely naked, his back pressed up against the wall as his Vyastil is on his knees before him, sucking him off before they enter the main floor. The human looks half in pain, half in ecstasy as his fingers curl into the wall behind him. His eyes are screwed shut, and I peer up at Eissa, who speaks to me in my mind.

That is Gerythn, he warns. *He is not kind. Do not speak to him or his companion.*

I wasn't planning on it. I'm not speaking to anyone, remember?

Eissa's rainbow eyes sparkle as he tugs on the thin chain, leading me forward. We move out of the small waiting room and step into a large space, the floors vibrating beneath me. The walls almost glow white as we step inside, and I hold my breath as I take it all in. There are colorful vines on the wall, snaking up around hazy windows and around light fixtures. They're the only decorations in the large room.

Well, unless you count the companions. Like me, they're naked except for the jewels on their cocks and piercings in their skin.

Some are standing near their Vyastil, their heads downturned, their hands behind their backs. Some are getting sucked, their heads thrown back in pleasure.

Eissa tugs on the chain, and I step forward toward a long table at the front of the room. Two Vyastil sit behind it and nod when Eissa and I appear. I keep my head down in faux deference, but I'm unable to keep my eyes completely turned away. I want to see what is happening.

An orange-and-green-haired Vyastil inclines his head at Eissa, and I see them speaking, probably in Eretharian. As expected, Eissa does not translate for me, so I watch as they converse. He tugs on my chain again, and my nipples tingle as he does. He must be speaking about me, I think.

My cheeks redden, and I'm glad for it. I want them to think I'm meek.

Eissa steps behind me and cups my cock, almost as if showing it off. I stand completely still, biting the inside of my cheek to keep my attitude at bay. Then Eissa gently grabs my balls and they settle in his palm.

I want to melt into the floor from embarrassment, but keep myself standing as the Vyastil takes me in. He does it slowly, a curious perusal before Eissa's hand leaves me and he steps back.

The Vyastil behind the table must rank higher than Eissa because Eissa bows toward him when they are finished speaking before he moves to the next one.

I am sorry, my Luca. But I must show you off, he tells me before he does the same thing with the other Vyastil.

I'm on display, I remind myself. I must allow this as much as I don't like it.

It's an odd feeling, belonging to someone like this, being at their mercy. I don't particularly like how vulnerable it makes me, or how small I feel. But at the same time, I want to make this gathering easy for Eissa, for the Vyastil who has consumed me, heart and soul.

When the Vyastil at the head table are satisfied, Eissa tugs on my chain and moves me back toward the other companions. I bite back a grunt of annoyance, folding my hands behind me like I see some of the others doing, my knuckles surely white from how tight I am holding on to them.

It's then I see Rathyn and Everest in the crowd—the sight of them lightening my mood significantly.

Rathyn looks as unhappy as Eissa is to be here, but Everest looks like an obedient companion. He's wearing no clothes like everyone else, but is adorned with a glittering collar and a chain that attaches to his overly decorated cock.

I recognize it. It's something similar to what Eissa put on me.

There is a shining blue gem sitting at his slit, and I know there is a rod inside of him. His cock is half hard, his nipples puckered and pierced like mine, but his rings are tipped with thick green gemstones that change in the light.

I don't know Rathyn well, but I know how obsessed he is with his human. I can guarantee the fancy jewelry he's wearing is Rathyn's doing. A way to show him off, to let everyone else know he is treasured.

I can’t ever imagine Eissa doing this to me, but then again, I don’t fucking know much, do I?

I will explain it all in time, Eissa says, and I bite back another sigh as we approach Everest and Rathyn.

Rathyn meets my gaze and gives a small nod toward me, but Everest doesn’t look up, his gaze focused on the ground. Eissa and Rathyn touch foreheads, which leaves me right in front of Everest, my toes in his line of sight. It’s then that he peeks up, and I see the small smirk on the corner of his lips.

He winks at me and then his face changes, going back to the obedient human he’s meant to be.

That makes something stir inside of me. If Everest can do this, so can I.

I turn my gaze toward Eissa and then back to Everest before lowering it to the ground, studying the moving floor beneath my feet. If I stare long enough, I can almost see a moving pattern. This must be what Everest is entertaining himself with.

So I do the same as Eissa and Rathyn speak to one another, and once again, nothing is explained to me. But I can feel Eissa’s presence beside me, which helps, and the occasional tug on the chain is oddly enticing.

Every time he does it, I find pleasure washes through me.

Belonging to him is different, and I find that I don’t dislike it.

I watch the floor for a long moment before I’m pulled away from Rathyn and Everest and toward another Vyastil, who has a companion on his knees beside him.

Eissa doesn’t touch his forehead with his but gives deference to him by inclining his head. If this is not someone Eissa likes, I won’t even bother looking. Instead, I stare down at the ground, my gaze oscillating between the patterns weaving through the ground and the kneeling companion.

He has strawberry-blond hair and a tattoo on his upper back. A black raven spread across both shoulder blades. I want to know why he has this, but obviously can’t ask. Not that I could anyway, because suddenly the companion arches back, his eyes shooting open, his hands falling behind him, his hips jutting up. It’s then that I see what’s wrapped around his cock.

It’s something alive, vining, sliding up and down his hard length, almost like it’s milking him.

I turn my gaze from it to Eissa. His brow is furrowed as he watches the companion writhing on the floor in what I think is either pleasure or pain,

but can’t quite tell which.

Then suddenly the Vyastil bends down, the human’s cock jerking before him, cum spilling into a vial. The human is breathing heavily, his cheeks stained red, the flush bleeding down his chest. But he gets no rest. The thing continues to contract and milk him, and I watch as the Vyastil tilts his head back and drinks from the vial.

Not from his human.

I can feel Eissa’s upset as he tugs me away, his words pushing into my mind once more. *That was some of the cruelty of our kind. I do not wish you to see any more of that.*

Does he not want his companion? What was that thing?

That is a rare organism, found only near the lands of the Tarek. It is a milking…wand. A tsunik. It is for those who do not wish to touch their companions.

My head cranes back, and I see the human arching his hips up as another orgasm is pulled from him, the Vyastil bending down and collecting the cum before drinking it.

I turn my gaze back to Eissa, who is pulling me toward a corner, far away from anyone else. *You look upset,* I send to him.

I am ashamed.

My eyes widen. *Why? You didn’t do it. That Vyastil did.*

No, but he is proof that we are not all as benevolent and kind as we have portrayed ourselves. He runs a hand against his chest, right over his hearts, and I want to lean into him, to pull him into a hug, but don’t dare. Instead, I turn my head back to the floor, staring at the patterns once more.

I wish I could look at you, Eissa says. *You are gorgeous like this, more beautiful than anyone here. I miss your eyes, and I cannot wait until we leave.*

It’s probably one of the more romantic things someone has said to me, and I find myself blushing and turning my gaze to the side to look at anything to distract me. If he keeps saying shit like this to me, I might break. And I can’t do that here.

I know Eissa is a Vyastil of importance, and I am just a companion who has to be obedient. I can’t shame him here by being defiant.

It’s then that I see a familiar flash of red and a mop of blond curls.

Lucie is here.

My heart jumps when his eyes meet mine.

They widen, and he lifts his hands for a moment before settling them in front of him, as if trying to keep himself from signing.

It's for the best because his Vyastil has him pressed against him, tail wrapped around Lucie's thigh possessively. My gaze rakes down the chain that sits against his skin, his body adorned even more than Everest's. As I learned from meeting him earlier, his nipples are pierced, as are his belly button and cock, the chain linking through each piercing, binding them together.

Talk about possessive, I think as his Vyastil catches someone else staring and cups Lucie's cock possessively.

Lucie blushes and turns his gaze away, biting down on his bottom lip.

I wonder how many fights break out here over companions and how many of them are for silly things like looking at one of them the wrong way.

My thoughts don't go far because I feel Eissa stiffen beside me, his tail curling around my waist.

Just like Dhoryn did with Lucie.

Everyone turns their heads and then tilts them in deference. A Vyastil I've never seen before is moving through the room. I can tell by the way he walks that he ranks higher than anyone here. His blue hair is pulled into a severe bun, his keen eyes moving around the room.

When he approaches the table, the two Vyastil who were shown my cock and balls stand, and the blue-haired Vyastil steps between them, flicking out his robe as he takes a seat.

Who is that? I ask Eissa.

Prince Jyrion. He is Quilliyn's brother.

My lips part as I try to take that in. I guess the same-colored hair should have tipped me off, but the angry and calculating gleam in Jyrion's eyes is so unlike Quilliyn.

Yes, they are different. In more ways than one, Eissa tells me. *I hope we do not have to encounter him, but I'm sure I will have to make an introduction. Forgive me, my Luca, for what I may have to do.*

I don't know what that means, but then Jyrion calls Rathyn and Everest up to the table. Or at least I assume that's what he does because Rathyn is tugging Everest behind him, almost roughly. So calloused and unfeeling, so different from what I'm used to seeing from the two of them.

What's happening? I ask, peering up through my lashes as Everest stumbles against Rathyn, almost losing his footing entirely.

Rathyn looks annoyed at how clumsy his companion is, and Jyrion sneers at the two of them.

Then I see his mouth move, but I can't make out what he's saying.

Jyrion is putting Rathyn to the test. Much like I think he'll do with us. I will try to be gentle, but there is a chance I won't be able to.

I swallow roughly as Jyrion lifts a finger and points at Everest.

Rathyn's shoulders stiffen, not that noticeably, but enough for my Deaf eyes to catch the movement, and then I see Jyrion hand Rathyn something.

I can't make it out, but I feel Eissa shivering beside me.

Rathyn turns whatever he has over in his hand and then inclines his head, tugging Everest toward a large chair in the corner. It's elevated so that everyone can see it, or more so the person who sits there.

Rathyn takes Everest by the throat and pushes him into the seat, spreading his legs, and then reaches back and secures the chain to something behind the chair.

Everest's head is tilted back, his neck exposed as Rathyn pulls something out of the vial and pries his mouth open. Everest seems to be fighting it, but he doesn't win.

Does he really not want this? I ask, feeling afraid for my new friend.

He does want this. Rathyn has assured me of this. It is all a show for the prince.

He's a great actor, I think, as Rathyn pries his mouth open and something is shoved between his lips.

What is it?

Ruenox.

I've heard that before, and my memory is jogged seconds later, when Everest's hips arch up, his cock hard as Rathyn falls to his knees before him, his mouth wrapping around his cock and sucking. This is the cum herb, the one that makes us overproduce.

Why would Jyrion make him take that? I ask, watching as Everest shudders and comes, Rathyn still kneeling before him.

He wants to humiliate them. Little does he know that Everest enjoys this.

My cock stirs at the sight, and I turn my gaze away, feeling guilty for watching. I mean, I don't mind a little voyeurism, but it feels wrong to watch Everest come over and over again.

So, I keep my gaze focused on the ground, watching those patterns swirl beneath my feet. I don't know what's going on with my eyes trained away from the action, but after a while, I can feel the mood shift, and then beside me, Eissa stiffens.

I do my best to glance up without making it look like I'm eyeballing anyone in the room, but I'm startled when I realize the prince is standing just a few feet away from me. His rainbow eyes are locked on me, and there's a look on his face. Dangerous, maybe. Hungry.

Predatory.

But not in the way that Eissa looks at me. The prince looks at me like he would devour me and make sure that every bite was agony.

It takes me a moment to realize they're speaking. Generally, I can hear a few very specific tones, but the singing, melodic Eretharian language is in the range that my favorite audiologist had once called, 'Really fucking Deaf.' But it's fascinating to watch their lips and tongues move around it—so unlike how humans speak.

I know if I were to reach up and press my fingers to Eissa's throat, I would feel the vibrations of it like music coming from a speaker. But I'm not foolish enough to draw that kind of attention to myself.

Especially with the way that Jyrion is staring at me.

And not with the way I can feel Eissa's fear.

The prince takes a step closer, and my first instinct is to step in front of Eissa to protect him. It's ridiculous, of course. He's at least a foot and a half taller and has claws on all of his appendages and fangs in his mouth. But all the same, I can't help it.

Eissa's tail wraps around my calf and squeezes, a comforting gesture, and I find myself only just able to relax as Jyrion finally stops inches away.

"Why does he not answer me?" I don't read this off his lips, and I certainly don't hear it.

No. What floods into my head is Eissa opening his own mind so I can understand what he does. It's startling and difficult to follow since my brain is not used to spoken language, but Eissa also manages to project how it all feels, and that keeps me from losing everything.

"He is trained not to," Eissa answers.

Jyrion's mouth curls up into a kind of sneer, showing fang. He lifts a hand and reaches for me, but before he can make contact, Eissa steps

between us, and I can feel his growl—the vibrations rumbling through my sternum.

There's a shift in the room, and I don't quite know what's happening, but before I can figure out a way to ask, Eissa turns toward me and wraps the leash chain around his fist.

My turn?

He doesn't answer. He guides me to the chair and, with a clawed hand, pushes me into it. The chain links above my head, and I close my eyes because if Everest or Lucie is watching, I don't think I'll be able to handle it.

My breath stutters in my chest when Eissa's body looms over mine, and then he enters my thoughts.

My Luca. I will defy them all and leave with you right now if you wish it.

I don't really know what to tell him. This entire situation doesn't feel right, but I don't need to know all the secrets he's keeping to know that whatever battle he's fighting goes deep. And from what I can deduce, it goes high up the Vyastil chain. And there's a very good chance he doesn't survive this, which terrifies me.

I'm not going to shorten my time with him because people are watching me get off. I can do this for him. I can do this for the chance that we can be something. I open my eyes so I can see his face, knowing that with him leaning over me, all I will be able to see is him.

I don't mind.

He presses deeper into my head, searching for the truth. Searching for a lie. I send him bits and pieces of memories from my younger, wilder days when I got up to a lot more than getting sucked off in a chair.

I feel his growl again.

I do not like these thoughts, my Luca. I do not like anyone touching what is mine.

Something about those words sends shivers up my spine. Part of me wants to challenge him because if I'm his, why does he turn away from me all the time? Why won't he take what he clearly wants?

But now's not the time.

I'm on your side, Eissa. Do what you need to do to keep your secrets. I'm not afraid.

I can sense him understand that I'm telling the truth, and the gratitude he sends me would have me weak in the knees. Thank god I'm sitting. He moves away from me, turning his head back to where the prince is watching with heavy eyes.

I close mine, so I don't have to see it.

Will you give me what Everest took?

No, my Luca. Not for your first time. Not in front of all of these people.

I don't know if it's the care he's showing me that's making me so relieved, but it hits me like a punch in the gut. He leans in again, claws tracing over my lips, then down my jaw, then they flick at my tender nipples, and I gasp.

I peer open one eye and see a ripple move through the crowd as Eissa falls to his knees. It's odd to know a Vyastil with his power would kneel in front of a human like myself, but I know this is a show of their control. Not mine.

The power is yours, my Luca.

I shiver as my cock begins to thicken, and his fingers, strong but delicate, wrap around me and gently pull at my cock.

I want to look down at him, to watch, but my neck is restrained at such an angle that I cannot. So, I keep my eyes closed and just let him tug me into full hardness and then gasp when I feel his warm, wet mouth close around me.

His forked tongue winds around my cock, doing what only he can do, making me come close to the edge without so much as trying.

My fingers curl against the arms of the chair, and I find my hips buck at the feeling of each drag and pull, the sound buried deep in me making it even more intense.

He does not let up either, almost as if he wants to get this over with as fast as possible. But even so, I can feel how much he is enjoying this, how much he wants to do more than just suck.

I respond with visions of me on my back, my legs twined around his back as he thrusts into me.

I know it's possible—my brother told me.

I feel Eissa growl and the vibration on my cock has me groaning as I spill into his mouth, an endless stream into his stomach.

It's only when he pulls off, my cock cool and wet, that I let my eyes flutter open. I see Eissa above me, reaching back to untie me.

Come, you can retire now. You need to rest.

I want to protest, but being the good little human, I let him lead me toward a small room off to the side, my gaze on the floor as I put one bare foot in front of the other.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty

LUCA

WHATEVER ANYONE MIGHT SAY about the Vyastil, they know how to take care of humans. What I'm currently drinking is not a human drink, but it rejuvenates me like nothing ever has, and oddly enough, being mostly naked with my bejeweled dick out in front of a bunch of strange people who are also dressed the same feels…

Well, not quite normal, but as close to it as I think I'm going to get in this situation.

And I'm not unfamiliar with being the only Deaf person in a room full of hearing people, so the silence and the strange looks don't bother me. I have a feeling most of them recognized the thickness in my cries as Eissa was swallowing me down.

I've been told by the few hearing guys that I've hooked up with and dated that my accent is thickest when I'm getting off. Vyastil probably won't notice the difference, but I can tell the humans who aren't high on monster herbs have noticed.

Milling around the room, I feel a little lonely and unsure until I see a mop of blond curls bouncing toward me. Lucie's smaller, so he's lost in the sea of tall men until he's right up on me.

There are a few Vyastil guards keeping a lazy eye on us, but they're not watching as Lucie raises his hands. 'You did amazing. Were you scared?'

I scoff as he leads me to a quiet corner with strange-looking cushions to sit on. They immediately conform to our bodies as we settle, and I let out a

groan of comfort as I lean back.

‘It was fine. Strange.’

He wrinkles his nose. ‘Never gets easier. Your Vyastil seems nice. He must like you.’

He signs that with a slight droop in his body, and it’s then I see the longing in his eyes. I feel a sudden wave of anxiety in my gut as I lean forward and wave at him to get his attention.

‘Does your Vyastil use that thing on you?’ There’s no sign for it, so I do my best with classifiers to mimic the organism that got the other human off. I don’t remember what Eissa had called it—a tsu-something.

Lucie’s eyes go wide when he realizes what I’m asking, and he shakes his head. ‘No. Never. Dhoryn isn’t the most attentive, but he’s not like some of the others.’ Lucie shudders, and I realize I’m too scared to ask him to clarify.

Before our conversation can go on, though, a shadow crosses my vision, and I realize it’s Everest. He still looks a little out of it, but he’s got a cup of the same drink I was given, and there’s color in his cheeks again.

And god, I can’t believe how happy I am to see him. We’re not exactly close, even with him working for Dante, but he’s my only real connection to Earth, to my family, and for that, I feel a rush of hard, painful emotion.

I can’t stop myself as I jump to my feet and yank him into a hug. It’s strange being naked, cocks out, but we’re both too spent to give a shit. He hugs me back with weaker arms, then drops down next to me.

‘How are you?’ His signs are getting much better now that he’s spending so much time with Cielo.

I shrug and glance over at Lucie, who’s staring at Everest with wide eyes. It’s clear he knows him, but there’s something I must be missing because he looks almost…afraid.

‘Lonely. I miss home. How is Dante?’

Everest’s smile is soft. ‘Good. He and Cielo have been checking up on the café, and they even went on a vacation last weekend. They told me about this spa near Lake Michigan that I’m going to take Rathyn to. Seascape Resort and Spa. I can’t fucking wait.’

The idea of Rathyn at a spa is hilarious. I’d laugh if I weren’t so beat.

Everest’s face sobers after a second. ‘Dante misses you. He’s been worried sick. Literally.’

I know it’s probably not one of his flares since he’s been on the treatment Cielo found for him here on Erethar, but the thought that it could be makes my stomach hurt. ‘I hope this wasn’t a mistake.’

Everest’s eyes cut over to Lucie, and he gives a very small shake of his head.

Right. Lucie is my friend, but he’s also not part of our circle. After meeting Dhoryn, I can safely assume he is not one of Eissa’s allies. He seems very much a Vyastil purist, and he appears to grudgingly enjoy taking cum from his human.

‘Sorry,’ I sign to Lucie. ‘This is Everest. We know each other from home.’

Lucie’s cheeks pinken. ‘I know who you are. Your Vyastil is Rathyn of the Dark Vale.’ He spells it slowly, almost with reverence.

It’s…bizarre.

Everest looks a little uncomfortable as he nods. Then he looks at me before glancing back at Lucie. ‘Deaf-you?’

Lucie shakes his head. ‘My brothers. They—’

He doesn’t get the chance to finish his sentence. Lucie suddenly stiffens, and before I can ask if he’s okay, a shadow looms over us. My heart skips a beat before I realize it’s Dhoryn. His eyes are cold—not as cold as the Vyastil who used that organism on his human, but he doesn’t look at Lucie the way Eissa looks at me. Or the way Rathyn looks at Everest.

“Come,” I see his lips move.

Lucie nods, his face now devoid of all expression, and he rises, following Dhoryn out of the room without another word.

When he’s gone, I turn to Everest. ‘Why?’ I know he doesn’t have the lexicon to understand more than that. But he doesn’t need to. His face tells me he understands exactly what I’m asking.

He shakes his head. ‘It’s hard to explain, and I can’t tell you everything here. I’ll ask Rath if we can stop by before we go back to Earth.’

That feels possibly dangerous, but I would love the company. ‘Okay.’

Everest nods, then stands up. ‘Eissa’s on his way over here. I’ll talk to you later.’

I feel it the second after Everest signs it—the presence of my monster. My Vyastil. It’s a gentle, barely there caress that turns warmer and more

intense the closer he gets. I want to jump to my feet and fling myself into his arms, but I know better than that.

I rise slowly, hooking my hands behind my back, and I wait for Eissa to approach. His tail touches me first, coasting up my calf where it curls around my thigh in a possessive hold. I would think it was something special, but I have seen all the Vyastil do this to their humans—even the ones who refuse to drink from them.

I dart a glance up to his face.

You are safe?

Odd question, but I answer him anyway. *I am safe. I spoke with Everest and another companion.*

His tension rises. *My Luca, it is not wise to—*

I know, I cut him off. *I didn't tell him anything. We just talked. He was nice.*

Who is his Vyastil?

Dhoryn. I send a quick image of both Lucie and Dhoryn through our connection, and I feel Eissa's surprise shudder through me, but he doesn't tell me why.

More secrets, I guess. Eissa's sigh ripples across the short distance between us and ghosts across my face. Then he lifts his hand and presses something against my palm. It takes me a moment to realize it's the portal key, and another moment to realize why he's giving it to me.

"No," I say aloud without thinking. I stop myself. 'I'm not going home alone.'

His irritation silences me immediately. *There are things I must attend to here, and I do not want you with me while I do them.*

But—

Please.

I get the impression he doesn't say please very often. Not like that. Not like he means it. My chest aches with how lonely it will be once again without him near me, but there's a good chance that Everest will show up and maybe then I can get some answers.

The key is programmed to take you back to my cottage. You will be safe there.

Safe, yes. But completely alone and ignored. I don't really know what's worse. But it's not like I can argue with him. It's not like he'll be willing to change his mind and stay with me.

He hasn’t so far.

Today, even after everything, is proof that he still intends to keep me at arm’s length.

Curling my fingers around the portal key, I give a single nod and turn away. I feel a small pulse of regret coming from Eissa, but I use everything in my power to shut him out until our connection is ice cold.

Eissa’s tail squeezes around me, but I don’t look back. Eventually he guides me through a door and to a waiting portal. It’s flanked by two stoic, bored-looking guards who don’t give me a single glance as I press the key to the side and watch it open.

I brace myself as Eissa’s tail slowly slips from my leg. Between us, it feels like a cavernous echo, but I don’t look back. Instead, I step forward and let the portal take me, hoping that at some point, for him, I become worth something.

The adornments from the meeting at the capital sit on the small table beside my bed. I’m wrapped in the tunic and pouting with my face in the pillow, buried under blankets Eissa brought from Earth, but I don’t get to wallow long.

A hard shove against the bed shakes me completely awake, and I peer over to see Gerald’s strange face looking up at me, blinking slowly.

‘Do-do?’ I sign.

He blinks, then shoves the bed so hard it moves several inches.

With a groan, I throw my feet over the edge and stand up. Maybe he needs exercise. I could definitely use some. I feel entirely run down, and I know it’s not just that I’m missing Eissa. Yes, he’s been gone for hours, and yes, there’s a gaping hole somewhere deep behind my ribs that he created.

But it’s also that all my routines have been thrown off. There’s no gym for me to work out my frustrations, and I’m not convinced the Eretharian sun provides me with the right amount of vitamin D my body needs to survive.

I’ll have to address that one later. I’m sure they have something for the companions that stay here long-term. For now, at least, I can get some fresh

air and take Gerald outside so he can ram his head into boulders and trees and maybe give the furniture a break.

Clicking my tongue, I motion for him to follow, and to my surprise, he does. We leave out the back door where there's a small walking path into the woods, and I check behind me several times to find him lumbering along.

He seems happier…I think. I don't know the emotional states of kraduns, but he's not trying to rearrange trees, so maybe that's a good thing. Either way, I think the outdoors is good for both of us.

The air here is cleaner and sweeter than Earth's, and I feel…I don't want to say better now that I'm out, because I don't.

But I don't feel like burying myself in the bed anymore, so that's progress.

The path curves at the edge, and just as I turn the corner, I notice a shadow up ahead. It's humanoid but way too tall to be a human, and I freeze as they step out of the shadows. For a moment, my heart stutters in my chest because it doesn't take me long to recognize him.

Just hours ago, he was staring at me as I was strapped to a chair while Eissa devoured my cum in front of an entire crowd—on his orders. Then, Prince Jyrion's hair had been pulled back away from his face, and he was wearing low-slung linen pants that were entirely see-through, a thick pendant on his chest, and cuffs on his arms.

Now he's wearing a simple sheer robe that sits open at his chest, and his hair is tied in a loose braid that rests over his shoulder. His eyes regard me for a moment, and there's something on his face, almost like a challenge.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Do I bow? Touch foreheads with him? I doubt that since Eissa didn't do that to him, but I don't think a casual wave is going to cut it. I'm pretty sure he's the crown prince set to inherit the entire Vyastil kingdom.

After a short forever—way too long for me to correct this social faux pas—Jyrion lifts his forearm into the air.

For a moment I think it might be some kind of sign he's going to take me into custody, but then a winged creature lands, claws gripping into his skin. I see pinpricks of violet Vyastil blood dripping from where the creature's cutting into him, but Jyrion seems unbothered.

He strokes the side of his finger from under the animal's chin down to its round belly. The thing is bird-like with feathers, but it also has scales,

and the face doesn't have a beak. It's almost a snout—like a mini dragon if dragons were fluffy, the size of a house cat, and covered in bright blue and purple feathers.

After a moment, Jyrion lowers his arm, and the creature flies off, landing by his feet before hopping over and eyeing Gerald. Jyrion seems entirely unbothered as Gerald lumbers into the bushes, and his creature follows it.

And now we're alone. Which…is not ideal, I think. Jyrion's staring at me in a way I can't quite read, and then he walks over, his legs taking up the space in three strides where it would have taken me double that.

He comes to a stop and tilts his head to the side, and I wonder how I'm going to get out of this without him figuring out I can't hear. I want to keep the secret because anything the Vyastil consider a defect will put Eissa under more scrutiny.

But I'm not going to be able to fake my way out of this since I can barely read Vyastil lips.

'What's your kradun's name?'

I'm answering before it occurs to me that he's used sign language, and I get as far as, 'G E R A,' before it hits me. My fingers still, then I quickly finish the name. 'L D.'

He nods.

Well, my cover is definitely blown. Licking my lips, I lift my hands again as anxiety and fear race through me, and my fingers shake as I ask, 'You know I'm Deaf?'

His gaze meets and holds mine so tightly, I feel like I can't let go, and the fear gets louder in my head. 'Yes,' he signs very carefully. 'I do.'

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-one

EISSA

THE LAST THING in the world I want is to leave Luca after everything he just went through. I can still feel his sense of betrayal after I sent him through the portal alone, but I had no real way to explain what I was doing because it's not safe for him to know.

If anyone outside of our collective allies suspected for even a moment that I cared enough about my human to spill secrets to him, he would be ripped from me in an instant. He would be taken apart piece by piece until they were satisfied he knew nothing, and by then, it would be too late to save him.

So I don't explain.

I let him go and endure the pain he sends my way as I wait for the council building to clear out. It doesn't take long. The princes have disappeared, and the rest of the council are long gone before the rest of the guests depart.

I spend most of that time in my office pretending to be busy, and it's only when the last of the portals are closed that I make my way out and head toward Rathyn's apartments.

They are bugged, of course. As part of his punishment, he's not allowed any real semblance of privacy, but he's found ways around it.

And we need to speak soon. My breeding time isn't too far away—I'm scheduled to take my herbs and procreate soon—that is, if it doesn't happen

randomly with Luca first. I need to figure out if they've made any headway with the rebellion on Earth.

The safest place for Luca to be is home on Earth and out of this companion contract, but I can't do that unless I know I'm not sending him off to be hurt worse. I cannot lose him. Losing Kori was bad enough. It nearly ruined me.

Losing Luca would destroy me completely.

I am mostly put together by the time Everest lets me into their quarters. He has mastered the Vyastilian greeting, going high up onto his toes to press his forehead to mine. He feels like family much in the way that Rathyn does, and it comforts me to see them together.

Rathyn approaches, wrapping his tail around Everest as he tips his forehead to mine, and we linger for just a moment before Rathyn walks over to the table and takes out a tablet, tapping a button in the center.

The recording has begun—a pointless, boring conversation we recorded a long while ago back in my office on Earth.

Everest grins, then beckons me to the farthest room in the apartment where the portal is waiting, and I step through, blinking as the lights around me go dim. I realize we're deep in a cave not too far from the Outerlands—if the scent and the presence of githyn are anything to go by.

There's a fire burning in the corner of the room, and Rathyn has laid out a space for all of us to sit. Everest gets comfortable on the xinhar as Rathyn and I take seats at the carved table near the wall.

"We are free to speak. I have an alarm set that will let us know when the recording is two minutes away from ending," Rathyn says.

It's not a lot of time, but it's enough.

"I would like to know if there has been any progress with the human rebellion being eradicated. I know m—that Luca," I nearly give myself away, "is eager to see his family."

Everest's face falls. "He seemed okay after the whole meeting, even after Jyrion the Dickhead made you suck him off in front of everyone. But yeah, he ah…he seemed sad underneath it all."

My hearts twist in my chest. "Did he say anything to you?"

Everest shrugs. "Not really. He asked about his family, wanted to know if Dante and Cielo were doing okay. But that really fucking grumpy-looking Vyastil came and took Luca's friend away, and yeah…"

"Dhoryn," I say.

Rathyn looks surprised, but of course he does. I very much doubt he's spoken to anyone about his relation to Dhoryn. Even I avoid thinking about it, let alone speaking his name in polite company. I have seen him a few times during council affairs—sometimes with his human and sometimes not.

But I was surprised he had a human at all after, well…after seeing what happened to Kori.

"Would you like me to speak to him?" Rathyn asks, interrupting my thoughts. "He may be of some help. His work in the archives might prove to be useful, and we both know how he feels about the royal family and most of the council."

Rathyn is not wrong. Dhoryn has spent most of his life as a historian, and while his job title was misleading—he was not asked to study, but to erase—he still has knowledge that most Vyastil do not possess. He could be a help to our cause.

But it would take a lot of convincing to get him on our side. Especially after everything.

"Perhaps." I stroke a claw over my chin. For now, it's best to change the subject. "And the rebellion?"

Rathyn gestures to Everest, who lets out a long-suffering sigh. "I'm not allowed to see Zane more than once a month right now. He's under some pretty tight restrictions as he's awaiting trial. I tried to call his parents, but they told me they knew what I was up to," his voice falls, "monster fucking, and hung up on me."

"I do not understand why you worry so much for Zane. He used his friendship with you to get close to Cielo and steal from him," Rathyn says. He doesn't sound angry, but Everest flinches anyway, and I can see the guilt on his face.

"I was hoping…" He stops and sighs. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. Zane's under constant surveillance and his calls are being recorded, so he's not going to tell me anything, even if he wanted to. He doesn't look happy, though."

"Prison isn't for happiness," Rathyn says.

Everest glowers at him. "Thank you, genius. I fucking know that. I'm just saying if he's miserable enough in there, maybe he'll take some time to reflect and see that he's gone a little too fucking far to the other side."

“My Everest,” Rathyn says, his tone flat, “Zane has been that far to his side the entire time you have known him.”

Everest’s cheeks pinken, and he folds his arms, looking angrier with each passing second.

It’s not an argument I wish to get between, so I turn my attention back to Rathyn. “If there’s any kind of resolution, please let me know right away. The sooner I can dissolve this contract, the better.”

Rathyn frowns. “Is he not pleasing to you?”

“I—no. It’s nothing like that. I just didn’t ever plan on having another human around.”

Rathyn’s ears flick in understanding. “Yes. Of course.”

“Also, he doesn’t want to be here. This was the only way to keep him safe, and it would be better for us all if he could return to his family.”

“As soon as we hear something, we’ll let you know,” Everest says quietly. “But he might want to get comfortable.”

“I’m not sure Luca will appreciate that, but I know he understands.” I don’t know his family well, but from everything Cielo has told me, they are all very close. They see each other multiple times a week, and while Luca has always been a bit of an outsider due to him being Deaf, that doesn’t change the love they have for each other.

It’s something Vyastil had once, before they began to control breeding and wiped out all semblance of affection from our society. And now that I’ve had a taste of it from Luca, I can’t imagine living without it.

This must be torture for him.

“So, since Rath and I have this place,” Everest says slowly, “maybe we can arrange for a sneaky visit from Dante. He couldn’t stay long, but no one knows this cave exists, and as long as we can get our hands on an untraceable portal key, we might be able to arrange something.”

My hearts jump. If I can do one thing for my Luca, let it be that.

“I will attempt to procure one,” Rathyn says. The one he’s using now has an Eretharian signature, so it doesn’t connect to Earth. Which means it’s not tracked. But getting Dante here on one with an Earth signature will be very tricky.

The council has ordered stricter monitoring since Cielo’s brothers escaped to Earth.

“I won’t say anything to him until we’re certain it can happen. I think he’s suffered enough disappointment,” I say.

Rathyn nods, then he stands. “The alert has gone off. We must go.”

Everest gets up with a groan, and Rathyn opens the portal, letting his VySytheh go first, and then I follow. He closes it behind him, and we take a seat as Rathyn begins the countdown with his fingers.

Four. Three. Two…

“Thank you for your time,” Rathyn says aloud. He walks over, and we touch foreheads, then Everest does the same before I take out my own key and prepare for my journey.

As I relax and open my mind, I feel a sudden surge of anxiety and fear coming from Luca. It’s not being sent purposefully. It’s uncontrolled. I push deeper but can’t move beyond what he’s seeing with his eyes—the walking trail behind the cottage.

I waste no time setting the portal coordinates and then step through without more than a quick nod to Rathyn and Everest. The world goes dark before I nearly tumble out into the forest just behind my home.

Panic rushes through me when I don’t immediately see Luca, and it’s only then I sense him behind me, safely within the stone walls. My claws dig into the dirt, then into the stone as I yank open the door and find him curled up on the sofa under the window with the newly renamed kradun at his feet.

His gaze meets mine, and his eyes look red as though he’s been crying.

‘What happened?’ I demand, marching over. I reach out to touch him, but he pulls away, making my heart twist with his rejection.

I know I deserve it, but it doesn’t hurt less.

After a short, agonizing moment, when he realizes I’m still waiting for an answer, he lifts a single hand. ‘Nothing.’

He’s lying, but I know after all of my deceit and all the things I have kept from him, it’s no more than I deserve. And as long as he is not hurt, I will let him keep his secret.

I cannot keep my eyes off him. I am worried about my human, even if I know part of his attitude is because of how I have treated him. He has not lifted his head from where he placed it, his eyes closed, a frown set on his lips.

And he is not allowing me to peer at his thoughts, his mind working hard to keep me out.

Usually he pushes back when he feels cornered, but this time it feels like something more, like he is truly upset about something, and I fear I'm to blame.

He does not want to speak about it, and he does not want me to know why he is feeling this way. It has made me feel…anxious.

Something I have been feeling more and more with each passing day. For me, Luca is a pleasure beyond what I can express, but underneath it all is a deep fear of losing him.

I cannot bear it.

In this moment, his coldness is making my entire body ache.

Sinking down next to him, I reach out and curl my hand around his bare ankle. His head jerks up as I smooth my thumb along the soft hair just above it, wanting to be connected to him somehow.

Even though this needs to end soon.

It makes my hearts throb in ways I have never experienced, but it is for the best.

I continue to touch him, running my thumb up and down his ankle and foot before moving up his calf. He has beautiful legs with small freckles under the hair. Everything about him is perfect.

His eyes are closed, and his face is tucked into the pillow, but he is not pulling away, so I continue to travel up his body. Slow and steady, I move, hoping to soothe away any of the anger he previously felt.

I can tell it's working because he is relaxing under my touch. My hand trails up under the sheer tunic he's wearing, and he stretches out his leg, allowing more access to his body. He still does not look at me, but I will accept whatever he's willing to give.

My fingers drift up and down the muscles there, feeling them bunch and flex beneath my fingers. *So strong for a human*, I think as my hand grazes the curve of his bottom.

He lets out a soft huff of air, and I feel a shot of lust pulse through me. It is from him, I think, and I continue my exploration, enjoying just letting my hands travel across his warm skin.

He turns once more, his body prone against the sofa, one of his legs hanging off, the other on my lap. His bottom is visible through the sheer fabric, and not having an unobstructed view is making frustration well up

within me. I have no right to do it, but I still ruck the fabric up, turning my body so I can run my hands across those tight, muscular globes.

He grunts, shifting back, giving me silent permission to carry on.

I will accept it gladly.

I'm in no hurry to finish this either. So I take my time, running my hands up his other leg, working my fingertips into the muscles, just like Kori enjoyed when he'd had a long day.

Only Luca feels different; he feels like more.

He squirms under my touch as I near his ass once more, and I cannot help but part his cheeks and stare at his hole. It's soft and pink, tight in ways I can only imagine.

My thumb presses against it, and Luca lets out a soft gasp as I swirl my finger around his rim.

I have never entered a human. I never desired to enter Kori, and though I have spent my life preparing to breed a female Vyastil, I have never felt the urge to do it. Not until now.

I want to be cocks deep inside of Luca, the imprint of them visible through his stomach.

Luca lets out a soft gasp and lifts himself up, his head craned back to glance at me. He must have seen the vision in my mind. I was unguarded and careless.

'I want see,' he says with one hand, his signs sloppy and careless but clear. He's curious about what I have hidden between my legs.

I stare at him, my hands still on his ass, my thumb still pressed against his hole. I cannot show him. I am far too close to my rut to let him, but the hurt in his eyes when he flops back down makes me give in.

I can fight it off, the urge to breed. If this will make him feel better, if this will allow him to forgive me for having to suck him off in front of everyone, then so be it. I will manage to restrain myself for him.

I tug on his leg until he leans up once more, our eyes meeting, then I sweep my tunic up and away from my body. There are scars there, but not as many as I have on my back and chest.

Luca's eyes catch on them as he scrambles upward, moving toward me with curiosity. He places himself right next to me, his legs tucked underneath him, his tunic splayed open just like mine, giving me an unobstructed view of his cock and balls.

I wet my lips, turning my gaze back to his face.

His brow is furrowed, his lips pulled between his teeth as he traces a long scar that sits on the inside of my thigh. My skin flutters when he grazes it, and his eyes slam into mine.

‘From?’ he asks, and I inhale deeply.

‘Punishment.’

‘For-for?’

He is far too curious, and maybe this is good. Maybe this will distract my body from the urge to rut. Maybe these scars will keep him from asking to see my cocks.

‘I did not obey.’ It is all I can give him. And he seems to accept it because he leans down, his lips connecting with the marks of my shame.

I suck in a breath, my hand curling into his hair, knowing I do not deserve any of this, but unable to tear him away. I let his lips drag across my skin, the sight of him against me, the feel…the scent, is making my slit leak, my cocks hardening within me.

My tail wraps around his upper thigh, the tip of it sliding up through his crease.

He bucks back, lifting his head and meeting my stare, and I realize then that my hand on the sofa cushions has torn into it, leaving a large gash.

He must notice it too because the corner of his lips turns up and he returns to teasing me. *Perhaps this is my punishment*, I think as he pushes my tunic up further, guiding my knees apart, and finding each and every scar lining my legs, his tongue and lips brushing over each one in a tender caress.

It is almost too much to take, but I have gone through worse.

I can deal with this torture.

But then his thumb presses into my slit, and I feel a roar push up against my throat.

I swallow it down, my hearts thundering in my chest as he brings the wet finger to his lips and sucks it inside. My hand tightens in his hair, the other digging further into the sofa.

I lied. I cannot bear it.

Then he does it again, pushing in further, hitting the tip of one of my cocks and letting out a surprised gasp. My legs widen even as I tell myself to push him away, to put a stop to this.

But I cannot. I am at his will and mercy. He can have me in whatever way he wants if only he’ll forgive me for what I’ve done and what I’ll have

to do.

He shifts, his hand pressing against my chest and pushing me back, exposing me even more. My knees fall open, and my tail helps him situate his body between my legs.

Both of his thumbs are on my slit now, pulling it open, his eyes taking it in. I do not know what he thinks, but I can feel amazement pulsing through the bond, curiosity, and then lust.

“Beautiful,” he says with his voice, and my ears flutter right before a shout escapes me.

When his mouth lands on me, his tongue pushing inside, I nearly lose all control. My hand tears at the back of the cushion, trying to keep myself still, but I’m unable to. He’s tasting me, a forbidden thing to do, but it feels so…*good*.

I let out an unbidden shout, the vibrations rattling the walls, making Luca shiver. I am glad he is Deaf. The sound alone could have hurt a lesser human. And I do not know if I can control another from following.

His hands spread me open further, two fingers pushing inside, much like I do when I need to feel pleasure myself after being so close to my VySytheh, listening to him come, feeling his orgasms rippling through me.

Only this time, Luca is the one working me toward my own release.

It is dangerous, far too close to my rut to be safe, but I cannot stop him. And I do not want to. My cocks extend slightly, and his fingers graze them. He swirls a touch around one tip before moving up, touching the other.

Soon they will be emerging from my body.

I feel him drag his fingers down the base of one and curl around the top, making me arch my head back and let out another loud roar.

Luca’s tongue continues to lap at me and crest the opening of the cockhead. He does not let up, and I do not try to stop him. He continues to torment me until I am nothing but a mindless creature, a wreck of a Vyastil subservient to his human.

The heads are fully exposed now, and I see Luca suck the first one between his lips. My hearts are beating too quickly, and when he moves to the second, I bite down on my bottom lip so hard I taste blood.

He peers up at me as I continue to extend, a slow, almost painful process that has me unwinding. Ruts are never pleasurable, but I fear that with him, if I were to ever go into one with him nearby, it would be the end of me.

I would not survive it. I do not think Vyastil are capable of experiencing something so intense. It was bred out of us. We are not strong enough anymore.

His fingers slip into me, curling around one cock base and stroking as the other twists toward him, desperate for the same attention.

I buck up and wind my hand into his hair, tighter, demanding, wanting to pull him off and push him closer.

He doesn't let up, continuing to suck and tug with his hands and tongue and mouth until I am writhing beneath him.

My cocks are fully extended now, Luca sitting astride one of my thighs, stroking them together, his other hand on his own cock. The sight of it has me nearly sobbing with desire, a foreign feeling, something I have never experienced.

My hand escapes the ruined cushion, and I curl it around his neck, pulling him up against me, finding his lips with my own.

The way he kisses me, like he wants to own me, needs to possess me, has me tunneling my tongue down his throat. I feel him swallow around it as he continues to stroke me, twisting his wrist in a way that has me nearly coming undone.

He does not let up, and I'm not sure that I could stop right now. He is much stronger than me in this moment. He pushes me back down, and his lips find my cocks once more, licking and sucking, the width of them together far too wide to fit into his mouth, but he still tries.

It is not a sight I can take much more of. His lips are red and wet, his cheeks the color of sunsets on Earth.

He is beautiful, my Luca. I cannot harm him. I cannot breed him.

Even though I know this, I can feel the precipice of my rut. I need to be careful not to bring myself to that cliff, only to fall.

But I can take what I can without going over completely.

I feel something snake up my thighs, working its way between my legs. My release is close.

Luca is not letting up.

It seems he wants to make me feel pleasure as I have made him feel it.

I hold on to him tighter, fighting for control as a wave of pleasure rushes through me, pulsing through my bottom cock first and then my top, my release hitting Luca's mouth and tongue before splashing across his face and chest, dripping down his cheeks and chin as he continues to suck.

He does not stop, and I do not attempt to tear him away.

I cannot move, the feeling of ecstasy so intense my ears are ringing, my eyes seeing nothing but bright stars.

It goes on forever, in waves that I drown in. Until it finally settles and my entire body is numb and loose.

My hand falls from Luca's hair, my knuckles hitting the floor as I attempt to breathe. It is not easy. My lungs have lost the ability to function.

I feel Luca move between my legs, and my eyes flutter open, taking him in. He's drenched, my release clear and dripping down his skin.

The sight of it…a roar builds up inside of me, but once more I swallow it down.

I need to regain myself, my control. I let him have a taste, let myself be vulnerable, and came close to ruining it all.

My cocks retract, disappearing between my slit, my body still humming with delight and fear as Luca licks his lips, tasting me.

I know it is safe for humans. It has been thoroughly tested, but still.

This cannot happen again.

But I do not say that. Not when my Luca looks pleased, his hands trailing through my release adorning his body.

I have never seen anyone look so beautiful.

'I'm messy,' he signs, and I let out a grumble and then a nod.

He does not look messy. He looks like mine.

'I should go bathe.'

I nod again and then attempt to move, but find my legs and arms are not working. I fear I am broken.

'No, you stay. I'll come back and clean you up.'

He looks so happy, so content. The earlier anger is gone, and I find that I don't regret what just happened, even if that feeling may fade when I have to give him up.

He leans forward and kisses me softly, our tongues twining lazily.

I realize then that he got off as well, his cock no longer hard between his legs.

I like that more than I care to admit. He found pleasure in mine. Of course he did. He's my VySytheh.

What's mine is his.

He finally pulls away, and I feel the absence of him as if someone tore out my hearts and set them aside.

‘Okay, now I’m going,’ he says with a soft laugh and kisses the side of my mouth before pushing himself up. ‘Don’t move.’

I watch him turn and walk toward the stairs leading to the rooms, drops of me falling off him and onto the floor as he moves, and I realize that this is more symbolic than it should be.

Gerald meanders in and shakes his head at me before turning to push a chair against a wall.

I know, I think. I’m disappointed in myself as well.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-two

LUCA

THINGS ARE DIFFERENT NOW. Not completely. Eissa didn't suddenly turn into a font of knowledge and secrets, spilling everything he's been keeping back, but he's also not holding me at arm's length.

At least, not physically.

I wasn't banished to my lonely bedroom when night fell. I didn't have to beg for his attention. I didn't have to ask him to stay. After he fed me, he gently led me to his room, laid me out over his cool sheets, then sucked two orgasms out of me before pulling me close and wrapping all four limbs and his tail around me.

I slept solid—like I haven't slept in months.

Maybe years.

I was full of trepidation this morning when I woke, expecting to find him gone, but I was met with a cup of something that vaguely resembled tea and a bowl of brown sugar oatmeal he most definitely got from a market back on Earth. It wasn't the best breakfast, but the fact that he sat next to me, eating his weird mossy stuff and occasionally meeting my gaze, felt like it meant something.

'Do you want to go for a walk? I'd like to show you something,' he signs after clearing our dishes.

The offer is startling, and a small part of me feels a pulse of apprehension because the last time I was outside, Jyrion was there. I still

haven’t told Eissa about it, and I’m not sure why. At first, I told myself it was because he’s keeping secrets, so why can’t I?

But the reality is, something in my gut wants me to keep it quiet.

Guilt gnaws at me, but it’s forgotten when he opens the door and lets Gerald out ahead of us, then wraps his tail around my waist as we start down the path that curves to the right of the house instead of the left.

It’s new, and we’re almost immediately in the forest, a thick canopy blocking out half of the pale sun’s rays.

I like it here so much. It’s so different, gorgeous in ways I can’t really explain, and the explosion of color around me makes me wonder if they can see shades the human eye can’t.

It’s all so soft too. The ground, the bark of the trees, the leaves, the flowers. Everything on Erethar seems to be built for tenderness, to be delicate. And it boggles my mind how they can be at war with other creatures here.

Or that they can be treating humans like walking cum banks.

Part of me wants to ask, but part of me also doesn’t want to know the truth. I want to enjoy what this place is before I understand what the rest of it means and the glass is shattered.

His tail pulses against me as he gets my attention, and he’s pointing up ahead where the trail starts to incline. ‘Cave,’ he signs. ‘I want to show you.’

I stiffen. It’s not that I don’t like caves, except, well, I don’t like caves. They’re dark, which makes communication difficult, and they’re closed in, which is something I have never liked. Also, on Earth, they tend to be far beneath the ground, and I have seen way too many creepy reels of cave disasters where people have gotten stuck upside down and left for dead.

Eissa clearly senses my hesitation and stops walking. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I won’t be able to see you sign,’ I tell him, going for the easy answer.

His head tilts, then he shakes it. ‘There is light. Githyn,’ he spells. It’s a word I don’t know, and maybe there aren’t the proper classifiers in ASL for him to explain in a human way that I’ll understand what they are.

For now, I’m going to assume it’s a light source.

‘Very small inside?’ I ask. I take a second to shoot him images of what scares me, and he blinks in surprise, then his lips tilt up, and I think he’s probably laughing.

‘No. Not small. Trust me?’

I do, god help me. I shouldn't after the way he's kept me at arm's length, but I do. Instead of answering him, I offer my hand, and I don't know why, but I'm surprised when his palm presses to mine. His fingers are so much bigger and longer than mine, and his claws are just barely extended at the tips. They spread mine almost wide enough to hurt, but his skin is so soft. I can feel it fluttering every so often as he tugs on me and we begin walking again.

It feels like both forever and no time at all before we're halfway up a large, tree-covered hill and standing at the mouth of what is most definitely a cave. If I didn't have keen eyes, I might have missed it. The entrance is large enough for a Vyastil to walk through, but it's angled to the side, giving the illusion that there's a solid wall in front of us.

As I take a step forward against the hillside, I realize I can fit through easily.

Eissa goes ahead of me, his tail still around my waist, and the path ahead of us gets darker and darker to the point I feel panicked.

"Wait!"

Eissa freezes, then I feel him shift, and a second later, the way ahead of us bursts into bright pinpricks of light. For a moment, I can't see anything except a shower of stars, and then they settle into something almost like millions of fairy lights hung from the ceiling.

My chest rumbles with a noise of wonder as I step past the narrow path into the massive cave. The floor's covered in that strange moss that moves, and off in the distance I can see carvings on the walls in what's clearly the Vyastil language.

'Beautiful,' I sign. When I look over at Eissa, he looks a little uncertain, but his lips are curled up in a smile.

He pulls me close using his tail, then grabs me by the wrist and brings me to the far wall where some of the carvings are. Before I can ask what it's about, he presses my palm to the stone and after a second, I notice faint vibrations against my fingertips.

My brows dip. 'Don't understand.'

He lets me go. 'Singing stones. The caves are made of them.'

My breath catches in my chest as I lean my entire body against the wall. I can feel it now, and when Eissa reaches out and taps his fingers in a pattern against the wall, the vibrations get stronger. I press my ear to it, and I can only just make out a faint melody, and I close my eyes to listen.

From what little of his voice I have heard since meeting him, it sounds almost the same.

I feel a caress against my cheek, and when I open my eyes, I realize he's touching me with the tip of his tail, and I can't help a small grin.

'Beautiful,' I sign again. I'm running out of adjectives. Pulling away, I glance at the carvings again, then trace my finger over some of the looping scrawl. 'Do you know what it says?'

His shoulders rise and fall with a sigh as he tugs me toward a bed of the moving moss, and we settle against it. It feels amazing as it conforms to my body, and I lie with my feet resting against Eissa's thighs. His clawed, bird-like feet extend far beyond my body, and I feel him kneading into the moss for a moment, a bit like a cat.

And just when I think he's not going to answer my question, he lifts his hands. 'They're old legends and myths about the Vyastil before…' His fingers trail off, and his face suddenly looks sad. 'It was generations before I was—' He bites his lip, then spells, 'Hatched.'

My brow dips. 'Like an egg?' I make the sign for egg, my eyes widening when he nods. 'Vyastil come from eggs?'

He nods again.

I think I might have heard that from somewhere, but I figured it was just human slander, trying to other the monsters even more than they already are. But now I can't stop staring at him, trying to picture a tiny baby Eissa crawling out of an egg.

Are they big?

Are there females?

My thoughts must be loud because Eissa reaches into my mind to answer me. *There are female Vyastil, and the eggs are quite large. We emerge bigger than human newborns with the ability to walk shortly after birth.*

It shouldn't be an odd concept. Humans are one of the few animals on Earth not able to walk, like, almost immediately. But something about it strikes me as so…bizarre.

Will I ever see one?

Something flickers across Eissa's face, but it's too quick for me to get a read on it. When I try to prod at his mind, it's a steel trap. But it doesn't last. His words float into my head. *No. Vyastil don't breed often, and breeding is*

carefully controlled. There are only a few females, and they are kept far away from humans. Hatchlings are just as closely guarded.

Females don't need cum? I can't help but wonder.

He doesn't answer that one at all.

I feel a slight twinge of irritation that he's still keeping secrets, but I suppose he doesn't really owe me anything about Vyastilian culture or their breeding habits. It's not like we got together, fell in love, and pledged to spend the rest of our lives as a couple.

We fucked once in Vegas, and that was supposed to be it.

I'm only here because I was a nosy bitch and now a bunch of people are trying to kill me.

My Luca, he sends me. He pulls his feet back, then climbs to his hands and knees and stalks closer. The moss shifts around us to accommodate his body, and he presses me hard into the soft fauna, dipping his head low, nosing against my jaw.

As much as I don't want to like it, I do. So fucking much. I lift my torso, pushing into his touch, and I feel his fangs graze my neck. A wild thought rushes through me that I can't control.

Bite me.

Both of us freeze, and for a moment, I think he might. But then his long, forked tongue slides out and licks up my neck before his lips close around my skin, and he sucks. I gasp, arching into him, and his arms lift me off the moss and against his body as his lips find mine.

He's skilled at human kissing, and I can't help but wonder if it's from the human who came before me. The unfortunate one who destroyed Eissa's ability to let another one of us get close to him.

I shove the thought out of my head before he can find it and kiss him back, tongue tangling with his as both hands brush down his torso, fingers catching on his piercings before I go for his slit.

His groan rumbles into my mouth, and I swallow the sound down as I shove his tunic aside and let my fingers trace his small opening. It pulses for me, parting gently, and I slip two fingers in to feel the tips of his cocks, throbbing like they were waiting for this.

"Yes?" I murmur aloud.

He hesitates for only a second, then nods, but instead of pushing harder against me, he pulls back and looks down at my body.

I let him drink his fill with his eyes, his gaze tracking me as I touch my own throat, my pierced nipples, then brushing them all the way down to my waiting cock. I stroke it slowly, letting precum bead at the tip, tempting his resolve.

I know he wants me. I know he wants to taste me. I hold myself in my palm like an offering, and after what feels like a war between his mind and his hearts, his body sags forward.

His tongue immediately curls around the barbell in my left nipple, tugging until his lips are around it, then he kisses lower, tasting every inch of skin on his way down to the place he wants to put his mouth the most.

And when he does, a noise erupts from my throat loud enough that even I can hear it. It must rattle off the walls, the githyn glowing even brighter. But he doesn't seem to notice as he swallows me down, my hips thrusting up to fuck his face. His throat softens, and his tongue wraps around my shaft, milking me and drawing me closer until I can't hold back.

"Ah, fuck!" My lips and tongue stutter around the word, and I have no idea how it sounds, nor do I care. The only thing that matters is the way he suckles me until my balls tighten, and I begin to spill.

He drinks it down in powerful, heavy swallows, and my entire body goes limp as he slowly lets me go. I'm already spent from before, but I don't know that I'll ever get tired of this.

I want some of the herbs Everest takes because I want to give Eissa more than he's asking for. I want him to take all of it from me.

He slides his body alongside mine and pulls me into his arms. *Perhaps next time.*

I twist to face him and lift my hands because I'm tired of talking inside my head. 'Do you have the herbs at home?'

He bites his lip. 'No. We will have to see the Tarek.'

I have a vague idea of who they are, but he sends me an image of them anyway, and my breath catches. They're tall, with four huge tentacles instead of legs, thick arms, and horns on either side of their head. They have pointed ears like the Vyastil, but their fangs are so large they could be considered tusks.

'Friend?' I ask.

He nods. 'Some Vyastil will tell you they are not. That they are dangerous. But they prefer peace. They prefer to be left alone. Their home

has been hidden from us since the dawn of our species, and the Vyastil council has spent generations trying to find it.'

I hate that for them, and I can tell Eissa hates it too.

'My friend.' He sends me another image of a specific Tarek at a worktable surrounded by small vials, then he spells, 'SABIK.'

I have a thousand more questions, but right now, I realize I want to spend this moment content in his arms. I don't feel hesitation in Eissa any longer. He's not stiff. He's not pulling away.

But I also don't know how long this will last before he cracks and runs, so for the moment, I'm going to take everything I can get.

We don't stay in the cave for long, Eissa eventually pulling me to my feet and leading me outside.

'How you feeling?' he asks, his tail wrapped around my waist. The tip sneaks between the opening of my tunic in the front and rests against my bare skin.

'Fine. You?'

He leans down, resting his forehead against mine, his eyes closing. My hand rests on his chest, and I feel his hearts beating, quick and hard.

'I'm good. Would you like to go visit Sabik?' he asks, and I nod. I didn't expect him to take me to see him today, and my cock hardens at the thought of getting those herbs that make you come again and again.

Eissa must feel the lust coursing through me because he shudders. He knows what visiting the Tarek will mean for both of us.

The fact that he's willing to consume part of me like that…it makes my heart flutter excitedly in my chest. I'm a little wary still, but the newness of it, the thought of watching him unguarded, makes me think that this entire thing will be worth it.

And even if it's not, I'll get to experience Eissa drinking his fill.

From me.

'Yes. I want. Let's go.' I step forward, not sure where I'm going, but wanting to hurry. He tugs me back toward him, a smile on his face.

'That is the wrong way. We must take a portal and then walk from there. It is too far to travel by foot.'

I nod and then step into him, feeling his hand wrap around me as the other produces a portal key.

Seconds later, we're stepping through it, and I blink, the dizziness and pressure in my ears dissipating faster than last time. I must be getting used to portal travel. When I open my eyes, I see that we're in a different part of Erethar. It is colorful in the same way the space around Eissa's cottage is, but muted in a dreary kind of way. I glance at the long grass and the tops of what I think are huts in the distance, smoke billowing up from fires.

'Come,' Eissa says, holding out his arms. I stare at him.

'What do you want me to do?'

'I will carry you.'

That makes me snort a laugh. 'What? No. I can walk.'

'It is far, and we will move faster if I can carry you.'

I make a face, but something about wrapping my legs around him, about having my body pressed against his makes me eager to do it. So, I step into his arms, and his tail and hands lift me up, settling me against his chest.

My legs wrap around his back, my arms around his neck.

Just as I suspected, my cock is hard, brushing against his abdomen. I feel the flutter of his skin against it, and his eyes meet mine.

'We must wait.'

I lean forward and tuck my face into his neck, kissing along his throat, making his hands tighten around me.

Behave.

I let out a soft laugh and feel something pulse through me, something just beneath the lust and need.

Happiness.

Eissa must feel it too because he softens, nuzzling me for a long moment before shifting me in his arms and taking off.

His clawed feet dig into the ground beneath him as he runs, forcing my thoughts from the two of us rolling around somewhere, our bodies sliding against each other, wet and hot, to how strong he is, how fast. I hold on tighter, letting out a loud laugh at the feeling of moving so quickly through the long grass that seems to grab at my feet.

Everything blurs by as he moves, almost too fast for me to really get a look at the land before us. All I can make out are the moons shining down on us and the glowing plants twinkling at the edge of the forest.

You should carry me around more often, I tell him. *I had no idea you had so many talents.*

I have many you have yet to experience.

Will you show them to me? One day?

It's a question filled with hope, of something more between us, but before he can answer, he twists, and we're turning toward the mountain as he picks up even more speed. I feel the wind whipping past me, and I turn my face fully into his neck, holding on until his body begins to slow, and eventually his grip on me tightens right before he comes to a halt and lets me slip from his arms.

My feet hit soft ground, and I realize we're at an entirely different cave entrance. This one, instead of going up the hill, goes down, and I can smell something vaguely familiar. Something like…

'Water,' I sign.

Eissa eyes me, then inclines his head just once in a short nod.

I don't know a lot about Erethar, but I know they trace their time through the orbits of their moons. I know there's never a completely dark sky because there are four of them, and their atmosphere is thicker and doesn't allow them to see stars. And, while it rains often, their water collects in deep, vast underground oceans.

Water is a far more precious resource for the Vyastil. They don't bathe as often as humans, and it's only the elite that have things like bathtubs and showers. I haven't asked about the other Vyastil that don't live in the capital, but from what I heard about Cielo, my guess is they have some kind of rations, and they're probably not generous.

So, the fact that I'm even close to their water must be a huge violation.

I tug on Eissa's arm before we get too close to the mouth of the cave, and he looks back at me. 'Illegal?'

He frowns.

'I smell water.'

His eyes widen in surprise, and he takes a step closer to me. 'Don't tell. Secret.'

My first shared secret with Eissa, and it makes me feel…there aren't really words in any language for it. I don't feel good about it, and yet it's a softer emotion that I tuck behind my ribs as he turns and finally leads me down beneath the ground.

The dark envelopes us, and Eissa keeps me close as I trace a touch along the walls, following his footsteps. Before panic can sink in, the path starts to glow up ahead, and it widens before opening up to a massive cave.

It's similar to the one before, only this looks lived in. There are workbenches along the walls, and in the center, a massive fire is burning with something cooking in what looks like a fairy-tale witch's cauldron.

And then, as we shuffle toward the fire, a huge shadow emerges from the far end of the cave. My breath catches in my chest when I see him, and although Eissa has shown me images of the Tarek, nothing can prepare me for this one.

At first glance, he seems shorter than Eissa, then his tentacles roll forward, and he rises several feet. His massive torso is a rich indigo, and as he gets closer, I can make out faint tattoos along his arms, chest, and neck. He has silver and gold hair in waves rolling down his back, and on the sides of his forehead, short, sharp horns extend upward.

His ears flick much like the Vyastil's, and he turns to face me so I can see his fangs, which protrude just over his lower lip. There's not a chance in hell I'll be able to understand what he's saying with those in the way.

Beside me, Eissa inclines his head, and then he signs as he speaks. "Prince Sabik."

"Prince," I blurt out loud.

Eissa turns to me, and while he speaks, his voice also enters my mind. "Sabik, son of Kharrek, from the ancient lands of Syel. He is the fifth-born prince to his house."

Sabik speaks, and a moment later I feel Eissa push his words into my head. "What are the gestures you are making?"

I bristle. Are the Tarek like the Vyastil? Will he think I'm unworthy if he knows I cannot hear?

Eissa's tail curls around me. 'Peace. The Tarek do not share the same views as the Vyastil.' He tugs me a little closer as he turns to Sabik, and I feel the words as he speaks. "Luca is Deaf. He cannot hear. Deaf humans use a signed language on their hands to communicate."

'Do you have Deaf?' I ask Sabik as Eissa interprets.

Sabik's eyes widen, then he inclines his head. "Yes. It is rare, but it happens. We have more senses than humans do." He offers a tentacle out, and I see that it's covered in small suction cups, a lot like an octopus.

I want to touch, but that seems rude, so I keep my hands to myself, and eventually he lowers his…limb? Appendage? To the floor. Turning his back to us, he makes his way over to his worktable, and I try not to stare at the way he moves.

It's so…different. So strange. I wonder if I could be attracted to someone who looked like him, or would it be too much?

Eissa tightens his tail on me. *Do not think of such things. You are mine.*

Rolling my eyes, I turn to him and make an impatient noise in the back of my throat. 'I'm allowed to be curious,' I sign.

He purses his lips in irritation but says nothing else as Sabik gathers a few things into a small, black pouch. He brings it over and holds it out, the string hanging from long claws, and Eissa takes it, tucking it into his tunic.

"These herbs are quite fresh, so take care. They will be much stronger than the ones you're used to."

I don't bother to explain that I'm not used to any of them since Eissa's kept them from me this entire time. Hm, guess I'm still a little bitter. Eissa runs the tip of his tail up my spine and over the back of my neck, the gesture soothing some of the sting, and I feel my lips settle into a tiny smile.

Sabik watches the exchange, then smiles and shakes his head. "I am happy for you, my friend. The last time you had a human—" He keeps speaking, but the words suddenly go silent in my head, and I feel rage pulsing through Eissa.

I turn toward him and step out of his tail. 'No. You don't get to decide what I can and cannot understand. You don't get to cut off communication from me. That is cruel.'

Eissa's eyes widen, then his ears flick in shame, and he brings his fist to his chest. 'I am sorry.'

I refuse to accept his apology. I only turn when I feel a tapping on my shoulder, and I look over at Sabik, who is circling his fist over his chest.

"No," I say aloud for his benefit. "You don't have to apologize. That is for him to do." I point at Eissa.

His hands hover a moment, and then he says, 'Sabik treated my wounds after I was punished and lost my former companion.' His hands shake as he signs those words, and my breath catches in my chest. I had no idea he suffered like that. I saw the scars on his thighs, but I had no idea what they were from.

I point to his thighs, and he nods.

I don’t want to forgive him so easily, but things have been so much better between us that I can’t help softening as he extends his tail toward me, and I step into it, letting him curl it around my leg again.

“Thank you,” Eissa says and signs. “I’m in your debt.”

Sabik stares at me for another moment, then speaks, and I feel his words again. “Please come visit soon. I would like to learn your language. I am eager to study everything human.”

I shrug and look at Eissa, who doesn’t seem overly bothered by the idea. He nods, so I sign and say, “Okay.”

Sabik looks pleased as his tentacles roll him back, then he inclines his head to Eissa, and I hear him one last time. “I must go, but stay as long as you like.”

Eissa bows, and I follow suit, and it’s not long before the Tarek is once again out of sight and we are alone. The cave feels oddly empty now, and I step out of the grip of Eissa’s tail, but only so I can push against his chest and place my hands over his hearts.

I like feeling the way they beat.

I am sorry, my Luca, he tells me.

Closing my eyes, I press my forehead against his sternum. *When you shut me out, it hurts for many reasons.*

Never again, he vows.

I’m not sure I believe him, but when I look up into his eyes, he looks sincere. He takes my chin in a soft hold, then ducks his head and captures me in a kiss.

Let me take you home, my precious human. We have things to tend to.

And herbs to use?

His laugh rumbles against me. *Eager thing. We shall see.*

Yes. We fucking shall.

I know Eissa took those herbs and hid them when we returned home. I was with Gerald, petting his rough shell as Eissa disappeared back into the house, but he left his mind wide open the whole time. Almost like he wanted me to find them.

So I did.

Eissa is currently attempting to wrangle Gerald back inside, so I've slipped the small vial out from the back of his wardrobe, pressing two herbs into my mouth without thinking.

I know the Sabik said they were fresh and more potent, and only to take one, but I figured he was just being overly cautious. I want to make sure it works.

I want to make sure Eissa gets his fill.

I swallow the bitter taste, and almost immediately my body starts to tingle, my mind growing lightheaded as all the blood rushes to the space between my legs.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck.

I gasp, my hands grabbing onto my hard and aching cock, stroking it roughly, the need to get off almost unbearable.

Eissa, I call out, my body falling onto his bed, my hips thrusting up into the air.

A moment later, Eissa is in the doorway, his movements frantic. But then he inhales, his eyes raking over me, and he stalks forward.

'Did you take it?' he asks as he rips the tunic from my body, leaving me completely bare.

'Yes.'

'You never obey,' he signs, his eyes landing on my cock, my hand shuttling up and down it. It's not working, though; the relief I need can only come from his mouth.

"Please. *Please*," I beg aloud. I feel my voice crack and he falls to his knees, engulfing me entirely.

It's all I need to come. I erupt almost immediately, feeling his throat work around me as he swallows. And he doesn't stop.

I lie there writhing, my hands clutching his ears as he takes me over and over, my body filling only to be emptied again. My mind floats, pleasure and euphoria pulsing through me, my body floating through a hazy fog.

My Luca, I hear him say, the suction around my cock almost painful now, but it's not over. *You are delicious. I do not want to stop. I cannot stop.*

Don't then. Don't stop. I hold on to him tighter, keeping his face against my groin, his tongue doing most of the work, his tongue ring driving me over the edge once more.

I lose track of time, my mind moving between consciousness and reality, my body squeezing tightly before feeling as if it's going to burst

once more. Over and over until I find myself almost distraught when it's done, when Eissa falls against my thighs and rests his head against my groin.

He's not moving, and for a moment I worry I killed him, but when I feel his body jerk, I realize he's hiccupping.

Cum drunk. *Literally*.

I'd laugh if I weren't so wrung out.

My heavy hand settles against his head, and I run it across his hair, soothingly. My cock is soft against his mouth, and I gasp when he pulls the head between his lips, letting it rest there, right against his tongue. He suckles gently, and I close my eyes.

Are you okay? I manage to finally ask, my mind open wide at the moment, too exhausted to keep part of it shut away. I wonder if his is the same.

Yes. I am perfect. That was… His thoughts filter away, and I catch glimpses of the two of us, not images of us now, but in a few years. I don't know how I can tell, but I seem older, and there's a rhythm between us we don't yet have.

In them, Eissa and I are together, his arms around mine, his tail wrapped around my waist, our naked bodies writhing against one another. My legs are spread, his cocks tunneling in and out of me, so large and thick that I can see the imprint of them pushing up against my stomach, as if they're going to burst through.

It's so fucking erotic.

'I'm going to breed you.'

I feel the honesty in his words, and his need to mark me in that way. I feel his eagerness to watch as I grow round with his seed. It is pure and utter lust, the desire to possess someone, but there, beneath it, surrounding us is love, and I wonder if this is what he hopes for us one day. If this is what he wants.

To possess me? Love me? To make a life with me?

It gives me hope, my heart full, but then, with an intake of breath, it switches.

A scream, red-rimmed eyes, blood-soaked clothes.

Pain.

Terror.

And then nothing at all.

It’s then that I feel Eissa pull me close, tucking me tightly against him, his face pushed against my stomach, wetness lingering against my skin.

I try to tug him up, so I can look into his eyes, so I can ask what that was. Was that Kori? Is that why he keeps pushing me away? None of it makes sense.

But in a way it does.

I just wish he’d talk to me, would open up, and just let us exist as we were meant to. Because we were meant to. To love, to lust, to have.

But he doesn’t let me in. He’ll never let me in. Not all the way.

I let out a shaky breath, one of my hands stroking his hair, the other rubbing the tip of his ear, making a purr erupt from him, content and happy.

Does he not realize he showed me that? Does he not know I saw?

I don’t know, and I say nothing—just close my eyes and let him cling to me. I can only hope that one day, the closer we get, he’ll open up to me and will give me all of him.

Because I know that’s what I want. As hard as it may be, he’s what I want.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-three

EISSA

THERE IS A VERY human expression which I think the Vyastil should adopt—playing with fire. That is exactly what I am doing. I am full of his cum, feeling stronger than I have in…it's hard to calculate how many moon cycles it's been since I helped myself to cum like this. But my mind is clear and focused, and it's a stark, almost cruel reminder why we need humans.

Very little information exists on why our biology shifted. Young Vyastil are taught from hatchlings that the Tarek attacked us with a bioweapon that forever altered us. They unleashed an illness that made us immune to our own medicines, that destroyed half the female Vyastil population and forced us to make treaties with the Vorthex for access to Earth.

I believed it for so long, but the more my eyes are opened to what's going on around me, the more I realize the propaganda and lies. We've been stripped of so much without noticing, sometimes willingly surrendering things that bring us joy and make us happy because joy and happiness are what bring flaws to Vyastil society.

And by the many gods who watch us, how different would things be if I had seen these cracks before Kori…

No. I can't let myself think that way. Not with Luca warm in my arms, knowing he is VySytheh, and that it took every ounce of my self-control not to pin him, bite him, and breed him.

It's foolish to consider because he cannot produce an egg for me to fertilize. I will never see him round before he lays it. And I have never

wanted such a thing anyway. I brought up exactly two Vyastil from hatchlings.

One I can be proud of. The other…

A chime goes off in the room before I can finish my thought, and for a moment I feel panic because the last thing I want is for Luca to be disturbed. It takes me a moment to remember he cannot hear it as the alert continues to sound.

With a small groan, I carefully extract myself from his arms, looking down at the way he curls around my pillow and settles. Every ounce of me wants to stay and ignore all of my responsibilities, but maybe this was what some of the Vyastil in the past were talking about.

Love over obligation can be dangerous, and too many of my people are counting on me to stay focused.

Walking over to the small table beside my wardrobe, I stare down at my tablet and see an order from the council. No. Not from the council. From Prince Jyrion. He's given me a task in the archives, searching for an old treaty with the Tarek.

The fact that one might have survived would be a miracle. According to historians, only two treaties were ever signed, and the Tarek violated them both within weeks of signing. Not that I buy it, but in all honesty, I don't mind looking.

Access to the archives means I can do a little digging around in old records that haven't been cataloged in our current systems. It means a chance I can find something to back up our cause. Proof that our society did not need to erase everything nearly human in us in order to move forward.

Turning toward the bedroom, I walk in where Luca is still sleeping and feel a tug in my chest. The last thing I want is to leave him. I know I have done all of this entirely wrong. In trying to protect my cause and myself, I have neglected him.

If I had another choice, I would make it.

It takes only a moment for me to slip into my tunic, ensuring all of my scars are properly covered, then lean over my desk and leave him a note. It didn't take me long to master human script, but it's still quite shaky, so I hope he's able to read it.

I set it down on the pillow, then gently push into his mind and touch his dreams. He is outside by the lake. Home—his home. His brother is off in

the distance, and his parents are at the shore. The sky is a mixture of clouds and sun, and it is so beautiful. Just like him.

His gaze moves up, and he's startled to see me, but he doesn't know this isn't part of the dream. I crouch beside him and take his chin in a gentle hold before pressing a long kiss against his lips. I taste him—not quite him, but the memory of him—and hum gently.

He pulls back and tilts his head to the side. 'That kiss felt like it meant something.'

'It does, my Luca.' I hold his gaze for a long moment. 'It means that you are everything to me.'

I feel another small pulse—a melancholy ache because he thinks this is a dream. That even with all the attention I have been paying him, I can't possibly feel the way he does. I wish for nothing more than to tear this all down. To wake him and pin him to the sheets and show him that every word spoken here between us is the truth.

But I can't.

I gently pull away until I'm staring down at his prone body, and I resist the urge to touch him as I back away, turn, and then make my way to the portal. Before I do, I place that suppressant herb on my tongue and swallow it down, knowing that it will buy me more time.

Work will be long, but it might be productive.

And the sooner I can find concrete evidence that the council and the royals have been manipulating us for far longer than we've been led to believe, the sooner all of this can end.

Reaching for the steaming mug of vyloc tea, I let the brew soothe the back of my throat. The air in the archives is achingly dry. It makes my skin feel like it's cracking and peeling off of my body, but it's necessary to preserve our records.

Ancient records were carved into stone. They are kept beneath the surface of Erethar, in long, carved caves, shelved carefully where only the most elite can reach them.

A thousand third-moon cycles after carving our records in stone, the ancient Vyastil began to work with aylani paper. This paper usually keeps,

even in the most drastic conditions, but they were rolled so tightly that the insides began to rot.

The humans had a similar problem with their ancient people, only it was worse because Earth is so full of accessible water that it is devastating to ancient records.

Several hundred third-moon cycles ago, the royal family in power had put together an archive team to transfer the scrolls into digital format, but they were overthrown. Their views were not—as the movement called them—Vyastilian enough. They were too open, too lenient on affection and emotion.

They did not last more than three generations before they were unseated. I have often tried to find the two youngest. They were hatchlings when their parents were taken away in chains, but there were no records of what became of them. They simply vanished.

I was a hatchling myself just a decade after they were gone, and the memory of them was still fresh in many Vyastilian minds. I would overhear whispers that they were right, couched in fear that speaking those whispers too loudly would be a life sentence in the mines.

And eventually those whispers died out, and people lost hope.

And when they lost hope, after a while, they forgot it was possible to hope at all.

With a heavy sigh, I roll up the current scroll, feeling somewhat defeated; there was no mention of the Tarek at all. I know this is potentially futile, but this is either a task to drive me insane, something I would not put past Jyrion, or it is a task attempting to destroy what little evidence we have left that things used to be different.

And that when they were different, we were still a thriving people. If that ends up being the truth of my situation, I will have to act quickly and preserve what I find before Jyrion learns about it.

And if I turn up nothing, then I might have to ask Sabik if he's willing to take the risk and share what his people have saved from our shared history.

That may be asking too much from my friend, though.

Standing up, I stretch my arms high above my head. I can feel a slight twinge on my scars. They're only ever noticeable in moments like this when my skin feels too tight for my body. I get a single, flashing memory of being on my knees, of the whips raining down on me, of the look on the

guard’s face as he was allowed to draw blood from an elite without losing his head.

It steals my breath for a second, and it’s then I realize my mind is vulnerable because I feel a quick little tug in my temple, and then Luca’s presence is there.

You are hurt.

Gripping the edge of my desk, I tip my head down and breathe. His presence is a balm to my frayed nerves, and I want nothing more than to crawl out of this little hole and into his arms.

But I cannot.

I am fine, my Luca. I am sorry for this morning—

Before I can send the full thought, he’s gone. Irritated with me for leaving. When I push further, there’s a wall up, and as much as I want to crash against it until he lets me in, I don’t. He deserves his space after everything I have put him through.

Straightening, I walk to the small door and wrench it open, but the second I turn into the hallway, I nearly collide with a large Vyastil hovering just a few steps from my door. It only takes me a moment to recognize him, of course.

I have known him since he was a hatchling. A small, squirming, upset thing placed into my arms as I was ordered to turn him into a Vyastil worthy of something. And I have been forced to hide my pride in Dhoryn for far too long now.

He did not turn into the warrior that Rathyn became. He did not bring pride to our people through strategic battles or the death of high-ranking Tarek.

He was always studious. Always a scholar. I would find him awake at all hours, poring through old history files, and it took me too many years to train him not to ask inappropriate questions every time I brought him with me to council.

There is no shame in his curiosity, and I did my best when he was growing to teach him that there is a time and place for those passions. But he took that as a rejection. Then Kori came along—Kori, who got more affection from me than Dhoryn ever did. He watched me dote on him, and I could see the craving in his eyes for touch, for comfort, for tenderness.

I could not take the risk of giving my hatchlings what I knew would encourage them to grow into Vyastil that would deserve the love of a

human. They would be thrown into the mines and left there to rot if anyone on the council so much as suspected I was not teaching them the proper Eretharian way.

And Dhoryn has hated me for that.

The last time we spoke with any real meaning was after I was released from my punishment, battered and torn to pieces. He carried me home and fed me every tonic he could get his hands on until my wounds stopped bleeding.

I recall his eyes meeting mine and a single question slipping from his lips. “Was he worth it?”

At the time, I believed Kori was. And even now I know he did no wrong. His crime was merely existing, and we both paid dearly for it. I couldn’t give an answer to Dhoryn then, and now watching him stay distant and cold from his own human is unsurprising, but it aches in a way I did not expect.

I will perhaps tell Luca the story someday, when I find the courage to tell him the entire truth about Kori. But I doubt it will be any time soon.

“Why are you here?” he growls, taking a step back from me. His eyes cut down to the sleeves covering my scars, and I know he’s remembering.

I fight the urge to lay my hands over them, like a barrier of protection from the past. “I was put on an assignment by Prince Jyrion.”

Dhoryn’s eyes flash. He and Jyrion attended the same classes together when they were young, and while Dhoryn never got as much attention from the prince as some of the others, Jyrion was always unnerved by Dhoryn’s stoic, silent nature.

And for that reason, I know he uses council gatherings to torment and humiliate Dhoryn and his human.

“I will let you continue your wor—”

“I need your assistance,” I blurt, cutting him off.

He blinks in surprise. “Mine?”

“Perhaps you can come to my cottage—”

“No.”

I swallow heavily. I know he’s been near it recently. He’s met Luca, who has become something like friends with Dhoryn’s human.

“It is…important,” I tell him.

He studies me for a long time, then just as I’m certain he’s going to reject me again, he inclines his head once.

Relief hits me like a physical blow. “If you wish to bring your companion…”

“I do not wish it.”

I fight back a small sigh. “I know that he and my—” I nearly slip there. I nearly declare Luca as mine. “My companion have become acquaintances.”

His eyes flash at me, and his ears flick in irritation. “I do not wish them to be anything. Your human will give Lucius ideas.”

I want to argue, but in reality, it’s probably true. My Luca could start a rebellion on his own if he ever had the urge. “I think he simply enjoys the company of other humans who speak his language. He has been…lonely here.”

“Then perhaps you should spend more time with him instead of putting that burden on other Vyastil’s companions,” Dhoryn bites out.

I suppose, in a way, I deserve this. I deserve more from the former hatchlings I did not give the time and attention they were quietly begging for. I could have created an army full of power, strength, and empathy if I had given the future any real thought.

But I failed us all in that regard, and it will take so much more effort now to enact my plan and break the conditioning on those willing to be broken.

And I can’t guarantee Dhoryn will be one of those Vyastil.

“The offer will remain open. I am staying at my cottage for the time being.”

He stares at me another moment, then turns and walks off without a proper farewell. I fight the urge to chase after him, to beg him for forgiveness. To tell him that I did everything wrong and I want the chance to make it better.

But what good would that do?

Taking a fortifying breath, I wait until I can no longer hear him, and then I continue my journey down the corridor to finish my search for the files that I need. It is our only hope left to fight the upcoming war, and my faith in this cause—for the first time in a long while—is starting to crack.

As much as I wish to return home immediately, I need to meet with Sabik. He answered my message just as I was finishing up for the day, and after hearing rumors that Prince Jyrion left the capital early and hasn't been seen for hours, I decide it's the best and safest time to visit him.

I know I'm being watched. Not as carefully as some, but since the attacks on the portal from the Earth side, and the growing resentment in humans, most of the Vyastil elite are on edge. Our relationship with the humans is young and fragile, and while we want them to believe we could overpower them in a moment, the reality is that, without the help of other Eretharians, we would lose that war.

And by the gods, I cannot imagine what those humans would do to Vyastil they captured. They would not keep us in mines.

I have read their history, and I do not like to think of what they will come up with. This problem must be solved before violence takes the place of rationality.

I step outside to use a portal to the Outerlands when I notice a storm off in the distance. It is the season for them, and every instinct I have is telling me to rush home and be with Luca. The first one Kori ever experienced left him shaking and terrified.

I do not want Luca to be alone for that, but the time I have for Sabik is short, and it's yet one more reminder that right now, duty comes before anything else. Regret wraps itself around my insides as I press the portal key to the lock and input my destination.

The guard doesn't look at me twice as it opens, and I step through and glance around. I'm closer to the storm now, and if I want to beat it to the caves, I must run.

The Outerlands right now is somber after Jyrion took his anger with Cielo and Rathyn out on a single village, and the rest of the villages haven't recovered. There are cooking fires, but no song. There are Vyastil walking around, but they do not meet each other's eyes.

And every time they see someone like me, all I can scent in the air is fear.

I want to collect them all and tell them that it won't always be like this. That I am not like everyone else. But I've given them no reason to believe me—nothing to have faith in other than the promise that if they step out of line, entire generations will be sent underground and starved to death.

So I turn, my claws digging into the ground, as I begin to run.

I make it up the mountain in a few quick strides, ducking into the cave before the winds begin to pick up. The trail is easy to follow, and eventually I move into the massive room that has been carved out for the Tarek for eons.

I stare around at the etchings on the walls—the ancient prayers, the history that most of the Vyastil have long-since forgotten. I trace a few lines with my claw, but before the moment can get to melancholy, I hear Sabik coming.

His tentacles have a very distinct sound as they push him along the cave floor, and when he appears, I can see he's dripping wet. Even with all of my knowledge, I do not know where most of the Tarek reside, but I do know they have access to water in ways we do not.

I bow my head as he approaches, and he does the same.

"It's good to see you so soon, my friend." He glances behind me, then looks surprised. "You are alone."

It takes me a second to realize who he's looking for. "Yes. I was given an assignment in the capital archives today and could not bring my Luca."

Sabik hums in the back of his throat, the trilling sound cascading around us. "He is…a unique one. It is a wonder they let you keep him with such a defect."

My skin flutters, and my ears pull back with anger. I have since lost the instinct to believe that Luca has any sort of defect. His lack of hearing has never stood in his way.

"Forgive me," Sabik says. "I did not mean to imply he was unworthy."

I take a breath and give a single nod. "Even the council understands that humans are…" Different? That being imperfect means nothing because they are beneath us? It's hard to find the words to describe.

Sabik simply nods his head in understanding. "Well, it is a shame he is not here. I have been practicing his language. It's one of the more fascinating ones. It is a wonder we do not have something like it on Erethar."

I understand what he means. Signed languages are expressive and almost instinctual. Their lexicon is built on culture and relationship to shared experiences, and for Luca, it means even without access to his mind, I can read him.

I know how he's feeling in his most subtle expressions and gestures, and he finds no reason to hide any of that from me.

“I will bring him to see you soon,” I say, though it’s hard to get the words out when I’m feeling so possessive. The feeling has been growing over the last few days, and it’s starting to become a concern.

Sabik comes a little closer and his head tips down toward me before his eyes widen. “Your breeding time is nearing.” The fact that he can scent it on me is not a good sign. “Does your VySytheh know?”

Shame courses through me. I have not spoken to Luca about my breeding time—that I will be forced to attempt to create a new Vyastil with whatever female has been selected for me. That there is a very real risk to my life because it is likely I will not be able to perform.

I have also not explained to Luca that he is VySytheh, either.

I have failed him in many ways, and I don’t know if I will be able to recover his trust in me when all of this is over.

When I look up, Sabik is across the room, and he takes a pouch off his table, returning to me with his arm extended, the strings hanging off his claws. “This may help delay your breeding time, but please be warned that if you take this, when your rut comes, it will be stronger than usual.”

“How much time will this give me?” I ask, taking the pouch.

“If you are generous with using it and are willing to accept the risks that come with using it often, you may be able to delay it for two second-moon cycles. But I can’t guarantee it won’t come close to destroying you if your rut comes on and you are not able to sate yourself and your urge to breed.”

I understand what he’s saying. It could very well kill me, and I cannot take Luca in a rut because it may very well kill him.

I need to ensure I have something in place to keep my plans going, even if my breeding time takes me out. But that is something I will worry about in the next moon cycle. For now, I can protect myself and Luca.

“Thank you,” I tell him softly, tucking the pouch into my tunic.

He nods, then tilts his head to the side. “You did not come here for a solution to your rut. What is it you want from me?”

“Information,” I tell him. I must be blunt now. I have so little time to waste. “The Vyastil cannot keep living like this. It is destroying who we are.”

He hums.

“But it’s hard to break centuries of conditioning where we see everyone else as the enemy. And the lies that this is how the Vyastil are meant to be.”

His tentacles move restlessly along the ground. “And how may I help with that?”

“I need some sort of proof that the Vyastil and Tarek were allies in the past. That we were more alike. That there is a shared history beyond the wars.”

His gaze flicks to the side, locking on the burning fire. “That is dangerous, my friend.”

“I know, but I think it’s the only hope I have of convincing people to join me.” I pace, my tail flicking along the ground as restless energy courses through me. Off in the distance, I hear the rumble of the storm, and then I feel a prickle of fear coming from Luca. I send him a question, asking if he is okay. I get a brief flash of the incoming storm. I push feelings of safety and home at him, to let him know he is safe, though I get no further response.

He is being brave. I know this. He is…not alone?

Fear races up my throat as I try to shove my way into his head, but the only image I see is a fuzzy glimpse of Gerald before I’m shut out again.

I force a calming breath into my lungs. At worst it will be Dhoryn with Lucie come to visit, but I think I’m just being paranoid. One wrong move and I will lose Luca, and I am far too aware of that possible future for my liking.

Sabik makes a small trill in the back of his throat to regain my attention. “Is something wrong?”

“The storm,” I say. “It will be Luca’s first.”

“He is strong. He is not like the other,” Sabik tells me. “It will be less safe for you to go out there to be with him than it will be for him to keep shelter in your home.”

He’s right, of course. I can’t risk using a portal here in the caves, and the last place I want to be when the storm hits is in the forest. Walking over, I take a seat beside the fire as he follows me, settling on his tentacles, towering over me, though he does not make me feel small.

“There are stories the Tarek tell of when the Vyastil and we used to live in harmony. I believe there are records somewhere, but it will take me a while to find them.”

“I will do anything for your help,” I tell him.

He thinks quietly for a moment. He’s calculating, I know that much. He is much more than he presents himself to be, and I know he’s using this to

gain the upper hand. But, I suppose, the Tarek deserve the upper hand after everything we've put them through.

"When this ends—if it ends in your favor," he says, and I try not to flinch, "whoever you put in power must be willing to negotiate the return of our lands."

The Outerlands, he means. Where all the herbs the Tarek have cultivated now grow. The lands we stole by force without any regret.

"Assuming I survive it, I will do everything in my power," I promise him. I know it's impossible to avoid all conflict. I know my plans may fail before we get anything off the ground.

There is a very good chance the threadbare treaty with the Vorthex will hold, and they will side with the Vyastil army. And we do not have the power to overthrow them. But what is the point if we do not try?

There's a shift in the air, and I realize the storm has passed. Climbing to my feet, I brush bits of dirt from my tunic, then turn toward Sabik. "Thank you for everything you have offered to do."

He nods, but just as I step away, a tentacle reaches out, and he snags the end of my sleeve. "Do you really intend to change things?"

I frown in confusion.

"I want to know this isn't some ploy to assuage your guilt that will result in nothing more than you dying and everything remaining as it is."

There's something in his tone I can't read, but he's not asking because he's concerned for my life. "I want change, not just for myself, but for every Vyastil who has been denied their VySytheh. I want to return to our nature, not to the manipulated, carefully controlled society those in power think we should have."

"We can fight," he says.

I blink at him.

"We have the power to fight."

"Sabik," I say slowly, because surely he is saying this to save face. The Tarek have lost every battle for their lands. They retreated into the dark caves, and the only time we fight them now is when they show up on the surface in larger numbers.

He shakes his head. "We do not fight for what we lost now because land is not worth the lives of our people."

It is a novel concept. One I believe in, but one I have not ever seen put into practice.

“We have everything we need,” he goes on. “But we are also very aware that things on Erethar cannot continue as they are now. You have created something with humans that will not last. They are not like the Tarek. They will not give up for any reason, once enough of them have found their voice to protest what the Vyastil are doing.”

I take in a shuddering breath as I think about Luca’s battered body and how close he came to death at the hands of his fellow humans. “I am too aware.”

Sabik comes to a stop close enough that I catch the scent of water on his skin. “Then you know you cannot win this battle alone. I don’t know that the Vorthex will risk their people if the humans are involved. They need them to survive.”

I incline my head. So do we, though not in the same way.

“We have power, Eissa. And we are prepared to use it if we know that there are Vyastil willing to step up and make things better.” He pauses. “We have an army.”

My hearts kick up in my chest, and for a moment, the world tilts sideways. An army. A willing army. “I…do not know what to say.”

“For now, say nothing. But let me bring this to my people, and the next time we meet, you will tell me of your plans. All of them. We want the same thing you do, Eissa.”

“Peace,” I say, and he snorts because we both know it’s so much more than that. My body calms and regulates, though there’s still a restlessness in my limbs that has nothing to do with this. I need to see my Luca. I need his arms.

I need to reassure myself he is still here, and that he is okay.

“We will speak soon,” I tell him.

Sabik holds up a hand, then moves to the end of the cave and digs around in a small bag. He returns with a palm-sized, oval device that reminds me of an egg. “You can communicate with me on this. Vyastilian technology cannot track it. Give me some time to speak to my people, and then I will let you know when we can come to the negotiating table.” He pauses. “In the meantime, I will do my best to find the records of when the Vyastil and the Tarek were friends.”

“I owe you everything, my friend,” I murmur.

“You owe me nothing. You have always shown me a kindness that helped restore my faith in your people. We have seen the Outlanders and

how they are treated. We want freedom for you too, and we are willing to shed and lose blood if it means all of this can end."

Leaning in, I touch my forehead to his and let myself have, for the first time since this idea began to stir in my chest, actual and tangible hope.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-four

LUCA

I'M IN A MOOD. Eissa disappeared after giving in, making me wait for more.

He pierced my dreams, made an appearance, made me yearn, and then left.

Of course he did, I think as I pet Gerald's hard shell, my eyes on the waving trees outside. The sky is green, turning from a sickly yellow to something deep jade. I don't know what that means here on Erethar. On Earth, I'd assume there was a tornado on the way, but here…I have no idea.

I inhale and feel the air in my lungs, metallic and sharp.

In the distance, I see the clouds pulsing, flickering on and off like a lightbulb. Beneath my feet, I feel the faint rumble of something deep and raw.

I hold my breath, my eyes taking in the horizon.

If this is a storm, then it's different from the ones on Earth.

I watch it all, my eyes never wavering from the oncoming clouds, the way they move closer and closer, visibility becoming thicker with each passing second. I think I'm safe here.

Right?

Eissa wouldn't leave me here to fend for myself if these storms were dangerous. But not knowing, not having any idea what to expect leaves me breathless.

He prods the outskirts of my mind, a small, cautious knock.

I let him in, just for a moment. Because I'm scared. Because I have no idea what is going to happen when it passes over me.

What's wrong, my Luca?

I let him see it, the storm nearing me with each passing breath. I feel the rumble from his chest, almost vibrating within me. It makes me feel safe, like a cat purring against me.

But he's not here, and all I have is the lumbering kradun with its antenna-like eyes swiveling this way and that before ambling off to rearrange more furniture.

It is safe. Do not worry. I would not leave you alone if it were not.

I don't feel safe. I feel alone and afraid, but I can't let him see that, so I shut him out, creating a barrier between us.

Gerald moves one of the chairs into the kitchen, and my gaze follows him before turning out to the green clouds growing nearer when suddenly the door swings open, and I see a familiar face appear. Bright blue hair, wind-swept and wild, long pierced ears, and eyes that are far too sinister to truly trust.

Jyrion.

'You are here,' he signs and then steps into the small foyer, his tunic billowing out as the wind sweeps by. His eyes take me in for just a moment, something in those rainbow orbs before he blinks and it's gone.

My jaw tightens, and I lift my chin. He was kind to me the first time I saw him here, surprising me with his knowledge of ASL. He doesn't seem like the type to embrace anything that's human. The way he ensured the Vyastil humiliated their companions made that obvious.

But when he's on his own like this, he seems…different. I don't trust him, but I'm curious enough to play along.

'I'm sorry for just appearing,' he goes on when I offer him nothing. 'I was on my way to see a friend, but the storm caught up with me. I have nowhere to take shelter. I did not think anyone would be around.'

The words he's chosen in ASL aren't quite right, but I understand what he's trying to convey. I stand up and close the door against the wind that is trying to keep it open.

He swipes at his forehead and offers me a slight bow.

'Of course, come in.' My signs more formal than usual. He is a prince, after all. Just then, the house shakes, and my gaze is drawn outside once more, to the strange-looking clouds. 'Are those dangerous?'

His eyes follow my finger, and he says, ‘They are called cyrathis. They are needed to replenish the water we have underground. They are not dangerous, but the storms can be violent.’

‘Why the clouds green?’ I ask.

He cocks his head, and I see his ears flutter. He turns to watch the swirling clouds approach, his shoulder brushing mine. ‘I do not know how to explain in human terms, but they are green from the…” his longer fingers flutter, and he adds, ‘*pollen*. It is Erethar’s way of reseeding the planet.’

I don’t understand it, but I nod, feeling my heart rate triple as the clouds pass overhead. The wispy windows grow hazy as the wind whips against them, and bits of green pollen flutter inside.

Jyrion draws me a little closer, his hand wrapping around my arm and tugging me toward the middle of the room. I hold my breath and feel the house shudder and shake—even Gerald stops what he’s doing, his antennae swiveling around as if sensing the possible danger.

For a moment, I think it will last forever. Seconds stretch into minutes, and the longer I am in Jyrion’s arms, the more I feel like I’m betraying Eissa. I begin to stiffen, to try to come up with a reason to let go, but before I can panic, the storm is done, leaving everything still once more.

I let out a small breath and then a relieved laugh, happy someone was with me through this. I was more afraid than I care to admit. I wish it were Eissa, of course, but since he’s not here, I’ll take a native to this planet rather than being alone.

‘You look worried,’ Jyrion signs, his body turning toward mine.

‘I was. I didn’t know what that was. I’m glad you showed up when you did.’

‘Eissa is not here.’

The way he signs that, no inflection on his face to state it’s a question, has my guard up. Did he know Eissa wasn’t here? Did he show up on purpose? I don’t know, but I do know to tread carefully.

‘No, he’s not. He’s been called away.’

‘I see.’ Jyrion glances around, looking at the kradun who is lumbering toward him. He steps out of Gerald’s way when he gets too close, and I see a small curl of his lips as Gerald knocks over a small table.

‘The kradun are high maintenance. I’m surprised Eissa has one with his schedule.’

I say nothing, not sure if something I say will get him into trouble. I feel I've already caused him so much. I don't want to make any of it worse.

'You want something to drink?' I ask, waving my hand to get his attention.

I don't know the Vyastilian customs, but offering a refreshment isn't weird, right? It seems cross-cultural. Or maybe even xeno-cultural? Is that a word?

'Yes, thank you.' His eyes move down to my cock, and I turn away.

'Not that. That is for my Vyastil.'

Jyrion's lips turn down for a moment, but he corrects it quickly, his lips thinning.

'Another drink? Not cum,' I clarify.

His chin dips, so I turn and make my way into the kitchen, my sheer tunic fluttering around me. Thank god I put one on today. After Eissa left me, I slipped one on in case I ran into anyone on my walk.

And right now, I wish I had human clothes on so I could cover up entirely.

The problem is, when I arrive in the kitchen, I realize I don't know what the Vyastil drink. I don't even know if I've ever seen them eat anything except for that weird mossy plant. I was served something at the council meeting, but I'm not sure that's something they partake in or if they just serve it to companions.

Besides cum, do they even drink anything at all?

'You do not know much. Eissa's other companion did not know much either,' Jyrion says when he sees my uncertainty.

He moves past me, one of his clawed and heavily adorned fingers sliding across the countertop. His eyes shift to meet mine, and I find myself blushing under his scrutiny. He's not the same Vyastil I saw at the gathering, where he had Everest take that herb and come over and over. He's not jeering, he's not smirking. He's just…normal.

It's unsettling.

I can't let him see he has me rattled. 'I know. I'm still learning. I have only been here a short time.'

'You must learn, or else you will be a disappointment. Do you know what happens to companions who are disappointments?'

I say nothing.

His mouth stretches into a slight grin. 'Ask Eissa. He's very familiar.'

My stomach churns at that. What happened to his other companion? Was he really that upset with his failures that he got rid of him? Were those images of blood and screams I saw on Eissa's orders?

When I say nothing, he turns, 'I will show you what we like to drink.' He opens a few cabinets, searching for something, and when he finds it, he turns to me. He twists the top open and holds it out to me, an earthy scent drifting toward me. 'This is vyloc. It is…like a human tea.'

'Do you use water? I thought it was scarce.'

'It is. No, we do not use that. We use…' His hands hesitate. 'It comes from the trees.'

'Sap?' I fingerspell.

He nods. 'Yes, a kind of sap.' His nose wrinkles and he stares at his fingers. 'That is an odd word.'

I say nothing, watching as he concocts the beverage, letting the lichen-like substance stew in the sap, creating a steaming, bubbling mixture.

It's not quite like tea, but something close, I guess.

It's certainly not what we were served in that back room at the council meeting.

When it's done, he holds it out to me to try, but I shake my head, not wanting to consume anything he's made. I really don't trust him. I don't know why he came all the way out here. It's unusual, and the more I think on it, the more it seems…wrong.

He places the small wooden mug to his lips and sips, his ears fluttering as he swallows. He's leaning back against the counter, one of his hands curled against the lip of it.

My gaze shifts outside, and I see the sky has cleared, the rumbling green storm clouds having passed. He must notice where my eyes have landed because he sets the mug down and straightens.

'Thank you for letting me come inside. It is never good to be caught in those storms.' He startles me a moment later when he drags his flat palm over the side of my neck. He does it with purpose, like it means something. I've seen some Vyastil greeting and farewell customs, but this is…new.

And something in my gut tells me it's something I should be very, *very* aware of. But I'm not going to ask him why he did it. Or what the meaning is. Instead, I take a single step back, then gesture for the door.

'I wish you safe travels to your destination,' I reply. When he doesn't move right away, I walk toward it, and it seems he gets the message. I can

feel him standing close behind me as I open the door, the fresh, warm air hitting my lungs.

I inhale and steady myself, turning around to face the prince.

Our eyes meet, a curious expression flickering across his face before it's gone.

Then he dips his chin, his forehead touching mine, before he turns and disappears.

Eissa appears sometime after dinner, the heavy vibrations of his feet on the bare floor waking me from a comfortable doze. He finds me on the couch, tunic splayed open, my cheeks flushed from the heat coming in through the windows. It was cooler earlier, but the storm seemed to have carried it away, leaving only warm, humid air behind.

I blink over at him, my eyes heavy with sleep. He sets something next to me, his ears downturned, but then he catches my gaze and those ears perk up, fluttering.

My heart thunders in my chest as he steps toward me, his tail wrapped around his waist tightly as if to protect himself. I let my legs fall open and feel the weight of him leaning down to brush his face against my neck.

Only he freezes, his chest heaving as he smells me.

Then he's pushing up, his eyes narrowed.

'Who was here?' he asks, a slash of a hand through the air.

I shake my head, my mind still foggy from sleep. But then I remember. Jyrion. How he just appeared and then lingered, his hand brushing across my neck before he left.

Did he do that on purpose?

I believe he never does anything without one.

'Yes. But it was nothing more than someone seeking shelter from the storm.'

Eissa lets out a long breath, his tail curling around my wrist and placing it on his chest.

I splay my fingers there, feeling his hearts thundering beneath my palm.

'You are not to let anyone in here without me knowing.'

I glance away, trying to pull my hand away, but he stops me, holding me against him.

‘Am I a prisoner here then? Am I not allowed to have friends?’

‘You are, but strangers…there are never strangers just wandering around this part of Erethar.’

I glance away again and his hand comes up, cupping my chin and forcing my gaze to him.

‘Who was it?’

I huff.

‘If I don’t tell you, will that make me a disappointment?’

Eissa’s nostrils flare, and he shakes his head. ‘No, you will never disappoint me, my Luca.’

My eyes sting, and I feel myself exhale before lifting my hand. ‘It was no one, just a stranger I let stay inside until the green clouds passed by.’

He stares at me long and hard, a prodding in my mind, but I shut him out. For some reason, I don’t want him to know. Not yet.

‘I do not like that they touched you.’

‘It was nothing.’

He doesn’t believe me, but he knows he won’t get anything else from me. Not right now. So he settles for sinking down against me, his body flush with mine, his face tucked into my neck, scenting me.

I arch up into him, unable to help myself. I love when he’s on me like this, possessing me, like he wants to devour the entirety of me. It makes me feel seen, makes me feel needed.

And I want to be needed by Eissa.

His body hums with pleasure as I continue to rub against him, his teeth raking against my sensitive pulse point. He must feel how my heart beats for him.

His tongue snakes out and licks at my skin, making me shiver, lust pooling low in my belly.

He shifts, peeling my tunic off, exposing me fully to him, and then proceeding to lick and kiss his way down my body, taking time to suck on my pierced nipples and then swirling his tongue around my navel. When he gets to my cock he rubs his cheek against it, my legs perched on both his shoulders.

His eyes lift up to meet mine, and we connect, my hand touching his face gently.

Then he pulls me into his mouth, sucking me just like he always does.

Like he's never had anything so good in his life.

And maybe he hasn't. I'd like to think that.

I groan and arch up into his touch, my legs tightening around him as he pulls me into his throat, his tongue wrapped around me, making me lightheaded from the pleasure of it. When I come, I gasp, catching my breath, my body curled up into itself, my hands digging into his hair and pulling.

He hums, a low vibration in my balls.

But he doesn't stop. Not there. No, instead he pushes my knees up into my chest. I can feel my hole opening and closing, wanting to be filled.

I want his cocks inside of me. Oh god, the stretch. Everest did say that there's a breeding herb that allows us to open for them, to take their cocks fully.

I want that. I want it so fucking bad.

He pushes his tongue into me, and I groan, my eyes rolling into the back of my head. The sensation of his wet tongue inside, the way it pulses and tugs on my prostate. It's almost too much.

And yet never enough.

I hear him then, an odd sound moving through my mind.

I will have you. One day. I want to breed you. I want to see you fat with my egg.

Never in my life have I thought I'd want that too, but then I envision it: the two of us on Earth, a small mini-Eissa in my arms, his tail wrapped around my wrist. It makes something inside of me explode in sensation.

And then I realize my cock has erupted again, spilling my seed against my stomach.

He pulls out of me and laps at the mess I made, his eyes closed as if relishing it.

When he finishes, he moves back up my body, his head resting against my shoulder. He's heavy, but I can take it, my hands moving around him, holding him to me tightly. I can feel his cockheads against my stomach, hard and throbbing.

I can take care of that for you.

His breath hits my chin, and then I see him, his hands moving through my mind. *If I start, I fear I won't be able to stop.*

I trust you.

You shouldn't. I cannot control myself. It is too soon…

His words trail off, and he exits my mind, leaving it buzzing. So I do nothing but hold him, allowing his full weight against me as I doze off to sleep.

The Eretharian atmosphere feels denser than Earth's. That much is obvious. The moons must be closer too, and their star must be incredibly bright for it to shine through. As I've been told, we're not in the same universe as Earth. It's similar but not the same. And the portals aren't a matter of folding space or any kind of physics humans understand.

When I asked Eissa about space travel, he simply shook his head and said, 'No. We don't do that.'

It was so final. So…interesting.

It's not something I'm willing to push, but being on my own so often has left me bored and curious. There are no books here. Eissa left me with a tablet that I can't really navigate and with the direct order to stay out of trouble.

Which I have.

Mostly.

I'm still feeling little punches and pulls of guilt for not telling Eissa about Jyrion's visits, but the truth is, I'm terrified about what he'll do. There's history there that I don't quite understand yet. Jyrion seems pretty set on getting under my skin.

It's like he doesn't want me to believe Eissa. To trust him.

To feel safe.

I know better than to tell a Vyastil like Prince Jyrion that Eissa and I can hear each other's thoughts, but it's a wonder he can't sense how close we are. He's got an agenda; I just don't know what, and I'm curious how much of what he says is lies encased in small truths, or the other way around.

Luckily, the next day, Eissa doesn't have to run off. I wake in the morning, basking in his soft touch, claws running over my skin as he traces the shape of my body. I feel a little surge of need as his velvet-soft skin skims over mine, but he doesn't seem to be working toward our usual conclusion.

He takes cum, of course. He settles between my legs and sucks me off with gentle pulses of his long tongue wrapped around my dick, milking me for every drop. But unlike Rathyn—greedy for it over and over—Eissa seems satisfied with just once.

Or maybe he's settled?

Maybe this has something to do with his former human.

Maybe I'm not enough.

I don't let myself think about that too hard.

We have a small water allotment which Eissa has allowed me to use to bathe, and I find him sitting outside watching Gerald tear around the yard, moving logs and boulders to his heart's content.

'Do kradun get lonely?' I ask as I sit.

Eissa frowns at me. 'I don't understand.'

I lift my hands to tell him that Jyrion was surprised a Vyastil as busy as Eissa would have a pet like Gerald, but that would blow my cover. Instead, I lean back on my elbows and don't answer him. My eyes close as I let the warmth of the Eretharian sun cascade over my face, my lungs filling with sweet air.

It's still a little humid from the storm yesterday, but it feels nice. I shudder when Eissa pushes some of my hair back from my forehead, then taps his claws along my cheeks and nose. I know he's tracing my freckles.

'You are beautiful,' he signs with purpose when I finally look at him.

I can't help but smile. The way he makes me feel, god, I wonder how I lived without it for so long. How am I supposed to cope when all of this is over and he sends me home? He is the Vyastil-human liaison, so I know he'll still have business on Earth, but it'll be different.

And as much as I miss my family, I don't want them at the cost of losing Eissa.

'You seem deep in thought, but you won't let me in,' his hands complain.

I've gotten better at shutting him out, but it's a necessity if I'm going to try to figure out why Jyrion's taken such an interest in me. He's shown so little regard for humans so far, so I know something's up.

I shrug. 'Just thinking about home.'

Eissa's face does something complicated, and his ears flick. It seems like maybe he's irritated, but I'm still learning all of his expressions. 'It shouldn't be much longer.'

I offer him a noise of acceptance, then I sit up. ‘Tell me more about your old companion.’

He stiffens. ‘No.’

I don’t know why the rejection hurts so much. ‘Was he like me?’

Eissa meets my gaze. ‘No. Nothing like you.’

“Okay,” I tell him aloud.

He breathes in deep, his chest expanding, then I feel him tapping against the inside of my temple, asking to be let in. I prefer sign to speaking in our heads. But even so, when he enters my mind, I can understand him even if I don’t fully understand the words. He sends me images and the meaning behind what he says, and it’s all a perfect blend for conversation.

But I don’t want to lose sign in the process.

‘Please?’ he asks.

I relax my mind and feel him ease inside, filling me. It’s like a warm hug from the inside out, and I hate to admit how much I love it. How much it comforts me. But it does.

Kori was one of the first humans I met who was truly interested in me. My differences made him curious. The fact that I was nothing like a human was enticing. But he still made me feel good about myself. Losing him was hard.

My heart aches for Eissa. I understand what he’s saying from both sides. I’ve been seduced and fucked by hearing guys who wanted to see if it was different with a Deaf man. I get stared at in public when I sign. Though I can’t hear them, I know people mimic my accent when I vocalize.

Sometimes I feel like a circus animal.

But Eissa sees me.

But I also understand Kori’s perspective because Eissa is inhuman. He is a Vyastil. A monster. He will never be like me. By all rationality and reason, we shouldn’t be compatible.

And yet, he feels like a piece of me that’s been missing all of my life.

I don’t know what to do with all of this, and as much as I want to ask more about Kori, I don’t. Not yet. ‘Will you have to go back to the capital soon?’

Eissa bows his head and nods. ‘Yes. I have been given several assignments that have me working there.’

‘I cannot go with you?’

I’m unsurprised when he shakes his head. ‘It would not be safe. I won’t be able to maintain the ruse of you as my companion for that long.’

He sends me images—a fantasy of us surrounded by Vyastil, him holding me and kissing me in the human way. He sends another of him kneeling at my feet and taking my cock tenderly, fingering my ass, then making me come for a crowd.

Showing them that it’s so much more than a simple exchange.

My Luca.

I close my eyes as I let those words hit me in the chest. Reaching over, I cup his cheek, then lean in for a kiss. His long, thin tongue wraps around mine as I breathe in deep, then let myself settle into what we are.

For now, what we could be will stay a fantasy. But I have no plans of giving up on making that a reality. No matter how much Eissa fights me on it.

He calls me his. But he is also mine.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-five

LUCA

EISSA HAS his mouth wrapped around my cock, his tongue doing things that make my eyes cross. It's mid-afternoon, and he cornered me in the main room, pushing me down against the small sofa, spreading my legs, and taking me.

I am moaning and thrashing, my tunic simply useless, the front splayed open, my cock hard and aching between his lips. I don't know why companions ever bother with clothes. They're useless.

Eissa's chest gives off a soft vibration, and I can't help but curl my hands against his ears and tug. I like the feel of the metal rings beneath my fingertips, and the way his ears flutter at my touch. There is so much that can be said with his ears.

And I know that right now, he's enjoying himself.

I am too. I'd like to enjoy it more than once, but Eissa has hidden the herb that makes humans come over and over, so I don't know how to make myself give him what he actually wants.

I beg him to let me. *Please, Eissa. I can give you so much more than this.*

No, not now, my Luca. Not now.

Why not? I want it.

I feel him shudder. *I want it too, but I cannot. I will lose control.*

I want to see that. I want to feel it.

Enough. Enough, please, he begs with a desperation he probably doesn't feel often.

I let it go, disappointment rushing through me. But then his hands push my knees up against my chest, his throat swallowing around me. I cry out, and I feel the soft push of something against my hole. I know it's his tail, the blunt edge wet from something. His slit? Lube? I don't know. I just know how good it feels, working its way inside.

I want that. Want to be split open by his cocks, to be bred by him. I know it's not possible, but I want it all the same.

The blunt edge pushes in, and I feel the slight *pop* as it moves, the muscle contracting around the pulsating ridge. Then the vibrations around my cock intensify, and my body bows up, my cock erupting into his mouth.

He swallows it, like he always does, his body sagging against mine, his ears twitching. It's only when he sits up, his gaze shifting to the door, that I realize someone is here.

Eissa's long tongue swipes out and rolls over his lips, the lingering cum disappearing, and then he's up. He moves to the door, his shoulders tense, and his tail whips out behind him like it's ready for an attack. The sight of it has me sitting up, pulling my tunic around me tightly as I watch the door swing open.

And then in walks Lucie, his eyes tentative and cold as he assesses the house he's walking into.

Right behind him is Dhoryn.

Lucie's eyes meet mine, and his mouth breaks out in a wide smile.

I ignore the Vyastil, who are staring at each other, and swing up from the couch, lunging toward my friend. Or whatever he is. But he knows sign and can communicate with me. It's so rare here on Erethar.

"Hi," I see him mouth as his hand clasps mine and he pulls me to another room. I can feel Dhoryn's eyes on me, on us, watching us until we are no longer in their line of sight.

Once we are free from prying eyes, he lets my hand fall and his own lift. 'Oh my god! So good to see you. When Dhoryn said we were going somewhere today, I had no idea what to expect. I thought it would be another blow job against a rock…' He grins at me and clasps my hands again, squeezing gently. I do the same, feeling grounded for the first time in ages.

‘What’s his sign name?’ My fingers lift, and I fingerspell his name slowly, trying to piece together the letters. Lucie nods and then drags a D handshape down the side of his mouth.

‘Why that?’ I ask, and Lucie shrugs.

‘Something I gave him when I was first contracted to him. He’s always frowning. Always serious. I’ve never seen him smile.’

I understand that, so I nod.

‘And yours?’

I show him my name sign, a smattering of freckles up my cheek, and then he asks for Eissa.

I tap an E over my heart, and Lucie bobs his head, a generic sign anyone can understand, but he doesn’t know the true one. The one I never use. It’s something special, something that signifies more.

I won’t tell anyone, not until I know we can be more than what we are right now.

‘Why you here?’ I ask, leading him to two small chairs in the corner. They weren’t meant to be here, but Gerald rearranged this entire room today, and it actually worked out perfectly.

‘I don’t know. Dhoryn wanted me to come with him. When we got here, he said he needed to speak to Eissa. I can’t say no to getting out of the house.’ He huffs and turns his gaze away, looking sad before his eyes meet mine once more. ‘Doesn’t matter. All that matters is you’re here, and I’m so happy to see you again. I was worried you’d only see me in the forest with Dhoryn between my legs, or at one of the companion meets with…’

His signs trail off, and I add, ‘Dhoryn between your legs.’

I can tell he’s laughing, can almost feel it as his lips curl up, his chest bouncing. Then he swipes at his eyes and nods.

‘It’s not easy being a companion. Especially with a dark and mysterious Vyastil.’ His sign for them is different, not what I use with my friends, so it takes me a moment to understand what he means, but when I do, I bob my head.

‘I know. Eissa is mysterious. He keeps so much from me.’ My fist clasps before my mouth, and Lucie’s eyes soften.

‘Same. I know very little about Dhoryn. And anytime I try to ask, he shuts down and pulls away. It’s like this terrible push and pull. I hate it.’

‘Same. Eissa,’ I begin. ‘He is very… anything about Eissa’s other. How long have you been a companion?’

‘A year. Almost. It’s coming up to our anniversary. We’ve lasted longer than most.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that most companions don’t last that long. The Vyastil grow tired of humans; they change who they want to suck quite often.’

My face pales, and Lucie must see it because he shakes his head. ‘It’s not that way for everyone…’ But it doesn’t ring true. It seems like maybe this is the way the Vyastil operate.

A disappointment.

That word rings through my mind, and I wince.

‘Do you know anything about Eissa’s other companion? Kori?’ I fingerspell his name quickly, and Lucie’s eyes widen.

‘No. I haven’t heard about him, but I did hear about…’ His hands trail off, and I lean forward.

‘What?’ I press.

‘I mean, I heard about Eissa. Vyastil talk about him.’

‘What do they say?’

Lucie looks toward the door and then back at me, turning so no one besides me can see his hands when they move. ‘They say he’s rebellious.’

My eyes widen, and I let out a small laugh at that. ‘What? No way. He’s the biggest rule follower ever.’

‘I mean it. That’s the word they used. I guess he did something years ago and it had something to do with the death of his companion. Ever since then, he’s been making up for it.’

‘Did the companion have a name?’ It has to be Kori.

‘They never said a name. We are nothing more than bodies to be used, so it’s no surprise, but I know it didn’t end well. I think…’ Lucie works his bottom lip between his teeth. ‘I think it’s one of the reasons Dhoryn is so distant from me. Or at least I think that could be why. No one wants to get in trouble…’ His hands fall, and I can see the movement of his chest as he sighs. ‘It doesn’t matter. My contract is almost up anyway, and he’s not going to renew it.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Like I said. We’re disposable. I bet that’s what happened with that companion, Kori. I mean, Eissa seems like a nice one, but you never know. They can’t be trusted. Not with your heart anyway.’

I don’t like that. It’s so contrary to what I feel for Eissa, so different from what I’ve come to learn about him. But he is distant. He keeps me at arm’s length most days, but he also lets me into his mind. He kisses me like I mean something.

I don’t think every human Vyastil pairing has this.

I wish I could speak to Dante or even Everest. I want to ask someone. But the way Lucie is blinking wildly, I don’t think he feels the same about Dhoryn, or if he does, it’s not reciprocated. They’re not bonded like Eissa and I are.

Lucie swipes at his eyes, and I reach out and squeeze his knee. ‘How about we go see what they’re talking about?’

‘They won’t like that. Dhoryn said they needed to speak privately and to not disturb them.’

I wriggle in my seat. ‘They don’t have to know we’re watching… listening,’ I correct.

Lucie’s eyes widen. ‘You mean spy?’

‘Yes. I know where they’re chatting. Maybe you can hear them through the walls? I know Gerald made a hole in one of them two days ago. I put a chair over one side and a plant over the other, so Eissa wouldn’t see it.’

Lucie’s eyes are nearly popping out of his head. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Yes. I want to know what they’re talking about. You can listen and interpret…’ My heart is beating frantically in my chest, and then it suddenly drops when I realize how ridiculous this all is. They won’t be speaking English. They’ll be speaking in their own language. One I can’t lip-read and one I’m sure Lucie doesn’t know.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asks, and I shake my head.

‘Never mind. They won’t be speaking in a language we can understand.’

Lucie shifts on his seat and looks a little sheepish. I clock it almost immediately.

‘What?’ I ask, and he shrugs.

‘I may know some. I’ve been getting lessons. But you can’t tell anyone. Not even Eissa. This is my secret, my superpower. I don’t want to give it away.’

‘Who’s teaching you?’

‘I can’t say, but…I know enough to know what the Vyastil are saying when they talk in front of me. It’s hard to form the words, but I can hear it

and understand.’

‘How long have you been practicing?’

‘Since I arrived.’ He rolls his lips between his teeth and peers up at me. ‘Can you keep a secret?’

I nod, and he glances around before signing softly, ‘Sometimes I can hear his thoughts…it helps with learning the language.’

My eyes widen, and I almost blurt that I can do the same with Eissa, but I don’t. I hold it inside. ‘Does Dhoryn know you can read his mind?’

He shakes his head and then shrugs. ‘I don’t know. How can he not know I’m in there? If he does know, he pretends he doesn’t.’

I can almost feel his sadness from where I sit. ‘I won’t tell anyone.’

He looks relieved.

I stand up, almost knocking into the small table that is suddenly in front of me. Gerald must have moved it while I wasn’t paying attention, and I hold out my hand to Lucie. ‘Come on. Let’s spy.’

His hand lands in mine and we’re off.

I find the hole in the wall that Gerald made and move the plant aside as noiselessly as possible. It clings to the remains of the wall it’s grown around, but we’re able to maneuver it away enough.

Then Lucie and I crouch down near it, and he puts his ear as close to it as possible. The plant reaches out and touches his cheek gently before Lucie carefully swats it away. I’m riveted, watching him intently as he listens. I want to know what he hears, want him to interpret right away, but I’m not sure that’s possible. Trilingual interpreting can’t be easy. He has to process the words from Eretharian to English to ASL, a complicated process.

I let him sit there undisturbed, my heart beating frantically in my throat.

If we’re caught, I could be in trouble. Or even worse, end up more of a disappointment than I fear I already am. But a few minutes later, Lucie lifts his hands to relay what he heard.

‘They were talking about us. It was the end of a longer conversation, I believe, but I did hear your name and mine. But then they switched to something else. Something about a Tarek and a rebellion.’

‘What?’ My eyes go wide. He can’t possibly be talking about the rebellion on Earth…can he?

‘Yeah. That’s what I heard. Now they’re talking about something else.’ He holds his finger up to his lips and tilts his head, the plant reaching out to touch his cheek once more.

This time I’m the one to peel it gently off his skin, rerouting it to the wall. I play with the leaves a bit as Lucie listens, then he turns to me, his eyes a little wide.

‘What’s wrong?’ I demand.

Lucie shakes his head, then moves away from the hole for a second. ‘Dhoryn doesn’t talk to me much. He doesn’t like to speak about where he grew up or anything like that.’

I’m not sure where he’s going with this. ‘Understand. Eissa same way.’

Lucie nods, and his lips part on a heavy breath. ‘Eissa has known him since he was a…’ His hand hovers like he’s not sure what sign he should use. Eventually he signs, ‘born egg child,’ and then fingerspells, ‘HATCHLING.’

I knew he parented Rathyn, but Dhoryn too? It’s impossible to imagine. ‘Did he raise him?’

Lucie shrugs. ‘Don’t know.’ I’m not sure why he looks so bothered, but I don’t have time to ask. ‘Come. They’re finishing up. I don’t want to get caught.’ Lucie stands, and we quickly make our way back to the room we were sitting in before. We situate ourselves on the couch, the pulse in our necks beating frantically. I can see his move beneath his skin, and I reach out and touch it.

He lifts his hand to cover it, a small smile of thanks on his lips.

And then Eissa and Dhoryn appear, Dhoryn eyeing Lucie from head to toe before snapping his fingers and pointing to the place beside him. Eissa’s ears turn downward at that, but he says nothing, just lets Dhoryn take the leash around Lucie’s neck and tug it, bringing him to the front door.

I watch them go, wanting to hug Lucie before he leaves, giving him a proper Deaf goodbye, but he isn’t allowed that. They turn and leave, my heart sinking at the information I just gathered and what it may mean for the future of the Vyastil. And of all humankind.

‘How was it?’ I ask when Eissa continues to stand there, his eyes moving from me to the door.

‘It was fine.’

‘Did you talk about anything important?’ I ask, and he cocks his head.

‘No. Just two old…friends catching up.’

That makes my chest tighten, and my lips curl up in a fake smile. He’s lying to me. That conversation was more than that, but then again, he has secrets. Many of them. But I do too.

My mind flashes to Jyrion before I shove it aside. I don’t want Eissa to know, to see.

I tuck it down and stand up, moving up to Eissa, my hands dragging over his chest, my lips meeting the crook of his neck. He doesn’t need to tell me. I want him to, but I know I’m nothing more than a companion, a human with a cock he enjoys. This will end soon, my time on Erethar coming to a close. I can’t stay here forever.

My lips leave his skin, and I see the flutter of his ears as he meets my gaze. He’s surprised I’m not pushing, not asking for more. But that’s because I already know. Not the whole truth, but enough of it.

‘You look stressed,’ I sign, my hand moving down to touch his slit. I feel him shudder as I push a finger into him. ‘Why don’t you lie down, and I can help you relax.’

I feel his growl as his tail wraps around me, tugging me close. And then he lifts me into his arms and carries me upstairs to his room, where he lays me on his bed, and we feast on one another.

Eissa is almost always gone when I wake, so finding myself pressed against him as I rise to consciousness is…strange. My cheek is pressed to his chest, and I can feel the gentle inhale and exhale in the way his ribs expand and contract, and he’s got a hand in my hair, claws gently tracing lines around my scalp.

I don’t know if he’s aware I’m awake, but I take a moment to simply bask in the feeling of being with him. Everything between us is so… complicated. We had a moment in Vegas that probably should never have happened, and then we were thrown together to save my life, and now…

Well…

Now we’re here, and I’ve fallen for him in ways I can’t describe. He lives in my head, burrowed under my skin, and I know that eventually

breaking the contract will leave me shredded and bleeding. But I also don't know if whatever this is is meant to last.

Monsters outlive humans by centuries, and everything I've learned so far is that companions rarely last long. So what does that mean for me?

Do they take and take and take until we have nothing left to give, until we are simply husks, and then discard us back where they found us?

There's a rumble beneath my chest, and I glance up to see Eissa staring down at me with an expression I can't read. If I knew better, I'd say it was fury, but I've seen him angry before, and this is not it.

Come, my Luca.

His voice gently trickles into my head, a melodic song somewhere between English and Eretharian. I fight the urge to obey, but it only lasts a second before I'm on my hands and knees. Eissa sits up against the headboard, then he draws me over his thighs and tucks me close.

My hard cock presses against his lower stomach, and his ears flick as I rock it gently against his soft skin.

He takes in another deep breath as his gaze meets mine and holds it. Then he lifts his hands. His fingers are almost trembling as he signs, 'I will never abandon you like you are nothing to me. That is impossible. You are mine.'

My chest aches. I think about his former human. About the way Jyrion spoke of Kori and how, without direct words, implied that Eissa was as careless with him as Dhoryn has been with Lucie.

I open my mind and let Eissa read that fear without showing him it was Jyrion who put that fear and doubt into my mind.

Eissa's ears flick and his eyes flash, and he bares his fangs at me. With one arm lashed around my waist to yank me even closer, his other hand lifts to sign, 'Never. You. Are. Mine.'

I lick my lips. 'For how long?'

Until all three of our hearts cease to beat.

I let his words flow from my mind into my limbs. My cock is harder than before, but I don't necessarily feel the urge to push further into it. I want his mouth on me, yes. That's never in question. I want the tip of his tail or his two dicks to stretch me wide. Want his fangs piercing my skin, claws tearing into the tender flesh of my back.

I want to be marked as his and kept that way.

But I also want more. I want to know him. I want to understand everything.

He lets out a heavy sigh, then pulls me until I'm lying against his chest. At first I think it might be his way of shutting the conversation down, then his fingers wind into my hair again, and I feel the pressure of him in my head.

Allow me this, he asks. *It will be easier if I can tell you and show you.*

I realize this might be a lot. It might be too much. But I need it. I need to understand him better. Lifting my hand, I nod my fist. 'Yes.'

He wraps his tail around my leg in a possessive hold, and as I close my eyes, I start to see flashes of images. It's Kori, I realize after a moment. Tall, thin, the perfect set of cut abs that exist in young people who don't even need to try.

He's gorgeous, with a full head of dark hair and wide eyes that seem to hold a curiosity most people don't have. He has an angelic face with perfect dimples in the center of each cheek, and a sunny smile that lights up the room.

I feel the memory of Eissa's chest going warm when he sees him. Of the need to know him, to please him, to taste him. I feel Eissa's yearning for him, and also the feeling of being blocked.

He could not hear inside Kori's mind. I don't know why, but that startles me profoundly.

I did not understand love, Eissa tells me. *I did not understand how profoundly deep humans were capable of feeling. I knew that they were different from the Vyastil. They were more primal, more in tune with their own nature than we had become. I knew we had been like that once, but it was so, so long ago.*

Slowly, as time went on, I allowed myself to feel for Kori in a way that would have had me arrested for treason. He never told me the words that he loved me, but he was attentive. I felt cared for in a way that I had never experienced before.

I whispered secrets to him. I let him in close.

And then he was taken from me.

My breath catches in my chest when my head is suddenly flooded with images. Kori is kneeling on the floor, his mouth bleeding. His hands are tied behind his back, and there's a thick collar around his neck. Eissa is in chains, face horrified, a sense of impending doom in his chest.

Jyrion is standing over Kori with one clawed hand holding him by the hair, and he's…he's smiling at Eissa. He looks as though he's taking pleasure from the scene.

Next, there is a dark room. Eissa is being forced into a half-kneel. Whips are cutting into his flesh, leaving scars on his body that would render him imperfect in the eyes of all Vyastil.

If he is ever exposed, he will lose his position.

Jyrion isn't there for this. Eissa is alone in the dark, flayed open and raw, and not sure if he's going to live.

This deep in his mind, I should be able to feel his pain, but I realize Eissa's shielding me from it. *Let me have it,* I beg him. *Please.*

No, my Luca. I will give you almost anything, but not that. Never that.

It's not worth the fight. I allow the memories to flood my mind. An eternity in the dark, whipping old wounds open when they start to close, no hope of herbs or cum to heal him.

Jyrion appears, and I feel Eissa's inability to tell how much time has passed. He's scarred now, permanently. Jyrion drags a finger over the uneven lines across Eissa's arms, and he smiles at him.

"Your pet is dead. Let this be a lesson for you so you never forget your place or to whom you belong."

I sit up with a gasp and realize that I have tears pouring down my face. I can still feel Eissa's agony—not from the whipping, but from the pain of knowing that Kori is dead and he blames himself for it.

A tender hand lifts, and Eissa's impossibly soft fingers gather my tears away before he leans forward and licks my cheeks clean with his long, thin tongue. The piercing traces over my jawline, and I allow myself to feel a comfort that I've never felt before.

'How did you survive it?'

He must know what I mean. Not being whipped raw, but the loss. I've felt grief before, but nothing like he did. How can he possibly take the risk on me now? God, it's no wonder he shoved me away like he did.

Eissa gathers me back against his chest, and I feel a low rumble. His purr eases some of the ache I still have lingering in my chest, and eventually he kisses slowly and carefully over my temple and my forehead.

Resting my ear against his chest, I trace a line over his bare, exposed arm. He's the only Vyastil I've seen who covers themselves from head to

toe, and now I get why. I've seen his scars before—but now I understand them.

My finger traces over a particularly thick one that wraps around his forearm from his elbow to his wrist. He flinches, but he doesn't pull back. With a heavy breath, I lean forward and start to kiss each one.

'Luca,' he signs in my periphery, where I can see him. 'You don't need to do this.'

I lift my head. 'Yes. I do. You deserve tenderness. Jyrion was wrong. You do not belong to people who would make you suffer for the crime of being in love. And I will kill anyone who hurts you like that again.'

His face does something strange, his eyes large, his rainbow irises all but floating on the pitch-black pools of his sclera. He is, in this moment, the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I open my mind to let him feel that.

He sucks in a breath as he takes that thought in, and then his claws tighten on me, and he yanks me up into a searing, powerful, possessive kiss.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-six

LUCA

THE KISS GOES on for ages, our tongues twisting together, my body grinding against his. I'm hard, aching even. I can feel his pleasure from my movements, can feel the tremble under his skin as I run my cock through his slit.

I know he won't fuck me, but maybe I can fuck him. He's wet, dripping even. I can feel his cocks extending, and I grind mine against them, feeling the rumble in Eissa's throat with each thrust upward.

His claws are digging into my skin, his skin flushed a dark purple as we move against each other. Then his legs spread, wrapping around my waist, and I stare down at him, feeling what he wants.

He wants me to fuck him.

I reach between us and slide two fingers into his slit, dragging along his ribbed lengths. He groans, and I do too as I continue to slide my fingers in and out of him. His eyelids are fluttering, his mouth opening and closing as his cocks drip onto his stomach.

It's not enough. I want more.

I bite and lick down his chest, lapping up his slick with my tongue. When I push his legs wider, he arches up. My mouth lands on his slit, my tongue pushing inside of him. I can feel his pleasure wind around me, the way his entire body is vibrating, making my own cock leak.

I feast on him, tasting the sweet slick of his slit.

Fuck, he tastes good.

I moan and feel Eissa shiver beneath me.

And when I've driven him to the point of near completion, I drag my body back up his. Our eyes meet as he pulls me into a frantic kiss, biting and licking inside of my mouth. I push my cock into his slit. It's wet and warm, my dick sliding against his. It's different, new, and I love it. His legs wrap around mine, his tail possessively curling around my neck as I fuck him.

I'm terribly close to release, and so is he. I can feel it, am experiencing it with each frantic thrust forward.

I have never felt like this, my Luca. Never. Need. I need.

His broken words in my mind float in and out, growing more incoherent the faster I fuck him, and when he arches up, his tail tight around my neck as his mouth opens, I feel it more than I hear it. But it's a roar, deep and rattling, shaking the bed and walls around us. His slit tightens, his cocks leaking. It's not a full release, not quite, but it's enough to have him sag against the bed, his eyes closed as he exhales shakily.

The sight of him satiated is too much.

My head falls back, my arms trembling as I try to keep myself upright, and I explode, filling him with my cum.

His legs tighten around me, and he holds me there, my hips shifting back and forth as I shudder through my release.

And then I fall onto him, my chest heaving, my entire body shaking. I'm still inside of him. He won't let me go. Not that I want him to. I want to live inside of him in every way.

I let my lips drag along his throat, anywhere they can reach. My free hand runs up his ear and tugs on it. He shudders again, his cock sputtering, the slippery liquid wetting my stomach as he comes once more.

I relish it, the feel of his extended cocks against my stomach, the way they vibrate against my softening cock.

I don't want this to end, but it always has to.

He turns his head, and I see him reach for his tablet. It's on the small table near his bed. His eyes flash across the screen, reading whatever message was just sent, and I feel him sigh.

I pretend I don't notice, just continue lying on him, feeling his cocks retract, my own finally slipping from his slit.

He taps me on the back, but I ignore that too. I don't want him to leave. He always fucking leaves.

I feel him sigh once more and then we're rolling, his large body over mine.

'I must go.'

I lift a hand and touch his cheek before signing, 'You could stay.'

'I cannot. Even if I wish to. It is Jyrion. He has summoned me.'

I slide my hand up my abdomen, and his eyes follow it, his ears fluttering. But it's not enough; I'm not enough to tempt him to stay. Instead, he wipes himself off and dresses quickly, hiding those scars from me. I hate that they're there, but I love him as he is.

'I will return later. And I will have you like that again.'

'Are you asking me nicely or telling me as your companion?' I sling back.

He flinches, and then he moves toward me, leaning over the bed, his hand stroking my cheek gently. 'No, because I enjoyed it. Because I want you always. You are more than my companion, my Luca.'

I love the way he signs my name. Love it even more when it comes with a soft kiss. But then I'm alone again, Eissa disappearing through the portal and leaving me naked in his bed, feeling lost and isolated.

Will it always be like this with us? I ask, feeling the soft moss beneath me curl around my limbs.

He doesn't answer, so I sigh, closing my eyes, and I let my mind conjure up more silent questions.

Will we always be at the beck and call of the tyrannical government? I don't know, but I want it to be different.

I want us to be free.

The fact that Eissa left me to tend to Jyrion frustrates me beyond measure. Part of me understands why he has to go. But I don't really understand what's going on with Eissa and his relationship to the council.

I don't think it's blind obedience.

I don't think it's any kind of obedience. But he's still not sharing any of that with me. He's still hiding deep, dark secrets, and if I'm going to learn anything, I'm going to have to keep playing spy.

It means being nice to Jyrion the next time I see him. And now that I know what he did to Eissa, dealing with Jyrion will likely be the best performance of my life. I'll be lucky if I can get away with it. Even Eissa can't know about it.

Flopping on my back, I stare up at the ceiling as I feel the vibrations of Gerald all around me. He's apparently unhappy with the sofa, so he's pushing it to the other side of the room, and I let him. I'll have to take him out for exercise in a bit, but for now, I don't mind lying here.

My body's deliciously sore from being with Eissa that morning, and my heart is aching from being alone.

I hate all of this. I don't regret meeting him—not really. I don't regret anything that led me to this moment, but god, I want to go home. And if I can't go home, then I want to see some of my family.

With a breath, I sit up and prod the mental connection to Eissa until I feel it give.

My Luca.

I want to see my brother.

You can't return to Earth. It's not safe.

Can you find a way for him to come here? Please?

There's a pause, so long that I think maybe he's shut me out. Then I feel something that could be a sigh. *Yes, my Luca. I will go and see Rathyn about it.*

Thank you.

There's a warm pulse of affection, and then I withdraw, feeling the connection between us settle. It's not complete silence, but I can tell Eissa isn't making it easy for me to dip into his thoughts.

It's only fair. I've been shutting him out the same way.

Rolling onto my stomach, I do a few push-ups to get my blood moving, then hop to my feet and make a loud hooting sound to get Gerald's attention. 'Outside,' I sign.

I don't know if he understands me or not, but his antennae turn away from the sofa, and he lumbers toward the door, so maybe he is picking up on my language. The thought makes me feel all soft inside.

I wonder if I could train him to be a hearing service animal. He's slow, but it's not like I'm ever in a hurry to answer the door or take a call, so he's kind of perfect. I watch him waddle past me as I open the door, and the

moment he’s outside, Gerald picks up speed and rushes immediately into the brush.

Fuck.

Glancing around at the sky, I feel a pulse of relief when I see there doesn’t seem to be any storms on the horizon, then I take off after him. He’s cleared a path through the low-lying plants, and I see him far ahead, heading for the walking trail.

I know that Gerald can take care of himself, and I know he knows his way back home, so I slow my pace to enjoy the quiet coolness of the forest. I miss home. I miss my family more than I can say. But I do like it here.

It’s not a place I want to give up willingly. I can only hope that Eissa’s able to arrange for Dante to visit because I want to share this with him. I want that human connection in a world entirely alien to ours.

Coming around the corner toward the path, I skid to an instant halt when I see the figure of a Vyastil kneeling on the ground with his hand extended toward Gerald. I’m immediately ready to defend my wild kradun with my life when the Vyastil tips his head up.

Something in my chest constricts as I recognize Jyrion’s face. His ears flick as he pushes himself to stand, and I take a good look at his exposed arms, the heavy necklace resting against his chest, and the cuffs at his wrists. He’s wearing a thin, gauzy wrap around his lower half that shows off everything.

Every inch of unmarked skin—skin unlike what Eissa has now. Because he’s the one who robbed Eissa of being able to walk around without shame.

My hands curl into fists, and I storm over, coming to a stop beside Gerald. My gaze meets Jyrion’s, and while I know I’m meant to be secretly spying—to get him on my side so I can learn what he’s planning and plotting—I can’t.

‘Asshole,’ I fling at him.

He blinks at me, his rainbow irises flashing. ‘I don’t understand that word.’

‘ASSHOLE. Where humans take a shit out of. It’s an insult,’ I tell him.

His cheeks darken. ‘I’ve upset you. I did not hurt your kradun.’

Taking a calming breath, I shuffle a single step back. If I confront him about what Eissa told me, I know enough to know that it could put us both in danger.

But I can’t just let this stand. I have to risk it.

‘When Eissa upsets you next, will you kill me like you killed his other human?’

Jyrion’s face shifts, his skin fluttering, ears twitching. He tilts his head to the side as if he’s studying me, and then he folds his arms in front of him. On the side, near his elbow, I catch sight of much darker skin, like a bruise.

When he sees me staring, he puts his arm behind him, and I know—at least in that moment—that the shame on his face is real.

‘What did Eissa tell you about his human?’

This has to be a test. I take a deep breath. ‘You were displeased with him, so Kori was executed, and Eissa was permanently scarred.’

‘You have seen the scars.’ The way Jyrion signs that is a statement, not a question. But I don’t know if it’s just because he doesn’t understand how to ask a question in ASL.

‘Yes.’

His shoulders sag. ‘Eissa was…disobedient. And there’s more to the story than a simple punishment. He was using Kori to gather information. Many of the council suspected Eissa was attempting to stage a takeover.’

I can’t read his face, and I hate it. Is that a warning? Is he onto me? Or is he lying?

‘Eissa…’ my hands hover. I need to be careful how I say this. ‘Cared about his human, and you killed him.’

Jyrion’s lips spread into something like a smile, fangs poking out. ‘Did he care for him? Or was he willing to let his human die to lessen his sentence? Kori was expendable. All humans are expendable to most Vyastil.’

‘Most,’ I repeat.

Jyrion shrugs and takes a single step toward me. There’s something in his face. Maybe I’m the biggest fool, but I swear it’s genuine. ‘Most. Not all. Some of us understand how rare it is when a human cares for us like they care for each other.’

I swallow heavily, then shake my head. ‘Eissa would never.’

Jyrion starts to reach for me, but his hand falls to his side. ‘Trusting him will only hurt you. Be careful. He will use every opportunity to further his grab for power. The scars stop him now, but they won’t stop him forever.’

I have no idea what to say, so I wait in silence as Jyrion kneels back down, scratches Gerald on the head, then stands back up and eventually disappears through the trees.

My chest feels strange as I beckon Gerald toward the cottage, and by the time I reach the steps, I can't take it any longer. I don't want to doubt Eissa. Everything I've felt for him has been so real. But what do I really know about him? I have only his side, and while he can show me the events, he blocked me from feeling what he felt.

Does that mean I would have been able to sense that he was grateful he sacrificed Kori's life to protect his own?

No. It's not possible. He hasn't said the words, but I know Eissa's fallen for me. I know he…

He loves me. The way I love him. He must. It's so much more than words, and he's compromised everything he believes in to keep me with him. Jyrion is the lying snake. He has to be.

Pressing my forehead to the closed door, I reach out across the connection. I can feel Eissa in conversation with someone, and I don't think he notices me. I push quietly, digging into his head deeper until I realize I'm in an office with Rathyn.

They're both speaking Eretharian, which doesn't quite make sense to me until the words process in Eissa's head, and I'm able to understand the general meaning of them.

"I don't know if it's possible," Rathyn is conveying. "But I can look into it. How long have you and Luca been bonded?"

"A while. Since the conference in Las Vegas. I tried to stop it, to push him away, but it was impossible."

"It was the same for my Everest and me."

"And did you try to break the bond when you realized you would be attached to a human for the rest of your life? And that your life will end with his?"

Rathyn shakes his head. "By the time I realized what it meant, I already felt too deeply about my Everest. I will not lose him. I will happily return to the ground in death when he does."

"I can't take that risk with Luca," Eissa says. "I don't want him to die the way Kori did, but I don't want to keep this—"

I rip myself out of Eissa's head as quickly as I can, my heart feeling like it's going to shatter. I don't need to see more than that. I don't need to know how he'd rather throw me to the wolves and is only protecting me—fucking me, sucking me—for the sake of convenience.

To further whatever agenda he has going on with the rebellion.

I contemplate my options, staring at the wall for hours, waiting for Eissa to come home so I can confront him, oscillating between agony and blind rage.

As late afternoon approaches, rage wins out. I refuse to be Eissa's fucking pawn any longer. I'll take my chances with the people who want me dead at home. At least there I'll have a fighting chance.

Pushing myself up, I storm through the house, my vision foggy with unshed tears as I drop to my knees beside the wardrobe in Eissa's room. There's a small sack there, and I begin to shove anything and everything I can get my hands on into the little carrying bag.

Someone will help me get back to Earth. I'll sneak into the capital and bribe someone, or I'll find Rathyn and demand he free me from this contract. They can't hold me, and I refuse to meet the same fate as Kori.

I will not continue to love a monster who only sees me for what he can get out of me.

I'm done with that life. And Eissa can kiss my ass.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-seven

EISSA

I MET with Rathyn briefly in his office before heading to the archives. I pleaded with him to help me find a way to dissolve my bond with Luca.

I couldn't get our moment together out of my head—the way he slipped inside me and brought me nearly to completion—had undone me in a way I did not expect. I nearly spilled breeding seed all over him. My body wanted to release it, wanted to spill it deep inside him and watch him grow fat with my egg.

And that is dangerous. I cannot risk it. Not when I'm so close to forming an alliance with the Tarek. That is the last piece of the puzzle we need, and I cannot afford to lose sight of our goal.

There will be so much time to make it up to my Luca once I free our people from the tyranny of the royal family and the council. And perhaps I will spend his entire span of human life begging him to understand, but it's the choice I must make.

Which means I need Rathyn's help because, as of right now, I can only think of one way to put a stop to the risk of losing myself entirely to Luca.

Rathyn cut our conversation short, with the knowledge that his office was not fully secure for such conversations, but he promised to look into it, and we agreed to meet in a safer location later today.

My second shift in the archives was as fruitful as the first, but now that I have Sabik looking into not just the treaties but also a possible alliance, I do

not feel the need to try to scour old records that the Vyastil have likely purged.

The only real frustration I have with this assignment is that I know it's pointless, and so does Jyrion. He has an entire team of trained Vyastil to do this work. His youngest brother—the prince who will never see any sort of power—oversees this department. Prince Vyrian was always the odd child. Quiet to the point that the public questioned whether or not he could speak.

And when he was forced to give a public announcement—in order to prove his abilities and avoid bringing shame to the royal family—he looked as though he wished for the ground to swallow him whole.

I always felt for Vyrian, though he rarely ever looked in my direction.

As I'm making my way back to my office, I pass by Dhoryn's, and I see the prince himself hovering near the door. He's got something in his hand that I can't make out, twisting it between his fingers. He doesn't so much as twitch as I approach and bow my head, but I know he's aware I'm standing there.

Glancing to the left, I see that Dhoryn's office door is closed tightly, but his windows are wide open. He's at his desk, his back to the door, and Lucie is sitting beside him on a low bench.

"What do you suppose his human is doing with his hands?" Vyrian murmurs very quietly.

I look back over at Lucie, who's shaping his fingers through…ah. The alphabet. "The humans call it sign language."

"The purpose?"

"Communication with other humans who lack hearing or have some sort of speech disorder." I don't really feel like getting into the specifics. "My human uses it to communicate."

Vyrian's eyes cut to me sharply. "*Your* human?"

I flick my ears. A warmth spreads through me, possessive and intense. I don't know why, and right now, I don't have time to think about it. I take a calming breath. "Yes, my human is Deaf. He does not hear and prefers not to use his voice to communicate."

"Is it a difficult language?"

"No. We have language modules in the system if you wish to learn. But there are at least three hundred. I have chosen American Sign Language. It belongs to the humans that surround the portals on Earth."

Vyrian glances down at his hands and mimics a few shapes. They're almost right, but not quite. If rumors are true, he's always been very good—better than most Vyastil—at picking up things like languages and patterns.

But he has also never been allowed to visit Earth, and as far as I have been aware, he has never been approved to take on a human companion.

"You have a human," Vyrian repeats slowly. "Do you know what this is?" He holds up the thing he's been toying with, and I realize it's a small tube of lip balm.

"Yes. Humans use it to keep moisture on their lips."

His eyes widen. "They do not produce moisture in their skin?"

"It's…complicated," I say. I don't have time to give a lesson on human anatomy either. There has been a strange tension in the bond between me and Luca today, and I have a feeling it's from me leaving him so abruptly.

"Forgive me, my prince, but I must go."

Vyrian tilts his head to the side as he regards me. "You address me with more formality than most."

"Is that not…what you prefer?"

He lets out a sigh. "Have you spoken to my brother at all?"

"Jyrion?"

His skin flutters, and his ears pull back sharply. Not Jyrion, then. It's no surprise the quietest prince detests his brother as much as everyone else does. "Quilliyn."

My chest aches with a longing for Earth. "It has been some time, but I am hoping he will visit soon."

Vyrian twists the lip balm in his fingers again. "He always brings me such fascinating human objects."

"Perhaps he can bring you with him to Earth some day?"

At that, he looks crushed. "I…" It's clear he's stopping himself from saying something. "Perhaps."

A lie. But I will let him keep his secrets. "It was good to see you, my prince. Perhaps I will introduce you to my companion soon."

At that, he lights up. "Yes? Truly?"

"Luca would love to meet you."

Vyrian steps up to me and tips his forehead to meet mine. Princes never do that, but I accept the gesture for what it is and let him linger there until he pulls away. His eyes go back to Dhoryn's window, and I hesitate only a moment before remembering I have something very important to do.

With a breath, I reach across the bond for Luca but am met with only silence. It's just as well. If Rathyn has the answer to my problem, then there will be a lot more silence going forward.

And that is something I will need to learn to live with.

After completing a few work tasks in my office, I head to my meeting with Rathyn. As I pass Dhoryn's, I see that his door is open and the lights are off, and there's no sign of him or Lucie anywhere.

I still need to speak with him, but it will have to happen after I get word from Sabik on whether or not the Tarek can aid us in our mission. I fill my lungs and breathe out softly, then turn the corner toward the council hall when I come to a skidding halt.

Vyrian is standing near a window beside the massive doors, staring at his hand. As I approach, he stiffens, but I can see a bruise forming just below his wrist. He is not the same as I left him just an hour earlier.

"My prince…"

He drops his arm and then clasps his hands behind his back. "Councilman. Greetings."

I haven't been addressed that way in so long. "Is everything alright?"

He blinks up at me. "Where does your human companion stay?"

"Ah. With…with me."

"Not here. At your apartment," he clarifies. It is not a question.

Something twists in my gut. "I have a cottage. Why? Is something the matter?"

He lets out a low trill, sounding almost distressed. "My brother…is…" He stops, then shakes his head. Before I can open my mouth to ask him what he's trying to say, he lifts a hand between us and, in painstakingly slow ASL letters, spells, 'DANGEROUS.'

I suck in a breath.

"The modules were quite helpful. I would like to speak to your Deaf human."

"My prince," I say very quietly, "is there something I should know?"

His ears flick, and his eyes flash. "Guard him." Then he turns and walks off, and I'm left with an almost burning panic in my chest.

I want nothing more than to open a portal right here and dive through to see Luca, but I know I can't.

I cannot give myself away like that. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and search for him. The connection between us feels frayed right now. I don't understand why. Or how. Something about it feels almost heavy.

Luca, I push. I feel him acknowledge me, but nothing more than that. I will return home soon.

Silence. Just endless, aching silence.

I'm still resolved to speak to Rathyn about dissolving the bond, but only if it can be recreated. It won't do much, but it might allow me to buy a little more time with the council regarding my breeding. And if I must procreate, then I will do my best to ensure that the Vyastil that hatches will not be corrupted the way so many are.

Still, I can't even consider allowing myself inside another without feeling like I want to crawl out of my skin and burn whatever bits of flesh touched anyone else who wasn't my Luca. Aelvorn, I am not going to make it through this.

With a fortifying breath, I rush down the corridor, and the moment I'm certain I'm not being watched, I slip into our meeting room. It's dark aside from a few atherian lamps glowing in the corner. There's a single desk, two chairs, and four windowless walls.

Once upon a time, this place brought me comfort. Now, I don't know peace unless I'm in Luca's arms.

Closing my eyes, I begin to pace anxiously, and I wait.

And I wait.

And I start to think perhaps Rathyn isn't coming, moments before I hear someone tapping the code on the wall. The door swings open, and Rathyn enters. He looks exasperated.

"Eissa," he rumbles. "Speak freely."

"My breeding time is coming," I blurt. "Sabik has given me herbs to suppress my urge, but—"

Rathyn sucks in a breath and rubs at his temple.

"I know, I know. It's helping, but it is not enough. If I fail to breed, the council will know that Luca's the reason and they will kill him."

Rathyn looks troubled. "Perhaps we should return him to Earth. There are so many Vyastil living in the village near the lake now. He might be protected if—"

“No.” It is about Luca’s safety, but I’m also not sure I could cope with him being so far from me. “That doesn’t solve my problem. I cannot breed if I am bonded to my human.”

Rathyn stares at me for a long time. “I thought your last companion was your VySytheh. You let me believe he was.”

My face heats with shame. “He was not. I am sorry I deceived you. You needed that push. Luca is my only VySytheh.”

Rathyn sighs and begins to pace the room. “And now you want to break that bond?”

It sickens me to nod, but I do. “Only temporarily. I can’t risk how far we’ve come, Rathyn. We may finally have an army at our backs, and I need more time to recruit other Vyastil before we can make a move. My breeding time will come before I can do that.”

He blinks slowly, then continues to pace. His tail flicks out, and I can sense his unease. “Have you bitten him?”

No. But I have wanted to with every fiber of my being. “I have not.”

“Then perhaps it is possible, but I’ve searched and have not found such information. We have not practiced bonding in generations. The evidence could have all been destroyed long ago, and I am watched too heavily to prod any further without suspicion. I’m afraid I cannot help you with this. I know that is a disappointment to you.”

I blow out a breath. “I could never be disappointed in one I have raised.”

He lifts a brow at me. “My brother.”

I jolt. I haven’t heard him refer to Dhoryn by that term in a very, very long time. “I am not disappointed in him. Not really. I only wish he could see what he has in his human. What he could have if he let himself open up.”

Rathyn snorts. “He will never.” He pauses, then says, “I must go. My Everest is at home attempting to arrange for Dante to visit his brother.”

My heart leaps in my chest. “Thank you. Luca will be so pleased.”

Rathyn looks, maybe not happy, but not despondent anymore. “I will speak to you soon.” He doesn’t say much in the way of farewell and instead lets himself out, the door closing with a hard thud.

The lock clicks into place, and I wait several minutes before opening it again and letting myself into the hall. It’s entirely empty, but the moment I

step into the solarium, I freeze. I was half-expecting to see Vyrian there still, but instead I find the two brothers I do not ever wish to see.

Jyrion and Izar.

Izar usually keeps his mouth shut. He has existed in Jyrion's shadow for as long as I can recall. But his eyes are cold as they land on me, and Jyrion is smirking as he approaches.

"Anything to report from the archives, Commander?" He does not use my title as a signal of respect.

"No, Prince Jyrion. As I'm sure you suspected, there is little to no evidence that the Vyastil ever held treaties with the Tarek."

His lips stretch into a wider smirk. "Mm." He leans in closer, and before I can ask why or take a step back, I catch it. It's a familiar scent—just a whiff—but it's there. Distinct.

And mine.

My Luca.

I swallow heavily as heat begins to course through me.

"Is there something wrong, Commander?" Jyrion asks, now showing fang.

"No." The word comes out raspy, and I feel beads of sweat forming on my temples.

"You don't look well." He leans in again, forcing me to take a breath full of the knowledge that he was with my Luca. That he touched him. "Perhaps it's a little too close to your breeding time for you to be in the capital. Perhaps it's time you retired to the mountains."

"I—my human," I manage, but my thoughts are growing increasingly foggy. I did not take my suppressant yet today, and I know now the hot feeling in my gut is anything but rage. Jyrion knows what he is doing.

And he's done this on purpose.

"I don't think you need to worry about him. We…spoke. We saw each other, and he informed me he was leaving."

My hearts leap in my chest, and for a moment, the heat in my belly is forgotten. He cannot be telling the truth. He must be lying. He does this to get a reaction out of those beneath him. I stretch into the bond as hard as I can, pushing into Luca's head. He fights me, but I do not see the cottage in his eyes.

I see forest.

I can’t tell if this is some elaborate lie, but the shock of it all makes the trembling in my fingers worse. “I must go.”

“Of course,” Jyrion cajoles. “You have business to take care of. Good luck with your time, Eissa. I’m sure your female will appreciate being treated with some…delicacy.”

I can’t think. I can’t breathe. I must find the suppressant, and then I must find Luca.

No matter what it takes.

I storm through the door, nearly tripping over a bench that was not there earlier. The kradun. He always seeks to infuriate me, to make things nearly impossible. I fling it aside and carry on.

I do not sense Luca here, but right now all I can focus on is the suppression herb. I need it.

I growl as I take the steps two at a time, pushing into my room and smelling the scent of my Luca there. It makes the heat inside of me bloom; it is almost overpowering.

It is starting. My rut.

I cannot control it.

I am too late.

My hands fling the drawer open where I keep what will save me, but it is not there.

Nothing is there. It is all gone.

I cry out, desperation filling my lungs, my hearts beating frantically as that heat overpowers me. Where is it? Where is he?

Luca! I call through the bond. *Luca!*

I hear nothing for a moment, and my desperation grows. I fling open the wardrobe and frantically start searching, but the herb is not there either. Nothing is there.

He has taken it.

Luca has taken it all and left.

I feel his absence now, just for a split second when the heat pauses for just a moment, but then it comes back, full force, making me double over.

Luca! I call out once more, sending the full intensity of my need for him through the bond.

I feel him then, a burst of anger making me fall back, my vision blurring.

What the fuck do you want—?

I gasp as pain pulses through me, my body arching back, my bones feeling as if they may snap. I cry out, my rut coming with no way to stop it.

Sabik was right. It is worse than before. And with no one to breed, I will surely die. Maybe that's what I deserve. After everything I did. After failing Kori and hurting Luca. Maybe the worlds would be better off without me.

I cry out again, my cocks pushing from my body, angry and full, needing to be pushed into someone, needing to knot. Luca is far too angry to help me, to come back for me.

I do not blame him. It is what I deserve. After everything I've put him through, I do not deserve peace.

I deserve this agony.

The pain overwhelms me, and the connection between Luca and me flickers in and out. I can feel his anger and then his fear. But I cannot maintain the connection. I just need to survive.

I stand up, ripping my clothes from my body. I cannot stand the feel of them scratching my oversensitive skin, and I inhale deeply, trying to work through the pain. This is not even the true rut yet. Just the beginning.

I do not think I will survive this.

It hurts.

Everything hurts.

My cocks are dripping, a flame licking up my skin as if I am on fire. I claw at the dresser, trying to center myself.

It does not work. It is suffocating. The walls are closing in on me. I trip to the front door, falling over another piece of furniture that has been moved just moments ago. My knees hit the ground, and I crawl outside, my head arching up as I let out another loud cry. It rattles the porch boards beneath me, and I thrust my hips forward, unable to find any friction.

I need friction. I need something tight and hot, something to put my seed into.

To rut over and over.

Oh Aelvorn, help me.

I pray to the ancient gods who formed this place, who created me with this curse. It is unbearable.

I glance out into the woods, and through blurring vision, see someone approach.

It is him. My Luca. I roar again, my spine arching up in pain, my hips thrusting forward once more as I grunt and groan. He moves faster, appearing before me and falling to his knees, his hands gripping my face.

I see his concern there, anger and fear.

‘What’s happening?’ he signs with one hand, his fingers trembling. ‘What is wrong? Are you in pain?’

I gasp and grunt, unable to form words. Everything hurts. Everything.

My rut.

They are the only words I can send through the bond before I cry out again, my cocks leaking, growing fuller and fuller. I need release. I need.

Luca leans back, beside him a satchel he took from my room. ‘I heard about this,’ he signs as I continue to thrust my hips forward.

My claws dig deep in the ground beneath me as I try to keep myself from reaching for him. I want to, to slide my cocks into his hole, but he is small and far too fragile without oyen. I would kill him if I did that, would rip him open front to back and not stop until I was done.

I could not live with myself if I harmed him more than I already have.

And I cannot ask him to consume the herb for breeding. It would not be fair.

This is my curse.

I will die rather than force him to take me.

Fuck you. Fuck you. You’re not dying. Tell me what to take. Where is it?

He starts to rummage through the bag and then empties it out onto the ground. I see it then, the small vial of herbs. The one that would solve all my problems.

I lunge for it, tossing it aside, and it rolls away. I reach between my legs and squeeze my cocks, but that only makes it hurt more. A guttural shout leaves me, and I arch up, watching as Luca scrambles toward the vial I threw.

He does not owe me this. Not when he hates me.

My Luca. No.

But then I see it, the flickering of glass in his hand, his fingers removing the top and pulling out far too much. The way it will open his body for me,

the way I could push inside and find my release over and over.

The way I could have him.

The images filter through my mind, and I throw myself forward to stop him, but he's already pushing it between his lips, his eyes widening as his body absorbs it.

It is too late for both of us. My rut has come, and he is ready.

Luca! I cry out through the bond, but he ignores me, flipping me off before I hear a broken groan come from his throat. I can smell his body loosening, the slick he's producing.

He's ripe, ready.

Oh my god. Oh god. Eissa. My Eissa. I need you.

I lunge forward, my claws shredding his clothes, my fangs baring down, scraping across the flesh of his neck, my tongue lapping at the blood I leave in its wake.

I want more. I want to mark him, but I cannot.

I *will* not.

I feel his small cock pressed against my own and it drives me wild. I want to watch him come, want to lap it from his skin as I knot him.

I cannot wait a moment more.

I lift him from the ground, his legs wrapping around my waist, my tail twisting around him, and then I slot my cocks at his gaping hole and impale him on me. He cries out, his hands clutching my shoulders as my cocks split him open, the need for him almost painful. But there is relief too. Such incredible relief.

Because it is Luca, it is more.

It is perfect.

I hear him moan as I pull him onto me completely, using my tail to prop him up.

He's breathing heavily, his inhales rasping as his eyelids flutter open and shut. His cheeks are the most beautiful pink, his lips wet and parted.

I lean forward and kiss him, a tender moment before my rut takes over once more.

He kisses me back, the movement as he leans forward stretching him even wider.

He groans, his cock jerking between us, and I growl, thrusting my tongue into his mouth and down his throat before pulling back.

I want to watch him take my rut. All of it.

My hands tighten against his waist, my claws digging into his skin. I know he will bleed, but his lust for me is overpowering any pain he feels. Instead, he clenches around me, his hole begging for more.

So I give it to him. My arms lift him off me and slam him back down.

His cock erupts, and his head falls back, his throat bobbing as I take him, small glorious moans leaving his beautiful mouth. The scent of his cum dripping down our bodies makes my mouth water.

I want him to come for me again, and I do not stop. The fever pitch of it is almost too much. All I can feel is him, his wet, tight hole holding me inside of him so perfectly as I thrust up into him.

You are perfect. My Luca. Perfect.

More, he replies. *More.*

I will give him what he wants, our bodies meeting in the most obscene way, the sound his wet hole makes as I push in and out of it making me more and more crazed. And those little sounds erupting from his mouth each time I thrust up…

Then he comes again, this time more powerful, his hole clenching around me as he shivers and quakes in my arms.

It overwhelms all of my senses.

I find myself tumbling over, my release met with a roar that rattles the house behind us. I fill him, my cum pulsing into his body, my seed wanting a place to settle, to breed.

My knot expands, linking us together as it grows until I'm filling him, stretching him to his limits, pumping him full of my essence. I have never experienced this kind of pleasure, of taking what is so clearly mine. My eyes close, and I black out for a moment, my entire body shaking, my skin fluttering as I release into him over and over.

He falls against my shoulder, his body shaking as his cock spills once more, his fingernails digging into my skin as he holds on. It is not over, my rut merely satiated for a moment. This will go on for at least the rest of the day, my cocks needing his hole for release. Over and over I will take him, my biology wanting to breed him.

His lips brush against my skin as he wiggles in my arms, a gasp leaving his lips. I should not have taken him here where anyone could have seen, but I could not help myself. I turn and carefully carry him to my bedroom, his throat ejecting small moans with each step I take, my knot catching on his rim.

But he does not hate it. No, he enjoys being knotted to me.
Of course he does. He is mine.
My Luca.
And I am his.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-eight

LUCA

I CAN STILL TASTE the bitterness of the herb on my tongue as Eissa settles me onto the bed, his body beneath mine, that knot on his cock splitting me open deliciously. I've heard about the herb and the Vyastil's rut from Everest and Dante, and I had no idea how it would feel until…

Oh god. It's *so* good.

My cheek is on his chest, listening to his hearts thrum beneath me.

What are you thinking about, my Luca? he asks, prodding into my mind.

I don't mind the question in Eretharian. It is soothing to my mind in a way, so unlike the spoken English words he sometimes uses.

How good it was, I tell him. *How I want more.*

His fingers clench against my sides, and I feel the rumble beneath me. *You will have more. My rut is not over. It will last a full cycle and then cease.*

And then?

And then you will be free.

I lift my head up at that comment and glower down at him. I can feel the pull of his cock against my rim and bite my bottom lip as our eyes meet. I don't even bother signing. My arms are still too weak.

I do not wish to be free.

And yet you left. You ran. You must yearn for it.

I was pissed off at the time, but I don't want to be free from you. Not now. Not ever.

Why were you upset?

You wanted to break our bond. I don't. Not ever.

I see his nostrils flare and feel the possessive way he holds onto me. His knot flares in my hole and I feel the subtle pulse of his seed releasing once more into me, trying to plant his seed for an egg to grow.

I never want to break the bond. I only ever considered it as a last resort. To make sure I could survive the rut without you.

My head rears back, and I know he can see the hurt on my face. Why would he want to not be with me for that? Why would he want another?

He must feel this, must read my mind, because he pulls me in for a long, drawn-out kiss. *I do not want another, but I did not want to force this upon you.*

I would have given it to you freely if you'd just asked. I hate the secrecy.

He nods, and his nose nuzzles my neck, making me moan with pleasure, and then he pulls away, his rainbow irises meeting mine.

I never want to keep secrets from you. But I fear you will always put your needs last. I want you to always choose yourself.

My eyes roll, and I reach up to kiss him once more, pushing into his mind and making sure it's clear what I feel, what I want. *I will always choose you. If you let me.*

He groans, and I feel his knot slacken, his cocks sliding free from my hole. It gapes, open and wide. There is no cum dripping from me, being absorbed into my channel.

The same channel that is ready to be filled again. I know because the absence makes me whine and ache.

Eissa rolls over, his arms bracketing me, his teeth grazing my neck. *I want to bite you, to claim you.*

Do it. I'm already yours.

He growls, the vibration making me shudder and shake, but he doesn't pierce my skin, just sends me images through the bond. Of him breeding me, fucking me, taking me.

Yes. Yes, I call back. *Take what you need.*

I feel the rumble of his moan as he spreads my legs and pushes back inside. I'm still wet, and he slides in easily, the ridges of his cocks bumping along my sensitive rim, making shivers of ecstasy pulse through my body. He's so big, splitting me wide open once again, but the herb helps, making me slick and gaping. He fits easily.

He fits perfectly.

It helps that the herb is making me wanton with need as well, that I don't feel complete until the knot is expanding. But I know I'd feel this way regardless. I've wanted him inside of me since the moment I laid eyes on him in Vegas.

And now it's possible.

Eissa's teeth sink into my skin once more, not breaking it, but enough to make me cry out as he ruts into me, his hips pistoning back and forth as he takes me. My legs are wrapped around his lower back, his tail curling up and over his shoulder, brushing against my lips.

I pull the blunt end into my mouth, and Eissa's nostrils flare, his hips pounding into me.

You are my soul, my perfect VySytheh.

I know I'm making the most obscene sounds, whimpers and cries, and mumbling incoherent words, my heart full to nearly bursting. Our skin is meeting with slaps, my cock bouncing against my abdomen as he fucks into me.

I come not once, but twice, Eissa's nostrils flaring as he leans down and laps it up, his tongue lashing against my skin as his cocks impale me.

It's too much, almost overbearing.

My fingers clutch onto his back, digging rivets into his soft, scarred skin. He doesn't stop, his eyes wild, his ears pushed back as he sits back on his haunches, grabs my hips, angling them up and ruts. This position is almost too much, the ridges on his cocks making my rim contract and release around him. I can feel them pulsing inside of me, vibrating against my prostate with each thrust forward and each drag back.

I come again, my eyes rolling into the back of my head.

He licks me clean once more, my cum smeared across his chin.

He looks good like this, messy and unhinged, so unlike the Eissa that has always kept himself buttoned up and tucked away.

He pulls me up the rest of the way, my body completely at his mercy as he rocks his hips back and forth, a violent rhythm that has me moaning like something feral and wanton. His teeth graze my neck once more, and I hold onto him again, pressing his head down against my skin, wanting him to bite me.

Please. I beg. *Please.*

I can feel his resolve slipping, the need to claim almost unbearable. His teeth graze and nibble, slowly digging into my skin but not piercing it.

But I know it's inevitable, the bond wrapping around us, tightening around my chest, our hearts beating almost as one.

And when Eissa comes, I feel his fangs sink into me, blood bursting from my veins as he consumes me, marking me as his. It's earth-shattering, the feel of him inside of me, body and soul. I come once more at the feeling of it.

And as his knot expands, I can feel the small pulses of his seed trying to breed me. Can feel his pleasure as if it were my own. He presses a clawed hand against my belly, the pressure making his cocks twitch inside of me.

I press a hand over his, and our eyes meet.

For a moment, I'm a little distraught at the thought that I'll never be able to give him an offspring, that I'm lacking once more. That he's bitten me and he can't ever take that back.

But Eissa soothes my mind, telling me all the ways he adores me—giving me images of how he sees me, making my heart expand and pulse with the knowledge that he loves me. And when he's sure I understand, he rolls and pulls me back onto his chest, our bodies connected until he slips free of me once more, and we do it again.

And again.

Until I feel so full I'm nearly bursting.

The next twenty-four hours are something I'll never be able to describe. I'm in such a trance that I can only remember bits and flashes of it. Eissa's cocks sliding into me, our skin slapping together as he takes me in every way imaginable. Me on my knees, biting down on the mattress to keep my screams inside, me riding him while his knot is still expanded, making him nearly feral, his claws ripping into the wall behind him. Me on my side, one leg thrown over his as he thrusts his cocks in and out of my hole.

I've come so many times I lost track. I had no idea I could even have that many orgasms.

By the time his rut is over, I'm exhausted, sweaty, and slick. I sleep nearly twelve hours after Eissa soothes me, wipes me up as best he can, and

curls around me, lapping at my skin.

When I finally wake, he's there, those rainbow orbs staring down at me, a curl of his lip and a hint of fang visible as he watches me.

'You slept so long. Are you feeling rested?'

I stretch out, feeling the ache between my legs, but it's not terrible. He must have given me zitha to help me heal.

'I am.'

'Sore?' he fingerspells.

'Just a little.' I grin up at him and touch his face, seeing his ears flutter as I do.

'How are you feeling?'

His cheeks flush, and he bends down, running his nose against mine, one of his fingers plucking at the ring in my nipple.

'I feel complete. Alive. I would like to rut you always.'

I snort, and he grins. 'How often do they come?'

'Every seven first-moon cycles.'

'I have no idea how long that is on Earth, but I'll be there for each one.'

'Yes, you will. I will never leave you, my Luca. Never. And I hope you will not leave me.'

I shake my head and then curl up closer to him, nuzzling against him and feeling the soft purr against my cheek.

I will never leave you again. I promise.

He is silent and still beneath me, and then I feel something, a slow prodding at my mind.

'What?' I ask, my hand flipping up in a question. 'What are you searching for? What do you want to know?'

Eissa strokes my cheek softly, and he tips my head up so I can see him. 'What are you thinking so hard about?'

'You.' It's a simple answer, but one that I can admit to readily.

But he prods a little deeper, wanting to know more—what I've been hiding. But before I can let him in, I need him to open up first.

OceanofPDF.com

twenty-nine

EISSA

THE FEELING RAGING inside of me is a mixture of resignation, fear, and contentment. Luca is mine. That cannot be changed. My fangs sank into his neck, and I took a taste of his blood, and he is now VySytheh. I can feel him even more deeply than before. It is a bond that cannot and will not be broken.

It's more than just the connection in our heads. When he ceases to be, so shall I cease to be.

But there is no longer an option for me to breed. Even if I were to confess to the council that my rut came early and my breeding would have to be postponed, it would not matter. My body simply would not allow my cocks to descend and fill a female Vyastil.

My only hope now is that Sabik will arrive with news that they are prepared to aid our mission, and that Dhoryn has done what he promised and started speaking with Outerlanders. He and I haven't discussed our meeting since he and Lucie left the cottage several days ago.

That feels like a lifetime now with everything that's happened.

I curl my tail tighter around Luca, who's still dozing against my chest. The amount of oyen he consumed in order to survive my rut drained him. He is now full of my seed, and I am full of his, and I can feel the whispers of his dreams flitting from his head into mine.

He feels…content. Happy. Relieved that I no longer wish to sever our bond. And I can only hope he understands that it was the last thing I wanted

to do. That it was for his safety, and for the safety of my people.

It was only said so there would be a future for us to see together. A future like *this*.

I am still afraid it's going to fall apart, but I am not yet willing to give up hope.

Luca makes a soft noise as his body begins to stir, and eventually he opens his eyes and looks up at me. There are dark circles beneath them, and I know he needs to eat and tend to his body. But he makes no move to do anything other than to curl up tighter against me.

'Good morning,' I sign. Now that our connection is deeper, I can tell just how much more he prefers signing to our mind connection. And just how much he prefers when I speak to him in his mind with Eretharian instead of English.

With one limp hand, Luca rubs at his eyes, then sits up. He gives a soft groan, which is likely from his aching muscles, and he rests his head against the headboard as he stares down at me. Before I can lift my hands to ask what he's thinking, he reaches out and traces a touch down my jaw.

'Beautiful.'

My skin heats. It is still a wonder he prefers what I look like to what he finds in humans. I recall with a vicious clarity the first time I set my eyes on the beings from Earth. They were so small—short, stocky limbs, dull skin lacking scales and fur. Their ears and teeth were blunt, and by the gods, they were so fragile.

I was so certain I would shatter their bodies without meaning to.

I had no idea how strong they were. I had no idea that one day, I would have a human beneath me, able to take everything I needed to give him.

Sitting up, I twist onto all fours and slip between his legs. He lets out a surprised laugh which lasts just as long as it takes for me to kiss the breath from his lungs. His chuckle turns into a groan, and while his cock will not get hard for some time after the way it was used and milked, it gives a feeble attempt as I grind my slit against him.

'I never wish to wake up to anything but your face,' I tell him. With those signs comes a small punch of fear because I have felt that feeling before.

Not as profoundly as I feel with Luca, but with Kori, it was some type of love. The early blossoms of it. There were good, quiet, tender moments of him lying beside me, and I never wanted that to end.

Kori was not VySytheh. He never could be. But losing him the way I did has created a fear in me that those same monsters could take Luca too.

‘Don’t,’ Luca signs between us as I settle back onto my side. He meets my gaze and shakes his head. ‘Not now.’

I bow my head and nod. I need to let this moment be soft and kind. We have earned it. I draw my fingers up his thigh, up his ribs, watching him twitch as I bring my touch higher to his chest where his single heart beats.

He watches the path my hand makes, then looks over and meets my gaze again. ‘Regret?’

‘Never.’

His mouth softens at the corners. ‘What happens now?’

My head tilts, and my ears flick with confusion. ‘Mean what?’

‘Secrets,’ Luca signs. ‘You have so many. I want to understand why you wanted to break the bond.’

The information I’d given him while heading deep into the rut was incomplete and full of terror. But I suppose there’s no point in hiding it all now. Pushing myself back up, I settle against the headboard beside him and rest one shoulder against it so I can face him better.

His gaze is on me, intense and ready, and I take a breath before I begin.

‘Vyastil history is…complicated. We were once more like humans.’ Luca’s eyes go wide at that confession. ‘We would mate for life, breed, raise our hatchlings. We studied philosophy and religion.’ My hands hesitate a moment. ‘We loved.’

Luca’s tongue darts out and wets his lips. ‘What changed?’

‘Leaders. Kings. Ideas. The current royal family began with one Vyastil general who killed the king and took his place. He fed the people lies about the Tarek poisoning our people. He said it was why we were losing strength and lifespan.’

‘Cum,’ Luca signs. ‘Why you need cum.’

I bow my head. The history is fractured, and so much has been lost. I don’t know all the details. I’m not sure a single creature on Erethar knows any longer. ‘The Vyastil were afraid. It was easy to blame the Tarek. They are peaceful, but they are stronger than we are. They cultivated the herbs, occupied the Outerlands. Greed took over. The king appointed leaders who taught our children that being like the Tarek was wrong. Mates were wrong. VySytheh was a weakness.’

He watches me spell VySytheh and his brow furrows. ‘You call me this. Means what?’

‘Mate. Bonded. Forever.’

His eyes go soft, and his fingers reach up, tracing the place I bit him, and I nod.

‘Yes. Mine.’

‘Mine,’ he signs back.

I fight the urge to abandon his question and go back to kissing him. ‘Each generation, more and more Vyastil forgot. More and more Tarek died. More lands were taken. Then the Vorthex had a solution to our problem.’

Luca frowns and mouths, ‘Vorthex?’

‘Wings. Lives in the sky,’ I explain. He nods.

‘Hepyn.’

‘Yes. He is one. They invented the portals when their need for…’ I hesitate. I don’t know how much about the Vorthex I want to explain to Luca. So many people are horrified by how we use the humans—how we have presented their participation in the clinics as a choice when so many of us know that there is no real choice at all.

But the Vorthex have used them in different ways.

Ways that might terrify Luca.

‘Tell me,’ he insists.

I swallow heavily. ‘They have different needs…but their scientists believed that human cum might aid the Vyastil and make up for what we had lost when we developed an immunity to the Tarek herbs.’

Luca’s brow furrows. ‘The Tarek did not poison the Vyastil?’

I let out a heavy breath. ‘No. I have told myself yes, they did, but it’s time to embrace the truth. It was an illness that spread. No one understands the origin. It altered our biology. It made us weaker. Human cum has filled in that gap, but that may not last forever.’

Luca reaches for me. ‘You won’t die, right?’

‘My hearts will cease to beat when yours does. Until then, no.’

He still looks concerned, but he nods. ‘Okay.’

I give myself a moment, and then I say, ‘Rathyn was the first Vyastil in a very long time to successfully create a VySytheh bond. I had already been researching a way to bring them back. They were a myth—an ancient story that was written on the cave walls. Rathyn was my proof. When he confessed to me, I…lied to him.’

Luca blinks at me. ‘I don’t understand.’

This is where more of my shame comes in. I must admit things I hadn’t wanted to admit to myself. ‘If Rathyn knew he was the first—that he was the only Vyastil with a VySytheh bond, he might have rejected it. He may have severed the bond before biting Everest. I knew he was going to be the start of something big…a revolution. If we could find enough Vyastil with the bond to convince the rest of our people that we had been deceived by the royal family and the council…’

Luca swallows heavily and nods for me to go on.

‘I let him believe that Kori was my VySytheh. That I could hear his thoughts, feel his heartbeat as if it were my own. It gave him the courage to keep Everest.’

Luca’s hands hesitate, then he asks, ‘Was he? Was Kori your—’

‘No.’ I take Luca’s hands by the wrists and kiss his palms. ‘I never heard his mind. We were not bonded in the way you and I are. You are my one and only.’

Luca leans into me and takes me in a soft, possessive kiss. ‘Mine,’ he signs when he pulls back.

‘Always yours.’ I sign back. ‘When I met you, the bond was… unexpected. I couldn’t afford to be a Vyastil who had a bond because I needed to embrace my role as a breeder. I couldn’t afford to lose the trust of the council. But I could not stop fate.’

Luca’s face does something complicated. ‘Regret?’

‘No.’

‘I ruined it.’

I shake my head. ‘It was meant to be. I will buy more time. I will find other Vyastil with the bond.’

‘Lucie,’ he signs quickly.

I shake my head. ‘No. They must be able to hear each other’s thoughts.’

‘Lucie can hear. He told me. He doesn’t know what it means, and Dhoryn won’t acknowledge it.’

I feel suddenly like I’ve been punched in the sternum. Not once has Dhoryn mentioned that to me. It hurts to know I raised him, shaped him, and he did not trust me with that information. Even after I explained to him what I needed.

But I cannot fault him for that. I was the one who failed him.

I let myself breathe through the ache in my chest, then I nod. ‘I will speak to him. I must find more Vyastil willing to fight. I have spoken to Sabik, and he is trying to recruit the Tarek army to aid us.’

‘What is the plan?’

I’m afraid to tell him. If the council gets their hands on Luca and tortures him, I know he will die before revealing these secrets. And it will be a very painful death. But the look in his eyes is determined, and he has earned this trust.

‘We plan to overthrow the royal family and dissolve the monarchy and the council. We will put new leaders in their place. We will reeducate our people. We will bring back Vyastil nature.’

‘And the humans?’

I don’t know. That is the one piece of the puzzle I don’t understand yet. It’s not as easy as shutting down the portals now. I know that the clinics must become truly voluntary. I know that humans deserve real choices, as do we.

And there are Vyastil who are truly happier on Earth. And perhaps there are also humans truly happier here on Erethar. We still have the problem of the human rebellion to deal with, and humans who will always hate the Vyastil for our presence there.

But right now, I don’t have a plan. Right now, the only thing that matters is saving my people from a fate we never deserved.

‘I don’t know what will happen in the future. I will be with you,’ I tell him. ‘And I will trust that we will find leaders who can help.’

Luca nods, then suddenly rises up, swings one leg over my thighs, and settles atop me. My tail comes around him, pulling him close, and he leans in to nuzzle his nose against mine.

I breathe in the scent of him, basking in the weight of his body, his wandering hands, and the careful kisses he lays on my jawline. The unchecked, unthinking noises he makes are music, and I wish I could lie here and listen to them all day.

‘I want to help,’ Luca signs when he finally pulls back.

‘Dangerous.’

‘I know. But I have a secret you need to know.’ He looks…nervous, and my hearts kick up, beating out of sync.

‘What secret?’

‘Prince Jyrion has been visiting me here when you’re gone.’

My entire body goes cold, like the blood in my veins has been replaced with ice. I stare at him, unable to move for the longest second. When I don't respond, Luca bows his head, and suddenly my mind is bombarded with images.

Memories.

Jyrion approaching Luca in the forest. Jyrion holding Luca close during the storm and laying his scent on him. Jyrion putting doubt into Luca's mind about me and my love for him.

I have never known rage like this, and it is only cooled as Luca places a hand to my cheek and forces my gaze to his.

'At first I thought I could get information out of him. Then he had me fooled for a moment, that you were using me.'

"My Luca," I say aloud.

He shakes his head. 'I know. I was an idiot for believing him. And I am sorry.' I accept his apology for what it is because it is genuine. 'But he thinks I have doubts about you. I can use that to get him to trust me.'

My head is shaking before I can give it any real, proper thought. 'No. Too dangerous. He killed Kori.'

'I know. But I am strong,' Luca insists. 'And I want all the Vyastil to be free. I want you to be free.'

I allow his words to settle in my chest. I can't bring myself to say yes, but I also know that he might be right. And if I am willing to risk myself, should I not allow him that same choice?

'Can we speak about it later?' I finally ask. 'I want to enjoy what we have for now. And there is time.'

Disappointment flashes in Luca's eyes, but he eventually nods. 'Okay.'

My body softens, and I tighten my tail around him. 'We will have moments together. And you will see Dante soon.'

Luca blinks at me. His trembling hand signs, 'Really?'

I nod. 'Rathyn told me he and Everest are working on it.'

His eyes widen, and then I see them fill with tears. He swallows heavily, then flings himself against my chest, burrowing deep into my arms. His sobs are soft, and they are raw.

I know how he's missed his family, and I feel like a true monster for having kept him away for so long. But I can do this small thing.

And there are still so many things I must do, like speak to Dhoryn and Sabik once more. And I must prepare myself for actual war, should the need

arise.

But for now, for this little moment, I will try to protect our peace.

I know I can find Dhoryn in the archives. It's either here or with his companion—his VySytheh. This secret that Dhoryn is holding makes my hearts ache. I do not understand why he would not trust me with this knowledge.

But he has always been more solitary than Rathyn, more inward-focused.

It is why he is so hard to know.

It is why I worry that if he does not care for his VySytheh like he should, he may run and leave. Just like Luca almost did when he broke down from my neglect.

Part of me thinks I should have known there was more to Lucie and Dhoryn's companionship than cum. The way Dhoryn pierced him, more than any other companion I have ever known. I knew he was possessive. But I did not realize why.

"Eissa," Vyrian says, startling me as he appears around a corner. His ears flutter when he sees me, and I see a hint of fang. "You are back so soon."

"I am searching for Dhoryn. Is he here?"

Vyrian inclines his head. "He is."

I walk toward the small enclave where Dhoryn works, and Vyrian follows.

Who are you with? I can feel affection coming through the bond.

Luca's words in my mind make my footsteps falter, and I send back a rush of love to him.

It is Vyrian. A…friend who works in the archives. I have known him for many moon cycles.

I want to meet him. He's special to you.

"Why do you look like that?" Vyrian asks, staring at me intently. "Is it your human? Are you worried?"

I bristle at the question, but then realize there is no way he can know Luca and I can speak to each other through our minds.

“No, I was thinking about other things.” I realize that he is following me once more, and I turn to glance at him. “Is there something you need? Is something bothering you that you wish to speak of?”

“Yes. I would like to meet your human. You said that I could when we last conversed. It would be a great honor.”

I can feel Luca insisting on it through the bond as well, his curiosity getting the better of him. It has always gotten him into trouble.

But I know despite my reservations, I stand no chance in this moment.

“Very well. You can come, but you must be discreet. I do not wish any harm to befall you.”

His face lights up, and his ears flutter once more. “Send me the coordinates. You will not even know I’ve arrived.”

And with that, he turns and walks off, leaving me to find Dhoryn.

He’s bent over his workstation, a looking glass at his eye, his hand scribbling something down on a piece of parchment. His ears arch back as he hears me approach, and I see the way his tail tightens around his thigh.

It’s only when I speak his name that he sets down his tools and stands to greet me.

“Eissa.” His eyes are narrowed in frustration at being interrupted. But beyond it, I can see that something more is bothering him.

But I know he will not tell me.

“We must speak.”

He gestures to a chair in front of him, but I shake my head.

“Not here.”

His eyes flash at me, and I know he knows. We had one very short conversation about my plans, but it’s time to lay it all out for him. I will be speaking with Sabik before the next first-moon cycle, and I must know who is on my side.

He lifts a hand and signs a single word, ‘Where?’

My eyes widen. I suppose it was foolish to assume that he would not have picked up any ASL from Lucie, but he had been distancing himself from his human as much as possible.

‘With me,’ I sign back. ‘Down the corridor, just before the council room. Hidden door.’

I don’t know if he knows enough to pick all of that up, but he inclines his head just once, and then he turns his gaze back to his work.

All I can do is hope he follows as I exit his office and pray to any gods listening and willing to grant favor that I will not be found by any council member or royal prince on my way.

Not even Vyrian.

My prayer is granted the moment I slip into the room and close the door nearly all the way. Pressing my back to the wall, I close my eyes, and I listen. And I wait.

And I wait.

It's only when I've nearly given up hope that Dhoryn is going to follow me that I hear claws on the floor. I peer through the door as quickly as I can, and when I catch sight of him, I flash a hand and beckon him inside.

He steps in with quick precision, and I seal the door behind us.

"This is an odd room," he says, glancing around. "How long have you had it?"

"Since Kori," I tell him, and he winces, glancing away from me. "I needed a place that was not monitored. I have met Rathyn here several times."

He sneers at the sound of his hatch-mate's name. They never got along, even as young ones, and I don't see that changing anytime soon. But I can hope they will work together, assuming Dhoryn will stay on our side.

I want him as an ally, though I know if he chooses not to join me, he will not be against me. I have at least earned that.

"I have taken steps to begin my plans," I tell him.

His ears flick. "Tell me."

"Prince Sabik." I see understanding dawning on his face. "The Tarek are likely willing to join our—my—cause."

He's silent for a long moment. "With conditions, I assume?"

"The Outerlands, and of course, a treaty."

He hums, then starts to pace. "The Tarek have been underestimated for far too long. Before the archives were purged, there were records of several battles they won. They gained some ground in the Outerlands before their surrender."

I was unaware of that, but I am not surprised, either. They surrendered their land to protect their people. Not because they had lost a violent war. "The Vyastil were once unwilling to lose massive numbers of our own people for pride," I remind him. "And perfection. We once worked the mines as a collective. We didn't use it as a pit to put our least wanted."

Dhoryn swallows thickly, bowing his head. “I am…aware.”

I suppose that Dhoryn might have been threatened with the mines. He is unlike most Vyastil. Just as Prince Vyrian might have been sentenced to the mines if he were hatched by any Vyastil other than the royal family.

So I know that weighs heavily on him.

“What is it you want from me?” he asks.

I had not told him that before. I simply tested the waters between us to see if he would stand against me. Now, I stare him in the face. “I need allies amongst our people. I need to know who has bonded with their human. I need eyes inside the mines to see if there are any strong enough to rise up. I need Outerlanders willing to take up arms against the soldiers that have starved them.”

“And you wish me to be this liaison?” he demands.

“You are more with the common people than Rathyn,” I remind him. “You have lived on the border of the Outerlands since you left my home.”

He is silent for so long I worry he is about to leave the room and sell me to the highest bidder on the council. And then he ceases his pacing and closes the distance between us.

“Is this for your human, Eissa?”

“This is for all of the Vyastil that we have failed,” I tell him. “I have been on the council, complicit in all of this, for too long.”

His lips thin and his fangs poke over his lower lip. “Would you sacrifice your human for this cause?”

“No.” I cannot lie to him. “He is VySytheh. He is mine. I would die with him.”

“You have bonded,” he says flatly.

My eyes cut to the ground and my claws itch to extend. “We have bonded. And I know that Lucie is your—”

“No,” he snaps with a growl. “We are not.”

“I know you hear his thoughts. I know you know what that means,” I press.

He waits for me to look up. “I have not taken him. I will not take him. I will not enter him. I will use his cum and eventually his thoughts will fade, and I will set him free.”

“Foolish,” I say.

His eyes narrow. “You were almost destroyed when they took Kori from you. You survived because of me.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“And now you would willingly die for your human because of this bond. There is no sense in it! No logic.”

“If they took Lucie from you now as they took Kori from me,” I start, but his growl nearly shakes the room. “I am only saying it’s not as foolish as you think. We have been lied to about who we are as Vyastil. We have been lied to about what we need, and what we are capable of. And what makes us strong.”

“Humans make us weak,” he says.

I know I will not convince him of the truth. Not yet. Not now. But once we take the power back and give it to the Vyastil who deserve to hold it, there will be time for him to see and to understand.

And to feel safe.

To believe that not everything will end in pain the way it did for Kori.

“Will you help me?” I ask him.

He takes a very long time to answer, but eventually he rolls his shoulders back and flicks his ears. “Yes. If only to remove that monster from the council and from the eventual throne.”

I know he means Jyrion.

“Have you spoken to the Vorthex?” he asks. “Will they stand with you?”

“I don’t believe they will stand with anyone. They are too vulnerable without humans. They will not risk an all-out war that could destroy their stock.”

Their stock of humans.

Of…holes.

Dhoryn looks unsettled, much the way I feel, but I do my best not to judge what the Vorthex need. “If you believe we can win this, then you have my pledge.”

Everything in me feels lighter suddenly. “Thank you. And I am sorry I did not protect you better. You should have never seen me that way. You should have never had to—”

“No,” he says, cutting me off. “Without me, you would have died. And I would not find the world as pleasant if you were not in it.”

My hearts twist in my chest, and I’m unable to stop myself from approaching and offering my forehead. He takes a moment, but for the first time in so, so many years, he touches his to mine.

It lingers there with an affection I did not expect, and when it is over far too soon, I feel the space between us. It's a tangible thing.

"Thank you. We can discuss more once I speak with Prince Sabik. And if you would like to join us, Luca is having a visitor soon. Another human. Perhaps Lucie might—"

"I will think on it," he says, his voice back to icy.

I nod, then gesture to the door. "I will send you a message and speak to you soon."

He casts one look back at me before letting himself out, and I allow myself long, indulgent moments inside the room, entirely alone, to feel the tiny spark of triumph. I have no idea if it will last, or if we will see victory at the end of this.

But if I do die in the end, at least I know that I will go down fighting.

OceanofPDF.com

thirty

LUCA

WHILE I WAIT for Eissa to return home, I spend time lazing around, watching Gerald move furniture around the house at a glacial pace. It's relaxing in a way.

My mind moves to Eissa, and I can feel his trepidation through the bond, my hand lifting to brush against the bite mark on my neck. It's barely noticeable now. Eissa insisted that I take some zitha before he left, so that when he returns, I'll be completely ache- and pain-free. Sadly, it took away the mark he left on me.

But I can still feel it, a low erotic thrum beneath my skin.

My head turns, and I glance through the hazy windows, taking in the changing sky, watching as the leaves sway in the distance.

I blink lazily, letting my eyelids fall, and when I open them, I nearly scream.

A Vyastil is standing over me, head cocked in curiosity, hair a swirl of silver and turquoise. He shrinks back at my shock but then straightens, an almost regal push of his shoulders as he does. It takes me a moment to realize it, but he looks a lot like Quilliyn. And not just in the way that Vyastil seem to all look alike.

'Hello,' he signs, and my thundering heart calms as I push myself up into a seated position.

'Who are you?' I ask, and the Vyastil blinks at me for a long moment. 'How do you know ASL?'

‘Vyrian. I am a friend of Eissa. He told me about you, and so I learned to communicate with you. When I saw him in the archives, he said I could come by, but to be discreet. So, here I am. I am very excited to meet a human.’

His signs are smooth and almost fluent, his ears fluttering as he speaks.

He’s no one to be afraid of. If anything, he seems curious.

‘Oh, I see. Nice to meet you. My name’s Luca.’

‘I know.’

His tail, which was wrapped around his waist, sneaks out, touching my leg. I let him, his curiosity making my heart warm. He has an innocent demeanor to him.

‘Your skin is soft, but not as soft as ours. And you have little hairs on it.’ He bends down, his talk flicking away before tightening around his thigh.

‘Yes, it’s different than your skin.’

He nods, and his finger reaches out to poke at it, pulling one from my leg and making me yelp. ‘Does that hurt?’ he asks, holding up a small hair from my leg between his fingers and staring at it.

‘Yes,’ I say and then let out a small disbelieving laugh. So, this is who Eissa was reluctant to bring over. I can see why, but I’m more intrigued than anything.

‘I apologize. I did not mean to cause you harm.’

He tucks the small hair into a pocket in his garment, and he glances down at me once more.

‘That’s fine. Just next time, ask.’

‘I can ask anything I want?’

I shrug. ‘I don’t mind. Sure. I’m Deaf. We like questions.’

He blinks a few times and then points to my crotch. ‘Can I see your penis? I have heard they are very small in comparison to the Vyastil, and I would like to watch it grow hard.’

I choke and shake my head. ‘I think Eissa wouldn’t like that.’

Just as those signs fall from my fingers, Eissa appears through the doorway, his tunic whipping around him. He doesn’t stop as he approaches, just pushes past Vyrian and pulls me into his arms. His face nuzzles my neck, the spot where he bit me, and I feel a pulse of adoration move through the bond we share.

But he doesn’t linger long, pulling away seconds later to look at Vyrian.

‘You must not ask a Vyastil’s companion these questions.’

Vyrian cocks his head. ‘Why? I am just curious.’

‘Harm could befall you if you ask the wrong companion. We can be… possessive. Not all will understand that it is merely curiosity.’

‘Even if I am a prince?’ he asks, and Eissa sighs.

My eyes flick from Eissa to Vyrian. I had no idea he was a prince. Did I offend him by saying no? I don’t think so. But then again, if he’s related to Jyrion…

‘Yes, even if you are a prince,’ Eissa says, speaking candidly. There’s something in the way he addresses him that tells me Vyrian is nothing like Jyrion.

Perhaps he is more like Quilliyn.

Vyrian considers Eissa’s comment a moment and then gives a nod. ‘Then I apologize for saying something I should not have. Forgive me.’

‘We accept. We shall speak no more about it. Luca,’ Eissa begins. ‘Vyrian is very curious about humans.’

‘I can tell,’ I say with a small smile.

‘You do not have much with you, but perhaps you would like to go up to your room and bring down anything you have from Earth. Even the smallest items I’m sure Vyrian would enjoy.’

Vyrian’s ears flutter in excitement, and his eyes widen. ‘I would like this very much.’

I grin and turn toward the stairs, rushing up them to grab what I can. When I return, Vyrian and Eissa are speaking to one another, their lips moving in a way I cannot understand, which leads me to believe they are speaking in Eretharian.

I don’t mind and set the small satchel down on the end table, letting them finish what they’re conversing about. But I can see that Vyrian is anxious to move on to other things, and Eissa must sense it because he smiles and shakes his head, beckoning me over to sit beside him.

I go quickly, letting myself sink back against Eissa as I set the small bag between us. Eissa’s tail wraps around me and pulls me close.

‘Go ahead. You can look.’

Vyrian’s eyes are wide, his hands trembling as he pulls the bag up to his chest and peers inside. Then he pulls out a small container of lip balm. The kind you unscrew and place your finger in.

‘What is it?’ he asks, turning it this way and that.

‘It’s for your lips. To make them smooth.’

‘I have heard of this!’ He holds it out to me. ‘I have one, but it is a different shape. Show me how this one works.’

I take it from his trembling hand and show him how to use it, unscrewing the cap, dipping my finger in and smoothing it across my lips. When I’m done, I hold it out to him. ‘Try.’

He is nearly vibrating with excitement as he takes it from me and mimics my movement, smearing it across his mouth a little too roughly, leaving a streak of balm behind. He smacks his lips and then makes a face when his tongue pokes out to run along them.

‘It tastes odd.’

‘You’re not supposed to lick it.’

He looks alarmed. ‘Will I grow ill?’

‘No. You’ll be fine.’

He sighs happily and then caps it and places it gingerly back into the bag. He pulls out two coins, a dime and a nickel, money I had in my pocket when I was injured. His eyes flash as he holds them in his palm, one finger petting them gently. ‘This looks like a treasure.’

‘It’s money…coins.’

‘Human money. I have read about these. They have value.’

‘You can have them,’ I say, and he looks like he’s about to faint.

‘I cannot. It is too much.’

I feel Eissa rumble behind me, and I can feel his tender caress against the edges of my mind.

I like him.

I do too.

He’s different.

He is. It is why he’s been hidden away. Thank you for being kind to him.

‘It is not too much. You can have.’

Vyrian’s lips part and then his tongue flicks out, and he tastes it, making a face before gingerly putting both coins into the pocket of his tunic.

Then he goes through the rest of the bag, marveling over each item he pulls out. The way he’s excited over the most mundane things makes me want to ask Eissa to bring back other items for him to enjoy. Maybe when Dante comes to visit, I can ask him to bring me a care package. One for myself and one for Vyrian. It doesn’t even have to be expensive things. I bet Dante could find items like buttons and screws, bits of string and fabric, and Vyrian would hoard them like golden treasures.

Eissa must sense my thoughts because he places his hand over my heart and whispers back his agreement. *Anything to make you happy, my Luca.*

But don't you know, my Eissa. You make me happy.

When Vyrian eventually leaves, his pocket full of things I can easily part with—not my lip balm; I need that—but things like a puzzle piece I'd been carrying around, a broken pencil that I never got rid of, and a bit of lint, I find myself yawning.

The zitha helped heal me, but I'm still exhausted from the rut.

Eissa must sense it because he picks me up and carries me to his bedroom.

'You must sleep,' he says softly as he tucks me under a soft blanket. 'Your body is so fragile. It needs time to rest.'

'Can you stay with me?'

'Yes. I will never leave you again.'

I am nearly vibrating with excitement for who's about to appear in Eissa's small cottage. It's been so long, forever it feels.

And when my brother steps through the front door, a heavy cloak over his shoulders, I nearly sob at the sight. My arms wind around him, pulling him in for a bruising hug. I can feel his grunt vibrate through his chest, and when I pull back, I see that his eyes are wet.

'I missed you,' he signs, swiping at his eyes, and then he says it again.

We hug once more, holding onto one another tightly for long minutes before we finally pull away. Eissa and Rathyn are standing nearby, their heads touching as they speak to one another, Everest lingering by their side, Rathyn's tail wrapped around his thigh.

But when we part, Everest moves, yanking me in for a warm embrace before pulling back.

'You look so much better. Eissa has been taking care of you?'

I peer over at him, feeling something affectionate wind around me, and I grow warm.

'Yes.' I feel my blush at the image he sends through my mind, of him pushing his cocks into me, breeding me.

I see the sly grin Dante and Everest give each other, and I roll my eyes.

‘Shut up,’ I sign, but they just shrug, grabbing onto my hands and pulling me toward one of the sofas.

‘This is a cool place,’ Dante says, looking around. ‘But the furniture is kind of all over the place.’

‘That’s because of him,’ I say, pointing to Gerald, who is rounding a corner, his antennae swiveling this way and that.

‘Oh fuck!’ Dante shouts with his hand, his legs pulling up onto the cushion he’s sitting on. ‘What is that?’

‘A kradun. He’s very chaotic, but sweet. His name is Gerald.’

Everest isn’t as afraid as my brother, more curious than anything. ‘Can I touch him?’ he asks when Gerald pushes his block head against a small chair and shoves it across the room toward us.

‘Yes. He likes his shell being scratched.’

As Gerald makes his way toward us, Everest reaches out, and his hand glides over the rock-like shell, making Gerald stop, his antennae flicking toward him before he butts his head against Everest’s knee.

I see Everest throw his head back and laugh before getting Rathyn’s attention. ‘I want one. I want a pet.’

Rathyn’s lips turn down, and he scowls. ‘No.’

Everest rolls his eyes and then hides his hands when he signs to both of us. ‘I will get one. Just watch. I can coax and convince him.’

I find myself laughing, my back sinking into the cushion behind me as Rathyn and Eissa watch us for a long moment.

‘We will give you privacy,’ Eissa says, and then Rathyn and Eissa move out onto the front porch, Gerald meandering out after them.

‘Your ASL is getting very good, by the way,’ I tell Everest when he turns his gaze back to me.

‘I’ve been practicing. And I have all the time in the world to learn. I mean, I’m not working much, just getting my cock sucked and using all those toys Dante has made for us—’ His hands stop, and then he waves at my brother. ‘Show him what you brought.’

Dante’s eyes widen, and he hops up, moving to the front door where he left his cloak. He reaches into one of the pockets and pulls out a box.

‘I just made this. Everest and Rathyn tried it out, and they liked it.’

Everest flushes. ‘Rathyn liked it a lot. Appeals to their breeding nature.’

I pull the lid of the box open and stare down at it. It’s a large dildo, shaped after a Vyastil cock, the base thick with a knot.

‘What does it do?’

‘It lays eggs in you, and then you push them out.’

I blink a few times and then let out a laugh. ‘You’re fucking with me.’

‘No. He’s not,’ Everest replies. ‘It’s really hot. You know…because the Vyastil can’t breed humans and we can’t lay eggs, and they really like watching us…’ his hands waggle in the air, and then he says, ‘give birth.’

I hold up the dildo to my face and examine it. Well, fuck. My cock stirs at the thought of Eissa watching me push the eggs out, one by one.

‘I’ll try it.’

‘Let me know if you think there should be any modifications to it. I’m all ears.’

I clear my throat and look at Everest and then Dante. ‘He has two dicks.’

They stare at me and then lean forward simultaneously. ‘*Two*?’

‘Yeah.’

Then they’re asking me all sorts of questions, ones I’d normally balk at, but I have no one to discuss this with. Lucie, maybe, but we aren’t as close. This is a safe space, one where I can ask questions and receive answers without second-guessing myself, without wondering if I’m being judged.

‘Wow. That sounds so hot. So, you’re mated with a breeder? I can’t believe it,’ Dante says.

‘Yeah. Same-same.’

‘With two cocks,’ Everest says, sighing. ‘I think you should make a toy like that, so Rath can use it on me.’

He freezes for a moment and then rolls his eyes. ‘Rath is being a nosy bitch. Says that I don’t need two dicks to be satisfied, but that’s not the point! The point is I want to try it!’ I can see the way his lips move. He’s talking while signing this, probably loudly so that Rathyn can hear.

Suddenly, Rathyn appears, and Everest flips him off. It only leads to Everest being picked up off the couch by Rathyn and led somewhere in the house. Don’t want to know what they’re going to do, but it leaves Dante and me alone for a long moment.

Dante lets out a happy laugh and leans into my side. I pull him in for another hug, and he grabs onto my hand, holding it tightly.

‘Tell me everything I’ve missed while I’ve been here. Any updates on anything?’

Dante peers up at me and leans back so we can communicate clearly.

‘Mom and Dad are fine. Worried about you, of course, but they know you’re happy and safe, so that appeases them a lot. And of course Gia and Amara ask me every time I see them about you. I’ve been vague, but they know enough.’

‘How’s Cielo?’

‘Wonderful. Perfect. I adore him.’

He sighs, and I can feel him tremble. I have a feeling that Cielo is talking to him through the bond they share. My hand moves up to my neck, and I touch the invisible mark Eissa left on me. Dante, of course, doesn’t miss it.

His eyes widen, and he squeezes my leg. ‘You and Eissa?’

‘Yes.’

‘You must keep it a secret. You can’t tell anyone. There are so few of us. It’s so dangerous.’

‘I know.’

He’s silent for a long moment, and then he shakes his head. ‘It’s wonderful and frightening, loving someone like that.’

‘I know.’

I think about Eissa and Kori, about how Kori was ripped away from his Vyastil, how much Eissa suffered from it… and continues to suffer.

But I don’t tell my brother any of that, sending a wave of affection through the bond and feeling it wrap tightly around Eissa. I sit like that for a long moment before Everest appears once more, his gait a little off, his cheeks and neck flushed red.

Dante and I stare at him, and we both can’t help but laugh, especially when Rathyn appears again looking smug, walking a little taller as he makes his way back outside with Eissa.

Everest falls onto the couch beside us and runs a hand through his hair. ‘Sorry about that. You know how possessive they get.’

We both nod, and then I reach out and touch Everest’s leg, getting his attention.

‘How’s Zane?’ The mention of his best friend makes his face pale, and I see his eyes well up.

‘He’s in big, big trouble. He’s going to jail. Going to spend years there, I think. They’re going to make an example out of him.’

My heart aches for him, but I also feel somewhat vindicated. I know Zane’s Everest’s best friend, but he also took part in something that caused

me so much pain, and it ripped me away from my family.

But if it hadn't happened, if I hadn't come to live with Eissa, would he and I ever have been bonded like this? Did that need to happen for Eissa to realize what I am to him?

I don't know, but I do feel sorry for Everest and the agony he must be in, realizing someone you love isn't who you think they are.

'We don't need to talk about him. I know what he did to you.'

I squeeze his leg once more, and our conversation turns back to Dante, his shop, and all the toys that Everest and Rathyn have tried. When Eissa and Rathyn appear a while later, we're laughing so hard tears are streaming down our cheeks.

They stand and watch us for a long moment, their lips curled up in amusement before Rathyn interrupts. 'We must go. We have stayed too long.'

I glance at Eissa, my laughter dying, my hand tightening on my brother's hand.

'Can he come back and visit?'

'Yes, soon.'

And with that we all stand, exchanging long hugs, tears now streaming down our cheeks from the pain of being ripped from one another again.

But it's bittersweet because when they leave, Eissa coddles me, curling me onto his lap and stroking my hair with his long fingers. I can feel him in my mind, soothing, whispering, and it makes me relax, the anxiety of possibly not seeing my brother for another long stretch dissipating.

Eissa promises me that I will see him again. That he is doing everything in his power so that I can return home.

Not without you.

His gaze moves to mine, and he cups my cheek.

Promise me. Not without you.

It's then that he gives me a soft nod, and I relax into him. He's going to find a way to bring me back to my family, for us to be reunited. And he's going to come with me.

I believe him because I know Eissa. I know his word is his bond.

OceanofPDF.com

thirty-one

EISSA

LUCA IS melancholy the next week, and I worry that bringing his brother to see him was the wrong choice if it only made him long for the things he cannot have. I cater to his every need, sucking him off during the day as often as he wants and curling against him at night. The guilt I feel is consuming me.

But he works his way into my mind when I feel the lowest, and he reassures me he's happy. He just misses home, his family, and the life he had.

I promise him that I'm working on a way to get him back to Earth, but I don't know if that's a lie.

I cannot promise that it will end the way I want—with us together, living safely and as free as I can possibly be from Erethar.

But my soothing does help, and slowly he brightens and perks up, as a flower does when it sees the sunlight or after a long rain on Earth. It could be that we are truly alone for the first time since he arrived here. I've not been called away to the capital or to the archives. I've been able to stay in my cottage, the two of us wrapped up in our small, comfortable cocoon.

But something feels off, like thick air before a storm.

To make matters worse, Jyrion hasn't shown up to visit Luca, and for some reason, that bothers me most of all. I worry that he's caught on to what Luca and I are, and with that, everything I am attempting to accomplish.

But I cannot let my worries take over my common sense. I must revert to logic in moments like those, as hard as it is. I need more information before panicking.

I know I must leave Luca soon and visit with those on Earth to try to see if there is any movement from the human rebellion. I know I must speak with Everest about his friend Zane, no matter how sad it makes him feel.

Now is not the time for feelings.

It is a time for truth and action.

I am growing weary of the long plight and my place in it.

'What's wrong?' Luca asks, finding me in the kitchen, my hand around a mug of tea. I have not drunk from it, and he must have noticed. Those beautiful eyes catch everything.

'I am thinking too much.'

'Do you need a distraction?' His hand moves to the tunic he's wearing, and he opens it up, exposing his nude body to me. Ah, all of that soft human skin. I adore it. I would worship it if he would allow me to.

'Yes. I think I do.'

He lets the tunic fall to the ground, and I step up to him, my tea forgotten as I pull him into my body. I feel my slit leak as I press up against his hardening cock, and I wish him to fuck me, to release his seed into my body.

But he has other plans because before I can suggest it, he pulls back and his eyes sparkle.

'I have another idea. Would you like to try it?'

I do not know what to expect, but I have never disliked anything Luca wishes to do with me, new or old. I let him link his hand with mine and drag me upstairs, weaving around the furniture blocking our path. When we arrive in his room, he points to the bed, and I sink onto it, watching as he bends down and pulls something from the wardrobe.

My eyes land on his ass, watching those tight globes flex as he rights and steps toward me.

'Dante gave me a gift. I haven't felt up to using it, but I think this is just what we both need.'

My nostrils flare as he opens the lid and I peer inside. It is a large, silicone cock with a knot on the end. It's ribbed like a Vyastil's, and there is a small button on the base.

‘I know it’s not two cocks, but it’ll work. Plus there’s a surprise at the end.’

‘What does it do?’

‘You’ll have to watch and find out. Want to fuck me with it?’

This is a silly question. ‘Yes.’

‘Take off your clothes.’

I shred them with my claws, letting the tatters fall to the ground, and Luca grins as he slides against me. He pushes us both back, his fingers dipping into my slit, and wets them before he drags them to his ass. He’s readying himself for this strange cock.

I wish it were mine, but I am interested to see what this will do.

Luca makes the most delicious noises as he works himself open, and I cannot help but reach up and pull him in for a kiss. I enjoy doing this with him. It is something I find myself dreaming of often. He moans into my mouth as my tongue twists around his, and I feel him rub his small cock against my thigh as he pushes his fingers into himself.

I want a turn, so I lift him up further, wetting my fingers with my slick and pushing two into his tight hole. He gasps against my mouth, sucking on my tongue as I work him open. His arms are trembling, his legs too. I can smell the precum of his cock leaking onto my stomach. He is already close.

He pulls back, his lips swollen, his pupils blown out. He reaches for the silicone cock and uses his voice to say, “Fuck me.”

It is something I am unable to resist. I roll us over, my body bracketing his. Our eyes meet, and I feel his legs lift, pressing against my chest and making me sit up. His hands curl under the backs of his knees, and he exposes himself to me.

When I come, push that button on the bottom. That’s the surprise.

I swallow as I press the head of the cock against his hole. I see it open, wet and pink from being used, and I cannot help but slowly work it inside, hearing the small pops as each ribbed edge moves past his rim.

He groans, his back arching as he takes each inch.

I like watching this more than I thought. I am a little jealous he’s not stuffed with me, but mostly I am intrigued.

My slit leaks, and I feel my cocks start to push from my body, dripping and wet.

Luca moans as I work it all the way to the hilt, the knot pushing through his rim and making him cry out. I watch how his hole swallows it. His cock

jumps, and I see a drop of cum slide down the tip.

I cannot help but lean down and lap at it.

Humans are so perfect, I think.

Perfectly wonderful.

When I lean back up, Luca's eyes are hooded, his bottom wiggling.

"Move," he moans. "Please."

I love his voice. Everything about him, and I cannot deny him anything. I pull the cock out of him and then push it back in, watching with warming skin how he takes it all, how he pants and begs, how his cock dribbles more and more cum onto his perfect skin. And when I ram the dildo all the way into him a final time, the knot splitting his rim, he shouts, and his cock explodes. My finger depresses that small button, and I feel a small hum before Luca's eyes widen, his body shivering and shaking.

Something is happening to him, but I do not know what. He's enjoying it, though, his eyes rolling into the back of his head, and one of his hands moves to his stomach, pressing down.

'What is it?' I ask, one hand still on the button, the other hovering between us.

'Eggs,' he replies, his eyes meeting mine. 'It lays eggs.'

My nostrils flare and my hearts thunder.

'They're not real,' he says, his fingers trembling, 'but…when you pull the dildo out, you can see me lay them.'

My ears flutter, and I can't help but lean down and kiss him, our tongues tangling. I consume him as his hands slide into my hair and tug roughly. We do this for ages, his belly growing round. Or maybe that is my imagination.

I do not know, but I am hard with want.

I want to see the results of this breeding.

When I finally push off him, I let my hand fall onto his stomach, pressing down and feeling the eggs inside. Vyastil females only lay one at a time, but the thought of my Luca laying more than one is making my cocks push all the way from my body.

They want to breed him again.

I pull the dick slowly from Luca's body, and my eyes move to his hole. It's open and wide, contracting around nothing. My fingers push inside of him, and I feel the soft, shell-like orb inside.

I growl, ferality creating a raging fever inside me.

And then he leans up, his hands on his legs, and he pushes, and I watch one come out and then another, the sight so erotic that I stroke myself at the sight.

When he finally falls back, his chest heaving, I fall on him, rutting against him like a beast, my entire body trembling. The feel of him, the sight of him giving birth to my eggs as my cocks explode against him, my lips falling to that spot on his neck that I bit.

I suck on it roughly, and his groan envelops me.

You liked it, didn't you?

I loved it, my Luca. I loved it just as I love you.

I love you too. I wish I could give you an egg. I'm sorry I can't.

No, I would not wish it. I want you just as you are.

That seems to soothe him because he sighs happily, his hands threading through my hair, brushing against my ears and making them flutter happily.

Everything else can wait, I think as I curl him against me and press my lips to his skin. Right now, I'm going to just exist with my VySytheh while there is still peace.

I will never not love the small, quiet noises that Luca doesn't know he's making. Just as I love the unthinking, unconscious ways he moves his body and his hands when he's relaxed and happy.

It is different. Better than it ever was with Kori, and the longer Luca is beside me, the more my past starts to feel like some kind of fevered nightmare. I spend hours while he sleeps thinking about his stomach tight and round with eggs. I think about watching them as they slipped from his body.

As a breeder, I was meant to have a biological drive to want eggs. To fertilize them and grow our population. That has never been me. The want to watch my VySytheh round with the evidence of our coupling is pure instinct.

I have raised hatchlings and nearly failed on both accounts. Rathyn and Dhoryn are their own beings and have the capability to be so good. But I'm not sure that had anything to do with me. I do not wish to fail my own genetic offspring in the same way.

And, in reality, Luca is enough for me.

I draw my hand down his body, but he doesn't do more than stir and roll in my direction. He is exhausted, and I know that things will only start to get worse. My rut is over, but that doesn't mean another one isn't coming on soon. I did not procreate, which means my duty is unfulfilled.

I stopped taking the suppressant herbs Sabik gave me, but it might be time to go on them again. Just for now. Just until I can secure my plans to get Luca safe and light the spark that will ignite a war.

So we can finally be free.

Slipping from the bed, I take my tablet on the way out of the room and head for the kitchen. I have been neglecting my own nutritional needs—I'm full of cum, but it is not enough for the Vyastil to live on. Luckily, there is fresh kirrashev, and I prepare myself a larger portion than usual, taking it with me into my office.

There are messages waiting. Two from the council about the upcoming meeting. There's one from Jyrion specifically that makes my hearts leap until I realize it's just his notes on my findings.

He is disappointed in me, and I find that gives me an odd thrill. If I am doing work up to his standard, then it is bad work.

The last is from Rathyn inviting me to a meeting. He leaves a symbol—an ancient letter most Vyastil can't read anymore. We are to meet in the caves. Perhaps he has heard something from Sabik. That sends both my hearts beating out of rhythm.

I take several slow breaths, then look up to find Luca standing in the doorway watching me with tired eyes. I finish my kirrashev in a single swallow, then beckon him over. He doesn't hesitate. His feet carry him to me, and I wrap my tail around his leg, yanking him into my lap.

He laughs loudly, then takes my chin between his fingers and gives me a long, devastating human kiss.

"Good morning," he says aloud, then pulls back to sign, 'Is it morning?'

Our nights aren't as long as Earth nights, and I wonder if it's messing with his internal body clock. 'Yes. Morning. I have work.'

He pulls a face, and I feel a pulse of annoyance, and something else. Fear. I get a flashing image of Jyrion in his mind, the prince standing in the doorway of our cottage.

'You can turn him away. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do,' I remind my VySytheh.

He taps his fingers to his temples gently. ‘I know. But I want to help. And I think Jyrion is more complicated than most people think.’

My brow furrows. ‘Explain.’

I am afraid for Luca. I do not want him to think there’s anything redeemable about the prince. He is cruel and ruthless and vicious. He will not hesitate to be kind to get what he wants, and he will not hesitate with fangs and claws when he is ready to strike.

I do not know that he is capable of love or bonding. There is something in him that is broken. Or, perhaps, something in him that needs breaking.

‘I saw bruises on him,’ Luca signs, his expression almost careful. ‘Sometimes he seems afraid. Truly afraid.’

‘Please don’t let that fool you into thinking you are safe with him,’ I beg.

Luca shakes his head and kisses me again, then pushes into the bond. *Never*.

There is a rich, heady truth behind that single word. It’s impossible not to believe or trust him. And the fact that he is scared of Jyrion makes me feel better. It lets me know that he will approach with some caution.

I could not leave him alone if I thought he would be reckless.

Luca kisses my neck, then he slides off my lap and stares down at me. ‘I want to feed you my cum before work. Come back to bed?’

That is a very quick, very easy yes.

I let him guide me to the bed, his mouth meeting mine in a sultry kiss as he grinds up against me. He is insatiable, perfect. Mine.

I do not want to leave him today. I want to stay here with him, sucking on his cock and letting him suck on mine. I want to watch him sleep, want to trace each line of his body with my fingers and tail.

Luca’s mouth pulls away from mine, his lips wet from my spit, and I can’t help but let my tongue run along his lower lip, feeling it quiver at my touch. My hands drag up his abdomen and pluck at his pierced nipples, making him whine.

“Eissa,” he moans, my name a beautiful melody on his tongue.

His eyelids droop, and he pushes me backward, scooting up my torso until that small human cock is at my mouth.

I do not hesitate. I wrap my tongue around it and suck, listening to his sweet crooning cries as he finds pleasure in my mouth.

The taste of him soon erupts on my tongue without warning, and I milk him until he's pulling off, his hand wrapped around his base, his chest heaving.

I smack my lips together, taking in every last drop, and then touch him tenderly. He sighs happily and flops down next to me, one leg thrown over my thigh, his hand reaching out to touch my thundering hearts.

I don't want you to go, but you must.

I don't want to leave, but he's right. I cannot leave Rathyn waiting. It is important enough for him to reach out. So he must have information that he can feed me.

I linger a little too long but eventually sneak away when Luca falls back asleep. I caress his soft skin with my eyes before making my way out of the house and through the portal.

I expected I might see a Vyastil in my office when I arrived, but I did not expect to see three Vyastil princes. Jyrion is facing my desk with Izar on his right and Vyrian on his left. Izar looks annoyed and tired, while Vyrian looks uncomfortable and confused and keeps trying to catch my gaze, though he never holds it.

"Your Highnesses," I say as I walk around my desk. Because they are standing, I do not sit. "How can I assist you?"

"As you are one of the top council members and well aware of security protocols and portal use," Jyrion says, flicking his ears with an arrogance only a prince can have, "I would like to know why there have been several attempts by the Vorthex to open unauthorized portals, outside of our agreement with them."

I blink at him. "I have never been privy to Vorthex portal use. That agreement has never crossed my desk. I believe the king and queen—"

"They don't trouble themselves with those trivial matters," Jyrion says. For the first time, I hear it. A strange tightness in his voice when he speaks about his parents. My gaze flickers down to his arms, and yes.

I see them.

Bruising that will eventually fade. Marks as a reminder of his place without being permanent or altering his appearance.

If Jyrion is aware I have noticed, he does not show it. “It is a concern of ours, and I wish you to look into it.”

I nod my head once. “I will see it done.”

“Personally,” he sneers. “Even if it means long nights away from your…companion.”

I do my best not to let my anger and anxiety show. “Of course.”

Jyrion takes one step back, nearly knocking into Vyrian, but then he freezes and reaches into his satchel, pulling out a small vial. He sets it on my desk. “One last thing. Your rut has been clearly delayed, which is upsetting the rest of the council. I have procured this for you.”

I stare at it, trying not to swallow too thickly. “Which is…?” I ask the question, but I recognize the blue, shimmering herb in the vial and my hearts sink.

“Tolyian, to bring about your breeding rut. I will schedule the guards to pick you up tomorrow at second moonrise to take you to the breeding caves.”

I thought I had more time. My chest feels tight, and my hearts are attempting to beat past my ribs. “I understand.”

I have only one thing to do now, which is to contact Sabik and see what we can do about moving up the timeline. I have no idea if he and the other Tarek are willing to aid us, but it is now or never.

And if it’s never…

Well, I cannot leave Luca now. I have held him, bonded to him, bred him in the only way a human can be bred. He is mine, and separating us could very well destroy us both. I will have to leave Erethar and never return.

And doing so may destroy what little chance my people have of breaking this cycle.

Jyrion blinks at me. “What are you waiting for?”

“I…you wish me to take it now?”

He huffs, and his eyes flash. “It will not take effect until just before the second moon rises. If you delay taking it, then you will throw the breeding time entirely off schedule.”

There is no getting out of this. “And if it begins to work sooner?”

Jyrion’s smile looks vicious, all fang and cruel joy. “Well. You’ll be with your companion, won’t you? And a Vyastil such as yourself would

never be satisfied with a human mating. So you will endure until the guards arrive.”

I understand what he is doing now. He is hoping that in my rut—in the feral state I will find myself in—I will ruin Luca before I’m taken to fertilize an egg. The only comfort that brings me is that it means he does not know the depth of my bond to Luca.

I pick up the vial, say a prayer to any of the gods willing to hear me, then lay the herbs on my tongue. They dissolve almost immediately, and I wait, my tail tense around my thigh.

But I feel nothing. There is a slight warming sensation in my stomach, and then that too fades.

I have some time, possibly. If I am lucky. But it will be mere hours before I will need to find Luca and make whatever choice necessary to save us.

OceanofPDF.com

thirty-two

EISSA

IT'S dark in the cave, my voice making the small githyn come alive from the vibrations. The walls are alight with them as I make my way farther and farther inside until I round a corner and see Rathyn standing there, something in his hand.

"Greetings," I say to him as I approach, that item going into his pocket quickly. Our foreheads touch, and I cannot help but ask, "What are you hiding from me?"

Rathyn makes a small face at me. "I'm not hiding anything. It was a gift from Everest to remember him when I am away. It is a silly human thing and of no importance."

I look at the place he disappeared the item into and then back at his eyes. "I do not think you mean that."

He huffs and turns, his ears fluttering. "I do not mean it. It is silly and fragile, but it is from him, so I find I quite enjoy it."

"What is it?" I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me.

He pulls out a small chain with what looks like half a heart on the end. "He says it is a relationship necklace."

He holds it out for me, and I see that Everest has had his name engraved on half the heart. "It is only half a heart."

"I did not understand it. I thought that he was leaving me when it was presented to me. But he has the other half of the heart. So when we are together, they are whole."

My eyes widen, and I touch it softly. “That is very…”

“Odd, but he says it is romantic.”

Romance, romantic. “Would Luca want one?”

Rathyn lets out a grunt, and he takes the necklace back, putting it in his tunic pocket. “I believe so. Humans are sentimental beings who like to wear half hearts around their necks.”

My eyes meet his, and I see something soft in his rainbow gaze. It has been there ever since he met Everest at the clinic. “I would like one. Can Everest procure one for me?”

“Yes. I shall ask. Then we can be ridiculous together.”

I let out a small laugh, and he grins at me. “The things we do for our humans.”

“And their tiny cocks.” My grin widens, and then Rathyn’s dies. “I did not come here to talk about tiny cocks and half hearts, but to let you know that Everest has met with Zane several times in prison.”

My mouth turns down. “And you are okay with this?”

“I must be. They are friends, from hatchlings. Everest loves him like a brother.”

“I understand.” And I do. I would not be able to cope with the knowledge that I was hurting Luca by forbidding him from seeing someone he cared so deeply about.

“And when he was there, he learned that Zane is still in contact with his family.”

“The same ones who have plotted against our kind?”

“Yes. He has not cut ties.”

That makes something angry well up inside of me. “Will Everest help us?”

“He will. He has decided, for the moment, that not speaking with Zane is the better option.” Rathyn’s words sound almost melancholy, like he’s hurting for his VySytheh. “He believes Zane is good, but there is too much conditioning on the surface.”

“I suppose that is something we can understand,” I tell him, and he nods. It is something all Vyastil are familiar with, even if so many of them are not yet aware of it.

Rathyn shifts restlessly. Sabik is late, and I’m starting to feel overly anxious. The herb still hasn’t taken effect, but I can feel the heat building at

the base of my tail. It will linger there for some time, but it will not stay that way.

I have mere hours, if I'm lucky, to get back to Luca and take the suppressant herb. And there is no guarantee that will work.

"You seem troubled," Rathyn says.

I turn to face him. "I am worried Jyrion is becoming aware of my… plans," I say slowly. "He's forced me to take tolyian to bring about my breeding rut."

Rathyn's eyes widen. "You ingested it?"

"I wasn't given a choice. I had no way to refuse him. There were no more excuses. I am far past the breeding time, and I knew that if I tried to say anything against him, he would make a move to take Luca from me."

Rathyn growls. "Then we must hope to Aelvorn that Sabik is willing to align with us."

"I am willing," comes a voice.

Both Rathyn and I freeze, and a moment later, Sabik appears. And this time, he is not alone.

I have had very little interaction with other Tarek. They guard their people carefully and with immense possessiveness. It only makes sense, of course. They lost so many to such a pointless war, and they do not breed as often as the Vyastil, so recovering their population numbers takes generations.

But the two beside Sabik look like him. They share the same coloring and the same horns, though the one on the left has longer horns. I recognize him as Sabik's older brother.

The crown prince.

My hearts speed up. The Tarek have long been underestimated in their ability to win a fight, and I very much doubt Rathyn and I would stand a chance if they were to turn against us.

But Sabik's words were ones of allyship. He meets my gaze as I bow, and Rathyn does the same.

"I don't believe you've been formally introduced to my brother," Sabik says. "King Zeial."

"*King*?" I say before I can stop myself.

Zeial's lips twitch around his tusks and his eyes flash, amused. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Sabik has told me of your support." His eyes move to Rathyn. "And this is the one you saved. The commander."

Rathyn has killed Tarek before. The moment is tense. I can sense Rathyn's nerves as he takes several steps closer, touches his chest, then bows his head.

Zeial's gaze lingers on him for a moment, then he turns his attention back to me. "Sabik came to me with your proposal. We took it to our war council."

I hold my breath again, and I wait.

I wonder if Zeial's enjoying drawing out the tension. It wouldn't surprise me if every member of their family had a flair for the dramatic. But then he goes on.

"You agree that there needs to be new leadership in place," he says.

"I do. Not just new leadership," I add. "An entire system of deprogramming and re-educating our people. I want to bring back everything that was stolen from us."

Zeial looks at Rathyn again. "You were the first, yes? To have created a VySytheh bond? The first in over three centuries."

Rathyn's eyes flash wide for just a second. It is painfully obvious how little he knows, and I blame myself for keeping so much close to my chest. It would have been too risky to share too much before we were ready to make a move, but the guilt is no less heavy for it.

"Is that true?" he asks.

Zeial is quiet for a long moment. "We believe so, though there were several Vyastil and several Ryvek who escaped through the portals early on and never returned to Erethar."

"How do you know this?" I ask. "Forgive the question, but the Tarek do not use portals. They have avoided humans since the Vorthex first began bringing them to Erethar."

All three Tarek look at each other. The two brothers, and who I must assume is their guard. At least, I assume it until the third, unnamed Tarek slides a tentacle around the king's wrist and the king holds him back.

The gesture is unthinking and small and yet massive because it would be a crime punishable by a life sentence in the mines to show such affection in public with another Vyastil. And that—that easy affection—that casual love is what I want for us.

No. It is what we need.

Rathyn steps in close, and I hear him make a soft murmur. He obviously sees it too.

Zeial looks back at me eventually. “We have been in contact with the Vorthex for some time. We do not agree with their means of surviving, but we do understand that they have little choice. Their need for the specific protein humans produce is not about power. It is about survival.”

I bow my head because it is true. There may come a time when the Vyastil need humans in the same way, but for now, it is merely to increase our strength and lifespan. The Outerlanders have been surviving without it all this time. But the Vyastil in the capital would not be willing to give up such a luxury.

“The Vorthex are currently displeased by the new restrictions the council has placed upon their portal use.”

I blink at him, and beside me, Rathyn stiffens.

“Restrictions?” he asks.

All three Tarek look somewhat surprised, then Sabik clears his throat. “You were unaware?” When I nod, he moves forward a few paces and folds his arms across his massive chest. Glancing back at his brother, he waits for the nod of approval. “You must also be unaware that at least one member of your council possesses the technology to shut down the portals remotely. And the Vorthex Portal Science Team has been working tirelessly on ways to combat it, but they’ve been unsuccessful.”

“The VPST can open unauthorized portals,” Rathyn says. “I have been using them for months.”

Sabik gives him a look. “Unauthorized portals still ping the radar, Commander. The Vyastil council may not be aware of exactly where the portals open, but they still possess the technology to close them at will. Half a dozen times now, Vorthex collection teams have been trapped on Earth and were forced to go through negotiations to return home. And those negotiations have ended in them being forced to leave their humans behind.”

My breath comes out in a rush. “If this matter was discussed by the council, they left me out of it.”

“Yes. I suspected as much,” Sabik says. “Which means that while your plans might be unknown, they must suspect you will attempt to make a

move against them. And it means they plan to use your vulnerable spots against you."

My vulnerable spots.

My Luca.

"The Vorthex have agreed to lend us military aid," Zeial says, "with the agreement that when the king, queen, and council have been overthrown, they have free rein to take humans as needed."

I stiffen. They have a system, of course, to protect the humans they send home after. But from what I have heard over the many years, the humans still leave forever changed.

"I am willing to discuss it. And I am willing to find a way to provide, but we need to be able to find a way that allows humans to agree. As they have done with us," I say.

Zeial scoffs. "You mean through coercion. Curing diseases and illness and providing clean water with Tarek technology to get their governments to make service to the Vyastil mandatory."

My ears flick in shame. "We wish for reform also."

"I believe they will agree to compromise being put on the table," Zeial says eventually. He pulls out a tablet and holds it out. "The Vorthex have laid out their terms, and the Tarek have laid out ours. Add your terms and sign, and then we will provide a way for communication when you are ready to move against the Vyastilian forces."

This is becoming real. Rathyn touches my arm, and I look over at him.

"Dhoryn is still working on recruiting the Outerlanders. Are you sure signing this is wise without more Vyastil behind us?"

"I'm not sure we have much of a choice now," I tell Rathyn. The heat is growing worse in my stomach, but I swallow it down. I have a little more time before it overwhelms me.

"You will have the force of two militaries behind you," Zeial reminds me. "And if it helps, we have several Vyastil contacts that have been quietly making plans to align with the Tarek."

My eyes widen. "Who?"

Zeial shakes his head. "We will bring that to the table the next time we meet. For now, we allow this moment to be our beginning."

I take the tablet and read over it carefully before adding in my requirements. A discussion before any agreements between Eretharians and

humans are made. And they must allow the Vyastil to decide who will lead our people once the king, queen, and council have been displaced.

I do not think my demands will be enough to shatter this fragile treaty between us, and I am feeling more and more like we can win this. Now we have two militaries on our side, and there's no telling which other Vyastil will be willing to align with us.

But if the only weapon the council currently has is one that can shut down the portals, it is not enough to triumph. It will only be a matter of how many die before they fall.

"I want as little bloodshed as possible," I say, handing the tablet back.

Zeial studies me for a long moment. "You will make a good leader, Eissa."

"Me? No," I laugh. "No, I—"

"I would pledge my loyalty to you," Rathyn says very quietly.

I shake my head. "I do not want that responsibility. I have been chained to duty and desk for too long. Now that I have my VySytheh, I just want…" I hesitate, searching for a word, and it comes to my fingertips before my lips. 'Freedom.'

They stare at me, and it is clear they don't know what I've signed, but it doesn't matter. I take a breath to explain when I'm doubled over in burning pain, and that's when Zeial's companion moves forward.

"He is in a rut," the Tarek says.

"Not yet," I gasp. The rolling, cramping heat subsides after a moment, and I look up at Sabik. "Do you have any more suppressant with you?"

Sabik shakes his head. "I am sorry. Harvest season has been over for quite some time. I gave you all I had. Was this unexpected or planned?"

"Forced," I murmur. "I was given tolyian." I must return home for my own supply of suppressant before it gets past the point where I cannot control it. "Jyrion must suspect something between Luca and me. He forced me to take the herb to bring on my rut so I can get the breeding out of the way."

"But you have a VySytheh. Even in a rut, you would not be able to couple with another," the other Tarek says.

I offer a wry smile and flick my ears in agreement. "Mm. That may be why he has done this. To prove I am a traitor and to order my death. And Luca's."

Rathyn stiffens. "I will kill him first."

Sabik reaches into his satchel and pulls out a very small, egg-shaped device and hands it to Rathyn. “If you need to escape, use this. A single press of your thumb will bring us to your location.”

Rathyn stares down at it. “What technology is this?”

“Vorthex,” the third Tarek says. He slides his tentacle over Zeial’s shoulder, and Zeial leans back into him. “We have been using it for some time, training with it. It uses portals so it’s not invulnerable, but the Vyastil council does not know about them. They work locally, on Erethar only, but they have been an effective tool.”

I feel some measure of relief as I slip it into my tunic pocket. Another rush of burning heat, and this time coupled with need, begins to build at the base of my tail. I close my eyes and reach for Luca.

I need you.

I’m here. What’s wrong?

I’m coming home soon. Are you alone?

Yes.

When I open my eyes, all three Tarek are staring at me. “I was communicating with my VySytheh.” It feels strange and freeing to admit this aloud in a room where neither Luca nor I are at risk. “I must take my leave now.”

“We will be in contact soon,” Sabik says. “But should anything happen between now and our next meeting, use the borelian.” He gestures at my pocket.

“Thank you.” I turn to Rathyn and step close so I can press my forehead to his. “I need you to find somewhere safe for Everest to be, and then head to my office, but be ready to portal to Luca. Jyrion said he will be sending guards for me to take me to the breeding grounds. I will not go quietly, but I cannot let them take Luca. And if they do—”

“I will save him,” Rathyn swears. “I have an unauthorized portal key. I will use it to bring him and you back to Earth.”

“Him,” I insist. “If you cannot get to us both.”

Rathyn’s eyes flash, and his ears flick in irritation, but after a long moment, he nods. He must know that he would ask the same if it came to him and Everest. “Yes.”

“If you can do that without alerting Jyrion that you are aligned with me, I beg you to do it,” I go on. “If I am compromised, I need you to take my place.”

Rathyn looks torn, but after a short while, he steps back and nods again. “I will.”

My relief is enough to eclipse my oncoming rut, but only for a moment. The need, the want, the feral desire for my VySytheh is starting to overwhelm me. “I must go.” My voice is thready and weak. “Be safe. All of you.”

I don’t wait for them to answer. Turning on my heel, I dig my claws into the cave floor, and then I start to run as fast as I am able. I must get to my Luca. I must stop this before it destroys everything I have worked for.

OceanofPDF.com

thirty-three

LUCA

EISSA IS a different color when he appears in the doorway of the house, his skin fluttering, his tail coiled so tightly around him that he looks like he may be split in two.

‘What is it? What happened?’ I ask as I rush toward him.

‘I need the herbs,’ he says, his hands shaking as he signs. ‘The suppression ones.’

My brow furrows. ‘What? Why?’

‘Jyrion. He gave me something, and it has put me into rut early. He wants me to breed. I need the herb so I can…’ He doubles over, and his ears turn down. The sight makes my chest ache.

I don’t like that, the fact that he doesn’t want to rut me. And is it even safe to mix the suppression herbs with what Jyrion gave him? I don’t know.

I don’t want to find out.

‘Stay here,’ I sign, helping him sit down on the couch as Gerald meanders around the corner. I nearly trip over the footstool he’s pushing around, but I manage to hop to the side and rush up the stairs.

I can feel the need pulsing through Eissa, the desire to breed and take me.

I hate Jyrion even more for what he’s made Eissa do, what he wants him to do. To breed someone else? It makes me rage, my skin growing hot and tight.

I search through the vials in my wardrobe and pull out the one I know will put me into a heat, and I push several onto my tongue.

My body warms and my skin grows oversensitive, the tunic I'm wearing scratching my skin. I rip it off, feeling my cock hardening, my hole growing wet and loose. Arching up, I fuck the air, but it does no good. I need more.

I need to be filled and bred.

I moan, my hand wrapping around my aching length, stroking it as I push two fingers inside of me. I'm suddenly desperate, and he must feel it because I feel the vibration of his footsteps coming up the stairs, the scent of him as he enters the room, his eyes dark, his tail slashing out behind him.

'What did you do?' he growls with his hands.

I shiver and fuck my fingers into me faster. It is not enough. I need ribbed cocks, thick and throbbing inside of me.

"Please, Eissa."

He's angry and horny and frantic as he steps toward me, a predator to his prey, but I know he'll never hurt me. He would never.

'Why do you never do as I say?' he signs as he pulls me into him and places his fangs against the bite on my neck. They scratch against it, making me groan at the sensation. And then I feel it, his two cocks wet and pressed against my stomach.

Please take me. I'm your companion. This is what I'm here for.

He vibrates with a growl, and his fingers dig into my side as he lifts his head and I stare into those glittering orbs. *You are more than that. You are my soul, my hearts.*

And then he picks me up and impales me on him, not gentle and kind, but desperate.

I gasp and cry out, feeling the ridges on his cocks push through my rim, the vibration in his swollen lengths making my eyes cross as he impales me on him over and over. I grunt and beg, my hands holding onto his shoulders as he uses me, his ears fluttering, his body shaking.

His eyes shift down to where our bodies meet, and I follow, watching the bulge of him pierce my abdomen. I can see it, the way he fucks me.

Humans weren't meant for this, but we do it anyway. We do it for the ones we love.

Give me more, I say, reaching into his mind. *Give me more.*

Tell me how, my Luca. And I will give it to you.

Kiss me.

My hand moves into his hair, pulling him toward me, and he comes willingly, thrusting into me as our lips meet. I hold him there, slanting my mouth over his as he fucks me. I feel every ridge, every push, and my cock spills over twice, soaking our skin as he continues to rut into me.

His tongue is everywhere, pushing into my mouth, dragging across my face and down my neck. And when he lands on the spot where he bit me once more, his teeth sink into it, marking me again.

I don't know what that means for us, but I hold him against me, letting him linger there a long moment before his lips leave my neck and he throws his head back, roaring. The walls shake, the vibrations from it moving through both of us. I feel his cock spurting inside of me, coating my walls and dripping out of me right before his knot begins to swell.

It's large and all-consuming, pulling another release from me before it's done and we're fully connected.

His forehead meets mine, and I let out a shaky breath.

Neither of us moves, the two of us just existing.

After a long moment, he finally settles us onto the bed, the knot tugging on my rim and making me gasp at the feeling of being spread so wide. He nuzzles against me, trying to get me comfortable, and when he feels that I am, he relaxes, my body on top of his, his hands on my hips and ass, his tail wrapped around my ankle as he holds me.

That was perfect.

It was. It is.

But you should have obeyed and done what I asked.

I won't do that if it could harm you.

He huffs, and I feel his fingers tighten on me before loosening. Then his lips meet the crown of my head, and he kisses it gently. *I would not have been harmed.*

You don't know that.

I can feel that I'm right. Eissa doesn't know what the mixture of the two herbs would have done to him. But he was willing to risk it to keep me from having to endure another rut with him, which is ridiculous. I quite enjoy them.

I'm glad I was here to take it. I want to be the one you go to when you're in a rut. You shouldn't have to take herbs. Are they even legal?

No, they are not. You must not mention this to anyone.

I nod, my cheek brushing against his chest as I do. *I won't tell anyone. I promise.*

I know you won't. But I must take them when I'm here. I do not want to breed another. It would kill me.

That makes me go cold, and I lift myself up enough to meet his faraway gaze. *I don't want you to die. So do what you must, but if we ever end up on Earth together, then you stop taking them. I want to be your cum dump. Okay?*

His eyes narrow, and he stares at me for a long moment. *That is derogatory. You are not a dump.*

I let out a small laugh. *I know.* I peck him on the tip of his nose. *It's just a saying. But you know what I mean. I want to be the one you dump your cum in, okay?*

He doesn't fully understand the meaning behind my words, but it's enough. He leans up and kisses me gently and then lets out a soft purr. *I will only use you. I cannot use another.*

Good, because the thought of him with someone else would nearly kill me too.

My mind conjures up Eissa with someone else, and I find myself recoiling, anxiety welling up within me. Eissa soothes me as best he can, but my mind is already jumping to worst-case scenarios.

What about Jyrion? I ask, feeling short of breath as I speak this to him through our bond. *Will he know that you had sex with me and not one of the females?*

Eissa's hands stop stroking, and he doesn't answer for a long time. *He will know.*

And what happens then?

I do not know. We will have to wait and see.

The wait seems like forever and not long enough. We're lounging on the bed, half-dazed with exhaustion, the other half amped up with the urge to do it again. I want him to push inside of me and open me up, but that requires me getting more of the breeding herb, and that requires moving. So instead, we make out, our tongues tangling as we hold onto one another.

Jyrion’s ghost looms in the room, his presence almost suffocating. We kiss harder, forcing ourselves to forget, to just exist with each other. My cock is hard as I roll my hips against him, feeling his slit dripping with slick.

I want to fuck him just like he fucked me.

He must sense it because he spreads his legs and arches his hips up.

I don’t need to be asked twice. I slide right inside, feeling him clench around me. It’s almost too much, the feel of his ridged cocks sliding against my own, how wet and warm he is. His legs curl around me, his lips searching for my own.

I don’t hesitate to kiss him like it could be the last time. Because it could. We don’t know what’s going to happen. The more Eissa told me about the breeding program, the more I realized how much trouble he’s in over this. How choosing me has made everything so much more complicated.

I thrust my hips forward, and Eissa arches back, his eyes closed in pleasure, his ears fluttering. I move faster, feeling my orgasm growing closer.

Never in my life did I think I’d be head over heels for a Vyastil, but here we are. The sight of him, the way he smells, the knowledge that he’s mine…

I want to mark him just like he marked me. I want everyone to look at him and know he belongs to me.

My muscles flex as I lean forward, my hips pistoning back and forth as I press my lips to his shoulder. He shudders, his nails digging into my back as he holds onto me.

Then I bite down, breaking some of the skin. I feel the rumble in his chest from his cry. His slit contracts, his cocks jerking against my own.

It doesn’t take much more than that for my release to fill him. My eyes roll back, my lips sucking on his tender skin. He knows what this means just as much as I do. And when I finally fall against him, he doesn’t let go. He holds onto me as I rock my hips back and forth, milking myself until I’m dry.

Then I stop entirely and let him hold me, his nails still embedded in my skin, his entire body trembling.

I hum lowly, satisfied at the feeling of emptying once more, of pushing my seed into his body.

We lie like that for a long time, his warm sheath holding my flaccid cock until I finally slip free and roll to my side. Our eyes meet, and he strokes my face tenderly. My own fingers brush against the mark I left on his shoulder, and he shudders.

‘Is it bad I did that?’ I ask with one trembling hand.

‘I do not know. No one has ever marked a Vyastil before, but it does not feel wrong.’

I let out a soft breath of relief and lean forward, pressing a kiss to his lips.

‘It doesn’t feel wrong to me either. It feels right. You feel right.’

His ears flutter, and he throws his leg over my own, the weight of him grounding me.

But then suddenly he freezes, his ears twitching, and he leans up.

‘What is it?’ I ask, pushing myself up onto my elbows.

‘Someone is at the door. They came quicker than I thought.’ He jumps up, still moving with a lithe grace I can’t quite comprehend, and he tosses a tunic at me.

‘Put that on.’

I do as I’m told with shaking hands, watching as Eissa throws on a garment and smooths out his hair.

It’s then that I feel it, a crash below. Something I’d normally attribute to Gerald moving furniture around, but it’s stronger, more forceful. Like someone pushing their way inside.

Eissa moves to stand next to me, putting himself in front of me as the door to the room opens and I see several Vyastil guards standing there, weapons drawn, eyes settled on us both. Eissa’s hand reaches back, and he pushes me further from view, but it’s no use. They lunge for him, dragging him forward. His mouth opens in a scream. I can feel it move through me as he tries to reach for my hand, but they don’t meet—just a brush before I’m pulled away from him and shackled roughly.

Eissa is struggling against them, but it only lasts a moment. One of the Vyastil guards leans in, and suddenly all the fight leaves his body. He collapses to his knees, and he allows himself to be put into chains.

Tell me what’s happening, I scream into his mind. I can’t ask with my hands. They’ve gagged me. And before he answers, something obscures my vision. I realize they’ve blindfolded me, and real panic sets in.

Calm, Eissa sends to me. *Breathe.*

I can’t seem to take in a single full breath, and I think I might be shouting, though in the haze settling over my body, I can’t really tell.

Calm, beloved, Eissa whispers in my head again. It’s not even a language at this point. It’s simply meaning. Warmth rushes through me, and suddenly, for just a moment, I can see. Only it’s not my eyes. It’s his.

I see myself on my knees with a black cloth over my eyes, hands bound behind my back. There’s a guard flanking me on the left, and one on the right. They look ready to get violent if I so much as give them a reason.

Good. Yes. Breathe. It’s going to be okay.

What is happening? I demand. *Please tell me.*

Jyrion has sent guards for us. He knows.

Terror rushes through my limbs. We were meant to escape before any of this happened. We were supposed to have more time.

It’s going to be okay. I have a failsafe, Eissa tells me.

How? Where?

Trust me, is all he says. Then the world is silent and dark once more, and I am entirely on my own.

The light is painfully bright when the blindfold is removed, and I glance around as best I can with hazy eyes. I’m in some sort of bizarre round room with a long table in front of me. The walls are that same glowing stone I’ve seen all over the city, and although I can’t hear it, there’s a vibration in the air around me that tells me there’s either music or several people talking at once.

When I turn my head to the left, I see Eissa standing on his own, arms still bound behind his back. Ahead of me in the center of the table is Jyrion. He’s not looking at me, but I can still feel his attention.

Eissa is speaking now, and it’s not in English, so I don’t have a single hope of being able to understand. I send my distress to him, and he sends me more warmth back, but he does not provide an interpretation.

My anger is intense.

I am sorry, beloved. Please be patient with me.

Taking a calming breath, I look over to my right, and my heart leaps in my chest when I realize one of the guards in full armor is Rathyn. He flicks

his gaze to me once, and only once, before he looks away.

I don't know if that's a sign that we're saved or we're fucked, and without my ability to hear anything or read the language on the Vyastil lips, there's no way for me to tell. I've never felt so trapped before.

So helpless.

So fucking *angry*.

I focus my rage on Jyrion, and he meets my gaze, and for just a second, he smiles.

I want to rip through my bindings and somehow manage to sprout claws and tear his throat out, because I know this is his way of proving to me that he could have done this at any time.

He'd been toying with me all along. Any bit of sympathy, pity, or compassion I felt for him is now consumed in fury. His mouth is open, and I can see it moving through the melodic language of the Vyastil.

He gestures with his hands, and it takes me a second to realize that in those gestures are signs.

'You. Mine.' He points to Eissa. 'Him. Dead.'

The fuck I'll let him kill Eissa. The fuck I'll ever let him take me. I'll give my life for my beloved, my VySytheh. I don't care what it takes. I don't care what I have to do. I strain against the ties, but nothing happens, and I know that if I'm going to be able to make any move at all, I will need to be clever, and very patient.

I take a deep breath, then turn my gaze to Eissa.

Good, he sends me. *Breathe. We will be okay*.

How?

Trust me, he begs.

I have no other choice in this moment. I roll my shoulders back, and then just as I start to look for Rathyn again, something in the room shifts. Tension rises. I feel it coming from Eissa in waves.

There's something happening. Something big.

And then, behind Jyrion, a door opens, and a figure emerges. Human—I can tell that right away. Barely clothed in a sheer tunic, he steps forward, hands clasped in front of him with his head bowed. It doesn't take much for me to recognize him. Not just from the photo I found in Eissa's things, but from the memories he shared with me.

The man in front of us is supposed to be dead, and here he is, reaching out for Jyrion and sliding up against him.

Before I can react, I feel it—the waves of shock and pain coming from Eissa. I look over at him and see his lips part, and I don't need to hear to know the sound coming from him is one of sheer and total agony.

Because this was not a man who gave up his life for Eissa.

The human smirking at him now is a man who very likely was responsible for every one of Eissa's scars.

OceanofPDF.com

thirty-four

EISSA

I WAS EXPECTING THE GUARDS. Their presence is not a surprise. But it takes every ounce of strength I possess, both mental and physical, not to fall into a complete panic when they take Luca into their grasp. Watching him be bound triggers old memories; only this time, it is my VySytheh. It is my beloved.

The other half of my soul.

And the fear on Luca's face sends me spiraling. I had told myself not to fight, but just coming out of my rut, I'm unable to stop myself at first. My claws and fangs are extended, and I draw blood before I'm even aware of it.

It's not until one of the guards has a weapon against my back and whispers words in my ear that I stop.

"I will kill your human," he says. I don't know this guard—a young thing, barely out of his hatchling phase, and too full of himself and the power that the council has given him. The idea that he is allowed to take someone of my rank into custody must be heady. "I am under orders to control you by any means necessary."

Those words are the only thing that can drag me out of my frantic, feral state. I cannot let him be harmed, and if my compliance will buy us time, I will give them that. So I freeze, and I sink to my knees, and let them bind me.

I feel Luca's panic as if it were my own, and when they blindfold him, I quickly slip into his mind so he is not trapped by both silence and darkness.

I lend him my eyes, and though his fear is profound, I feel a trust in me that I'm not sure I yet deserve.

I tell him that we have a plan. A failsafe.

I want to tell him I have made strides with the Tarek and the Vorthex, and that there is an escape option. It will take work, and it will take skill, but Rathyn possesses the communication device, which means we still have hope.

But I cannot explain it all to Luca yet. I must know that Rathyn hasn't been found out first. Which means allowing the guards to take us.

"Remove the mask from his eyes," I demand as I'm pushed to my feet.

The guard laughs at me. "I don't take orders from you any longer. You are under arrest and are to be brought before the council for immediate trial."

Immediate sentencing, he means. Because I have done this before. I have stepped into the council room as a prisoner and watched as they took my companion from me, and then locked me in the dark for moon cycles upon moon cycles as I was tortured and mocked.

I would forever be changed by that, but the past will be no comparison to the shell I will become if Luca meets the same fate.

No. I cannot allow that to happen.

"He is Deaf," I tell them as one of the other guards barks an order for Luca to rise. "He cannot hear."

The Vyastil guard's eyes widen and he takes a step back from Luca as though touching him might give him the same condition. I fight back a vicious retort.

"Take the mask from his eyes," I say again, this time more of a request.

The guards refuse, but they do haul Luca to his feet, and my beloved obeys. I send him a small pulse of praise through the bond, though I know he's still afraid. I watch him still his trembling as the guards open a portal and shove him through.

I follow next, nearly tripping over his prone body as we step into the hallway just a few feet from the council room doors. The growl in my throat reverberates along the walls, but the guards ignore me as they pull Luca back up to his feet.

My claws are itching to tear at my bonds. I don't know that I would be successful, but my desire to protect him is overwhelming almost all of my

rational sense. A small part of me can understand why some Vyastil in power would want to rid us of this irrational, animal nature.

What are we if we can't overcome instinct?

And yet, I would not trade it for anything in the world.

I think if we were to stand in the hallway much longer, I might lose my control, but it's only a few moments before the doors sweep open, and the guards shove me forward. I do everything I can not to look back, and I avoid slipping into Luca's mind because my grip on my sanity is thinner than a bylain thread.

The council sits before me, each one of them staring at me with passive eyes. Jyrion is in the center as always, and the chair I once occupied is painfully empty. I know it is a symbol. There is always a backup member to replace empty seats. So this was a message to me.

"Eissa of the North Hills, you stand before the remaining council accused of high treason and archive manipulation."

Those are my charges? High treason I expected, but archive manipulation?

"Are you prepared to defend yourself?"

I take a breath, then answer. "I am not."

If I were any other Vyastil, I would be in the Ancient Hall standing before a tribunal. I do not know if this is a message meant to convey I am more or less important to them. I meet Izar's gaze, and I can tell he is uncertain about all of this.

He was never good at hiding how he felt, and now, in the flick of his ears and the way his gaze keeps darting to his brother, I think perhaps with a few convincing words, I will be able to sway him.

I look over at Zynth next. The high warlord who sits on the council for duty alone. He has always voted with the majority and has never cared for Vyastil politics. His place is out on the field, and he may soon get his wish.

If I survive this, and if Rathyn's loyalties are still undiscovered, I may send him to speak with Zynth. We may yet have another ally so long as he is promised to keep his position and be relieved of these duties.

Jyrion lets out the smallest sigh. "A charge of high treason does not afford you time to prepare a defense. As a once-sitting member of this council, surely you are aware of the rules."

I feel Luca pushing at my mind, begging me to interpret what's happening, but I cannot. Not yet.

“I am not prepared to defend myself,” I repeat. I do know the rules, and refusing to defend myself in the moment means that Jyrion can’t go forward with questioning.

At least, not with me.

“Remove the blindfold from the human companion,” he orders.

I strain against my cuffs for a moment, but they are unforgiving. My skin is aching, and I may now be bleeding, and I am helpless to do anything but watch as one of the guards pulls the mask from Luca’s eyes.

He blinks, and I can see pain written on his face as he looks around, nearly frantic. The doors open behind him, and the mood in the room shifts as several other Vyastil arrive. Leading the procession, as he would have been ordered to do, is Rathyn.

“Rathyn of the Dark Vale,” Jyrion says. The tone in his voice tells me that this is a test of loyalty, and I can only hope that Rathyn will hold. “You are called here to witness.”

Rathyn says nothing, but he nods once and then moves to the side, right in Luca’s eyeline. I see the moment when my VySytheh notices him. A line of tension ripples up Luca’s spine.

Rathyn gives him only a mere flicker of a glance before he turns his attention back to the council.

“The charges are as follows,” Jyrion says. “Inappropriate relationship to a human. The gratuitous display of emotion. Refusing breeding duties. Attempting to breed with a non-Vyastil, which could result in another forbidden hybrid. Tampering with historical evidence…”

I nearly make a noise at that one. He must have been setting me up in some manner, but I don’t know how. I hold my breath as he goes on.

“Collusion with the Tarek.”

My blood runs cold as Jyrion smiles. He knows. Maybe not everything, but enough. Was he having me followed, or was this something Luca managed to let slip when he and Jyrion were meeting?

I refuse to blame Luca for it. I had been keeping so much from him for so long. He couldn’t possibly have known what to keep a secret and what was safe to tell.

“Are you prepared to defend yourself against these charges?” Jyrion asks again.

I have three more refusals before the hearing will go forward with or without my consent. I flick my gaze over to Rathyn and then twist my body

just enough that he can see my hand behind my back.

‘S A B I K.’

I do not look at him to know whether or not he’s able to read the letters of my hands. Jyrion is all-too familiar with sign language, so if he were to see us communicating in this way, he would know what we were saying.

But I’m not sure Rathyn is aware of this, so I make sure to keep my gaze far away from him.

I don’t know how much time it will take for Sabik to arrange a rescue. If he’s even able to do so. I have no idea what weapons or power or access to the capital they have. Everything they are using now is technology from the Vorthex, and the Vorthex have rarely been welcomed into our cities.

“I am not,” I finally answer.

Jyrion takes a breath. “That is fine. I will go ahead and begin to prepare my character witness.”

Not protocol, but I doubt anyone will challenge Jyrion, and it wouldn’t matter anyway. He has decided the outcome, and he is only doing this because he likes to put on a show.

The doors to my right open and I can’t help but glance over. For a moment I think it’s whoever Jyrion has summoned, but the look on his face says he was not expecting the figure who walks through the door.

It’s Vyrian. His eyes are wide, and he looks both confused and furious. “What have you done?” he demands.

Jyrion’s tail flicks. “Sit and be quiet, or I will have you removed. Though you really should stay, little brother. This will be a good lesson for you.”

I glance at Luca, but his gaze is fixed on the ground, and I know he’s doing it to try to control himself. The fear must be overwhelming. I want nothing more than to pull him into my arms, but I cannot.

Then suddenly he looks at me, and I see the determination and fight in his eyes.

Good. Breathe. We will be okay.

How? The silent word in my head is begging.

Trust me.

He doesn’t answer, but he does roll his shoulders back, and he breathes a little more steadily. And I’m afforded one moment of peace before a door behind Jyrion opens.

“Ah. Right on time, as always. Come forward,” he commands in English, in a tone that he reserves solely for humans. Only…it’s a bit more tender than I’m used to hearing from him.

And then the figure comes into view, and suddenly it feels like something has ripped the floor from beneath me. Staring at me from beneath lowered lids is a man who is not meant to be here. A human that I have bled for. That I nearly died for.

A human who was ripped from my arms and killed all because of me.

Only he wasn’t.

Because Kori is here, and he looks up at me.

And he smiles.

I feel my lips part, but no sound escapes me. A scream is lodged in my chest, and the disbelief racing through my veins is so overwhelming that, for a moment, I forget where I am. It’s only when I attempt to reach for Kori that I realize I am still bound.

My entire body is trembling as Kori slides up to Jyrion’s side, and I watch as the prince’s tail curls around him, possessive and commanding. Jyrion is smiling. He is taking so much pleasure in my pain that I can almost feel it in the room.

Somewhere behind me, a Vyastil is growling, and I fear it’s Rathyn. He did not meet Kori, but there’s no chance he’s unaware now of who this human is.

I take a deep breath. “Why is he alive?”

Jyrion stares at me with wide eyes in a sorry attempt to look innocent. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“He was ordered to be put to death just as I was ordered to be tortured and scarred.”

Jyrion laughs even as he tugs Kori closer to him. “I gave no such order. It was declared that he was to be removed permanently.”

“Yes. And we all know what that order meant,” I spit. It’s taking me too long to calm down, and I glance over at Luca, who is staring at Kori with a look of horror on his face. But it’s not shock. Not entirely.

No. There’s also anger, and I do not understand why.

My gaze snaps back to Jyrion, who is running his claws down Kori's arm, and Kori is stealing a glance at me. "Explain."

Jyrion looks startled. "Are you making demands of me? You, Eissa of the North Hills? In shackles?"

"I am."

He throws his head back and laughs. "It is not my fault you were so eager to rid yourself of your human that you did not look deeper into your sentence and punishment."

"I—" My words fail me. I was not eager to be rid of Kori. I was tortured and left in pain. It took me months to recover, and the grief was overwhelming. But perhaps that's what Jyrion had been counting on.

Years upon years have gone by, and Jyrion never said a word. He watched my pain, knowing he was responsible. Knowing he could end it.

And now I stand before him with my VySytheh at my side.

Jyrion tilts his head to the side. "Are you prepared to defend yourself?"

I stare at him and take a single, fortifying breath. "I am not."

Jyrion doesn't look nearly as annoyed now. He gestures for Kori to step away from him. "Little human," he murmurs in a way that makes my stomach churn, "are you willing to give your statement about your companionship with Eissa of the North Hills?"

Kori looks over at me, defiant as he has always been. And I allow myself to look at him fully now—as he is, years older. There are silver streaks in his hair and wrinkles beside his eyes.

Age has done him no disservice but also no favors.

"I am." His voice sounds the same. The last time I heard it, he was screaming my name, begging for help.

And I thought I had failed him. He has been alive all this time and never once attempted to find me? Even if it was to accuse me of letting him go? It does not add up.

I fight my urge to look over at Luca, but I take a breath, then open my mind to him. I allow the words spoken in the room to flow freely toward him, and he makes a soft, startled noise.

"Did you find your Vyastil companion to have fulfilled all of his contract duties?"

"In part," Kori says. He folds his hands demurely in front of him. He has always been good at playing this part. "He seemed uninterested in cum. I offered it to him, but he only partook a fraction of what was available."

There’s a murmur of outrage amongst the crowd.

“And what was he more interested in?” Jyrion probes.

“The human experience,” Kori says. He straightens his shoulders and then meets my gaze directly. “Human emotion. *Love*.”

The murmur gets louder.

“He was not what he presented himself to be,” Kori goes on. “The leader of the entire Vyastil army, but he was weak. He was…so *human*.”

Jyrion smirks. “Were you grateful when you were removed from his care?”

Kori smiles. “I was.” He starts to take a step closer to Jyrion, but the prince quickly shakes his head, and for just a second, the arrogant look on Kori’s face falls.

“And you have been satisfied as a companion since then?”

“I have no regrets,” Kori says, and he looks me in the eye as he speaks.

I am not a foolish Vyastil, but I have been known to be too optimistic. I have been known to see good, better, and best in people who do not deserve it. I was blinded by curiosity and affection when I had Kori under my contract. And I was overwhelmed with grief and guilt when I believed I was responsible for his death.

It did not ever, not once, occur to me that he had a hand in his own survival. And that he willingly let me hate myself for years upon years simply to serve himself.

“Why?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Kori looks at Jyrion, who gestures at him to go ahead. Then Kori looks at me. “Because you are weak. Prince Jyrion is strong.”

My knees threaten to buckle. The pain is not as great as it might have been if I had not found my VySytheh, but it still attempts to overwhelm me. I reach out to Luca in my mind, and he is there, waiting. Listening.

I will kill him.

I hold my breath, then send back, *I love you.*

Luca makes a loud noise. *Don’t do anything stupid, Eissa. Please.* Then I am bombarded by images built out of his fear—images of me lying on the floor, bloodied and no longer breathing.

I will not.

I recover my composure and look up at Jyrion. “This is such a circus for the charge of behaving like a human. You really enjoy the sound of your voice, do you not?”

Beside him, Izar glances away, attempting to hide a smile, and to my side, Vyrian bursts into laughter, though it doesn't linger. But it is enough to humiliate Jyrion, whose ears whip back and his eyes flash.

"Bold for a Vyastil who betrayed his people by colluding with the Tarek."

"What proof?" I demand.

His lips thin. "Are you prepared to defend yourself?"

I allow myself a single breath as I glance at Rathyn. He gives me a barely there nod, then I turn my attention back to Jyrion and give him the answer he's been waiting for. "I am."

As per protocol, my shackles are removed, and a moment later, I hear Luca's hit the ground. He makes a curious noise, but I feel a punch of relief when he does not move. This is a test—to see if he is trained, to see if I am willing to follow protocol.

I am. For now.

I will do my best to drag this out until I am certain Sabik is not coming for us. Or, as I can truly hope, that he has enough time to form a plan. I am not brave enough to look to Rathyn now, but I swear I can feel his eyes on me.

"What proof?" I ask again.

Jyrion spreads his hands over the council table. "You have been taking rut suppressants in order to delay your breeding. You wish to put your breeding seed inside your human companion."

"What does that have to do with the Tarek?"

"They are the only known Eretharian to possess the suppressant. You were not authorized to take it. Therefore, you have been in contact with a member of the Tarek to obtain your dose."

I almost laugh. Not because he's wrong, but because it means he does not know how deeply in contact with the Tarek I am. It means he does not know how far this runs. It means that even if I am compromised, if Rathyn can maintain, all hope is not lost.

"I am willing to offer you leniency. Banishment," Jyrion says after a long beat.

My eyes widen. "Why?"

"Because it would be a more fitting punishment that you should live and suffer away from your people. You will rot and wallow amongst the humans you adore." His smile widens. "For a cost."

I almost laugh. “Which is?”

“You will retain custody of your former companion and surrender your current companion to me.”

A noise of outrage escapes me before I can stop it, but no one notices. In that moment, Kori whips around and stares at Jyrion.

“You can’t be serious!”

“Quiet,” Jyrion snaps, showing fang.

Kori takes a step away from him. “You’re…you’re fucking lying! You cannot be serious. You said you lo—”

“*Enough*!” Jyrion waves his hand, and a guard goes for Kori, but as he was when I knew him, he is quick. He dodges the guard, and before I can blink, he crosses the distance between us and curls his fists into my tunic.

I attempt to side-step him, but he clings like a banthyar. “Eissa.” I haven’t heard my name on his lips in so, so long. “I’m sorry.”

“Release me,” I demand.

Kori looks panicked. “He lied to me! He said you were using me! He said that if I told him what you were doing, who you were speaking with, he’d give me everything I wanted.”

“And you wish me to take pity on you knowing you sold me for the highest bid?” I ask.

Luca has taken a step closer now, and I can see the fury on his face. I’m still projecting every word to him so he is not lost, and if he was angry before, it is something else now. I believe if he could, he would kill Kori where he stood.

“Release me,” I tell Kori. When he doesn’t, I dig my claws into his arms and force him to let go. With most of my strength, I toss him into the air, and he lands on the council table with a heavy thud.

Izar sneers, Jyrion jumps back, and Zynth continues to look impossibly bored with this entire situation. If there were no threat to Luca, I might have found this entire thing amusing.

But we are still trapped, and right now I do not know if I have any means of escape.

Jyrion clears his throat. “Guards, take the humans. Rathyn, take Eissa into custody and prepare him for the mines.”

There’s a pause—just a second of hesitation, but that’s all the time that needs to pass. There’s a shimmer in the room, and the distinct scent of a

portal about to open. Unsure where it is opening, I throw myself on top of Luca, and we roll several feet away before the portal flares to life.

Jyrion begins screaming orders, but the sound is being drowned out by the arrival of the Tarek. Seven of them, and they are armed, pointing their weapons at the Vyastil council.

Two of them position themselves in front of me and Luca, and a moment later, tentacles have us. My hearts leap, and I quickly send to Luca, *Do not panic.*

I won't. I know they are here for us.

There's a shout a second later, and I push myself to the right of my Tarek guard to find Kori scrambling off the table. One of the Tarek has a weapon pointed at him, and it looks like Kori has managed to steal Jyrion's syani from him. The weapon is vicious, and a single pull of the trigger will cease one heart's function. A second pull of the trigger will stop the other.

One of the Tarek shouts something in their language, which I do not fully speak, and Jyrion takes the moment that Kori is distracted to rake claws over his throat. Blood spurts from his neck, and Kori turns, firing one shot at Jyrion and hitting him. He goes down with a gasp, and then Kori fires another at a Tarek.

And then all hell breaks loose. The Tarek form a circle around me and Luca, and with cover fire, the two that have us in tentacles pull us through the portal. I feel something graze my shoulder, but nothing makes contact as we are thrown past the barrier.

And then for a moment, everything goes dark.

OceanofPDF.com

thirty-five

EISSA

IT TAKES me far too long to regain my bearings, but when I do, I realize that Luca is in my arms. We're on the floor of Sabik's cave, and the portal is presently shut down. The only light is from a fire in the center that looks like it's been burning for far too long, but as I start to fully come to, the flames get brighter.

And then I see Sabik adding more wood. The room comes fully into view, and it's in that moment that Luca twists in my arms and looks up at me. He has a bruise on his temple, and I'm not sure where it came from, and he seems shaken, though steadier than I feel.

'Okay?' I ask.

He swallows heavily, then he reaches up and touches my cheek and nods. I want nothing more than to lean into his touch, to pin him to the ground and kiss him, then suck the cum out of his body.

I have tiny tendrils of the rut still lingering under my skin, and knowing he was bound by another Vyastil is testing me. Especially now that we're alone.

Only, we're not alone. Sabik is watching us as he stokes the flames higher until it's both very bright and very warm. And it's then I notice the pain I'm feeling. Not just on the outside, but it feels like my hearts have been battered.

Luca touches my chin and holds my gaze. 'Are you okay?'

I can only give him an honest answer. ‘I don’t know.’ A part of me is afraid he will think that this ache I feel is because I still have feelings for Kori, but that is the furthest thing from the truth.

The bleeding wounds deep in my chest are from his betrayal, and the years wasted mourning him. Knowing that Kori was alive and living his best life with Jyrion, having sold me—being the one responsible for the scars I will forever bear?

The scars that nearly shamed me out of Vyastil society?

Luca holds up his hand and drops his middle and ring fingers to his palm. ‘I love you.’

My hearts swell, and I clutch him close, kissing him deeply. *I love you,* I send him. Not in words, but in pure, raw emotion.

He lets out the smallest noise and clings before pulling himself back, then he takes a breath and pulls out of my arms, offering his hands to help me up. It’s a ridiculous gesture. He is so small and fragile, but for a moment it’s nice to allow myself to feel cared for.

And protected.

“Are you injured?” Sabik asks as he comes closer. He signs the question as well, and Luca shakes his head before lifting up his shirt.

There is bruising over his ribs that wraps around toward his back, but I know it’s superficial. All the same, rage pools in my belly as I take an assessment of myself. As I pass my hand over my arm, I feel the tunic is torn, and there is a small wound bleeding on my shoulder.

Sabik notices and turns me so he can examine it. “From what?”

“A syani blaster.”

Sabik makes a curious noise. “You were lucky, my friend,” he says and signs. “Any deeper into your skin and it would have stopped one of your hearts. Allow me to listen?”

Luca makes a distressed noise, so I send him a rush of calm as I turn toward Sabik. He lifts a tentacle and places the suckers over my chest, feeling and hearing the rhythm of each beat.

After what feels like forever, he pulls away and nods. “Not even a murmur.”

‘Jyrion was hit,’ Luca offers.

Sabik’s brows lift. ‘Once or twice?’

‘Once.’

‘Then he will live,’ Sabik signs, and Luca looks disappointed. I feel a similar emotion, but it’s not worth thinking about now. We have bigger problems. We are safe in this moment, but I do not think it will last, and any hope I had of remaining here to lead my people is now gone.

“May I speak freely?” Sabik asks and signs.

Luca shrugs. ‘Voice. I’m exhausted. Eissa can fill me in later.’

I turn to him. ‘Are you sure? I can open my mind for you again.’

He shakes his head. ‘No. I love you for what you did. It took away so much of my fear, but my brain is exhausted. If there’s any important information, sign it. But I’d really like to lie down.’

My precious, delicate human. I wrap my tail around him and then lift him into my arms, kissing him as I walk him to the edge of the cave. The xinhar curls around him, cradling him, and I see his entire body finally relax.

‘How long can we stay here?’ he asks, his fingers moving softly in front of his chest.

‘I don’t know. It’s very likely we must return to Earth soon.’

He nods and blinks slowly and heavily. ‘You saved my life.’

‘You saved mine,’ I offer back. I lean in and kiss him once more before turning back to Sabik, who is waiting patiently.

A moment of silence stretches between us, then Sabik says, “The commander of the Vorthex will be here soon. I have received a message from him regarding the intelligence he received in the Vyastil capital.”

My hearts kick up. “I assume it’s to do with the attack and the escape?”

“Yes.” Sabik lets out a small sigh. “I have sent my team back into hiding. The Vyastil will never be able to find us if we do not wish to be found, but it’s time to plan your exit. Rathyn is on his way.”

“He is not under suspicion, then?”

“I’m sure he is,” Sabik says with a soft laugh, “but he has been ordered to capture you and bring you to the palace caves to await another trial. Reports are that Jyrion is severely injured and is currently undergoing treatment.”

“And Kori?” I ask. When Sabik frowns, I add, “Jyrion’s human.” It feels so strange to call him that—wrong, and there is still a lingering grief that has taken new shape in my mind.

“I do not know.”

I let all of this sink in. None of it is surprising information. “I will not be able to help in Erethar any longer. Rathyn has agreed to step up and take my place. We need more time to gather allies within the Vyastil army, and we need more time to convince the Outlanders that they are capable of rising up.”

Sabik nods. “This was not in the plan, but we can work with it. Xamydos will have more information for you when he arrives.”

I know the name. I have spoken with Commander Xamydos over messages, but we have never met in person. I have, in fact, only spoken face-to-face with one Vorthex, but he is earthbound and wingless.

Almost as if on cue, there’s a pulse in the room, and from around the dark corner in the cave, a figure emerges. Vorthex look so much like Vyastil it’s easy to confuse us if you don’t see the wings. Their span is massive, and while they can tuck them behind their backs, it sets them apart from us.

Xamydos is taller than the average Vorthex, his shoulders broader, his claws longer. His skin is a rich blue-green, his hair pure white, his eyes similar to ours, but his ears are longer, and the smallest horns protrude on either side of his forehead, betraying his age.

From my studies, I know only Vorthex who have reached their majority grow horns. The Vyastil had them generations upon generations ago, but around the time we started lacking the nutrients that human cum provides us, we lost them in our evolutionary cycle.

Xamydos stares at me as he walks forward, then he stops and bows his head once. “You are Eissa of the North Hills?”

“I am. Commander Xamydos?”

He presses his palm to his chest, then drops it. “My business here is urgent. Prince Jyrion is currently being treated for damage to his left heart. Once he has recovered, my contact informs me he will most likely be interrupting all portal usage between Erethar and Earth. We do not have much time if you wish to make an escape.”

Panic skitters up my spine. “I see. Then I may not have time to speak with Rathyn—”

“I am here.”

I nearly faint with relief as Rathyn appears, and he is not alone. He has Everest beside him, Dhoryn and Lucie at his heels, and then another shadow reveals itself to be Vyrian. My hackles rise, though I know that the Vyastil prince is no threat to me.

But I am surprised to see him no less.

Rathyn follows my gaze and lets out a heavy sigh as he approaches, pulls me in close, and presses his forehead to mine. “You are safe,” he murmurs. “And unharmed.”

Unharmed is subjective, I suppose, but this is not the time to explore that. “And you? Were you compromised?”

“No. But I will be under even further scrutiny if I do not bring you in.”

My eyes widen. “Are you asking me to—”

“No,” Rathyn says very quickly. “I will accept whatever punishment Jyrion wishes to lay upon me.” He says it like he means it, but I know there are limits. He would never let Jyrion touch Everest. “You and Luca will make your escape through the portal tonight. From here.”

Luca peers up at me, obviously having read Rathyn’s lips. ‘Wait. What about Gerald?’

I think about the bond the kradun and Luca have formed, and my heart aches. ‘I do not know if there is time to retrieve him.’

His bottom lip wobbles, and I feel my hearts near tear in two.

“I will try to send someone for him,” Rathyn says and signs, and I’m startled to see him use the language, but he must have learned thanks to Everest.

Luca lets out a small breath of relief and turns to me. ‘He will survive on Earth?’

‘I believe so,’ I tell him, then I turn to Dhoryn, who has lifted a hand for my attention.

“I will remain on Erethar,” Dhoryn says and then signs, ‘I will make sure the kradun is delivered to you.’

Lucie looks furious. “Wait! What? Staying on Erethar? That is objectively the worst fucking decision you could possibly make!”

The entire room seems startled. Though most of us have not known Lucie long, he has always been docile and willing to accept whatever Dhoryn says. Even Dhoryn seems taken aback.

“I will not have this discussion with you,” Dhoryn snaps. “The decision is not yours to make. You are nothing more than a human—”

“Whoa, what the fuck?” Everest demands. Rathyn wraps his tail around him tightly.

Lucie’s eyes darken. “I have half a fucking mind to go back to Earth now and leave your ass here to rot!”

“Then that is what you should do,” Dhoryn says.

He cannot mean that. They are VySytheh, even if they’re not willing to admit it. They cannot be separated by an entire universe.

Lucie’s jaw tightens, and he folds his arms over his chest. “Fine. Fuck you. See if I care what happens to you.”

Dhoryn’s eyes flash, but instead of saying anything, he storms back out the way he came.

“Should someone go after him?” Everest asks. “Is he going to sell us all out, or—”

“He would not,” Rathyn says softly. “He is…difficult and disagreeable, but he will not cause harm to our cause.”

I let out a breath, then look over at Vyrian, who hasn’t said a word since all of this began. “My prince—”

“No,” Vyrian says. “Please don’t…I don’t…I don’t like that name. Not here. Please.”

I hold up a hand in surrender. “Of course. But I am curious as to why you’re here.”

Vyrian bows his head. “Quilliyn sent for me. He is…afraid for me if I stay.”

“I sent him a message,” Everest says. “After everything I heard, I don’t think he’s safe here with Jyrion. It’s bad enough I’m staying.”

My eyes go wide, but before I can speak, Xamydos does so for me. “Please understand the risks, human. If Jyrion is able to shut down the portals, it could take dozens upon dozens of third-moon cycles to restore them. Time passes more quickly on Earth. The risk that you will return decades later—”

“I’m not leaving Rathyn,” Everest says. “There are people I love on Earth, but he is my VySytheh.”

I swallow heavily. “We all must make sacrifices.” I turn to Vyrian. “You understand what coming to Earth means, yes? You will not be able to return here for a long time. Possibly ever.”

He nods, his fingers twisting together. “I understand. People think I’m not capable, but I am. I know what it means. And I’m not afraid of my brothers, but I want to be with Quilliyn. He thinks I will be happier there.”

“He may be right,” I tell him, and he smiles at me.

Turning my head, I notice that Luca is now sitting up, staring at us, so I quickly relay everything to him through our connection. He takes it all in,

then stands up and walks over to where Lucie is and holds out his arms.

I hadn't been paying close enough attention, but I see tears on Lucie's face, and he signs, 'He left me,' before he drops into Luca's tight grasp. They linger that way for a moment, and when Luca signs again, I can't see what he tells him, but Lucie's face loses some of its pain.

"We are wasting too much time," Xamydos says. "I do not want to risk the portal shutting down as everyone is passing through."

The Vorthex Commander is right. We can't linger. I pull Luca close, then open our connection again as I turn to Rathyn.

"You know the plan."

"I do."

"Then I will see you soon." I feel an ache deep inside me as we touch foreheads.

"Kori survived," he murmurs. "I am going to hunt him down."

"Allow him to live. But do not allow him freedom," I whisper.

Rathyn nods before pulling away, and the ache in my chest grows deeper as Everest throws himself into my arms for a strong hug.

The goodbyes are long, and by the time we have formed the line to exit this world, Xamydos has the portal open. I can sense Earth just beyond, and my hearts give a flutter. I have missed it terribly, but knowing I will not be back here for an indeterminable amount of time is hard.

I glance over at Sabik. "The gods' blessing upon your battles ahead."

He nods and presses his fist to his chest. "The gods' blessing upon your heads for patience."

I press my fist to my chest and then turn as I gesture for Luca to go ahead of me. He takes a last look around, then steps through. Vyrian is next. Then Lucie. And then that just leaves me. I take a breath, but before I step through, I hear a noise in the distance.

"Go," Rathyn urges with some panic.

Just as my foot crosses the barrier, I look back one last time and see that it is not a Vyastilian guard there on behalf of Jyrion. It's Dhoryn. And the final look I have of Erethar is his devastated face.

The world around me spins, and the next thing I know, I'm in my second home.

OceanofPDF.com

thirty-six

LUCA

IT'S night when we fall through the portal, the stars and moon hidden behind the dark gray clouds threatening a storm.

Eissa is trembling, his tail wrapped around his waist protectively, his eyes flitting back and forth as if expecting someone to come after us through the portal. But according to the Vorthex commander, the portals will soon be shut down, and on this lonely, dark street near my house there's no one here except Eissa and me, and Vyrian and Lucie.

I hope Dhoryn keeps his word and delivers Gerald to us. I can't imagine my life without him.

To my right, I see Lucie swiping at his wet cheeks, his shoulders slumped forward, his arms wrapped around his chest. Vyrian on my left is glancing around, his eyes almost owlish, his ears fluttering in excitement. Such polar opposite reactions to what we just went through.

'This is magnificent,' Vyrian signs, looking up at the night sky just as a raindrop falls on his face.

He gasps and meets my gaze.

'Rain,' I reply with my hands. 'Water from the sky.'

'Water. Rain,' he replies, and just as he signs that, it starts to pour, water pounding the street beneath our feet. I reach out and grab onto Eissa's hand. He squeezes it tightly, and we rush forward, toward my small condo with the light still on. *It's exactly as I left it*, I think as I find the spare key under the mat and let us all inside.

All except Vyrian, who stands on the porch, hand outstretched as the rain hits his palm.

Eissa leaves the door open, reaching for a throw blanket that I settled over the back of my couch and placing it on Lucie's shoulders while I flip on the lights.

They blink on, and suddenly I find myself overwhelmed. It's felt like ages since I've been here, and it's all the same. Untouched. Even my plants are still alive, which means someone—probably Dante or Cielo, took the time to come over and make sure they were watered.

I feel Eissa approach me, his tail reaching out and wrapping around my waist, pulling me in. His hands are on me now, soft and caressing, touching me reverently, making sure I'm not injured. I'm not. I'm fine. Angry as hell on behalf of the betrayal I witnessed. But I'm more concerned for Eissa, to be honest.

'I'm fine,' I say, grabbing onto his hands and squeezing them tightly.

I feel his limbs tremble, and I bring his fingers up to my lips and kiss them softly. His tail tightens around me, a soft pulse before it loosens.

'I cannot believe what just happened,' he says, his hands shaking. 'Kori. He was alive…'

He turns his head, and I do the same, seeing Lucie hunched over, his entire body heaving with sadness.

'But we will discuss it all later. We must take care of Lucie and Vyrian. And I'm sure your brother will want to know you are safe.'

I want to discuss it now, want to lie in bed and comfort him, but he's right. It has to wait for the quiet of the early morning when we are finally alone.

I nod and lean forward, pulling Eissa into a long hug, feeling his arms wrap around me as he holds me to him. I feel his hearts beat soundly and I let myself just exist like this for a long moment—knowing he's safe and alive—before pulling away and meeting his gaze. His hand brushes my cheek softly, and he tilts my chin up, kissing me, his tongue pushing into my mouth, tasting me. I can feel the vibration of his contented purr move through his body before he pulls away.

He glances over at Lucie once more, and I see him staring at us, dejected, cheeks and nose red from crying.

I step away from Eissa, knowing that watching us together must only be bringing him pain. I can't imagine being separated from Eissa. We would

go days without one another, and I felt his absence like a hole in my chest. And now that the portals will most likely be shut down, Lucie will be without his other half—possibly for a very long time.

‘I’ll make us some tea,’ I tell Eissa. ‘Could you go over and wake my brother and Cielo to let them know we’re back?’

Eissa reaches out and touches me once more, as if he can’t help it, and then inclines his chin. ‘I will go and be back shortly.’

I fill the kettle and set it to boil before making my way to the couch where Lucie is. In the open doorway I see Vyrian on the sidewalk outside my condo, arms still outstretched, completely soaked, his lips curled up in a delighted smile.

If only some of that could transfer to Lucie.

I move to sit down next to him, bringing him into my arms. He goes willingly, clinging to me, his body shaking from the sobs that overtake him once more. My hand strokes up and down his back, unsure of how to console him.

I glance over and see the water is boiling, and I pat Lucie’s back. He lifts his wet gaze, and I sign, ‘Tea.’

He might not want it, but the way he’s trembling tells me he needs it. Something warm, something like home.

I push up, my chest pinching as I move toward the kitchen to make us a cup of tea. As I’m steeping a bag, something moves in my periphery and I see Cielo and Dante appear, their eyes wide, their hair sleep-mussed.

‘Oh my god!’ Dante signs, rushing over to me, pulling me into a long hug. My eyes close as I breathe him in. We stand like that for ages until I finally pull back and reach for Cielo. He lifts me up and squishes me against his chest, his tail wrapping around me as he holds me tightly.

I feel a possessive rumble move through my bond with Eissa and glance at him standing near the doorway, watching us. But he doesn’t move, doesn’t interject.

When Cielo puts me down, Eissa moves toward me, pulling me into his side and wrapping his tail around me, staking his claim.

‘I can’t believe you’re here,’ Dante says, his hands fluttering around him. ‘I had no idea…what happened and who…’ He points to Lucie curled up on the couch and then to the front door where I assume Vyrian is.

‘It was chaos. I have so much to tell you, but,’ I begin and then point to the tea mugs, ‘let me give this to him. Lucie,’ I fingerspell. ‘He needs it.’

‘What happened?’ Dante asks, and I make a small fist in the air, asking him to *hold on* for a moment. Dante nods but flicks his gaze back to Lucie, concern in his gaze, and then he does what I knew he’d do. He moves toward him, this stranger, and pulls him into his arms.

Lucie clings to him as he did to me, seeking comfort where he can. He must feel like he’s being ripped in two.

I don’t know how to help, so I just let Eissa guide me toward the couch where we settle around him with mugs of tea in hand, Cielo next to Dante cradling Lucie, and Eissa pulling me onto his lap. I know exactly how Eissa feels. I don’t want to be parted from him again. The last few hours were hell.

‘Tell us everything,’ Dante says, obviously using his voice because Lucie waves a hand in his direction.

‘I know ASL. You don’t need to voice for me.’

Dante blinks at him, obviously curious about his background, but doesn’t ask. Now’s not the time. Instead, he just squeezes him once more.

‘It’s a long story, and I’m too tired to go into too many details,’ I begin, but Dante and Cielo just settle back, waiting. ‘Eissa managed to start a revolution, his old companion isn’t dead like we thought, and Jyrion is going to shut down the portals.’

Everyone blinks at me, Lucie’s face crumpling once more, tears sliding down his cheeks as he attempts to drink his tea.

My hands finally fall to my lap, and everyone slumps back, staring blankly at me. They’re in shock, and I am too. And the more I sit here, the more exhausted I become. I just want to shower and sink into bed with Eissa, to hold him to me and breathe him in.

Dante must catch the way I look because he gets my attention.

‘You look exhausted. Why don’t I make up the spare bed in my place for Lucie and…’ He points outside.

‘Vyrian. He’s Quilliyn’s brother.’

His eyes widen. ‘I didn’t know he had another. I thought there were only three.’

‘They hid him away…he’s different.’

Dante’s lips turn down, and then he straightens his shoulders. ‘Well, that makes me hate that royal family even more…’ He shakes out his hands and then adds, ‘I’ll take them back to ours and let you have some time to…be together.’

My chest aches at the thought, but Lucie just nods, setting his empty mug of tea down and standing. He looks forlorn, like his heart is breaking. I stand and pull him into a hug, squeezing him tightly.

‘I’ll check in on you tomorrow. Try to sleep.’

‘How can I sleep when he’s not here?’

I don’t know. I don’t have an answer. I just let Cielo and Dante wrap him up and guide him toward the door. And just as they do, Vyrian appears, soaking wet, water dripping off him onto my floor.

‘Rain. It is magical. I thought it would never end.’ He blinks, catching sight of Cielo, Dante, and Lucie, and he cocks his head. ‘Are you going out to see the magic sky water? If so, it has ended.’

Dante lets out a soft laugh and peers back at me, his eyes twinkling. ‘No, we’re going to my place. To sleep and rest. You have had a long day.’

Vyrian’s lips turn down, but Dante seems to catch on because he reaches out and touches him gently. His ears flutter, and his eyes widen.

‘I will give you a room with windows. We can open them, and you can listen to it. And I have a porch you can sit on if you’d like.’

Vyrian is delighted by this. ‘I should like to sleep in the rain.’

Dante lets out another soft laugh and then guides them out of my house, leaving Eissa and me alone. We stare at one another for a long moment, and then he picks me up and carries me to bed.

I convince him to let us shower, to wash off the horror of today. He agrees, slipping into my small shower with me and taking his time running soap over my skin. He lets me do the same even though his Vyastil skin doesn’t need it. And when we dry off, we fall into bed, our naked bodies tangled around each other, our lips meeting in a frantic kiss.

We came so close to losing it all. We could have lost one another, could have been separated like Lucie and Dhoryn. It only makes us more fevered.

He’s on top of me, his hips grinding down against my own, his tongue pushing into my mouth and down my throat. I swallow around it. I feel his groan, the vibration moving through me, the drip of his slit against my cock. He shifts up and sinks down on me, my cock sliding into him.

I gasp and arch up, my fingers digging into his skin.

My Luca. My Luca, he chants through the bond, riding me. I'm so close, my body clenched tightly. The sight of him above me, his head thrown back, his strong thighs flexing as he moves, nearly undoes me. My big, strong Vyastil.

Mine. I thrust my hips up, and I see his lips part, his cocks pushing from his body. I reach out and grab onto them, shuttling my fists up and down each one, making a sharp trill leave his lips, a sound even I can hear.

Yours.

Yes, me. That's who you belong to.

I work my hand faster, fucking him with my cock and my fingers until he's spilling onto my abdomen. The sight of being covered in his cum wrecks me. I explode with his name on my lips, my release filling him, an endless stream.

His chin meets his chest, and I see his torso heaving as he struggles to breathe. Then his eyes open and those rainbow irises meet mine.

He falls onto me, his face buried in my neck, his lips sucking and pulling on the tender skin where he marked me. I feel the love and affection he has for me traveling through the bond, and I hold onto him tightly, my cock slipping from his slit as we roll to our sides and hold onto each other tightly.

Our lips meet once more in soft, lazy kisses, the kind you give when you feel safe, when you realize you could have lost it all but didn't.

We fall asleep like that, our bodies twined, our faces tucked into each other. Just existing. For the first time in what feels like forever, it's just Eissa and me.

I wake to the sight of Eissa staring down at me, a hand stroking my cheek absently. I know the Vyastil don't sleep as much as humans, so I knew he'd be up before me. I snuggle in closer, nuzzling my face against his neck, pressing a kiss there, feeling his skin flutter under my lips.

'How are you feeling?' he asks when I finally pull back.

'Happy to be home with you.'

His hand runs down the front of my neck, and he places it over my heart.

‘I am happy as well.’

I reach over and clutch his hand in mine. ‘Are you sure? That was a lot…’

He glances away, and a flit of anxiety pulses through me. Kori betrayed him in the worst way, but Eissa did care for him. He can’t be entirely okay right now.

‘Do not worry,’ Eissa replies, feeling the spark of anxiety flaring to life within me. ‘I am…’ his lips turn down, and his hand flutters before me for a moment. ‘I am hurt more than anything. That he would do this to me when I did nothing but care for him. It was not what you and I share, but it was important to me. I am hurt he didn’t feel the same…didn’t respect me enough to try to save us both the grief.’

‘Jyrion,’ I hiss with my fingers.

‘Yes, he wormed his way into Kori’s life, and Kori fell for it. Betrayed me in the worst way.’

I will kill him. I should have killed him.

My hands curl against the scars on his back, and Eissa lets out a long breath. ‘No. I wouldn’t want that on your conscience. You humans have a word for this…karma.’

I nod, and he touches my face once more, soft and adoring. How could Kori have ever betrayed someone like him? I’ll never understand the corruption of certain minds.

‘He’ll get what’s coming to him.’

Eissa nods and presses his forehead against mine, breathing me in. *When I was there in front of the council, all I could think about was you. Even when I saw Kori…I was just worried about you, my Luca. I did not want you harmed.*

His body shudders, and I hold him tightly. *I was just worried about you. I didn’t want you hurt again.*

I’m unharmed.

You are, but…it was a lot. It’s okay to not be okay for a while.

I will consider it, my human. Because I have you, and you, my Luca, are my heart.

Eissa shudders once more, and we just hold one another, finding comfort in each other. We stay like that for hours until we’re rustled from bed by Vyrian.

He’s standing over the bed, his eyes wide.

‘I did not sleep,’ he tells us in ASL. ‘Everything is…fascinating.’ He blinks and then pulls out something from his tunic. ‘Did you know there are things called seeee-quinz.’ His fingers get jumbled as he tries to fingerspell it, but I know what he means as soon as he opens his palm. Inside, I see a bunch of different colored sequins glittering up at us.

‘They’re beautiful, and my new friend has many of them.’ He looks delighted, and I can’t help but let out a small laugh.

I sit up, the sheet falling around my waist, and Eissa lets out a small growl, and for a moment I think it’s because I’m naked in front of another Vyastil, but that’s not it. It’s because I’ve moved away from him. His tail wraps around me, and he tugs me onto his lap as Vyrian pulls out another treasure from his pocket.

I lean forward and see a stapler and a pile of rubber bands.

I let out another small laugh, and Vyrian beams. ‘The crunch this contraption makes is wonderful.’ He demonstrates, and Eissa purrs behind me.

‘I’m so happy you’re happy.’

‘It is quite different from Erethar, but I find I will be quite busy here. There is so much to discover.’

‘There is.’

He peers around my room and walks over to a small plant with flowers on it. He reaches out and touches the leaves, probably expecting it to respond, but it doesn’t. ‘What is it called?’

‘An African violet.’

‘I do not know African.’

‘It is a continent with many countries inside.’

‘I should like to go there one day.’

‘I’d like to be there when you do.’

He grins again and then picks up the plant and walks from the room, leaving Eissa and me staring after him. I turn to look over my shoulder at him, and his fingers caress my cheek.

‘He looks happy,’ he signs. ‘I think he will do well on Earth.’

‘He will. And you?’ I ask, concern lowering my brows. ‘Will you be happy here? I know you cannot return to Erethar.’

‘I will miss parts of it, but nothing compares to how my hearts would break if you were not with me. We are safer here. It is your home and where you go, my love, I will go.’

My eyes grow wet, and I sniffle. Eissa's ears turn down, fearful he's upset me. But I lean up and send through the bond, *I am not upset. I am just so fucking happy. I love you.*

He sighs into the kiss I give him, and I feel a deep yearning for me.

So I push him onto his back, crawl up his chest, and give him what he wants.

OceanofPDF.com

thirty-seven

EISSA

THE NEXT TWO days are filled with Dante and Luca comforting a forlorn Lucie and getting Vyrian settled into Quilliyn's apartment. I do not get to see Luca as much as I'd like, but I know this is important.

Gerald was also delivered to us, a Tarek having come through the portal in the middle of the night and dropping him onto the porch. The commotion of the kradun trying to enter the door by sheer force pulled me from Luca's cock. I was angry at the interruption, but Luca's joy at seeing his pet made everything worth it.

He fed me two more times after that as I listened to Gerald happily rearranging furniture in the other room.

The only part that made it upsetting was when Lucie found out that Dhoryn did not deliver the kradun. That he had the chance to come to Earth and did not. He sent another in his stead.

We have not seen Lucie for two days. We know he is alive because Dante is with him often, but Luca worries for his new friend.

Right now, Luca and Dante are getting Lucie a bus ticket back to Iowa, hoping his family will help him in his grief. And I am currently rearranging furniture in Vyrian's new room, hoping my new friend finds this place acceptable.

"Are you sure I can live here for as long as I'd like?" Vyrian asks his brother, his head cocked to the side.

"Of course. Your home is mine."

Vyrian seems unsure, as he should be. His brothers on Erethar were never kind to him.

Quilliyn, however, is different. He always has been. It's why he escaped to Earth the first chance he had.

"If you insist."

"I do."

Vyrian nods and moves away from us, pulling out a box full of things he's collected over the past two days.

Luca has spoken to Quilliyn about putting up shelves in Vyrian's room, and when Quilliyn agreed, he ordered some. Pretty soon, this room will become his home. And one day, perhaps he will move out and find a place of his own.

I bend down and help Quilliyn move a dresser into the room, and when I stand up, I sense him. Luca. He's here.

My hearts thunder in my chest, and I turn around, seeing him appear. He looks perfect, all tousled hair and freckles. He's wearing loose pants that show his swinging cock and a tight shirt, showing off all of his muscles. My tongue wets my lips as he approaches.

'Hey. Am I interrupting?'

'You are not. We are just getting Vyrian settled.'

Just as I say that, Vyrian turns and embraces Luca, a gesture he has learned since he's been here. He says he's collecting hugs. "They are all different based on the size and shape of the human," he told me yesterday after a hug from Dante.

He then looked at me and cocked his head. "Shall we hug as well?"

I bristled at the suggestion, but then I opened my arms, and he stepped into my embrace, his arms winding around my back. He held us like that for a moment and then pulled away, his ears twitching.

'It was different. I think I like human hugs more.'

I couldn't help the grin that split my face at that moment. He is…yes, he will do well here on Earth. Humankind is much more accepting of those who are different. Not perfect, but better than the Vyastil.

I pull Luca into me, and he presses a kiss to my cheek. Then he turns his gaze to Quilliyn, who is watching us with affection.

'Have you heard anything from Jyrion?' Luca asks when Vyrian has turned away to organize another small box of treasures.

‘No. The portals are permanently shut down. No one can get through, and all communications have been cut off at the Foundry.’

My lips turn down at this, and so do Luca’s. ‘So, Dhoryn, Everest, and Rathyn…they’re stuck on Erethar? With no way to communicate with us?’

‘You are correct,” Quilliyn says, looking just as upset about this as we are. “It is not ideal, but I know that they will not be able to keep them shut down for long. We need access to Earth. The Vorthex do as well. His decision to do this will not go over well.’

‘How long do you think they’ll be closed?’

Quilliyn shakes his head. ‘I have no way of knowing. I hope just a few weeks, but it could be years. It depends on how strong the resistance is.’

Luca leans into me further, his arms wrapping around my waist, his face tucked into my chest. I stroke his hair and sense the sadness he feels through the bond, but beneath it there is also hope and relief that we are here and safe.

I am glad for this too.

I could not imagine us being trapped on Erethar under Jyrion’s reign. We would not be safe there and would live in constant fear.

Vyrian turns around and blinks at us, holding up a spool of yarn. ‘I am going to learn to crochet. Cielo will teach me. I shall start by making the kradun a hat.’

Then he turns back around and shuffles through his box, making Luca laugh softly.

‘I can’t wait for a Gerald hat.’

‘He does not deserve it. He is a menace,’ I sign.

‘He is perfect,’ Luca says, nuzzling further into me.

I do not think Gerald is perfect, but I’m glad that Luca is happy with his presence. He moved the coffee table into the kitchen last night, and Luca tripped over it while getting water. I heard the yelp of pain and rushed to him, only to find him holding his shin and petting Gerald’s hard shell.

I adore him. I adore this life I’ve allowed myself to have.

Yes, we will be fine. We will get through anything now that we have one another.

OceanofPDF.com

epilogue

SYL

I'M NOT REALLY a gym guy, but it's become a great place to work out my frustration. And okay, maybe I only last ten minutes on the treadmill and fifteen minutes with light weights, but for an entomology nerd who doesn't get out much and is paler than Michigan in winter, it's something.

At least I'm sweating. It's going to curb some of my frustrations before I have to make my way to the café.

I don't mind my job. Granted, it's not what I envisioned myself doing after walking the stage for my biology bachelor's, but jobs are scarce as fuck around here, and I will die before I take a job at the middle school teaching smart-mouthed little cretins who refuse to pay attention and have some AI program write all their homework.

But right now, things are weird around here, and it's hard to think of anything else. Seven months ago, there was a series of explosions all over town. Then a sudden flurry of portal activity, which the news attempted to report on, though the information seemed like bullshit.

Then, suddenly, in the middle of the night, all the portals abruptly went dead. There was widespread panic as all the humans and Vyastil tried to get them to function again, but it's been months now, and there's been no communication from the other side.

The clinic is still functional, and the Vyastil trapped here are still going to their appointments, along with keeping the factory operational, but I've been starting to wonder if maybe this is it.

Maybe the Vyastil on the other side got their fill and shut it all down. Maybe they got freaked out by the anti-monster resistance trying to blow them up and decided cum wasn't worth it.

Or hell, maybe they found another species that fulfilled their needs.

All I know is that things are different. My bosses don't care, of course. They're from Erethar, but neither of them ever planned on going back. Just like the blue-haired monster in the tight gym tank top and short shorts I'm staring at now.

Quilliyn owns the gym, and he hasn't seemed to care that he can't get back to Erethar. He's been his usual, smiling self. He even grins at me as I walk through the door. Makes me wonder what he wants, but then I shake that off.

I can be an asshole sometimes.

I need to be nicer.

I'm working on it.

I send up a wave as I walk up to Quilliyn, who's leaning on the counter, and then my eyes settle on the guy who owns the space my bosses rent. Luca's a good guy, a Deaf guy, but nice. Doesn't help that my signing skills are pathetic and extend to the alphabet—at least, most of it; I always fuck up X and R—and a handful of basic conversation signs.

But Luca has never made me feel like shit about it, which makes me feel like shit for not trying hard enough. Fuck it. I'm signing up for a class this summer. It's not like I don't have the time. The café pays me a stupid amount of money for bare minimum hours, and I'm hoping that's not going to change in the future.

Luca jerks his chin up at me and drags his finger up his chest. 'What's up?'

'Nothing,' I sign back. One of the dozen words I know. He knows that's about where my lexicon ends, and I see his eyes narrow on my mouth. "Busy today?"

Quilliyn shrugs and signs as he speaks. "It's not bad. I'm surprised to see you here twice in one week."

I scan my badge and try to will my cheeks back to their normal pale color instead of the hot, prickling blush they're displaying. Don't know why this monster needs to wear nipple shirts. It's…distracting.

"The joys of being constantly pissed off."

Luca makes a worried noise in the back of his throat. 'Wrong?'

I know that tap on his chin means what's wrong. "Work bullshit. Anyway, I don't mean to interrupt."

Luca shakes his head as Quilliyn leans over the counter. "You're fine. We were just talking about Brody and his friends."

The name sounds weirdly familiar, and it takes me a second to remember something I'd seen going around social media. A few articles were written about three guys who went missing in the middle of the night. They'd gone out to a bonfire near the lake, and all that was left behind were a pair of yellow Crocs, a blue glass bong shaped like an elephant, and a zucchini.

Everyone was wondering about the presence of the vegetable more than the missing dudes.

The story took hold for a little while, but it was eclipsed by the portals closing, so I hadn't even realized those guys were never found.

"You know them?"

Luca's face falls as Quilliyn nods. "They basically lived here. Good guys. A couple people have been looking into their disappearance, but they weren't the type of guys to just wander off without saying anything."

My mind goes to a dozen places. Like the anti-monster groups. The portals. Other angry Vyastil.

But it's not like I'm a detective. I'm just some semi-scientist debating whether I'll ever get into grad school or not, working at a little coffee shop with one monster who doesn't mind me, and one who probably wishes I'd disappear into the night.

My frustration ratchets up, and I take a deep breath. "I should go start my run. I have to be at the shop in an hour."

Quilliyn nods, and Luca signs a quick, 'Have fun,' and I wander off, doing my best to shove Hepyn and Zinni out of my head. It won't last, but for this little bit, I'll get a few moments' peace.

My dad used to tell me that the only thing I'd ever be good for was slinging burgers on a fry top, that my biology degree was a pointless waste of money.

Joke's on him. I've been working at a coffee shop for the last fifteen months slinging coffee, and I'm starting to think it's my calling.

Not because I'm great at making coffee. My two bosses don't usually put me on as barista because I can't seem to make a decent espresso shot, and the last time I tried to steam milk, more of it ended up sprayed all over the walls than in the little metal pitcher.

But I can handle people, even if I don't like them. And I'm decent with money, which is one thing my bosses have never been able to get the hang of. I don't blame them. They're monsters. They came through the portal, well…fuck knows when. I never asked.

I liked their little shop because while humans came in to order coffee and pastries, they didn't like to stay. Even people who had been in town as long as the monsters had were still kind of uneasy with them owning businesses and property.

That meant before I graduated, I almost always had a quiet place to study, and the only thing that bothered me was the voice of my father in my head telling me what a waste of space I was because the world didn't need another entomologist.

Well, fuck you, Dad. The world probably doesn't need me in the field of entomology, but as soon as I save enough money to pay for grad school—and figure out, you know, how to pay rent and everything while I'm doing that—I'll walk the stage again, and then…

I don't know. Go research insects in Costa Rica, where there are still plenty of undiscovered species.

Or maybe I'll go to Erethar and categorize their insects.

In the meantime, I'm going to use my freaky math skills to keep these well-meaning but disastrous monsters from losing their shop to the IRS.

Though, I don't actually know if the IRS taxes monsters. It's hard to tell what's happening now that the portals have all closed and everything is in limbo.

I'd gotten an email about six months ago letting me know that my service to the clinic was suspended indefinitely. When I showed it to Zinni, he looked like he was going to cry—which was weird because why would he give a shit? He was kind—much kinder to me than Hepyn, who seems to hate every fiber of my being, but he's also different from the Vyastil.

He's not even a Vyastil—something they forget I know, and I swear to god it feels like they think humans can't hear even when we're in the same

room. Or they forget they're speaking English.

Either way, they have secrets, and I have mine, and I'm happy to play this little game of pretending we don't know we're all in this shit together.

"Why are you staring at the wall?"

The sound of Hepyn's voice irritates me. It's a nice voice—a little different than Zinni's melodic hum, which seems to embrace each English word he speaks. Hepyn is different—harsh, cold, like he's never experienced an ounce of joy, comfort, or peace.

I glance over at him to see he's not wearing the coffee shop T-shirt, but a robe thingy. It kind of reminds me of the cloaks my nerdy friends used to wear when they'd RPG Vampire Masquerade in the park every weekend during our sophomore year.

They're all probably shitting themselves in excitement now that monsters are actually here and interacting with humans. Though, there's still no such thing as vampires…I think.

"I'm bored."

Hepyn scoffs. "There are many tasks you can busy yourself with."

Turning, I hitch my hip against the counter and stare at him. He's seemed a bit…down lately. His voice is still sharp, but it's not as powerful as it used to be, and he's taking more days off, which is entirely unlike him.

Something is going on. Zinni also seems to know it. He's been treating Hepyn with more delicacy than usual. It's pissing the taller monster off, though he hasn't said anything in my presence. I think it has something to do with what Eissa told me months and months ago, and that makes me feel antsy all over.

Hepyn could be dying. Or close to it. He needs a human, but I don't know how, and before Eissa could explain, I was cut off.

"Why don't you go home and take a nap, grumpy?" I snark back. "Or… I don't know. Go make an appointment at the clinic and see if a little cum will perk you up."

His ears do that funny twitching thing they always do when he's annoyed. His are shorter than Zinni's and not as versatile at displaying emotion. But it seems to fit with his personality.

"I do not partake in human cum."

"Maybe you should. It might help dislodge that stick up your asshole."

"I do not have an asshole—"

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Literal.” He’s always like this, and I can’t tell if he does it to piss me off or if that’s really just the way his brain works.

He blinks slowly at me but says nothing, which is another sign that something’s not quite right.

I walk over to him and stare into his inhuman eyes before lifting my hand and pressing my wrist to his forehead. “Do your kind get fevers?”

He freezes, then flinches away, taking several steps back. He does that a lot too. It’s almost like he finds my presence revolting, which isn’t exactly an ego boost. But after all this time, I’ve gotten used to it.

I’m not the hottest guy. Don’t really have dates or…friends, really.

It’s why I like bugs. Bugs don’t give a fuck, and they don’t judge.

“We do not get fevers the way humans do. And I am not ill.”

“I still think maybe you need a break. You seem off.”

His jaw clenches, and then he parts his lips, and I catch a glimpse of his fangs. I’ve often wondered how sharp they actually are. I’ve wondered a lot about him. More than I probably should, considering he hates me.

But that’s also been a thing of mine. Every single crush I had in school was on some jackass jock who hated me for being a weirdo little queer. And the meaner they were, the more I fantasized about them.

It’s a problem, I know. I can’t help it.

And it’s been the same for Hepyn. Not that Zinni hasn’t been on my radar, of course. But he’s so kind. I’ve dreamt of him wrapping his long arms and legs around me when I’ve had a bad day and making me feel like nothing in the world can touch me.

But Hepyn…I’ve dreamt of him winding the tip of his long tail around my throat, shoving me against the wall, then dropping to his knees and sucking me dry.

And I hope to fuck he never finds out about my fantasies. He’d probably fire me and find a way to blacklist me from the entire town. And I need this job.

“Are you two fighting again?” comes a voice from the kitchen doorway.

Hepyn’s ears flick toward the sound of Zinni’s voice before he looks over. He seems to soften, and it leaves me with a deep ache in the pit of my stomach because god, I want one of them to look at me like that.

Hell, I want anyone to look at me like that.

I’ll, of course, end up being the crazy cat man when I get old, but instead of cats it’ll be sphinx moths and titan beetles. There will be webs in

each corner of my house and insect poop on my floors.

I'm a real winner.

"I was just saying Hepyn seems a little tired and he might benefit from a trip to the clinic," I answer before any more bullshit can fall from Hepyn's mouth.

The monster in question flicks his tail, slapping the tip against the floor and saying something in Eretharian. I've gotten good at understanding some of it, but the language is so fast and relies heavily on tones that I don't think most humans can hear.

Zinni stares at Hepyn for a moment, then says something back. And before I can demand to know what they're talking about, Hepyn turns and pushes past Zinni, letting the door swing shut behind him.

"Sorry," I mutter.

Zinni walks over and lays a comforting hand on my shoulder. His claws barely graze my skin, and I fight the urge to push against them and feel the sting. "He doesn't partake in human cum as they do in the clinic."

"Why not?" I'm curious to see if he'll give me more information this time.

Now that I've gotten good at reading Zinni's body language, I can tell the way his ears flick and his skin sort of…ruffles when he's trying to answer without answering. "It's complicated."

"Because he's not a Vyastil, right?" *Fuck it,* I think as I say it.

Zinni's eyes widen. "Syl…"

"I've known for a while, remember? And I'm not going to tell anyone. But you two should probably know humans can hear you if you're standing, like, three feet away."

Zinni looks vaguely horrified. I wonder if this has something to do with the fact that he has a Deaf landlord. Maybe he's forgotten other humans aren't. He takes a deep breath, then his hand trails down before he grabs me by the wrist and pulls me into the little nook where we keep all the extra to-go supplies.

"I need you to understand how important it is that you continue to keep this secret."

My brows fly up. "Is it illegal for him to be here or something?"

"His species typically cannot survive on Earth."

Something like horror hits me right in the center of the gut. No, it's not horror; it's fear. "Is he going to be okay? Last time Eissa was here, he said

that Hepyn could be in trouble. And now he for sure can't get back to Erethar with the portals closed."

Zinni takes a long moment before he answers. "He would not go back to Erethar even if the portals were open. And it's not really my story to tell. But we are…" he hesitates, "working on a solution to his problem."

"It's a problem a human could solve, right?"

Zinni looks torn. "I…well. Technically, yes." Bowing his head, he takes me by the shoulders and holds tight. "We like having you here, Syl."

"*You* do."

"Hepyn is not as comfortable as I am expressing himself. He knows we would be lost without you." My chest goes oddly warm, and I feel myself blushing. "I need you to understand that what Hepyn needs is not something you can help him with."

Well, that's a challenge if I've ever heard one. I have a feeling Zinni won't tell me more, no matter how hard I irritate and bother him about it. So, my only option—if I really want to find out—is to ask someone who is willing to tell.

And I'm not sure I could find Eissa now that he's gone into hiding, but I bet there's someone else who knows just as much.

And while I don't know anyone off the top of my head, I do know there's a sanctuary village of monsters and humans being built by the lake. I might not have connections now, but if I spend enough time snooping around, I should be able to find answers.

I love being a snoop. I'm terrible at it, but I have all the necessary things I need. Including a magnifying glass that I use to look at ants as they work, and binoculars which I procured to watch moths flutter in the light.

I've been asked if I'm birdwatching once today. I just smiled and nodded. Fuckers making assumptions. Not everyone likes feathered dinosaurs. Some people like goddamn bugs.

I fiddle with the binoculars around my neck as I linger across the street from where I know Luca is at this very moment. He owns the coffee shop and comes in often. He's always signing, and I feel like a chump because I haven't taken the time to learn any of it. It leaves me out more often than

not. It’s my own fault, but right now, I’m nose-deep in work. I don’t have time to take on something else.

Unless it involves figuring out what’s going on with my boss.

Suddenly, the door of one of the cottages opens, and a monster appears, his body cloaked in a sheer tunic, his hair pulled up into two ponytails, large bows on each one.

His head tilts up to the sky, and he breaks out in a wide smile as he seems to bask in it. Then he lets out a happy trill and his gaze slams into mine.

I freeze, realizing stupidly that I’m standing across the street and staring.

With binoculars and a magnifying glass.

The monster sends up a wave and a wide grin before crossing the street right toward me. And listen, I interact with humans and Vyastil alike at the coffee shop, but I’m behind a counter and it’s my job. This is different.

He’s walking with a purpose.

And when he stops in front of me, he waves again and then holds out his arms like he wants a hug.

I stare at him, my mouth parting in shock.

“Hello, human. I have just come from a sleepover, and I would like a hug.”

I stammer when I hear someone call out, “Vyrian! You can’t just go up to people and ask for hugs. We talked about this!”

I peer around Vyrian and see a man who has come into the shop a few times. Luca’s brother, Dante, I think. He’s holding the hand of a monster wearing a pink jacket and is trotting across the street.

“I’m so sorry. He’s overly friendly and curious,” Dante says with a small laugh.

Vyrian nods. “I have been here for seven moon cycles, and everything is still fascinating. Including the mating rituals of humans.”

I blush and gape once more.

Dante lets out another horrified laugh. “God, I’m sorry. But you must know how it is. I recognize you from Creature Comforts…” He snaps his fingers and adds, “Sal?”

“Syl,” I correct.

“Nice to see you again. This is Cielo. And this is Vyrian.”

Vyrian’s ears flutter.

“I enjoy your name, *Syllllll*. I would like you to write it down so I can add it to my collection.”

“Yeah, alright.”

He beams at that, like I just offered him a hundred bucks.

Then his eyes swivel to the binoculars around my neck, and he reaches out and touches them.

“What are they?” he asks, his rainbow orbs blinking down at me.

With a fumbling hand, I pull the binoculars from around my neck and hand them to him. “Binoculars. They let you see things that are far away.”

He holds them up to his eyes, and they grow even larger.

I roll my lips between my teeth and muffle a smile. I think I like this monster. He seems…nice.

Then again, they all seem fucking nice. It’s unnerving.

At least their niceness means I don’t envision them pushing me against a wall and fucking me. Thank the gods for that.

“Are you working today?” Dante asks, and I turn my gaze back to him as Vyrian wanders off to examine things with his new toy.

“Uh, yeah. Later. Just…you know, I was out and about looking at…insects.”

“All the way out here?” he asks, gesturing toward the lake.

I shrug. “Different bugs near water.”

“Oh, very cool. I’m not a fan of bugs, but Vyrian is. I’m sure he’d listen to you talk for ages about them.”

“Yeah, alright.” I shift on my feet, twisting my hands together before me.

“Um, well, sorry about the weird meeting,” Dante says, sensing I’m uncomfortable. And I am, but I also have questions.

He turns to walk off when I shout, a little too loudly, “Wait!”

He glances over his shoulder and quirks an eyebrow at me.

“Sorry, shit. I just…I have some questions and was hoping you could help me answer them…you or…you know, that guy.”

I wave to Cielo, and his ears flutter.

“Oh, what kind of questions?” Dante asks.

“Just…well…about someone I work with. It’s kind of private, but also I’m getting worried, so…” My words are jumbled and confusing, but thankfully Dante just nods toward his cottage.

“Worried about what?”

“Stuff.”

“Come on. Cielo made scones with me this morning, and we have coffee.”

I don’t usually just walk into a stranger’s house, but I need answers, and this may be the only time I get the answers I need.

I follow them inside, taking in the cozy living room filled with plants and knickknacks. I see that there is bedding on the back porch, but I don’t ask about it, just linger awkwardly in the doorway and watch as Cielo and Dante make their way into the quaint kitchen.

I inhale and scent vanilla and flour in the air, and my stomach rumbles. I forgot to eat this morning when I decided to be Scooby fucking Doo.

“Go on, sit.”

I do as he says, the cushions sinking beneath me as Cielo walks over and hands me a cup of hot coffee and a scone.

I take it from him, and he lowers himself onto the floor, pulling Dante onto his lap and nuzzling his face into his neck.

I shift awkwardly at the outward display of affection. I don’t mind it. I’m just a little jealous.

“Why are you helping me?” I finally ask, taking a bite of my scone and chewing.

Not bad, I think. I should tell Zinni and Hepyn to consider making some of these and selling them.

“Well, you seem nice, and I’ve been where you are. So many questions about the Vyastil but so few answers.”

I swallow and take a long sip of my coffee. “Yeah, alright. Only, this isn’t about the Vyastil.”

I assess them when I say that, watching as Cielo’s eyes narrow and Dante’s widen. Can I trust them? I think so. I mean, his brother is Luca, who is partnered up with Eissa, one of the high-ranking leaders. And Dante seems cool…

Although Zinni said not to tell anyone.

But fuck, something’s going on, and I hate being left out.

“What do you mean?” Dante finally asks when I say nothing for far too long.

“Can you keep a secret?”

“*Girl*,” Dante drawls with a laugh. “We’re a house of secrets up in here.”

That makes my lips twitch, and I fiddle with my lip ring for a moment before sighing. “So you know my bosses? Zinni and Hepyn?”

Cielo cocks his head, his ears fluttering as I speak.

“Yeah, we do. Not, like, personally, but they seem nice,” Dante says.

“Yeah, well, do you know that…” I hesitate a moment and then think fuck it. “…that one of them isn’t a Vyastil?”

Cielo stiffens, and I see him hold onto Dante a little tighter.

“Yeah, though we don’t speak about it,” Dante says. “Luca says it’s important not to. It could be dangerous.”

“Yeah,” I nod, setting the scone down and wiping my sweaty hands on my jeans. “Do you know what Hepyn is, then?”

Cielo speaks now, his words soft and melodic. “He is a Vorthex.”

“What’s that mean?” I ask when he doesn’t explain.

“They live in the *ssssskys*. They have *weeeengs*.”

I shake my head and think about Hepyn. “Hepyn doesn’t,” I murmur.

Dante and Cielo are both silent, and my heart drops. Oh shit. Did someone cut off his fucking wings? I know that Zinni is missing a tail, and that’s the whole reason he came to Earth, so maybe…

Anger boils up inside of me, and my hands clench into fists.

“I don’t know what happened,” Dante goes on, “just that Luca said it was a punishment.”

“But he will not seeerveeeve long here,” Cielo cuts in.

“Why?” I ask. Worry hits me like a freight train. “Is that why he seems so sick?”

Cielo nods, his face drawn. “The Vorthex…they need…”

Fuck. I’m about to get actual answers. “I know it’s not cum.”

He shakes his head and then nods. “Yessss and no.”

Frustration bubbles up inside of me. “Can you elaborate, please? I’ve been trying to figure this out for months, and no one will say anything, and he just keeps getting sicker!” I take a deep breath and roll my shoulders. “Sorry. It just sucks not being able to help.”

Just as I say that, the door opens and Vyrian walks in, his eyes blinking behind the binoculars. “Help with what?”

“My boss. He’s a Vorthex,” I blurt before realizing that maybe telling a Vyastil I don’t know is not a good idea.

But Vyrian looks more pleased than anything. “Oh, the Vorthex are fascinating,” he says, interjecting himself into the conversation. He angles

the binoculars at me as he continues speaking. “They live in the sky above Erethar and require male human holes for survival…” I blink at him, but he’s not finished. “They have a fascinating anatomy and breeding procedure.”

“Vyrian,” Dante says softly, but he doesn’t stop; he just moves the binoculars around the room, looking at everything he can.

My throat goes dry as I attempt to swallow. “What do you mean by…by holes?”

“Holes are humans who are meant to milk the Vorthex several times a month during their cycles. If they are not milked, they cannot survive. But what is more fascinating is the extra extremity that appears during each session…”

“Vyrian,” Dante says again, but he carries on, too caught up in his explanation.

“…they have a…I do not know the human word, but it appears from beneath the Vorthex cock and attaches to the small human penis to consume the human seed…”

“Vyrian!” Dante says loudly, finally making him stop.

“Have I said too much?” he asks, and Dante runs a hand down his face. I do the same, my skin hot and fevered.

“Yes, I think you might have… Go get our guest some water. He looks like he’s going to pass out.”

I mean, that’s not what’s happening right now, but I could use a cold drink. Maybe a beer.

Because I’m hard as fuck right now, thinking about bending over, Hepyn using my hole to milk his cock and…according to the monster before me, he’ll milk me too.

What the fuck? Why do I like that?

A cold glass is shoved into my hand, and I take a long gulp, feeling the cool liquid move down my throat. It allows me a moment to process. How long has Hepyn been here? How long has he gone without? How much longer does he have to survive?

Everyone is watching me cautiously, and when I finally find my voice, I ask the only question I’m able to voice.

“So, if I bend over and become his hole, he’ll get better?”

They blink back at me, and I know I have my answer.

I'm halfway to my car before Dante catches up with me, Vyrian at his heels. I already have it in my head what I want to do—no, what I *need* to do—but I can see it on Dante's face that he's going to try to stop me.

But I'm not about to let Hepyn die. I don't care that he doesn't like me. I don't care that he probably wouldn't do the same if our situations were reversed. I just don't have it in me to let him suffer.

"Look, if you're going to try to talk me out of this—" I start.

Dante heaves a breath, holding up his hand. I can tell he's not a gym guy—a bit like me. Makes me like him more. "Just…hang on. Fuck." He clears his throat and straightens up. "Come with me and talk to Eissa. I don't know a lot about the Vorthex, but he and Vyrian can explain to you why your idea is a very, very bad one."

I wrinkle my nose. "Getting dicked down and sucked by some…tentacle appendage doesn't sound like the worst idea."

Dante rolls his eyes up toward the sky. "Please."

Vyrian takes a step forward. He's lost his smile. "Dante is telling you all truths. The Vorthex are not like the Vyastil. We may be genetically related in a lot of ways, but they are dangerous."

I could just turn and walk away, but I have a feeling these two might follow me, and that would blow my cover. Especially because it's going to take some mind-fuck trickery to get Hepyn to hear me out, let alone agree to let me be his…hole, or whatever.

The thought makes my face bloom hotly. God, I haven't been fucked in so, so long, and now I'm going to offer my ass up to my boss to save him?

What even is my life right now?

"Where is Eissa?" I finally ask.

"He's on his way. He'll be here in ten minutes. You two can talk out back," Dante says, waving me back to the house.

I shuffle back in, and Cielo gives me a sad trill and a half smile as I nod at him, then I follow Dante through their little cottage kitchen and out the back door. It's a really nice setup. There's a low fence with the perfect view of the lake, and a monster-sized swing hanging from a pagoda in the distance.

Dante gestures to their dining table, and I sit, folding my hands on the mosaic tiles. A few scarites make their way across the edge of the table, and

I watch them.

"Oh, ew," Dante says, raising a hand.

"Don't!" He freezes, and I take a breath. "Sorry, just…they're good to have in your garden."

Dante shudders. "They creep me the fuck out."

I've always been fascinated by bugs, so I don't get where his fear comes from, but after years of studying entomology, his reaction is not uncommon. Even other biology majors at the college get weird about insects.

"I like them," Vyrian says, dropping to a crouch beside the table. He gets so close his nose is almost touching the metal, and I can see his rainbow irises following their path. "Why do they help gardens?"

"They eat a lot of garden pests," I tell him. Leaning forward, I push my finger toward two of them, and they both immediately fall over onto their backs.

Vyrian gasps and leans back. "Dead?"

I grin. "No. They play dead when they're threatened. They usually live underground, so I think people scare them."

"Like Cielo's pussyum!"

I blink at him. "His *what* now?"

Dante covers his smile with his hand for a second, then says, "'Possum."

Fighting back a laugh, I reach over and pluck the beetles from the table and cup them in my hand. A couple give an exploratory squirm before going still, and I jerk my head toward the edge of the grass.

"Come on. We can bring them home."

Vyrian jumps up, looking thrilled, and he follows after me, crouching at the edge of the grass when I do. I open my fingers, then tip my palm and drop them onto the sandy bits of dirt that line the grass.

"They look dead," Vyrian says, giving a mournful trill.

"Just watch."

It takes a moment, but after several long seconds, they all pop up and quickly burrow beneath the earth. Vyrian watches with a careful expression, then looks at me. "We have a lot of underground on Erethar. Some of it is very nice. Some is…not."

"The mines," I murmur.

He nods. "I would be sent to the mines if I were not a prince."

My eyes go wide. "A prince? Like…an actual prince?"

He tilts his head, looking confused. “I don’t understand that human phrase. Is there a not-actual prince?”

I don’t know how to explain myself, so I shake my head and stand, and Vyrian follows. We stand there a moment, looking out over the water, and I wonder if Hepyn and Zinni ever come out here.

They’ve told me before that water on Erethar is precious—that it’s kept in large underground caverns. There are no surface oceans at all, and the ones beneath aren’t accessible to most of the creatures who live on Erethar.

I also realize the Vyastil have us believing it’s only them, but it’s clear their world—their universe—is probably just as vast and diverse as ours.

I startle when Vyrian reaches out, and he tugs on a strand of my hair. “May I have this?”

My brow furrows. “My hair? Like…all of it?”

“No.” He pulls back and his fingers sort of twist together in a way that looks a bit like stimming. “I…can we be friends?”

I almost burst into laughter. The question is so honest. “Yeah, sure.”

He brightens like the sun. “May I have your hair?”

“He means a lock of hair,” Dante clarifies, coming closer. “He collects them. Like the Victorians used to do.”

Vyrian puffs out his chest. “I have a large collection now. Six locks. With bows!” He touches his own bows in his ponytails, and I can’t help but smile.

It’s maybe the weirdest request I’ve gotten outside of someone asking if we can make cum-flavored creamer. I think I like this one a bit more. “Yeah. We can cut a piece before I go.”

Dante’s giving me a look I can’t quite read, and when Vyrian walks away, heading toward the water, he steps close. “Thanks for being nice to him. He can be a bit…”

I hold my breath. He’s going to say too much. I’ve gotten that quite a few times in my life too.

“…innocent. Or I guess maybe ignorant,” Dante goes on. “I want him to learn how to survive here, but I’m scared the way the world works is going to break him.”

I shake my head as I look over at Vyrian, who is now digging in the sand, probably looking for more beetles. “I think he’ll be alright.”

Dante smiles, then he goes totally still for a second before clearing his throat. “Eissa’s here.”

I want to ask how the fuck he could possibly know that, but in that moment, Eissa appears.

I haven't seen Eissa or Luca much since they got back and the portals all closed.

He looks the same, though maybe a bit happier. He's wearing his linen top and pants, and his hair is in a tight braid down his back. He's regal. And I think quite a bit older than most Vyastil I know.

He inclines his head as I approach, then he gestures for me to sit. It's a little too easy to follow Vyastil orders. Probably something I should examine another day.

"I understand you're aware of Hepyn's unique needs," he says as he takes the seat next to me.

That's one way of putting it. "Dante thinks it's a bad idea if I offer myself up to help."

Eissa lets out a long breath, and an undercurrent of melodic hum beneath it. He steeples his fingers, presses the tips to his mouth, and is silent for a long time. I'm starting to think he has no plans to answer me, but then he meets my gaze.

"Although the theory has never been tested, I have a very good reason to believe that most humans wouldn't survive being a conscious hole for the Vorthex. And I do not wish you to die."

It takes me a moment for all of Eissa's words to sink in, then I look over at him. "I don't understand what you mean."

"The Vorthex are the reason the Vyastil have portal technology. They invented it," he says. "When it became obvious that the Vyastil were in need of something very specific from humans in order to prolong our lives, they offered us the technology in exchange for a peace treaty."

My brows fly up. "You were at war?"

"It's complicated."

Christ, I am getting tired of hearing that. "Can you try to explain?"

"It would take far too long for me to give you real details. But I can say that the Vyastil leadership has fed clever, believable lies to the humans in order to secure our exchange agreement. What we require is…more

palatable, I think, than the Vorthex. Or a few of the other species. Most of them have gone extinct for lack of access to the human world."

Okay. Now I have a thousand questions, and they're mostly about alien abductions, but I need to stay focused. "Vyrian said they need to basically fuck humans, and then suck our dicks with some tentacle thing?"

"That is a crude way of putting it," Eissa says, his ears flicking and his mouth twitching like he's trying to hide a smile. "But yes."

"So, how is that dangerous?"

"Because they require a lot. And they require some blood."

I snort. "Like a vampire?"

His eyes flash, but before I can ask about that, he says, "I suppose in a sense. It's no more than a mouthful. And while one session with the Vorthex might be survivable, it's not sustainable."

"How long do they…need it?" I rasp.

"Many times," comes Vyrian's voice. He bounds up to the table and crouches beside me, his tail wrapping around my ankle like he's inspecting my skin before he pulls it away. "Their cycles aren't very frequent, but it requires at least a week or two with a hole. And to survive that level of use, humans are given herbs to keep them docile and unconscious."

My stomach roils. "Unconscious?"

"It's—" Eissa starts.

"Do not say complicated."

He holds up his hands. "The Vorthex had an agreement with humans. They started to breed them on Erethar, which was successful for a while, but eventually something about our world made the humans infertile. So now they collect volunteers."

"Actual volunteers?" I press.

Eissa looks away. "The humans remember nothing when it's over. And they're very well compensated."

That doesn't make it better. Fuck's sake. I suppose there's a lot even humans would do for survival. Hell, humans do cruel things for fun, so it's not like we're perfect. But this sounds like nightmare fuel.

"How long can they go without a hole?" I ask.

Vyrian cocks his head to the side and speaks before Eissa can answer. "Many moon cycles, but each missed," he uses an Eretharian word I don't understand, "makes them weaker. I have not met Hepyn, but he is probably close to death now."

He says that so matter-of-factly. Like the words aren't threatening to shatter me.

Eissa makes a soft trill to get my attention. "I understand what you're willing to offer your friend." I bite back a retort telling him Hepyn isn't my friend, but that's pointless. "If we had access to some of the herbs, I might suggest helping him this once. But without that…"

"You have other herbs," I point out. "The ones that make humans heal faster. Ones that make them kind of high as fuck at the clinic."

Eissa bites his lip. "There are some that might make the session easier. Oyen," he says, like I'm supposed to know that word. He takes a breath, then looks me in the eye. "I do not wish Hepyn to pass. He's been through enough as it is. If he is willing, I will have someone deliver an herbal package to you. It will leave you exhausted, and it will put you into a state of…"

"Horny," Vyrian says with a smile. "I learned that word recently. A desperate desire to breed."

Oh, fuck me. I mean, I'm kind of already horny, so who knows what this will do to me.

"Vyrian," Eissa whispers, shaking his head. "He's also not incorrect. It will overwhelm your senses, and some humans—especially ones who have not bonded to their partners—might feel a little like they cannot consent."

"But I'm saying yes now. With a clear head," I tell him.

Eissa says nothing for a long moment. His eyes close and I can see his fingers twitching. Then he looks at me. "Speak with Hepyn and then contact me. Dante will give you my personal number. If this is something you both agree to, then I will provide aid."

That's something. Getting Hepyn to agree will be the tricky part, but I'm one determined, stubborn asshole, and when I want to get my way, I always find a solution.

And saving Hepyn has become mission number one.

OceanofPDF.com

cora rose

Cora Rose loves any kind of romance and consumes way too many books each year. She currently lives in the U.S. and spends her days daydreaming about the characters inside her head.

Facebook: facebook.com/coraroseromance
Instagram: instagram.com/coraroseromance
Patreon: patreon.com/CoraRoseRomance
Amazon: amazon.com/stores/Cora%20Rose/author/B09YMVH36P

The Unexpected Series
Whit
Sem
Emery
Luke
Lex
Colin
Diablo
Ben
Dean

Unexpectedly Twisted Series
The Silencer
His Prince
His Enforcer

The Inevitable Series
Until Him
Always Him

Timeless Series
A Minute More
One More Time

Our Exception Series
Except You
Suddenly You
Reluctantly You

Standalone
Waiting for You
Exception
Full Service

Cora Rose and Nicole Dykes

Behind the Camera Series
Reaching Reed
Becoming Bennet
Discovering Damon
Loving Leo

Homegrown Hearts
Sunshine For Sale

Cora Rose and Lark Taylor
Covenant

Cora Rose and E.M. Lindsey

Deaf Hearts
Kiss-Fist
ILY
PAH!

Feed and Feast
Suck
Taste
Tempt

Murder Hearts
Hunt Me

OceanofPDF.com

e.m. lindsey

E.M. Lindsey is a non-binary writer who lives in the northeast United States, close to the water where their heart lies.

Join EM Lindsey's newsletter teasers, freebies, short stories, and more.

Punk as Puck

Legends and Fury

Storm Season

Royal Crush

Words We Never Said

The Beginning of Always

BrewBiz Deaf Café

Broken Chains

The Carnal Tower

Hit and Run

Irons and Works

The Sin Bin: West Coast

With Cora Rose

Deaf Hearts

Kiss Fist

ILY

PAH!

Feed and Feast

Suck

Taste

Tempt

Murder Hearts

Hunt Me

EM Lindsey's Website

EM's Patreon

Free Short Stories

EM Lindsey's Amazon Account

EM Lindsey on Instagram

EM Lindsey on Bookbub



OceanofPDF.com