MONSTER GAMES

THEIR ROYAL PET



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEXI C. FOSS


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Their Royal Pet

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Editing by: Outthink Editing, LLC

Proofreading by: Katie Schmahl

Cover Design: Covers by Jay

Title Page Design: JV Arts

Map Illustration & Header Illustrations: : Ricky Gunawan

Published by: Ninja Newt Publishing, LLC

Digital Edition

ISBN: 978-1-68530-348-8

Print Edition

ISBN: 978-1-68530-460-7

AI Disclaimer: This book does not contain any elements of AI content. All art was designed by real artists, and all of the words were written by the author.

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Are you ready to play hide-and-seek with us, Darling?
Because the Monster Games are about to begin.
And we can't wait to join the hunt…

Tiru's tentacles are already tingling for you.
Ika's inner dragon is begging to be unleashed.
And I am in dire need of a mateable queen.

So if you want to be claimed, then turn the page.
We're waiting…

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About Their Royal Pet



Welcome to Monsters Island.
Once a year, candidates are chosen to participate in mating games.
And by *chosen*, I mean *sacrificed*…

When my name is picked from the sacred Chalice, I know my time in this world has come to an end.
A week from now, I'll be hunted by monsters from other realms.
There's nowhere for me to hide.
But that doesn't mean I won't fight fate.

Only, it seems I've attracted the attention of the Elite Island King.
As well as two rival royals from alternate kingdoms.

The problem is, they want me to choose between them.
And I refuse.

In a world where monsters reign, *choice* is a subjective term.
But these royals are determined to win my heart.
And I just might let them all claim me in the end…

Author's Note: *Their Royal Pet* is a standalone reverse harem romantasy set in a dystopian human realm overrun by monsters. Each book in the Monster Games world can be read as a standalone.

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WELCOME TO THE



MONSTER GAMES

THE HUMANS in the world are bred and trained to be claimed by beings from various realms.

Many mortals are aware of their fates; others are not.

But every year, the villages throughout the globe gather and select their Offerings. Some are sent to Monsters Night to be hunted. A chosen few are subjected to the prestigious Monster Games, where their strengths and mate-like capabilities are put to the ultimate test.

The Monster Islands are part of the Monster Games.

These are no ordinary trials. They're dark. Deadly. And depraved.

Only the strongest candidates will survive.

The rest are cast out to the depths of the ocean to suffer worse fates.

So, what's it going to be, darling?
Are you ready for your first trial?
I hope you know how to tread water.
Because in the Monster Islands…
It's sink or swim.

PLEASE NOTE: *Their Royal Pet* is a standalone why-choose romance featuring a strong heroine and her three royal mates. This book introduces a new area of the Monsters Night universe, making it a unique story with brand-new characters and no overarching plots or characters. As such, it can be read entirely on its own.

Below are some themes you may find in *Their Royal Pet*:

✓ Group scenes/play (no MM)
✓ Consent between the heroine and her mates
✓ No Other Woman or Other Man Drama (No Cheating)
✓ Possessive Over The Top Alpha Males… who hate each other at first
✓ Touch Her and Die Vibes
✓ Dominant/submissive dynamics in the bedroom
✓ Strong Heroine who doesn't kneel right away
✓ Pregnancy Themes (No Actual Pregnancy)
✓ Primal Energy
✓ Decorative Peen
✓ Tentacle Play
Enjoy! <3

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PROLOGUE

ZAEL

MONSTER GAMES COUNTDOWN: SIX WEEKS

"ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT." I slide the tablet back across the crystal-topped table to Huntz. "Those portals are not opening within my region. Ask Njord."

"The Elite Isle King has his own monsters to manage, my lord. Aquatopia is under our jurisdiction, not his." The visiting emissary steeples his long fingers against the glass-like top and leans toward me. "King Ika is within his right to request entry into this year's Monster Games."

"And I maintain my right to tell him to fuck right off," I return. "These are *my* islands."

"Technically, only the humans are under your protection. Queen Seren manages otherworld access, and these are the portals she's already approved for this year's events." He unlinks his fingers to gently nudge the tablet toward me once more. "She requested I share our list with you as a courtesy. Nothing more."

I narrow my gaze at the male siren. He's dressed in a suit, his dark hair slicked back, his grayish eyes exuding boredom. All elegance and grace. Just like his melodic voice.

However, I pick up on the threatening undertone.

He's trying to remind me of my place.

I’m the Elite Island King. I manage the procreation and preparation of mortal candidates for the Monster Games. His master—the Monster Island Queen—oversees entry into our world and supernatural participation in the mating trials.

We’re meant to be a team. And royals are supposed to work together to achieve the most fruitful Monster Games results—or Monsters Night results, in certain regions.

However, Seren has no interest in my opinion.

Nor am I all that interested in hers.

Thus, Seren and I have never collaborated well with one another. And it seems this year’s event will be no different than the last.

“Tell Seren I send my gratitude,” I return before picking up the tablet and tossing it in a nearby wastebasket. “See you both in six weeks.”

I don’t wait for Emissary Huntz to reply. I merely push away from the conference room table and leave the room.

He whistles in my wake, the sound similar to a sigh. Except he’s a siren, so it resembles a melodic hum. Only, it reminds me of nails on a chalkboard.

And it fucking chases me down the hall, all the way to the elevator awaiting my command.

I step inside and see him following me. I hold his gaze and hit the button to close the glass doors before he can enter. The translucent material allows me to see his resulting scowl, which causes me to give him a little wave in response.

“Always antagonizing the sirens,” a voice singsongs through the loudspeaker. “One of these days, they’re going to attack, my liege. Likely under some legitimate claim of disrespect.”

“That sounds like a wet dream for you, Mariana,” I reply, turning to stare out the windows overlooking Elite Island. My palace walls are the tallest in the region, rivaling the heights of all the surrounding volcanic mountains. And the conference room is at the very top.

It’s a place of power, one that makes adversaries like Seren uncomfortable. She’s a water and land creature.

I’m one with the ocean, too. But I can also take flight, granting me a special arrangement with the air that the Monster Island Queen will never comprehend or fathom.

However, I take the elevator all the way down to my personal suite now.

Deep underground.

Surrounded by more glass that showcases the illustrious water animals known to this mortal world. A dolphin swims by as I reach my destination, causing my lips to tilt upward.

I can't speak to the mammals, but I enjoy their songs far more than those of the siren I left waiting up on the top floor.

Mariana meets me as the doors open, her ruby eyebrow arching toward her matching hairline. "It's a fantasy for us all," she says, answering my comment from a moment ago, just in person rather than over the intercom. "Now let me see the list."

"It's in the trash bin up on seventeen," I tell her.

Her painted lips twist into a scowl, not unlike the one I just witnessed on Huntz's features. "Z."

"M."

She puts her hands on her hips. "Must you always make this difficult?"

"Per the overdressed opera singer upstairs, the list is just a courtesy, Mariana. Why bother reviewing it for any longer than necessary?"

"That overdressed opera singer is wearing an expensive three-piece suit similar to the one you're currently sporting," she points out. "Only he kept on the jacket."

"Hence, *overdressed*."

"And further, just because it can't be changed doesn't mean we can't play with the invite list," she goes on, ignoring my comment and heading for the elevator I just vacated. "I'll go retrieve the trash, and we'll discuss."

She's halfway into the elevator car when I say, "Ika of Aquatopia Kingdom is on that list."

Mariana freezes, then slowly turns to face me. Her palm flies out to stop the door from closing on her. "*What*?"

"Oh, it gets better." I fold my arms. "Tiru of Cephalopoda will also be venturing into the realm next month."

Her black eyes widen, an expression I would find comical on most days.

But not today.

"Holy waters," she breathes. "The royal cuntcake has lost her fucking mind."

"Indeed." I turn toward my living area, which stretches into the kitchen and the bar I very much want to visit.

The click of Mariana's heels on my marble floor confirms she's following me, so I fix her a drink first—a special sea-inspired vodka from my home world, one I know she likes.

Her long fingers, adorned with sharp purple nails, curl around the glass as I hand it to her. She says nothing while I mix something else for myself.

And by the time I look at her again, I note that her drink is untouched.

Her gaze has a faraway gleam, telling me she's already engaging her strategic instincts.

I wasn't kidding when I called war a wet dream for my best friend and second-in-command. She adores playing political chess.

I do as well. To an extent.

"Seren is trying to distract you from something," Mariana says, setting her untouched glass down. "The question is, *what*?"

I know better than to waste perfectly good liquor, so I sip on my apple-honeyed bourbon and lean against the bar, thinking.

Seren has hated me for decades. Wanted me dethroned for even longer.

And it's no secret that I possess a strong dislike for the royal line of Aquatopia. "Ika only recently inherited his title as King of Aquatopia," I murmur, pondering aloud. "I'm sure he's using that as his reason to enter the Monster Games—he needs a mate to become his queen."

"Seems like a good cover story to stage a coup," Mariana replies.

I hum in agreement. "Only, it's duly evident." I take another sip of my bourbon, then set the glass beside Mariana's and give her my complete focus. "Inviting Tiru is over the top, even for Seren. It's too extreme a distraction. So what's her real goal? To piss me off? To force me to participate in the Monster Games?"

I've never desired a mate.

Not from this realm, anyway.

"The Village Islands mortals are under my protection. It's a conflict of interest for me to claim one of them," I go on before Mariana can comment. "And I'm already required to attend as an observer. Thus it can't be a way to simply coax me over to Monster Island."

"Observing and participating are two entirely different activities," Mariana cuts in. "Observing means you're aware of every aspect of the games, too. While participating…"

She trails off, allowing me to finish the statement for her.

“Participating narrows my focus.” I pick up my drink again to take another sip, considering my options. “Participating doesn’t require me to actually claim a mate.”

“So you could pretend to be there for the inevitable hunt, as a cover of sorts.”

“Feign interest in a candidate,” I add, amused by the prospect. “Probably whichever one Ika seems to favor.”

Mariana’s lips twitch. “Just to piss him off.”

“Naturally.”

“And while Seren thinks you’re properly distracted, she’ll reveal her cards.”

“Then we’ll play an ace to trump whatever hand she feels she has,” I reply. “But to do that, we need at least an inkling of what she’s up to.”

“Which means you need me to go play the part of spy.”

I pretend to consider that and snap my fingers like an idea just came to me. “You know, I did just throw away the tablet full of names, thus making your job of preparing for the Monster Games rather difficult. I suppose that means you’ll need to pay Seren’s court a visit to beg for another list.”

“It’s almost like you tossed it on purpose,” she returns.

“Oh, I’m certain I did.” I finish my drink. “Try not to kill anyone whilst playing on Monster Island.”

“No promises.” She grabs her glass and shoots the contents into her mouth, taking it all in one swallow. Slamming it down on the marble counter, she sighs, “Right. I’ll be back.”

With that, she heads toward the elevator.

“Meanwhile, I’ll research the candidates,” I say as she reaches the glass doors. “Perhaps I can remove whatever *reason* Tiru and Ika have for visiting our realm and fix all of this before it can begin.”

She glances back at me. “Oh? We’re assassinating innocent humans now?”

“I didn’t say I would *assassinate* the candidate,” I return. “*Remove* is a vague term that could mean so many things.”

“Uh-huh.” She rolls her eyes. “Alter that candidate list, and Seren will have cause to *remove* you, Z.”

“Accidents happen every day, M,” I drawl. “Especially when you live on islands as deadly as ours.”

She returns a noncommittal hum, but I see the glitter of amusement in her dark gaze. “Well, in that case, happy ‘researching,’ my liege.” She gives me a mock bow. “May the hunt be fruitful and enjoyable.” The insinuation in her tone isn’t lost on me.

“I don’t play with mortals, M,” I remind her.

She lifts a shoulder as she steps backward into the elevator, her eyes still holding a touch of amusement. “Never say never, Z…”

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CHAPTER ONE
MIZA

MONSTER GAMES COUNTDOWN: EIGHT DAYS

I HATE LILY PADS.

They're slick. Flimsy. And constantly *moving*.

One would think that after nearly two decades of practice, I would have mastered the art of kneeling on these slippery death traps. Yet I can't stop shaking.

"*Ugh*," I growl, irritated beyond measure.

Every year, I fail at this formal task.

Well, the last *four* years, anyway.

This will be my fifth *Day of the Choosing*, and thus far, I've fallen off my pad during each ceremony. Which has earned me the wrath of our Village Viscount.

"Improper. Impudent. Impossible." Those are the three adjectives he snapped at me after last year's ritual. "You're a disgrace to our island, Ms. Kananaka."

At this rate, I'll never be chosen by the sacred Chalice. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. The Monster Games are intense and terrifying, and while I've spent my life preparing for them, I don't actually want to participate in them.

I'll just end up being fish food.

I can’t even balance on a lily pad properly. How would I ever survive the Monster Games?

I glance down at the water and shudder. This is a shallow area of the bay, making it nearly impossible to drown here. Yet I can’t help fearing what rests beneath. Even now, I swear a shadow moves under the current, inching toward me.

Swallowing, I close my eyes and try to focus on the task.

Thirty minutes on a wet pedestal. Just balance on my knees. Bow my head. Look demure. Don’t mo—

“Ah!” I scream as something bumps the pad, knocking me easily into the water. My arms flail automatically, my instinct to swim overwhelming every other part of my brain and body.

Don’t drown.

Don’t drown.

Don’t drown.

I kick my legs, then curse as I meet the sand. It scrapes across my bare skin, causing me to go to my knees in the water.

Which is only about two feet deep.

“Ridiculous,” I growl at myself, sputtering out the salty substance and hating the sensation of brine on my tongue.

Hanging my head, I glare at the water. It *always* betrays me. Sending waves to knock me off my podium. Waves that only appear to touch me, never anyone else around me.

Waves only I seem to see.

I shake that thought and move back to the practice pad, ready to try again.

Only to jump back as a fox-like creature leaps up onto the flat surface to give her waterlogged fur a shake. Her green eyes resemble glittering emeralds as she bows playfully at me.

“Oh, you!” I almost laugh. “I *did* see a shadow. *Yours*.”

She cocks her head like she can understand me, then gracefully dives into the water to swim a quick lap around the pad.

“I should have known you would be here,” I say when she surfaces again. My little water friend only comes out at night, which is often when I sneak out of the village to come down here to practice my kneeling.

No one knows except her.

The first time we met, she startled me so much that I ran home, terrified that I'd fabricated her into existence. Because she's not a fish. Or… or any kind of seal. But some sort of… fox-like amphibian.

That's the best I can come up with, considering none of my marine biology texts show pictures that are anything like her.

I'm not even sure she's a female. However, I named her KiKi, and she seems to respond to it.

She does a flip out of the water that reminds me of a dolphin, only she springs up high enough to land on the pad with all four of her paws. Then she shakes out her blue-and-purple coat again before flopping over to lounge on the pedestal like an elegant cat.

I blow out a breath and shake my head. "You just make it look so easy, don't you?"

"Well, I imagine she should, given her home habitat," a deep voice says, causing me to freeze in the water.

Oh, monsters…

It's against the rules to sneak out after curfew. But I've done it for so many years without getting caught that I… I didn't even think twice about speaking to KiKi.

And it's not like I'm up to something nefarious.

I'm just practicing, as I always do.

KiKi straightens, her emerald gaze on the beach behind me. Or rather, on the man who just spoke. I'm certain of it. Because her fur—which is somehow already dry—seems to be filled with static as it stands on end.

"Calm down, little guardian," the deep voice murmurs. "I'm not here to cause harm."

Little guardian? I repeat to myself, frowning at the nickname.

KiKi chatters back at him in that strange chirping way of hers.

"Forgive me," the man replies. "*Fierce* guardian."

KiKi preens and plops her butt down, seemingly pleased.

I merely blink at her. Again I wonder how much she understands because she appears to have accepted his commentary.

"You can turn around now, human. Clearly, I see you." There's a note of humor in his tone, one I don't resonate with.

Because he called me *human*.

Which can only mean one thing—he's *not* human.

I swallow. Monsters circle our land all the time, but they never come to shore here. Not even during the games. Everything happens on Monster Island, not on the Village Islands.

My heart skips a beat as I force myself to face the supernatural being. There's no point in hiding. As he said, *he's already seen me*.

He's standing near a palm tree, the shadows making him hard to see even with the bright moon above. However, there's enough light that I can make out his silhouette—humanoid in shape. He's muscular, but lean. Short hair of an undecipherable color. Dark, though, I think.

However, his eyes are hollows of the unknown. I can only tell that his attention is on me.

Which, yeah, *obviously* he's looking in my direction.

"Hi," I say, giving a pathetic little wave with a barely lifted hand. "I know I shouldn't be out here. I'm just, er, practicing for tomorrow."

He cants his head. "Haven't you spent your entire life preparing for the Day of the Choosing?"

My lips pinch to the side. I have no idea how much this being knows, but I assume he's aware of everything. He's a superior being, after all.

A monster.

And I'm merely a human.

Trained all my life to potentially be selected for the infamous games.

So, no point in lying, right?

I've already been caught. Once he turns me into the Viscount or the Village Protectors, I'll be punished in some way. Perhaps even be disqualified from this year's ceremony.

That would probably be more of a reward than a punishment, but they won't know that.

"I can't balance on the pads," I blurt out, deciding I don't care what this monster knows about me. It's not like I'll be eligible to join the games anytime soon. "The lily pads, I mean. I always end up slipping before the ceremony ends and I…" I trail off, trying to find the right way to explain this. "Well, I'm tired of failing."

He folds his arms and leans against the tree that's shadowing most of his features from view. "That was refreshingly honest."

"You expected me to lie to a superior?" I counter.

"So, you know who I am?" he asks.

I frown. “Who? No. What? Well, also no. But you’re obviously not human.”

“I don’t look human to you?” I hear a note of humor in his tone again. Although, I’m not sure what he finds amusing about this situation.

Which is why I provide him with another honest answer. “You referred to me as *human*, thus suggesting you are, well, *not* human.”

“Hmm,” he hums. “I suppose that’s true.”

He doesn’t say anything else.

As I’m not quite sure what to do, I just… remain quiet.

The water is the only sound around us, the rhythmic rolling of waves hitting the outer reef a soothing rumble I usually enjoy when hiding in this cove. Yet, right now, it does little to quell my mounting nerves.

I fidget with the lace against my hip, the thin material no doubt translucent to the monster’s gaze. Not that he probably cares. All candidates wear similar outfits on the Day of the Choosing—gauzy swim trunks for the men and babydolls for the women.

It’s the same uniform that we train in, too.

I used to despise it, not because of the translucent aspect, but because the fabric isn’t meant for water. It’s uncomfortable, scratchy, and often falls apart. I would much prefer the wetsuits the Village Protectors and Viscount get to wear.

But that’s never going to happen.

Just like getting picked for the Monster Games, I think. *Or ever staying still on that damn lily pad*.

I shoot a glare at the offending item, momentarily ignoring the man by the tree.

KiKi makes a little chirp from where she’s beautifully perched on top of the slippery surface, her paws having no problem maintaining her balance.

“I would say that if I could mimic that pose, I might be able to stay on top of the pad, too,” I say to KiKi. “But we both know that’s not true.”

Because the moment I feel the swirl of the ocean, I fall. It doesn’t matter if I’m seated, crawling on all fours, or kneeling; I end up in the water. Almost like an invisible wave knocks me over.

KiKi chirps in response, no doubt agreeing with my misery. Or perhaps she’s saying something like “You’re hopelessly clumsy.”

I sigh. “To be fair, I walk on land just fine.” It comes out as a muttered response, one that may or may not be an appropriate reply to her chattering.

Fortunately, she seems to understand my tone because she dives off the pad and swims toward me to do a playful little circle.

One that ends when the supernatural man clears his throat, reminding me of his presence. “How long have you known this creature?” he asks, his deep voice punctuating the words in a way that almost resembles a demand more than a question.

“Umm…” I watch as KiKi gracefully leaps back up onto the pad and gives her coat another one of those magical shakes that automatically dispels every droplet of water. “A couple of years?”

I think back to when we first met. It was about a week before my first Day of the Choosing.

Which would make it… “Five years, actually. Give or take a few days.”

“So you know what she is?” he says.

I blink at that. “What she is?” I parrot back at him. “Like a water fox?”

He huffs a laugh, one that has KiKi making a strange sound in response. Almost like a chortle, but not quite. Because she’s bristling as though angry at him. Or warning him. I’m not sure.

The man falls quiet again, his gaze seeming to be trained on KiKi instead of me.

“Please don’t hurt her,” I whisper, sensing the shifting tension in the water. KiKi hasn’t moved, exactly, but something about her stillness has me… concerned. “She’s innocent.”

“Hardly,” the man mutters, returning his attention to me. “She’s a menace.”

KiKi hisses at that.

“You are.”

She makes another irritated sound.

“I’ll give you a chance to prove it in a moment,” he tells her, making me gape between them.

“You can understand her?”

“In a sense, yes,” he says, suddenly sounding tired as he palms the back of his neck and shakes his head. “This is not what I expected, Ms. Kananaka. *You* are not what I expected.” He steps away from the tree, leaving the shadows and allowing me to see his features beneath the moonlight.

I gasp, my eyes widening.

Not just because he knows my name.

But because he's… he's… "King Zael," I breathe, bowing my head immediately. "Forgive me."

"For what?" he asks. "Speaking plainly? Ignoring curfew? Intriguing me? Playing with a cephlalosune?"

"A cepalasoon?" I attempt to repeat, frowning and glancing up at him. "You mean KiKi?"

"You've named it?"

KiKi chirps, as if to answer his question.

He snorts. "Cute."

She preens.

And he simply shakes his head, then takes another step forward before sliding his hands into the pockets of his perfectly pressed slacks.

Because he's wearing a suit.

All black.

Just like he always does during his formal addresses to our village.

Though, I've never seen him in person. He usually just hovers on a translucent screen in the sky as he stoically thanks us all for participating in the Day of the Choosing each year. It's a brief display, one that lasts for maybe ten seconds before each ritual.

Yet it's one of the more enjoyable aspects of the ceremony.

Because I get to see his ice-blue eyes. There's something so unworldly about his gaze, something so *calming*. I… I almost want to swim forward now so I can see if they're just as vivid in person.

What is he even doing here? I wonder.

I come out here almost every night and never see him or anyone else.

So why is he suddenly on this beach now?

I want to ask. Except it's not my right to do so.

Shells, I shouldn't even be *looking* at him. However, I can't bow again. I can barely move. I'm captivated by his regal presence. He's even more beautiful beneath the rays of the night, his hair thick and unruly—reminding me of an errant wave.

I just wish I could see those sparkling eyes. The glimmering silver-blue depths.

My hands tingle with the urge to wade closer to him, to study him more intently.

Which is asinine.

Actually, this entire reaction is crazy.

I was just caught breaking curfew by the Elite Island King. And rather than echoing my apology, I'm thinking about swimming toward him so I can stare into his eyes.

A groan nearly escapes me as I consider going to my knees in the water and just… drowning myself.

"Sorry," I mutter, aware that the single word is likely nowhere near good enough. Only, I can't seem to force myself to say anything else.

Great work, Miza. Really great.

"As far as apologies go, I've certainly heard better," King Zael replies, that note of amusement evident in his tone again.

It's a note I would never have associated with him, as I've only ever heard his bored tones before.

Yet he sounds nothing like the man from the sky right now.

Except for maybe his accent.

It's cultured. Though, not nearly as prominent as his annual address.

Granted, he says, like, five words every year. So maybe… maybe it's because I actually heard him speak tonight?

And why am I even going on about this nonsense right now? I should be thinking about how to explain myself. How to earn his forgiveness. How to—

"Ms. Kananaka," he murmurs.

I force myself to swallow and lock my shoulders. "I know I've broken curfew. I'll accept whatever punishment you feel is appropriate."

I swear his lips twitch.

"I'm not going to punish you, darling. Not tonight, anyway."

I frown. *What does he mean by that?*

"And I'm not going to inform your Viscount or the Village Protectors about our chance meeting, so don't fear them either. All I'm going to do is strongly encourage you to return to your hut." He leans forward a little, like he's about to impart a secret.

I find myself moving toward him.

Or maybe that sensation is all in my mind.

Everything is beginning to feel dreamlike. Unreal. *Fantastical.*

"It's far too late for you to be swimming out here alone," he whispers, his voice suddenly near my ear. "Especially when we're this close to the games."

I swear his lips brush my temple.

Which isn’t possible.

I was just in the water.

Yet there’s sand covering my toes now.

A towel swathing my upper body.

And a very warm presence at my front.

“Your hair color almost looks real,” he says, his voice still soft as he speaks against my ear.

“Because it is,” I mumble, feeling oddly tired. *What’s happening to me?*

“But it’s pink.”

“I know.” It’s a trait that many have commented on because it saves me from having to attend the monthly dyeing sessions.

“Coral-colored hair helps attract mates,” a Village Professor explained when I was young. “So all of you will be given a color that matches your complexion, and you will do what you can to maintain that color for the rest of your existence.”

That same professor—*Master Gibbons*—later informed me that I was exempt.

“Your natural color is perfection,” he said, fondling my hair as though he had a right to touch me.

I suppose he did as my teacher.

There were many subjects he taught us throughout the years.

Including ones I prefer not to think about.

“Fascinating,” King Zael breathes, his awe grounding me in the present once more. He’s definitely holding me, though I’m not sure how I ended up in his arms.

No. He’s not just holding me… he’s carrying me.

I try to look around, confused and dazed by what’s happened.

“Shh,” he hushes. “I’m not going to hurt you, Miza.”

Gods, the way he says my name… It sends a shiver down my spine, one that has my thighs clenching in response. *What is this? Why do I feel so… strange?*

“Just a little bit of hypnosis,” he replies, making me wonder if I voiced that question aloud or if he can read my mind. “The sun will be up in a matter of hours, leaving me with very little time left before tomorrow’s ceremony. So I needed to speed things along.”

I don’t understand, I think, dizzy. *Speed what up? And where are you taking me?* “Why?” I manage to force out, my lips feeling oddly sluggish,

like I’m already asleep.

Yet I’m too aware to truly be lost to my dreams.

I can hear the ocean. Feel his heat. *Smell his fiery scent.* He reminds me of… of a bonfire. That subtle simmering of flames, mingling with the spring air. It’s so vivid. So tangible. *So hypnotic*.

Hypnosis, I add with a thought. *A little bit of hypnosis*.

Because he’s a monster.

A king.

The Elite Island King.

Oh, shells, what have I done?

“Nothing,” he says, his voice a rumble against my ear now. *Because my head is pressed to his chest.* “You’re not in trouble, darling. Not yet, anyway.”

What does that even mean?

“You’ll see soon enough,” he replies, once again making me question whether I’ve spoken aloud or not.

This whole situation also has me questioning my sanity.

Especially as the familiar scents of home tickle my nose. *Warm bread. Cinnamon. A touch of sugary sweetness.*

My mom always bakes bread for the Day of the Choosing. It’s her special treat, one she spends all afternoon and evening making from scratch, just to give me something memorable the morning of the ceremony.

What’s left unspoken is the truth of the occasion, the fact that she wants to give me something to remember her by in case it’s our final meal together.

The candidates who are chosen for the Monster Games never return.

My fate would be no different.

Fortunately, my chances are slim, given that I can’t even balance on a lily pad.

Something soft touches my cheek—*my pillow*, I recognize—followed by fingers combing through my hair. “Sleep, darling,” King Zael murmurs. “We’ll meet again soon.”

His words make me frown. *But you said…*

“I don’t plan to punish you tonight,” he reminds me, clearly understanding the trajectory of my thought. “I said nothing about tomorrow.” His lips ghost along my temple, then down to where my pulse has begun to race. “*Sleep*.”

It’s a command, one that lulls me into the darkness.
Where I dream of stormy seas.
A pissed-off Viscount.
And a vengeful Elite Island King…

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CHAPTER TWO

ZAEL

I STUDY MIZA'S PROFILE, noting the perfect symmetry of her features. They're almost too perfect. Too *inhuman*. Just like her coral-like hair.

I shouldn't touch her.

But I can't seem to stop myself from stroking my fingers through her damp strands once more.

Her hair resembles silk, which is strange given that she was just in the open water. Her strands should be tangled. Harsh to the touch. *Laden with sand and salt.* Yet it's like the ocean has left her soft and untouched.

Just like her little guardian, *Kiki*.

What the fuck is a cephlalosune doing in my islands? And not just any cephlalosune, but a *royal* one.

Which means Tiru sent her.

Hence my ever-evolving agenda for the evening.

I came here to evaluate the final group of candidates for this year's Monster Games, only to find one of them missing from her bed.

Ms. Miza Kananaka.

Well, she's tucked in now. Because I fucking carried her back here.

After *talking* to her.

Which wasn't my intention at all. I should have reprimanded her. Yet I found her too interesting to scold. She was honest. Fearless. *Bold*.

And fucking tempting in that see-through lingerie.

I’ve seen countless mortals wear the exact same attire over the years, and none of them have grabbed my attention. Until her.

This beautiful, pink-haired creature who can’t balance on a lily pad.

Such a ridiculous ritual. It was established long before I became the Elite Island King, and I haven’t cared enough to change it.

Maybe Miza will change my mind.

Obviously, not for tomorrow, though. However, I fully intend to watch her throughout the ceremony now.

Alas, first, I need to deal with the cephlalosune and the Kraken King who owns her.

I slowly pull my fingers from Miza’s hair and draw my knuckles down her cheek.

It’s wrong.

I shouldn’t have compelled her to come to me on the beach. I shouldn’t have carried her here. And I certainly shouldn’t have placed her in a dream state.

Yet I did all those things.

Which is why I don’t stop myself from leaning down to brush another kiss against her temple.

If I’m going to play with destiny, I might as well dive in headfirst.

“I don’t know what you are, darling, but I look forward to using you as bait,” I whisper. “Now be a good girl and dream of your king.”

Her full lips part, almost as though she’s gasping in her sleep.

Or maybe she’s preparing herself for my claim.

I wish I could stay to learn more, to indulge myself in the fantasies of her mind, but I wasn’t lying when I said the sun would rise soon.

With a sigh, I leave her room and her family hut, then focus my attention on the waiting cephlalosune. “All right, *fierce* guardian. Let’s have a chat…”



THE WATER DRIPS from my scales as I emerge in my underground cave entrance. A midnight swim wasn’t on my agenda, nor was it something I

actually had time for. But since nothing has gone according to plan this evening, I opted to return via the water instead of the air.

That I chose to strip and shift right next to the lily pad I'd found Miza balancing on mere hours ago isn't lost on me.

The pink-haired beauty refuses to leave my mind. Her curves beneath the translucent lace. Her alluring blue eyes. The defiance that seemed to radiate off her as she boldly looked at me even after realizing my identity.

Yes, there's definitely something enticing about Miza Kananaka.

The little guardian—*KiKi*—didn't provide any useful information. However, her presence around Miza was informative enough.

So, instead, I sent her off with a message for the Kraken King.

One I know will infuriate him.

Just thinking about it causes my lips to curl as I call upon my human form.

"I see I arrived just in time," Mariana says, managing to sound both amused and irritated at the same time.

She tosses a towel at me not a second after my shift completes. I catch the fabric before it can bounce off my chest, then use it to dry myself off before wrapping it around my waist.

"What'd you do with your suit?"

"Burned it," I reply, shrugging.

She sighs loudly. "It's a good thing you're a king with an unlimited budget."

"You say that like acquiring suits is a difficult task." It might be. I wouldn't know, as I have someone who does it for me. "And since when do you care about my wardrobe?"

"I don't, but I've been looking for you for hours."

"Should have gone for a swim," I say, running my fingers through my damp hair.

Of course, doing so reminds me of Miza and how her strands maintained that silky texture.

Mine do not.

In fact, I can feel the salt embedding on every strand.

Which makes me want to take a shower.

Miza didn't even need one when I set her in that bed, something that's very *inhuman*.

"Are you even listening to me?" Mariana demands.

I blink, realizing that no, I haven't heard a word she's said. "I have water in my ears." I make a show of trying to dislodge the invisible liquid, causing my best friend to frown.

"What the fuck has gotten into you?"

I smile. "I'm sleep deprived." A lie. I'm a dragon king. I don't need sleep. "What's more pressing here is why you've been hunting me. Start talking, M. I want to grab a shower before sunrise."

She growls, the sound causing my inner beast to stir with interest.

Not of the sexual kind, but of the challenging kind.

He wants to roar back.

However, I calm him by allowing his fire to dance along my torso and down my arms. It's a simple display of power, one that has Mariana taking an involuntary step back.

I don't apologize for the action, just smooth the flames along my skin and act like I'm using the heat to burn off the rest of the water from my body.

"Huntz came by about four hours ago to see you. When I couldn't locate you, I took the meeting, and he informed me that Her Majesty the Queen has decided to let Princess Celina oversee this year's Monster Games."

The fiery embers vanish into the air as everything stills around me. "She *what*?"

Rather than repeat herself, Mariana just stares at me.

"You just spent the last few weeks stalking around her island," I say slowly. "Were there any whispers of her intent to pass the crown on to her daughter?"

She bristles and shakes her head. "No. Not even a hint." Her tone tells me she's pissed about that. Mariana is a brilliant spy. For her to not even catch an inkling of this potential change… means Seren played this a lot more intelligently than I could ever have anticipated.

She's not known for her strategy.

But I'm starting to wonder if the old queen is growing wiser with age.

Regardless, this last-minute change complicates everything. "Is Celina even ready for this? She's, what, a century old? Is this some sort of royal test? Or is Seren merely trying to provoke a reaction from me?"

"Celina is almost two hundred years old," Mariana corrects me, an irritated note in her tone, likely because she's as pissed off as I am. "And

abso-fucking-lutely, yes, she's trying to get under your scales. Which is clearly working."

I grunt at that. She's not wrong, but I hate that she's right. I hate that Seren has been able to surprise me twice in the last six weeks, too. First with her invitation list and now with this. *Fuck*.

"I told Huntz you wouldn't approve," Mariana adds.

"No shit," I mutter.

"He said your opinion is moot. He was merely—"

"Informing me as a courtesy," I interject, using his words from six weeks ago. "It's not a coincidence that they waited to inform me of this 'change' until hours before the Day of the Choosing ceremonies were set to begin."

"I know."

Of course she knows. It's obvious. Just like Seren's intentions by inviting my two rivals into the realm are obvious.

She wants a war.

And she's trying to coax me into reacting.

Is Miza part of this? I wonder, thinking about her unique qualities.

The candidate files didn't reveal anything unique or interesting, making my review rather burdensome. Miza's village was the least intriguing of all as well, which is why her island was the last one I visited.

Imagine my shock when I found her consorting with a fucking cephlalosune. Not to mention her *natural* pink hair.

She may not be part of any of this nonsense with Seren, but she's my best lead at the moment. Because she's officially the most unique prospect in the games. At least to me.

Right, then. I'll begin by digging into her background, then determine how to properly use her as bait in this fight.

I start toward the hall that leads to my quarters, Mariana right behind me. "Are you going to call her?" she asks.

I pause. "Call who?" I haven't mentioned Miza aloud. But maybe Mariana knows what I learned whilst visiting the villages?

"Seren," my best friend says slowly, her tone a mixture of confusion and concern.

I nearly sigh out loud. My head is a mess of strategic plays, each one seeming to overlay the next. Yet Miza is a piece of the puzzle I don't understand.

She’s clearly captured Tiru’s attention, though. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have sent KiKi to my islands to guard the human.

The little creature may not have actually admitted to being his pet, but her regal coat colors of purple and blue marked her as royal.

Therefore, I’m positive she’s from his court.

I just don’t know why he tasked her with guarding a mortal.

The humans are under my protection. They don’t need a guardian. And while Miza’s candidacy was announced a few weeks ago, she said she’s known KiKi for years.

How is that even possible?

“Zael?” Mariana prompts, her concern deepening.

“No,” I say before she can repeat her question about the royal bitch again. “I’m not calling Seren. I’m going to look through the candidate files again.”

Mariana stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. “What? Why?”

“Because I’m missing something,” I tell her. “And I’m going to figure out what that something is.”

“Shouldn’t we focus on Celina?”

“No. She’s a distraction, not the endgame. There’s someone or something hiding in plain sight, and I’m going to figure out what it is.” I enter my space and head right for my desk. “Seren wants to play. I refuse.” I look at Mariana. “I’m going to kill this war before it can even begin.”

Her expression goes from wary to unreadable. “All right, then tell me what you need, Z.”

“When I figure that out, I’ll let you know.” Then I fire up my screens and get to work.

Starting with Miza Kananaka.

What are you really, darling? I wonder, starting at the very beginning of her file—from the date of her creation and birth. *What are your files trying to hide?*

Because if she’s not really human, then someone has engaged in illegal genetic altering on my islands.

That’s allowed in other regions. But not mine. *Never* mine.

I’m the Elite Island King.

I protect the humans under my rule.

If someone has defied my expectations, I’ll make them pay.

And if that someone happens to be the Monster Island Queen, I'll remove her. *For good*.

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CHAPTER THREE

TIRU

THE PROPOSAL before me reeks of deceit.

King Tiru, I'm writing to formally request your company for tomorrow's Day of the Choosing ceremonies. We can watch them together in the throne room. Yours, Celina.

My nose twitches in protest because the scent is all wrong. It's like she sprayed the words with a perfume meant to attract my attention. Except all I want to do is ball the parchment in my fist and toss it into the flames of my nearby fireplace.

"*Fuck*." I fling it away instead, shove away from my desk, and go wash my hands at my office bar. Whatever fragrant oil she used sticks to my skin, permeating the air with false notes of lilac and citrus. "*Lies*." That's what I really smell. Hence the stench of *deceit*.

The Cephalopoda Realm has always taken sirens as mates. Which makes it not surprising at all that my father, the former Kraken King, made a deal to mate me—his eldest son—to a siren of royal blood.

Unfortunately, Queen Seren only has one daughter.

A daughter whom I've met several times over the last century.

A daughter whom I feel absolutely no connection with.

A daughter who has made her eagerness very clear.

By sending me letters laden with contrived scents.

Having shared air with Princess Celina, I'm fully aware of her natural fragrance. And it's neither flowery nor citrusy.

It’s salty.

Like ocean brine.

And makes inhaling in her presence difficult.

She’s simply not my desired mate, something my inner beast growls about every time she tries to touch me.

Alas, our parents made other plans, signing our destinies away before either of us was even aware enough to consent. No, not even that.

They’d penned that contract in blood before Celina was even *born*.

Fucking alliances.

A growl rumbles in my chest, one that echoes through my personal quarters as I scrub my skin raw.

“Not a fan of lilacs?” a deep voice drawls from the shadows, causing my eyes to narrow. I would turn toward the intruder, but I know the owner of it will be invisible.

Damn stealth dragon.

“How long have you been lurking in my den?” I ask, irritated by this unexpected and unwelcome visit.

In true stealth dragon fashion, the menace doesn’t appear or answer my question. He merely *chuckles*. And that sound reverberates around me in a taunting wave, one that dares my inner kraken to come out to spar. To fight. *To destroy.*

“You know what? Never mind. I don’t care. Just fuck off, Ika.” It’s bad enough I have to see him for the next week or so during the games. No point in prolonging our time together.

The Stealth Dragon King tsks and appears not five feet from my bar, his dark eyes glinting like obsidian stones beneath moonlight. “That bouquet of bullshit certainly has your tentacles in a twist. I take it you don’t want to join Princess Celina for tomorrow’s ceremonies?”

My jaw ticks as I turn off the water and dry my hands. “Reading my missives now, are you?”

“In fairness, you were so utterly captivated by that letter that I grew curious.” He lifts a shoulder in a partial shrug. “I mean, you know how I feel about curious things, Big T. I *investigate*.” He reaches for my favorite bottle of sea rum and pops the cap.

I grab it before he can take a swig directly from the top and glare at him. “What do you want, Stealth King?” My nicknames for him are not nearly as creative as his are for me. But I don’t fucking care.

He smiles. “So many things, Your Tentacleness. So many things.” The words resemble a song from his lips, one that has me rolling my eyes in response.

Ika loves riddles and puzzles and *nonsense*.

If I could kill him, I would.

Unfortunately, that would mean breaking over a dozen ocean treaties.

Plus pissing off an entire kingdom of stealth creatures that enjoy deploying deadly ink poisons.

No, fucking thank you.

Snagging a glass, I pour myself a healthy amount from the bottle. I take two swallows before setting it aside and pouring a second cup for Ika. It’s that or risk him taking the bottle again and vanishing.

I screw the cap back on and put it in a space on the bar that’s just out of his reach.

“Cheers.” He knocks the contents back in one gulp and sets the glass down with a finality that rings through the room. “Remind me to introduce you to fire tonic this week. It’s stronger, something I suspect we’re both going to need.”

“So you’re here about the games?” I guess, picking up my drink to take another sip. “I’m surprised you want to take a mate.”

“Hmm,” he hums. “Interesting you say that, given you’re betrothed, and yet you’re also on the list of potential suitors. Why is that?”

I give him a look. “You already know the answer to that.” It’s a fucking taunt issued by the Siren Queen.

I’ve had two hundred years to find my fated mate. Two hundred years to locate an ideal soul match.

Alas, the concept of true mates doesn’t seem to exist for Cephalopoda kind anymore. The last fated joining was well over three thousand years ago.

Still, my father added a clause that gave me two centuries to try to find my own before signing my life away to the Siren Kingdom.

That clause expires next week.

On the kickoff of the Monster Games.

Which is no doubt why Queen Seren wants me to attend.

This year’s annual mate hunt is my last chance to find my fated connection. Yet we all know I won’t match with a *mortal*.

Hence, it’s a taunt from the queen bitch herself.

“I’ve always enjoyed Seren’s games,” Ika muses. “She’s such an inspiration.”

I finish my drink and set it down with a finality that rivals Ika’s movements from moments ago. “Fuck off, Ika.”

“You already said that.”

“Yet you’re still here,” I growl.

He bats his long, dark lashes at me in false innocence. “Maybe I’ve missed you.”

“What do you really want, Ika?” I demand, exhausted by his antics. “I know you don’t care about my pending mateship.”

“On the contrary, I care a great deal.” He places his hand over his heart like he’s making a pledge. “It’s greatly amusing to me, Your Tentacleship.”

I face him. “So it’s a sparring match you desire? Because you’re practically inviting me to try to kill you right now.”

He waggles his brows. “I love it when we flirt.”

My jaw threatens to break from clenching it so hard. Ika Taniyn is a menace. How he manages to rule the Aquatopia Kingdom is fucking beyond me. He probably just plays tricks on everyone who enters the throne room, chasing them all off with his irritating personality.

Dismissing him mentally, I return to my desk and use another piece of paper to pick up the parchment, then walk both over to the fireplace and watch the deceitful proposal burn.

“Does that mean you won’t be at the ceremonies tomorrow?” Ika asks. “Princess Celina will be so disappointed.”

“She can consider it a taste of our future together,” I mutter.

“You could just say no,” the Stealth King suggests. “It’s not like you signed that agreement.”

“Is that how you run your kingdom?” I counter. “By reneging on deals drafted by your predecessors?”

“Considering I killed my predecessor…” He trails off, allowing me to infer whatever I want from that. “I often forget that some kings actually care what their daddies think about their choices and governing decisions.”

I’ve already rolled my eyes enough for one evening, so I don’t bother reacting to his barb.

“If you have nothing important to say, then I’m going for a swim,” I tell him, removing my shirt and kicking off my shoes.

Venturing into the mortal realm tomorrow means having to regulate my shifts and potentially run into rivals beneath the waves.

Rivals like King Zael.

And Ika, actually.

Though, the Stealth Dragon King has been oddly friendly with me over these last few years, frequently dropping by without an invitation in an attempt to annoy the shit out of me.

Just like tonight.

I don't know why he seems hell-bent on crafting an alliance between us. But he's made it clear that he feels our futures are intertwined in some unforeseen-to-me way.

Every time I tell him to leave, he either ignores me—as he has tonight—or says something cryptic about how it's better for me to get used to him now rather than later.

Whatever the fuck that means.

I've tried asking.

He never elaborates, just shifts topics to something else.

I'm rather certain the bloodthirsty dragon is insane.

Which would explain his constantly tempting fate by visiting me without invitation. This is my domain. It wouldn't be hard to show him what that means by drowning him in my power.

But he hasn't truly provoked me to violence. Nor has he ever attempted to challenge me.

He's actually done the opposite, occasionally providing insight or helpful information. He clearly has an agenda. I simply haven't learned what it is yet.

"Nah, I just came by to borrow something," he drawls, causing my brow to furrow.

"Borrow something?" I echo, wary once more.

He smiles. "Don't worry your pretty teal head about it."

"Ika—"

"Oh, and I'm here for a conversation about Zael," he adds.

I blink. "You just said—"

"He's not going to be pleased that we're attending this year's games," he says, talking over me. "And he'll be even more displeased when he realizes we've formed an alliance. So—"

"We have *not* formed an alliance," I interject. "I still despise you."

He places a hand over his heart and feigns a groan. “You wound me.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Get to the point, Ika.”

“I was trying to, but you decided to insult our budding friendship.”

“We have no friendship.”

“Yet I’m standing here in your private den, sharing your favorite drink with you, and shooting the shit. What else would you call this, hmm?”

“A nuisance,” I deadpan. “An irritation? A waste of my fucking time?”

“If you truly hated me as much as you desire to hate me, we would be fighting now, not flirting.”

“We are not flirting.”

He shrugs. “You’re in denial. That’s fine. But we’re destined, you and I, and Zael will soon understand what that means, too. Which brings me back to my point before you so rudely interrupted me with unnecessary barbs—Zael thinks he’s our enemy. He’s not.”

His expression takes on a dreamy quality, confirming what I already know about him—he’s a fucking lunatic.

And I no longer have patience for this conversation, or whatever the fuck it’s supposed to be.

“The next few weeks should be quite enjoyable, in so many ways,” he goes on. “I can’t—”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Stealth King,” I interject. “But I’m certain the next few weeks won’t be enjoyable at all. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a date with the ocean.” I unfasten my pants, no longer interested in his presence. If he wants to *borrow* something from my office, so be it.

Ika heaves a long, drawn-out sigh. “Fine, fine. You can thank me later. I’ll think about what I want as payment and get back to you.”

“Payment for what?” I ask, exasperated by his inane chatter.

“Are there tentacles in your ears?” He cocks his head. “Wait, I already know the answer to that. How unfortunate that I have to translate for you going forward.” He sighs again. “Anyway, enjoy your swim.” He disappears, leaving me growling in frustration.

“Impossible Stealth—”

“You won’t miss this, right?” he asks, reappearing at my desk, his hand reaching for the one item no one would ever dare to touch.

A companion floral.

My eyes widen as he plucks the solitary flower from the potted plant—a flower that only recently bloomed.

It's a symbol of protection. Of *hope*.

A unique plant that takes hundreds of years to mature.

A *sacred* plant with a flower that only blooms for a kraken's true mate.

A flower that suggested I might actually stand a chance when it came to breaking this deal with the Siren Queen.

And now…

He just…

"You fucking—"

"Thank you!" he singsongs, vanishing again.

"*Ika*!" I roar.

"Sorry, sorry, forgot something," he says from every corner of the room.

A flurry of purple and blue catches my eye—the colors royal in nature—then disappears.

"See you tomorrow," he whispers right into my ear, causing me to swing toward him, my fist attempting to slug the menace in the face. But all I feel is air.

And then nothing.

My growl is far more fierce than before. Far more *furious*.

That plant…

"*Fuck*."

The asshole knows what he just did and finds it *amusing*.

"*Fuck*!"

I should chase him. Shred him. *Destroy* him.

However, unlike the stealth dragon, I can't fucking teleport at will. And I have no idea where he's run off to. With my luck, he's in another realm yet has a trap set for me in his home kingdom.

I simply stand there for the longest moment, staring at the ruined plant.

My destroyed flower.

The last symbol of hope.

Another growl emanates from me, one I'm certain can be felt throughout my entire fucking realm.

It's a growl of pain. Of loss. Of… *destruction*.

It's ridiculous. I already knew my time was up, that my mate would never actually receive that flower because she doesn't exist in this world.

But Ika’s lack of ceremony just awoke something inside me. Something dangerous.

Something *lethal.*

My kraken.

I need to hunt. To kill. To *maim*.

I rip off my pants and walk over to the water pool near my office bar. Ika might still be lingering. He might be gone. It’s impossible to say with that damn menace.

With a roar of fury, I dive into the water and engage my inner beast.

If Ika is psychotic enough to stick around for a swim, I’ll fucking drown him beneath my power.

Because in this realm, I’m the king.

And he’ll learn what that means if he dares to try to follow me…

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CHAPTER FOUR

IKA

"I FEAR I've angered your king, darling KiKi," I murmur, drawing my fingers along the furious little creature's soft mane.

KiKi isn't her real name but an acquired one that I've adopted, as it suits the aquatic animal.

And it makes me think of my intended. My future. *My mark*.

"It's all right, though," I go on, still talking to KiKi about Tiru. "He'll understand soon enough."

I finally release the petite beast from my paralyzing toxin, allowing her to sprint across Tiru's den to his desk and then toward the water hole he just dove into.

"Ah ah ah," I tsk, teleporting to block her before she can escape into the water. "You and I are going to have that chat first. I need to know what message King Zael gave you for His Supreme Tentacleness."

She growls.

I smile. "You really are the perfect guardian. Between you and Jinx, our prize has been well protected."

KiKi huffs at that.

"But we both know the true danger has only just begun. After all, I've been tasked with killing the poor girl. And I haven't quite decided her fate yet." It's a taunt, one that has KiKi turning toward me with a ferocious sound that rivals her master's roar from moments ago.

Well, I suppose he's not really her *master*. She's her own beast, which is why she's been sneaking off to the Human Realm and playing with mortals.

Or rather, a specific mortal.

"What exactly did you tell the Elite Island King?" I demand, no longer playing with the pretty little *sune*. I much prefer my made-up version of her formal animal name to *cephlalosune*. Far too many syllables than necessary. "Speak quickly, KiKi. I have another date after this."

I twirl the flower's stem between my fingers, my focus locked on the emerald-like gaze of the tiny snarling beast. She's clearly offended that I think she would tell Zael anything.

Which pleases me.

Because that means she didn't divulge any of our secrets.

"You are a perfect little ally," I coo at her.

I swear she rolls her eyes in response, just like Tiru often does.

"Now tell me the whole message from Zael," I murmur. I came to see our prize and was surprised to find the Elite Island King scolding KiKi near the water's edge. "All I caught was his final command telling you to make sure the Cephalopoda King understood every word."

KiKi mutters something unintelligible, her little chirp sounding more like a grumble than anything else.

Then she proceeds to dance around and chatter at me in her bizarre little language, one I slightly understand, thanks to our years of getting to know one another. Jinx usually helps with the translation, but I left her in the Human Realm.

"Hmm, I see," I hum, bored by Zael's threat.

He basically instructed her to inform Tiru that he'll be escorted to the nearest portal out if Zael discovers any malicious or unsavory activity regarding the candidates.

"They're under my protection, blah, blah, blah," I parrot back to KiKi in my best impersonation of Zael's pompous tones while flapping my free hand with the words. "Yawn." One would think the Elite Island King could at least get a little creative with his threats.

Alas, he's proven just as obstinate and tedious as always.

"Right, well, that was a waste of time," I mutter. "At least I was able to play a little with His Tentacleness first." I twirl the flower again. "And now I have a proper gift, too." I lean down until I'm eye level with KiKi. "Don't

bother giving that message to Tiru. It wasn't for him; it was for me." Zael just doesn't realize that.

The sune grumbles.

Which has me smiling again. "Don't worry, love. We'll let His Tentacleness in on our secrets soon." I sober a little, giving her a serious look. "We both know there are reasons for keeping him in the dark. But it won't be for much longer."

KiKi's eyes reveal her intelligence and understanding. She's an exquisite creature, one I admire and respect.

That's the only reason I add, "I'm sorry for wrapping you up in my toxins. I wanted to talk to you first."

Her expression tells me I'm not forgiven.

"I'll make it up to you, darling," I purr at her. "I promise." Blowing the beautiful sune a kiss, I vanish again, this time teleporting myself to the Human Realm.

I'm not allowed to enter yet. Not for another twelve hours—for the Day of the Choosing ceremonies.

But I have never cared about the rules of this world.

And technically, those rules are for *portals*.

I teleport.

There's a subtle difference in the nuances. For example, KiKi has to dig a portal hole, kind of like how a fox in this world might paw at the earth to create a hole in the ground. Only, she scrapes at the air to manifest a portal in the atmosphere that allows her to travel to other worlds.

I simply think about another space I've visited or foreseen—even in a dream—and appear.

Which is how I find myself in Miza Kananaka's bedroom, *without* using a portal.

"Hello, Sleeping Beauty," I murmur, loving the way her pretty pink hair sprawls across her pillows. "I've missed you."

That might be a strange thing to say to a woman I've never actually met in person. However, it's true. Because while I may not care about the rules, I have tempered the urge to visit my intended destiny over the last few years. It was simply too much of a risk.

And I'm all too aware of how fate can be altered when inappropriately handled.

“You have no idea how hard it has been to stay away from you,” I add in a whisper, twirling the flower between my fingers again. “How nearly impossible it is not to touch you even now.”

The first and only time I’ve ever seen Miza was during her first Day of the Choosing ceremony. I caught a glimpse of her on the video feeds and recognized her instantly.

But I didn’t react.

I didn’t try to teleport to her side.

I merely observed, then followed the fated strands in my mind and watched the paths unweave.

Imagine my shock when I realized the intricate details regarding my destiny and those of two rival kings.

I could alter their fates, though. I still might.

Time will tell.

Miza may choose.

Death might reign.

“We’ll see, won’t we, little siren?” I muse, smiling as she sighs. “Until then, I have a gift for you.” I creep forward, careful not to disturb her in her sleep, and place the flower on the pillow by her head. “The Kraken King would love for you to wear this in your hair during tomorrow’s ceremony. So be a good girl and do what you’re told, hmm?”

My fingers itch to stroke her silky pink strands.

But I hold myself back.

Restraint is key.

“See you again soon, sweetheart,” I vow, allowing myself one more look at her beautiful face. Even her eyelashes are slightly pink, same with her eyebrows. Such an exquisite color against her pale skin. But it’s her mouth I love most—those bow-shaped lips are practically begging to be kissed.

I’ve dreamt of that mouth. All the things it can do, *will* do… the way she sounds when she cries. Screams. *Moans*.

My dick practically throbs with anticipation, aware of what might come between us.

A pun, I think, amused. *There will definitely be a lot of* cum *between us*.

Grinning, I force myself to step away, then teleport back to my own kingdom.

There are so many tasks that need to be completed before the ceremonies.

So many pieces to put in place.

As well as an assassination order to be signed.

One issued by the Siren Queen.

With Miza Kananaka’s name written on it in blood.

Her death day is scheduled for next week. During the Monster Games. It’ll look like an accident. A happenstance of fate.

These are dangerous times, after all. So many desperate monsters hunting for their mates.

Poor Miza will be at the center of a fight.

And drown beneath the waves of her quarreling suitors.

Or will she? I wonder, smiling to myself. *Tick tock, little siren. Tick tock.*

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CHAPTER FIVE

MIZA

THE DAY OF THE CHOOSING

THERE'S A TICKING in my head that wakes me before the village alarm, the repetitive *thud*, *thud*, *thud* an echo inside my mind.

"*Ugh*." I have no idea what time it is or why I feel so dazed. I'm not even sure how I ended up in my bed or why… "Why am I staring at a flower?" I whisper to myself, blinking at the vibrant orange and red lily-like petals only inches from my face.

It smells divine, the scent instantly calming the thrumming in my ears and forcing me to inhale sharply.

"Wow," I breathe, my eyes closing again as I lose myself to the fragrance. It's unique. Powerful. *Soothing*. "How strange…" I'm guessing my mother placed it here for today's event. She probably considers it good luck or something.

Sitting up, I glance around and see my ceremony outfit already laid out over the bench at the foot of the bed. The lacy fabric is always the same, though the color changes to depict the age of the candidate. Or rather, which year the candidate represents.

First-years wear white.

Second-years wear pink.

Yellow is for the third-years. Orange is for the fourth-years.

And turquoise represents *my* year—my fifth ceremony.

That means everyone wearing turquoise is also twenty-three years old.

Age doesn't really matter, though. All mortals between the years of eighteen and thirty-five are eligible for the Monster Games. The fabric colors just show who has survived the Day of the Choosing longer than the others.

"Right," I mutter to myself. In about five minutes, a village alarm will sound, telling everyone to prepare for today.

I'm not sure if it's years of experience that tells me the current time or if it's my familiarity with the location of the sun in my room. Regardless, I slip free from my sheets and go to the bathroom in the hallway to take a shower.

The village bells ring loudly midway through my cleansing routine, the sound sending a chill down my spine.

In a little over two hours, I'll be attempting to balance on a dreaded lily pad.

Monsters, I sigh to myself. *Here we go again.*

I try not to think about what's to come as I finish showering. But it's hard not to picture myself falling into the ocean like last year.

And the year before.

And the year before that.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I force myself to focus on drying my hair. I style it afterward—with the flower from my mom—and don the translucent lace uniform.

"Morning, sunshine," my mom says in a too-cheerful tone as I enter our small kitchen. She's in the process of warming the bread, her back to me. "Did you find everything I left out for you?"

"Yes."

She nods, her light blonde hair swinging in her low ponytail. "The turquoise is nicer than last year's orange."

I snort. "You only say that because it clashed with my hair."

Although, the fiery flower she gave me kind of clashes, too.

Except it sort of resembles vibrant flames against my pink waves. Or that's what it looked like in the mirror, anyway.

She straightens and turns with a plate. "I say that because no one should wear…" She trails off as she faces me, her eyes going to the flower tucked behind my ear. "Oh."

My brow furrows. “Did you want me to do something else with it?” I ask her. “Like tie my hair up and put it in the back somehow?”

She doesn’t reply, just swallows.

“Mom?” I prompt, confused by her silence. I reach up to fuss with the stem. “Do I need to fix it or—”

“No!” She sets the plate down on the table and grabs my hand. “No, honey. No. Leave it. It’s fine. Sorry. I… I was just surprised by the beauty of… of that flower.”

I frown at her and arch a brow. “You picked it…”

“What?”

“You gave me this flower to wear… right?”

She blinks a few times and clears her throat. “Yeah. Yes. Of course. Right. I did.” She shakes her head like she’s trying to dispel a thought or something, then laughs a little. “Sorry, Miza. You know… you know what today does to me. I just…” She laughs again, wiping a tear from her eye. “I just worry. That’s all.”

I sigh. “Mom, I’ll be fine.”

Her lips curl a little into a sad smile, and she nods. “Here, honey.” She clears her throat again. “You should eat. And quickly. We’re running out of time.” She moves the plate over to sit in front of me. “You can’t be late.”

“Mom,” I try again.

“Miza.” She levels me with a stern look. “*Eat*. Please.” Then she leaves the room.

I huff out a breath. The Day of the Choosing is stressful for everyone involved. Even as a small child, I still had to attend. I just wasn’t offered up as a potential candidate then.

That all changed at eighteen years old.

But I’ve survived four ceremonies thus far. Today will be no different.

Except, wait… Something nags at my mind. Something about last night. *How did I get into my bed?*

I frown as I attempt to force myself to eat—an action that makes chewing a bit odd, but I manage—and try to sort through my foggy mind.

Why does everything feel so… dazed?

I’m used to feeling a little out of it first thing in the morning. However, a shower always clears my thoughts. Plus, I’ve been awake for more than long enough for that brain mist to dissipate.

So why does it feel like I’m still half asleep?

“Miza,” my mom says, returning to the kitchen in a black summer dress.

All humans over the age of thirty-five wear black on the Day of the Choosing. And unlike my outfit, hers is opaque. Cottony, not lacy.

Far more comfortable, I think, envious of the wardrobe.

“We have five minutes,” she tells me, looking pointedly at my half-eaten breakfast.

Five minutes? I repeat to myself. *How?*

Time seems to be moving faster than usual. Strange. I woke up early. But a glance out the window and the position of the sun confirm that my mom is right.

Starfish.

I shove the rest of the food into my mouth, an action that has my mom releasing a sound of surprised irritation. “*Miza*.”

“You wanted me to eat,” I say around the food, the words coming out jumbled and basically unintelligible.

“That’s mature,” she mutters.

If I could smile, I would. But I’m too busy chewing now.

She grabs a glass and fills it with water for me, which I guzzle down as soon as I finish swallowing the bread.

“I spent all day making that,” she grumbles at me.

“It was really good,” I promise her.

“You barely tasted it,” she scolds, then shakes her head again. “It’s fine. We need to go. *Now.*” A bell tolls with that final word, adding urgency to our movements as we rush outside to the main square.

The line of candidates has already begun to form, leaving me with mere seconds to part from my mother. I turn and throw my arms around her neck. “I love you. It’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. See you afterward, okay?” The words are a rush from my mouth as I whisper them into her ear.

She doesn’t reply, just clings to me in a hug that makes it difficult to breathe.

“Mom?” I prompt when she doesn’t let me go.

“I love you, sweet girl. Never forget that.” She kisses my temple, the action stirring a strange sort of electrical sensation that travels over my skin. A sensation that seems to echo from my mind. Like her kiss reminded me of something. But I can’t quite figure out what. “Go, Miza. *Go*.”

My feet stumble as my mom gives me a shove.

I seem to have lost time again.

I… I don’t understand what’s happening to me.

Is it nerves from today? Something else?

What happened last night? I wonder as I hurry toward the candidate line to find my place among the sea of turquoise outfits.

My last name places me in the middle of my year, the alphabetical order one I memorized over a decade ago when my age group first started practicing for the Day of the Choosing ceremony. I fall into line on autopilot, my head bowing on instinct.

This is the easy part.

The ceremonial line.

Walking.

Boarding the water train.

Stepping out onto the plank-like docks.

And then… *onto the lily pads*.

My stomach twists as I go through the motions, the surroundings a blur as I move through time and space.

The first time I did this, I enjoyed the scenery from the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of the train. It was so pretty to see all the colors of the ocean compared to those of the sky, as the train is both above and below the water.

But I’ve stopped indulging in the scenery.

It just reminds me of what’s to come.

I can hardly breathe when the train finally stops on the other side of our island, at the formal ritual site. My mother should be arriving on shore soon, too, only via an on-land bus instead of a rail system.

Everyone is required to attend the Day of the Choosing. Those under five and over thirty-five are taken to the stadium-like seating that overlooks the bay. Those between the ages of five and seventeen are situated with their various age groups, *learning* about their futures.

It’s quiet.

Eerie.

Terrifying.

Because all anyone can hear right now is the sound of the waves rumbling against the reefs that protect this sacred cove.

It’s not enough to help still the water around the lily pads, though. At least, not enough for *me*.

I can feel the current calling my name, threatening to knock me off my pedestal before I can even climb onto it.

You can do this, I tell myself. *Just focus on balancing. Ignore the water. Ignore the wind. Ignore… ignore everything except the pad beneath my knees.*

"Positions," a Village Protector declares.

I swallow and pad over on my bare feet to the door I'll soon exit through.

There's a tall boy in front of me—Pietre Kino. He's wearing turquoise like me, only as swim trunks and nothing more. If I lifted my gaze from the floor, his sturdy back would be all I could see, so I don't bother to look around. I remain in my demure position and wait as the robotic countdown initiates through the train's inner chamber.

"Ten."

"Nine."

"Eight."

I swallow.

"Seven."

"Six."

I briefly close my eyes.

"Five."

I can do this, I tell myself again. *It's fine. I've got this.*

"Four."

"Three."

"Two."

The door opens on "One," and a breeze filters through the cabin, causing me to shiver. It's warm, not cold, but the salty scent stirs goose bumps along my arms.

I can taste the water even though I can't see it yet, the ocean's presence powerful and terrifying.

I know how to swim. I'm actually quite skilled at it. Yet something about the waves always elicits this fear within me.

Or rather, the creatures beneath the waves…

The monsters are circling. I can feel them watching. Waiting. *Lurking*. It might all be in my mind, but I swear I can sense each and every one of them.

Tentacles. Fins. Scales.

So many threats lying in wait to take today's Offerings to wherever they—

Pietre moves, drawing my focus back to our task.

He goes through the door, forcing me to step up to the waiting plate.

I don't watch as he walks the plank. I simply stare at the glowing red floor beneath my feet and wait for it to turn green.

Hours seem to pass, but it's really only a few minutes as the platform shifts slightly to take me to my designated space.

Green, I think as everything lights up, telling me to proceed. *You can do this. You can do this. You can do this*.

Walking the plank is easy. It's not long. Maybe five feet. But it ends at that dreaded lily pad.

I almost glare at the offending platform, irritated by its existence.

However, I swallow the urge and focus on shifting into the requisite position instead.

The soft texture welcomes my feet and then my knees as I execute a perfect descent onto the pad below. It's not the first time I've managed to do this so elegantly, but it's definitely one of a handful of times that I've succeeded in being this graceful on the pedestal.

Maybe it's a good sign.

A positive omen.

Stop, I tell myself. *Don't overthink this. Just… just breathe.*

Inhale.

Exhale.

That's all I do for several minutes as the sound of waves crashes against the reefs in the distance.

Positioning all the candidates takes thirty minutes from start to finish. I used to count the seconds. Today, I simply focus on being still.

The water isn't going to bump me off the pad.

The ocean isn't trying to swallow me.

The sea isn't my enemy.

That's my mantra, over and over again, until my concentration is broken by Viscount Kahu's booming voice saying, "Welcome to our Annual Day of the Choosing."

I jolt and nearly fall, my heart suddenly beating a mile a minute.

Every year, without fail, his announcement sends terror through my veins. Mostly because his deep tones travel through the sky and seem to come from everywhere. Almost like a cyclone where the sound reverberates

in a funnel, echoing on repeat until it's eventually swallowed by the rumbling tide.

"We give thanks on this occasion to the monsters who help our realm flourish," Viscount Kahu goes on. "Without them, we would be nothing. We would suffer. We would *perish*."

My chin is already angled down, so I can't see the others around me, but I know everyone has their heads bowed in reverence. That's what is expected during this opening sermon.

"That's why, on this cherished day, we provide our monster allies with prized candidates."

I shiver once more as those words reverberate through the air.

"Candidates who we hope will please the superiors in this important alliance, thus encouraging continued collaboration between our kinds and a renewed blessing of our shores."

There's no mistaking the underlying connotation of the Viscount's pledge. He's reminding all of us—the humans on the lily pads—that if we are chosen for this great sacrifice, we must do our best to behave throughout the Monster Games.

We exist to be chosen.

Exist to potentially become a prized mate.

Exist to *please*.

"With that, I am pleased to announce that the Kahu Village has been asked to supply seven candidates for this year's Monster Games," our Viscount goes on, the excitement in his tone at odds with the dread twisting inside me.

Seven.

That's four more than last year.

Five more than the year before that.

We used to offer two or three at most.

But seven?

Why so many? I wonder, dizzy.

There are dozens of villages throughout the islands, all of which send candidates. We watch the games live via screens in our huts, and there are usually only fifty or so Offerings a year.

Are some of the villages exempt this year? I wonder.

"We feel very honored to be chosen for this opportunity and thank our superiors for their faith in our sacred village of Kahu," the Viscount

murmurs.

Silence falls, and I suspect he's making a show of praying.

I can just picture his bald head gleaming like sable stone beneath the glaring sun. His dark eyes are probably closed, too. And there's definitely sweat beading across his brow from the heat emanating off his dark clothes.

Viscount Kahu is a hard man. Intimidating. Older. His silver eyebrows seeming to whiten with age. But there's always been something off about him.

Something… at odds with his harsh exterior. Almost like he's forcing himself to exude a domineering presence.

I've never been able to identify what it is that feels wrong about him.

And I'm not about to try now.

"Let us bow our heads and pray," he says, nearly making me snort.

Because all of us are already bowing.

Yet he says the words anyway and begins to chant in the old language.

I echo the words where appropriate—where I've been *instructed* to do so—and feel the sea stirring around me with interest.

This is always when the water starts to speak to me. Or spook me. Or whatever it's doing.

It ripples beneath my lily pad, threatening my balance, just like it always does.

No, I think at it. *No!*

It's useless. I know that. But I…

My brow furrows. *Wait…*

Normally, the ocean mocks my inner demand by growing even more forceful, as though it mistakes the word *no* for *yes*. Or perhaps it just wants to put me in my place.

However… however, it's *calming* again.

My eyes widen. *What…?*

"One final note before we begin," Viscount Kahu says. "We're blessed today to receive the Elite Island King, who has chosen to call names from the sacred Chalice. In person."

Every part of me stills.

Elite Island King.

My mind whirs.

There's something very important about that.

Something… something I need to remember.

But what? I wonder, panicking. *What am I failing to—*

"Thank you, Viscount Kahu," a deep voice says right against my ear.

My head snaps up.

But the owner of the voice is nowhere near me.

And I'm suddenly off-balance.

Wavering.

No! I mentally shout. *Don't let me fall. Not now!*

Everything freezes.

The water.

My body.

My heart.

Because I'm staring directly into a pair of ice-blue eyes.

The Elite Island King is being projected into the sky, standing beside Viscount Kahu on a platform before the sacred Chalice.

Yet I swear the Elite Island King is looking at me from above. Seeing into my soul. *Reminding me of last night when he drew me out of the water…*

Oh, sweet monsters…

Reality starts to settle. Memories resurface. Words are spoken that I can't hear. It's like I'm caught in a time loop, one that mingles last night's events and today's ceremony.

Impossible.

How?

I don't…

"Kahu Village's first Offering is…" I hear the Elite Island King saying right against my ear again. Deep. Hypnotic. Cultured. *Real*. "Miza Kananaka."

The world comes rushing in on a wave of insanity. Heat. Wind. *Water*.

One moment, I'm staring into the sky at those ice-like eyes.

The next, I'm drowning beneath my lily pad.

Chosen.

I've been chosen.

And now… I'm going to die.

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CHAPTER SIX
ZAEL

THAT FUCKING FLOWER, I think, seething as Miza's body vanishes beneath her lily pad, her body caught in a water tunnel cast by one of my seaguards.

I sent that cephlalosune back with a simple message—*The humans are under my protection until the culmination of the Monster Games. Don't test me, Kraken King. You won't like the results.*

And what did that asshole do?

He placed a *mating flower* on a mortal who hadn't even been called up as an Offering yet.

A mortal who was supposed to be the fifth candidate selected in today's Day of the Choosing. However, I was so distracted by her and that fiery blossom in her hair that I spoke her name first.

And now her terror is echoing throughout the water amphitheater, her gargled screams making it decidedly difficult to control my facial expression.

Her reaction isn't abnormal.

In fact, it's expected.

She was just yanked off her lily pad by an unseen entity and pulled deep underwater into a whirlpool-like tunnel.

None of the candidates know what happens between now and the televised portion of the Monster Games. That's done on purpose.

The uncertainty of the experience creates obedience. And obedient humans are easier to protect.

However, I’m somewhat regretting that tactic right now. There’s something about Miza’s fear that unnerves me.

It’s strange.

This is a standard part of the annual ritual.

So why is her terror making it difficult to maintain my composure?

Taking over a Day of the Choosing ceremony is something I do every year. Usually, I pick a village at random. This time, though, I chose Kahu Village.

Because of Miza.

It was a last-minute change, one I made after meeting the now-shrieking female.

She’s whirling violently through the underwater tunnel, her screams all anyone can hear. They can’t see her. But that’s the point.

What happens to an Offering is a secret.

The next time anyone sees her, it’ll be on a televised screen during the culmination of the Monster Games.

Of course, the humans all think it’s the *beginning* of the games.

That’s the trick.

The truth we never reveal.

Because the next week is all about *courting*. And if the mortals knew that, they wouldn’t see this experience as a competition they need to prepare for, but an opportunity.

The whole point is to test mortals for supernatural markers, and the best way to do that is to create an ambitious atmosphere where certain attributes shine.

Viscount Kahu shifts beside me, confirming I’ve waited too long to call the next Offering’s name. Or perhaps he noticed that I went off script since the name I pulled from the Chalice was not Miza Kananaka’s. He’s close enough to read the paper in my hand.

But he’s smartly chosen to remain silent.

I wait another beat, my heart hammering as Miza’s screams are drowned out by the waves crashing against the reefs.

She’s at least a mile away now, the theatrics no longer required. Soon, she’ll find herself deposited in an ornate bedroom at the Elite Island Palace.

That’s where she’ll live for the next week while supernaturals visit from Monster Island and try to win her affections.

The Kraken King will no doubt be among the suitors.

And I will *personally* involve myself in that matter.

Actually, maybe I'll join him in the games, I decide as I slide my hand into the Chalice to select the next card. *Mariana will fucking love that*.

I can practically hear her laughing in my head already.

It's not like I'll actually take a mate. But I might block Tiru from claiming Miza.

Hmm.

"Lolita Megaw," I say, voicing a random name from the Kahu Village list rather than looking at the card.

The Viscount shifts his stance, his confusion palpable.

I keep him in suspense for the next Offering, again voicing a name from the list that doesn't match my card.

But when I reach for the fourth piece of paper, he sees *Lolita Megaw*.

Which is when I call for the Offering who should have been mentioned first.

All of them scream each time they're yanked beneath the water, my seaguards intentionally abrupt for the cinematic display of it all.

However, the fifth candidate merely disappears with a masculine grunt, his show of strength setting the stage for the sixth and seventh Offerings, both of whom are equally as quiet.

It results in a rather bland finale, given that all anyone can hear are the waves crashing against the nearby reefs.

"Typically, a video would play for you now," I say conversationally, deciding to speak my mind. "One that thanks you for your Offerings and wishes everyone well for the games. In fact, that prerecorded message is likely playing right now throughout the other villages under my protection."

I pull a device from my pocket to check if I'm right. For the most part, I am.

"All the other ceremonies are wrapping up. Or they're already done." I utter the words aloud for myself more than anyone else. "That means this year's Offerings should be in their final holding cells." It's a purposeful term, one we use to inspire fear.

However, *cells* isn't an accurate description.

The Offerings' quarters are massive rooms with water holes at the centers.

Water holes with direct access to the deep seas below, something that's utilized by suitors to visit in their oceanic forms.

It’s important for the mortals to accept their intended mates in all ways, thus allowing for a different kind of test. If a human is terrified of a suitor in monster form, then compatibility is called into question.

I wonder what Miza will think of my dragon, I muse as I activate a live broadcast from my watch.

The sky blinks above, my face disappearing and reappearing. The visage doesn’t change for those in the Kahu Village water arena. But now I’m live across the Monster Islands.

As well as in each of the Offerings’ rooms.

Which means Miza should be able to see me now, hovering on the ceiling of her guest suite.

“Hello,” I murmur, that one word for her even though it’s currently being blasted to all the humans under my protection. “I apologize for the secondary broadcast, but the Monster Games are going to be a little different this year.”

The Viscount visibly stills beside me, and I imagine that several humans throughout the villages are reacting similarly.

But they’re not the ones this message is for.

I’m speaking to Seren now.

To the monsters she’s invited into our realm.

To Ika and Tiru.

“I’ve ruled these islands for centuries, survived for far longer than that, and have done so without ever seeking a mate.” I stare directly into the translucent lens created by my watch but pretend I’m looking straight at Seren as I add, “I’ve decided to change that this year.”

It’s my prerogative, my *right*, to join the games as a mating suitor. However, it’s customary to inform one’s counterpart first.

So this is my way of replying to Seren’s latest antics with a “Fuck you, too, Your Royal Cuntness.” Because I didn’t call her personally to inform her of my intentions. Instead, I’m announcing my intentions to the entire fucking region, as well as all our interrealm visitors.

And that includes Ika and Tiru.

You came into my world to play. Now I’m going to join you in the water and remind you why I’m the Elite Island King.

Staring down the camera, I go on, saying, “I’m joining this year’s Monster Games to hunt for a mate. Let’s hope the Offerings live up to my expectations.”

That last part is a personal challenge for Miza.

I'm not sure why I voiced it, but the words came naturally, just as her beautiful face is what I picture now as I smile and add, "I'm coming for you, *darling*."

Taking a step back on the platform, I cast fire over my form to burn the suit from my skin, all while my watch continues to record me live for everyone in my territory to see. This is a show of power now, one I'm dedicating to everyone who dares to challenge me.

Seren.

Ika.

Tiru.

That fucking flower, I seethe, diving headfirst from the stage toward the water below. It's a good three-hundred-foot drop, but that's plenty of time to complete my shift.

I brush my thumb across my wrist, bringing up a screen that allows me to end the live feed. But rather than kill the footage immediately, I tell it to end in fifteen seconds.

The video follows me as I fall through the sky, the little screen flying with me toward the shallow water below.

I wait a beat, then call upon my beast and shift in midair, my wings flaring out around me to save me from colliding with the ocean too soon. Another presentation of my abilities, as most dragons from my world are built only for the water.

But I can *fly*.

Just as I can control fire.

I'm a being of many elements.

And I demonstrate that by sailing through the air, only to cut toward the waves just as the video feed ends.

I can practically hear Mariana saying "Show-off" somewhere nearby. She's not wrong. I wanted Seren to remember just who and what I am.

Only, it's not just she who I'm hoping witnessed my beast's transformation.

It's Miza, too.

Is she impressed? I wonder. *Or is she terrified?*

I suppose there's only one way to find out.

I head toward my palace, but I don't follow the seapath that leads to my underground cave.

Instead, I hunt for the water hole that'll take me to Miza's new quarters.

I think it's time we have another chat, I decide. *And find out what she knows about that fucking flower…*

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CHAPTER SEVEN

MIZA

Several Minutes Earlier

Sweet monsters, I can't breathe.

There's water everywhere. Minimal light. The perpetual sensation of being yanked through the ocean. Being pulled deep beneath the waves. *Drowning, drowning, drowning…*

I scream—something I really need to *stop* doing because I'm wasting precious air!—and claw at the power whirling around me, trying to swim, to move, to *escape* this violent undertow. It's futile. The ocean doesn't acknowledge my efforts.

Because I'm merely mortal.

An Offering.

Because King Zael just said my name.

And I swear he did it while staring right at me.

Which is an insane notion. The visual in the sky makes it seem like he's looking directly at everyone.

Besides, I have more pressing items to worry about right now. *Like escaping this—*

Air rushes into my mouth as a bubble forms across my lips, causing my eyes to widen. Everything spins in the next moment, coaxing a startled shriek from my mouth.

Which is ridiculous.

I’m wasting oxygen again.

Stop freaking out and think! I shout at myself, my eyes closing as I attempt to drown out the chaos whirling around me.

There’s no stopping this power, this… this… *What am I actually caught within?* I wonder, confused by the swift movements. *This isn’t how undertows work…*

I’ve been seized by one before. It sucked me under the water and dragged me out a good thirty yards before releasing me to the ocean. I’ll never forget that terrifying feeling of being trapped in the strength of the current, but I surfaced in the end and navigated around it to make it back to shore.

That’s not what this is, I think, my brow furrowing. *There are no magic oxygen bubble things in an under—*

My body shoots up suddenly, causing me to gasp as my head surfaces and the bubble bursts with a loud *pop*. I sputter, then blink, confused by the room around me.

What…?

“Welcome to the Elite Island Palace,” a masculine voice says, causing me to spin around to find a monster mere inches behind me.

A seaguard, I recognize with an inner jolt.

I’ve seen dozens of photos of his kind, plus witnessed them swimming out in the ocean, but I’ve never met one in person.

From what I learned in school, the seaguards protect the Elite Island.

And the Elite Island King, I think, swallowing. *Zael*.

“Your room is equipped with everything you should need during your stay,” the seaguard goes on, his gravelly voice echoing through the ornate room around us. “Instructions on what to expect next should arrive within a few hours. Until then, feel free to enjoy something from the tray.”

I blink at him. “T-tray?”

He points to the bed a few feet away from the water we’re floating in, and more specifically, to the *tray* on top of it.

“Oh.”

His eyes flicker as a translucent film closes over his gaze before reopening. *Eyelids*, I realize. *Or something like that*.

He’s also part fish. Sort of like a merman, I guess. Shirtless and almost all-man from the hips up, and a fin for his lower half. The tattooed slashes on his muscular arms indicate his rank, if I remember correctly.

“Do you have any questions for me, Ms. Kananaka? Or am I dismissed?”

My focus shifts from the blue-scaled gills in his neck up to his mouth before settling on his crystal-blue gaze. “Umm, what?”

“Do you have any questions for me, Ms. Kananaka?” he repeats, his words slower this time, like he thinks I’m struggling to understand him. “Or am I dismissed?”

I stare at him. “I don’t…” I clear my throat. “You’re asking me to dismiss—”

He spins suddenly, allowing me to see the purple-and-turquoise fins decorating his spine. They’re pretty yet currently flared with spikes that look rather deadly. “It is not time for visitation yet,” he hisses out, causing me to back up into the stairs behind me.

I was so caught up in the surrounding room, the seaguard, and the strange trip here that I failed to realize I’m *standing* in the water. And more than that, there’s a set of steps that leads out of this bizarre hole.

Did I die? I wonder. *Is this, like… the afterlife…?*

Because the opulent surroundings are certainly otherworldly. All silvers and whites and golds. Marble floors. Stone walls, except for one that’s all glass and shows the ocean beyond. There’s a pillar by the bed, too.

“You are breaking all sorts of protocols,” the seaguard growls.

I frown at his finned back. “Excuse me?” I ask, confused. “I’m not…” I trail off as tentacles appear in the water. “What…?” *Oh, monsters…*

The tentacles lengthen, the veins thickening as the purplish color begins to glow beneath the water.

“Stand down,” the seaguard demands.

The creature responds by wrapping one of its appendages around the seaguard’s middle and a second around his neck.

Oh…

“King Zael… will… hear… about this,” the seaguard chokes out.

Then he vanishes from sight, being jerked down into the hole.

I gape, then begin to scramble up the stairs, only for a tentacle to grab my ankle and yank me right back down. “Ah!” I shout, losing my balance and falling into the water with an undignified splash.

My arms move automatically, bringing me back up to the surface. I kick the tentacle away from my ankle, only for it to grab my calf and roam up

my leg in response. I jolt when it tickles the back of my knee, then try to dislodge it again.

Which causes it to pull me deeper into the water once more.

Sputtering, I attempt to swim, my arms and legs strong from years of practice.

But the tentacle easily holds me in place.

Growling, I give up and move to float on my back. “You know what? If you want to drown me, then drown me,” I tell the creature. “I’m not going to fight you.”

It’s pointless anyway. This monster is clearly stronger than me. And the octopus-like appendages have made it pretty clear that the being doesn’t want me to get out of the water.

Closing my eyes, I let the squid-thing do whatever it’s going to do to me.

The tentacle releases its hold on my lower limb, yet I feel it hovering near my skin as a presence grows beneath me. I can’t see it—because my eyes are still closed and it’s under me, not above me—but I can *sense* the being’s existence.

It’s a strange sensation.

Warm.

Intimidating.

Overpowering.

I swallow.

Whatever—or *whoever*—is coming for me… is massive.

Maybe it’s all in my head, just like all those times I’ve felt the ocean’s malevolent intentions for me. But my instincts are flaring with alarm, causing my heart to beat rapidly in my chest.

The water moves just enough to confirm my suspicion.

Warmth touches my back, making me shiver.

“I’m not going to drown you, little lei,” a deep voice rumbles, the words clear even through the water. Almost as though he’s talking into my mind, not just near my head. “I am, however, going to ask about that flower tucked behind your ear.”

My brow furrows and my eyes slit open, then widen as I find a shirtless man hovering above me. He… he looks human. Except his hair is a vibrant turquoise, and his eyes are slashes of intense silver. And his face is far more handsome than that of any other man I’ve ever seen.

Apart from King Zael, I think. *He's… he's definitely on a similar level.*

Which means this man isn't a man but a monster.

Something I already knew since he arrived in a twist of tentacles.

Or, well, I assume that was him, anyway.

My throat works as I try to swallow.

He's staring at me with an intensity that leaves me a little breathless. He's not smiling. He's not frowning. Just… *studying*.

"How did you come by this flower?" he asks, his striking gaze going to my mouth and then my ear. "Did Ika give it to you?"

My brow furrows again. "I-Ika?" I repeat, not sure what that means. "Is that a plant?"

He cants his head, causing his damp hair to drape across his forehead in an unruly fashion. My fingers flex with a bizarre instinct to touch that stray strand and return it to the others. It would give me an excuse to touch him, something I suddenly very much want to do.

What's wrong with me? I wonder, blinking up at this magnetic male. *Why am I… so drawn to him?*

His lips curl into the most enticing grin I've ever seen. "Unfortunately, no. A plant would be much easier to kill."

His words are edged with lethal intent, the statement one that should unnerve me.

Yet all I can do is continue gazing up into his beautiful face. It's like I'm hypnotized.

Which reminds me of last night.

Of King Zael.

Of the memories that only recently resurfaced of him *carrying* me to my bed.

Monsters, I'm losing my mind…

"So if Ika didn't give this to you, how did you acquire it?" His fingers graze the petals near my ear as he speaks.

Part of me idly wonders how the flower managed to stay intact and remain in place. I didn't pin it to my hair. I merely tucked the stem behind my ear.

I should have lost it the moment I fell into the water.

But I didn't.

And now this very handsome monster seems utterly fixated on it.

"Umm." I clear my throat. "My mom left it on my pillow for me."

The man arches a turquoise eyebrow. “Your mom?” His gaze returns to mine before tracing up to my hairline and back. “And your mom is… human?”

“Er, yes.”

“You’re certain?”

“I…” I frown. “Yes?”

“That doesn’t sound certain,” he murmurs. “Your mom has pink hair, too?”

“Not anymore, no.”

He examines me with those intense silver eyes. “What does that mean?”

“She no longer dyes it pink.”

His mouth curls down. “Oh. Your hair is dyed.” He sounds so disappointed that I scowl.

“No.” I move to stand again, no longer wishing to float. “My hair is *very* real, thank you.” I don’t mean to respond defensively, but he’s the second person—er, *monster*—to question my hair in less than a day.

And my hair has always been a point of contention with others, too.

He arches a brow. “The pink is real?”

“Yes,” I almost hiss. “It’s *naturally* pink.”

He reaches for a strand, his fingers brushing my cheek along the way and sending a shock of electricity through me.

I jump.

And he instantly drops his hand. “My apologies,” he says, his expression softening a bit as he looks at me. “I’m… I’m startled by this revelation and acting without thought.”

“Because of my hair?” I ask, confused as to what he means by *revelation*.

“Because of *you*,” he says, coming to his full height before me.

My eyes widen as I have to tip my head back to maintain our eye contact.

He’s tall. Like, *really* tall. I’m only five foot three, and he has to have at least a foot on me. Maybe more.

King Zael was tall, too, I think, dazed from the memory of approaching him at the water’s edge.

“Hello,” the male from my thoughts says, making me jump again and spin toward him.

Only it’s a screen hovering in the air that has his visage on it, not the actual king in question. “Er, hello,” I reply.

“I apologize for the secondary broadcast, but the Monster Games are going to be a little different this year,” he goes on, making me feel like an idiot for responding.

Because he’s not talking to me.

He’s talking to the villages.

To *everyone*.

I shake my head, trying to clear the dizzying sensation from my thoughts.

“He really is a pompous prick, isn’t he?” the turquoise-haired, godlike man behind me says conversationally.

“I’ve ruled these islands for centuries, survived for far longer than that, and have done so without ever seeking a mate,” King Zael continues. “I’ve decided to change that this year.”

“Oh, great,” the man at my back replies. “Really looking forward to seeing more of you than necessary now.”

I frown. *Is he aware that King Zael can’t hear him?* “I think he’s broadcasting—”

“I’m joining this year’s Monster Games to hunt for a mate,” King Zael says at the same time I speak, causing me to abruptly stop and gape at him in the air. “Let’s hope the Offerings live up to my expectations.”

W-why does that feel like a challenge? I wonder, shivering. *He can’t possibly be talking to me, right?*

“I’m coming for you, *darling*,” he adds.

My lips part.

He referred to me as *darling* last night, too.

“I’m not going to punish you, darling. Not tonight, anyway.”

“You’re not in trouble, darling. Not yet, anyway.”

“Sleep, darling.”

Oh, starfish, he *is* talking to me.

Unless it’s a coincidence.

Why would he…? My thought trails off as King Zael’s clothes burn off his body from some sort of magical fire, exposing every inch of his muscular torso. *Oh, wow…* The camera screen ends near his hips, but it’s clear this male is a work of art.

Something he’s obviously aware of as he dives off the cliff without a backward glance.

I gasp as he transforms in midair into a majestic dragon with ice-blue wings.

Then the video ends, leaving me staring up at an ornate ceiling engraved with intricately woven lights that are twinkling like stars.

“Have you met Zael?” the male behind me asks quietly, his voice seeming to hold an edge to it.

“Yes,” I answer honestly.

“I see.” The two words are like ice, prompting me to slowly turn toward him.

It’s instinctual, and probably a bit psychotic, but I feel the need to look at him. “Who are you?” I whisper, confused by this magnetic pull I feel toward him. “*What* are you?”

Maybe he’s hypnotizing me like King Zael did. Only in a different way.

Though, I’m still not sure why King Zael did that last night.

Is he joining the games to punish me? I wonder, recalling how he said he wasn’t going to punish me last night. But he left it open-ended for the future. *Am I in trouble?*

Probably.

I’m *always* in trouble.

And I did fall off the lily pad.

Or was I taken from it? It’s hard to say for sure.

“I’m Tiru,” the male murmurs, still standing and allowing me to witness his full height. “I’m the Kraken King of the Cephalopoda Realm. And it seems that you, Ms. Kananaka, might be my fated mate.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

IKA

Might be? I repeat with a mental snort. *Might be your fated mate? Get your tentacles out of your ass and own that shit. I mean, dear Gods, Your Royal Idiotness. It's pretty fucking clear, isn't it?*

It takes physical restraint not to materialize from the shadows and throttle the King of Ignorance for being a blind dolt.

However, the show is about to start, and I really don't want to ruin it by preemptively announcing my presence.

So, instead, I lounge on Miza's future bed and slip a conch pop into my mouth. It's a little saltier than I like, but it'll do.

"F-fated mate?" Miza repeats, her delicate shoulders stiffening.

I rather liked it when she was facing the bedroom moments ago. That turquoise lingerie of hers leaves nothing to the imagination. It's translucent and not just because it's wet.

I want to rip that delicate lace off of her with my teeth.

Then taste those rosy nipples of hers. They're already peaked, making them perfectly ripe for my tongue.

How Tiru manages to focus on her face is beyond me. Her tits are literally right fucking there. Exposed. Alluring. *Aroused*.

Or maybe she's just cold.

I prefer to assume the former. *Is she wet between her legs, too? Preparing for us to fuck her into oblivion? Gods, I hope so.*

It’s not a logical desire. She doesn’t even know I exist yet. But a stealth dragon can dream…

“Yes,” Tiru says, the soft quality of his voice one that will serve all of us well in the bedroom. Primarily because it will be used to coax Miza to do a myriad of things. Position her in certain ways. Prepare her for her mates… “That flower is a companion—”

A rumbling growl from the ocean below cuts Tiru off, his expression morphing into one of annoyance as he glances over his shoulder at the approaching Elite Island King.

My lips curl around my conch pop. *Yeah, this is gonna be good*.

“What was that?” Miza whispers, backing up toward the stairs.

“Get out of the water,” Tiru demands. “And find a towel.”

“But what’s—”

“*Now*, lei,” he tells her, a snarl underlining his tone.

I fight the urge to sigh. For a centuries-old Kraken King, I expected him to have at least some skill with the ladies by now. But apparently, he’s just as grumpy with women—*with his fucking fated mate*—as he is with me.

The conch pop in my mouth nearly clacks against my teeth as I shake my head.

This mate-circle is going to be impossible to manage, I think. *I’m not even sure it’s worth…* The thought trails off as Miza scrambles out of the water, giving me a beautiful show of curves and femininity. *Scratch that. Absolutely fucking worth it if I get to play with those tits and that delectable ass.*

Gods, she’s fucking perfection.

And she’s walking right toward me.

Well, not *me*, but the towel waiting for her on the bed. It’s next to the tray at the foot of her bed—a tray I’ve been avoiding jostling as I’ve moved around on the mattress.

She takes another step forward, placing her closer to the middle of the bed.

I tense with anticipation as she grabs the towel yet continues forward like she might sit on the bed. Only, she pauses within inches of my legs, then wraps herself up in the cotton while remaining standing.

My lips curl down. *I was enjoying that view, little siren*, I think at her with a mental pout.

Unfortunately, a new display has begun in the water. One involving blue scales and matching wings.

I roll my eyes. His performance on camera—where he shifted in midair and flew along the water—was a bit much. I, too, have wings when in dragon form. But unlike his, mine actually stand out against the water.

My beast is also bigger.

And I can disappear whenever the fuck I want.

He might control fire, but I'm a walking poison.

So really, who's the stronger king here?

Me. Obviously.

I twirl my conch pop in my mouth as he attempts to intimidate the Kraken King with his size.

But Tiru simply stares at him. "The games started the moment you spoke her name, Zael. So I don't care what your pet seaguard told you—I'm not breaking any rules by being here now."

Oh, I don't think that's why the King of Showboating is here, I muse.

Miza leans against the bed as Zael reveals himself and begins to shift back into his human form.

Removing the conch pop from my mouth, I silently sit up so that my nose is mere inches from her glorious pink mane. It's dangerous. She might sense me behind her. Maybe feel my breath on the back of her nape. Or pick up on my scent.

However, she's too focused on the masculine display in the pool to notice the invisible threat lurking on her bed.

"By being here now? No," Zael says. "But you're forgetting that I already know about you sending your pet to court a candidate. Not to mention that taunt you left in her fucking hair."

Tiru visibly stiffens. "A pet? Are you talking about *Ika*? Because I can assure you that fucking meddler is *not* my pet."

"Ika?" Zael repeats, spitting my name like it's a curse. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"What fuck are *you* talking about?" Tiru counters.

The two men square off with one another, all muscle and little brain.

No words are exchanged, just posturing.

"Typical," I say on a sigh, materializing.

Miza yelps and spins around to gape at me.

“Apologies, sweetheart,” I murmur, moving to place my feet on the ground. It allows me to stay close to her, something I was enjoying before she rudely jumped away. “Didn’t mean to frighten you.”

That’s not entirely true.

I definitely like the hint of fear in her eyes. It forces her pupils to dilate in a way that reminds me of sex. I suspect her gaze will be somewhat similar when she’s choking on my cock.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Zael demands, his blue eyes suddenly fixated on me.

“Enjoying a conch pop,” I reply, twirling the candy between my fingers. “Sorry, did you want one?”

I pull a few out of my pocket with my opposite hand. I offer them to Miza first.

When she doesn’t try to grab a lollipop, I hold them out toward the two glaring men in the pool.

“No?” I shrug, putting them away and popping the other back into my mouth. “Your loss,” I say around the stick. “If you prefer to suck on something else, let me know.” That last part is for Miza.

She’s still gaping at me. “How…?” She sputters out. “*Where*…?”

I arch a brow. “How?” I repeat, pulling the lollipop from my mouth again. “You just sort of, well, *suck*.” I demonstrate with my mouth. “As to *where*…” My gaze slowly dips over her, my mind easily recalling what she looks like beneath that towel. “Well, little siren, I’ll let you pick.”

“N-no,” she stammers. “That’s not what I meant.”

I know, I think, amused. She was more likely trying to figure out how I appeared behind her. However, I feign a confused look and set my conch pop down on her untouched food tray. “Are you asking where I want you to suck? Because—”

“*Ika*,” Tiru bites out.

I hold up a finger in his direction. “Interruptions are impolite, Your Tentacleness. Wait your turn.” I drop my hand and smile at the bewildered female before me. “I’m focused on our gorgeous future right now.”

Water moves nearby, telling me he’s exiting the pool. Of course, I can see that in my peripheral vision, but I choose to focus on Miza instead of the approaching Kraken King.

Zael is right behind him, though. Which proves a bit more distracting when he lights up one hand like a bloody torch.

“The King of Showboating is about to threaten me, sweetheart,” I tell Miza softly. “But don’t worry. I’m not afraid of a little sunburn.”

She blinks at me. “Who are you?”

I smile. “Ika Taniyn,” I tell her. “Stealth Dragon King of Aquatopia.”

Her eyes widen, telling me she’s heard of my home.

Good.

Though, I am curious as to what she learned about Aquatopia in school. Probably something along the lines of *dangerous beasts with penchants for poisons*.

But it’s not my kind’s fault that dangerous toxins are naturally produced by our dragon halves.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I promise her, my voice low as Tiru and Zael stalk forward. “I would never hurt you, little siren.”

However, the two approaching males are not entitled to my vow.

“Consider your options carefully,” I say, now speaking to the rivals as I stand and move in front of Miza to protect her from whatever’s coming. I look at Zael’s flaming hand. “Consider your surroundings, Your Fieriness. These quarters are small. I can vanish at will. And there’s a delicate female at my back.”

“Explain yourself,” he demands.

“That will take a while,” I warn him. “I’m over a thousand years old. But if you want to go back to the beginning—”

He grabs my throat in a move that’s shockingly quick, his hand hot against my skin. Fortunately, my dragon bathes in flames regularly. Thus, I merely absorb Zael’s power rather than truly burn.

When he realizes I’m immune, his gaze narrows. “What game are you playing?”

“Chess,” I reply without missing a beat, the word choked since my vocal cords are currently being compressed by his impressive grip.

I could vanish, just like I said.

But I don’t want his flames any closer to Miza.

Zael’s jaw ticks, then he looks at Tiru again. “You’ve been illegally interacting with a candidate. That’s an infraction that disqualifies you from this year’s games.”

Tiru narrows his gaze. “I’ve done no such thing.”

“Then explain the flower in Miza’s hair,” Zael demands, releasing me to focus on Mr. Tentacles.

“Ika,” Tiru snarls.

“Present,” I return with a grin.

His Royal Krakenness—*or is it Crankiness?*—glares at me. “You stole that flower from me last night and—”

“I prefer *borrowed* as a term,” I interject.

“—clearly gave it to Miza,” he goes on. “So if anyone—”

“Which you’re welcome for, by the way,” I insert. “Created quite the introduction, if I do say so myself.”

“*If anyone*,” he repeats with a snarl, “has broken the rules here, it’s *Ika*.”

I nod, conversationally adding, “Rules are made to be broken. At least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

Zael looks ready to throttle me.

That’s nothing new. The feeling is often mutual, too.

“Look,” I say, before these two can spoil an otherwise perfect moment. “Miza’s had a long morning. I think what she needs now is some food, and maybe a little pampering. Everything else can wait.”

I face her, aware that giving two deadly rivals my back is a risk. But I adore a dangerous game.

And there’s nothing more lethal than engaging in mating wars with competing royals.

“You’re not in the mood for a conch pop, which is a shame because they’re fucking delicious.” I cock my head to the side. “Want to peek at the tray? See if you fancy something under the lid?”

She stares up at me.

“The tray on your bed,” I say, gesturing toward it with my chin. “It has some vegetables and rice. If that’s not to your liking, then tell me what you desire and I’ll acquire it.”

“You say that like you’ll be staying in my realm for longer than a few more minutes,” Zael growls near my ear, his hand clamping down on my shoulder and setting my shirt on fire.

Miza’s eyes widen, causing my own to narrow.

It’s one thing to threaten me.

Entirely another to frighten our intended.

I grab Zael’s wrist and send a warning jolt into his bloodstream.

Just a hint of the deadly toxin I can create.

Enough to make him go numb without doing any real harm.

He hisses, his anger mounting as he yanks me back and throws me across the room, right into the pool.

My lips purse. “Wet jeans are the *worst*,” I mutter, irritated by the water seeping into my clothes.

Though, I’m also rather impressed with Zael’s sparring techniques.

He’s grown a lot since we last… played.

“Let’s go for a swim,” I invite him aloud, pulling off my shirt. “Leave Tiru to feed our Miza. Gives him time to work on his bedside manner—which is in dire need of an upgrade, by the way.”

I look at the naked Kraken King and decide to offer him a few pointers, just to help speed things along.

“Don’t snarl at our intended, Your Crankiness. Also, only issue demands when it involves orgasms. Women don’t appreciate being bossed around outside of bedroom play. Understand?”

The expression on his face is one of murderous rage.

Which, naturally, has me sighing, “And for the love of all that’s oceanic, fix the grumpy bullshit. You just found your fated mate. That’s cause for celebration, something that typically involves *smiling*. Right now, you look like you’re about to attend a funeral instead.”

“The only funeral I’ll be attending is *yours*,” he snarls at me.

I roll my eyes as I kick off my shoes underwater. “I suggest you work on originality, too, Your Tentacleness. Because if I’m bored, our intended is bored.”

“She’s not *our* intended,” he informs me flatly. “She’s *my* intended.”

“That remains to be seen,” Zael interjects. “I consider *both of you* to be disqualified from the games.”

“The Siren Queen will never agree,” I tell him, bending slightly to yank off my waterlogged socks. “And as we all know, that’s her jurisdiction, not yours.”

“The humans are under *my* protection until the culmination of the games,” Zael states flatly. “Not Seren’s.”

I shrug. “My comment still stands. As does my offer for a swim. So are you coming or not?” I carefully unzip my soaked jeans—*still the fucking worst sensation in all the realms*—and work on peeling them off my thighs. “Consider it another opportunity to *showboat*. We both know you love that.”

I’m still tangled in the fabric as Zael marches toward me. “I’m going to kill you.”

“Sounds like foreplay,” I taunt, finally freeing my legs.

I gather all my clothes and set them on the floor, then look at Miza—who hasn’t moved an inch and is struggling to figure out which of us to focus on. “Sweetheart,” I murmur to her. “Would you mind hanging these in the bathroom for me? I’ll be back for them later.”

“The fuck you will,” Zael says, executing a dive that’ll place him right on top of me.

I shadow out of his way just in time, my body appearing on the floor and dripping water everywhere in the process.

Of course, Zael and Ika have already left a mess behind.

“I wish I could stay to help you clean this up,” I tell Miza, who is currently running her gaze over my naked form in open amazement, causing my lips to quirk up at the edges. “And that look just makes me want to stay more. Thanks for the ego stroke, sweetheart.”

Zael growls another warning, suggesting he’s about to fly up out of the water to throttle me.

That would just create a bigger puddle on the floor.

Speaking of ego strokes…” I look at Tiru. “Cover your tentacle, Kraken King. Our intended isn’t ready for that monster yet.”

He takes a murderous step toward me, which has my grin spreading into a full-blown smile before I execute a backward dive into the water.

My dragon bursts free with the movement, resulting in a huge splash that probably just made it even messier in Miza’s quarters.

Good thing her floors are elegant marble, not carpet.

A wise decorative decision by the Elite Island King. Assuming he even provided his insight, anyway.

What isn’t a wise decision, though, is Zael coming at me in beast form. His primary power is fire. And quick movements, apparently. But my toxins are even more potent when my dragon is in charge, something I remind him of as I draw my talons through the water, releasing black ink-like strands in their wake.

He quickly dodges, and I swipe my hand through the mess to reabsorb the toxic liquid, not wanting to risk the poison surfacing near Miza’s new quarters. An odd choice, considering I’ve accepted a bounty that requires her death. One might say I’m trying to prolong the moment.

Or perhaps I just don’t want to make it too obvious.

Ah, a debate for another day.

Right now, I have a fiery king to piss off.

I think I’ll start by showing him who has stronger wings, I decide.

With a flip of my tail, I send myself into a spin through the water, beneath the palace, and out into the open ocean.

Then I take to the air.

It’s time to fly…

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CHAPTER NINE

MIZA

Three naked men.

Muscular men.

Built men.

Sexy men.

Well-endowed men.

That's… that's all I can think about. All I see. There's only one left in the room, but all three males are still very much lingering in my head. Their athletic physiques engraved into my eyelids each time I close them. Their impressive *manhoods* forever burned into my memory.

Because wow.

Wow.

I've… I've seen a lot of basically nude men throughout my life. The gauzy swim trunks don't really hide much.

But these males—these *monsters*—are, well, they're not human. That much is very clear. *Even clearer with King Tiru facing me now with that… that* tentacle *between his thighs*.

King Ika's description was appropriate.

It's… his *appendage*… it's scaled. Green. Blue. Erect. *Large*.

I swallow. It's rude to stare. I should… I should look away. But he's walking toward me. And I can't see anything else. Just his nakedness. The flexing muscles. Defined abs. The intimidating *girth* of his manhood. The thick thighs.

He moves past me to grab something from the wall, giving me a nice look at his backside again. All strength and masculine lines.

My view disappears, though, as he wraps himself up in a robe.

Frowning, I look around him and realize there are several of those hanging on hooks near the bed. All of them large, like they're meant for males of his size.

"Am I… sharing a room with someone?" I ask slowly. "Or, er, *someones*?" I glance at the bed—the *only* bed in the room. It's large. Could probably fit four or five people. But I… I don't know how I feel about sleeping next to strangers.

King Tiru turns around, his turquoise hair a stark contrast to the white cotton engulfing his massive form. "Not that I'm aware of. Why?" he asks, his eyebrows—which match his hair—coming down.

I gesture to the robes on the wall. "Because of all those?" I suggest, frowning right along with him. "They're too big for me."

He glances at them, then back at me, his lips quirking up as though he finds the query amusing. "They're not meant for you, little lei. They're meant for anyone visiting you. Like me." He finishes tying the robe around himself, his silvery eyes studying my face. "Most of us will approach via the water…"

He gestures back at the pool with his chin, which isn't entirely needed.

I understand what he means. "In your monster forms," I translate.

"Yes." He cants his head. "Does that frighten you?"

"Should it?" I counter.

"Maybe." He's still studying me intently. "Do you know anything about my realm?"

I tighten the towel around myself as I sift through all my coursework in my head. "I… I've learned about a lot of other worlds. Other kingdoms. *Realms*." The terms all feel interchangeable sometimes. I know there can be distinctions, but it's a vast universe of supernatural potential.

However, if I remember right…

"The Cephalopoda Realm is all underwater. There is no land. Domiciles have been built into reefs, which are basically large communities beneath a dome filled with oxygen. It allows your human halves to breathe and move around." I pinch my lips as I try to recall more details.

I've seen photos of a lot of these other worlds. Read about the monsters who live there. Memorized facts about what they desire in human mates.

“Oh!” My eyes widen as I think of a fascinating trait of his world, one I enjoyed learning about. “You have starfish that provide light like actual suns under the water.” I smile. “They’re beautiful. At least, in the photos I’ve seen.”

They’re massive, too.

And just float in the unending ocean, emitting heat and brightness.

“As for the monsters who live there…” I trail off, my throat suddenly going dry. “They prefer their water creature halves to their human ones, so chosen mates need to be, umm, prepared for that.”

He arches one of his eyebrows. “Is that what you’ve been taught?”

I consider all my studies, wanting to be sure. It’s entirely possible I’m conflating the details with another realm. However, it’s common for monsters to prefer their beastly appearances. They don’t want to have to be human for their mates.

That’s why we’re expected to accept them… *in all forms*.

I’m about to say that when King Tiru murmurs, “It’s not necessarily wrong. We do indulge our inner beasts’ need for water. But most of us don’t prefer one form over the other. We’re simply both.” He runs his fingers through his still-damp hair, his gaze roaming over me. “Are you hungry?”

I blink at him, my mouth opening, closing, then opening again. It’s such an abrupt subject change that I… I don’t know how to respond for a second. So I blurt out the first thing I can say, which is an ineloquent “I don’t know.”

His gaze narrows a bit. “Hmm.” He moves around me to the tray on the bed and uncovers it to examine the contents. “Are these foods you like? Vegetables and rice?”

I glance at it, my lips pursing. “They’re… palatable.” I’m not going to say I necessarily *like* those items. I much prefer my mother’s homemade bread.

Which I’m probably never going to taste again, I realize with a pang.

It’s been such chaos since the ceremony began—since my name was *called*—that I haven’t had a moment to consider my fate.

I’m an Offering.

An Offering who’s currently talking to a monster.

Not just any monster—a Kraken King.

After arguing with the Elite Island King and the Stealth Dragon King of Aquatopia.

I press my palm to my head, suddenly dizzy with the realization that this… this is *real*. I was distracted by the nudity before. Shocked by all the men and their overbearing waves of testosterone.

But now that things are somewhat settling… reality is beginning to seep into my mind.

A reality where I'm part of the Monster Games. That three monster kings… *know who I am*.

Why? Frowning, I touch the flower by my ear. *Because of this?*

King Zael referred to it as a "taunt." Then King Tiru accused King Ika of stealing it and giving it to me.

"Am I not supposed to have this?" I ask, pulling the item from my hair. I still don't know how it survived that whirlpool swim, yet it seems perfectly intact now. It's not even wet. "Do you need it back?" I hold it out toward him, prepared to return it.

Though, I don't really want to.

It's a very pretty flower.

And the thought of losing it… makes me oddly disappointed. I can't define why. It's just a plant. I shouldn't feel attached to it.

King Tiru takes a step back, drawing my focus up to his startled expression. "*No*." The word leaves him on an alarming exhale that has my eyes widening in response. His vehement reply seems to whistle through the room, drawing goose bumps along my arm.

"I… I'm sorry," I rush out, not quite sure why I'm apologizing but feeling the need to anyway. "I… I was just… I thought… I thought it was a problem, like I'm not meant to…" I stop talking. Mostly because I feel like an idiot. I'm not someone who rambles. Yet I'm rambling now. I'm *shaking*, too.

Today has been a lot.

Too much.

Overwhelming.

Insane.

I'm never going to see my mom again. Never going to taste my favorite bread. Never going to… to do many things. I might not even live here anymore soon. Oceans, I might not even be alive *this time next week.*

I sit on the bed, my gaze blinking, unseeing, as my hand falls to my lap.

The quiver in my lip isn't me. Neither is the uncertainty clouding my mind.

I've known all my life that I might one day be chosen for the games. It's dangerous. But I've prepared for it. And while I might not be the best at balancing on a lily pad, I am skilled in the water.

When it's not trying to drown me, anyway, I think, shivering.

But that doesn't mean—

"Fuck," King Tiru growls out, making me flinch. "*Fuck*. I am not going about this the right way at all."

He steps toward me, causing me to want to back up on the bed.

However, before I can physically react, he crouches in front of me and says, "I'm the one who is sorry, Miza. That flower is meant for you. If I'm showing frustration, it's because I'm the one who should have given it to you, not Ika."

I frown. "But Ika didn't give me the flower. My mom…" I trail off, recalling her reaction earlier, how she seemed startled by the blossom in my hair. Then I asked her about her reaction, and she never truly clarified it. My lips curl down. "Did Ika place it on my pillow… while I slept?"

The notion of that makes me uneasy.

I'd wonder how he appeared in my room, but he basically materialized in this room without alerting me to his presence.

"Can he, uh, teleport?" I don't know another term for it. "Or, I guess, enter a room… while invisible?"

"Both," King Tiru says. "Those are two of his *many* irritating traits."

"Oh." The word leaves me softly. "And he stole this flower from you, then…" I look down at the pretty red and orange petals, the colors making my pale palm look a little pinker than usual. "You were telling me about it before. What it means to you?"

"It's a companion floral," he says, still crouching and staring up at me.

Well, he's closer to eye level, actually.

Because he's tall, something that isn't really lessened by him squatting down.

"Companion florals only bloom for a kraken's true mate. When Ika took it, I expected the bloom to die quickly. But your touch has kept it very much alive." His gaze goes to my hands. "It means you're meant to be mine, which is far more impactful than I can even begin to explain. Over time, I'll try. However, first…"

He stands, the robe acting as a cape in his wake as he moves. I'm not sure if squatting unknotted the fabric or if it's simply not big enough for his

muscular form, but he seems completely oblivious to it as he starts searching through a kitchen adjacent to the bedroom.

This suite is larger than my entire hut, I think, a bit bewildered as I begin to truly look around for the first time. I was a bit distracted by the men before.

Naked men with impressive manhoods.

One of which was… pierced? Ika. Metal. It glinted in the light. Just like the decorations on his ear. Plus his tattoos…

I swear the one resembled a dragon. And it was *moving*.

Or maybe it was my imagination.

An imagination that will forever be fueled by the last thirty minutes of my existence.

Swallowing, I try to focus on King Tiru. But as he turns toward me, his robe gapes open, and my gaze is instantly drawn to his sculpted chest. Defined abs. Dipping low to his…

He blocks my view with a bowl in his hand, one he carries to the pool. Bending, he fills it with water before bringing it over to me and holding it out for my review.

“Put the flower in here,” he instructs me. “If I’m right about what you are to me, the companion floral will blossom even more over the coming days.”

My brow furrows as I consider what he’s saying. Picked flowers typically *die* after being severed from their roots. So I’m not quite sure what he means by “blossom.” But I set the fiery item in the bowl of water, since that’s what he requested and it’s his flower anyway.

The water seems to sparkle around it, which is strange.

Then the flower twirls as if under a spell and settles into the liquid. It kind of reminds me of a water lily, something I saw often in our village pond. I used to love staring at them during my outdoor lessons as a young child.

At least until we started having to practice balancing on the lily pads in the same pond.

Around that time, I stopped liking everything in the water.

I was only five.

Not a great realization when growing up on an island.

“See?” King Tiru murmurs. “It’s already settling happily.” He sounds relieved, his expression warming as he carries the bowl to a table across the

room. “Is over here all right?”

“Umm, yes?” I’m not sure where else I would recommend he set it. There are minimal flat surfaces in here.

There’s the bed.

A single nightstand with an oversized lamp.

The table he’s standing beside—which I assume is meant to take meals at, as it has two chairs. It’s also next to the kitchen area where King Tiru found the bowl before. So I suppose it’s meant to be a dining area.

Which is adjacent to a sitting room with two sofas in the opposite corner. There’s enough seating for a party of six, but no tables. So while it’s a massive room, there are not many places for a bowl of water.

And a magical flower, I think.

“Is there, uh, anything I need to do to care for it?” I ask, still a bit confused as to how he thinks this bowl of water is going to keep the floral alive.

“No, little lei. It’s a gift.” He gives me an amused look as he spins the bowl, causing glittery sparks to rise off the water. “There’s nothing you need to do for it.”

“Most plants require food,” I begin, trying to explain. “But I guess, uh, picked flowers, well, don’t.”

His amusement seems to grow. “This is no ordinary flower, Ms. Kananaka. You’ll see.” He tugs his robe closed again and starts toward me. “We should eat. If you’re not interested in what’s on the tray, then—”

A hologram appears in his path, causing him to freeze. “There you are,” the female says, sounding exasperated. “Why aren’t you in your guest suite? I told you I would stop by to take you to lunch.”

He stares at her for a long moment. “My apologies, Princess Celina. I’ve been wandering the Elite Island.”

Princess Celina, I repeat in a thought, my brow furrowing. *Is she another visiting royal?*

How many are there in this year’s games?

Maybe it’s common. I’ve never been familiar with the identities of the monsters entering our world, just the types and realms they come from.

And even then, there are probably thousands I’ve never heard of, too.

“Trying to infuriate Zael?” the woman purrs, sounding intrigued.

“I don’t have to try to do that,” he returns flatly. “He’s perpetually irritated.”

The woman giggles, the sound grating on my nerves. Mostly because it sounds fake. And the way she brings a delicate hand up to her mouth—or what I assume is her mouth since I can't actually see her face—while shaking her slender shoulders is… annoying. "I approve, my king."

The possession underlying those last two words has me glaring at her pink head.

Pink hair.

Similar to mine.

Only her strands are tied up into a formal updo. And she's wearing a long gold dress that touches the floor.

Very different from my towel and lingerie.

Not that I should be comparing myself to her. Nor should I care that she's here and giggling at King Tiru. He obviously knows her. Unlike me.

Although, he did say I'm his fated mate.

Or that I might be.

If the companion flower survives… I glance at it, frowning as King Tiru asks, "How exactly did you find me, Celina?" The dropping of her title seems to be purposeful, as it has the other female's spine stiffening.

Though, it also might be his question—and the lethal tone underlining the words—that stirred her visible response. "I engaged the locator charm," she says slowly. "I was worried something may have happened to you."

"That's only authorized for use during an emergency," he says, that dangerous note still lingering in his voice. However, it's softened with his smile—one I see because the female before me is in hologram form and therefore translucent. "Just don't do it again, yeah?"

"No promises," she murmurs, her flirtatious tone suggesting she's batting her eyelashes at him. Or doing something similar, anyway. "Meet me for lunch. Now."

"Of course," he concedes with a slight bow of his head. "I'll leave Zael a note, then swim over to find you."

"Good." The visage disappears, and his smile instantly vanishes.

In fact, he looks exceptionally annoyed.

"Uh." I clear my throat. "Friend of yours?"

He glances up at me, almost like he forgot I was in the room. "*No*." It's an emphatic answer. "She means nothing to me. But I do need to go meet with her."

“Okay.” The word leaves my mouth in a normal voice. Yet my throat suddenly feels like it has sand in it. Which is strange.

“I promise to explain this to you later,” he tells me, his expression earnest.

My brow furrows. “Explain what?”

“Everything,” he vows, removing his robe. He hangs it on a hook near the seating area.

I didn’t even see it on the wall. But now I realize they’re all over the place, like the space was built to have items—*clothes*—hanging in every corner of the room.

“I’ll be back for you,” he says, suddenly in front of me again. Rather than crouch, he simply bends down to place a kiss on my forehead. “Eat something, lei. You’re going to need your strength later.”

With those ominous words, he turns and walks toward the swimming pool.

I should ask what he means by needing my strength.

Comment on my dislike for plain rice.

Something.

Anything other than *nothing*. All while staring at his firm backside.

Apparently, naked men render me stupid now. *Deliciously sculpted naked men. Naked men with perfect asses.*

Starfish, Miza, get yourself together, I mentally scold myself.

My lips part, words ready to rush forth, but then King Tiru glances at me over his shoulder and winks.

I have no idea what I was going to say now.

Not that it matters.

In the next instant, he executes a perfect dive into the water, his entry not stirring a single splash. It’s impressive. Admirable. *Infuriating*.

Because what just happened?

He called me his fated mate.

Talked to me about a companion floral.

Then left to go have lunch with another royal.

A very flirty royal.

With beautiful hair.

Curves.

And I’m certain she also possessed a pretty face.

Not that I should care about any of that. I literally just met King Tiru.

Well, kind of.

He yanked on me with his tentacles, then introduced himself. I guess that's a "meeting."

But it was interrupted by King Zael. *And* King Ika. Both of whom swam off. *Naked*.

Gods, that word is apparently the only one I know today.

"Stop," I mutter to myself. "Just *stop* thinking and eat."

I grab the tray, only to pause as my gaze lands on an envelope beside it with my name scripted across it.

Monsters, I think, picking up the item and opening it to scan the contents inside.

Elevator Designation: 12
Report Time: 18:00
Departure Time: 18:05
Evening Attire: Rack Night One – Closet
Be prepared for a long night on your feet.
Welcome to the real Monster Games.

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CHAPTER TEN

TIRU

Fuck. The moment Celina mentioned the locator charm, I nearly lost my shit in front of Miza.

That charm is only meant to be used if a visitor overstays his or her welcome in this realm. Or, as I said, in the case of an emergency.

My not arriving in my suite for a lunch does not qualify as a fucking emergency.

Celina engaging her access to the locator network is an abuse of power. Or perhaps she means it as a *display* of power.

Regardless, it's unacceptable.

I am not hers to manage. Nor did I ever agree to a lunch today.

But I didn't want to risk her throwing a royal fit in Miza's suite.

My connection to Miza is too new. A delicate discovery, one that's already tainted by Ika's meddling. I do not need Celina adding stress to the situation.

So I played along and agreed to meet her on Monster Island.

However, as soon as this dreaded lunch is over, I'm researching this fated-mate link to Miza.

And I'm going to start by locating her mother.

A human, I muse, startled and confused all over again. *Impossible*.

Krakens have only ever fate-matched with sirens. Mostly from Seren's home realm, but there have been a few pairings with sirens from other kingdoms, too.

But *always* sirens.

Never mortals.

Yet Miza is mortal. *With naturally pink hair*, I think, my brow furrowing. *Is that… normal?*

I've not researched humans much beyond the potential to keep them as mates. Not fated ones, just… companions, really. Which many of my kind have done since our fate-bonds seem to be nonexistent.

Though, I've never considered that as an option.

Mostly because of the dreaded contract.

The only type of mate I could ever take is one with connections to my soul. And humans are not supposed to be compatible in that manner.

Which means this destined link I feel to Miza could all be a trick, one orchestrated by Ika.

Except, my companion floral *thrived* beneath Miza's touch. The blossom practically glittered in her pretty hair, the colors bleeding into her skin with a natural kiss of power.

Gods, the way she looked on that lily pad…

I was sitting in my suite while the various Day of the Choosing ceremonies played on a myriad of translucent screens throughout the room. All of them on silent. But my attention was instantly pulled in her direction the moment the camera highlighted her.

It was a split second of time.

Panning to her just before she was yanked off her starting platform into the water.

Then showcased her spinning beneath the waves as a seaguard took her to the Elite Island Palace.

All I could see was my flower mingling with her hair. I stopped thinking and merely *reacted*. One click told me her designated suite. A single demand called my kraken into existence, shredding my clothes in the process.

And then I sprinted through the water to her intended location.

That damn seaguard was in my way, something I fixed with a swift tug on his fins.

Only after that did I give pause. Because I didn't want to frighten Miza. I simply wanted to *know* her. Which started with my tentacles roaming up her beautiful, stemlike legs to her waist.

She tried to escape a few times, causing my inner beast to react accordingly. It was a playful response, one meant to test her boundaries.

But then she said, “You know what? If you want to drown me, then drown me. I’m not going to fight you.”

Those comments made me realize that my actions were having an undesirable effect. So I slowly shifted into my human form and allowed myself to breach the surface.

It took serious restraint not to pull her into my arms and hold her. To fondle the flower in her hair. To *kiss* her.

My mating instinct hit me hard, causing my beast to growl inside. *Mine. Mine. Mine*. That word repeats in my head even now, the mantra one that nearly sends—

A wall of fire crosses my path, forcing me to halt my swim and spin downward into the ocean depths.

My kraken bellows beneath the waves, instantly furious.

Because there’s only one asshole capable of creating flames under water. *Zael*.

With an enraged roar, I whirl around and shoot upward to the surface. I’m partially shifted before I reach the top, my head hitting the air moments before Zael joins me in his dragon form.

“What the fuck?” I demand.

He narrows his ice-blue eyes—the color of which matches his glittering scales—and huffs out a breath before engaging his shift.

Right.

The Elite Island King might be able to create a waterproof inferno, but he can’t partially change forms. Some might mistake that as a weakness on his part. However, I know how fast he can transition. The only reason he’s taking his time right now is to test my patience.

Or perhaps he’s unsure of my intentions.

Well, the feeling there is fucking mutual.

“I realize we’ve not always seen eye to eye, *Elite Island King*, but I have every right to be in your waters for the games. If you have an issue with that, take it up with Seren.”

His human irises are the same color as his dragon’s, yet they’re somehow even more intense now as he glares at me. “The humans are still under my protection, Kraken King.”

“I’m aware of the rules, *Your Highness*.” I can’t help the sarcasm. We’re equals who are speaking in formal terms, using them as barbs rather than words of reverence. “Explain your issue, Zael. Be blunt and I’ll return the favor.”

“You’re already aware of my grievance. Unless your little pet cephlalosune didn’t deliver my message?”

I stare at him. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Which cephlalosune? And why were you talking to one?”

He arches a brow. “Yes. The one Miza refers to as *KiKi*?” He phrases it as a question, like it should somehow magically provoke my comprehension of his commentary.

“Miza knows a cephlalosune?” I return, confused as fuck. “That’s impossible.” They live in my realm, not this one. And they’re under my command. “I’ve not issued orders for any of them to visit this world.”

Although, had I known of Miza’s existence before today, I absolutely would have sent an army of them here to guard her.

They’re protectors.

Maybe one of them somehow knew…? I think, frowning. “What did the cephlalosune look like?”

“Like a cephlalosune,” he deadpans.

“That’s helpful,” I return in the same tone. “Thank you.”

“She had your colors—purple and blue—marking her as royal. Green eyes. Chatty little thing. And seems to like being called *KiKi*.” That eyebrow of his inches upward even more, nearly reaching his dark hairline. “Sound familiar?”

My teeth grind together. “Sounds like every cephlalosune in my palace.”

“Thus making the *description* a waste of time,” he drawls. “Yeah?”

I roll my neck, the tension mounting there becoming a little too much. “What did you tell the cephlalosune?”

“That I don’t tolerate rule breakers on my islands. The humans are *mine*. Courting one before the games is unacceptable.” His gaze narrows. “What I can’t figure out is *how* you knew five years ago that she would enter the games.”

I gape at him. “What?”

“Your cephlalosune has been guarding Miza for five years.”

“That’s not possible.”

“So you keep saying. And yet…” He trails off, his expression expectant.

Five years, I repeat to myself, trying to understand how… “Oh.” *Five. Years.* That’s about when Ika started fucking around in my realm.

Visiting me.

Claiming we were meant to be “frenemies,” not “enemies.”

I’ve always ignored his antics and made-up terms, but he’s been rather persistent of late.

And visiting more and more…

I finish shifting into my human form, my tentacles disappearing as my legs take shape. “Where’s Ika?” I demand. “Did he fly off somewhere?”

Zael doesn’t immediately reply, his silence testing my patience. “He’s… currently indisposed.”

Now it’s my turn to cock a brow. “Indisposed?” I tilt my head, suddenly curious. “How?”

“Let’s just say that I reminded him who the king is in this realm,” Zael replies, a threat lingering in his words.

Which, naturally, has me responding, “Oh? Cain stopped by for a visit?” My reference to the Elite City King causes Zael’s eyes to narrow once more.

There are multiple kings and queens in this world, all of them guarding human populations while preparing for annual Monsters Night or Monster Games events.

I’ve met several of them.

But Cain is one who I know often irks Zael. Mostly because the males are well matched in strength and power, which means neither male will bow to the other.

It makes me even more grateful for my much smaller home realm. One king. One sea. A myriad of creatures. *Peace*. The only potential contender I’ll ever have to deal with is my younger brother, Uriah.

Very unlike Zael, who faces constant threats in this realm.

“I would drown that dreamwalking asshole if he entered my islands, and he fucking knows it,” Zael informs me, voice flat.

Dreamwalking asshole is clearly Zael’s pet name for King Cain.

My lips twitch. “Your arrogance certainly rivals that of the Elite City King.”

I don’t know Cain well, my visits having mostly been to the Monster Islands rather than the mainland. But we’ve met in passing. And I spoke to

him just long enough to learn that he's as condescendingly confident as the dragon in front of me.

Not that I wish to discuss it further.

"How long will Ika be *indisposed*?" I ask, my smile fading as I return our conversation to the subject at hand. "He has the answer you're seeking regarding my cephlalosune. Answers I would like to hear, too."

Zael falls quiet again, his gaze assessing.

I fucking hate his contemplative silences. They're a show of power. One of which I'm only bowing to right now because I don't want to get caught in a net of underwater flames.

While I can absolutely outswim him, he's right when he says these are *his* islands. The sea answers to him. Not to me. And I really don't want to fight at the moment. Besides, we're mostly on the same side here—*against Ika*.

"Look," I go on. "I don't know what that meddler is up to, but he's been fucking with me for the last few years. Now, he's making it seem as though Miza might be my fated mate. I want to know if there's any truth to that."

My heart gives a pang in my chest, my inner beast not liking me questioning the blossoming link to Miza.

But this could all be some twisted game on Ika's part.

One he may have started playing with me five years ago. *Assuming he took a cephlalosune from my realm.*

I run my fingers through my damp hair, my legs still kicking as the water moves around us. It feels nice to be buoyant in the middle of the waves. Powerful. *Like home*.

Yet my heart is beating a mile a minute in my chest as I question everything I *feel* versus everything I *know*.

Being with Miza… Gods, she felt right. She felt like my other half. Like I was finally *whole*.

But *knowing* Ika is involved just makes me question what's real and what's fabricated.

"Let's pretend—"

Zael abruptly stops speaking, his suspicious gaze turning toward the horizon as energy stirs nearby.

I follow his glowering stare, my own eyes narrowing. "Celina," I growl, irritated that she's once again interrupting a conversation.

I just told her not to use the locator charm on me fifteen or twenty minutes ago. Yet here she comes, her tainted aroma clouding my senses. *Lilacs and citrus.* Those scents somehow break through the ocean mist, yet her salty brine undertone still exists.

A fragrance of lies, I growl as my kraken bristles inside.

If I ever find the source of that deceitful perfume, I'm going to fucking burn it.

"What is the meaning of this?" Zael demands. "Trying to lure me into a trap?"

I roll my eyes. "You're the one who caught me in a net of fire, Dragon King. And I have no desire to *trap* you."

However, I do have a desire to shift back into my monster form and flee.

But I don't add that last part out loud.

"We'll need to continue our conversation after tonight's welcome ceremony," I continue, unable to mask the irritation in my tone. "I have an… appointment."

"Appointment?" he echoes as Celina's pink head pops up out of the water, her black gaze glittering like obsidian rocks as she looks at Zael.

The annoyance in her facial features only intensifies when she shifts her attention to me.

"There you are," she says, her voice matching her expression. "I thought you were done playing with Zael?"

"Playing with…?" Zael begins to repeat. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"We were just chatting," I interject, not wanting Zael to make this any worse than it already is.

I don't know what Celina will do if she finds out I was in an Offering's room. Technically, there's nothing she can do. But my instincts are screaming at me not to reveal any details about Miza.

And I trust my damn instincts.

"Zael caught me lurking around his palace as I was leaving," I add, staring at him while I voice the lie. "He decided to accompany me back to Monster Island. Or that's what I assume, anyway. I was in the process of asking him just now."

He doesn't visibly react to my words, his age and wisdom keeping his expression stoic. "*Accompany* might be a light term."

“Escorting?” I offer. “*Guiding*, perhaps?”

“Just stay off my island,” he mutters.

“That’s going to be difficult, given tonight’s event,” I tell him. “As I said already, I’m authorized to be here, Zael. Get used to it.”

“You’re not going to turn this into a problem, are you, Zael?” Celina interjects, her voice holding a taunting trill to it. “Because Tiru isn’t just here for the games. He’s my betrothed, after all.”

I fight the urge to wince.

Fortunately, Zael’s stoic mask vanishes as shock steals his expression. “*Betrothed*?”

Celina swims up to my side, her fin brushing my leg beneath the water and causing my inner beast to growl in warning. He’s seconds away from ripping through my skin and drowning her beneath his tentacles.

I thought restraining myself from touching Miza was hard earlier.

I was wrong.

Not erupting in a wave of violence is hard.

Because siren princess or no, I do *not* like this foul-smelling creature touching me.

“Why, yes,” Celina practically purrs, her hand now on my arm. “Didn’t Tiru tell you?”

“Our engagement will only be finalized if I don’t find a mate in the Monster Games,” I remind her in as gentle a tone as I can muster.

Which isn’t that gentle at all.

Mostly because my beast is still roaring inside me.

“A *fated* mate,” she returns, her dark eyes slitting. “Something your kind hasn’t found in thousands of years, yes?”

I give her a tight smile as I kick my feet away from her fin and put some much-needed distance between us. “Did you use the locator charm to find me again?” I ask her, changing the subject. “Because you were ‘worried’?” I can’t help the note of sarcasm in my voice.

Politics bore me.

And I’m exhausted by the need to be nice to someone my father tied me to without my consent.

Someone who keeps finding me by abusing her power.

I’ve only been in this realm for a few hours. If her behavior today is anything to go by, it’s going to be a long few weeks.

Or a very long fucking existence.

“You activated the locator charm?” Zael demands, taking over the conversation.

Celina rolls her eyes. “The visiting monsters are not under your jurisdiction, Zael. So don’t even bother concerning yourself with this matter.” She looks at me. “Shall we go eat now, love?”

My jaw ticks.

My monster snarls.

And my desire to be cordial sinks to the bottom of the ocean.

“No.” It’s a sharp response, one I probably shouldn’t voice. But fuck this. I am *not* her love. Her mate. Her any-fucking-thing. And I am *not* her damn pet. “I’m a king, Celina. A visiting royal. I do not appreciate you trying to keep me on a leash. Think about that for the afternoon. Perhaps we’ll discuss it more this evening.”

With that, I engage my kraken and let him rip through my skin on a roar of power.

Power I want her to feel. To know. To *understand*.

We might be betrothed through a deal struck by our parents, but that doesn’t mean I’ll ever fucking kneel to her.

The only one I’ll ever bow to is my fated mate.

Gods, I would happily go to my knees for Miza, I think, picturing it in my head as my kraken shoots me through the water.

As far as I’m concerned, Celina and Zael can finish the conversation.

I’m done.

I need to swim as far away from them as possible. Away from the islands. Away from anyone who can disrupt the fantasy unfolding inside my mind.

Her naked body sprawled out on the bed. Pink hair fanning the pillows. Full lips parting on a moan. Blue eyes glimmering with passion as I crawl up toward her splayed thighs.

Oh, yes, I would feast on her all day and night. Kneel for hours, days, *weeks*, at a time. Whatever she desired.

Which is insane, as I don’t even know if she’s truly mine yet.

Fate or a ruse?

Fucking Ika.

And fucking Zael, too.

Both dragons are going to be a problem.

One might be messing with me, and the other is overprotective.

Why does Zael even care? I wonder as I push myself out to sea, needing a deep ditch to explore. *Because I'm involved? Or is it something else entirely?*

I frown, considering the possibilities that fall into the *something else* category. Possibilities such as *mutual interest*.

Gods, if he fancies Miza, we're going to have a problem. I don't mind sharing a mate, if that's her choice. But sharing a mate with the Elite Island King?

No.

Absolutely not.

There is no way in all the oceans that I could ever be in a mate-circle with that pompous prick of a dragon king.

We would kill each other.

Or worse…

We'd end up hurting our intended mate.

I shiver, my beast releasing a low growl in irritation at sensing my inner turmoil. He might not understand my thoughts, but he understands intentions and feelings. Feelings like *guilt*.

Fuck, hurting Miza is the last thing I could ever do.

Which means I have to accept whatever and *whomever* she chooses.

I'm just not sure Zael could ever do the same.

Assuming he even wants her, I mutter to myself. *But who wouldn't? She's gorgeous. And her scent… all citrus blossoms with a subtle bite of cinnamon.*

I caught it the moment I surfaced in the water in her room, my nose touching the air and forcing me to inhale deeply for what felt like the first time in my long life.

I don't know how much of that reaction was to the flower in her hair, or Ika's meddling, or simply… *her*.

But I intend to find out.

Tonight, at the welcome party, I'll ask Miza Kananaka to dance. And I'll see if she still smells like fate *without* the flower in her hair.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

MIZA

I LOOK LIKE A WATERFALL.

Rather, this *dress* resembles a waterfall.

It's blue lace with translucent fabric along my torso and arms, making it look like I'm covered in water droplets. And the skirt flows with thick layers from my hips down to the floor, but only at the back, leaving my legs exposed in the front.

I run my palms across the corset-style middle, noting how the sheer areas complement my pale skin. The pattern covers my nipples, hiding the rosy color from view. But my breasts are extremely visible, just like in my Day of the Choosing attire.

So it's basically lingerie in dress form, I muse, frowning at my reflection. *Yet it's undeniably elegant.*

There's a pair of silver heels that I'm meant to wear, too. I try them on and practice walking through my room with them, wanting to ensure I don't fall later.

I'm halfway through the room when a dragon head pops up from the watering hole and looks at me with light blue eyes swirled with glittering gold. I blink, somewhat mesmerized by the beautiful beast. His scales are a dark purple, but his horns are black and his wing-like fins match the golden flecks in his eyes.

"Hello," I whisper.

The dragon blinks, then vanishes from sight.

Literally.

Not… not in a “swam back down into the hole” kind of way, but in a “no longer exists” manner.

Yet I *hear* him moving.

My lips part as water droplets appear on the floor, the creature clearly entering my room in its invisible state.

Then everything goes still.

No water droplets.

No footprints.

Just that initial shifting of water onto the floor. And now… *nothing*.

“Ika?” I whisper, guessing it’s him since he did something similar earlier.

Well. Not similar, exactly. He simply materialized behind me without a word. But something tells me this is him again.

Or maybe I just *hope* it’s him.

“Hello, little siren,” he murmurs, causing me to spin around as I search for him.

“Why are you invisible?” I ask him, still whispering.

“Because I’m naked,” he replies, his voice near my ear. “And we can’t afford any distractions right now, thanks to Zael’s little firebomb. So now we only have time for work. But afterward…” He trails off, his presence seeming to disappear.

I wait for him to say more or to show himself.

I frown when he doesn’t.

“Ika?”

No reply.

“Ika?” I hiss his name again, stalking off toward my bathroom and wondering if he went in there.

When I enter the closet, I find him zipping up a pair of black dress pants.

“Miss me?” he asks, his lips quirking up at the edges.

I blink as he grabs a black dress shirt from the dowel rod beside him. I didn’t pay much attention to this section when I picked out my gown, as I was focused on locating the rack labeled *Night One*. There doesn’t appear to be a label on this area, though. Yet it’s full of suits, ones that remind me of Zael’s preferred attire.

Or what I’ve always seen Zael wear, anyway.

Ika fastens the buttons of his shirt in quick succession, hiding his muscular torso from my view. I feel a strange sense of disappointment, which causes my brow to furrow. Because I shouldn't be feeling *sad* or focusing on his athletic physique.

Or admiring how good he looks in all black.

I should be asking, "Why are you here?"

"To help you with your hair," he replies without missing a beat.

"M-my hair?" I stammer, frowning at him. "Why?" I pick up one of the strands to examine the slightly curled ends. "You're not here to dye it, are you?" I can't help the wary question. Because I really don't want to change my natural color. But I don't admit that aloud, as I can't exactly argue with a monster, let alone a *king*.

Ika's dark eyes widen. "Gods, no. I wouldn't dare to disturb your beautiful color. I merely wanted to offer my assistance in performing an updo."

I stare at him. "A what?"

His lips twitch. "An *updo*." He unfastens the ends of his sleeves and starts rolling the fabric up one of his arms. His muscles flex with the movement, drawing my gaze downward for a moment. "I want to expose your neck."

My gaze flies back up to him. "Why?"

"Because it's sexy," he murmurs. "Makes men think about kissing your pulse. Grabbing your throat. Putting a collar on you. *Marking* you." His eyes go to my hair. "And as for the updo, it'll taunt Zael and Tiru. They'll spend all night thinking about how their hands will look in these beautiful, silky waves of yours."

He finishes rolling up his opposite sleeve, leaving both his forearms exposed, and claps his hands together, distracting me from his words.

"Right. Let's get to work." He grabs my hip to turn me toward the door, then slides his palm to my lower back to give me a nudge. "Go back into the bathroom and stand by the floor-length mirror. I'll be right there."

His hand disappears, leaving me oddly unsteady as I try to hobble over to the area he indicated. My heels suddenly seem… dangerous. Unstable. *Impractical*.

Yet, before I can consider slipping out of the shoes, Ika returns. "You look gorgeous in this dress, little siren," he murmurs, his lips near my ear as he pulls my hair back with his hands. "I especially like your legs."

He openly admires my reflection, causing my cheeks to heat in response.

“Thank you.” The words escape me automatically, like my mouth is somehow functioning despite my fractured brain. “Why would someone want to grab my throat?” I blurt out the question as all his words start replaying through my head, specifically the ones about why he wants to *expose my neck*.

His eyes meet mine in the mirror, his dark brown irises seeming to glimmer. “Because we monsters like to dominate our prey, little siren.” He leans down to press a kiss to my neck, his gaze still holding mine. “Your delicate neck calls to our inner beasts, making us want to nip, bite, and *claim*.”

I shiver. “Oh.” I swallow. “What if…? What if I don’t…?” I trail off, uncertain of how to voice my concern. Uncertain of even *why* I’m trying to speak. I know better. He’s my superior. A potential… a potential mate, maybe. A… a *king*. I can’t question anything he’s saying. I’m meant to bow. To compete. *To die*.

He frowns. “Finish that question.”

I shake my head. “It’s nothing. Never mind. Forget I spoke. Please.”

“No.” He uses his grip in my hair to gently turn me around to face him, his opposite hand going to my chin to hold me before him. “Talk to me, Miza. What’s troubling you? Do you not want to expose your neck?”

He immediately releases my hair, his fingers suddenly combing through the strands to decorate my shoulders.

“Is that better?” he asks, his tone strangely soft.

I stare at him, at a loss for words. Confused by his presence. By *him*. “Why are you trying to please me?”

“Why wouldn’t I try to please you?” he counters. “You’re my future, Miza.”

“Your future?” I echo in a whisper, even more confused.

“Yes.” He tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. “You’re Tiru’s and Zael’s future, too. But they haven’t quite figured that out yet. Hence my desire to… encourage them along.” He gives one of my strands a playful tug. “However, if you don’t want them thinking about your throat or your neck, that’s fine.”

“I don’t know if that’s what I want or not,” I admit, suddenly feeling the urge to explain myself. I barely know this male. This *dragon*. But

something about him is oddly familiar. And his mention of the future has me feeling all sorts of tingles in my belly. “Will thinking about my neck lead them to wanting to grab my throat?”

“Absolutely.”

“To hurt me?” I guess.

He tilts his head again, like he did in the closet. “Hmm,” he hums, his gaze seeming to darken as he steps into my personal space and walks me back into the mirrored wall behind me. “I think I see the problem.”

“Problem?” I repeat.

He nods. “Yes.” His hand leaves my hair, his palm wrapping around my throat as he settles his body against mine, his mouth suddenly an inch from my own.

My eyes widen. My heart kick-starts. And my breath… I… I think I forget how to breathe, actually. Because he’s so close. *Too* close.

Except, I like it.

He’s warm. Hard. *Overwhelming*.

“Inhale, sweetheart,” he commands.

For whatever reason, I obey, my lungs inflating as his scent washes over me. *Warm coconuts, roasting on a fire,* I think, instantly dizzy. Such a specific aroma. So potent. *So powerful*.

Because it reminds me of quiet nights on the beach, indulging in a campfire as it sizzles into nonexistence. A rare occurrence for our village. But it’s one of the few gatherings that seemed to be solely for us, not for the monsters we were destined to serve.

How ironic that this dragon reminds me of that glimpse of freedom.

His palm on my throat, though, grounds me in the present. In my *reality,* where I’m being pressed up against a mirror with his much larger, more powerful form holding me hostage.

He strokes my pulse, causing me to shiver. It’s a tender motion, one that’s at odds with his domineering position. His opposite hand goes to my hip, his touch burning me through the thin fabric as he bends his head to run his nose along the column of my neck.

“Gods, you smell divine, little siren,” he whispers. “Like a coconut colada with a splash of orange zest.” His lips brush my tender skin. “All I want to do is sink my teeth into your pretty throat and see if you taste as good as I think you do.”

His voice is rough, his tone deepening to a low baritone that has my thighs clenching in response. I… I should probably be terrified. And maybe I am. But the quivering inside me doesn't seem to be grounded in fear. It's a tremble caused by something else entirely.

"Seeing you in this dress has me struggling to maintain control of my urges." He utters the words softly, like a confession, his mouth reaching my ear once more. "And exposing your neck just encourages me more, makes me want to take you right here against this wall."

I swallow, uncertain of how to respond to his wicked words.

"I would keep my hand here." He squeezes my throat slightly. "Hold you in place while I devour your mouth. Kiss you until you can't breathe. Then use my other hand to bunch up this tight dress of yours and expose your slick heat."

He presses his lower half against me, stirring a moan from my chest as warmth floods my core.

I'm picturing what he's saying. *Understanding* his dark desires. And suddenly, all I feel is intense heat in every part of my body.

I'm shaking on the outside now. Truly shuddering.

His thumb brushes my pulse again, his lips leaving my ear to pepper kisses down my neck as his palm tightens on my throat.

My breath catches, my ability to inhale seemingly gone. Only to return in a flash, and I'm dizzy all over again, trying to determine what I want, what's real, what's *happening*.

Ika's handsome face is before me, his dark eyes capturing and holding mine. This dragon king no longer seems like a stranger. His scent makes me feel grounded in familiarity. Home at a bonfire. Roasting coconuts. Reveling in the midnight air.

"This, Miza," he says, his low voice ensnaring my focus and drawing my attention to his full lips. "*This* is why I want to expose your neck. To entice Tiru and Zael to stroke your throat. Just like I am now. Not to hurt you or to harm you, but to *seduce* you." Those last two words are spoken against my mouth.

I move forward, desiring more.

But Ika takes a step back and releases me before I can kiss him.

I immediately feel… cold. And alone. And *naive*. I blink several times, trying to wake myself up from whatever fog he just wove around me.

“Trust me, little siren, I want to kiss you, too. But the countdown is about to sound, and if we’re going to put your hair up, it needs to happen now.”

My brow furrows, the word *countdown* about to leave my mouth as a question when a loud *bong* rings through the suite, making me jump.

“And there it is,” he mutters. “Fucking Zael and his firebomb. I will absolutely be returning the favor later.” He walks over to a nearby makeup area and starts pulling out supplies. “Choose, Miza. Hair up or down?”

I have half a mind to say *down* because I’m annoyed over our almost kiss and whatever magic he just wove over me.

But I kind of want to see what Ika will do with my hair.

So I decide to be brave and say, “Up.”

The smile he gives me almost makes that response worth it. “Excellent choice, gorgeous. Now face the mirror again. We only have fifteen minutes to get this done. And we’re going to need at least three of those for the flower.”

I frown. “The flower?”

He grins. “Yes. The companion floral. I plan to put it in your hair as the centerpiece. Tiru is going to fucking love it…”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

ZAEL

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, *Seren isn't coming*?" I demand, glaring at the overdressed opera singer in front of me. "She always delivers the opening ceremonies."

"Yes, but this year, Her Royal Highness felt it was appropriate for Princess Celina to do the honors," Huntz informs me in his trilling tones. "And as this is our jurisdiction now, we are within our rights to conduct this change. I'm merely informing you as—"

"A courtesy," I finish for him. "Yes. Thank you for being *courteous*. Now allow me to return the favor."

I step into his personal space and force him to feel the heat of my dragon through his pompous penguin-like suit. He tries to step back. However, a low growl from me holds him captive.

Huntz might like to pretend he has authority here, but he recognizes real power when it stares him down.

"Tell *Her Royal Highness* that I will be visiting with her first thing tomorrow. She'd better be available, or I'll hunt her down and make her available. Do we understand each other, *Emissary*?" My tone is calm. Deep. *Purposeful*. And ensures he understands the threat underlying each word.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he replies, the melodic quality of his voice vanishing beneath his raspy response. "I'll let Her Royal Highness know."

"Good." I reach out to tug on his straight tie, purposely causing it to go askew because I know he'll hate it. "Enjoy the party, Huntz."

With a polite smile, I leave him shaking against the wall.

Mariana arches a brow at me from across the room, no doubt curious as to what I've done to the Monster Island Emissary. If he were *my* emissary, I would fire him for being such a sniveling coward.

But Seren has always preferred a weak court to a strong one.

That's one of the many areas we differ in when it comes to our leadership styles.

I believe a king is only as powerful as his allies.

Which is why I surround myself with strength.

Case in point, Mariana. She's part stealth dragon, part water vampire. Which makes her exceptionally intense. Fortunately, she doesn't fancy royal titles, or she might have challenged me decades ago for my position as the Elite Island King.

"What did you do to poor Huntz?" she asks, appearing at my side in a blink.

Her teleportation skill is one of the talents I envy in her.

And a talent I envy in Ika, too, I think, scowling inside. I hate that I envy that asshole for anything. But I can't deny he's a formidable adversary.

Mariana looks pointedly at the overdressed opera singer as he fixes his tie, his arms still shaking. "I let him feel the heat of my dragon," I say conversationally. "I don't think he enjoyed it."

My second-in-command snorts. "Most water creatures dislike fire, Z."

"Do they?" I ask, feigning innocence. "I had no idea."

She rolls her black eyes. "What did he do to deserve your ire?"

"What hasn't he done?" I mutter, running my fingers through my hair as I take in the growing crowd.

"Zael."

"Mariana," I return, adding the same stress to her name as she did to mine.

She gives me a look.

I grin.

Then I tell her what the asshole opera singer said about tonight's opening ceremony.

"She's trying to provoke you," Mariana surmises, causing me to nod in agreement. "I vote we let this play out. If Celina fails, as I imagine you expect her to, then the royal cuntcake can clean up her mess."

“You don’t anticipate her failure?” I inquire, catching Mariana’s choice of words.

My second shrugs. “I learned long ago to never underestimate an opponent based on age alone.”

I study her and nod. “A wise outlook.”

“I know.”

My lips twitch at her arrogant reply. “All right. Let’s see what Celina can do.” She certainly didn’t impress me all that much in the waves today. The moment Tiru reminded her of his kingly status, she visibly bristled and huffed in his wake.

Then glanced at me and said, “I hope you’re happy.”

And with that, she swam off without another word.

Like his dismissal of her was somehow *my* fault.

She was the one abusing her power by tracking him with the locator charm. I’m surprised he didn’t try to drown her with his tentacles.

Which reminds me… “Are you aware that Tiru and Celina are *betrothed*?” I ask Mariana.

A startled expression crosses my second’s face, telling me this is news to her. “*What*?”

I nod. “Yes. Apparently, they’re set to wed if he doesn’t find a mate during the games.”

Mariana doesn’t respond right away, her black gaze seeming to take on an infuriated gleam as her jaw clenches. “I see.” The two words are bitten out, her ire somewhat surprising.

I suppose she’s pissed that Seren’s firming up her alliance with another realm, thus bolstering her power via her daughter.

It should probably infuriate me, too. But I saw Tiru’s reaction to Celina today. He has no interest in mating her.

He does, however, appear to have an interest in Miza.

Now it’s time for *my* jaw to clench. My inner beast does *not* approve of Tiru’s obvious intrigue. Or Ika’s, for that matter.

Why her? I wonder. *Why are both of my rivals drawn to* her*?*

Of all the candidates, it has to be the one who caught my eye, too.

Granted, I primarily noticed her because of the cephlalosune swimming around her in the water. And that’s directly linked to Tiru, and likely Ika, too.

So maybe I’m not actually taken with the girl, just attracted to whatever game my rivals are playing.

Regardless of the cause, I’m going to ensure neither of those assholes wins Miza in the end. She deserves better. Not to say *better* is me, but I just… I just *can’t* let her end up with Ika or Tiru.

“We can’t let that happen,” Mariana says, causing my lips to curl down.

She has a lot of talents, but mind reading isn’t one of them. “Let what happen, exactly?”

Mariana looks at me like I’ve grown two heads. “Let Tiru and Celina *mate*.”

Oh. Right. That. Yes. Oddly, that doesn’t sound nearly as horrible to me as Tiru mating Miza.

Which is clearly a problem.

Because, obviously, strengthening the relationship between Seren and the Cephalopoda Realm is a much bigger threat than Miza choosing Tiru.

Why my beast seems to disagree is an issue I’ll resolve later.

For now, I focus on my second and nod. “Agreed.”

“Then he needs to find a mate in the games.” Mariana frowns at the growing crowd. “You studied the candidates. Which one will suit him?”

I fold my arms and fight the urge to scowl. I *loathe* that I know the answer to her question. And I refuse to provide it. “I’m not a matchmaker,” I tell her instead, not wanting to lie to my best friend. “Let’s just see how tonight goes.”

I still need to finish my chat with Tiru, anyway.

And I want to see Miza.

I wasn’t provided with an opportunity to check on her earlier. For whatever reason, I want to make sure she’s okay. All the commotion in her room earlier was… unexpected. Unplanned. *Unfortunate*. So many ways I could describe that chaotic event.

Fucking Ika.

Fucking Tiru, too.

Fuck them both, I think with a snarl.

“I can see this development bothers you as much as it bothers me,” Mariana murmurs, sounding amused. “Good. I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“When are we not on the same page?” I ask her.

“Touché.” She appears to be visibly relaxed now, something I wish I felt, too. But I don’t. This whole situation has me on edge.

And it’s worsened as Celina takes the stage to address the visiting supernaturals.

“Welcome!” She smiles so broadly I’m surprised her face doesn’t fall apart.

Mariana observes with a wary expression, one I can’t even muster.

This is a waste of my time.

“You enjoy this shit show,” I tell her. “I’m going to go check on the humans.”

Especially Miza.

But I don’t share that part with Mariana.

Not that she appears to be listening to me anyway. She’s utterly focused on Celina, as is everyone else in the room.

Well, not *everyone*.

Particularly, a set of dark eyes that are on me. Ones that have me narrowing my own in response. It seems my firebomb didn’t knock Ika out for as long as I would have liked.

Not surprising.

He’s a dynamic nuisance.

Something he drives home now by jerking his chin toward the back of the room and vanishing. I grit my teeth and debate ignoring his summons.

I don’t report to him.

I don’t even have to respect him.

But I do want answers in regard to what he’s been doing with Miza. The cephlalosune. Tiru’s flower.

Fuck.

I start forward, weaving through the crowd while Celina carries on from the platform. She’s putting on quite the performance, confirming that she’s taken ample notes from her mother.

Great, I think. *Two over-the-top, diva-like siren royals are just what I need in my waters.*

My teeth grind together, my irritation mounting, only to reach a crescendo as Tiru steps into my path. “We need to finish our conversation,” he tells me in a low voice.

“I’m not the one who swam off in a fit of rage earlier,” I remind him flatly. “And shouldn’t you be up on the stage with your *betrothed*?”

His irises gleam like freshly polished silver. But he ignores my commentary entirely and demands, “Where’s Ika?”

“Present,” Ika says, materializing beside us. “Did you miss me, Your Crankiness?”

Tiru takes a step forward, his muscles bulging beneath his fitted suit. “You’d better start talking, and fast.”

Ika gives him a confused look. “Do you have tentacles in your ears again? I’m rather certain I was just speaking. Was it the speed that bothered you? BecauseIcanfixthat.” The last sentence is spoken as a single word, one I barely comprehend.

“Stop,” I say, cutting them both off before this conversation spirals into the depths of the ocean. “This isn’t the place for our discussion.” We’re within earshot of several visiting supernaturals, most of whom have started to glance our way with a little too much interest. “Let’s take a—”

“And now, without further ado, I present this year’s Monster Games Offerings!” Celina practically shouts into the microphone, causing the hairs along the back of my neck to rise.

Because this isn’t the usual order of things.

Typically, Seren makes a speech, welcoming the supernaturals. They mingle. Ask questions. Prepare for the night’s festivities. Then I am asked to come introduce the humans because they’re under *my* jurisdiction.

That should be thirty minutes from now.

Which means the mistress of ceremonies isn’t the only aspect of tonight that was changed without my approval.

She fucking altered the schedule, too.

Something that becomes abundantly clear as the doors open and my seaguards begin leading the parade of Offerings.

My seaguards. Mine.

What. The. Fuck?

I meet Mariana’s gaze from across the room and find her staring right back at me with a look of alarm.

I don’t know who authorized this shit show. However, I’m going to find out. And that betrayer is going to pay dearly for defying my orders.

This is *my* palace. *My* island. *My* humans.

I don’t know what Seren is trying to accomplish, but this game ends tonight. Because I’m done playing. It’s time to remind that seacunt who I am.

The Elite Island King.

I take a step forward, only to be rendered motionless by Miza entering the room in a stunning blue gown, one that shimmers at the top and reveals far too much skin.

It's normal attire.

Everyone is dressed that way.

But I suddenly want to rush over to drape my jacket across her shoulders. Particularly as I notice Ika and Tiru openly appraising her. Along with every other individual in the room.

She's fucking stunning.

Glittering like a damn sapphire beneath the lights.

Capturing the attention of far too many would-be suitors.

That's her job. Her purpose. *Her destiny*.

And yet I'm struggling to accept it.

I need to go hunt Seren down and demand that she kneel. Except all I want to do now is make Miza kneel for entirely different reasons.

Or, fuck, kneel for her instead.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, needing to fix my resolve. To alter my frame of mind. To remember my fucking role as *king*.

"She's wearing my flower again," Tiru breathes.

"I know," Ika murmurs. "You're welcome, by the way."

I glance at both men and watch as Tiru slowly looks at Ika. "Excuse me?"

Ika smiles his trademark impish grin. "I played with her hair."

"When?" Tiru and I demand at the same time.

"Aww, this is great!" Ika claps, clearly delighted by whatever fuckery he's up to now. "Look at you both already embracing the mate-circle. Well done, team."

My brow furrows, utterly lost.

But Tiru doesn't seem all that confused. Instead, he grabs Ika by the throat and walks him backward into a wall. "Stop. Fucking. Around."

Ika merely smiles and replies, "Never."

Then the bastard vanishes.

Tiru growls. "I'm going to kill him."

"I'll help," I promise. "Although, first…" I return my focus to Miza as she's surrounded by suitors. "We need to fix *that*." I might not want to share Miza with Tiru, but I recognize him as an ally in this fight.

Except he grabs my wrist when I start toward our target. “Hold on,” he says, his voice low. “I don’t think this is the right move.”

“Excuse me?” I glance at him, irritated by him questioning my decision. “She’s being swarmed over there.”

“Yes, I know. But this is exactly what Ika wants.”

Everything stills inside me, my instincts quieting as I listen to what Tiru is saying.

“And I’m not sure it’s best for Celina to see me with Miza,” he adds, his words barely a whisper. “I can’t explain it here. You were right when you said this wasn’t the place for a discussion. We need to meet later.”

I consider his statements and look over to see the siren in question staring right at us. More specifically, his hand on my wrist.

Another sweep of the room reveals Ika near Miza, his dark eyes on us, not her.

My jaw ticks.

Tiru’s right. Something’s amiss. “Where do you want to meet?”

“Wherever the locator charm doesn’t work,” he mutters.

I finally look at him again. “I might have a way to help you with that.”

“Then you name the location and time, and I’ll be there.”

It takes me another moment to utter a suggestion.

“That won’t work,” he starts. “Celina—”

“It’ll work because you’re going to hit me,” I tell him. “Or you’re going to try to, anyway.” I tilt my chin. “Go on then, Kraken King. Give it your best shot.”

“What?”

“It’ll explain my knocking you out.”

“*What*?” he echoes.

“Trust me.”

“Not a chance in the seas,” he hisses back, visibly agitated now.

I roll my eyes. “Well, then at least this’ll look real. Because it certainly *feels* real.”

“What the fuck are you—”

I introduce my fist to his jaw, causing him to stumble back with a shocked expression. That expression quickly morphs into aggression, though, as his beast takes over.

He charges forward, his fist forming as his arm rises.

Which is when I hit him with a bolt of power—the same one I used on Ika—and send the Kraken King to the floor.

The room instantly falls silent, all eyes on me as I make a show of fixing my tie.

“Welcome to the Elite Island Palace,” I tell them, my casual tone reverberating throughout the ballroom on a note of energy I’m certain *everyone* can feel.

Particularly, *Celina*.

But just in case she can’t sense my vitality swimming through the air, I use a button on my watch to project myself across every inch of the space, lighting up the walls with my royal colors—sky blue and gold—and ensure my words reach everyone on the island.

“I apologize for the delayed introduction,” I go on, meeting Celina’s gaze. She’s still up on my platform—the one holding *my* throne—and standing beside it like she’s thinking about taking it.

Try, I dare her with my eyes. *Fucking. Try.*

Then I refocus on everyone else, including the little camera recording me from my watch, and smile. It’s not friendly. It’s a warning. A chilling *reality* of who I am and what I can do. All without breaking a sweat or exerting a single ounce of effort.

“I was busy handling a security concern. Please remember that the humans are *mine* to protect. Any perceived slight against that rule will be dealt with swiftly…” I trail off, glancing at Tiru’s unconscious form. “And *efficiently*.”

Searching the crowd, I spy two of my seaguards lingering near the open water hole at the center of the ballroom and nod at them.

“Cork. Jan. Please escort the Kraken King back to his quarters. I believe my warning has been… *sufficiently* delivered.” Those last two lines are spoken for Celina, as are the ones that follow. “I’m the Elite Island King. This is my territory. And I do not take kindly to deviations from *any* protocol.”

This whole demonstration was my way of confirming that her little show tonight—or rather, her *mother’s* show—pissed me off. But rather than punish Celina or Seren directly, I took it out on Celina’s betrothed.

A win-win, really.

The display of authority will serve as a message for Seren.

And Tiru will be pissed.

However, my firebomb knocked out his locator charm, just like it did to Ika earlier. It wasn't intentional when I did it to Ika. Just a consequence of my fiery power overriding all the magic decorating his skin.

Now the same just happened to Tiru.

The magical runes could be replaced, but I'll leave that to Seren to handle.

My seaguards begin to drag Tiru toward the water hole. Their fins are much stronger than their legs, making water transport more feasible for a supernatural of Tiru's size.

Three thirty, I think as the unconscious male moves by me. *Miza's room.*

That's where I told Tiru we should meet.

Hopefully, he's awake by three. If not, I'll talk to Miza instead.

"Well," I say, clasping my hands together and flashing a smile at the room. "I hope everyone enjoys their time tonight. But please remember that our Offerings have an early morning tomorrow. Their trials are about to begin."

With that, I turn off the audio portion of my broadcast and start toward a smirking Mariana while the camera follows my every move.

When I reach my second, I say, "You're in charge of security tonight. I have some seaguards to interrogate."

I don't elaborate on what I mean or give her a chance to reply. I merely continue forward and whistle at the nearest seaguard—one of my generals. *Farrah*.

"Come with me," I tell her, offering my arm.

She doesn't hesitate or comment, simply strides forward and slips her tanned arm through mine.

The onlookers will assume I'm leaving for some playtime.

I suppose I am. Interrogations are always fun, after all.

But I'm going to find out who issued the command that altered this evening's events. And then I'm going to deal with the issue. *Personally*.

It's a reasonable distraction, one that will keep me from walking over to Miza and whisking her away from the monster suitors surrounding her.

Because Tiru's right.

That's exactly what Ika wants. I don't know what game he's playing, but something tells me Seren is somehow involved.

I glance across the room at the Stealth Dragon King, meet his amused gaze, and narrow my own. *I don't know what you're up to, Ika, but I'm not*

falling into your trap.

With that mental thought—one I know he couldn't actually hear but could no doubt read from my expression—I leave the room to interrogate Farrah.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MIZA

My stomach twists as King Zael's video feed ends.

He's gone, I think, staring at the doorway he just disappeared through.

With a gorgeous woman on his arm.

A seaguard.

One who checked my attire earlier and gave approval before escorting me from my station location to the Offering presentation line.

I had no idea that King Zael had a lover. But of course he does. Why wouldn't he?

And why do I care?

It doesn't matter that she's tall. Or that she's thin. Tan. Has vibrant eyes and violet hair that flows like water to her hips.

None of that matters.

It's certainly not important that she's stunning, either. *Right…?* My teeth grind together. *He left with her*.

That thought plays through my mind as I try to focus on the monsters surrounding me.

He punched King Tiru. Knocked him out with fire. Then left with that beautiful woman.

Why?

"Careful, sweetheart," a deep voice whispers in my ear. "Zael might have claimed that the trials begin tomorrow, but they've really already begun."

I frown and glance over my shoulder at the tall male standing right behind me. I hadn't even noticed Ika's approach. Shells, I haven't been paying attention to anyone around me.

Not since King Zael punched King Tiru, anyway.

Ika's palm wraps around my hip, ensnaring my focus now as he pulls me back into his hard chest. "Pining after the Elite Island King could cost you some valuable suitor attention," he murmurs. "Not wise when you need our support in the games."

My frown deepens. "I am *not* pining over him."

"You are," he counters. "And that's fine. You're allowed to be annoyed with his idiocy. The seas know I am, too. But there are powerful individuals in this room who can't know what he means to you yet. So focus on the monsters around you and feign interest."

He rotates me in his arms before I can reply, his hand grasping my throat as the opposite remains on my hip.

"Or you can give me all your attention and not feign anything at all," he goes on, his palm sliding to my nape and giving it a squeeze. "Shall we dance?"

I blink at him, dizzy from his words. His touch. *His change in topic*.

I wasn't given any instructions for tonight other than to follow the line of Offerings into the ballroom. From there, I was pulled into a group of men and women—all of whom I assumed were monsters since they were already here when I entered—and basically froze.

Then King Zael punched King Tiru.

And yep.

Yeah.

Umm. "What am I supposed to be doing?" I ask in a low voice. "And what trials?" I go on, no longer even attempting to keep my thoughts to myself. "Is that in relation to the games? They're tomorrow? Except you said they started now. What does that mean, Ika?"

"So many questions," Ika replies, dark amusement stroking his tone. "It's almost like the Elite Island King has done nothing to prepare you." His thumb skims my neck as his gaze goes over my head. "I'm going to go teach this Offering a lesson on royal expectations. If anyone is interested in joining, feel free to follow."

My heart skips a beat at the sudden lethal edge underlining those last two statements. They weren't directed at me, but they were seemingly

about me. And he sounds angry now. The word *lesson* almost resembled a threat, too.

Did I do something wrong? I spoke casually to him. I… I probably shouldn't have done that.

Actually, I *know* I shouldn't have done that. But something about him makes me lower my guard, causing me to be far too comfortable in his presence when I barely even know him.

My eyes widen as his palm leaves my nape to slip down my spine to the small of my back. "Let's go, Ms. Kananaka. I think we'll dance *outside*."

The silky quality of his words is at odds with the whispers from moments ago, and so very different from the way he spoke to me while doing my hair.

It almost makes me want to *run*.

But my legs move as he guides me along beside him, almost as though I'm a shell caught in his overpowering tidal wave.

His palm grasps my hip suddenly to halt my steps, his attention turning backward. "Just so we're clear, if you choose to come for the show, or consider interfering, I'll assume that means you're daring me to share. Or worse, challenging my position. Such actions could result in dangerous consequences. But if you want to play…"

He trails off as tendrils of smoke form around us, the inky substance blossoming into a cloud that taunts the crystal lights hanging above.

My eyes widen as that cloud morphs into a giant dragon shape with translucent wings.

The room falls quiet, similar to what happened when King Zael hit King Tiru. Except there's a hint of alarm with this silence, one that escalates as the beast's jaws open to swallow the ornate chandelier hovering over the water in the center of the room.

My lips part, my heart kick-starting in my chest.

Then everything vanishes, and I find myself standing on a beach near the ocean.

I nearly fall, my heels catching in the sand, only for my legs to fly upward as Ika scoops me into his arms.

"Sorry about that, sweetheart," he says, his tone lacking the anger from seconds ago. "Since Zael decided to alter tonight's plans, I had to improvise. And I didn't want to risk the wrong person overhearing your questions."

I gape at him. “What…? What just happened?”

“I believe I just scared off all of your unworthy suitors,” he muses, his dark eyes dancing in the moonlight. “You’re welcome.”

That… that doesn’t help me understand. “*What* was that?” I try again. “The… the dragon…?”

“Not a real dragon, just a poison fog echo. I allowed it to take shape for fun. Did you like it?”

“A poison fog… echo?” I repeat, blinking at him.

“Yes. Like smoke, only with a lethal edge. Except I didn’t actually push any nefarious toxins into the cloud. That would have destroyed the party. And I’m definitely not one to ruin the fun of others.” He starts walking toward the tree line dotting the beach. “The visage is already gone. I just wanted to issue a warning.”

A warning, I think, my brow furrowing. “Why?”

He gives me an amused look. “Because I can, sweetheart. I’m the Stealth Dragon King. Which reminds me—thank you for providing me with a quick exit plan. Now I get you all to myself for the remainder of the evening. That wasn’t my original intent. I wanted to show you off to Tiru and Zael. Alas…”

Ika sets me down on the ground, my heels connecting with grass instead of sand. Then he goes to one knee before me, his dark head suddenly near my belly.

“Here. Let me help.” He grasps my ankle, causing me to grab his shoulders for balance.

I frown at him as he unfastens my stiletto, slipping it free from my foot. Then he switches it for the other limb, removing both of my heels and setting them off to the side. He takes off his jacket next, then sits down and unties his dress shoes.

My brow is still pinched when he stands—sans shoes and socks—and takes my hand. “Let’s go for a stroll.”

“So you can teach me a lesson?” I ask, still utterly confused.

He chuckles. “The only *lesson* I desire to deliver is one between your thighs. But I don’t think you’re ready for what I want to do to you, little siren.” He brushes my nose with his index finger. “So we’ll walk and talk instead.” He leans close, his eyes capturing mine. “I’ll answer your questions, too. Or try to, anyway.”

His fingers link with mine, and he tugs me back onto the beach. “So I’m not in trouble?”

“Well, I didn’t necessarily say that,” he drawls. “We’re likely both going to experience repercussions from this, but…” He lifts a shoulder in a partial shrug. “Some rewards are worth the punishment, don’t you think?” He looks knowingly at me. “That’s why you go on those midnight swims, right? That’s an acceptable risk?”

My breath catches in my throat, my feet stumbling in the sand. “You know about that?” The words come out choked.

“I know about a lot of things,” he murmurs. “Which I suppose brings us back to your questions. Let’s see if I can remember them all…”

He falls silent for a moment, then paraphrases my previous inquiries from the ballroom.

What am I supposed to be doing?

What trials? In relation to the games tomorrow? Or tonight?

“The point of the introductory ball was to win favor from potential suitors,” he goes on. “You were supposed to be seducing them into playing with you. Which would have worked beautifully if Zael hadn’t altered our evening plans.”

Ika releases my hand to press his palm to my lower back, our steps slowing as we reach an edge on the beach decorated by rocks. Rather than go around them, he guides me over by telling me where to step.

When we reach the other side, there’s more sand, and we resume walking while he continues talking.

“As you should be aware, the Monster Games are about claiming mates. The trials leading up to the culminating event, however, are meant to show off an Offering’s talent.” His hand moves to my hip, pulling me closer as a wave rushes the beach, nearly reaching my dress’s train.

The natural movement has my pulse echoing in my ears in time with the crash of water nearby.

This all feels so surreal.

Like a dream, I think dizzily. *A familiar… dream…*

“This evening’s introductions were meant to showcase your social capabilities, which I think proved to be spectacular,” he says, ensnaring my attention. “But others may not like that you referred to me with such familiarity.”

I frown. “What do you mean? What familiarity?” I don’t even know him.

Which I suppose makes it rather strange that I’m letting him manhandle me on this beach.

But I’m pretty sure I don’t have a choice.

Not that I particularly *want* the option to leave. I… I kind of *like* talking to Ika. He seems patient. Informative. *Caring*.

“Some believe kings are meant to be revered and bowed to,” he says. “Speaking to one informally—without a title, I mean—is often frowned upon.” He glances down at me, amusement glittering in his dark eyes. “But I rather like that you referred to me as just Ika.”

I freeze, my feet suddenly stuck in the sand. “I…” My eyes widen. “I didn’t realize I did that.” I wasn’t even thinking when I said his name. Shells, I’m not even sure when I stopped referring to him as *King Ika*. Actually, I’m not positive that I ever referred to him in that way. “*Oceans*. I’m a mess.”

“No, sweetheart.” He grasps my chin and forces my gaze to meet his. “You’re a queen. And queens never bow to their equals.”

I swallow. “I’m not a queen.”

“You are,” he insists. “And the way you spoke to me tonight is exactly what I desire. You will never call me *king*. To you, I am merely Ika.” He cants his head. “Although, if you want to refer to me as *sir* or *Your Highness* in the bedroom, I would not be opposed.”

I gape at him. And not just because of that final sentence, but because of everything he’s saying. “I’m not a queen,” I repeat. “I’m *human*.” The Monster Island Queen is a siren. Which, actually, hold on… he does keep calling me *little siren*. “You know I’m human, right?” I ask slowly. “That I’m not a siren?”

“You’re not?” He doesn’t sound surprised or confused, just amused.

Which has me frowning at him. Because none of this makes sense. “My hair might be naturally pink, but I’m human. That’s why I’m an… an *Offering*.” The word sends goose bumps pebbling down my arms, making me shiver.

Oceans, today has been so long. So overwhelming. *So strange*.

Part of me wonders if I’ll wake up tomorrow and find out this has all been a dream.

Meeting King Zael on the beach.

Being chosen during the Day of the Choosing.

King Tiru and Ika… King *Ika*. I close my eyes because the title doesn't feel right. Which makes no sense. He's a royal, just like King Zael and King Tiru.

Yet he also just told me never to call him King Ika.

I blow out a breath as I try to fix my brain and focus on the present. To, well, I don't actually know. I'm supposed to be at that introduction party in the underwater ballroom. Instead, I'm on the beach. No longer walking. Just… being held by a stealth dragon.

I try to recall what I know about his home world and his monster species. But it isn't much.

They prefer shadows and darkness.

"Aquatopia is a sea in perpetual night," I whisper to myself. "The only light can be found inside the underwater caves, created by glowing jellyfish."

"Mmm, not quite. I've found light in the most unexpected of places." His voice is as low as mine, his lips near my ear. "Particularly, in my dreams."

I open my eyes. "Why does that sound like a secret?"

"Because you're perceptive," he replies, his hand leaving my jaw to drift down my throat. "You're also gorgeous, daring, and tenacious. I look forward to watching those latter two qualities bloom in tomorrow's trial. Which I suppose means I should take you back to your room for rest."

I'm not sure *daring* and *tenacious* are accurate terms. But I don't correct him. He seems to believe he knows me.

He also thinks I'm not human, I muse, my lips twisting. *Maybe he has me confused with someone else.*

Except he knew about my midnight swims.

How? I wonder. *Did King Zael tell him?* My eyes widen as another possibility crosses my mind. *Is it written in a file about me somewhere? Was I not as careful as I originally thought?*

"Shh," Ika hushes me. "I can hear that mind of yours whirring. What you need now is to rest. We'll play more after tomorrow's trial." He presses a kiss to my cheek, the touch seeming to burn right into my soul.

The world swirls in shades of gray, leading to night as everything goes silent.

Then the familiar surroundings of the suite from earlier appear around us.

"Would you like my help in preparing for sleep?" Ika asks softly. "I can untangle your hair for you."

I blink up at him, confused by this alluring male and his gentleness. "Why are you being so nice to me?" I ask, unable to hold back the question. "Tiru said I'm his fated mate," I add. "Or he thinks I might be, anyway. Am I the same to you?"

"Because you're quite literally the woman of my dreams," he replies, giving me a half grin. "I've been waiting for this moment for a very long time, Miza." He reaches up to pluck the flower from my hair and walks over to set it in the bowl on the nightstand. "Fated or not, we're destined."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

He shrugs. "To some. But my kind doesn't have fated mates. We simply have fate."

"Which you see in your dreams?" I ask, trying to understand his cryptic statements.

His lips curl. "Those of us with the gift of sight do, yes."

"And you have the gift of sight?" I guess.

He wanders back over to me and brushes his index finger against my nose. "So many questions. Turn around so I can help you out of that dress."

I never actually told him I wanted help to get ready for bed, but I obey his request anyway, as I want him to keep talking.

However, he falls silent behind me, his fingers drifting down my back with the hidden zipper. I'm not even sure how he found it. It took me a while to put this dress on earlier, the lace and ruffles rather intricately woven together.

But he removes it from me now as though he's been undressing women for years.

And he likely has.

A thought that… irks me. My stomach clenches in a fashion similar to the way it did earlier, when Zael left with that beautiful woman. And come to think of it, I wasn't too pleased when Tiru ran off to meet his princess either.

Why do I feel so possessive of these men that I hardly know?

I literally just met them.

“Can I have fated mates?” I blurt out, frowning. Maybe that’s why I’m feeling this intense pull toward the three kings.

“Maybe,” he replies softly, his touch warm as he reaches the end of the zipper. The fabric parts, allowing cool air to stroke my exposed back. “I suppose that depends on whether or not you’re truly human.” The words are uttered near my shoulder just before he presses a kiss to my bare skin.

I shiver, my brain momentarily blanking. “Ika…”

“Miza,” he returns, then spins me around to face him, his hand on my cheek as his opposite one catches the front of my dress to keep it from falling. “There are a myriad of fantasies roaming through my mind right now. So I’m going to politely ask you to take hold of your gown, walk slowly into the bathroom, and change.”

I swallow, his mouth tauntingly close to mine. “Okay.”

He doesn’t immediately release me, his forehead kissing mine. “Grab your dress, little siren.”

I lift my hand up to where he’s holding my gown and press my palm to the top near my breasts.

“Good girl,” he praises, releasing me and taking a step backward. “Now walk slowly to the bathroom,” he repeats. “And find something suitable for sleep.”

Rather than respond, I do what he says.

Er, sort of.

My feet trip over themselves as I try to hurry to the bathroom, which ends with him catching me by the waist and yanking me back into his chest.

I yelp as I lose my dress, my eyes widening.

“Miza, sweetheart,” he growls against my ear. “Slow movements only. Fast ones excite my beast, and you’re not ready to dance with him yet.”

He doesn’t immediately release me, his body hard and strong against mine.

My heart practically sings in response, my limbs shaking from the adrenaline of being caught by him in such an intense grip.

“*Slow*,” he repeats for the third or fourth time. “Now go.” His touch falls away, and I nearly sprint to the bathroom, my instincts firing with the need to flee.

But it’s not out of fear.

It’s something else.

Like I *want* to be chased.

Which is… crazy.

I’m too exhausted to run right now.

Except I feel full of energy again. Rejuvenated. *Alive*.

However, I rein in the urges and take one step at a time toward the bathroom. Then slip inside and close the door behind me.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IKA

FUCKING ZAEL.

Tonight's plan was simple—dress Miza up, dance her around the ballroom, and hook Tiru. I knew Zael would be more difficult to persuade, but I didn't expect him to be a damn hindrance.

Blowing out a curse, I run my hand over my face and try to pull myself together.

For a moment, I thought Miza might actually run. She considered it. I *felt* her instincts fire, like she might attempt to engage in a chase.

Then she smartly—*thankfully*—moved slowly into the other room to change.

Not that it's going to help much.

My beast is fucking panting for a taste of that creamy skin. Demanding I sink my teeth into her flesh and *drink*.

It's a primal need.

A *mating* desire.

But she's not ready. She needs to understand what this means, who I am, who *she* is, before I claim her.

It doesn't matter that I've dreamt of her for eons or that I know everything about her. *She* doesn't know *me*. And that's where this all stops.

My yearnings.

My dark and depraved dreams.

My urge to *hunt*.

I want her willing—fuck, I want her *begging*—before I take her.

It's the only way for her to accept my beast.

And it's not just my dragon that she'll be learning how to please. It's Zael's dragon, too. As well as Tiru's kraken.

Assuming those two assholes can get their shit sorted out.

I unfasten my shirt, needing to feel more air. To free myself from the confines of the clothes. To be *me*.

But I stop myself from undressing entirely.

Instead, I peel off everything except my boxers.

It's ridiculous. She's already seen me naked, and I'm fairly certain I was at least partially erect at that point. However, I'm fully aroused now, to the point that my piercings are making my dick throb.

I reach down to give my shaft a stroke through the thin silk and growl as it worsens my need.

If I end up fucking Miza tonight, it'll be Zael's fault. It was a simple plan. *A simple fucking plan*. But he had to go and punch Tiru.

On one hand, I'm impressed that I didn't foresee that potential path.

On the other, I'm… well, *annoyed* isn't the right term. I did enjoy having Miza all to myself tonight.

And watching her leave the bathroom in a sexy negligee only heightens my enjoyment.

Because fuck me, she's beautiful. Wearing lacy blue boy shorts and a tank top that's completely translucent.

Her eyes widen as she sees me standing beside the bed in just my boxer shorts, her gaze dancing over my torso with clear interest.

"Don't look at me like that, little siren," I tell her. "In my current mood, I'll take it as an invitation, and I know it's not one you're ready to give." Before she can reply, I saunter up to her and grab her chin to force her pretty blue eyes to meet mine. "You're going to bed. I'll be sleeping on the couch."

Those irises of hers flare. "You're staying the night?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"For protection," I add. "You won't even know I'm here. I'll be cloaked."

"Cloaked… as in invisible?" she asks, searching my face.

I release her chin but run my knuckles along her jaw. “Yes. Mostly.” I engage my ability, disappearing. “You’ll still be able to hear me,” I murmur as her eyes go wide. “And you’ll be able to feel me.” That last part I add while allowing my fingers to dance along her neck, stroking her from her ear to her shoulder.

She shivers in response, the visible reaction drawing me closer until my mouth is a scant inch from hers.

“If you hear me groaning on the couch, just know that I’m thinking of you, gorgeous,” I whisper, my nose brushing hers as I dare to steal a quick kiss.

Except she gasps against my mouth, her hands suddenly on my shoulders as she clings to my still-invisible form.

“Dangerous decision,” I inform her, turning corporeal again.

Needing a distraction—*anything* to keep from truly kissing her—I start pulling pins from her hair to free her silky strands. The pink curls bounce against her back and shoulders, creating a deceptively fuckable look.

“Gods, Miza.” I’m done. She’s too damn beautiful. Too alluring. Too *mine*. “Blame the dreams.” That’s all I say before I claim her mouth.

It’s a horrible decision.

A wrong choice.

The only fucking way to exist…

Because I’ve craved her for what feels like eternity. Waited for the moment our paths finally crossed for far too long. Dreamt of her before I even understood what it all meant.

And protected her since the moment I realized that she existed. That she was finally in my timeline.

No longer a dream.

Very fucking real.

Now she’s in my arms. Her lips on mine. Her nails digging into my skin. Her soft curls tangling with my fingers. Her heat warming my skin. Her coconut colada scent intoxicating my senses.

Two minutes, I tell myself. *You can indulge for two minutes*.

It’s the permission I need, the risk I’m willing to take.

We’re meant to be, I think. *Unless it all goes horribly wrong.*

But I refuse to think about that outcome. About the bounty on her head. About the potential for disaster. *Her likely death*.

And instead live in the now. Feeling her. Kissing her. Owning her with my tongue. Groaning as she kisses me back. Fucking *dying* as her arms encircle my neck.

I don't stop myself from lifting her off the ground, our heights equaling as her legs wrap around my hips. She's so petite. So soft. So *fragile*. But it's deceptive. Because inside, there's a queen who is dying to reign. To escape. To take her rightful place. And *make us all bow*.

I just need to coax that goddess out of her.

Which requires Zael and Tiru to play ball.

Fuck.

Thinking about them has me ripping my mouth away from Miza, a vicious pant leaving me as I press my forehead to hers. "I'm sorry, Miza. That's not what I meant to do when I brought you back here."

"Then what did you mean to do?" a deep voice deadpans from behind me.

Miza freezes in my arms.

And my eyes narrow.

I was so caught up in Miza that I failed to notice Zael's arrival.

I can't remember the last time anyone snuck up on me, let alone a being as powerful as the Elite Island King.

That just shows how consumed I am by her presence. By finally being near her. Touching her. *Kissing* her.

Which, naturally, Zael has just interrupted.

Granted, I stopped before he spoke, but it was the thought of him and Tiru that grounded me in a world of expectations and reality. So blaming him for my growing discomfort is absolutely fair.

Brushing my lips against Miza's, I coax her into relaxing a little and help her slide down to the floor. "Go grab a robe," I tell her. "Then get comfortable in the bed."

"You're commanding my human now?" Zael asks.

"I'm taking care of *our* future," I counter, turning to face him.

The fucker is still dressed in his full three-piece suit from earlier, confirming he entered via a door, not the water.

That knowledge just irritates me more.

I should have heard him approach. Should have *sensed* the interruption.

But I was too caught up in my own pleasure—in *Miza*—to pay attention to anyone or anything else.

A dangerous mistake I absolutely can't make again. Not until I'm sure Miza is safe. Which is clearly not right now because Zael looks ready to attack me. *Again*.

"Don't even think about hitting me with another firebomb," I tell him. "I only allowed the first one so you could help me get rid of that damn locator charm." I knew his supernatural flames would eat right through that enchantment. It hurt, but the pain was worth the end result.

Miza moves to my side, not grabbing a robe or going to the bed like I suggested, but instead clinging to my arm as she softly greets him with "King Zael."

Her actions—moving to my side and ignoring my suggestions—are underlined in confidence. Yet her using his royal title betrays her queenly status, something that just irks me more.

I meant what I told her: Queens are not supposed to bow to their equals.

Zael's gaze gentles a bit as he shifts his attention to her. "Ms. Kananaka. Are you all right?"

She swallows and nods. "Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you."

I glance between them as silence takes over the conversation, and roll my eyes. "These formalities are boring."

"Formalities are expected," Zael returns. "Not that you would know anything about that."

My eyebrow inches upward. "I know my informal approach led to the best kiss of my existence."

"And that's supposed to impress me?" he counters. "You took advantage of an Offering, Ika. That's not something to boast about, especially not to the royal in charge of her protection."

"Is that what bothers you?" I ask. "That I kissed an Offering under your supposed protection? Or that I kissed *Miza*?"

His jaw ticks. "Your existence in my realm bothers me. The rest is just semantics."

I huff a breath at that. "You're as bad at this as Tiru." Ignoring him, I focus on the only one in the room that matters. "Miza." I lift a palm to her cheek to shift her attention away from Zael and up to me. "Remember what I said about queens, okay? You don't need to address anyone formally."

"I'm not a queen," she says through her teeth. "I'm a human. An *Offering*."

I pull her closer. “We’ll work on your perception, sweetheart.” I lean down to kiss her, aware that Zael’s watching, and not giving a shit. He can either join us or fuck off.

Miza jolts against me, clearly startled that I’m kissing her again. But the moment my tongue parts her lips, she melts into my embrace. Her nails meet my abdomen first, then her palms slide up my bare chest to my shoulders.

There’s no hesitation at all. No denial. No hint of a rejection. Just pure, unadulterated need.

Which has my dragon roaring with victory as he writhes against my skin, the shadowed outline of his presence burning across my middle. I’m certain Zael can see the tattoo moving. Miza likely would have felt it if she’d kept her hands against my torso. Maybe she can even sense the warmth against her belly.

In case she doesn’t, I use a palm against her lower back to pull her closer, wanting my dragon to have a taste of her. Even if it’s just a kiss of her heat through her thin top.

My neck tingles as the script along my skin changes, the words chosen by my inner beast.

This morning, they read, *A dark beginning breeds anew.*

Cryptic, as per usual.

There are a thousand ways I could interpret that statement. So I choose not to try.

I have no doubt that whatever he’s saying now will be just as difficult to decipher. But I’m certain hunger will have something to do with it.

“Fuck, Miza,” I breathe against her mouth, my hand sliding to her nape to anchor her against me. “I’ve waited eons for this.” It’s an admission I shouldn’t voice. A confession that could cost us everything. However, I’ve not lived a low-risk existence. I believe in high stakes. Fights. And defying odds.

My future with Miza will be no different.

It’s why I’ve embraced the concept of aligning with Zael and Tiru. I may not like either of them—in fact, I’m rather certain I *despise* Zael—but I know what could happen if we unite.

Just as I know what will happen if we don’t.

So many potential paths.

So many possible outcomes.

Miza is the center of it all. The key. *The heart*.

If she survives, I think, sliding my tongue against hers.

She has to realize her potential, understand her purpose, and then she'll have a fighting chance.

But if she continues to bow and supplicate, to play the part of human… Well, I've seen where that leads, too.

I refuse to think about that now, instead holding her close and devouring her. She tastes like sin. Like hope. Like *pain*.

Sweet decadence.

Coconut and oranges.

Blood.

I don't know if I'm flavoring the present or the future. It's intoxicating. Overwhelming. *Delirium*.

"You've made your point," Zael growls.

"I don't believe I have," I reply, picking Miza up again and teleporting us to her bed.

She gasps when I settle between her splayed thighs, my groin thick and heavy against her barely covered pussy.

"Gods, little siren," I murmur, staring down at her as I settle on my elbows to brace myself over her. "You certainly kiss like a queen."

Her cheeks pinken as she peers up at me. "Thank you." The words are barely audible, her face seeming to redden even more as she squirms against my lower half.

"Mmm, a praise kink?" I guess, intrigued. "Duly noted, gorgeous." I start forward, ready to take her mouth again, when heat shoots up my spine.

My dragon growls, the sound escaping my lips as I glance sharply over my shoulder.

"Do you fucking mind?" I demand, creating a blanket of shadows to smother the flames dancing along my back.

"Yes. I do." Zael sounds furious. "Get the fuck off my Offering."

"*Your* Offering?" I sit up, straddling Miza's hips. "You have to actually talk to her to make her *yours*, Zael. Which I don't recall you doing tonight. And we both know last night doesn't count."

An inferno flies up my back once more, this time in rope form, and wraps around my neck like a leash.

I grab at it as Zael gives the flames a tug, his movement effectively yanking me off the bed and away from Miza.

She yelps in response, causing my inner dragon to snarl with rage.

It's one thing to threaten me. Entirely another to frighten her.

I'm on my feet in an instant, shadowing to Zael's back, where I hit him with a volt of paralyzing poison.

Except he moves faster than I anticipate, causing the energy to go beyond him toward Miza.

I don't think; I react, shadowing once more and reappearing right in front of her. The bolt hits me square in the chest, eliciting a curse from my lips.

It's my own poison; thus, I can quickly create an antidote. But I'm not fast enough.

Because Zael has me pinned against the wall beneath a dozen fiery ropes in the next moment. A pained groan escapes me, the treacherous sound infuriating me further.

I *hate* that Zael found a weakness. Hate even more that he put Miza in jeopardy. This arrogant asshole is supposed to be part of the mate-circle. Yet he fucking *moved* and nearly allowed her to absorb a hit that was clearly meant for him.

"Her life," I pant out as my antidote begins to work, the paralyzing toxin abating. "Her life… *comes first*."

With that, I shadow out of his hold into the bathroom and grab a robe. After a few deep breaths—mostly to gain control of my rage—I return to the bedroom and find him frozen in place, his eyes on a trembling Miza.

"Some protector you are," I growl at him. Grabbing a bottle of water from the kitchenette, I bring it to Miza. "Drink this."

"Are… are you okay?" she asks.

"I'm fine," I tell her, popping off the cap. "Now be a good girl and drink the water."

She swallows and accepts the bottle.

Zael watches warily as she drinks, his expression holding a note of contrition. "I'm sorry, Miza. I would never hurt you."

I snort at that.

"You're the one who unleashed a fucking poison cloud," he hisses at me.

"After you set me on fire while I was *touching* her," I point out. "On a flammable bed."

"I was in control of that flame," he mutters.

“Just as I controlled the toxin,” I return. “But only by sacrificing my safety in the process, which you promptly took advantage of.”

His jaw ticks.

“Be furious with me all you want, but if you put her life in jeopardy like that again, I will fucking kill you,” I warn him. The lethality underlining my tone is a promise. “Don’t ever underestimate what I’ll do where she’s concerned.”

He stares me down, clearly considering my words.

But after a moment, he gives a slight nod. “Her life comes first.” He echoes my words from moments ago like they’re an olive branch. A temporary truce. Maybe they are, but I’m still furious with his stubborn-headed asshole-ishness.

“I’m okay,” Miza whispers, the bottle empty in her hand.

I return my focus to her. “Do you need anything? Food? A snack before you sleep?”

“I don’t think I’m going to sleep anytime soon,” she says, sounding wary.

My lips quirk upward. “Do you want to yell at the Elite Island King?”

Her eyes widen. “What? *No*.”

“I think you should,” I press. “Show him how queenly you can be.”

“I’m not a queen,” she reiterates, sounding frustrated. She even throws her hands up with the words. “I’m human, Ika.”

“How about this…” I murmur, not wanting to argue with her—mostly because she’s not ready to hear the truth yet. “You can be *my* queen.”

Her eyes widen. “What?”

“Consider it a nickname,” I tell her, brushing my finger against her nose. “Or a proposal.” I frown. “Actually, no. Not a proposal. When I propose—which I will at some point—it’ll be a grand gesture. And it certainly won’t be while His Asshole-ishness is watching.”

Zael grunts at the barb.

I ignore him, entirely focused on Miza. “How about some ice cream?”

She looks at me like I’m giving her whiplash. I probably am with my jumping statements.

“Then you need to rest,” I add. “His Asshole-ishness did say the Offerings need to sleep well tonight before the trials tomorrow. So we’ll do a sundae followed by sleep. Yeah?”

“Call me that one more time,” Zael interjects.

I look right at him and say, “Dear *Asshole-ishness*, our future would like some ice cream. Do you think you could ask one of your devoted seaguards to arrange it? Please and thank you.”

His icy gaze narrows, his fury palpable.

But I turn my back on him again to look at Miza. “Would you like anything else with your ice cream? His Asshole-ishness would like to know before he leaves.”

The Elite Island King releases a soft growl, causing my lips to twitch.

“N-no,” Miza whispers. “Ice cream is… I mean… I don’t need anything.”

“You need to eat,” Zael says, his presence heating the room as he moves to stand beside me. “You were meant to enjoy food at the introduction ball tonight, but I heard from the seaguards that you were kidnapped before the meals could be served. I’ll arrange something.”

He doesn’t leave the room, just walks over to a speaker in the wall and presses a button to bring it to life.

Miza watches warily as he begins to order a smorgasbord of food and desserts. Much better than my initial offer of ice cream.

It seems the King of Showboating is back.

I prefer that to His Asshole-ishness.

Maybe my original plans for the evening can still be realized.

Or perhaps it’ll end with me killing Zael.

Ah, either way, I look forward to the party.

Secrets and blood.

My kind of night.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ZAEL

MIZA'S PLUMP lips close around Ika's fork, causing my abdomen to tense. It's such an innocent action, yet undeniably sensual.

And it's driving me fucking crazy.

I did not come here for this.

Did not come here to lust after the beautiful Offering.

Did not come here to watch Ika fucking feed her.

However, I can't take my eyes off her luscious mouth.

Well, no, that's not entirely true. I've absolutely caught my gaze wandering south to her translucent top.

She seems completely unaware of her mostly nude state. Probably because of all her training in the village.

My eyes narrow at that distinct realization. I've never much cared about how the humans of my world were trained so long as they were safe and well taken care of. But now I'm wondering how many others have seen Miza in this state of undress.

And I'm not sure I like the answer forming in my mind.

Because it has to be hundreds of others. Maybe thousands due to the televised nature of the Day of the Choosing.

Which means far too many humans and supernaturals have seen *my* female in intimate attire.

This is insanity.

Insanity that feels like a punishment, one I'm suffering through with a scowl as Ika feeds her.

Gods, the way her cheeks redden.… It's a beautiful sight. Though, I'm not sure if that's her response to his attentions or the dragon roaming his exposed torso.

He threw on a robe but didn't bother to tie it, thus allowing his physique to remain on display. And it seems Miza is rather enjoying the view.

His dragon must realize she's studying him because the fucking silhouette-like tattoo hasn't stopped moving since we sat down to eat. Ika's beast is clearly eager to come out and play.

In fact, I'm pretty sure he just *winked* at Miza.

My creature paces inside, growling at the sight. I don't wear my dragon on my skin, though I could probably create a fiery version of him.

I glance at Ika, wondering if all of this is some sort of act. He's always struck me as the sadist type, his penchant for mayhem and blood renowned.

However, he's staring at Miza with unmistakable reverence as he feeds her another bite of pasta.

I can't reconcile this version of the Stealth Dragon King with the one I've known for eons.

He's a nuisance. Impossible to talk to. An arrogant prick. Too savage to be reasoned with.

Yet he's *gentle* with Miza. Smiling at her. Holding her with care.

And he jumped in front of his own toxin to protect her, I think, swallowing at the infuriating memory.

The words he said afterward will forever haunt me. I was so caught up in the fight that I didn't think about potential ramifications of our violence. I just wanted to end him.

Gods, watching him kiss Miza… it was like the perfect torture. Part of me yearned to join them. The more practical side, however, demanded I *kill* Ika.

Which is the voice I listened to when I set him on fire.

An unforgivable choice, given that he was on top of Miza. I was absolutely in control of those flames, but I'm not surprised that she's barely looked at me throughout this whole meal. She's probably terrified of me.

Fuck.

Another apology taunts my tongue, one I've nearly voiced a dozen times now. I technically already said I was sorry. But it doesn't feel good

enough.

Maybe I should… My thought trails off as my wrist buzzes with an incoming message. I pull it up to see a report from Farrah regarding what she's found out about the commencement order.

My interrogation was short-lived when it became clear she was just following commands. So I put her in charge of determining where the directive came from. She eagerly agreed, promising to keep me updated right as another seaguard came in with a report regarding Ika's antics.

It didn't surprise me at all that he'd created an incident.

Although, I was furious to learn that incident involved taking Miza to an undisclosed location.

As soon as we finish this meal, I'm putting that locator charm on him again.

"Umm, if you need to return to your, uh, date, I understand," Miza says.

My brow furrows as I close the window on my watch and look at Ika. "You were on a date?"

"Technically speaking? Yes, I believe our evening beach stroll could be called a date, considering the romantic quality of our experience," he murmurs. "However, she wasn't talking to me, Elite Island King."

I blink and focus on Miza. Her cheeks are still flushed a pretty pink. "What date are you talking about?"

Her lips twist as a hint of annoyance crosses her features. But it's gone in a flash as she quietly says, "The one you went on during the ceremony."

What? "I didn't go on a date during the ceremony. Why would you think that?"

"Because you left with a female seaguard on your arm," Ika tells me. "Not exactly the best way to woo an Offering, Zael."

I shoot him a glare. "Stop inserting commentary where it's not needed."

"Says the king who just asked a stupid question," he drawls as he stretches an arm out along the back of Miza's chair. "You're almost as bad with women as Tiru, which is fucking shocking, given your ages and experiences."

"I am not bad with women," I promise him.

"Shall we revisit the episode from an hour ago when you lit me on fire before almost allowing our future to be engulfed in a paralytic cloud?" he inquires, his conversational tone grating heavily on my nerves.

My jaw ticks. “Unlike you, I didn’t come here to seduce an Offering.” Which doesn’t excuse my behavior at all, but I’m not the only guilty party in this room.

“So you merely arrived to put her life in jeopardy, then?” he counters.

Miza clears her throat. “I didn’t mean to create a debate. I just wanted you to know that if you need to go back to the woman, I’ll understand.”

“Farrah isn’t waiting for me,” I tell her. “She’s one of my generals. I tasked her with determining the cause of a protocol issue.” I’m not sure why I feel the need to explain that to Miza, but it suddenly seems very important that she knows it was purely a business meeting. “Tonight’s ceremony did not go as scheduled.”

“That happens when you let an overconfident princess run the show,” Ika inserts unhelpfully.

“I didn’t *let* her do anything,” I growl back at him.

The look he gives me is one of wonder. “Wow. I had no idea how similar you and Tiru were until tonight. This future mate-circle is starting to make more sense every second. And my impending job is just getting bigger and bigger.”

“Mate-circle?” I echo.

He smiles. “Now you’re getting it.”

“I have no idea what you’re going on about.” Or why I’m even focused on him again. I want to talk to Miza, not him. “It seems Ika is trying to engage me in some sort of game. Tiru, too.”

Miza frowns. “What kind of game?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” I murmur.

Ika snorts.

But I don’t give him a chance to argue or try to sway her otherwise. Instead, I point out a tangible example. “That’s why he stole that flower and gave it to you.”

I gesture with my chin toward the adjacent bedroom, aware that the flower is in a bowl on the nightstand in there. I saw it when I arrived, the gleaming red petals impossible to miss.

“He used that flower as a way of marking you as Tiru’s fated mate.” I reach forward to grab a piece of pizza for my empty plate, then lean back in my chair as I add, “And that’s not all he’s done.”

“If you’re going to recount the sins of my existence, we’re going to be here a while,” Ika drawls, his thumb tracing Miza’s shoulder to her upper

arm.

She shivers in response, though she frowns at me. “Are you saying that I’m not Tiru’s fated mate?”

“No, he’s implying that I helped wake up the Kraken King,” Ika says before I can reply, causing me to narrow my eyes.

“No, I’m informing her that you’re meddling, and it’s hard to know what’s real and what’s not.” I take a bite of my pizza slice, the spicy pepperoni flavor barely registering in my mouth. Because all I can taste is *Miza*.

Her scent reminds me of lava rum spiced with oranges.

Cinnamon and citrus, I think, inhaling deeply. It makes me want to spread those pretty legs of hers and see if she tastes like she smells.

Which is wrong.

She’s an Offering.

A human meant to be claimed by visiting supernaturals.

Yet all I want to do is yank her away from Ika and place her in the empty chair beside me. To take over feeding her. To *hold* her.

Which confuses everything even more.

I have no idea if this is a true attraction or something Ika has orchestrated.

“Ika took you away from the ball tonight because he knew I would be notified and forced to intervene,” I tell Miza. Although, I’m more or less thinking out loud, trying to establish practical reasoning to help override my lustful need.

“That’s not why I took her from the introductory event,” Ika states flatly as he brings a forkful of spaghetti up to Miza’s mouth.

But she stops him from feeding her, her hand on his wrist as she gently pushes it away. “Then why did you take me from the ballroom?”

“Because you were being hounded by potential suitors, none of whom stand a chance.” He shoots me a glare. “Tonight was supposed to be about the four of us getting to know one another. *You* disrupted the plan by punching Tiru.” His expression lessens a little. “Admittedly, though, I enjoyed the deviation.”

“I’m not one of the mate candidates,” I remind him flatly. “My job is to protect the humans.”

He nods. “Yes, and how many of them have monsters in their rooms right now, *Elite Island King*? Are you going to go check on every Offering

to ensure they're being properly cared for tonight?"

He sets down the fork with the pasta on it, his eyes still on me.

I try to maintain a neutral expression, but my jaw insists on clenching. Because Ika and I both know the answer to his question. *None of them*. My seaguards are in charge of supervising as needed. I'm only ever called in for emergencies.

I could argue that Ika's were emergency-worthy circumstances, but I would be lying. Stealing an Offering is a minor offense that my seaguards would typically handle. However, I chose to intervene because of Ika's involvement.

Or maybe it's because the situation centered around Miza, I admit to myself.

"Actually," he goes on, "a better question is, have you ever personally involved yourself in an Offering's well-being before tonight?"

"In all fairness, I've never met an Offering with a pet cephlalosune," I counter. "Which reminds me—you wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Ika? How a being from the Cephalopoda Kingdom managed to befriend a human in *my* realm?"

"Are you talking about KiKi?" Miza inserts, her brow furrowing.

"Yes," I tell her. "*KiKi* is a creature from Tiru's home world. Yet he had no idea that she's been hanging out in my islands. Nor did he know anything about your existence until today. Or that's what he claims, anyway. Nevertheless, Ika…" I trail off and stare right at him. "I think Ika's known about you for a while."

He merely smiles.

However, Miza reaches for her glass of water and gulps half of it down. I'm about to ask her if she's feeling all right when my wrist buzzes with an incoming message from Mariana. *The last of the Offerings are returning to their rooms. We should meet to debrief. Where are you?*

My lips purse as I dismiss the note.

I'll respond to her when I'm done here.

"The introductory ball has finished," I tell Miza, wanting to focus on her. "I think that means it's time for you to eat dessert and then get some rest."

"That's why I brought her back here to begin with," Ika murmurs. "Well over an hour ago."

“She needed food,” I point out. “Because you stole her away from the ceremony before it was complete.”

“So you think I should have let all those suitors sweep her off to one of the tables to feed her?”

“You could have joined them.”

He grunts. “I would have killed them all, Your Boringness. Because unlike you, I actually care who touches my future.”

Miza slips out of her chair and stands away from Ika, her blue eyes flicking between us. “I’m not in the mood for dessert. But I do think sleep is a wise choice.” She takes a step back, then executes a perfect curtsy. “*Your Highnesses*.” The two words fall off her tongue with a sarcastic twist.

Then she starts toward the bathroom.

“Oh, hold on now, sweetheart.” Ika vanishes and reappears in her path, his skill infuriatingly flawless.

She stumbles, and he catches her with his hands on her hips.

The way her body freezes in response has my hackles going up on my neck. *That* is not the way a woman reacts to a favorable touch.

But before I can even comment on it, Ika takes a step back and lifts his hands. “Sorry, Miza,” he says, clearly having read her frigid stance in a manner similar to the way I did.

However, I’m amazed that he not only gave her space but also *apologized*.

Who the fuck is this stealth dragon? I think, mystified by the male standing not ten feet from where I’m seated. *This isn’t the Ika I’ve known for centuries…*

It’s like he’s been embodied by an imposter.

“I know today has been a lot.” The gentleness in Ika’s tone is nothing like the teasing from moments ago, again marking him as a foreign entity. A complete and utter *stranger*. “I think sleep is a great idea, especially considering the trial you’ll face tomorrow, but I want you to know that this isn’t a game to me.”

She doesn’t reply, just stares at him.

“I take the future very seriously,” he goes on. “I won’t lie to you—I’m absolutely enjoying the happenstance of our fate. However, this is so much more important than anyone in this room realizes. I wish I could say more, wish I could explain everything to you, but that’s not how destiny works.”

“Are you allowed to discuss the past?” I ask, pushing away from the table to join them. “Such as how long you’ve been aware of Miza’s existence?”

He doesn’t look at me or even acknowledge that I’ve spoken. “All I want you to understand, Miza, is that I’m not playing with you or your feelings. Meeting you—*knowing* you—means everything to me. I’m sorry for overwhelming you today. And I’m sorry if I’ve frightened you. My intention was to finally meet you. That’s all.”

She continues studying him, her throat working as she swallows. Then she gives him a nod. “Good night, Ika.”

“Good night, Miza,” he returns.

She glances at me and bows her head. “Your Majesty.”

With that, she turns to walk to the bed, her translucent lingerie revealing every inch of her toned body. Yet I can’t bring myself to enjoy the view because I don’t like how our conversation ended.

She called him *Ika* and me *Your Majesty*.

Not *Zael*.

The kingly title is precisely how she should address me. Except I wanted to hear my name on her tongue. Not a formal address.

“I don’t even have to look at you to know there’s regret in your features,” Ika murmurs. “Maybe jealousy.” He turns then, his dark eyes meeting mine. “Both, I see. Good. Maybe you’ll wake the fuck up soon.”

My gaze narrows. “Why does that sound like a threat?”

His lips curl. “Because you don’t trust me.”

“And why the fuck would I trust you?”

“Why indeed,” he drawls, walking around me to the table to retrieve the glass of wine he hasn’t touched all night. “Let’s go wake Tiru up and have a chat. But not too long of one. I need to return here to guard our future queen.”

Rather than ask about the title he’s bestowing on Miza, I voice the most relevant question. “Protect her from what?”

“Monsters like me,” he says, glancing back at me. “There’s a bounty on her life, and I highly doubt I’m the only one who accepted the task.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“You’re as bad as Tiru when it comes to listening,” Ika mutters, then finishes his entire glass of wine in a few gulps before setting it down on the table and facing me fully. “You know what *bounty* means, yeah?”

“I know what a fucking bounty is,” I snarl at him, flames lighting up my hands. “You’re planning to kill her?”

“Maybe,” he replies, his gaze taking on a faraway gleam as he falls silent.

I take advantage of his distraction—or whatever the fuck is happening—and grab his throat with my burning palm.

He flinches but doesn’t shadow out of my hold, instead allowing me to walk him back into the nearest wall. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you,” I demand.

“Because I know too much.”

“Then start talking.”

“I offered to do that already,” he says, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind. “But you’re missing the point.”

“What point?” I ask through my teeth, ready to rip his fucking head off.

“Her Majesty will have a backup plan for my potential failure, which means I can’t leave Miza unprotected for long. The disappearing act I performed tonight will have appeased anyone watching, but when Miza arrives healthy and alive at tomorrow’s trial, they’ll know I didn’t complete the task.”

I frown at him, my flames beginning to cool. “And?”

“*And* any potential backup plans will be engaged.” His exasperated tone has me wanting to squeeze his throat a little tighter. “She also might send someone in tonight to confirm that the hit is complete, which is *why* I can’t talk for too long. So I suggest you stop wasting time.”

Smoke billows around us, causing me to growl as Ika’s teleportation ability seizes hold of my being and forces me to travel with him.

When the familiar furnishings of a guest suite appear around us, my gaze narrows more. But my flames die completely as I see Tiru passed out on the bed.

“Let’s wake him up.” Ika releases me from his shadowy hold and walks toward the bed. “As I said, we don’t have much time. And there’s a lot I need to say.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MIZA

"THERE'S a bounty on her life, and I highly doubt I'm the only one who accepted the task."

I shouldn't have eavesdropped last night, but it was hard not to overhear Ika's deep tones. King Zael's, too, given how furious he sounded.

Then they started talking about the bounty.

And Ika replied, "Maybe," to King Zael asking if he intended to kill me.

I didn't sleep well after that. All I could think about was what would happen when Ika returned. Or what might happen if he *didn't* return.

I'm not even sure if Ika came back at all. When the alarm sounded this morning to rouse me—and I assume all the other Offerings, too—I walked out into the living area to find it empty.

While he did say something about being *cloaked* on the couch, I didn't bother to ask if he was around. Mostly because I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Now I kind of regret that as I stand in this vapid corridor with the other Offerings, wearing nothing but a towel. Our names were called a few minutes ago, creating the order we're now lined up in. But other than being told to enter this area, we haven't been given any other instructions.

King Zael mentioned a trial, which I assume is the point of this exercise. I just wish I knew what kind of trial to expect.

Something exhausting, I'm sure.

Hence the need for sleep that I didn't get.

I blow out a breath and nearly roll my eyes, suddenly irritated by the last twenty-four hours of my life. Because how in the oceans was I expected to *sleep* last night?

Three kings.

One of whom kissed me, then promised this wasn't a game right before casually commenting on a bounty for my life. Oh, and he *might* kill me.

Another who is supposedly my fated mate, which may actually be a lie because his rival might have orchestrated the whole thing.

And the third is the king I've known all my life, who is suddenly aware of my existence for reasons I don't fully understand.

Yep. Yeah. That all should make sleeping easy, right?

I nearly snort out loud, yet I manage to swallow the sound right as a familiar-looking seaguard appears. *The woman King Zael left with last night,* I recognize, my eyes narrowing.

He claimed she was his general.

However, the way they touched seemed a little too familiar.

A fact that shouldn't bother me, as I have no business feeling possessive of a male who isn't actually mine. Except now all I want to do is claw this female's face off.

Starfish, what's wrong with me?

"Good Morning, Offerings," the woman—*Farrah*—greets, her sensual voice rivaling her stunning appearance. "As part of the companion match process, your skills and attributes will be displayed for our visiting mate candidates. This will help our guests select their desired Offering during the finale."

My stomach twists. The Monster Games are always televised one week after the Day of the Choosing. So I've never witnessed whatever happens in the seven-day period between those two events.

Companion match process sounds ominous. As does the idea that our skills and attributes will be put on display.

"Today's trial will be focused on speed," Farrah continues, her words causing my insides to churn even more. "In preparation, you will each be fitted with special swimwear for our pool. We need to dress you quickly and efficiently, so please refrain from making any comments during the process."

I swallow, then flinch as she claps her hands once.

“Right, then. Let’s begin. Line A, follow Seaguard Gyro. Line B, you’ll go with Seaguard Hopkins. Line C, you’re with me.”

I wince. Because of course I’m in *her* line.

I don’t even pay attention as she issues commands for the additional lines of Offerings. I just start walking when she claps her hands again to take control of our group.

The hallway is chilly, even with the towel wrapped around my midsection. That air doesn’t improve inside the stark white room she leads us into either. It’s actually even colder, something that gives me a brief moment of hesitation when she says, “Towels on the hooks behind you, please.”

While her words are voiced as a request, there’s no denying the subtle hint of a demand underlining her tone.

Goose bumps pebble down my arms and legs as I follow her instructions. I cast my eyes down to the tiled floor, awaiting more commands.

They come quickly as someone approaches me and helps me into a swimsuit, something I’ve only ever worn in certain courses at the village school.

It’s a very constricting fabric, the spandex-like material clinging to me like a second skin. But it’s opaque, covering my midsection entirely while leaving my arms and legs free.

A cap and goggles are handed to me next, both items I’m familiar enough with to assemble on my own. Once done, I’m escorted out of the room and into another line.

The floor is cold against my bare feet, the air-conditioned corridor too cold for my current attire. But it gives me something to focus on rather than whatever trial waits for us ahead.

Will Ika be there? I wonder. *King Tiru, too?*

I expect King Zael will be involved in some way since he’s in charge of us. Although, he didn’t stay long at the introductory ball last night. He left with—

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Farrah announces right as I start to think about her. It’s like I conjured her with my thoughts.

Except I didn’t.

She’s been here the whole time.

Guiding. Dictating. *Observing*.

I swallow as her sea-green eyes briefly meet mine. But she doesn't linger. Doesn't even seem to truly *see* me. Just passes over me like I'm no one.

It's likely because I look the same as everyone else—dressed for a competitive swim of some kind. The only differences are the swimsuit types of one-pieces for women and tiny polyester-spandex briefs for the men.

"Right, then," Farrah says with a clap of her hands. "Follow me to the natatorium. You will be escorted to the bleachers to find your requisite seat. Then the first official trial will begin."

My brow furrows as my line begins to move.

I've watched the Monster Games every year since as far back as I can remember. Never once did any of them take place in a *natatorium*. They're always in the ocean, with the Offerings starting on the dreaded lily pads, then diving into the waves at the sound of a gunshot.

It's all about *surviving*.

Not competing in a pool.

Is this what the other Offerings did before the big event? I wonder. *Practice swimming laps?*

A blanket of heat swathes my exposed spine as the humid air of the natatorium replaces the icy chill of the hallway. I make the mistake of glancing around, my gaze widening at finding a full auditorium surrounding the long pool.

Fifty meters, I think, recognizing the length as similar to our village's outdoor natatorium.

But this pool isn't outside.

It's inside and covered by a massive dome with chandeliers on the ceiling.

And at least forty rows of stands stretching up the sides from a second floor.

The bleachers we're being led to are on the same level as the pool, the metallic seats covered with individual towels.

I'm guided over to one that's purple and blue, but I don't wrap myself in it. I sit on top of it like everyone else is around me.

Everyone is silent, as are all the onlookers in the stands. I glance up again, noting the shadows in the auditorium seating area. They're caused by the lights being fixed on the pool and on the bleachers, not the observers. But I know they're there. I saw them as we entered.

And a spotlight moves now to a familiar face at the front of the crowd directly across from us.

King Zael.

He stands, and I realize the spotlight isn't streaming down from the ceiling but from some sort of magical orb directly above him. It sort of reminds me of how he usually broadcasts himself in the sky, only he's not appearing on the ceiling or anywhere else now. He's simply *illuminated*.

"Good morning," he greets, and I swear he's staring right at me as he speaks. Just like he did during the Day of the Choosing. "I trust you all are well rested and ready to begin."

I'm not, I think. *Well rested, I mean.*

As for a trial in the pool… that's fine. It's much better than open water. Mostly because the chlorinated water doesn't bother me.

It's the sea that I fear.

The lack of control. The sense that the ocean wants to *claim* me.

"Today's trial is about speed," he goes on, echoing what Farrah has already shared. "Therefore, you will be divided into heats, where you will sprint for fifty meters. That's one lap of this pool." He gestures to the aquatics space below. "There are ten lanes. The center eight will be used."

I study the blocks for a moment, wondering which one I'll be assigned to. Starting dives are my least favorite activity. I'm much stronger once I'm in the water.

Which is a problem for a fifty-meter sprint. Every millisecond counts in a race. Which means my start has to be flawless if I want to stand out in this competition.

"Once the heats are done, the top eight finishing times will compete again this evening. And the top three winners will be given premium placement in the next trial." I swear King Zael is still looking at me while he speaks, his icy eyes seeming to try to convey something to me from across the pool.

Although, it's probably just my imagination. After last night's impromptu meal, coupled with everything else, I'm feeling a bit confused.

Overwhelmed, too.

And slightly pissed off, I acknowledge.

Ika said he's not playing a game with me. But that doesn't mean he's not engaged in some sort of ploy with the other two royals.

They clearly hate one another.

I have no idea why.

Nor do I understand what it has to do with me.

But I can feel King Zael's possession from here. Which, again, might be in my head. However, I swear his energy is swimming all over my body right now as he begins discussing our requisite warm-up arrangements.

The lines we were assigned earlier by Farrah are our same groups for getting in the pool. Once we're done, we'll be given our competition heat and lane designation—something Zael explains next before concluding with, "You have twenty minutes to prepare, then the trial will officially begin."

The light shuts off, removing the illumination from his handsome form. Yet I can still see his shadow in the dark as he sits. And I can still sense his gaze on me.

That burn from his attention seems to follow me as I go through the motions of warming up with my line. We're in the third lane, which is closer to where King Zael sits in the stands.

Is he watching me right now? Grading my technique? I wonder. *What about King Tiru? Ika?*

I shouldn't care.

Except all of this is about *mating*, right? Or winning favor from suitors, as Ika said.

Which means I actually should care.

Because I'm meant to be showing off my talents. That's the point of the trials, after all.

Therefore, I *want* to impress them. Maybe not just King Zael, King Tiru, and Ika, but *everyone*.

And I will, I decide, pulling myself out of the water after finishing my warm-up. *I'm going to show them how fast I can swim*.

Then I'm going to win one of those premium placements for tomorrow's trial.

I may not have wanted to join the Monster Games, but I've trained my whole life for this experience.

Not only am I going to survive these trials, but I'm also going to make sure those three rival kings are paying attention for the right reasons.

No more being enamored of their monster traits, I tell myself. *No more bowing to their kingly presence.*

Because it's time for me to be who I am.

A fighter.
A survivor.
A winner.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TIRU

A SWITCH SEEMS to flip in Miza's mind, her posture going from reserved to confident in a blink.

I only catch it because I've been watching her since the moment she stepped into the natatorium. Her focus was on the tiled floor through most of her walk to the bleachers, then fixated on Zael while he spoke, and back to the ground as she walked on the pool deck.

But something happened after completing her warm-up.

She pulled herself out with a grace I admired, then strode over to the bleachers and suddenly righted her spine.

Her bold gaze goes to where Zael sits, his eyes as transfixed upon her as my own. I doubt she can see much in the shadows. However, my eyes are well accustomed to dark spaces, allowing me to see Zael just as easily as I would in broad daylight.

The woman beside him—his second-in-command, Mariana—leans in to say something while watching Miza.

Whatever she says doesn't pull his attention away. Nor does he respond. He simply holds Miza's stare as she sits down on her designated towel.

A towel *I* set there for her.

Of course, she doesn't know that. Zael didn't announce where the towels came from or how they're all being sponsored by potential suitors.

That's fine. She'll learn who gifted her that towel soon.

After her swim.

I glance at the heat sheet I was given upon entry, my gaze homing in on Miza's name. *Heat five, lane five*.

I'm curious about how fast she can swim. Her display on the lily pad yesterday didn't exactly yield a lot of details on her skills in the water. She actually seemed rather fearful at one point. But when I joined her in the pool in her room, she seemed fine.

Apart from telling me to drown her, anyway.

The Offerings all begin to line up behind the starting blocks, the first round of humans climbing up to the platform to bend down into the requisite position.

"Take your mark," a feminine voice says, the owner of it one of the seaguards.

A horn sounds, and the swimmers launch off the blocks into practiced dives, then begin sprinting across the pool. The silence in the stands is so resolute that the sounds of their kicking feet and wheeling arms can easily be heard.

But the moment they touch the wall at the opposite end, several groups of onlookers clap. Suitors, I'm guessing, for the specific individuals in the race.

Only one really stood out to me as decent. The others weren't nearly as natural in the water.

"Ugh, *yawn*," Ika drawls as he appears beside me, his sudden presence causing the hairs along my arms to stand on end in instant irritation.

"I fucking hate it when you do that," I snarl under my breath.

"Yawn?" he asks, purposely obtuse.

"No," I growl. "Talk. Bother me. Be anywhere in my general presence." The list falls off my tongue easily, as *everything* this stealth dragon does infuriates me. Even more so after last night's "discussion" in my guest quarters.

A discussion that was really just Ika recounting several ways he's fucked with my existence over the better half of the last decade.

"One of my many talents involves prophetic dreams," he said at the beginning of the conversation, his tone notably serious. "I don't always know what's the future and what's not. Nor can I elaborate on what I've foreseen. But I've learned over my long life that I can help facilitate certain aspects of it."

The look Zael gave me at that moment told me he believed about as much of that as I did. Not that I was too keen on siding with Zael. After waking up with a killer migraine, I wanted to slaughter him for hitting me with that firebomb.

Of all people, *Ika* stopped me.

The moment I saw Zael, I flew out of the bed toward him. Only for Ika to step into my path and say, “We don’t have enough time for you and Zael to resume your flirting. The firebomb disabled the locator charm. It might not have been the kindest method, but it was effective. So move on and let me explain.”

Then he went on to tell us about his fortune-telling talents.

Explained that he’d kidnapped one of my cephlalosunes and tasked her to guard Miza.

Said he’d stolen the companion flower so that there would be no misunderstanding my fate.

And ended his quick diatribe with, “Now I must return to guard our future myself. Ta-ta for now.”

The bastard vanished before we could comment further, leaving me alone with Zael. Which was when I found out about the *bounty* on Miza’s life, one Ika had supposedly *accepted*.

I didn’t wait around to discuss next steps with Zael. I shifted into my kraken form and swam as fast as I could to Miza’s room, then stayed in the pool all night, waiting for potential predators.

No one came.

But I was sure Ika hid somewhere close by, maybe even in her room.

However, I could see her bed from the water. Aside from a lot of tossing and turning, she appeared to be safe. Although, that didn’t reassure me, especially knowing that Ika was lurking nearby in his cloaked state.

He likely knew I was in the water, too. Yet he never revealed himself.

Which leads me to wonder why he’s chosen *now* to grace me with his presence. “What do you want, Ika?” I voice the question softly, not wanting to disturb the silence that’s fallen across the natatorium once more.

“Miza,” he answers without hesitation, his voice just as quiet. “Look at her in that sweet little suit down there, all focused and ready to compete. Gods, it makes me wonder if she’ll be that competitive or fierce in bed.”

I shoot him a glare. “You’ll never find out.” My tone might be soft, but the lethality underscoring my words is absolutely palpable.

The bastard simply smirks. “Oh, I absolutely will,” he promises me. “As will you. And Zael. Assuming you assholes don’t make her choose.”

“More cryptic bullshit about the future?” I guess.

“No, that’s just logic speaking,” he returns as the next round of swimmers takes off across the pool. “Do you think she’ll win her heat?”

The jarring change in topic is accompanied by a roar from the crowd as two of the Offerings tie in the water. Their swims were remarkably better than the group before them.

“That was far more entertaining,” Ika concedes. “But back to our little siren, how do you think she’ll do?”

“If you can see the future, why don’t you tell me?” I counter.

He smiles. “That’s not how the gift works, I’m afraid.”

“So you haven’t foreseen your death yet?” I ask, infusing a note of false innocence in my tone. “Fascinating, as I’ve seen it a hundred times in the last twenty-four hours alone.”

He snorts. “Your fantasies don’t equate to reality, Your Crankiness. And while I am pleased to know how much I’ve been on your mind, perhaps you should shift your obsession to a certain pink-haired siren instead?”

“I’m not interested in Princess Celina,” I mutter under my breath as the crowd stills once more for the next heat.

There isn’t anyone sitting near enough to us to overhear our conversation. But some of the beings in this room have even more enhanced hearing than my own.

And I don’t want to discuss political affairs too openly.

Especially not with a known rival.

“I wasn’t talking about Celina,” Ika says after the third group of swimmers touches the wall. His words are masked by the loud cheers sounding from suitors who are clearly pleased with the performance below. “The only beautiful woman here is Miza. Obviously.”

“You called her a siren.”

“Yes.”

“She’s human,” I say, glancing at him. “Unless you know something you’re not sharing?”

“I know a lot of things, Your Tentacleness,” he replies with a smile. “For example, krakens have fated mates. And those fated mates have only ever been sirens. Though, I suppose you knew that little tidbit already, yeah? So maybe that fact doesn’t count?”

I stare at him as the applause begins to dim, the next round of Offerings stepping up to the blocks. I want to ask him more, to demand he give me something to work with. Only, that's exactly what he's been doing—giving me information.

The question is whether or not I believe him.

Whether or not I *trust* his antics to be founded on truth… or some sort of warped game.

"He promised Miza that he's not playing with her," Zael told me last night.

"Do you believe him?" I asked.

"I don't know," Zael admitted. "I probably shouldn't."

And that's precisely the problem.

Ika has never been an ally or a friend. He claims to be one now, commenting on how we share a future—one he's supposedly seen in his dreams.

The buzzer sounds as the swimmers take off again. But I don't turn to watch them. I continue looking at Ika, and he stares right back, his dark eyes swirling with knowledge.

What could he possibly gain by connecting me to an Offering under false pretenses? I wonder.

If I take Miza as a mate, then I've found my queen, and I'll simply take her home. That doesn't impact him favorably in any way.

Unless he wants Celina for himself.

In which case, he can have her. I have no desire to mate the siren princess or obtain autonomy over Monster Island.

"If you're trying to firm up a stronger alliance between your realm and this one, I won't stand in your way," I inform him after the race finishes below.

The applause isn't as enthusiastic this time, but it's still enough to drown out our conversation.

"That's your response to my fated-mate comment?" His lips quirk and he shakes his head. "Your obtuseness is grating, Kraken King. Good thing I have someone more important to focus on now." His gaze leaves mine to travel down to the pool, to the gorgeous woman standing behind lane five.

Miza is entirely focused on the pool, her gaze hidden beneath her tinted goggles. I'm not fond of being unable to see her eyes. Or her hair, for that matter.

All those voluminous pink waves. Gods, I want to thread my fingers through her thick strands and hold her to me for the rest of my existence. It's a need that burns inside me, scorching my soul with the intensity of our match.

I still haven't confirmed her scent. Even last night, while lurking in the waters of her room, I couldn't smell her properly. That companion floral was all I could sense.

"Fuck," Ika groans as Miza steps up onto the block and positions her feet into the starting position. "What I wouldn't give to bend her over just like that."

"You're begging me to kill you right now," I growl back at him.

"No, I'm begging you to shut the fuck up," he returns. "I'm busy watching our future and thinking about how much fun it would be to take her on that block. It's the perfect item to bend her over. I could take her pussy while she sucks off your tentacle."

His crude words instantly paint an image in my head.

One that becomes a lot harder to ignore as the seaguard says, "Take your mark." Because those words cause my fated mate to lean all the way down and grip the edges of the block beneath her.

Oceans, I think, my cock hardening at the sight of her perfect ass perched beautifully in the air.

The buzzer sounds, and she executes a flawless dive, one I should be admiring for the athletic form, but all I can think about is what Ika just said.

About bending her over that fucking block and taking her. *Together*.

My sweet lei—a nickname reserved for a kraken's fated mate—surfaces after a few strong butterfly kicks and takes off across the pool.

Her strokes are powerful. Fast. *Expertly executed*. And she's more than half a body length ahead by the time she reaches the twenty-five-meter mark.

"She hasn't taken a single breath," Ika whispers.

I swallow, hearing his words but not acknowledging them out loud. Mostly because I can't speak. I'm too fucking hard, thanks to his twisted fantasy playing through my mind. And I'm breathless as I watch Miza sprint.

She's moving through the water with the grace of a *siren*. Just without the fin.

But her body is perfectly streamlined, her kicks powerful and dynamic.

When she reaches the wall, the natatorium erupts in a roar of approval.

Because she just swam the fastest time of all the heats, beating her own group by nearly a full body length at the end.

And she never took a breath, I realize, my heart beating a mile a minute. *Dear fucking depths… what an amazing display of speed and agility.*

"Still think she's human?" Ika asks.

I can't take my eyes off the alluring woman as she expertly pulls herself out of the pool. A nearby seaguard hands her a towel—one that's black in color, not blue and purple.

My brow furrows. *That's not the towel I left for her in the stands.*

She wraps the fabric around her hips, a ghosting script appearing in the offensive cotton that marks her as *Property of Ika Taniyn.*

A growl echoes in my chest, one that grows as the bastard beside me says, "I may have engaged in a little switcheroo. But don't worry. I don't mind sharing…"

I turn, ready to introduce my fist to his fucking face.

And he vanishes with a chuckle.

"See you soon, Your Crankiness," he says from my opposite side, causing me to swing toward him. "Maybe get some sleep tonight. I hear that helps with general grumpiness."

I attempt to hit him again, my fist following his voice—which just came from the place he was sitting before he disappeared—only to meet air.

"*Prick*," I snarl.

I swear I hear him chuckle.

Then the natatorium falls silent once more for the next heat. Not that I'm interested in watching. My gaze is on Miza, her pink hair on display now that she's removed her cap and goggles.

Several others in the stands appear to be watching her, too.

That swim just made everyone take notice.

That's fine. No one else stands a chance. Because Miza Kananaka is *mine*.

My fated mate.

My lei.

My siren…

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MIZA

FIRST PLACE, I think, my heart hammering in my chest. *I'm in first place*.

King Zael announced the top eight after the final heat, and my name was the last one he said. That means I'll be in the center lane tonight during the final. And if I keep my spot, I'll have premium placement for the next trial.

I fight the urge to smile as I follow my group back through the hallways.

We've been dismissed for the afternoon and were told to head back to our rooms, where suitors will be waiting.

"Except for the top eight," King Zael announced moments before our dismissal. "Our finalists need to rest for their race later, so those Offerings will be off-limits to suitors for the remainder of the day. But after their swims tonight, you may visit and stay the night. If you so desire."

Which means *I* won't have any suitors this afternoon.

But I might tonight, I think, shivering. *All night.*

Though, I'm pretty sure that already happened with Ika. I also shared a meal with two kings, one of whom isn't even a suitor.

"Ms. Kananaka," a feminine voice says, causing my focus to drift up from the floor to find Farrah's narrowed gaze on me.

Did I miss something she said? I wonder. *Did I make a wrong turn?* I glance around. *No. I'm… I'm still in the right corridor with everyone else…*

"Yes?" I ask, trying to sound a lot more confident than I feel.

“I need you to follow me,” she states flatly.

I thought I already was, I nearly reply. Instead, I just respond with, “Okay…?”

Her gaze narrows more, telling me she doesn’t appreciate my tone.

Well, too bad. I don’t understand what she wants me to do differently. I’m still in the same line she directed me to as we left the natatorium—a line she’s *leading*.

A few others glance at me, seeming to share in my confusion.

Then their eyes widen a little as Farrah takes hold of my arm to pull me away from the group. “The rest of you, continue forward. Another seaguard will meet you at the corner to lead you the rest of the way.”

With that, she turns and ensures I go with her as she tugs on me.

Her hand feels like ice against my skin, her touch not all that gentle. But as we reach a set of silver doors, she releases me and hums something under her breath. It sounds like a soothing melody one might hear better beneath the water.

Then the doors open, and she steps into the elevator car. “Come with me, please,” she says, her back to me.

I swallow and move into the pristine space with her, my gaze roaming over the windows surrounding the back wall.

The doors close behind me, and the floors begin to whoosh by in a blur of water.

That’s all I see out the window—darkening depths of ocean blue.

When we finally settle near the bottom, the outside is nearly pitch black, making me wonder just how deep we’ve gone.

Where are you taking me? I want to ask. *And why are you taking me there?*

But all Farrah does is turn abruptly to face the doors as they separate, and walk out in her clacking heels. “Let’s go, Offering,” she says, her irritation palpable.

What did I do?

Am I in trouble for something?

She keys in a code at a door only a few feet out of the elevator, causing a whirring to sound as the metallic slats part to grant us entry.

Except she only moves a few steps inside the plush foyer before she stops and glances at me. “Inside, Ms. Kananaka. It’s not wise to keep the Elite Island King waiting.”

I frown. “King Zael is here?”

“Not yet, but he will be at any moment, and he’s requested that you join him for lunch.” Her vibrant eyes run over me. “Not a normal occurrence or one I’ve ever been asked to facilitate. But if you so much as try to take advantage of his kindness, I will drown you.”

“Put away the claws, Farrah,” another woman says, sounding amused. “This human isn’t going to harm our king. I’ll make sure of it.”

Farrah visibly relaxes as she turns toward the other woman, one I recognize as having been seated beside King Zael during the trial this morning. “Good.” She executes a little bow. “Thank you, Mariana.”

With that, she rights herself and leaves the room. But not before nudging me into the foyer just a little more so that the doors can effectively close behind me.

The new woman—Mariana—looks over me with interest. “So you’re the one creating all the fuss?” Her lips twitch. “Fascinating.”

I frown. “What fuss am I creating?”

She arches a ruby-colored brow, the deep red complementing her tan skin. “A bold question from an Offering.”

My frown deepens. She’s not wrong. I’ve been raised to respect monster kind, to revere them. But I don’t really appreciate her accusation. Nor did I like how close she sat to King Zael earlier.

Although, neither item is what’s making me feel “bold” right now. It’s my swim. I *won*. Well, I was the fastest this morning, anyway. And something about that made me feel powerful. On top of the world.

It’s likely a short-lived reaction to my achievement, but it’s a strength I’m not ready to let go of yet. “You said I’m causing a fuss. I want to know what you mean.”

Her black eyes hold mine, her dominance seeming to shine through as she stares me down.

I don’t know what kind of water creature she is, but I gather she’s a dangerous one. I should probably bow or apologize. Back off. Allow her to win this round. *Something*.

Only, I can’t seem to pull my gaze away from her. It’s like I refuse to lose. A strange reaction to a superior being. However, I embrace it and arch my brow just like she did moments ago.

Her lips curl, not into a snarl but into a genuine smile. “Oh, I like you,” she declares. “I can see why you’re so taken with this one, Z.”

“Sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong again, M?” a deep voice counters as King Zael enters the hallway behind her, his ice-blue eyes glancing at her before locking on me. “Don’t mind my second-in-command, Miza. She has a penchant for drama.”

Mariana snorts. “Says the one trying to pick a fight with Ika and Tiru.”

He doesn’t look at her, his gaze still on me as he replies, “I’m not trying to pick a fight with anyone.”

“So you didn’t change this afternoon’s visitation rules in order to ensure they couldn’t see this pretty little toy?” She saunters toward me and circles me like I’m not aware of what she just called me.

“I’m not a toy,” I inform her flatly. “I’m an Offering. A potential mate. *Not* a toy.”

“You would be surprised at how many monsters consider mates to be toys,” she returns, her lips a little too close to my ear. “Especially in the bedroom.”

“That’s enough, Mariana,” King Zael says, a not-so-subtle bite edging his tone. “Did you need something? Or are you here to piss me off?”

“So touchy,” she muses, taking a step away from me. “I would be, too, if I found a diamond hidden among a group of seastones.”

“*Mariana*.”

“Yes, yes, I know. You want me to fuck off.” She waves a perfectly manicured hand in his direction. “You can’t blame me for being curious, Z. After all these years of having no interest in taking a queen, you’re suddenly jumping headfirst into the literal mating pool. I’m fascinated.”

“Goodbye, Mariana,” he states flatly.

She smiles and blows him a kiss. “You love me.”

I narrow my gaze, not liking the sound of that.

Yet, rather than deny it, he merely shakes his head and says, “You and Ika are destined for one another. Fucking menaces, both of you.”

And that only worsens my glare. *He thinks Ika would like her? He kissed* me *last night.*

Of course, he also apparently wants me dead, too.

Or “might” want me dead.

I don’t know.

It’s confusing. Frustrating. And *exhausting*.

“Why am I here?” I demand, tired from not sleeping last night. Overwhelmed by the last thirty-six hours of my life. And still riding the

high of my swim. It's a dangerous combination, one that makes me a lot more confident than I should be. Especially when faced with the Elite Island King.

"Yep, definitely approve," Mariana says in a singsong voice before jumping away from me. "I'm going, I'm going. Don't worry. Byeeee."

The door opens and closes behind me, signifying her exit, while King Zael stares daggers at her wake.

Then he blinks and looks at me, his head cocking. "That was an impressive swim, Ms. Kananaka. I wanted to reward you with lunch, if you're open to it."

"I have a choice?" I wonder out loud, then wince when his lips curl down. "Sorry, Your Highness. I didn't mean to… to voice that thought…" I flinch again, annoyed with myself.

I'm not sure where this sassiness came from.

Well, that's not true. I've always possessed a sarcastic voice in my head. But I've never really allowed that part of me to *speak*.

Except I seem to completely lack a filter today.

"I won't force you to spend time with me, Ms. Kananaka." His words are quiet, his expression holding a touch of confusion.

Welcome to my world, I think.

"I wasn't saying that," I mutter. "I'm just… not feeling like myself." I frown. "Actually, no, I am myself. I'm simply… lacking the expected formalities at the moment. The last few days have been a lot to process." My shoulders fall. "Please forgive me, Your Highness."

I finally force myself to gaze down at the floor. It takes considerable effort, given the voice in my head screaming at me to stand strong. It's a voice that's been oddly missing these last few days but seems to be yelling now.

Don't bow, that part of me growls. *Stand up. Stand straight. And do not submit.*

My jaw clenches, then every part of me stills as King Zael moves into my personal space and takes hold of my chin. He guides my gaze upward to meet his icy irises, the intensity in his eyes threatening to burn me all the way to my soul.

"Zael," he tells me. "When we're alone, you call me *Zael*. No formalities needed or expected. In fact, I would prefer that you always call me by my given name, not my title."

My eyebrows draw downward, causing my forehead to crease. “That’s not what you said yesterday.”

“That’s not how I felt yesterday,” he returns. “But I’m beginning to understand now why Ika insisted on breaking decorum. A queen doesn’t bow to her king.” His thumb traces my jaw, his gaze following the movement. “You were extraordinary in the water, Miza. I think you impressed everyone in the natatorium.”

I swallow. “Thank you.”

He smiles. “No, darling, *thank you*,” he murmurs, his touch drifting to my neck as he brushes his knuckles across my pulse. “Your skin is cool. I assume the air-conditioning is a little too powerful right now. How about you take a shower to warm up while I fix lunch?”

I gaze up at him, considering his words. “A shower actually sounds… nice.” Because I am cold. Shivering, in fact. But my inner fire is burning hot right now, too, distracting me from the chill in the air. Now that I’m aware of it, though, I’m suddenly freezing.

His hand lowers to mine as he gives it a little tug. “Come on. I’ll give you a quick tour on the way to the bathroom.” His fingers thread through mine, his skin much hotter than my own. I lean into him on instinct, wanting more of his warmth.

He releases me in response, making me wonder if I reacted the wrong way. But then his arm wraps around my shoulders, bathing me in his heat and eliciting more shivers from within.

Only, these shivers have nothing to do with the icy tendrils curling around my exposed skin and everything to do with the man holding me.

I shudder, which causes him to pull me even closer. “Sorry, darling. I forget how sensitive human skin can be to temperature changes.” He starts rubbing his hand along my arm while walking me down the hallway. “These are my private quarters,” he tells me.

“That everyone can access via the elevator?” I ask, confused.

“Only those with the right credentials.”

“Your lovers, you mean,” I translate, scowling. “You know, it’s not very nice to force one of them to escort me down here.” I stop walking and look at him. “Unless you have a harem and they’re… used to that?” That notion irritates me for reasons I can’t define. Or reasons I *refuse* to identify, anyway.

Starfish, what has gotten into me today?

“Jealousy isn’t a trait I’ve ever liked,” he says, studying me. “Yet I’m finding it quite endearing on you right now.”

Those words just piss me off more. “I’m not interested in joining your harem.”

He laughs. “Well, that’s good. Because I don’t have a harem, nor do I want one.”

“Then how do you explain the two gorgeous women with *credentials* entering your *private suite*?”

“Mariana is my second-in-command, and Farrah is a high-ranking general. They both have access to me for *professional* reasons.” His gaze drops to my mouth as he adds, “Not personal ones.” He moves to stand in front of me again, his arm lowering to my back to pull me closer. “Your possessive instincts intrigue me.”

I swallow. “I… I’m not sure where they’re coming from.” It’s an honest answer. “Or why I’m feeling so… forward today.” My brow crinkles again. “I know better, Your Highness. I promise I do.”

“Zael,” he reminds me, his hand coming up to palm my cheek. “And I don’t mind your *forwardness* or your *possessiveness*. In fact, I quite like both traits.” His thumb traces my bottom lip. “They’re very regal in nature, Ms. Kananaka.”

“Miza,” I tell him, shivering again. Mostly because I actually like hearing the formality on his tongue. I’m not sure why. It makes me feel… important.

“Miza,” he repeats, lowering his forehead to mine. “If it makes you feel any better, I feel quite possessive about you, too. And I can firmly say that has never happened to me before.”

His confession warms the air between us, his lips so close to mine I can almost taste them.

But when I tremble again, he pulls back and murmurs, “Shower, then food. We can discuss the rest after.”

That last phrase echoes in my mind as he escorts me through his suite.

The long hallway leads to an open area, where there’s another elevator, one he tells me is only ever accessed by him and Mariana.

From there, he guides me into another foyer of sorts that opens into a large room with windows featuring a vast sea. Unlike the view from the other elevator, this one has more light outside that showcases various corals and ocean life.

“It’s an enchantment,” he explains when he sees me frowning at the view. “One I created with my flames. I’ve basically created underwater torches that act as little suns to help facilitate growth and attract wildlife.”

He sounds almost shy as he explains the magic to me.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell him.

“Thank you.” He continues the tour through his living area, points out the massive kitchen and the dining nook nearby, then takes me into a bedroom with a giant four-poster bed.

It’s surrounded by more windows that overlook the sea, as well as boasting a large pool in the corner. The pool alone is about the size of my guest suite, and it clearly leads into the ocean.

I have no idea how the water isn’t filling the room since we’re entirely submerged down here, but maybe there’s some sort of fluid mechanics or physics that I don’t understand.

Or it’s all just… magic.

The bathroom is the final destination of our tour, the marble-decorated space large enough to accommodate him in dragon form. Or I assume that’s the reason his bathtub is big enough for a party of ten, right along with his walk-in shower.

“All you have to do is press your palm to the glass, and the control panel for the various showerheads will appear,” he tells me, demonstrating with his own hand. “I’ll find you something to change into and grab you a fresh towel, too.”

He leaves me in the pristine bathroom, where I spin around to take in the massive mirrors framing the granite countertops.

Everything is so clean. Masculine. And *advanced*.

The showers I grew up using feel substandard compared to this.

But I should have expected opulence, given that the guest suite I’m staying in has similar technology and features. Just smaller. *Much smaller*.

Yet, just yesterday, I considered my accommodations to be extremely spacious, too.

“Here,” Zael says as he walks out of the adjoining closet holding a shirt and what look like shorts. Or maybe they’re boxers. “I don’t exactly have female clothes lying around, so I grabbed you something of my own. I hope that’s okay.”

He walks over to a closet built into the wall with automated doors and waves his hand over one to take out a towel.

“This countertop is heated,” he tells me, setting the cotton down on it. “So you don’t have to worry about catching a chill after the shower.” He glances inside the massive walk-in space. “There’s shampoo, conditioner, and other items already in there. Brushes in the drawer over there.” He gestures back to the sink area. “Umm… anything else you need?”

I stare at him. “N-no, I think I’ll be okay. Thank you.”

He nods, seemingly nervous. “No one other than me ever bathes in here. So I’m not as equipped for this as I would have thought.”

“Oh.” My cheeks heat at the sincerity in his voice. I’m not sure if he’s telling me this because he wants to placate my strange possessive urges or if he’s just… being honest. Regardless of the intent, I’m grateful for the knowledge. “Thank you,” I say again.

He moves into my personal space and brings one hand up to my hair. His gaze follows the movement, making me wonder what he’s thinking.

But then his desire becomes clear as he pulls my ponytail free, causing my hair to fall in waves around my shoulders. It’s not really wet, thanks to my cap. And also because my hair has always naturally dried quickly.

“I’m far too tempted to join you, little queen,” he whispers. “So I’m going to go busy myself in the other room. Come out when you’re ready to eat.”

With that, he leaves, his nickname for me warming my mind.

Little queen.

I thought I liked *darling*, but I… I think I like this new endearment more.

Just as I enjoyed hearing him say a queen doesn’t bow to her king. It’s similar to what Ika said.

Both men are wrong, of course. I’m not a queen.

But as I remove my suit and step into the shower, I fantasize about an alternate world where I could be a queen. Specifically, *their* queen.

Mated to Ika, Zael, and King Tiru…

I close my eyes, the fantasy unfolding inside my mind.

“Gods, I wish this was real,” I whisper to myself, leaning back against the tiled wall as the water springs to life. I didn’t turn it on, but I assume it felt my movements. Or maybe it has some sort of sensor. I don’t know. I don’t care. All I want to do is lose myself to the imaginary world spinning through my thoughts.

“Your wish is my command,” a deep voice replies, causing my eyes to fly open just as a palm covers my mouth.

A muscular body pins me to the wall, a pair of dark eyes staring down at me from above.

Ika.

“Just tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you,” he says softly, his lower half pressing into mine to trap my hips with his own. “Anything you desire, little siren. Anything at all.”

I gape at him.

His lips curl in response. “I’m going to drop my hand now,” he whispers. “Try not to scream, sweetheart. Or I might take it as an invitation for me to introduce you to *my* fantasies. Which I assure you are much darker than anything you could ever imagine…”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

IKA

ZAEL IS A FOOL.

He left this gorgeous woman alone and naked in the shower. *To go make lunch*. Or what-the-fuck-ever meal he's planning.

Shit.

I'll make a meal myself. *Between her toned thighs.*

"Ika," she breathes as I remove my palm from her mouth. "Are… are you here to kill me?"

My eyebrow inches upward, her question not what I expected her to ask. But the reason behind it amuses me. "Were you eavesdropping last night, little siren?"

Her pretty blue eyes narrow at me. "It was hard not to listen in after hearing there's a *bounty* on my life."

I nod. "Yes, I imagine you found that to be quite interesting indeed."

"*Interesting* is not the term I would use." Those alluring irises of hers resemble blue flames, the furious quality of her stare making my dick throb.

"Hmm, I suppose not." I allow my hands to go to her hips, my lower body aching to rock into her. To claim her. To *fuck* her.

But I wore boxer shorts to stop myself from taking this too far.

Because this is about giving my beautiful siren a reward for her swim, not about indulging in my depraved needs for personal gain.

Although, that doesn't mean I won't enjoy every fucking second of this experience.

It’s one I’ve been craving ever since my dreams of her first started.

“Are you here to kill me?” she asks again, more confidently than the first time. There’s also a fire in her expression that matches her tone, one that has my cock standing up and taking notice.

“Oh, I’m definitely not here to kill you, little siren,” I tell her.

Today, anyway, I mentally add. *Or perhaps ever*.

The future is so… uncertain.

But I don’t elaborate on any of that.

The here and now are far more important. Especially with her wet body so close to mine.

“When Zael asked if you were going to kill me, you said ‘maybe.’ That doesn’t make me trust you, Ika.”

“I’m so relieved to hear you call him Zael instead of King Zael,” I admit. “It’s about time that arrogant ass requested it, too.”

Miza frowns at me, her ire momentarily cooling. “You heard him request it?”

“I did. I’ve been by your side since you left the natatorium. I’m not letting anyone touch you. Other than your intended mates, I mean.”

“Intended mates…?” Her brow furrows even more. “Wait, you’re just trying to distract me. I want to know if you plan to kill me, Ika.”

“I already answered that inquiry,” I murmur.

“You said you’re not here to kill me. As in right now, I assume. So, what about later? What about tomorrow? Next week? *During the games*?”

“Such a smart little siren.”

“Says the evasive stealth dragon,” she fires back.

“Ohhh, there she is, the love of my existence, my sassy siren queen,” I purr, positively delighted.

Her resulting scowl is adorable. Actually, no. It’s sexy as fuck. Primarily because she’s naked and glowering at me. “You’re making me hard, sweetheart,” I warn her. “A potentially dangerous consequence after those fantasies Tiru and I shared during your race.”

“What’s dangerous is shadowing into my quarters without an invitation,” a deep voice interjects. “Step away from my Offering, Stealth Dragon King, or I’ll remove you myself.”

I glance over my shoulder and take in his suit-clad form. He may have lost the jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, but he’s far too overdressed. As per usual, I suppose.

“I know you run hot,” I tell him, “so perhaps that’s why you feel comfortable with all those layers when in warm environments. But if you want to come play, you’re going to have to lose the shirt and pants.”

“I’m not playing with you.”

“With me? No,” I return. “But we can play with Miza. It’s the least she deserves after that brilliant swim. Besides, you were just harping on about how you want to ensure she’s well rested and cared for before her swim later. What better way to do that than to dole out a bunch of orgasms?”

Miza gasps, drawing my attention to her mouth and then up to her wide eyes.

She’s no longer glaring at me.

She’s *gaping* at me.

And her cheeks sport twin spots of pink.

“Do you like that idea, sweetheart?” I ask. “Is that the fantasy you wished was real?” I lean into her, my hands on her hips, my lips at her ear. “Being worshipped by your royal mates? Orgasming against our tongues? Our fingers? On our cocks?”

She trembles beneath my touch, her breaths leaving her in short pants.

I smile. “Tell us how you want to come, and we’ll give you exactly what you need.”

Movement at my back suggests Zael has entered the shower.

His hand is burning—*literally*—as he grabs my shoulder. “Let go of my Offering.”

“Don’t repeat the mistakes of last night, Dragon King.” I utter the words in a violent whisper, my amusement dying beneath his flames. “If your fire moves one inch closer to our future, I will shadow you to the depths of my world and leave you there to smolder in silence.”

A quiet consideration falls between us, one that’s disturbed by Miza releasing a shuddering exhale.

That simple sound extinguishes his ire, the embers instantly vanishing from my skin. “Miza is meant to be showering and resting,” Zael informs me, his voice softer while still holding an edge to it. “And *you* are not meant to be anywhere near here.”

“You rewrote the rules to exclude courtship this afternoon for the finalists just so you could spend some time alone with our future,” I reply without missing a beat. “As the rules are apparently flexible now, I’m bending them as well.”

I look over my shoulder at him once more and arch a brow.

“Either you play with us, or you fuck off. Choose, Zael. And soon. Because I’m giving our future an orgasm—with or without you.” Dismissing him again, I refocus on a gaping Miza. “Have you decided how you would like to come, little siren?”

Her pretty blue eyes grow impossibly wider.

“You can tell him no,” Zael inserts, his dominance a palpable presence at my back. “In fact, you can tell him to fuck off, and I’ll make him leave.”

“If she wants me to leave, you won’t need to *make me* do anything,” I reply, my attention still on the deliciously naked female in front of me rather than the arrogant dragon behind me. “I value your consent, Miza.” The statement is a quiet one, but I know she hears the veracity underlining each word.

Because her nostrils flare.

And her pupils dilate.

“That’s why I’m asking for your preferences,” I add. “If you don’t want an orgasm, that’s okay, too.” I allow my gaze to travel downward to the water playing over her breasts. “But I think we both know you’re interested, little siren. *Very* interested.”

Her rosy nipples are hard points, begging to be kissed. Sucked. *Bitten.* And that sweet space between her thighs, her virgin cunt, is practically dripping with need.

My cock throbs with the desire to slide into her slick heat and fuck her into oblivion.

But it’s my mouth that aches the most, my tongue craving a taste of her hot arousal.

Because I can *smell* her.

“Gods, all I want to do is worship at the altar between your thighs, sweetheart,” I confide softly, my hands roaming up her sides toward her delectable curves. “Stroke your breasts and memorize their weight with my palms.”

I brush the underside of her perfect tits with my thumb and love the gasp that escapes her alluring lips.

“If you can’t voice your wants, maybe you can identify your limits instead,” I suggest, aware that she hasn’t spoken in several minutes. “You can simply tell us to stop if we go too far. We’ll do whatever you demand.” I glance back at the overdressed asshole behind me and add, “Right, Zael?”

His blue eyes are twin pools of liquid fire as he glowers back at me.

However, I can see the intrigue darkening his expression. The want. The *need*.

My words are inspiring visions in his head. Ideas. Cravings that will only be satiated by playing.

The bastard might hate me for them, but he'll thank me later when the flavor of Miza's pussy coats his tongue.

Which gives me an idea…

"Tell me your dragon isn't begging you to fall to your knees right now," I say to him, my voice a low growl of sound. "Tell me he isn't *dying* for a taste of that sweet cunt. Because if I can smell her, you can smell her. And we both know what she needs, what she *deserves*. Unless you want to deny it? Deny *her*?"

His jaw ticks, flames igniting in his palms.

I wait for him to attack me, but he doesn't. He merely… flickers with barely concealed fury.

And says nothing.

"Mmm, silence is compliance." I slip my palms back down Miza's sides and look at her. "Do you want Zael to stroke you, little siren?" I cant my head, ensuring she can see Zael and he can see her. "A simple nod and he'll touch you, just like I'm touching you."

She shivers beneath my palms, her throat seeming to bob as she swallows.

I draw my hands up again, slowly and purposely toward her breasts.

Her breath hitches as I palm them boldly, my thumbs playing over her stiff nipples.

Zael hisses behind me, and I can't tell if he wants to rip me away from her so he can take over the motion or if he merely wants to kill me for intimately caressing our future. I haven't technically acquired her permission. Though, she hasn't expressly denied her interest, either.

Actually, the way she's arching into my touch now insinuates that she's *very* accepting of my intentions.

"Fuck, Miza," I whisper, pleased with her show of acquiescence. "It's like your breasts were crafted for my hands, the curve fitting my palms to perfection."

Zael's heated presence intensifies at my back, suggesting he's on the verge of imploding.

Whether it’ll be a good implosion or a bad one remains to be seen.

But I decide to force the former, to ensure the Elite Dragon King behaves.

I lower my hands to Miza’s hips and lift her into the air. She squeals, her palms grasping my shoulders as I carry her over to a nearby bench. “I’m going to sit down with you in my lap. Then we’re going to present your cunt to Zael. Either he’ll accept the invitation to taste you, or I’ll indulge your needs.”

“*Ika*,” she breathes, her nostrils flaring as her eyes directly meet mine.

I rather like holding her this way, evening our heights so I can stare directly into those pretty blue depths.

“Do you want your pussy licked?” I ask her, pausing next to the place where I intend to begin her pleasurable tutorial.

She swallows again, her pupils dilating. “I…”

I arch a brow as silence descends once more. “Yes or no, little siren,” I tell her gently. “Do you want to experience an orgasm?”

She squirms a little, her thighs clenching in the air. “Y-yes,” she whispers.

“Good girl,” I praise her, pleased with both her response and the fact that she finally voiced her desire. “Can we invite Zael to play?” I ask her. “Yes… or no?”

Her eyes remain on me as she bites her lip and nods a little. “Yes.” It’s a soft response, but one I know the Elite Island King hears just fine.

“Mmm,” I hum, smiling at her as I sit on the bench, her legs automatically parting across my lap. “I’m very proud of you, sweetheart.” I brush my nose against hers, then take her mouth with my own.

I want to reward her with my tongue.

My lips.

My kiss.

So I do.

I devour my little siren, following up my words with actions, letting her know just how happy I am with her responses. With her telling us how she feels.

Maybe they seemed like small words to her, but they mean everything to me. To *us*. Because they demonstrate consent. Demonstrate need. Demonstrate *our future*.

I draw my hands up her sides, one going to her nape as I deepen our embrace, the other going to her breast to fondle her once more. Her nipples are even harder now, the tips resembling diamonds against my skin.

She's almost ready. Almost on edge. Almost where I want her. Where I *need* her.

But I don't rush her. I merely coax her. Feeling her. Kissing her. Letting her tongue match my pace. Rewarding her with my touch as she arches into me for more.

It's a delicate dance, a sweet introduction to what we will become.

A blast of heat reminds me that Zael is very much a part of this destiny, his presence one I feel more than see as he moves closer to us.

It takes effort to pull myself away from Miza's questing mouth. However, I want to ensure he's not losing his shit.

I meet his gaze just as his flames extinguish, leaving him fully naked in the shower.

"That's a useful trick," I admit, my hand moving from Miza's nape to her hair as I fist her strands to guide her focus back and over her shoulder to where Zael stands. "Do you like that, Miza? The way he burned all his clothes off just for you?"

Her thighs clamp down around me, her gaze drinking in the sight of the sculpted Elite Island King.

I've been with enough men to recognize that Zael is beautiful. Perfectly formed. *Lethal*. All of that knowledge makes it easier to accept him as part of the mate-circle. Because I know he'll be able to keep up and please our little siren.

Which, he's about to see, requires a lot more than a few mere licks.

This woman isn't truly human.

It's something he may already suspect.

But when we're finished in this shower, his suspicion will become a reality.

Let the real games begin…

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CHAPTER TWENTY

MIZA

OCEANS, I can't believe I'm doing this.

Straddling Ika.

Staring at Zael.

Naked Zael.

With… with an impressive… yes.

My throat feels dry, yet I force myself to swallow as I study every inch of his exquisite form. He's… he's sculpted to perfection. Which I already knew. I… I saw him just… was that yesterday?

Does it matter?

I just want to lick him.

Touch him.

Something.

Yet my legs are around Ika.

Who is equally as alluring. Only a little more clothed. But that scrap of black fabric doesn't hide his erection.

His long, thick cock… situated between my thighs.

The urge to press down against him hits me hard in the lower belly. Rather than fight it, I give in and grind down onto his prominent manhood. Because why should I stop myself? He has me on his lap, his hand in my hair while his opposite palm holds my breast. And he promised me an orgasm. Or asked if I wanted one, anyway.

I said yes, I marvel. *I… I feel so… alive. So bold. So…*

Shells, I don’t want to think of more words. I just want to experience whatever this is and embrace the power thriving inside me.

I fight the hold Ika has in my hair and force my head back toward his, needing to kiss him again. To feel his tongue in my mouth. To simply *enjoy*.

He doesn’t stop me, his grip allowing my movements. But then his hand tenses as he takes control of our embrace, his lips instantly mastering mine and making my knees shake.

Warmth blossoms all around me, consuming my existence and making me writhe in his lap. Only for a third hand to reach me, the touch even hotter than the inferno building inside me.

It’s a hand on my nape.

A hand that belongs to Zael.

A hand that travels down my spine to my hip as I’m suddenly being yanked away from Ika and pulled into another man’s lap.

My body lights up in invisible flames when my core brushes his groin, his dick perfectly fitting to my soaking center.

My eyes widen, my instincts firing as my brain registers what should happen next.

I might be a virgin, but I’ve had sexual training. I *know* how this works. I just didn’t expect it to happen quite like this.

In a shower.

With two men.

One of whom is now… *stroking my face*, I realize, my eyes opening to find Zael’s intense blue gaze focused entirely on me. His fingertips are light against my jaw, his opposite hand at my lower back as he holds me against him. “I absolutely want to taste you, little queen,” he tells me softly. “But I need to kiss you first.”

My lips part, his words ones I swear I’ve heard in my dreams, uttered in that exact accented voice.

I’ve forever found Zael intriguing, his royal presence having always been untouchable and godlike in the sky.

Now I’m astride his lap.

Inches from his face.

Seconds away from kissing him…

I swallow, my heart beating a mile a minute in my chest.

“Say yes,” he murmurs. “Tell me to—”

I lean in and press my lips to his before he can finish the statement, needing to make this dream a reality and not wanting to give him any reason to reconsider his request.

He smiles against my mouth, his fingers still featherlight against my skin as he strokes my jawline. But then the smile melts away, his touch becoming less gentle when he reaches my hairline.

I gasp when he takes a fistful of my damp strands, his grip suddenly unyielding, his lips demanding, his body *hard*.

The hand on my lower back turns into an arm as he holds me against him, his tongue suddenly invading my mouth and introducing me to a *real* kiss.

It's different from Ika's tendencies.

Zael is… *commanding*. In charge. *A king*.

Yet so was Ika, just in an entirely different way.

With Ika, I felt like I was given time to adjust, to learn how to kiss him back, to answer his strokes and preferences on my own time.

But Zael is too dominant to wait. Too intense. *Too skilled*.

He masters me with his mouth, commanding me into submission, and leaves me vibrating with need on his lap.

It's… it's overwhelming. Intoxicating. *Perfect*.

I chase him, trying to be everything he's requiring and more. Kissing him back with equal fervor. Proving to him that I can keep up. I can learn. *I can be his*.

I don't even recognize myself or understand my own mind and actions. I'm just… here. Living. *Thriving*. Becoming whatever and whoever he needs me to be.

Except, not quite.

I *am* this woman. This female. The one on his lap, clinging to his shoulders, grinding against his hardness, pursuing a high I barely understand. It just feels right. Feels amazing. *Feels fantastical*.

The world shifts so suddenly that I growl, furious at being ripped away from my king's mouth. Only to find my head yanked backward by his fist in my hair, his lips finding mine as my back meets his chest.

I scarcely comprehend the position, simply know that my legs are still parted over his thighs with his dick digging into my ass. I reach back to thread my fingers through his thick strands and continue kissing him.

His answering growl rumbles against my chest, his hand gliding up from my hip to wrap around my throat as his grip in my hair tightens. “Ika’s going to kneel for you, darling,” Zael says against my lips. “And he’s going to feast on that dripping cunt until *I* tell him to stop.”

“So it’s going to be like that?” Ika asks, sounding amused. “All right.”

Zael doesn’t give me a chance to speak, his mouth taking mine again with a ferocity that makes it hard to breathe. I almost try to pull back, to inhale, to remember how to live. But then I feel Ika’s palms on my thighs, and all I can do is… *survive*.

His lips follow his touch, his mouth kissing a path from my inner knee all the way up to my thighs.

“How does it feel knowing you have a king on his knees for you, little siren?” he asks, his words causing my heart to hammer in my chest. “To know another king has his palm wrapped around your delicate throat so he can control your screams?”

Zael’s grasp tightens a little in response to Ika’s words, causing my pulse to race even harder.

I thought I was being brave by kissing him, by showing him what I wanted and indulging in this fantasy. But I’m quickly realizing that these men are very much in charge.

And I’m *extremely* vulnerable between them.

I swallow, somewhat unnerved by that realization. Yet oddly… *aroused*.

I like them being dominant. Taking what they want. Kissing me. Stroking me. *Licking me.*

Ika’s mouth is dangerously close to my center, his lips caressing the crease of my thigh, right by my—

“*Oh*,” I gasp against Zael’s mouth, jolting as Ika nuzzles into my sex and traces my sensitive flesh with his tongue.

I’ve *never* been kissed down there. Never truly been touched by another. Just by myself—when I experimented on my own as part of my homework for sexual education classes.

I’m aware of my clit. Of my inner channel. Of how it feels to curl a finger deep inside myself.

But it’s nothing compared to Ika’s attentions now, his tongue lighting a fire across my damp skin as he draws his mouth up to my swollen flesh.

He takes that sensitive part of me between his teeth and nibbles, causing me to yelp in surprise.

Only for Zael’s hand to close off my airway while he continues kissing me. Devouring me. *Owning me*. Reminding me that he’s here, that he’s in charge, that he’s the reason I’m allowed to breathe.

Or not breathe.

I tremble, fear mingling with interest, my mind and body battling with how I should feel. How I should *react.*

One man is *biting* me. The other is *choking* me. I should probably be fighting them. Shrieking. Begging them to stop.

Except I can’t. I like this too much. Love being at their mercy. Experiencing their branding touches. Their mouths. Their hands. Their *tongues*.

Zael strokes my thudding pulse point with his thumb, his grip lessening just enough to allow me to inhale right as Ika seals his lips around my clit and sucks.

My inhale turns into an exhaled scream, my body igniting on a wave of excruciating heat that sears me to my very soul.

It’s all-consuming.

Overwhelming.

Scorching me from the inside out.

The sudden sensations leave me incapable of breathing, my body boneless, my mind falling into an ocean of exquisite darkness.

I’ve never felt anything like this before in my entire existence. Any and all orgasms before this moment are nothing compared to *this*.

I’m on another plane of existence.

Swimming.

Drowning in pleasure.

And Ika’s mouth is ensuring I can’t resurface, his tongue and teeth and lips driving me deeper and deeper into the depths of oblivion.

When his finger slides inside me, I scream. It’s too much. It’s not enough. It’s perfect. *I need more…*

Zael growls, his grip cutting off my air again. “You heard our queen. *More*, Ika. *Again*.”

I’m so dizzy that I’m not sure if I uttered those words aloud or if Zael’s suddenly reading my mind. Maybe both. Maybe neither. I don’t really care. I’m too focused on what these two men are doing to my body.

Zael’s hand leaves my hair to slip down to my chest, his palm squeezing my breast.

I moan, my lower half lifting up toward Ika's mouth, only to be pushed back down as he inserts a second finger into me.

Shells, I'm a writhing mess of need. Of desire. *Of wanton insanity*.

It's like someone else has possessed my body, a being I don't recognize. And I love it. I love *her*—this version of me I've never met before. She feels powerful. *Queen-like*. A suitable match for the men currently owning me with their mouths and hands.

"Come again," Zael tells me. "Come hard. I want you to fucking soak Ika with your pleasure, *drown* him with your pussy. Shut him up for the rest of our lives."

Ika chuckles, the sound vibrating my clit and sending shock waves through my core.

Then his hand disappears and he grabs my wrist. I'm mildly cognizant that I'm touching each man, my focus entirely on how they're stroking me.

However, his momentary pause makes me realize I wasn't only grasping Zael's hair, but Ika's too. Except Ika forces me to release his mane as he yanks my wrist downward. "Fuck yourself with your fingers for me, sweetheart," he demands.

I'm a slave to his words, my body entirely under his spell as I instantly slip three fingers into my throbbing center.

"Mmm, that's it," he hums, his voice vibrating my clit. "Such a good fucking girl for me. Just a little more, beautiful. Nice and wet. That's it." His grip around my wrist tightens as he pulls my hand away from my center. "Now feed Zael for me. I want him to experience this heaven so he knows *exactly* what he's missing."

Zael pulls his mouth away from me to look down at the man between my thighs. I shudder at the intensity in his blue gaze, especially as he turns it on me. "Do what Ika told you to do." His accent is more prominent now, his voice deeper. "Let me taste you."

Every part of me lights up once more, the invisible heat swarming every inch of my skin as I do exactly what he and Ika tell me to do.

Zael's tongue moves expertly over my fingers, his eyes holding mine while he sucks me deeper into his mouth.

Oceans, that's hot…

I clench my thighs, only for Ika to press back with his hands. Then his mouth seals over me once more, his lips suckling my sensitive bud and driving me mad with need.

“More,” I whisper, aware that I’ve requested it aloud this time. Glancing down, I meet Ika’s burning gaze as I add, “I… I want your fingers again.”

It’s such a bold request. So unlike me. Yet it feels right.

And he rewards me by doing exactly what I asked, his hand gliding upward to spear me with expert ease.

“*Fuck*,” Zael groans, drawing my attention back to him. His grip on my neck reminds me that he’s still very much in charge a brief second before his mouth reclaims mine.

A tangy sweetness lights up my taste buds, the flavor one I recognize as my own. *My arousal. On his tongue. Because Ika made me feed him.*

Oh Gods…

Every part of me quivers with want, my body alight with need, my soul vibrating with unexpected life.

Maybe this really is a dream, I marvel. *Or maybe… maybe it’s real.*

Regardless, I don’t care.

I simply feel. Embrace. *Exist.*

And fall apart on another unexpected wave of intensity, driven by Ika’s mouth and his fingers curling inside me.

It’s so overwhelmingly amazing, so immediate and without any sort of warning. One minute, I’m indulging, and then next second, I’m taken under by a whirlpool of sensations that refuse to let me surface.

Screams leave me.

Only to be captured by Zael’s mouth.

At least until the world swims around me, my body moving in ways I don’t understand until I find myself straddling Ika with Zael’s head between my thighs.

Both men moved in unison, like they discussed their positions without me hearing them. Maybe… maybe they had. Maybe they just knew how to rotate around. I… I don’t know if I’m aware enough to care.

Because Zael is licking me now. Eating me like he’s starving for more. *Needing* to fuck me with his tongue.

And Ika’s mouth is teaching me how to kiss again, how to embrace him, *how to breathe…*

I’m riding Zael’s tongue with abandon, pumping my hips like I’m trying to fuck him right now. It’s so unlike anything I’ve ever done before but feels natural at the same time.

Rather than overthink it, I engage with this side of myself and just… *indulge.*

Both men continue touching me. Sucking me. Kissing me. Tonguing me. *Penetrating me with their fingers.* And I let them. Follow their leads. Continue to swim in the depths of bliss. Existing on waves of pleasure. Twirling over and over in and out of cyclones of ecstasy.

Until finally I'm carried to a bed.

Laid out.

And devoured *again*.

Zael's head is between my legs, his tongue branding me as his, while Ika feasts on my breasts, his teeth leaving marks all over my chest.

This has to be a dream, I think again. *It's too fantastical to be real.*

But the pleasure they wring from me is *very* tangible. Life-altering. *Amazing*.

"How many is that?" Zael asks, drawing my gaze down to where he's hovering above my aching clit.

"Six," Ika replies, his mouth around my nipple. "We should probably make her eat soon."

"Six?" Zael echoes. "That's not possible. She's human."

"Is she?" Ika returns, making me frown. "Let's see if she can handle eight…"

I'm only vaguely aware that he means *orgasms*.

Only vaguely aware that he just questioned me being human. *Again*.

He keeps calling me a siren. As a nickname. But maybe he thinks I really am one?

I should probably care more about that than I do. However, Zael's growl against my intimate flesh instantly lulls me into another wave of pleasure.

And all I care about is coming again.

And again.

And again…

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ZAEL

TEN ORGASMS, I think, stroking my fingers through Miza's soft pink hair. *Ten. Fucking. Orgasms*.

Not throughout the day.

But over the course of ninety minutes.

This last bout of pleasure sent her cascading into a much-needed sleeping state, hence the beautiful display on my pillow.

Not only is she naked and flushed from our intentions, but her lips are swollen from our mouths and parted in sensual invitation.

My hard cock desperately wants me to accept that invitation, to slide into the haven of her mouth and wake her with a thrust down her pretty little throat.

It's a depraved desire, one Ika inspired seconds ago by commenting on her fuckable mouth.

"You're thinking about it," he says now. "Thinking about how it would feel to make her choke on your cock while she's asleep." He reaches down to rub a hand over his obvious erection, the black fabric of his boxers doing little to hide the rigid outline.

"I'm not fucking her without consent."

"Not today, no," he agrees. "But we could ask her for consent in the future. Sleep play can be so much fun, after all."

Two days ago, I would have scoffed at the thought and told him to fuck off.

But a lot has changed in the last forty-eight hours.

“She came ten times,” I whisper, drawing my fingers through her hair once more. “Ten times, Ika.”

“I know.”

“Humans can’t do that.”

“Perhaps genetically engineered ones in your world can,” he returns. “Or maybe she’s not human.”

I look at him. “Tell me what you know.”

The bastard shakes his head. “It doesn’t work like that. I can encourage you to swim in a specific lane, but the moment I define a destination, everything changes.” He shrugs. “Besides, my dreams are not always correct. In fact, the only prophecies that have come to fruition lately involve Miza.”

“Since when do stealth dragons dream about the future?” I demand.

“It’s a recent development,” he answers vaguely. “One I can’t elaborate upon.”

“Of course you can’t.” Fuck, this asshole infuriates me.

Yet I let him coax me into bed with him.

Well, kind of, anyway. I study Miza. He essentially used this stunning woman as bait.

And I can’t say I regret falling into the trap.

The way she came apart between us was the most beautiful display of pleasure I’ve ever witnessed.

She’s fucking hypnotic. A euphoric experience. *Utterly supernatural.*

Which brings me back to wondering *how* she exists. “We’ve spent centuries altering human genetics in this realm, ensuring they can survive monster matings. But what she just did was extraordinary.”

“Because *she* is extraordinary,” Ika murmurs, his long legs crossed at the ankles from where he lounges on her other side. “However, she still needs to eat. Especially if we want her to win tonight. So are you going to cook for her, or am I?”

“You say that like I wasn’t in the process of preparing a meal for her when you unceremoniously invited yourself into my suite,” I mutter at him.

“Technically, your seaguard held the door open for me. It’s not my fault she couldn’t see me.”

I stare at him. “You’re a fucking menace.”

“And you sound like Tiru,” he returns, grinning. “By the way, this bed is exceptionally comfortable.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

He arches a brow. “You want to return Miza to that guest suite? Downgrade our future’s accommodations after allowing her to experience the luxuries fit for a queen?” He tsks. “Not very gentlemanly, Zael.”

“What I do with Miza is not your concern,” I growl at him. “*You* are the one who is unwelcome here.”

“He says after sharing a delectable meal together,” Ika muses, rolling onto his elbow to stare down at a stirring Miza. “I offered her pussy to you as a gift, Zael. You accepted. *And* you fucking loved it. So don’t try to swim backward. We have a future to tend to. *Together.*”

He leans down to brush a kiss across Miza’s plump lips, his palm sliding up to collar her throat. His presence is so close to my fingertips in her hair that I almost yank my hand away. But I don’t want him to be the only one touching her as she wakes.

It would feel like defeat. Like I’m admitting she’s more his than mine. And I… I can’t allow that to even be a consideration in her mind.

Which is confusing since I’m not a suitor in the Monster Games. Nor have I ever considered taking a mate.

However, there’s something undeniably addicting about Miza Kananaka. Something that makes me want to change my stance on taking a queen.

Though, Ika’s involvement certainly complicates things. He also knows too much. *Sees* too much. Yet won’t provide any details or explanations. Just expects me to *accept* this fate.

I suppose I did today. But seeing Miza naked and wet, hearing her voice her desire… I was utterly incapable of denying her.

I *wanted* her. Fuck, I still want her.

My dick is as hard as seastone, demanding that I part her silky thighs and slide into her beautiful cunt. She’s wet from all her orgasms, tight, too. And it would feel so damn good to fuck her.

Except Ika would want to join.

He hasn’t tried to hide his erection, despite keeping his boxers on the entire time. But that thick length of his is very prominent.

And currently pressed up against Miza’s thigh.

Miza moans as she awakens more, her hand trailing up Ika's arm to find his neck as he kisses her again.

My jaw clenches, my hand in her hair tightening its grip. Why does he get the privilege of tasting her first? Narrowing my gaze, I lean into her side to ensure she feels my presence. Then I nip at her ear and say, "Welcome back, little queen. Shall we make you come again?"

That's not what we should do.

She needs to eat.

But now I want to assert my dominance again. To make her scream *my* name into Ika's mouth. I draw my hand away from her hair, down her exquisite body to her hip, then slip my touch forward to palm her pussy.

She gasps in response, her lower body pushing into my hand on instinct.

"You're insatiable," I murmur, fucking loving that she's already demanding more despite all the pleasure we've forced on her.

"A necessary trait for a woman destined to take on three demanding mates," Ika says against her mouth. "Now open for us, Miza. Take my tongue while Zael fucks you with his fingers."

I narrow my gaze, not particularly appreciating him trying to control the situation. When he did that earlier, I flipped our positions around and took charge.

Unfortunately, I can't exactly rip Miza out from under him now, even if I want to.

However, I don't have to do precisely what he says, either.

Kissing a path down Miza's neck, I go to her pretty tits and lick one nipple before gently biting the stiff peak while my fingers explore her cunt. Not penetrating her. Just… *stroking*. Almost touching her clit, but not quite. Needing her to sense me without gathering the friction she needs.

Featherlight brushes.

Teasing kisses against her breast.

Breathing hot air across her nipple.

I want her pent up. Begging. *And saying my name*.

The little growl that rumbles through her chest tells me I'm doing everything exactly right. Building her up to the edge without providing the necessary push into oblivion.

"*Zael,*" she moans, causing my lips to curl.

"Yes, darling?" I reply, feigning innocence as I pull my mouth away from her breast to look at her. "You want *me* to kiss you instead of Ika?"

The stealth dragon lifts his head to stare me down with his dark eyes. “If you want me to feast on her pussy again, just issue the command, *Your Arrogantness.*”

I narrow my gaze right back at him. “I would prefer that you fuck off.”

He palms Miza’s tit—the one farthest from my mouth—and arches a brow. “I don’t think Miza wants me to leave.” He pinches her nipple, causing her to gasp. “In fact, I think she very much wants both of us to stay with her. Play with her. *Make her come*. Yes?”

“Yes,” she hisses, arching up into his touch as her lower body tries to seek out my hand. “P-please. More. I need *more*.”

“You’re not sensitive at all?” I question, my thumb finding her clit and pressing down—*hard*—just to see what she’ll do.

The little queen merely groans in response, her cheeks flushing with renewed passion. “Oceans,” she breathes. “It feels so good, Zael.” The words leaving her mouth are so unlike those of the woman I met a few nights ago.

This female isn’t meek or bowing to authority. She’s taking command and issuing unspoken demands with her body. Seeking pleasure. *Seducing two kings…*

Three, if Tiru were here.

Fuck.

I don’t know what this woman is, but she’s definitely not human. That much I’m certain of now.

Yet I can’t pause mid-act and issue questions, not while her pussy is weeping beneath my hand. While her mouth is parted in silent invitation, begging me to fill her in some way…

I move upward to kiss her, taking over for Ika since he’s pulled back enough to make room. But I don’t shift my hand from her cunt either. I simply glide it down and spear her with three fingers at once.

She screams, bowing off the bed, only to be held down by my hand on her pussy and my tongue thrusting into her mouth.

Mine, I think. *My female. My Offering. My queen.*

Ika doesn’t fight, just focuses on her tits—something I know because his knuckles brush my chest as he slips his hand between us.

It’s a subtle reminder that he’s here, that he’s not going anywhere.

Well, fuck him.

It’s going to be *my* name she screams. *My* name she praises as she explodes.

“Come for Zael, sweetheart,” Ika says, intruding on the moment. “Give him what he wants so we can drag you into the kitchen and feed you.” His head is suddenly closer to mine as he kisses a path up to her ear to add, “I’ll lick your sweet pussy while you eat. Make you come all afternoon on my tongue, if that’s your desire.”

She moans into my mouth, making me growl in response. “*I* will be the one worshipping her cunt.” The words are for Ika despite my lips being against hers. “*You* can feed her.”

Ika merely chuckles in response. “Do you like hearing us fight over you, Miza? Knowing that we both want to worship you with our mouths for eternity?” His voice drops an octave as he continues with, “Can you imagine what will happen when we fuck you? How we’ll fight for dominance with you in the middle of us?”

Now it’s my turn to groan because *fuck*, his words are driving me to the brink of madness.

Because *I* can picture the fantasy he’s weaving and rather than infuriate me or turn me off, it’s making me harder than I already am.

Competing with him—thrust for thrust—while trying to drive our woman to come… chasing our own pleasure inside her…

Gods, I am *not* interested in Ika. I despise him. *Hate* him. Yet the notion of sharing Miza with him is not nearly as appalling as it should be.

“Zael’s cock is so much thicker than those fingers inside you, little siren,” he goes on, deepening my desire to fuck her. She doesn’t seem all that opposed, her tight sheath squeezing the shit out of me as I drive into her.

I try to distract her with my tongue, or maybe I meant to distract myself, but it only heightens the craving.

“He’ll take your pussy first while I fuck your ass,” Ika says, his lips still against her ear, his words more than loud enough for me to hear. “Then Tiru will join by sliding into your mouth.”

Miza practically vibrates beneath me, her body burning in response to his filthy imagination.

“You’ll have to learn how to handle all three of us, but we’ll go slow and teach you,” Ika promises her. “We’ll make you our queen. Worship you. Fuck you. *Claim you*.”

“*Oh!*” she screams in response to those last two words, or maybe from everything he said, her body thrown into a violent climax that has her clamping down around me and stilling my motions below.

The only part of my hand that I can move is my thumb, which I do—against her clit—massaging her as she soars through the sensations of her orgasm.

She pants against my mouth, my name a whisper more than a shriek.

And followed by “*Ika*.”

Which has me narrowing my gaze, determination darkening my mood.

I want her to forget he’s here. But the bastard makes that impossible by chuckling and kissing her cheek. “Such a good little siren,” he praises her. “Now let’s go eat. You can ride my face while Zael feeds you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him to fuck off—*again*—since I just told him *I* would be the one licking her sweet pussy while *he* gives her food.

But Miza responds before I get a chance to speak. “Okay.”

A single word.

That’s all she says.

Yet something about it pierces the heart of my irritation, causing my objections to deflate in a heartbeat.

Okay, I think, echoing her sentiment. *Okay*.

One afternoon as a team, taking care of Miza, ensuring she does well in tonight’s finals… is *okay*.

I can reevaluate everything later.

Tomorrow.

Whenever.

Because right now, we’re focusing on her. And Ika’s right—she needs food.

As well as more pleasure.

How much can she take? I wonder. *Enough to satisfy three kings?*

It’s a question I can’t even believe I’m considering.

But it’s a query I suddenly need an answer to.

A query… that might lead to something… *exquisite*.

Maybe Ika’s in my head. Perhaps I’m lust-drunk on Miza’s orange-spiced essence.

Fuck, I can still taste her on my tongue, the residual lava rum flavor running down my throat and demanding that I indulge in another lick.

Regardless of the cause, my mind is alight with foreign notions. Breathing ideas of a potential future that feels impossible to contemplate.

Yet it also seems too *real* as Ika helps Miza off my bed and wraps her in one of my robes.

Appears to be exceptionally tangible as I pull on a pair of gray sweatpants and lead her from my room.

And evolves into a realistic present as the three of us settle into my kitchen space to share a sensual meal.

Rather than question the impossibility of what's happening here, I simply indulge in the fantasy. "Fruit?" I ask Miza, grabbing the tray I started assembling almost two hours ago. Ika's presence interrupted my process, but there are a few pieces for Miza to begin nibbling on.

"Thank you," she says, her cheeks pink as her gaze darts away with a hint of shyness.

"No point in hiding now, little queen," I tell her. "Not when we've become so intimately acquainted." I tuck a strand of her pink hair behind her ear and lean forward to brush my lips across hers. "You're mine now, Miza."

"*Ours*," Ika corrects me. "Unless you're going to force her to choose?"

My gaze narrows at the idea. I don't like the notion of *forcing* Miza to do anything. "Let's just focus on taking care of Miza," I finally decide out loud, my words for Ika. "We can discuss… the rest later."

Because I'm not ready to determine what any of this means.

Fuck, I shouldn't have even told her she was mine. I'm not a candidate in these games. Though, I'm within my rights to join, so I could be involved…

I mentally shake off the debate, not wanting to lose myself to the semantics now.

This afternoon is about indulging.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

"Eat," I tell Miza, bringing another strawberry to her mouth. "You'll need your strength for later. After all, the Monster Games have only just begun."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MIZA

MY LEGS ARE TINGLING, my body aflame with remembrances of earlier.

I can barely focus on the natatorium, the spectators, the seven other Offerings waiting for tonight's race. We just finished our warm-ups, yet all I could think about the entire time I swam was about the pleasure Zael and Ika introduced me to today.

I'm not unfamiliar with orgasms. But the climaxes I experienced in Zael's room were… mind-blowing. New. *Utterly unworldly.*

I never knew I could feel that way.

Now my only desire is to experience it all over again. The yearning is consuming my thoughts, distracting me from the event ahead.

I need to focus, I tell myself. *This race is important*.

The top three candidates will be given premium placement in the next trial, which I have no doubt will be more difficult than this one.

Competing in a pool is easy.

It's the ocean that terrifies me.

And that's where the Monster Games actually take place—in the open sea.

A shiver traverses my spine at the reminder, my mind seeming to ground itself in reality once more. Pleasure might be amazing, but surviving is what matters most.

Will Ika or Zael save me if the waves try to take me? I wonder, glancing up to where Zael is seated on his platform in the natatorium. I can't see him,

the lights dim like they were earlier. But I know he's there because he spoke again before our warm-ups.

His voice echoed through the aquatics center with regal confidence, welcoming all eight finalists. It was formal, straightforward, and gave nothing away.

Part of me wondered if he played with other Offerings in the past, choosing to bring a lucky woman or man down to his personal quarters just like he did for me today.

Is it all a game to him?

Because it seems to be a game to Ika. A dangerous one.

There's a bounty on my head, one he accepted.

I forgot about that little detail for a while today, allowing my mind and body to be consumed by the two kings drowning me in orgasms.

It's time to surface from that dream, I decide. *Time to face reality once more*.

Which is in the shape of the block before me.

I need to win this race.

It's only one lap of the pool.

Blowing out a breath, I tell myself, *I can do this*.

It doesn't matter that I'm flanked by two men who are well over six feet tall. I've swum against bigger, stronger men for years. And I *always* win.

I'm fast.

Everyone in my village knew it, too. Including our Viscount. It was one of the many reasons my inability to balance on the damn lily pads frustrated him.

"You would be the perfect Offering if you could figure out how to show a little more decorum," Viscount Kahu said on more than one occasion.

Well, I might not be able to kneel all that well, but I can swim, I think at him now. *And I'm going to prove that by winning this race.*

Because hopefully that'll aid me in the next trial. *Whatever that'll be*.

I inhale and exhale again, shaking out my arms, and roll my neck. *I've got this. I just need to nail my start*. The one-hundred-meter races were always my strength while training in the village. Mostly because I could account for any mistakes I made on the block.

That's not happening tonight. I'm going to have a perfect dive. It's going to be fine.

So what if my legs feel like jelly after all the orgasms today?

And yeah, I might be slightly distracted by the men watching me.

Specifically, Zael and Ika.

King Tiru, too, I realize, glancing back at the royal-blue-and-purple towel behind my block. It has King Tiru's insignia on it, telling me he provided the item this time, not Ika.

What does that mean for later? I wonder.

The Offerings were paired off with their "benefactors" after this morning's races. And those benefactors were denoted by the names inscribed on the towels.

Ika's script was noted across my black cotton earlier.

But now the vibrant fabric has *Tiru Engeri* written along the side.

I glance up at the darkened stands again, wondering where he's sitting. Then briefly look back at Zael. *Is he watching me right now? Thinking about earlier? Or was all that a one-time event?*

He kissed me when he left me near the natatorium entrance. The only one who saw him was Ika—who also kissed me.

Then they both wished me luck and nothing more.

No promises for later.

No comments on what any of this meant.

Just a simple "Swim fast" from Ika before they wandered off in the opposite direction.

Well, I'm going to do more than swim fast. I'm going to win.

And then I guess we'll see what happens next.

Ika asked Zael if he was going to make me choose, I think, my hands falling to the block as I wait for the whistle to blow. *Choose between them?*

That doesn't make a lot of sense.

"Successful Offerings are often claimed by more than one mate," Viscount Kahu said years ago while explaining the purpose of the Monster Games. "The more mates you attract, the better."

He made it sound like it was a good thing to have multiple monsters interested in an Offering. To *accept* multiple mates.

So why would Zael ask me to choose? Or did I mis—

A whistle cuts through my thoughts, snapping my attention to the pool once more as I move on autopilot to climb up onto the starting block.

Time to race.

A jolt of excitement swims through my veins, my feet positioning themselves on the tilted surface, my toes curling over the edge of the

somewhat rough surface. My opposite foot moves to the back into a track-start position, my arms hanging limply as I bend forward and wait for the announcer's next demand.

Silence descends.

All I hear is the water, barely moving below, the subtle call of the racing pool one I've always enjoyed. More than the allure of the ocean, anyway.

My neck rolls once more, my head positioning automatically.

"Take your mark," the starter says.

I grip the block lightly, my arms tenser now.

Beep!

I'm flying through the air in a split second, my timing exactly what it needs to be. And then I'm entering the water in a perfectly executed dive, my feet already kicking as I try to position myself ahead of the sprinting wave around me.

Swimmers moving fast create a current, and I don't want to drown in the wake manifested by larger men. I need to *move*. I need to sprint ahead. I need to ensure I reach the other end *first*.

A scream builds in my head as I surface in the water, my arms moving powerfully to carry me forward, my lungs already demanding that I breathe.

But I won't.

It's less than thirty seconds from start to finish.

Under twenty-five seconds if I swim this right.

Closer to twenty if I want to beat the men in this heat…

A calm overcomes me, my lungs instantly cooling as my need for oxygen succumbs to the desire to win.

Kick, Miza, I tell myself. *Kick, kick, kick.*

My arms are moving on autopilot, aware of how this is done. But it's my legs that need to carry me home. *Harder. Faster. Yes, yes.…*

I'm close, time moving by in rapid succession as I near the end of the pool.

I can almost taste the finish.

So close.

Almost there.

Head down, I plunge forward, determined, my body moving faster than it should, my mind utterly captivated by the need to reach that wall first.

Yet somehow I gentle my final stroke, gliding in with my palm as I slam into the wall with the force of the tidal wave created by my own feet.

A roar rips through the crowd, one I barely hear as I turn to stare up at the scoreboard.

Lane 5… Miza Kananaka… 22:19

There's a number one at the end, indicating I've won. But I'm too focused on the time to consider the rest.

22:19.

I just swam a fifty-meter freestyle in twenty-two seconds.

That's more than three seconds faster than this morning.

And utterly impossible.

I've *never* broken twenty-five seconds, let alone by that much.

"Holy waters," the man in the lane beside me breathes. "How did you do that?"

I swallow. "I…" I don't know how to respond to that.

Fortunately, I'm saved from trying to find words as King Tiru crouches beside the block and stares down at me. "That was a beautiful swim, little lei."

My cheeks heat at his praise. "Th-thank you."

He holds out a hand. "May I?"

I'm not sure what he wants exactly, so I take off my swim cap and goggles for him. He smiles, grabbing them and slipping them into the pockets of his black dress pants. Because of course he's wearing a suit. In the natatorium. Where it's hot.

His hand appears again.

Swallowing once more, I reach for him, and he effortlessly pulls me out of the water. Then wraps me in his purple-and-blue towel.

"Congratulations, finalists." Zael's voice carries across the pool, the spotlight falling on him again. "I believe we just witnessed a new record." He stares down at me from his place in the stands, his blue eyes smiling. "Nice swim, Ms. Kananaka."

The way his tone caresses my name causes me to shiver.

"This concludes our first trial," he goes on, only pausing for a beat. "Our second trial commences tomorrow evening, which gives our finalists at least eighteen hours to enjoy the attentions of their suitors before we reconvene. Enjoy."

The streaming light cuts out, causing chatter to ignite throughout the natatorium.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” Ika drawls as he appears beside me. “One would think a showboater like Zael would put on a better performance.” He gazes down at me with his dark eyes, his lips curling at the side. “At least you were entertaining, little siren.”

“She’s mine for the night,” King Tiru interjects before I can respond to Ika’s comment.

“Technically, I believe she’s *ours* for the night,” Ika informs him. “She accepted my towel earlier. Now she’s wearing yours. And if I understand Zael’s rules correctly, both of us qualify for her evening company.”

“It was *my* towel on her bench during this morning’s race,” King Tiru growls. “Not yours.”

“Yet it was my towel she picked up after her first swim,” Ika returns. “Therefore, I qualify as a suitor for tonight’s purposes.” He wraps his arm around me, his opposite hand going to King Tiru. “Now let’s go before anyone else tries to join our party.”

King Tiru’s lips part like he’s about to issue a retort, but his words vanish as the world shifts around us.

Shadowing, I recognize, my heart skipping a beat. *Was it just last night that Ika teleported me for the first time?* It feels like many days or weeks ago. So much has happened in a short span of time, and now I don’t know what he’s up to or where he’s—

I blink as my guest suite materializes before me. *Oh.*

“I am not sharing her with you,” King Tiru says, sounding furious.

“So you’ll make her choose?” Ika fires back, his words reminding me of the ones he spoke to Zael earlier.

Only, Zael never really replied to the statement, instead shifting our focus to food and… pleasure.

My cheeks warm as I think about the latter, my body suddenly very aware that I’m currently standing between two rival kings.

Two rival kings who are glaring at each other.

Ika’s hand moves to my throat, his palm hot against my skin as he steps even closer to me, his gaze on King Tiru. “Well?” he presses. “Are you going to force Miza to pick between us?”

The Kraken King’s palm is against my lower back, his touch seeming to burn right through my towel to brand my skin. “I would never force my mate to do anything,” he growls at Ika.

“So if she wants us both, you’ll *share*?” Ika demands.

King Tiru's hand flexes, his presence seeming to intensify as a new wave of heat pours over me. "I'll do whatever she asks of me," he finally says after a beat, his tone less severe than before. "I am hers to command."

I blink. *What?* I think, stunned.

Because that sounded reverent. Impassioned. Like… like a *vow*.

"Good," Ika replies, his stance shifting into a less threatening pose, his lips curling at the edges. "Then I can trust you to take care of our future this evening while I go help Zael with something."

My brow furrows as Ika pulls me in for a kiss, one that quickly dismantles my frown and has me melting into him on instinct.

Because wow.

Wow.

His kiss is addictive. Perfect. *Intoxicating*.

And it leaves me wanting more of what he gave me earlier. More touching. More licking. *More orgasms*.

"Mmm," he hums against my mouth. "I fucking love how receptive you are, Miza. Handling the three of us won't be easy, but you're proving to be quite the talented siren." His lips claim mine, this time engaging me in a deeper embrace, more fervent, more *purposeful*.

My stomach ignites with butterflies, my pulse thrumming in my ears.

More, I think, wrapping my arms around his neck. *More. More. More.*

The towel whispers down my legs, and Ika catches my hips, pulling me solidly against him. "So hungry," he whispers. "You'd better feed our intended, Tiru. If I return to find her unsatisfied, I will be severely disappointed in you and that monster between your thighs."

My arms fall in the next moment, leaving me bereft and staring at the empty space before me.

Ika shadowed again.

A growl escapes me, one founded on annoyance. Because how dare he leave me after kissing me like *that*?

King Tiru clears his throat, his palm still against my lower back—only he's touching my skin now since my towel fell.

He never let me go even while Ika devoured me with his mouth.

Which has me feeling a little… strange.

Guilty, maybe? Concerned?

King Tiru told me I might be his fated mate. Yet I just made out with another man—one he clearly dislikes—in front of him. And I spent the day

with Zael as well.

Does that make me a bad fated mate?

Am I even his fated mate?

I… I swallow, turning toward the Kraken King, worried about what I might see in his expression. But all I find is interest in his silver eyes. *Intense* interest.

“That truly was an amazing swim, sweet lei,” he murmurs, his words not at all what I expected to hear from him. Using his hand on my lower back, he encourages me closer, his gaze falling to my lips before slowly rising again. “But it’s not your talent that has me hypnotized right now.”

I press my palms to his chest, wanting to feel his strength. There’s something undeniably comforting about his presence. About his warmth. His *touch*.

I just feel naturally drawn to him.

I suppose I feel that way about Zael and Ika, too. But King Tiru is a little different. He makes me want to trust him despite barely knowing him. To believe that he would always protect me, no matter what.

It’s a foreign expectation, one established without any evidence or foundation of truth. Yet I feel as though I understand his intentions on a natural level I can’t define.

Very different from Ika, whom I’m pretty sure I shouldn’t have faith in —especially since he admitted to accepting the bounty on my life.

And not quite the same as Zael, whom I’ve simply been aware of for years… and attracted to in my dreams.

King Tiru is utterly different. Completely new. However, he feels old in my heart.

“Why do I feel so connected to you?” I ask, aware that he mentioned being hypnotized by something other than my “talent” and still wondering what he meant by that. But needing to understand this link even more. “Because of the fated bond you mentioned?”

He nods. “You’re meant to be mine.”

He leans down to press his nose to my cheekbone, his eyes falling closed as he inhales.

I shiver in response, his fragrance filling my nostrils and reminding me of a chilly beach night. Ocean air. Ripened pineapples. Sweet yet dangerous. Because monsters always lurk in the darkness. Not even the

most alluring fruit could make me forget about the lethal creatures swimming just off the coast.

Somehow, his scent is reminiscent of that knowledge. The perfect midnight indulgence, haunted by threatening shadows.

An addictive treat with an ominous undertone.

"It's in your scent." His words are eerily similar to my thoughts.

Except he's not talking about *his* fragrance. He's talking about *mine*.

"Citrus blossoms twinged with cinnamon," he goes on, his silver eyes smiling. "I thought it might be an influence from the companion flower, that maybe Ika was trying to trick me, but your natural aroma was the first note I sensed after pulling you from the water. You're my other half, sweet lei."

He presses a palm to the side of my face, his eyes opening once more to stare down at me again.

"Krakens only ever mate sirens. Until now. Until *you*. And this is after eons of my kind being without their other halves. I thought—I *feared*—that perhaps my realm was no longer destined to find true matches for our souls. But meeting you proves otherwise. Knowing you're mine… Miza, this changes everything."

I stare at him. "What do you mean?" I ask, my stomach twisting with uncertainty. "Wh-what's changing?"

"The future," he replies, pressing his forehead to mine. "*My* future. You're my fated mate. Because of you… *I'm free*."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ZAEL

Several Minutes Earlier

"Z," Mariana whispers, her gaze on the finalists below and their doting suitors.

My focus is on the space Miza stood in mere seconds ago, her body having vanished from view as Ika shadowed her and Tiru off to Gods know where.

I want to follow them.

To *join*.

To… I don't know. Stake my claim again. Kiss Miza. Fuck her with my tongue all damn night.

But I can't.

Because that swim…

"That swim shouldn't have been possible," Mariana says, her words overlapping with my thoughts.

"I know," I answer, just as quietly. For a human male, that time might have been achievable for a select few with remarkable swimming skills. But for a woman? No one in history has ever come close. And that's *with* genetic alterations factored into the mix.

"Her profile has to be a lie," Mariana goes on, still speaking under her breath. "There's no way she's mortal, Z."

"I know," I agree.

Another beat of silence falls between us as the crowd below begins to dissipate, Offerings being led out by packs of interested suitors.

It makes me glad for Ika's talent, that he was able to shadow Miza and Tiru out of there before anyone else could try to talk to our Offering.

Our Offering, I repeat to myself, realizing that I'm starting to think in terms of group pronouns, not solitary ones.

"What do you want to do about it?" Mariana asks, focusing her solid black eyes on me. "Seren will want answers."

I grunt at that. "If she cares so much about these trials, why isn't she here? Fires, *Celina* didn't even show up to watch." I narrow my gaze at my second. "And why would I provide answers? We know what the geneticists are doing. This isn't that, M."

"Are you sure?" she returns quietly, her tone not argumentative but filled with caution. "Maybe it's worth a conversation with the researchers. Find out if they're taking instructions from anyone or anywhere else." She gives me a knowing look. "Like the seaguards."

My jaw ticks at the subtle reminder that my seaguards acted under someone else's authority last night.

And that someone has yet to be identified.

The last update I had from Farrah basically said, *Everyone I've spoken to says the order came from you.*

Which it very much did not.

An impersonator acted on my behalf by using my communication channels to issue an order I never authorized.

The problem is that I have no idea who did it.

Only a handful of high-ranking court members have the access codes to my personal devices, all of whom are trusted and in my inner circle.

Which makes me wonder if I was hacked.

Or if a powerful being overrode my channels to issue her own message.

A powerful being like Seren.

There's a reason she's my counterpart as the Monster Island Queen. Her abilities are impressive and vastly unknown. However, I know many of them are of a mental nature.

Which could include hacking into my surveillance.

Or, more likely, involve manipulating someone I trust into doing her bidding.

"I need to talk to Seren," I tell Mariana.

She frowns. “But we don’t have any answers to give her yet.”

“She *is* the answer,” I counter. “And I’m going to demand an explanation.”

Mariana gives me a look that suggests she doesn’t agree with me.

“Speak your mind, M,” I tell her, not wanting to waste time. “Tell me what I’m missing.”

“I know Seren’s powerful,” she says, speaking slowly, like she’s trying to think through her words before voicing them out loud.

It’s the opposite of what I desire at the moment. However, I take a deep breath and wait for her to continue.

“I’m just struggling to see how she could be the true cause of this,” she finally admits. “It’s entirely possible that our geneticists made an enhancement we don’t know about. They’re constantly making breakthroughs, and maybe they’re demonstrating one of them in these games.”

I fold my arms, my focus entirely on her. “So you think they’re showing off?”

“Maybe,” she hedges. “I think we should start by questioning them, find out what they’ve done, and go from there. Accusing Seren without any evidence feels… rash.” She studies me. “And very unlike you, Z.” She narrows her gaze. “This female has gotten under your skin.”

“Which one?” I ask, feigning innocence. “Seren’s always under my skin, so surely you don’t mean her.”

“I mean the one who just swam an impossible time,” she deadpans. “The one you played with in your suite all day.” She cants her head, her glare intensifying. “The one making you act irrationally.”

“I am not acting irrationally.”

“Says the king who indulged a rival this afternoon and *shared* a woman,” she counters.

“Were you spying on me, M?”

“No. I saw the two of you kiss the Offering outside of the natatorium.” She arches a ruby-colored brow. “On the security feeds, by the way. Which means your seaguards saw it, too.”

“Why were you watching the security feeds?”

“Because we have a bunch of foreign visitors in our palace,” she returns without missing a beat. “And, as you know, it’s my job to monitor security of the grounds, *especially* during the week of the trials. Yet you’re

questioning me like I'm an enemy, not an ally. So I'll repeat—that female is under your skin."

My jaw ticks.

Not because I'm irritated with her for having witnessed a private exchange between me and Miza… and Ika. But because she's right.

I shouldn't be questioning Mariana like this. I should be listening to her. Discussing how to proceed. *Thinking logically*.

Yet all I want to do is go throttle Seren, demand answers, and then track down Tiru and Miza.

"Fuck," I mutter, palming my nape as I lean back to blow out a breath.

"Did you?" she asks, sounding amused.

"Don't pry, M," I growl at her.

"Can you blame me?"

I right myself and stare at her.

"You're positively besotted," she goes on, her amusement growing with each word. "Mr. I Don't Want a Mate seems to be quite taken with the not-so-human Offering." She cants her head, her ruby ponytail swinging with the movement. "I'm fascinated."

"What a boring existence you must lead to be so enthralled by me taking an interest in a beautiful woman," I return, my tone flat. "Maybe you should pick an Offering to fuck?"

She snorts at that. "I would break a human, Z."

"Then maybe you should go talk to the geneticists," I suggest. "See if they can make you an inhuman mortal."

Her eyes light up. "Actually, that's not a bad idea," she says, thoughtful. "I could visit under the guise of wanting an Offering like yours and see what they say."

I bristle at that. "You can't have Miza. She's *mine*."

"Ours, technically," Ika inserts conversationally as he materializes right beside me. "But I agree with Zael on this—Miza is off-limits." He narrows his dark eyes at Mariana. "Why would you be interested in our intended?"

"I didn't say I was," Mariana mutters, her irritation palpable. "What the fuck are you doing here, stealth dragon?"

"I'm joining Zael on his field trip," he tells her without missing a beat, causing me to wonder what "field trip" he means. However, before I can even ask, he demands, "What the fuck did you say about Miza?"

“Holy waters, you’ve both lost your balls over this female,” she exclaims, sounding exasperated as she faces off with us. “She’s definitely not human.”

“No shit,” Ika returns. “Stop deflecting and tell me what you said.”

“That I want to talk to the researchers about what the hell they’ve done with her genetics!” she shouts, uncharacteristically losing her cool. Yet she’s the one who adds, “The two of you need to get your shit together.”

I’m about to defend myself when Ika contradicts my opinion with “Well, that’s definitely true. I’ve been telling Zael and Tiru that for what feels like eons now. Maybe only a day in our present reality. But semantics and all that pizzazz.” He looks at me. “Shall we go?”

I stare at him. “Go where?” I partly hope he says to Miza’s quarters. Even though that’s entirely inappropriate right now.

Flames, Mariana’s right. Miza has me by the damn balls.

I’m not thinking straight at all. Either Miza is even more powerful than she seems, or Ika’s poisoned my mind—a suspicion I’ve considered more than once.

Except he contradicts my theory by saying, “To visit Seren. Obviously.” His brow furrows. “Sorry, did I appear too soon? These visions of mine… they’re not entirely predictable.” He makes a show of looking down at his wrist, his suit jacket and dress shirt pulling just enough to reveal the edge of a watch.

Only, he doesn’t even bother to expose the device entirely, choosing instead to shrug rather than actually read the time.

“Well, I want to get back to Tiru and Miza before anything truly interesting happens. So if we’re a bit ahead of schedule, that’s fine.” He holds out his hand. “Shall we, mate husband?”

“Mate husband?” I repeat, my brow furrowing. “What the fuck is that?”

He gives a partial shrug. “A term I’m playing with. You’re my mate’s mate. So I guess that makes us husbands in a way.”

“No.” It’s an automatic reply. “*No*.”

“Brother husband?”

“This isn’t incest.”

“‘Mate-circle member’ is too long,” he tells me. “M-C-M might work, though. Like an abbreviation?”

“Why are we having this conversation?” I growl, irritated by his very existence.

“Because you rejected ‘mate husband,’” he says like he’s reminding me of some sort of common explanation. “Keep up, Z. *Oh!*” He snaps his fingers. “I’ve got it. You can be the dumb mate.”

“I’m going to make you the *dead mate* if you keep talking,” I inform him, taking a step forward.

“I’m considering it a win that you’re calling me ‘mate’ at all,” he replies, grinning. “Now let’s go.” His hand seals around my wrist, his gaze flicking to Mariana. “Have fun talking to the doctors. It’ll be a useless venture, though. The truth lies with the sirens. Ta-ta.”

The natatorium vanishes, but not before I hear Mariana’s resulting growl. It’s feral in nature, giving away her inner monster traits.

However, it’s quickly swallowed by the sound of rushing water as a wave crashes into a nearby coastline.

My leather shoes sink into the sand, nearly dismantling my balance when the familiar shores of Monster Island appear around me.

Though, the Monster Island Palace is nowhere to be seen.

Ika’s taken me to the beach where the Offerings will face their final challenge in the Hunting Maze.

“This isn’t where Seren lives,” I say dryly, yanking my wrist from his hold and folding my arms. “Tell me why we’re here.”

“Because we need to talk,” Ika replies, running his fingers through his dark hair. “That swim tonight will have several entities questioning Miza’s origins. While I’m thrilled our queen swam her heart out, it means the interest in her is about to skyrocket. And not just by potential suitors.”

He’s not telling me anything I don’t already know. So I merely stare at him, waiting for more.

“There’s a bounty on her head, Zael.”

“Yes, you mentioned that.” The words come out through clenched teeth because I’m recalling that he also *accepted* that bounty. “Is that why we’re here? Do you intend to kill Miza in the final hunt?”

His gaze takes on a faraway gleam, silence falling between us.

I wait.

He remains quiet, just continues to stare at nothing.

It’s a strange sort of disassociation, one I’ve never seen in him before. He’s always so infuriatingly chipper, or playing the role of irritating mastermind.

Or merely pissing me off in general.

But he’s actually being quiet for a change. Unfocused. Borderline… vulnerable.

“Ika,” I say, my brow furrowing.

He blinks, seeming to return to me once more. “We need to talk to Seren together.”

“About the bounty?” I guess when he doesn’t say anything else.

“Maybe.” He shakes his head like he’s trying to clear it. “All I know is, we’re on this path together. So we need to present a united front when we go to see her.”

I arch a brow. “We may have shared Miza for a few hours today, but that was about giving her pleasure, not about forming a ‘united front.’”

His mouth curls up into a partial grin. “That was just an appetizer to the main course, Zael. And we will always serve as a joint entity when it comes to protecting Miza.” He tilts his head to the side. “Unless I’ve misjudged you entirely?” He phrases it as a question, his eyes slitting. “You care about her, yes?”

“Of course I care about her. She’s an Offering under my protection.”

He snorts. “So she’s just like all the others to you?” He reaches up to straighten his tie, taking a step forward to invade my personal space. “You make a habit of sharing your Offerings with presumed enemies?”

“Miza would be the first,” I admit, a subtle growl entering my tone. “Which I’m not fully convinced isn’t a coincidence since you’re involved.”

“It’s not a coincidence, Zael. It’s fate.”

“So you keep saying.”

“Then take a chance on the truth and visit Seren with me. Perhaps a discussion with her will help you understand our situation.”

“Or perhaps you’re trying to lure me into some sort of trap,” I counter.

“If I wanted you dead, Zael, you would be dead,” he returns. “But I very much need you alive. Because whether you want to accept this or not, we’re bound by this destiny to protect Miza. It’s more than a mere mating pull. It’s your soul’s reason for existing.”

I study him for a beat, not trusting him in the slightest.

But it’s not like Monster Island is particularly dangerous for me. I’m king of this region for a reason. If Ika wants to test my true potential, then we’ll battle. And I’ll win.

Or maybe I’ll learn more about whatever secrets he’s hiding.

Because I’m certain there are a great many things he’s not telling me. Things he seems to feel he *can’t* share.

Perhaps this is his way of *showing* me what he’s incapable of *saying*.

I consider him for another second, then nod. “All right, Ika. I’ll play. But if this is some sort of ornate scheme to dethrone me, I’ll warn you now—I won’t go down without a fight.”

He smiles. “An epic battle that would be, wouldn’t it? However, the only one entitled to any throne is our future queen. Alas, that’s a topic for another day.” He holds out his hand and repeats the words from earlier. “Shall we?”

Normally, I would tell him to fuck off, and I’d shift and fly to the Monster Island Palace. But that would leave me vulnerable and naked, something I’ve already done once today.

The only place I plan to repeat that act is in Miza’s quarters later.

So I respond by pressing my palm to the stealth dragon’s and let him shadow us to Seren’s inner sanctum.

And sigh when we’re instantly surrounded by sirens holding tridents.

“We’re here to meet with Seren,” I say, forcing myself to remain calm.

Ika doesn’t put on the same serene façade, though, his body erupting in a pulse of dangerous energy as he adds, “You can escort us to her willingly. Or we’ll locate her on our own. Your choice, *baritones*.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

TIRU

MIZA STARES up at me with big blue eyes, her dark lashes framing the color in the most alluring of ways. That, coupled with her pink hair and porcelain skin, makes her the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. All I want to do is lower my lips to her plump mouth and taste her.

"Your future?" she asks softly, her words bringing me back to our conversation about her being my fated mate and how that changes everything for me.

I nod. "Two hundred years ago, my father crafted a deal with the Monster Island Queen, one that betrothed me to her daughter."

Miza's eyebrows fly upward.

However, I continue speaking before she can comment on my engagement. "But there was an exception written into the agreement. It states that if I find my fated mate, I don't have to wed Seren's daughter. And *you* are my fated mate, which means the entire contract is officially null and void."

I smile down at her, more pleased than she could ever imagine.

Yet she doesn't seem to share my joy.

Instead, she looks at me with… uncertainty. Or maybe that's displeasure? I'm not quite sure.

"Your existence changes everything," I reiterate, trying to help her understand the happiness of this situation. "I no longer have to marry Celina."

“Celina?” she repeats, straightening and placing her palm on my chest to put a little distance between us. My hands go to her hips, my hold gentle so she can easily break it if she needs more space than she’s already taken. “As in *Princess* Celina? The one who spoke at the ball?”

And now some of my joy dissipates because I really don’t want to think about Celina more than I have to.

But my fated mate deserves an answer, so I dip my chin in confirmation.

“Yes. Celina’s participating in the Monster Games this year because of me. This event was my last chance to find a fated mate, something many thought was impossible, given the disappearance of soul bonds over the last few millennia. However… I found you.”

“And knowing me nullifies your engagement,” she reiterates, like she’s trying to process and understand the situation.

“It does so much more than that. Your existence—*our mating*—is going to restore hope to all of kraken kind. Maybe even the sirens, too.” I smile at her, my excitement returning. “I don’t know how this is possible or why it has taken this long to find you. I’m just relieved it’s finally happened.”

“Because our, uh, connection saves you from having to marry Princess Celina?”

I frown, not liking the way she’s worded that. “Nullifying the agreement between my father and Seren is certainly a positive outcome, but that’s not why I’m relieved.”

“Right,” she says slowly, still studying me. “You’re relieved because me being your fated mate means fated soul bonds still exist.”

I nod. “That’s part of it, yes. But I’m mostly relieved because I’ve found you—my other half.”

She frowns as she considers my words. “And you’re sure?” she asks hesitantly. “Because the last time we spoke, you said I *might* be your fated mate. Now you seem… certain?”

“I’ve never been more positive of anything in my entire two-hundred-plus years of life,” I tell her, my thumbs drawing circles against the towel clothing her hips. “The moment I pulled you from the pool, I caught your scent. And this time, I *know* it’s not because Ika tainted it with the companion flower. It’s all you.”

I lean forward to press my nose to her neck, longing to inhale her sweet aroma.

Citrus blossoms, sprinkled with cinnamon.

Oceans, she's perfect. Feminine. Strong. *Mine*.

"You have no idea how long I've searched for you," I whisper, closing my eyes. "How many nights I've dreamt of your existence, just to wake up alone."

"Because you wanted to break the engagement and provide hope for your people?" she inquires, her words causing my brow to furrow.

"No, lei, so I could finally be with the other half of my soul." I pull back enough to meet her gaze again. The wariness I see there has my confusion deepening. "I've said something wrong, haven't I?" I sigh and let go of her hips to take a step back.

I need to think.

To… to fix this.

To help her *understand*.

Except, I don't actually know how to explain any of this at all.

So I decide to just… be honest. "I've never done this before," I confide, my fingers restless at my sides as I fight the urge to pull her into my arms again.

Not touching her hurts.

Not kissing her burns.

Not falling to my knees and fucking worshipping her… is a fight beyond measure.

Because this female means more to me than anything else in existence. She's my intended. My future. *My soulmate*.

"I've been searching for my other half since I understood she or he existed. I always assumed it would be a female, though, as I never had much interest in men. But that's… that's not important." I clear my throat. "Miza, you changing everything isn't why I'm happy. It's a benefit, yes. However, I'm just happy you exist."

I can tell by her expression that I haven't fixed my faux pas—whatever it was—yet.

My jaw threatens to clench. "I'm really out of my depth here," I admit, almost laughing at myself. "I've spent two centuries hunting for my intended mate without actually learning how to talk to her. I… I've actually spent most of the last two hundred years alone."

Which I suppose makes Ika my only friend. I talk to him more than I do my brother.

But I don’t add those two details out loud, as they’re not really relevant.

“I’m trying to tell you that I have no idea what to do now that I’ve found you. All I want to do is kiss you. And, well, a lot more than that.” The truth spills from my lips, my inner kraken seeming to take the reins. “Tasting you is all I can think about.”

Her cheeks blossom with color, the first signs of wariness leaving her expression to be replaced by the prettiest blush. “Oh” is all she says, the pink darkening to red.

“Have I embarrassed you?” I ask, feeling like an utter failure. “Because that’s not my intent, Miza. I’m trying to tell you that I… I’m inexperienced. Fuck, that’s probably obvious, isn’t it?” I start to pace, no longer able to look at her, my own cheeks heating and no doubt the same color as her own.

Here I am, renowned Kraken King of the Cephalopoda Realm, *blushing* as I fumble through what should be a very important—very *powerful*—conversation.

“I’m sorry. I’ve just never seen the point in pursuing a relationship with anyone when all I truly desired was my fated mate.” I frown, my words ringing a bit false in my ears. “Actually, I won’t apologize for that. Being with anyone other than you… would simply feel wrong. I can’t feel remorse for making the right choice.”

I drag my fingers through my hair and stop pacing so I can look at her again.

She’s no longer blushing, but looking at me with tears in her eyes.

“Ah, shit,” I mutter. “How do I continue to make this worse? When I apologized, I meant for being a blundering idiot, not for my faithfulness to my plight. I’ve never wanted anyone before you, so I never mastered the art of mateship conversation. There wasn’t a point. Except, now I’m thinking maybe…”

I trail off, cringing at the very thought of having “practiced” this with anyone else.

How could I when I never desired another being? Never felt this immense connection? Never yearned for even intimacy to pass the time?

Dear oceans, I can address a fucking nation of krakens without so much as a stutter. Yet I can’t seem to fucking talk to my own mate.

“Tiru,” she says, reaching for me and placing her palm against my heart. “You don’t need to apologize for anything.” She steps closer, her very

presence cooling the churning waves inside me, calming my inner beast, allowing me to breathe again.

I didn't even realize I was panting until now. Sweating, too.

Is this what being nervous feels like? I marvel. *Because it fucking sucks*.

"I'm new to all of this, too," she goes on. "I was just trying to understand the fated-mate connection and what it means to you. Because this is all… foreign to me."

"It means everything." The reverence in my voice is unmistakable. "Just your touch right now grounds me in a way I've never felt before." I noticed it when we first met, too. But I thought Ika might be responsible for the sensation.

However, I'm certain now.

It's Miza.

It's our souls' connection.

It's fate.

I glance over at the water bowl holding the companion flower, noting how it's thriving. Not even Ika should be able to influence that sort of growth.

But even without the flower, I'd still know this is true. Her scent has curled around every aspect of my being, her presence a warmth I can't deny.

"You're my heart, Miza," I whisper. "If you want me to take you away from all this madness right now, I will. I'll take you home to my palace and make you my queen." I press my palm to her cheek, staring down at her. "Just as, if you want to stay, I'll remain at your side. I'm yours to command. For now and for always."

Her blue eyes are wide as she gazes up at me. "I can't leave yet, King Tiru. I—"

"Just Tiru, please," I interject. "And I don't need your reason unless you want to share it, sweet lei. I meant what I said—I'm yours. Nothing will ever change that. Even if you reject me, say you never want to see me again. I'll do as you ask to please you. But my faithfulness will remain."

"Why?" she breathes. "Why would you… accept that?"

"Because your wishes matter more than my own." It's a simple truth, one I utter with a shrug. "I would protect you from afar, though. That's nonnegotiable."

"So you'd just let me be… with someone else?"

“If that’s what you desired, yes.”

“Even Ika or Zael?” she presses.

I wince a little at the thought but concede with a nod. “Is that what you want? To reject me and be with Ika or Zael instead?”

“No!” she exclaims, her swift response confusing me.

“Then why are you asking about Ika and Zael?”

“Because you all seem to hate each other,” she blurts out. “And I’m trying to figure out… how this works. Or… I don’t know. Actually, since you’ve been honest, I’ll return the favor—I’m a little overwhelmed.” She giggles a bit. “No, I’m *very* overwhelmed. And hungry. And kind of cold.”

Another laugh escapes her, and she shakes her head, her pink hair waving with the movement.

“I’m sorry.” More laughter leaves her, and she tries to cover her mouth. “This is ridiculous.”

I frown. “Being with Ika or Zael?” I’m not sure what we’re talking about now. “Or… or our mating?”

“Yes,” she answers. Then her eyes go wide. “Wait, *no*. I mean, my reaction is ridiculous. Shells, now *I* feel like a bumbling… whatever you said. Which you weren’t, by the way. I found your explanation to be refreshing. Maybe a little confusing, but I… I appreciated your candor.” She blushes again.

This time I run my knuckles across the alluring color, unable to stop myself. She’s so damn pretty. Endearing, too.

As well as cold and hungry, I remind myself.

“Would you like clothes?” I ask. “And food?”

She blinks at me.

Then laughs again.

This time doubling over into my chest and giggling so hard that her body shakes.

I frown down at her. “That wasn’t… a joke.”

“I know,” she mumbles against me. “I’m just… well, overwhelmed, like I said.” She visibly tries to settle herself. When that doesn’t seem to work, I pick her up.

“Ocean or bathtub?” I ask her.

“Wh-what?” she asks, still giggling.

“Water always soothes me. As my soulmate, I assume it soothes you, too. So ocean or bathtub?”

She instantly sobers. “Bathtub.” The immediate response makes my lips curl down once more.

“You don’t like the ocean?” I ask, confused by the tremor in her tone.

“I love the ocean, but it doesn’t like me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I reply, even more confused. “You’re my fated mate. The ocean should love you.”

“It doesn’t,” she insists. “It tries to drown me whenever I balance on the lily pads.”

I open my mouth to ask more, but her resulting shudder has me rethinking the conversation.

We’ll revisit that topic after she’s warm and fed, I decide, carrying her into the bathroom. “I’m going to ask you more about that later,” I inform her softly. “For now, tell me what you want to eat, and I’ll make it while you bathe.”

“Umm, I don’t know what’s available in the kitchen.”

“It doesn’t matter what’s available. Tell me what you want, and I’ll ensure it’s made.” When I can see she’s about to question that, I shift her a little in my arms so I can press a finger to her lips. “Trust me to take care of you, lei. Please.”

She blinks, then nods, so I lower my hand.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Cinnamon-sugar bread,” she whispers. “That’s what my mom always makes on the Day of the Choosing. If I had known yesterday would be my last day ever having it—or seeing her—I would have… eaten more. Hugged her longer.” Her gaze falls. “I haven’t had a moment to think about any of that.”

“You’ll see your mom again,” I vow. “No mate of mine is going to be cut off from her family.”

Her blue eyes fly back up to mine. “Really?”

I nod. “I’ll talk to Zael about it.” And if he tells me she can’t see her mother again, I’ll punch him in the face and go around him.

But something tells me he’ll move mountains for Miza, too.

Which… isn’t what I anticipated. Or rather, my *reaction* to that knowledge isn’t what I expected. Because rather than be annoyed by his involvement, I feel oddly relieved to have a connection to someone else who will do whatever it takes to please Miza.

She’s what matters most to me in the world now.

Having help to make her happy… is a positive, not a negative.

“And I’ll see what I can do about the bread,” I add, setting her on the floor by the tub. “I can’t promise it’ll be exactly the same, but I’ll try.”

Her eyes light up in a way that makes me feel far more powerful than being a king ever could.

“It’s a white bread with cinnamon and sugar baked in to the dough. I don’t know if it’s possible to make right now, as my mom always lets it rise with the sun. But just the thought of you trying is a gift. So thank you.” She goes up on her toes and brushes her lips against my cheek.

I smile. “I’ll ask if there is any freshly baked bread. Do you want anything else?”

Her palm is against my chest, her body still leaning up into mine as she remains on her toes, her lips near my face.

She doesn’t immediately reply, just shifts a little to look up at me.

After a moment, she nods. “Actually, I think there’s something I want more.”

I arch a brow. “More than bread?”

“Yes.”

“Name it.”

“You,” she says.

I frown. “You want to eat me?”

Her lips twitch. “No.” She grabs my hand and tugs me away from the bath, her towel dropping to the floor with the movement. “No, I want *you*, Tiru. Not food. Not a bath. Just… *you*.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MIZA

I FEEL BOLD.

Empowered.

Alive.

I'm pretty sure Ika and Zael have bespelled me with some kind of unique confidence. Or maybe it's some sort of fated-mate magic weaving through my intentions.

But I'm no longer hungry.

Or cold.

I'm… *enamored* with Tiru.

Okay, so maybe it's everything he said. His truthfulness. His sweetness. *His innocence*.

"When you said you had no experience," I start, trying to make sure I understood him right. "You mean…"

"I've never been with anyone," he replies, his palm on my cheek and moving to my nape. "There was never any point when all I've ever desired is my fated mate." He leans down to run his nose against mine. "I've never even kissed anyone, Miza."

I shiver. "So I'll be your first?"

"And my only," he vows. "Forever."

I was cold before. Hungry, too. But now, all I feel is *heat*. Actually, I'm pretty sure I'm melting. "Tiru," I breathe, unable to hide the emotions he's evoking inside me.

This whole experience has… has been so unlike anything I could have imagined.

The Monster Games are supposed to be about survival. Yet I'm finding it to be so much more than that. It's… it's about *living*. Finding a future.

Or perhaps this moment is simply about that.

Tiru said he would take me away from all of this, whisk me off to his kingdom right now and make me a queen.

It's tempting.

But I can't leave Ika and Zael. I don't know if what happened between the three of us was a fluke or the spark for something more. I need to understand their intentions before I choose what lane to swim in.

However, I don't have to decide now.

And Tiru has made it clear that regardless of my choice, he'll always be there.

"I'm not sure I deserve you," I admit, confused and elated by his promises.

"No, you deserve so much more," he whispers, his exhale minty and luring me closer. "You're my soul's mate. *My heart*. Your happiness means everything to me now, lei. *Everything*." His lips ghost across mine, a teasing caress that makes my heart skip a beat.

I lean into him, needing to kiss him, to feel him, to *embrace* this intensity between us.

My fated mate.

I… I didn't know that was possible, but I sense our connection just like I can feel my links to Ika and Zael.

Are they all meant to be mine? I wonder.

But the thought dissipates as Tiru kisses me again, this time with a bit more pressure, his heat an aphrodisiac that I can't ignore.

This is probably insane. Except, it feels normal. Expected. *Necessary*.

So I slip my tongue into his mouth, just like Zael and Ika taught me to do with them, and fall headfirst into Tiru's embrace.

He's more tentative. Gentler. *Sweeter*. Taking his time with me, learning with each stroke of his tongue against mine. Until suddenly, he's devouring me. It's like a switch flips between us, his hand on my nape slipping up to grasp a fistful of my hair as he takes charge of our kiss.

I moan, utterly lost to him. To his dominance. To his *need*.

His lips are demanding against mine, begging me to submit, urging me to follow his lead. So I do, letting him kiss me. Taste me. *Own* me.

Shells, he's a fast learner, his touch lighting a fire within me that burns just as hot as it did in the shower earlier with Ika and Zael.

Only, this is still somehow more tender. Emotional. Like our embrace is the marriage between our souls.

Maybe it is.

Maybe that's how fated mates work for krakens.

If it is, I accept it. Because there is literally nowhere else I want to be right now.

Tiru's arm bands around my back, lifting me into the air as his opposite hand remains in my hair. I cling to his shoulders, allowing him to carry me wherever he desires, only to find myself seated on the counter. The marble sends a chill through my overheated legs, one his touch and his kiss instantly chase away.

I'm so lost to his warmth that I can't even process my surroundings.

He's crowding me. Possessing me. *Consuming me*.

"Tiru," I say on an exhale as his lips leave mine to trail kisses along my jaw.

"Miza," he replies, suckling on my earlobe before tracing his mouth down my throat. "Tell me if I do something you dislike. Or tell me to stop if I go too far."

I swallow, my neck arching as he continues kissing and nipping my tender skin. "I just want more." I claw at his suit jacket. "I want to feel you. Not these clothes. Just *you*." The boldness I felt minutes ago resurfaces, my desire a beast within me that demands freedom.

And I let her out.

Let her lead.

Let her show me what to do.

Which is how I find myself pulling off his jacket and ripping at his shirt, his buttons springing free as I yank the fabric open to get to his chest.

I almost apologize.

But the way his silver irises gleam leaves me panting instead.

He wants me as badly as I want him. Maybe even more so.

I have no idea what I'm doing.

And I suspect he feels the same way.

His inexperience rivals mine, which is… refreshing. The two males earlier knew exactly how to play my body, but Tiru doesn't possess the same knowledge. Just as I'm not as skilled or as confident in how to handle him.

I like that.

It helps me feel more at ease.

More prepared for whatever is about to happen between us. Because Tiru won't have any expectations. And neither will I.

He stills as my hands explore his torso, his breaths hot and short against my throat, like he's waiting to see what I'll do. Or maybe he's feeling as overwhelmed as I am.

With featherlight touches, I draw my fingertips up to his shoulders to finish removing the fabric from his arms, leaving him deliciously shirtless. I shift forward to press a kiss to his pec, the muscle hard and pronounced against my mouth.

He's like sculpted marble. All perfect male. Entirely flawless skin. Strong yet silky smooth.

I shudder, wanting to pet more of him. To explore every inch of his body. I wasn't afforded a chance to do this with Ika and Zael, their mouths and hands entirely focused on me.

I didn't mind at the time.

Now I'm thankful I wasn't provided the opportunity to touch them like this because I wouldn't have known what I was doing.

Except I feel oddly in control with Tiru. Perfectly in my depth. Because neither of us knows what to do with the other.

Sliding my hands down to his belt, I glance up at him and ask, "Is this okay?" as I begin to tug on the leather material.

"Yes." The response leaves him in a hoarse whisper, one that emboldens my movements and makes me want to hear more of that delirious desire in his tone.

How is this beautiful man mine? I marvel, pulling on his belt buckle and fumbling a little with the latch.

He doesn't reach down to help me, just lets me move at my own pace.

It takes me a moment, but I manage to unfasten him and then work on the button and zipper of his pants.

His breathing seems to stop as I push the black trousers away from his hips and down his thick thighs.

He’s not wearing boxers, I realize, my gaze instantly going to his pronounced manhood. I… I saw it when he was naked in my room before. After shifting from his kraken form to his human form.

And I noticed then that the color wasn’t the same as the rest of his body.

But up close, I can see the turquoise and blue scales, plus a splash of purple.

I swallow, not because of the pretty pattern but because of the sheer size of him. He’s… he’s definitely not human.

Because I’ve seen males naked before. Or at least, in gauzy swim trunks during the Day of the Choosing. And none of them have ever been… like this.

“Miza?” Tiru asks, clearly picking up on my uncertainty. His fingers go to my chin to pull my gaze up to his.

“Hmm?” I hum, still a little taken aback by, uh, *him*.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure how to… or… well, what to do?” The words come out a bit convoluted, but I’m… yeah, I’m still in shock.

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“No,” I reply. “I mean, yes, I know. But I… I want to do *something*. I just don’t know what.”

He studies me for a long moment. “You mean you want to touch me?”

“I think I want to pleasure you,” I say, considering the comment as I voice it. “No, I *definitely* want to pleasure you,” I decide out loud. “But I don’t… I don’t think I can fit that inside me, Tiru. It’s *huge*.” I thought maybe I would try to please him with my mouth like Ika and Zael did to me.

However, I don’t think that’s going to be possible.

And he’s *definitely* not going between my legs.

Which is a really horrible realization because I have no idea how to be with him if I can’t take him.

For whatever reason, he smiles, the expression one that’s at odds with how I’m feeling.

“This isn’t funny, Tiru. I wanted to try to suck your…” I glance down again, causing his touch to drift to my neck and away from my chin. “*Appendage*,” I say, giving that monster between his legs a name. “But my lips only go so wide.” I attempt to show him, then overheat when he starts to chuckle.

It’s a sexy-as-sin sound.

And yet *very* inappropriate right now.

“*Tiru*,” I growl at him. “I’m not joking around. This is very frustrating! I wanted to suck your cock and can’t!”

His chuckle deepens into a laugh, and suddenly his arms are around me in a fierce hug, one I try to break free from so I can glower at him.

But then he simply kisses me.

I almost bite him. Or I think about biting him, anyway.

Except his tongue enters my mouth and fries my brain.

I’m only vaguely aware of him kicking off his shoes and pants, leaving him gloriously naked with that monster hanging between us, threatening to break me in half.

“Miza,” Tiru murmurs against my lips. “We’re going to learn together.” He kisses me again, this time a bit softer. “And I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“Say that to your monster appendage,” I mutter back at him.

He chuckles again, making me scowl. “You have no idea how good you’re making me feel right now.”

“I’m not even touching you.” Which isn’t entirely true. My hands are hovering at his sides, holding on to him as he embraces me. But I’m not actively trying to pleasure him. *Yet.*

Maybe I can… hmm… I draw my touch downward to his scaled member and wrap my fingers around him.

He stills.

And I… I stroke. Slowly. Learning. Feeling the unique texture against my palms, noting that he’s just as silky here as he is everywhere.

While the appearance is scaled in nature, it’s nothing like the scales I’ve felt before. It’s… more ribbed… and… “Are you vibrating?” I ask, pausing my caress to *feel* him.

My eyes—which I just now realize were closed—fly open.

“You *are* vibrating.” My lips part as I pull away from his kiss so I can gape down at his *vibrating* cock. It’s… it’s subtle. But definitely rhythmic.

“You’re my fated mate,” he replies, like that explains everything.

“And that makes you vibrate?” I ask.

He shrugs. “It makes me do a lot of things, Miza.” He plants his hands on the counter on either side of my hips, caging me between him and the marbled top. “I’m literally built for your pleasure, lei.”

“Uh-huh. And part of that pleasure is splitting me in half with your monster cock?”

He bursts out a laugh and shakes his head. “Your compliments are killing me.”

“It’s not a compliment, Tiru!”

“Yes, my love, it is,” he replies. “Trust me.”

I think he means that in a proverbial sense, but I measure those two words with seriousness. For whatever reason, I *do* trust him. Maybe it’s the fated-mate link? Or perhaps I’ve fallen under some sort of spell.

But I actually feel safe enough with him to… to *trust* him.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay?” he repeats, arching a turquoise brow. “Okay, meaning…?”

“I trust you,” I tell him, and his expression sobers instantly.

“Miza…”

I wait, but he doesn’t say anything else. Instead, he recaptures my mouth with his and dominates me with his tongue.

The world shifts on its axis around us, portaling into a new realm of passion. His hand is on my nape, his other on my shoulder, then he’s unexpectedly guiding the straps of my suit down to help me disrobe. Somehow, he’s much more adept at this than I was with his pants. It’s almost like the material melts right off of me.

Except when he gets to my waist, then he has to pull me off the counter to help me.

And suddenly he’s kneeling between my legs and staring up at me after removing my swimsuit.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he tells me, his voice underlined in reverence. “May I… touch you?”

I swallow and nod. “Yes.”

“May I kiss you?” he adds. “Everywhere?”

I nod again. “Yes.”

He smiles and stands once more, then lifts me off the ground and carries me into the bedroom. “I’m going to worship you, *mate*. For eternity.”

I’m about to reply to that when he settles me on the bed and lies on top of me, his vibrating shaft instantly against my clit. “*Ohhh*,” I moan, pressing right up into him. “*Oceans*, Tiru. That’s… that’s…” I’m pretty sure my eyes roll into the back of my head as the sensation intensifies, his scales seeming to *move*.

“If you think that feels good, wait until I’m deep inside you,” he whispers, his lips at my ear. “But we’ll work up to that, love. Slowly. Okay?”

Shells, hearing the term *love* on his lips again… as an endearment… it does something to me. As did *mate* from seconds ago.

And *lei*.

He’s undoing me with his charm. Seducing me with his *vibrating cock*. “Tiru,” I whisper, his name resembling a plea. “Kiss me again.” It’s all I can say, all I can think to do.

Thankfully, he listens.

His lips capturing mine.

His hands roaming my sides, skimming the curve of my breasts.

His manhood massaging my overheated center.

It’s perfect. It’s bliss. *It’s fate…*

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

IKA

THE SIRENS MADE the smart choice and agreed to track down their queen. Unfortunately, they also tracked down their princess.

My lips flatten as she waltzes into the sitting room, her pink hair swirling around her shoulders like a tumultuous wave. “King Ika,” she greets, a purr underlining her words. But as she glances at Zael, her expression sours as she adds, “Zael.”

“Celina,” Seren murmurs, following her daughter into the room. “It’s rude to address one king by his title while ignoring the other.”

“One king has earned my respect,” Celina counters. “The other has not.”

I arch a brow. “And how have I earned your respect, Celina?” I ask, purposely not using her title at all. “I don’t believe we’ve ever actually spoken.”

“Which is why I used to admire you,” she answers, putting on an impressive pout as she looks at me again. “Now I’m not so sure of my assessment.”

I dip my chin in acknowledgment. “It’s an assessment you absolutely want to revisit,” I assure her. “I am *not* a respectable man.” Particularly with those I loathe.

And I’m rather certain Celina has swum her way onto that list.

“Are you flirting with me?” she asks, sauntering toward me with her long, manicured fingers reaching out to touch my shirt.

I take a deliberate step back and allow my venomous power to swarm across my skin in an inky veneer of threatening energy. “No, Celina. I am not flirting with you.” There’s no hint of kindness to my words. Just a straight answer uttered in a voice I rarely use.

Even Zael glances my way in surprise.

I stare right back at him. “I’m pretending to be you.”

He scoffs at that. “You could never be me, Ika.”

“You’re right. I’m too powerful for that.” I return my focus to the two sirens, barely catching the ghost of a smile on Seren’s lips. It’s there and gone so quickly that I almost wonder if I imagined it. But I have no cause to fantasize about such things. Which means Her Highness was amused by something.

Though, now she’s studying me with cold eyes, her silver irises dulled to a stainless-steel gray. “Why are you both here?” she demands, all haughty queen.

“We’ve missed you at the Monster Games,” Zael says, his response one that I wasn’t expecting, but I don’t correct him.

Instead, I let him lead while I study Seren.

It’s been a while since I last saw her, yet I swear she looks older. Which isn’t typical for a siren. They usually stop aging around thirty years old. However, there are clear signs of distress around her eyes. Signs she seems to have tried to cover up with some concealer.

Also strange.

Sirens are naturally beautiful. They don’t require makeup to mask or bring out certain attributes. Their eyelashes are vivid and thick. Their hair is long and full. Their bodies tend to be short yet curved in all the right places. And their skin tones typically boast an alluring appeal.

Celina’s pale pink coloring is certainly healthy and thriving. By contrast, Seren’s pale green hues look a bit more olive right now. And her violet hair almost appears to be dyed.

“Is that true, Ika?” Seren asks, making me realize I’ve missed whatever someone—probably Zael—just said.

“I have no idea,” I admit honestly. “When Zael speaks, I tend to stop listening.” Not a lie. Not a truth, either. Somewhere in the middle. “Did he say something important?”

The Elite Island King shoots me a look so full of violence that I’m almost amused.

I let him think we were walking in here as a team, which we are, but the only way to truly manifest an alliance is for me to play the part of nemesis.

For a little bit longer, anyway.

We'll see where the night goes.

I can't *foresee* it. The only image in my mind is what led to this point. The path beyond it is murky. However, something crucial happens tonight. Something that will define everything.

"Zael was saying that my visitors, which I assume includes you, have been wondering why I missed the opening ceremony and the first trial." She sits on a shell-shaped throne, her long fingers draping casually along the armrest as she leans forward with interest. "So. Is that true?"

Her daughter moves to stand behind her, the pair providing a united front. But I don't miss the way Seren's shoulders stiffen or the subtle narrowing of Celina's obsidian eyes as she glances down at her mother's regal chair.

There seems to be some sort of animosity brewing here on Monster Island, hmm? I think.

Although, out loud, I merely say, "I don't actually care where you've been or what you're up to. I only came here to renegotiate the bounty on Miza Kananaka's head."

Seren arches one of her violet eyebrows. "I'm certain I have no idea what you're talking about, Stealth Dragon King."

"I'm certain you do, Monster Island Queen." I walk over, grab a chair, and drag it across her sitting room, which is really just a small throne room that she probably uses to fake intimacy for important guests. But that opulent shell-shaped monstrosity she's sitting on is absolutely a power statement.

I decide to make one of my own by purposely allowing the metal to scrape across her marbled tiles before swinging it around to straddle from behind, my arms crossing against the back of it as I hug it to my chest.

"If you want me to kill the beautiful woman, you're going to need to up your reward. Because right now, that pussy of hers is worth a lot more than what you're offering." I cock my head. "I can still taste her, Seren. Like fucking orange blossoms. And you know how much I love orange blossoms."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she returns, bristling under the weight of my words.

“I’ve not told you how much I love orange blossoms, then?” I reply, feigning surprise. “Ah, well, your loss. Regarding the bounty, though, I’m thinking ten times the payment ought to be convincing enough. I mean, we’re talking about a nonhuman entity, right? That alone is worth more, yeah?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Seren demands, her silver eyes sharpening as she sits even more upright in her throne. “What *bounty*?” She looks at Zael. “On one of your Offerings? And you’re allowing this?”

“My being here should tell you how I feel about all of this,” Zael returns flatly. “Tell me what you know.”

“I could say the same to you,” she fires back. “Who is this Missy Kana?”

“Miza Kananaka,” I insert before he can reply. “And stop playing dumb, Seren. It’s boring and beneath you.”

She growls, the sound impressive as it echoes through the room. “Why are you so certain I’m familiar with any of this, Ika?”

“Because your name is on the bounty,” I reply, studying her intently.

I’ve suspected that the mastermind behind the hit isn’t actually the Monster Island Queen. Her expression now—fury mingling with astonishment—confirms my suspicion.

“I assure you, I have not issued any sort of bounty.” She pushes away from her throne so suddenly that Celina jumps back, clearly intimidated by her mother’s movements.

Definitely something going on between them, I decide. *Something that has Celina fearful of her own mummy dearest*.

Though, I suppose if I had a mother like Seren, I might be a bit intimidated, too.

Granted, I killed the parent who made me feel that way. So. There’s that.

“And what do you mean that the Offering isn’t human?” Seren demands, glancing between me and Zael. “Start talking.”

“I guess you should have attended tonight’s trial,” I drawl.

The glare she shoots me is almost as impressive as the one Zael gave me a few minutes ago.

“It’s a wonder you two are not better friends,” I muse out loud.

“Why did you bring him with you?” Seren growls, now focused on Zael.

“He insisted” is all he says in reply, one broad shoulder lifting in a partial shrug.

The queen’s jaw visibly ticks. “Zael—”

“Let’s not play games, Seren,” he interrupts. “You’re aware of the genetics projects. It seems one of the geneticists may have created too perfect a specimen, making her basically inhuman in nature. That same Offering has a bounty on her head—one issued under *your* credentials. That’s not a coincidence.”

She drums her fingers at her sides, the manicured nails a dark teal color that matches the hue of her evening gown—one I suspect she didn’t just throw on for this meeting.

Were you entertaining other visiting monarchs? I wonder. *Or did you know we were coming?*

I’m curious whether it’s the latter, if Seren possesses some sort of fortune-telling ability like me.

She’s remarkably powerful; that much is evident in her aura alone. There’s also a reason she’s the Monster Island Queen.

Interesting that Celina doesn’t seem to emanate nearly as much energy as her mother. *Is Seren siphoning her daughter’s abilities and thereby squandering her potential?* That’s what my father tried to do to me.

Hence, I slaughtered him.

Is Celina considering doing the same to Seren?

I shift my attention to the younger siren, watching her as Seren says, “Someone is trying to pit us against each other. You know I would never touch an Offering. I may like to flirt with the rules, Zael, but I would never outright break one.”

Celina’s expression darkens for just long enough to make me question the veracity of Seren’s words. She’s not known for blatantly lying. But she is, as she said, known to *flirt with the rules.*… as well as the truth.

What do you know, Princess of Baritones? I muse, focusing on her while Zael and Seren continue speaking to one another.

“Who would benefit from starting a war between us?” Zael asks, not in a sarcastic manner but in a serious one.

“Ika would,” Seren points out.

“Would I?” I nearly laugh. “I might enjoy the resulting chaos, but I see no true *benefit* other than a bit of amusement on my part.” I sober a little as I add, “And I would take Zael’s side in a fight. So the battle would end

quickly and prove fruitless, thus being a waste of time for me to ignite to begin with."

Silence falls, causing me to glance at Seren and Zael, both of whom are watching me with interest.

"Why would you take his side?" Celina demands, finally joining the conversation again. "You *hate* him."

"He made Miza come earlier, and I rather enjoyed the show," I deadpan in response.

"I'm going to kill you," he tells me.

I arch a brow. "I don't think Miza would appreciate that. She clearly liked my tongue against her pussy this afternoon."

"Stop fucking talking," he growls.

"You brought me here to speak, Zael," I remind him, then hold up my hand when I can see he's about to contest that comment. "We don't have time for bickering. We need to determine who placed a hit on our intended and decide if we want to renegotiate the price or kill the organizer."

I'm personally in the mood to do the latter, but I don't bother to tell Zael that. I'm sure he feels similarly.

"Your intended?" Seren echoes.

I smile. "Don't feign surprise, Queen of Sirens. We both know you see things." It's a guess on my part, one that grows in certainty as her nostrils flare in response.

She's not pleased that I've commented on her foresight.

She also doesn't deny it.

Instead, she says, "What do you want from me? Assistance in tracking down the culprit?"

I shake my head and speak before Zael can comment. "Approval to handle it how we see fit would suffice. Zael, Tiru, and I will figure out the rest."

"Tiru?" Celina repeats, once again joining our conversation. Only, her tone holds a slight screech to it. "What do you mean, *Tiru*?"

I blink at her. "Kraken King. About yay high." I put my hand next to my head, then lower it to my groin as I add, "*Massive* tentacle. Ring any bells?"

If looks could kill, I'd be a dead stealth dragon.

Fortunately, Celina doesn't possess laser eye powers.

Nor does she seem to possess any other useful traits.

Because all she does now is gape at me.

“Pretty sure you were betrothed until yesterday?” I go on, trying to help her out. “Until he found his fated mate, I mean.”

“Tiru found his fated mate?”

“You’re starting to remind me of a parrot,” I mutter. “That’s not a compliment, by the way.”

“The Offering is his fated mate?” Seren interjects. “The one with a bounty on her head? Who you claim *isn’t* human?”

“That would be the one,” I reply, thankful that someone is following what I’m saying. “So, anyway, Tiru, Zael, and I will—”

“Are you certain?” Seren interrupts again.

“Certain of what?” I ask, playing dumb. “That we’re going to find the mastermind behind the bounty and rip them apart? Pretty certain, yeah.”

“That Tiru and Miza are fated mates,” Seren stresses, mentioning the obvious. Only, she’s not… upset. She’s *intrigued*.

Very unlike Celina, who looks on the verge of throwing a tantrum—something I really don’t want to witness, as a siren’s screech is literally ear-piercing.

“You would have to ask Tiru,” Zael replies before I can speak.

That’s fine.

If he wants to lead again, I’ll allow it so long as he moves this shit along. Seren clearly knows nothing—about the bounty, anyway. I’m certain she knows other things she’s not currently saying.

Meanwhile, Celina is just as useless as I anticipated.

And I’m getting fucking bored.

I would much rather go hunting.

Or… join Tiru and Miza.

Mmm, I muse. *The latter sounds—*

“I think we need to compile a list of those who would benefit from sparking a war between us,” Zael says, causing my shoulders to deflate entirely.

Because *ugh*. “That will take all fucking night.”

“But it’ll give us a list of potential suspects for the bounty,” Zael tells me. “Whoever that individual is, he or she likely knows what Miza is, and I want answers.”

“Wouldn’t the geneticist who helped create her be able to provide those details faster than us making a list of enemies that would profit off your

downfall?" I say, really hoping he'll agree and just move the night along so we can get back to Miza.

I wonder what Tiru is doing to her right now, I think. *Maybe—*

"Yes," Zael replies. "Assuming that geneticist is still alive." He pulls a device from his pocket and begins transcribing a message. "M, I need you to look at Miza Kananaka's file and tell me who was part of her birthing plan. Send." He closes the device. "We still need a list of suspects. Someone is trying to provoke us."

"Someone is succeeding," Celina hisses. "Is it Tiru?"

I blink at her. "Why would Tiru want to cause problems? Pretty sure all he's thinking about right now is getting his dick sucked."

And she clearly wants to kill me again. "You could at least *try* to be respectful."

"About what? Your arranged mating? The one neither of you wanted?" I grunt. "You should be celebrating right now, Princess. You're *free*."

There's a glimmer of something in her gaze that isn't as hateful as before. Something… *triumphant*. But it vanishes before she allows the emotion to prosper. "You know nothing about my feelings, stealth dragon."

"Nor do I care about them, siren," I return. "Regardless, Tiru's not a suspect. It goes against a kraken's nature to put their mate in jeopardy. You, however," I begin slowly, "might benefit from his mate's demise… assuming you actually wanted to wed him?"

Now *that* is an interesting twist, one that just occurred to me as I uttered the words.

If she likes Tiru, she could be the one behind the bounty.

Of course, it would have required her to know about Miza *before* the Monster Games. Which, if Seren knew about her, maybe from a vision or something else entirely, Celina could have known, too.

And if she actually wanted Tiru for herself, then she would have motive to want Miza dead.

Is that the tension I'm picking up on? I wonder. *Does Seren know what her daughter has done? Or is it all related to Celina's motive?*

"If Zael and Seren fought, who would become the new Monster Island Queen?" I go on, still staring right at Celina. "You, *Princess*? Would *you* benefit if Mummy Dearest fought with Big Daddy Dragon over here?"

"Never call me that again," Zael mutters.

I ignore him, entirely focused on the frigid princess. She hasn't moved or breathed since I started down this line of thought.

I'm onto something.

She's not innocent.

But is she truly smart enough to craft all of this?

She seemed rather alarmed and surprised that Tiru had found his fated mate. So perhaps not.

However, there's something here. I can *feel* it.

"I would never take a fated mate away from a kraken or a siren," she says, bristling at the accusation. "And if what you're implying is true, then I would have had to somehow know about this Mary woman and who she would be to Tiru, which is obviously impossible."

"I knew," I murmur. "So it's definitely *not* impossible. And her name is *Miza*."

"What-the-fuck-ever," Celina snarls. "I didn't create a bounty. How could I? I don't even have any assets to pay one!" That last part is fired in her mother's direction, not mine. "I'm a princess in name only, right, *Mother*?"

With that snappy little comment, she heads toward the door.

"I'm not going to stay here and accept these accusations" is all Celina adds before flipping her pink hair over her shoulder in a dismissive gesture and stomping out of the room.

"And that, my dear child, is why you'll never be queen," Seren says softly. So softly that I barely hear her. But I note the disappointment and sadness in her features as she shakes her head.

"Ika has a point," Zael comments. "She would benefit from me destroying you."

Seren's lips twitch as she returns her attention to the Monster Island King. "You think so highly of yourself, Zael. It's a mistake many kings make, which is why I've never taken a mate."

She smooths her hands down her skirts and takes a step back.

"I agree with making a list," she continues. "I'll work on one tonight, and we can compare at tomorrow's trial. Maybe showing up together before the crowd will thwart our unknown nemesis's efforts. Or perhaps it'll make him or her try harder." She shrugs. "Either way, we'll figure this out. *Together.*"

That last word is issued as a threat more than a request.

Or that’s how I hear it, anyway.

“Go question your geneticists,” she adds, dismissing us with a wave of her elegant fingers. “We’ll regroup in the evening at the beach.”

The Monster Island Queen vanishes into thin air before Zael can speak, causing his eyebrow to cock upward.

“I’m going to assume by that look that you didn’t realize she could do that,” I say.

His jaw clenches, then he holds out a hand toward me. “Let’s go visit Miza’s village. I have some questions for her mother.”

“Is that your way of requesting a lift?” I ask, amused. “Most would issue a *please* at the end and phrase it as a request, not a demand.”

“Most are not kings.”

“I, too, am a king,” I remind him.

“One who wants my throne?” he inquires.

“One who wants to put Miza on your throne,” I counter, shadowing to his back to grab him by the throat.

He growls, and I teleport us to Miza’s village, just like he requested, but not before giving his neck a threatening squeeze. When I release him, he takes a swing in my direction, only to hit air as I jump backward out of his reach.

I tsk loudly into the darkness. “Now, now, Elite Island King. Let’s not fight. I would hate to bloody you up before we meet our future mother-in-law.”

His snarl of sound is washed out by an incoming wave.

I smile and shadow to the pathway that connects the beach to the village and start walking toward Miza’s former home.

It won’t be the first time I’ve met the woman she calls “Mom.”

And I’m certain it won’t be the last time, either.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TIRU

OCEANS, Miza tastes like divinity. She's a goddess beneath me, moaning as I stroke the sides of her breasts and arching into me in her quest for friction.

The sensations her little movements are creating have me growling in response, my inner kraken demanding more. Begging me to *bite*.

She's my fated mate. *Mine*. I want to mark her. Ensure everyone else knows who she belongs to. Beg her to complete our connection by letting me slide into her weeping cunt.

But she's not ready to take me yet.

I can help with that, I think, sending commands south to my cock to pulsate even more against her sweet clit.

"*Tiru!*" she shouts, slamming her hips up into mine as she falls apart on a climax that I can *feel* in my soul. Fuck, I think I even taste it on my tongue. It's beautiful. Hypnotic. *Addicting*.

I've witnessed women in the throes of pleasure before. Men, too. Sirens are sensual creatures by nature, and krakens are beasts who crave sex. It makes for very public displays in my home realm.

Yet I've never been entranced by the art of an orgasm.

Until now.

Until Miza.

All I can do is watch as she convulses, listen as she moans, and pant as she soaks my shaft.

Fuck. My inner kraken roars inside my head, demanding to take over, to slam into her sweet heat and join her in this delicious oblivion.

Taming my need is the biggest battle of my life, my mind overruling the passion exploding within my soul.

If I do what my kraken demands, I'll hurt Miza.

And that realization alone is enough to anchor me. To force me to simply enjoy as she continues to come as a result of my vibrations.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I tell her, loving the way she's fully embracing her pleasure. She's not shy or reserved. She's sultry and sensual. *Like a siren*, I think, enthralled by the similarities. *She's human and yet…* There's something here. Something important.

But her lips collide with mine in the next beat, silencing my mind as she pulls me into an amorous kiss.

It's all tongue. And her little attempt at dominance has my kraken sprinting to the surface to take over once more.

Everything is instinctual.

Wrapping my palm around her nape. Angling her head to deepen our embrace. Caressing her tit with my opposite hand.

It's like we fit together.

Like I was made for this moment. *For her*.

Because I was.

Our souls are fated. Our bodies are meant for one another, too.

I just need to ease my mate into the moment, help her understand that she can take me regardless of my size. I'm certain of it.

And if she can't, we'll… get creative.

Hmm, I hum to myself, considering my options and realizing I have a *very* creative way I could introduce her to my thickness. Work up to the length of my cock. Ease her into accepting my claim…

I engage in a partial shift, just enough to produce one of my tentacles, the base of which sprouts from my spine, almost like a tail.

It's one of my more slender limbs, but hefty enough to be felt as I trail the tip up her shapely leg.

Her eyes open, her pupils dilated with arousal—an arousal I deepen by increasing the reverberations against her clit.

"Ohhh." She presses against me, her pussy saturating my shaft in a tempting kiss. But it's the other part of me that slides between her legs, questing upward to fondle her delicate skin right alongside my cock.

“I want to try something,” I tell her as I guide my tip to her opening. “Don’t worry. The tentacle’s not as thick.”

“T-tentacle?” she repeats.

I nod. “Yes. And it also vibrates.” I demonstrate by turning up the frequency, which causes her hips to undulate toward me, forcing me inside a little.

“*Oceans*,” she breathes.

“I thought we could… work up to other things,” I hedge.

“Yes,” she agrees, arching again and taking a little bit more into her delicious heat.

I swallow, the sensation of having her clench around me so utterly different from anything else I’ve ever experienced. My dick is so hard it’s starting to *leak*. Right onto her lower belly. But I can’t seem to stop myself from pushing farther into her, needing to experience *more*.

Which she seems to wholeheartedly agree with because she moves upward to accept more of my tentacle and begins to writhe.

Deeper, I think, swirling my limb inside her and striving to help expand her inner walls. *But slowly…* I don’t want to hurt her. I just want to help her learn how to take me.

The tentacle she’s riding now is maybe two or three fingers thick.

So I call upon a second that’s… a little bit wider… as I withdraw the other one.

“*Tiru*,” she growls, her gaze fierce as she stares at me. “Put it back.”

My lips twitch. Her demand is very queenly. And I fucking love that she’s telling me what to do. “I’m going to give you something a little bigger to play with, lei.”

I don’t hesitate, quickly switching the limbs and loving the way her nostrils flare as I insert the thicker tentacle.

It pulsates just like the rest of me, my scales massaging her pussy both inside and out.

She spasms in response, which naturally has me wanting to go further, to *explore* her.

Except I want to see what I’m doing.

“I need to watch as I fuck you,” I tell Miza, my lips already traveling downward, only to pause momentarily on her breasts. Because oceans, they’re perfect.

I take a rosy tip into my mouth to suck, my tongue swirling around the nipple as I lightly penetrate her below.

She squirms, a complaint leaving her lips about the lost stimulation against her clit. I slide the slender tentacle up to play there while I feast on her tits, my thicker appendage remaining just inside her entrance and ramping up the reverberations.

Another moan leaves her as she begins moving, her body seeming to take over as she embarks on a quest for pleasure.

I let her lead, loving that she's rubbing against one tentacle while trying to force the other to go deeper into her channel.

When she reaches down to grab the scaled limb, I jolt, her touch so intimate that I swear I'm about to come. Because the way she's stroking my tentacle sends bolts of lightning through my bloodstream and makes my cock ache with jealousy.

Except she's taking even more of me into her hot pussy, her lips parting on a stunning display of pleasure that almost instantly morphs into pain as she takes too much.

I start to move, preparing to roll off of her entirely.

However, her grip tightens, her breaths coming in pants. "Don't," she says. "Just… just don't… please."

"But I've hurt you." I'm not quite sure *how* I've hurt her. I just know that I have, given her expression.

"I… I think… I think I just… lost my virginity." Her cheeks turn a pretty shade of red.

And I blink at her. "What?"

"My maidenhead," she explains, the words making me feel like a fucking idiot.

Fuck.

I… I wasn't thinking.

She said she was inexperienced.

I admitted my own inexperience.

And yes. That means we're both virgins. Or were, anyway.

"I… I'm sorry," I say, my brow furrowing. "I should have considered that when… Before I…" I swallow. "I was trying to help."

She gives me a small smile. "I'm not upset, Tiru. I just need a minute."

"Okay," I whisper, still feeling like an idiot. "How can I help?"

“Start vibrating again,” she says without missing a beat. “And keep using your mouth. Please.”

I arch a brow. “You want to keep going?”

“*Yes*,” she says, the stress on that single word alone immediately igniting my reverberations.

Her plump lips part on an exquisite sound in response, one that tells me she approves. *A lot*.

I lean down to continue licking her breasts, my tentacles merely humming for her below without moving. She doesn’t do anything, just lies there, indulging in the sensations, her hand still wrapped around me in a death grip.

Until suddenly she pushes more of me into her.

When I reach a certain place deep inside, she shudders, clearly enjoying something I’m doing. “Is that your G-spot, love?” I wonder out loud, my words spoken against her breast. “Does this feel good?”

“So good,” she whispers, moving her hips again and fucking my tentacle. “*So good, Tiru*.” She moves a little, then repositions as she adds, “I think… I think maybe it’s my G-spot. Wherever or whatever this is, it’s amazing.” Her breathy tone has me wishing I could reach down to give my dick a firm stroke.

Like she can read my mind, she does that to my tentacle, the movement making my chest rumble with need. My beast is raging, issuing demands that threaten my restraint.

But I’m determined to do this right.

Which is why I slide my slender limb downward toward her entrance to join the other.

She stills as she feels the second tentacle.

To try to distract her, I kiss a path along her abdomen to her pussy so I can take over stimulating her swollen nub with my tongue and mouth.

Sealing my lips around her, I suckle and instantly groan at the delightful flavor of her cunt. *I think I know where that hint of cinnamon comes from*, I marvel, reveling in the taste of her. There are citrusy notes, too. But that alluring spice is all here, driving me to give her a long, thorough lick.

Her fingers lace through my hair, holding me in place as her hips begin to undulate once more. Her other hand continues to work my tentacle, except she loosens her clasp slightly to try to take hold of my other appendage as well.

Grasping both limbs takes some effort, but she manages, then shudders while saying, “I’m ready, Tiru.”

I don’t ask what she means. Instead, I thread my slender tentacle through her grip and enter her pussy right alongside the other limb.

I go slow, giving her time to acclimate, and wait for her to tighten her hold in protest. But she doesn’t. Her grasp actually seems to slacken more as she begins to lose herself to the movements. “I feel so full,” she marvels in a whisper. “You’re stretching me, which should hurt… yet it feels good. *So. Good.”*

She convulses around both my tentacles, causing my dick to weep even more. Because *fuck*. Yeah, that… that feels more than good. It feels *fucking phenomenal*.

The moment I slip inside her, I’m going to come. I can feel it now. It’s a need that has my kraken writhing inside of me.

I didn’t even plan to do this tonight. I wanted to go at her pace. To just do whatever she needed. But now it seems… we both *need* this. A claiming.

Perhaps not *the* claiming.

But a claiming of a sort.

One where I introduce her to pleasure beyond her wildest dreams and ensure she knows exactly what I can give her. *For eternity*.

“This is just the beginning,” I tell her. “We’re learning right now. Remember that, Miza. Know that I’m devoted to pleasing you—*in all ways*. Fuck, I’ll spend our lives together mastering the art of making you come.”

Those last few words are spoken in a reverent growl against her wet heat, the statement one I utter as a vow.

I will perfect my skills.

And guarantee that she’s forever satisfied.

Even if it means sharing her, too.

“Tiru,” she pants, her inner walls clamping down around me as her natural fragrance permeates the air.

A scream leaves her in the next instant, her body convulsing in waves of ecstasy that have my cock leaking in kind. *Oceans, I want her so fucking bad.*

Keeping one hand on her hip, I slide my opposite one down to grip my aching dick. There’s so much precum that I’m saturating her sheets with it.

Good, I think, groaning as I stroke myself. *I want to leave my mark here. Make sure everyone who enters can scent my claim.*

But I’m distracted from my desire when Miza’s grip in my hair tightens, her hand pulling my head away from her damp center to yank me upward.

I let her lead, climbing up her body to accept the kiss she seems to crave. However, before I can deepen the embrace, she rips her mouth from mine as she starts tugging on my tentacles. “I want to try, Tiru,” she says, looking up at me with lust-blown pupils. “I want to see if you’ll… *fit*.”

I swallow, her words forcing me to squeeze my cock to keep from exploding all over her. “Fuck, Miza,” I breathe, pressing my forehead to hers.

“Yes,” she replies. “*Yes*.”

A shudder rolls through me. “I’m going to come the second I enter you,” I warn her. “But it’ll just be to take the edge off.” Krakens have a stamina built to sustain a siren’s needs; that’s why our kinds were historically fated.

I’m not sure what Miza actually is—maybe human, but likely not. However, I’m certain I’ll be able to satisfy her. *For hours. Days. Weeks.* Whatever she demands.

She reaches down to cover my hand, her touch hot. “Now, Tiru,” she growls, her command causing my kraken to rumble to the surface, pleased that our mate is taking charge.

I’ve ruled for so long that I’m not used to others issuing commands in my presence. It’s fucking hot that my intended queen tells me exactly what she wants. No hesitation. All boldness. *Beautifully regal*.

Her legs spread wider, easily accommodating my hips as I position the head of my cock at her entrance. The searing kiss has my balls squeezing, my dick pulsing with the onset of my orgasm.

Rather than ease in, I release my shaft and thrust into her weeping heat, needing to ensure I’m deep inside her as I unleash my seed. I can’t risk any of it slipping out of her yet. I want my claim *felt*.

And the way she tenses tells me I’ve succeeded.

Her nails dig into my shoulders, then drag down my back as she arches up into me. “*Ohhhhh*,” she moans, my essence vibrating just like my dick. “*Oh my Oceans*, *Tiru!*”

She’s instantly convulsing right along with me, my euphoria hers to share. It’s something I’ve never experienced but have known would happen with my eventual mate. It’s not just our soul bond; it’s our *chemistry*.

“A kraken’s seed is an aphrodisiac,” I manage to tell her, groaning with the words, my neck strained as my jaw clenches. “*Fuck*… This is amazing…” I’ve fucked my own fist before. Many times. Dreaming of a mate. Wishing for this exact moment. But nothing in my fantasies equals just how magnificent this feels.

Her insides squeeze me, milking every ounce of my seed, demanding I fill her to completion.

And I do.

Fuck yes… I do…

I want her full of my essence. Swimming in my damn fluids. Owned and possessed entirely by *me*.

My beast roars with victory, my hips starting to move as I begin working both myself and Miza into another state of frenzy. I need to come again. To keep filling her. To make her mine. *To create a life together.*

Oceans, it’s an instinct—a fucking *demand*—that drives my actions, causing me to blink in and out of reality. I just need to fuck my mate. Breed her. Mark her. *Love her.*

She claws at my back, like she’s lost to the same needs.

She’s screaming my name.

Nipping at my lips.

Begging for kisses.

Sucking on my tongue.

Drawing her claim into my skin.

Thrusting her hips.

Losing her mind with me.

It’s a fuck fest.

An intimate dance of limbs.

My tentacles join, one wrapping around her throat, holding her to me by her nape as I palm her breasts. My other tentacle goes to her waist, and I lift her, rolling us until she’s straddling my hips.

Her tits push out as she arches back, her lips parted on a delicious moan while she rides me.

“So gorgeous,” I praise. “So perfect. Yes, lei. Just like that. Keep going.”

She does, moving up and down on my cock, not caring at all about the fluid building between us—hers and mine.

Another orgasm hits me right in the gut, causing her to collapse into me in the next moment as the ecstasy drags her under with me.

I hold her, the two of us writhing together, reveling in our shared euphoria.

Then I flip us again to resume rutting into her.

I'm lost to our mating.

Lost to our sexual dance.

Her legs wrap around my hips, telling me she's right there with me, somehow hanging on, meeting me thrust for thrust while we carry on coming in unison.

"A third time," I pant. "*We're going for a third time.*"

"Yes," she says, her voice hoarse from screaming.

But she doesn't tell me to stop.

She urges me onward, her lips meeting mine in a devastating kiss as we continue to fuck.

It's endless.

It's flawless.

It's a reunion of two lost souls.

Words of love and promises of the future nearly leave my mouth, but her nails scratching down my back and splitting the skin have me hissing instead. "Again," I growl, loving that she's impassioned enough to mark me. "*Again*, lei."

She acquiesces, then bites down on my bottom lip, breaking the skin there as well.

Blood pours between us.

And she *growls* as she drinks.

It's animalistic.

Intense.

A claim…

My beast bellows with victory, the sound emanating from my chest. I don't think; I act, our bodies repositioning again with her straddling me once more so I can bury my face in her tits. I clamp down on the left one, just over her heart, *and bite*.

She screams my name, her body instantly falling into another round of rapturous waves. I fuck her. She fucks me. And I lose myself entirely to the rut.

The need.

The burning climax.

Our mutual claim.

We’re mated.

Fated.

Fuck if I know.

The future has secured us both.

And all I can do is fully embrace it. Please my mate. Drown her in my seed. Wring every orgasm possible out of her.

Until neither of us can move.

Fuck everyone and everything else.

Being with Miza is all that matters…

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ZAEL

I'M GOING to drown Ika.

Maybe not tonight, but at some point in the next week.

He's *infuriating*.

And walking five paces ahead of me with an arrogant stride that's causing my hands to fist. Because he knows *exactly* where we're heading.

Which means he's visited Miza's house before.

I already knew that, I suppose, because of the flower he apparently left for her to wear to the Day of the Choosing ceremony.

But watching his confident steps now confirms just how familiar he is with this village.

"How many times have you been here?" I demand.

"Twice," he replies without hesitation. "Once, five years ago, and then the other night." He glances back at me. "For the record, I didn't actually visit Miza the first time, only this last time. I might be half in love with her, but I'm not a stalker."

"Half in love?" I repeat, incredulous. "You barely know her."

"Correction, she barely knows me," he says. "But she is quite literally the woman of my dreams. So I feel as though I know her pretty well. However, you're right to question me. I'm not half in love. I'm probably fully in love."

"Yet you wanted to negotiate the bounty on her head," I drawl. "What a great mate you are."

He snorts. “Just because I want to play with the price doesn’t mean I actually intend to kill her, Zael. And besides, Seren isn’t the one who issued the hit, which I already suspected. Try to keep up, yeah?”

Yep. Definitely going to *drown* this asshole.

Unfortunately, we reach Miza’s former home too quickly for me to act.

And I instantly still when I pick up on the sense of wrongness surrounding the area.

Someone has been here recently. Someone powerful.

“You feel that?” Ika asks softly.

“I wouldn’t be who I am if I didn’t,” I return, but it’s not spoken as a retort so much as a blunt statement. “Do you recognize the energy?”

He shakes his head slowly. “No. It’s… *chaotic*. Like me, only… not.”

I nod, agreeing with that assessment. The aura here does remind me of Ika’s manic vitality. But it’s less… dark. More… fiery.

He’s all icy stealth and violent pandemonium.

Whoever was just here exudes confusion and fire.

“I have no idea what kind of being emanates this type of essence,” I say, walking around to the front and noting the wide-open door. “But I think it’s safe to say Miza’s mother isn’t here.”

“Only one way to know for sure.” Ika enters the house with a toxic cloud brewing in his hand, his movements quick and efficient.

I follow, a flame tickling my fingertips, awaiting my command.

Alas, a swift sweep through the home confirms it’s empty.

My gaze narrows. “This isn’t a coincidence.”

Ika doesn’t comment, just glances around with a frown. Then he grabs a small loaf of bread from the table and takes hold of my arm with his opposite hand.

In a blink, we’re suddenly in Miza’s quarters, where the scent of sex is heavy in the air. Ika and I instantly still, his grip on my arm unyielding.

I slowly turn my head toward the bed area and find Miza being held down by Tiru’s tentacles, one of which is wrapped around her throat.

I charge forward, flames crawling over my hands, only to sizzle out at the look of pure ecstasy on Miza’s face.

Fires.

She’s never looked more beautiful than she does right now. Hair tangled. A tentacle writhing across her tits. Another at her throat. Hips bucking wildly. Full lips parted on a moan that vibrates through the air.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Ika breathes beside me.

If Tiru notices we’re here, he doesn’t show it. Neither does Miza, the pair of them lost to their passion.

I’ve witnessed sex thousands of times, partaken in my own erotic parties as well. But this… this has me nearly coming in my pants like a juvenile dragon.

Ika must feel similarly because he reaches down to adjust himself right as Miza falls apart on the bed in a stunning display of euphoria.

It’s so intense that she loses consciousness while Tiru shouts out his own release.

He’s panting as he finishes, his tentacles gliding reverently along Miza’s skin before he pulls them into his back. They vanish as he shifts a little, the partial transformation one I envy. But it’s the cock sliding out of Miza’s well-fucked pussy that I envy more.

Because I want to be him.

On top of her.

Fucking her.

Claiming her.

This addiction to Miza Kananaka is dangerous. Yet I can’t help myself.

She’s so damn alluring.

And now she resembles a sensual goddess, her body beautifully fucked, her eyes closed in sleep.

“Miza,” Tiru murmurs. “Are you okay?”

“I think you fucked her into a coma,” Ika says conversationally.

Tiru freezes, then glances sharply our way. His silver eyes are huge, his pupils nowhere in sight. “How long have you been standing there?” he growls, his beast very much in control.

“Long enough to need to jack off,” Ika drawls, staring at Miza’s chest. “You bit her.”

“She’s *mine*,” Tiru snarls.

“Ours,” Ika and I reply in unison.

I didn’t mean to say that or to speak, but my dragon forced the word through my lips. The pronoun choice is… a surprise. However, I don’t fight it.

Because Tiru is not solely claiming this female.

To my surprise, the kraken nods. “Yes. True. Miza wants to stay for you both, so we’re staying.”

I stare at him. “You tried to take her before the end of the Monster Games?” That’s a violation of the rules and he knows it.

“I offered to escort her home before the games end and make her my queen. But she didn’t want to leave yet. Because of the two of you.” He doesn’t sound sad about it or resigned. He’s merely conveying facts. But as he refocuses on Miza, he frowns. “Have I hurt her?”

Ika snorts. “You overwhelmed her with that monster between your legs, Tiru. She’s fine.”

“I…” He trails off and goes up on his elbows. “I didn’t mean to *overwhelm* her. I… I lost control and went into a rut. I only fell out of it because she stopped participating.” He glances at us again. “Or maybe I sensed your presence without realizing it.” He returns his attention to Miza and starts checking her. “There’s… She’s bruising…”

Ika and I step forward, likely for the same reasons of needing to make sure Tiru didn’t injure her. I’ll fucking end him if he did.

But all I see are some love bites on her breasts and a few fingerprints near her hips.

“I lost control and hurt my mate,” Tiru breathes. “I don’t deserve her.”

Ika and I share a look, his expression of confusion likely rivaling my own.

“She looks well fucked to me,” Ika says, his brow furrowing. “Have you never fucked a woman into a coma before, King T?”

“I’ve never taken anyone to bed before,” Tiru answers, the honesty in his tone flooring me. “Why would I? All I’ve ever desired is my fated mate.” He gives us his attention again. “You’re sure she’s all right?”

“Wait.” Ika holds up a hand. “You were a fucking virgin?”

While I want a clarification response to that question as well, I can see the real concern in Tiru’s features, so I say, “She’s going to be fine. She’s just recovering from what I assume was a mind-blowing orgasm. Give her a few minutes and she’ll wake up… or maybe sleep soundly all night.”

Tiru swallows, then palms her cheek and leans down to brush a kiss across her swollen lips. “Rest for as long as you need, love,” he tells her. “And I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“You didn’t,” I assure him again. “Because if you did, you’d be dead right now.”

“Facts,” Ika returns. “Now, about you being a virgin—”

“Why would I kiss or touch anyone who isn’t my fated mate?” Tiru demands.

Ika parts his lips. Closes them. Tries again. Frowns and then shrugs. “Well, at least you now have a valid excuse for being terrible with women.” He looks at me. “You, however, do not. Because I know you’re not a fucking virgin.”

“Of course I’m not,” I retort. “And I’m also not bad with women.”

“I know. That’s why I said you’re *terrible* with them.”

“She came at least four times on my tongue earlier,” I point out, exceptionally offended and extremely pissed off. “Or were you too blinded by your own arrogance that you missed those climaxes?”

“If anyone’s arrogant here, it’s you,” he returns without missing a beat. “And I suppose you have been improving over the last twenty-four hours. But you still have no idea how to treat Miza.”

“And you do?” I demand.

“Obviously.” With that pronouncement, he leaves for the bathroom.

I stare at his back. “You’re going to go jack off instead of finishing this conversation?” I guess. “Or maybe eat that bread you’re holding?”

“Nope. I’m going to pour a bath for Miza. Your self-absorbed bitching woke her up, and I suspect she needs comfort.”

I instantly shift my gaze to Miza. She’s glancing between all three of us with an adorable blush decorating her features.

“Are you okay?” Tiru asks. “Did I hurt you?”

I nearly roll my eyes. We just told him she was fine—*twice*. But I can’t bring myself to be too annoyed by his concern or his repetitiveness.

“I feel… like I’m flying…” Miza releases a little giggle, then covers her mouth. “I’m very okay, Tiru.” She says it through her hand and then again after removing her palm to cup his cheek. “Kiss me?”

He doesn’t hesitate, his lips claiming hers in an erotic display I can’t look away from. She melts into him, her hums of approval seeming to call to every part of me.

By the time Tiru pulls away, I’m panting.

All the playing earlier, coupled with the stress of tonight, has me exceptionally pent up.

But I refuse to use Miza as an outlet. Not for my own pleasure, anyway.

However, there are other ways to calm my inner beast.

I squat down so I’m at eye level with where Miza is lying on the bed. “Can I bathe you, darling?”

She blinks at me. “Bathe me?”

I nod. “Aftercare is important, and while I’m certain Tiru would be amazing at it, I am requesting an opportunity to provide comfort as you recover.”

Tiru rolls to her side, his hand against her lower belly as he meets my gaze. “Can I watch?” He doesn’t appear to be asking for kink reasons, but for learning purposes.

I nod. “If Miza agrees.”

“The tub is big enough for all four of us,” Ika proclaims from the doorway. “So we’ll all join.” He’s already taking off his dress shirt, the buttons seeming to disappear beneath his fingers as he moves his hand down his sternum. “That okay with you, sweetheart?”

She seems to be too busy watching him strip to answer the question. But as he starts unfastening his pants, she nods and replies, “Yes.”

I’m not sure if she’s agreeing to the bath or to something a little more sensual in nature. However, I accept the confirmation and stand to join Ika in removing our clothes.

Miza watches with hooded eyes, her cheeks pink again as she licks her lips in appreciation.

I stop when I’m just in my boxers, but Ika rips his off and says, “She may as well get used to all our finer attributes. Besides, she handled that giant tentacle, so she should be fine with ours.”

“Speak for yourself,” I tell him. “Your dick might not be as impressive as Tiru’s, but you have no idea what mine can do.”

“Says the man refusing to show the goods.”

“I’m a shifter,” I remind him. “I don’t fucking care about stripping down to my skin.” Not to mention, the asshole has literally seen me naked before. Just fucking yesterday, if memory serves correctly.

However, he merely arches a dark brow in silent challenge.

Growling, I tear off my boxers. “Happy?”

“Not nearly as happy as you,” he drawls, noting my erect state.

“Fuck off,” I mutter at him.

And part of me can’t believe that I’m naked with two other men, both of whom are notorious rivals. Though, I might be starting to respect Tiru.

Ika, however, can dive off a cliff and shift against a bunch of sharp sea rocks.

Tiru ignores me and Ika, his muscular form rolling off the bed and taking Miza right along with him. She clings to him as he carries her toward the bathroom. “Zael can hold you in the tub while I go get you some food. I still plan to try to make that bread you’re craving.”

“Pretty sure I covered that already,” Ika replies. “It’s on the counter in the bathroom.”

Tiru stills and glances at Ika. “What?”

The stealth dragon merely shrugs. “I had an instinct. I followed it.” In true Ika fashion, he doesn’t elaborate, just moves past Tiru to go into the bathroom first.

Tiru and Miza follow with me right behind them.

Ika’s leaning over the ledge of the tub, evaluating something. I move to see what he’s doing and realize he’s playing with bath salts. I have no idea where he found them, and I don’t bother asking. Instead, I enjoy the mingling of orange blossom and cinnamon, two scents I realize represent Miza well.

“Let’s rinse off first,” Tiru suggests quietly to our Offering, taking her toward the shower.

I go with them so I can turn everything on, then decide to step inside the enclosure as well. “I’ll wash her while you soap yourself up,” I say, holding out my arms to take Miza.

He meets my gaze for a blink. Some of the silver in his irises has lessened to allow his pupils to shine through again, telling me the beast within is no longer in charge.

Which probably explains why Tiru acquiesces and hands over Miza without a fight.

She instantly curls into me, her head on my shoulder as she sighs, “You’re so warm.”

I hold her tightly and press my lips to her cheek. “And you, my darling, are lust-drunk.”

She giggles. “I don’t know what that means, but I’m okay with it.”

“It means you’ve been thoroughly fucked and pleased today, and now you need to be properly taken care of,” I murmur, stepping beneath the warm spray. “Just relax, little queen. We’ll see to your every need.” I brush a kiss against her temple, then get to work and wash her off.

She’s covered in Tiru’s seed, something that should irritate the fuck out of me, but I can’t seem to be bothered by it right now. Not with her leaning against me and letting me touch her wherever I desire.

I set her on the bench, then kneel to lather soap along her legs.

She’s so soft and pretty. I want to stroke every inch of her. Kiss her. Lick her. *Worship her*.

Except she’s sore and tired. I can see it from the way she subtly flinches as I wash between her thighs. “Does everything feel tender here?” I ask, gently cleansing her and lightly brushing over her clit.

Miza shivers in response, biting her plump lip. “Yes, but it… it still feels good, too.” She shudders again, grabbing my shoulders and holding on as I finish my task.

Part of me wants to push her, see how far I can take her tonight.

However, the smarter part of me acknowledges that she needs rest for tomorrow’s trial. So I focus on what’s best for her and ensure she’s properly cleaned. Tiru leans against the shower wall, observing as I work, his gaze calculating and studious.

A virgin, I marvel. *I would never have expected that of a fellow king*.

Women and men throw themselves into my path daily. I’m certain it’s the same for Ika and Tiru.

But I suppose if I knew there might be one soul out there for me… I probably would have abstained as well.

Except I never really wanted a mate.

Until recently, I think. *Until… Miza.*

I swallow, trying not to consider what that means and instead focusing on my task.

Once I’m done, I lift Miza from the bench and step out of the shower. Ika’s already in the bath, waiting with his arms held out for her. There’s a floating tray nearby with water and bread, making me again wonder how he’s coming up with all these supplies.

I’m rather certain that tray is from my room, actually. Not this guest suite.

And the glass of water—the *crystal* glass—is definitely mine.

My jaw ticks, but I hand Miza over to him, not wanting to risk dropping her into the water. Then I climb the stairs and situate myself right beside the two of them.

“Is that…?” Miza’s voice trails off, her eyes on the bread. “That’s my mother’s bread. I can smell it. How did you get it?” She glances between Ika and Tiru. “You couldn’t possibly have made this…?”

“Zael and I stopped by your home in the village. The bread was just sitting on the table, so we took it with us.” Ika shrugs. “I know how much you love Giovanna’s baking, so I borrowed a few slices. Hopefully she doesn’t mind.”

“Did you see my mom?” she asks, straightening in his lap to look back at him.

“I did not,” he answers easily. “It was late and she wasn’t in the kitchen.”

“Oh.” Miza deflates momentarily before glancing at the bread with a deep longing. “I’m… I really want to see her again.”

“You will,” Ika promises.

However, I’m not sure that’s a good promise to make. We have no idea what happened in that house tonight or who took Miza’s mother. *Or is she a caretaker?* I wonder.

I really need to figure out Miza’s genetics and look into *who* created her.

But I can’t bring myself to leave her right now. I want to be here with her, to take care of her, and just… exist in her space.

It’s a strange craving.

A foreign need.

I should fight it. I *will* fight it. *Later*, I promise myself. *Much… much later*.

Just as I’ll tell Miza about her missing mother once we determine what happened. For now, there’s no reason to worry her. She’s been through a lot today. Resting is necessary for tomorrow.

Then, while she survives the Monster Games, we’ll work on solving the mystery of her birth. Plus track down whoever took Giovanna Kananaka.

I make a mental note to send my seaguards out to look for clues, then think better of it and pull up a screen from my watch. It’s the only item I’m still wearing because I never take it off. It shifts with me. It’s part of me. It *is* me.

Thankfully, Miza is too preoccupied with her bread to notice what I’m doing. But Ika sees the screen, his eyes scanning the message I’m typing out to Mariana with orders.

He skillfully keeps Miza fixated on eating by angling her a little bit toward the tray and away from my work, which tells me he agrees with my decision to wait to inform her of her mother's disappearance.

Of course, he already made that rather clear by artfully giving her the truth while omitting the missing-persons part of the equation.

Rereading my message to Mariana, I add a few notes about needing to draft a list of individuals who would benefit from pitting me against Seren. I then tell her I'll elaborate on that bit later, mostly because I don't want to explain the bounty on Miza's head in a message, and hit Send.

It's then that I realize Tiru could see the message and definitely read it because he's arching his brow at me.

Later, I mouth at him.

He considers me for a moment, then nods.

Right now, our focus needs to be on Miza's preparations for tomorrow's trial.

But soon, we'll discuss strategy.

Because whatever is happening on my islands is about to be unmasked. And the culprit—or *culprits*—will face the consequences of my wrath.

After that's dealt with, I'll consider the future. Maybe that'll include keeping Miza by my side. Or maybe that'll mean letting her go to another realm.

At least for tonight, she's mine.

That's all that matters… *for now*.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MIZA

AT SOME POINT, I fell asleep in the tub.

And the next thing I know, I'm waking up with my head against Zael's chest with Tiru curled at my back.

Ika is nowhere to be seen, but I smell something savory coming from the kitchen area of the guest suite.

When I pick my head up to glance in that direction, I find a naked Ika dancing around in just an apron. Wearing nothing else. Just the apron.

I shiver, recalling how all three men were naked with me in the bath last night, and realize they're all still naked now, too.

Oceans, I'm in trouble.

I can't believe what I let Tiru do to me last night.

Yet all I can think about is letting him do it again while Zael and Ika watch. Then maybe asking them to take turns.

Is it wrong to want Zael and Ika after claiming Tiru as my fated mate? I'm so confused by that. I should only want Tiru, right?

But I… I want Zael and Ika, too.

Which probably means I'm broken in some way. Or greedy.

Except I was taught to expect to be claimed by more than one monster. So why wouldn't I want more than one?

"I can hear you thinking from here, sweetheart," Ika murmurs as he saunters toward the bed in his apron. "If you're trying to determine the best

way to wake a man up, it's with your mouth or your pussy on his cock." He waggles his brows as my jaw drops.

"*Ika*." I basically hiss his name, not because I'm offended but because he can't give me ideas like that, as now all I want to do is exactly what he just said.

"What?" he asks, feigning innocence. "I was simply providing a suggestion."

"And while I agree that having my dick sucked first thing in the morning is an excellent way to wake up, hearing Ika fucking talking is not my ideal alarm clock," Zael mutters, his voice a rumble beneath my ear.

"No shit," Tiru grumbles.

"How would you know? You were a virgin until last night," Ika says. "Unless you did the whole oral thing with others and just avoided penetration?"

I freeze, now wondering if another woman or man has played with Tiru in the morning before. My lips curl down at the thought. I don't like it. Not one bit.

Which is probably hypocritical, given that my head is on another man's chest right now. But—

"Or did Miza suck off your tentacle before riding it into the moonlight last night?" Ika goes on, interrupting my chaotic thoughts and making my cheeks warm with his words.

"I was talking about hearing your voice, asshole," Tiru growls. "I've only ever and will only ever be with Miza. And while I imagine I would love to have her lips wrapped around my cock every morning, I'm *certain* that I loathe you jabbering on like an irritating morning commentator."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you woke up to me instructing Miza on how to orally please that tentacle of yours," Ika replies conversationally.

"Pretty sure that would cause me to lose my erection," Tiru mutters back at him.

Ika's resulting grin is slow and purposeful, his movements matching his expression as he saunters over to the bed. He focuses on me, a challenge in his gaze as he asks, "How wide can you open your mouth, little siren?"

I shiver, his words sending a bolt of lust to my lower abdomen.

Oceans, who am I? I wonder, feeling that spark of life enter my veins just like it did yesterday in the shower with Ika and Zael, and again with Tiru last night.

Rather than overthink it, I embrace it and boldly hold Ika's gaze as I part my lips as wide as they'll go.

The look he gives me in return—all fiery approval—makes me want to preen in response. Because I pleased him by demonstrating the answer rather than verbalizing it.

"Such a good girl for us," he praises, holding out his hand. "Come here."

I press my palm to his and let him pull me up in the bed.

"Kneel, please," he says.

I do, right where he gestures beside Zael.

"Since Tiru doesn't seem to think this will be worth his while, we'll play with the Elite Island King instead." He glances at Zael. "Unless you share Tiru's performance anxiety?"

"It's not performance anxiety," Tiru grouses at him while Zael responds with a simple "I can keep up with anything you suggest."

"I thought you might say that," Ika replies. I'm not sure who he's talking to—Zael or Tiru—but he doesn't elaborate to either of them and instead focuses on me. "The best way to begin is with some light teasing. I suggest straddling Zael's hips and leaning down to kiss him."

That sounds easy enough, so I go to remove the sheet to get better access, but Ika reaches out to grab my hand before I can pull the fabric away from Zael's waist.

"Keep the silk there," he tells me. "The barrier creates more tension." He holds my gaze as he adds, "Trust me, Miza. I'll guide you, and together we'll blow Zael's mind."

I swallow and give him a little nod, agreeing to trust him. Just like I trusted Tiru last night.

Maybe it's naïve to put my faith in these men, but it feels right to let them lead and listen to their advice. They also haven't provided me with any reason *not* to trust them.

Well, actually, Ika kind of has, given that he accepted a *bounty* on my head. But I highly doubt he's planning to suffocate me with Zael's erection.

And I don't think Zael will allow that, anyway.

Just as I *know* Tiru won't. Tiru is mine. I feel it in my heart and soul, sense him in my mind. I might not be able to hear his thoughts, but his emotions are warm and tangible. His protective energy heats my blood almost as much as his desire does.

I glance at him and find his silver gaze gleaming as he watches me. No hint of annoyance or possessiveness. Merely… *intrigue*.

A tremble works through me at that realization, the boldness inside me growing into a peak of fascination. Because I want to deepen that expression in his features, make him more than simply intrigued. Oceans, I want him to go mad with desire.

It's a craving I can't locate the origin of or truly define. However, I indulge the yearning and move to straddle Zael, just like Ika instructed. Zael's hands find my hips, holding me as I lean down to kiss him. He doesn't take over the motion, instead allowing me to lead.

So I start slowly, merely brushing my lips against his, then trace the seam of his mouth with my tongue. He parts to grant me entry, his minty taste filling my senses and making my legs clench.

His flavor pairs nicely with the undertones of eucalyptus in his scent. Though, the notes of burning sage and bonfire embers burn stronger, creating a fiery cologne that has me sighing into our embrace. It feels like coming home. There's safety and comfort underlying those collective notes.

He draws a hand up my back to my nape, giving it a squeeze as our kiss deepens. He's subtly starting to take control, mastering me with his tongue, guiding me with his lips.

But it's Ika's mouth near my ear that says, "Don't submit, little siren. Pull your mouth away and kiss a path along his jaw to his neck. Pause to nibble his pulse before making your way down his sternum. Slowly, though. Tease him. Make him beg. Don't let him take over. You're in charge this morning, not him."

The quiver his words evoke echoes through my limbs but centers in my core.

I love that he's so close to me. Coaching me. *Helping me*.

I'm not sure when he slid onto the bed, his movements so stealthy that I didn't even feel the mattress move, but he's right beside me as I draw my mouth away from Zael's. Ika's also no longer wearing the apron, his naked body on full display.

Which naturally draws my gaze downward to his pierced cock. It's hard and pointing right at me, making me want to shift course.

Except I can feel Zael's pronounced erection between us, the sheets doing little to mask his arousal.

That's the tension Ika mentioned, I realize, pressing down on Zael's length and seeking a hint of friction. *This teases both of us…*

Zael's grasp on my nape tightens, his body straining a bit beneath me, so I do it again and smile when his lips part.

Yes, definitely teasing both of us.

Leaning into him again, I kiss his jaw just like I was instructed to do, and start slowly moving downward with my body and my mouth.

I pause to memorize his muscular pecs, though, loving the way his sculpted body is mine to explore. I use my mouth on him while drawing my fingertips across his rippled abdomen, reveling in his exquisite physique.

He's beautifully crafted. Unreal. *Divine*.

All three of them are.

And they're mine, some dark part of me whispers. *My men. My mates. Mine.*

That might not be true for longer than today, but I choose to live in this moment and not consider anything or anyone else.

The sheet shifts as I kiss a path downward, the fabric seeming to naturally follow my movements as I reach Zael's lower abdomen. His muscles are tense, his hand shifting to my hair to take hold of my messy strands.

I glance up to see him watching me with glittering blue eyes, his hunger a palpable presence that makes my thighs clench with expectation.

A sudden desire to flip around and seat myself on his face flashes through my head. But I fight it off, wanting to focus on pleasuring him.

These men spent hours gifting me orgasms yesterday.

It's my turn to return the favor.

"Hold his gaze and move a little bit farther down until your mouth is hovering right over his cock," Ika murmurs, my body already doing what he says before he even finishes speaking. "Good girl, sweetheart. Just like that. Breathe on him. Make him beg."

Zael's hand tightens in my hair. "She'll have to do more than stare to make me beg, stealth dragon."

Ika chuckles. "You hear that, little siren? He's issuing a challenge. Maybe you should use your hands a little. Brush kisses along the tip. *Nibble*. See what makes him squirm."

I accept that challenge but decide to follow the bold instincts rising within me and wrap my lips around Zael's head instead. His nostrils flare as

I hold his gaze, his cock jerking a little in my mouth. I swirl my tongue around him, then groan when a delicious flavor blossoms across my taste buds.

It's smoky with a hint of salt, yet it's the underlying essence that has me wanting more of him. I can't identify the source of it or what it reminds me of, just know that I need him to produce more of it.

So I suck him deep into my mouth, demanding more of him, and moan as he gives me what I want. Ika makes a comment that I don't hear, my enjoyment too overwhelming to focus on his instructions anymore.

But I feel Zael's hand tightening in my hair, his strength and power seeming to hum through me in a wave of intensity. When he tries to guide my head, I don't let him, instead pushing against his hand to drag my teeth to the tip, where I lick him again.

He groans, my name leaving his tongue in reverent approval. He likes that I fought him. Or maybe it's the sensation I created with my mouth. Regardless, I do it again, then release him entirely to place kisses down his shaft all the way to his balls, which I cup in my hand to gently squeeze.

I have no idea what I'm doing. Exploring. Learning. *Playing*.

But the hiss that escapes him tells me I'm doing something right.

Knuckles brushing my cheek draws my gaze to Ika, reminding me that I'm supposed to be listening to him. "Fuck, Miza," he breathes. "The way you're looking at me right now is so fucking hot." Suddenly, his hand is covering Zael's, and he's yanking me away from my task and drawing me into his embrace.

"Ika," I whisper, somewhat as a complaint, but then he's kissing me and I no longer know what I wanted to say to him. I love the way he takes charge and dominates me with his tongue. He's so passionate. So skilled. *So alluring*.

Except, far too quickly, he releases me and pushes me back down to Zael's cock, which has a hint of cum glistening on the tip. I eagerly lap it up, eliciting a deep growl of approval from Zael as he tightens his grasp. Ika's still holding me, too, the pair of them guiding my movements.

I let them.

Opening my mouth.

Taking Zael deep.

Only to cough as he hits the back of my throat. I attempt to yank myself backward, but both men stop me at the tip, telling me to breathe.

“Eagerness is a turn-on,” Ika tells me. “Gagging or choking on our cocks is a compliment as well. But take care of yourself, little siren. You’re in charge of your own limits. So you tell us when it’s too much, all right?”

I don’t really like the fact that I could even have a limit.

And I’m determined to do this correctly.

Which means getting over this stupid gag reflex.

Tiru fit last night, I remind myself. *That may have been another part of my body, but he* fit.

I can make this work, too. I have to. I want Zael. I want to prove to him I’m worthy. Prove to him that I’m an ideal mate. Give him pleasure like he did to me yesterday.

“Wrap your hand around his base,” Ika tells me. “Give it a squeeze, then slowly move your mouth down to meet your grip. That’ll cover him entirely and drive him wild.”

“Don’t be afraid to use your teeth, too,” Zael adds, his thumb drawing a circle against my scalp. “I’m not afraid of a little pain, my darling queen.”

My thighs clench at his endearment voiced in that deep baritone of his. There was a subtle growl to his words, too, one I know was caused by my mouth on his cock.

He likes what I’m doing.

That’s all the encouragement I need to keep going.

To suck him down again.

Grab his base.

Squeeze.

Suck.

Nibble.

And lick.

“Fuck, Miza,” he groans, his hips shifting off the bed like he’s struggling to stay still. His grasp in my hair is like cement, his strength threatening to overpower my movements. Except he holds himself back, his jaw tense from the obvious restraint.

It makes me want to push him, to see what happens if he snaps.

I have no idea where that desire comes from, but it sends heat through my veins. I suddenly can’t stop picturing the Elite Island King losing control.

Will he drag me up by the hair? Kiss me? Roll me beneath him?

A shudder works through me at the prospect.

Though, I also want to make him come.

Taste his essence.

Drink from him.

It's a foreign need. Only, all of this is new to me. Yet my instincts are demanding I do certain things, pursue specific avenues, *indulge in forbidden pleasures*.

Stop thinking, I tell myself. *Just do what comes naturally*.

Ika says something to that effect out loud, his words matching my inner thoughts.

I listen to him and that voice echoing from deep within, bobbing my head up and down while trying to swallow as much of Zael as I can.

I cup his balls, too, just like Ika told me to do. Keep my other palm around his base and squeeze. Pump. Moving up and down. Sucking. Licking. *Nipping* the tip.

"Fuck, darling," Zael growls, his hips moving in a writhing motion that drives me wild. I want to do more. Make him shout. *Force him to fall apart*. "Just like that, Miza. Tongue my head. Now down again. Fuck, yes, that's good. So fucking good."

He sounds like he's on the edge, just like I experienced so many times yesterday.

I'm half tempted to stop, to see if he'll beg me now. But I'm too caught up in the motions to speak. Besides, I want his cum on my tongue. I want to properly taste him. Swallow him. Indulge in his pleasure.

"Take a deep breath for us," Ika tells me, his hand still covering Zael's, both of their fingers in my hair as they pull me up to the tip.

I growl, irritated that my mouth is no longer full, and miss whatever Ika says next.

But then Zael echoing Ika's command has me inhaling through my nose.

"As much air as you can, Miza," Ika adds. "Fill those lungs. You're going to need it, sweetheart. Because Zael is about to drown you in his seed."

The rumble that leaves the Elite Island King has my insides twisting with arousal. Because holy oceans, that sound was *sexy*.

I want to hear him make it again.

And I want to feel him explode.

So I finish inhaling like I was told, then nearly lose half of my air with the sigh I release as the men let me continue my task. Only for my mouth to be full of Zael's essence in the next instant, his resulting growl echoing through every inch of my being.

Oh, oceans… that's even sexier.

But he's coming faster than I can swallow.

And it's… it's too much. I try, gulping him down, but the essence is so hot it nearly burns. And it's doing strange things to me. It's… it's lighting me on fire from within.

My eyes widen.

He's like Tiru, only… only different.

I release his balls to grab my core, my insides seeming to gush with fluid as my own body inches toward an orgasm I haven't even worked myself up to.

His seed is urging me onward, sliding down my throat and sending explosive sensations to all of my nerve endings.

I moan, then choke because he's still coming and I've stopped swallowing. I try to keep up, but it's too much.

Too much cum.

Too much sensation.

Too much fire.

Zael and Ika yank me away in unison, and I'm suddenly on my back with Zael between my legs. He's pumping his dick with his fist, painting my intimate flesh with his burning seed while Ika holds both of my hands over my head.

I scream as a spurt of hot liquid hits my clit and sends me flying into a sea of oblivion.

It's intense insanity.

Euphoria overload.

And it just keeps *going* as Zael continues erupting on my overheated flesh.

I squirm beneath him, but his thighs on mine hold me in place, forcing me to take every ounce of rapture until I'm melting beneath him into a puddle of liquid pleasure.

By the time he's done, I'm panting harder than him. Then he helps me breathe by sealing his lips over mine and kissing me with a fervor that makes my toes curl.

It isn’t until much later that he stops kissing me, his nose brushing mine. “Next time I fuck your mouth, I expect you to swallow every drop, little queen,” he tells me. “Understand?”

My throat works as I nod. “I’m sorry if I disappointed you.” I don’t know that I actually did, but I feel like I messed up by choking.

He huffs a short laugh. “You didn’t disappoint me, Miza. You were fucking amazing. But I want you to enjoy everything I can give you.” He brushes his lips against mine again. “My pleasure is your pleasure. *Always*.”

I shudder at that promise. It reminds me of Tiru’s words last night.

“Fiery sperm,” Ika drawls. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Wait until her pussy clenches around your cock while I’m coming down her throat. You’ll feel it, too, stealth dragon. And you’ll come right along with us,” Zael replies, his mouth still against mine. “The next time I gift you my seed, though, it’ll be in your sweet cunt, Miza. And you’ll climax for hours afterward.”

He kisses me again, this time with a hint of passion that underlies his promise.

A promise I rather want him to deliver on right now.

“Doesn’t look like you lost that erection, T,” Ika says conversationally, the bed shifting as he rolls off of it. “I would suggest Miza enjoy you as an appetizer, but breakfast is ready and our intended needs to eat more than cum. She has a trial in a few hours, one that involves a lot of open-water swimming, yeah?”

My eyes open.

My heart stops.

Open-water swimming.

As in… *ocean* swimming.

I almost forgot about the trial today and the placement I won by finishing first in the race.

Shellfish…

These monsters and their sensual prowess made me lose sight of the Monster Games. They… they distracted me from *everything*.

However, I still have to survive.

Surely my men won’t let me drown, right? I think. *But what if I can’t perform in the ocean? Will they second-guess their interest in me?*

Tiru won’t. He’s my fated mate.

Except his kind usually mates sirens. And I’m not a siren.

What if this trial demonstrates that and—

"Miza," Zael murmurs, his palm on my cheek and drawing my attention back to where he's lying on top of me. "Nothing bad is going to happen to you in the trial."

I swallow, wondering how he read my mind. Though, I wasn't thinking about anything bad happening to me so much as failing the task.

Only now I'm wondering, *Why did he phrase it like that? What's going to happen during this trial?*

And more importantly, what happens if he's wrong?

The ocean is unpredictable at best. It also doesn't like me. Something out there constantly tries to force me under, to smother me with the waves. I've felt it all my life. Being placed in open water isn't going to magically fix that or make that sensation go away.

My mother always told me, "It's just in your head."

But deep down, I'm certain there's something or someone out there who wants to drown me. It's only a matter of time until that entity succeeds.

"Come on," Zael says, giving me a smile. "Let's eat. Then we can discuss the trial, and you'll see there's nothing to be afraid of. Just an evening swim, that's it." He gives me another kiss and rolls off the bed, then gathers me in his arms to pull me up with him.

Just an evening swim, I repeat to myself. *Yeah. Maybe to him. To me… an evening swim in the open ocean… is death.*

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CHAPTER THIRTY

ZAEL

"SOMETHING'S BOTHERING HER," I say in a low voice to Ika as the Offerings line up on the beach. The moon serves as the spotlight, illuminating each candidate in their gauzy swim outfits. Miza's is pure lingerie—a turquoise babydoll that's sheer and leaves nothing to the imagination.

I've had to fight the urge to demand that Ika shadow down to the sand and grab her more than once now. I *hate* that everyone can see her intimate flesh.

She's ours. Not a prize to be admired. Not a female to be desired. But *ours*.

I've never really considered what the Offerings are forced to wear before or the trials they endure. It's been our ritual for centuries.

However, I'm suddenly *very* against every aspect of these games.

"I think that's been evident since lunch," Ika replies, referring to whatever's bothering our Offering. "This trial has her spooked."

"I don't understand why. It's just another swimming exercise." Granted, this one is about surviving in the ocean versus speed in a pool, but it's a safe trial. "We already told her that Tiru will be out in the waves waiting for her, too."

Originally, it was going to be Ika and Tiru. But then Ika pointed out that it might be best to be seen at my side with Seren.

"It'll either intimidate the aggressor or provoke a reaction," he added. "Either way, it's a good idea to show that we're collaborating with one

another rather than working against each other. And, on the unlikely chance this all really is Seren, you'll benefit from having me as an ally."

That last sentence was what sealed the course of action for me.

While Ika might not think Seren's the instigator of this whole situation, I'm not so sure. I don't consider it a coincidence that Giovanna Kananaka disappeared right after our meeting with Seren.

Just as I don't consider it a coincidence that Seren invited Tiru and Ika into the Monster Games only for Miza to end up being an ideal mate for all three of us.

However, I haven't admitted that last part out loud to anyone. It's just been a festering thought that started this afternoon as the four of us shared a meal.

Miza is quickly becoming the heart of a mate-circle I never desired in the first place. A mate-circle Ika somehow foresaw with an ability I still know nothing about. And then there's Tiru, the Kraken King who found his fate-match in Miza, too.

After millennia of krakens being fated-mateless.

On top of all that, Miza clearly isn't human.

So yeah, something is going on here. Something nefarious. And I'm not at all convinced of Seren's innocence.

She stands to my left now, with Ika on my right.

Mariana is in front of me but keeps glancing back over her shoulder with an expression that tells me exactly how she feels about me being flanked by two beings I've always considered to be renowned nemeses.

She doesn't trust them at all.

I shouldn't either.

Yet somehow, my faith in Ika has shifted. I still find him to be irritating as fuck, but I'm learning that there's a lot more to him than he's ever allowed anyone to see.

Tiru falls into that category as well.

This week has been eye-opening.

And Miza… she's teaching me things I never knew I needed to learn.

Like how to share.

That orgasm earlier was the best of my existence, and that was with her choking around my cock. I couldn't believe I'd let Ika lead her into that, yet I found it impossible to stop him. Because the moment he talked about instructing her to suck me off, I was lost to the fantasy.

Now I’m seated beside him like we’ve always been a team.

Mariana knows that’s not true at all. And she’s clearly not pleased by this development, but she’s smartly keeping the opinion to herself.

For now, I think.

After this trial, I fully expect to receive an earful of complaints from her.

The only conversation we’ve had today has been over messages in a text format. One was an update to say she has no idea where Giovanna was taken or who took her because the security feeds from the village provided nothing useful.

The other message was a very long list of those who would benefit from a war between me and Seren.

Tiru and Ika were at the top of that list, their names bolded as though she wanted to remind me of whom I’ve been spending time with these last few days.

“She fears the ocean,” Ika says under his breath, drawing my attention back to Miza on the beach. She’s staring out at the dark waves with clear trepidation.

“Or maybe she fears the boats,” I suggest, noting the approaching ships. They’re hovering over the water on a pair of ski-like blades that slice through the waves with astute efficiency. “Most Offerings have only ever been on the underwater monorails, not the hoverjets.”

Ika says nothing, just watches the approaching water vehicles.

The Offerings are all lined up, ready to board.

But before they begin, I’m supposed to make a few statements.

I wait until the hoverjets are finished with their arrivals, their engines cutting off to allow the waves to be heard in the late evening air.

I give it a minute, my gaze on Miza’s frozen form. She’s several hundred yards away from where I’m standing on a nearby yacht, but I can see her clearly even in the night. Her pretty pink hair is illuminated beautifully by the moon above, her pale skin appearing far more fragile than it should.

I can make out every detail of her form, my dragon sight far better than her human eyes.

Though, she’s not truly human, is she? I think, running my gaze over her again. *So why is she afraid of the ocean?* It should be calling to her. That’s

part of what our geneticists are trying to do—create mortals who love the ocean as much as our inner beasts do.

I really need to prioritize a conversation with the researchers. Mariana said she spoke to them today, learning nothing new about their practices or what they've been up to.

They're following the same protocols we laid out hundreds of years ago is what her message told me earlier. *As for Miza Kananaka, there's nothing unique in her genetic profile. At least according to her most recent labs*.

My jaw ticks. I already knew that part since I reviewed Miza's files the night I first met her on the beach.

But something is amiss.

There has to be *someone* who knows what's happening here.

However, now isn't the time to lament on that reality. I need to focus on addressing the Offerings. *On talking to Miza…*

Clearing my throat, I press my thumb to the side of my watch and call up a screen to begin my broadcast.

"Welcome to our second trial," I say, keeping my greeting short and to the point. "Tonight's test is about survival and compatibility with the waves. The goal is to make it back to shore. That's it."

I don't add that each Offering has at least one suitor in the water who will be trying to thwart their mortal efforts.

Because the actual goal is to be *caught*.

Whoever "wins" will get the Offering to himself or herself for the next ninety-six hours. It'll be the suitor's choice if he or she wants to share.

Consent, however, remains vital.

That's the point of the courting period—which is what the next four days are traditionally called in the lead-up to the final ceremonies.

"Consider this a warm-up for the Monster Games," I add, talking to the Offerings once more. "You'll be hunted. Claimed. And taken. Proving you can survive that experience is crucial to the mating ceremonies that will follow."

Miza visibly shivers, her jaw seeming to tense. While the light might be shining on my form to illuminate my presence in the sky above the beach, I can still see her clearly.

She's the only one I'm looking at.

The only one I care about tonight.

“Swim fast. Swim strong. Swim *to live*.” Those three statements are exclusively for her.

However, for the others, I go on with some important parameters.

“It doesn’t matter where you touch the shore, just that you eventually reach Monster Island. From there, you will find new accommodations within the Hunting Maze or the Breeding Huts. Choose wisely. These will be your temporary sanctuaries until the final trial—which will be the Monster Games in five days’ time.”

I pause for effect, just like I do every year.

But I hold Miza’s gaze through my lens, pretending that I’m right in front of her.

“All of your needs will be met. The only thing you have to do is make it to shore—using any means necessary. Those who reach the island the fastest will have first pick of where to stay. That’s the benefit of winning, but it’s really not about speed this time so much as relying on your instincts and trusting fate.”

The surprise awaiting the Offerings is the suitors lurking in the ocean. Some of them probably already know about that part of this evaluation, as there are no rules dictating what information is shared before a trial. Thus, we told Miza that Tiru would be out in the waves waiting for her.

Unfortunately, she doesn’t seem consoled by that fact. Which is why I just uttered the part about trusting fate.

It’s wise information for all the Offerings.

The point of this exercise is to accept mates in all forms—human, monster, and otherwise. That’s the purpose of the suitors waiting in the water to help the mortals survive. It’s about developing faith in one another and learning how fates can intertwine to the benefit of both parties.

But the only one I really care about learning that lesson is Miza.

And it seems she’s in desperate need of it at the moment because she’s *shaking*.

What the fuck? I want to demand. *It’s just a swim. You’re clearly a natural.*

We’re also standing right here. Nothing is going to happen to her. Ika can shadow into the depths of fucking hell to drag her back if needed.

Okay, perhaps not that drastic. But still, she should know that we’re not going to let anything happen to her.

Yet she’s standing there—

Seren clears her throat, reminding me that I'm not only in charge of the ceremony right now, but I'm also currently being televised on the beach and to the beings waiting in the water.

Right.

"May the strongest of you survive," I murmur, the words ones I've said what feels like a thousand times. Because they're the ones that get televised for the Monster Games.

If the Offerings are paying attention, they'll realize *tonight* is the trial they've seen televised for years. Not the actual Monster Games. But the race to shore. The hunt. *The claiming beneath the waves*.

Miza's gaze snaps up to the yacht, her nostrils flaring just as I cut the feed.

She knows.

And she's not the only one.

Several other Offerings exchange glances, their expressions conveying confusion.

Good.

That's the point.

We want them dysregulated. It's the best way to ensure they don't overthink what comes next.

The hoverjets fire up their engines and prowl forward.

"Let the Monster Games *begin*," I add, my voice carrying through the darkness and amplified by enchanted speakers in the air.

Every part of me longs to shred my suit and join the others in the water. But I can't. My role is to stay on this yacht and *observe*.

It's never been a struggle before.

However, watching Miza board her hoverjet has my skin crawling with wrongness.

Something bad is about to happen.

It's a feeling that shouldn't exist, because I *know* it's wrong. This trial has been completed hundreds of times. There's nothing dangerous about it. My seaguards are in the water, controlling the elements and securing the Offerings.

I may have spouted details about survival, but it's only meant to up the stakes.

The mortals *need* to trust their monster suitors. That's all.

So why is my skin prickling with nerves?

“The pink-haired female on hoverjet three is the one with the bounty?” Seren asks, her voice barely a whisper as she speaks right against my ear.

I nod. “Yes.”

“I see.” She straightens, her shrewd gaze on Miza. I study Seren’s profile, trying to discern her expression. But she gives nothing away. She’s as stoic as ever, simply observing the Offerings like they mean nothing to her.

That doesn’t mean she didn’t put a hit on Miza, though.

Nor does it mean I trust Seren at all.

However, something still isn’t right. I can sense it in the energy warming the air.

There’s an ominous aura lurking somewhere nearby. Is it emanating from Seren or someone else?

“Where’s Celina?” Ika inquires, his dark gaze on Seren. “Did she opt not to attend tonight since Tiru is officially off the market? Or is she joining the games to see if she can find her own fated mate?”

“I suggested she stay home for the evening while I attend the survival trial,” Seren replies without looking at him, her focus still on the Offerings.

More specifically, on Miza.

“There’s nothing for Celina to do here tonight. And none of the Offerings are ideal matches. She would break these humans with a blink.” Seren glances at me. “No offense.”

“Offense taken,” Mariana cuts in, turning to stare the Monster Island Queen down. “Our geneticists are the best in this world. Their success rate in producing water-friendly mates is ninety-seven percent. Perhaps Celina isn’t built to handle them appropriately, but they are absolutely built to satisfy her.”

Seren cocks her head, her silver gaze gleaming as she looks at my second-in-command. They’re essentially at eye level, thanks to the stairs we’re standing upon. Seren’s only five foot three or so, similar to Miza’s height, while my second is six foot one, placing her slightly taller than Seren even with the step difference.

But it’s not the impressive height that gives Mariana her confidence; it’s her birthright. She’s all alpha female, and she’s ensuring Seren feels the weight of that right now.

Alas, Seren is all queen. So she’s just as confident as my second.

Which, naturally, means both women are now squaring off with each other and demanding the other bow… with no success.

“So don’t fault our mating pool for your own shortcomings as a matriarch,” Mariana adds, her eyes turning solid black as she glares at the Monster Island Queen. “It’s your job to teach Celina respect. It’s not our geneticists’ job to create an *unbreakable* toy for her to mate.”

My eyebrows lift, the pure venom in Mariana’s tone catching me off guard. I rarely hear her use that tone. She’s usually the voice of reason, not the one issuing insults to our rivals.

Ika releases a whistle beneath his breath. “I’m rather certain this is the opposite of presenting a united front.”

His words go unheard as the sea begins to brew with a coming storm, one I suspect is being called upon by Seren.

Fires.

“Mariana,” I start.

But it’s too late.

The siren queen is furious, and my second is welcoming the fury with a simple arched brow. “I’m sorry, *Your Royal Cuntness*. Did I strike a nerve?”

“*Mariana*,” I growl. “What—”

A wave rocks the yacht before I can finish my statement, causing my hands to fist at my sides.

“You coddle the humans and expect them to be able to handle a siren’s power,” Seren says, her focus entirely on Mariana. “*That* is a direct fault of your leadership, not mine.”

“I believe you mean a siren’s *tantrum*,” Mariana fires back. “It’s a wonder your kind has been without fated mates for so long. Oh, wait, it couldn’t possibly have anything to do with your cuntiness, could it?”

I close my eyes and release a breath.

This is so unlike Mariana.

And so fucking unhelpful right now.

My dragon paces inside, not appreciating the increasing turmoil of the ocean surrounding us.

The storms are coming from *beneath* the surface, rising swiftly and threatening the balance of the tide.

“Zael.” Ika’s tone has me snapping my attention to him, a demand for him to give me a second of peace dying on my tongue when I realize the *cause* of him saying my name.

There’s a tidal wave growing about a mile out, the crest of it glittering in the moonlight.

And its trajectory is clear.

It’s not coming toward us but heading in the direction of the hoverjets.

Which have just parked at their starting location.

My lips part, a command about to leave my mouth for the nearby seaguards right as the bells ring loudly through the air.

The bells that tell the seaguards to drop the first Offering into the ocean, roughly three miles from shore.

That first Offering being the one who won last night’s trial.

Miza Kananaka.

“*Fuck*!”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MIZA

"*Go*." The guttural command follows the chiming bells, causing my skin to break out in goose bumps.

Because that demand is meant for me and me alone.

This is the privilege I've won for having the fastest time during last night's race—I get to jump into the ocean first.

Shells.

I take a deep breath and do as I'm told because there is no other choice. They explained the rules on the beach.

"You'll be released in order of your placements in yesterday's trial, with the top three places being one hundred meters apart and the rest of you being called forward in waves as the hoverjets move," Farrah said after lining us up in our requisite lines.

I was first to board.

Because I was meant to be the first to exit.

"The second the bells chime, you jump," Farrah told me soon after our hoverjet stopped what seemed to be miles away from the coast. "And then… you swim."

That was my only instruction—*swim*.

Zael more or less said the same thing, too. Plus, he uttered the words I've heard countless times over the years while watching the annual Monster Games. "May the strongest of you survive. Let the Monster Games begin."

A shudder rolls through me.

It hasn't been a week yet, I think for the hundredth time. *Why are the games starting now?*

Unless I've fallen into some sort of strange time warp?

What happens next is a fight for survival. A swim that's impossible to complete.

Because every Offering will be caught and *claimed*.

Is this a warm-up for what's to come? Or the real event?

I'm so confused. And cold. *And sinking,* I realize, kicking my feet to keep me above the tumultuous surface. *Oceans, what am I doing? I should be swimming!*

I was given a head start and told to make it back to shore. Yet I've wasted the last however many seconds in the water, pondering what's to come.

I *know* what's about to happen. Thinking about it isn't going to change the future. I need to start moving. And I need to start moving *right now*.

My legs flutter, my arms pinwheeling to carry me forward.

Except a wave cuts off my vision of the island in the distance, momentarily disorienting me in the night.

This is dangerous.

I could very easily get lost out here on my own.

They claimed this starting position was a benefit of winning the race, but I'm questioning that logic right now. There's safety in numbers.

I tread water for a moment, waiting for the wave to quell so I can see shore again. There are torchlights on the beach, creating a hum in the distance. I saw it a few seconds ago. But it doesn't reappear, so I spin around to search for it. To look for the boats. To identify anything that can tell me where I am in the ocean.

Nothing but sea.

I swallow. *This isn't good.*

Where did the island go? The hoverjets? *The moon?*

I look up. The sky is glowing dimly in the night.

This isn't right.

I've spent hours on the beach after midnight before, albeit in a cove, so I *know* what to expect. At least from the stars.

And right now, there are none.

The water is too turbulent. Too abundant.

It feels heavy as well.

Like it's forming binds around my limbs to yank me down via some invisible weight.

I shake my head. *It's all a phobia. Not real. I'm… I'm fine. I just need to calm down.*

But my racing heart refuses to slow. If anything, my pulse escalates as the water rises in the distance, forming a tower of sheer force.

I'm seeing things.

I have to be seeing things.

Okay. I don't think I'm seeing things.

Because that tower is only growing.

I don't remember seeing anything like this in the previous Monster Games, but they didn't often show the surface. Everything seems to happen underwater.

That's why I've always feared drowning in these events. I can only hold my breath for so long.

But maybe there's a reason we only ever see what occurs beneath the current. Deep down. *Where the monsters lurk*.

"Is that where you are, Tiru?" I whisper, my words lost to the roaring wind.

That wall is approaching me now, maybe a hundred or so meters away. There's no telling how thick it is, but if it hits me while I'm above water, it's going to knock me into a flip. Granted, it's likely carrying a current that's going to spin me around beneath the surface, too.

However, the best way to avoid the breaking force is to dive beneath the turbulent area.

I learned that many years ago when trying to figure out how to control the water. The ocean does what it wants, but there are ways to work with nature rather than against it.

Except nothing about this approaching wave feels *natural*.

Swallowing, I force myself to focus on the magnificent wall of water and time my dive appropriately.

Getting closer, I think, repeating the phrase over and over until it's so close I can almost taste the salt spray from the incredible cyclone-like intensity.

Inhaling deeply, I pull as much oxygen into my lungs as possible, then flip in the water to try to dive down beneath the incoming mass.

Darkness overcomes me in the next moment as power pulls at my limbs, causing me to spin beneath the force of the wave.

It's all wrong. The potency of the unnatural motion sends me spiraling, my body whirling uncontrollably. Water taunts my nostrils, forcing me to pinch my nose to better hold my breath, but by the time the rotation ends, I have no idea which way is up and which way is down.

I try to let my body naturally drift, hoping buoyancy will take over and right my sense of direction.

However, all I do is… remain stagnant.

In complete and utter darkness.

There's no sun above to help light my path, and the moon is too dim.

My eyes widen, the sting of salt touching my irises. *No, no, no!*

Panic threatens to drown me. *Literally*. But I force myself to calm. To *think*.

Use your nose, I tell myself, twirling myself around to determine which way causes water to rush my nostrils and which way doesn't. *Okay, good. That way must be up,* I decide when water moves in a certain direction. *Oceans, I hope I'm right.*

I have only one shot at this.

Swallowing, I start to swim, praying it's the right direction, and finding nothing but water.

Oh Gods…

I… I don't know how deep I am or if maybe the whirling of water played tricks with my senses. *I don't… How am I supposed to…?*

Stop, I tell myself, willing the tears to stay at bay.

But my lungs are beginning to burn almost as much as my eyes.

How long have I been under? I wonder dizzily, my arms and legs pumping a little less powerfully. *How much longer can I—*

No.

No.

I won't finish that question.

I just need to *swim*.

My arms create a frog-like movement as I try to continue my path upward, while my feet form a butterfly kick because it's my strongest motion.

Come on, I think. *Come on!*

The moon has to be somewhere. I can't be *that* deep.

Unless I'm swimming in the wrong direction.

I shake my head, refusing to psych myself out.

Upward. Upward. Upward.

But everything is so *dark*.

My heart hammers in my chest, true fear beginning to take hold.

Where's Tiru?!

And how did that massive wave exist?

I have so many questions and no answers. *Just swim!* I shout at myself, pushing my limbs to the limit of their ability.

But the surface… it's… it's nowhere.

It's like I'm moving through ink.

This is a nightmare, I realize. *None of this is real.*

I've dreamt of this a thousand times.

Feared it for longer.

Soon, the monsters will appear.

And then… I'll wake up.

Right?

Not right, I whisper to myself. *This is real.*

And my lungs are running out of time.

I… I can't keep holding my breath. I need to inhale. *I need air*.

But there is nothing down here except water.

Oh, oceans, I'm going to drown. Truly dro—

A shock slams into my side, causing my lips to part on a scream that releases the last of my air.

Such a stupid reaction. *So incredibly wrong!*

Because now… now I can't… *Oh no!* Tears mingle with the ocean. My hands claw uselessly at the water. My feet move. And my mouth… *No, no, no!*

The first bite of salt hits my lungs as my body automatically inhales on my behalf, pure instinct overriding the terror of the moment. *I'm breathing in water. I'm drowning.*

It *hurts*.

I cough.

Sputter.

Fight the wrongness of the intrusion.

Everything is still too dark.

I'm lost.

Whirling again.

A worthless being beneath the waves.

Choking on water.

Suffocating.

It’s worse than my nightmares. There’s a heavy weight building in my chest. A searing pain behind my eyes. Splinters in my ribs. An ache through my lower limbs, dragging me down… down… down.

“*Tiru*!” I scream soundlessly into the water, my lungs too full of liquid to make even a whisper come true. Because I’m drowning. Well and truly *dying*.

Sinking, sinking…

Except my arms are still moving. Still swimming. *Still trying…*

Fury rips through me, my mind overpowering the reality. Because I *refuse* to let this happen. I refuse to die!

Fight. Swim. Survive.

My legs give another resounding kick, causing a ripple to echo around me as I shoot through the water with a force that feels utterly unlike anything I’ve ever created before.

It’s like I’m flying beneath the sea.

And breathing, I realize with a start as my lungs suddenly explode with sensation.

Water spews from my mouth, my cough so forceful I spin in a somersault. Only to flatten again with another robust butterfly flutter from my legs.

How…? I look down, a strange film over my eyes that suddenly allows me to see shapes in the darkness. The sting no longer exists. It’s… it’s like I’m wearing goggles, only with night vision enabled.

Impossible.

A-and what is… that? I give my legs another kick and freeze as a fin appears in my vision.

A massive *taillike* fin.

Similar to a seaguard’s. But longer. More frilly.

I do another twist, my hands running over the scales covering my skin. *What…? I… How?*

My body begins to whirl, my fin beating my body in a perfect circle over and over again.

I have a tail.

And I’m breathing under the water.

Actually, I’m not really breathing at all.

I skim my hands up my sides to the aches in my ribs and find indents that are moving like gills.

Impossible.

Maybe I’ve died and gone to some sort of ocean afterlife?

I blink, my vision clearing instantly to reveal the night sea life.

There are fish all around me, their colors cast in a world of grays, whites, and blacks.

But one of them is glowing.

KiKi? I wonder, frowning as I realize that I haven’t seen my sea friend in a few days. *Is that you?*

No, I realize in the next beat. The glow is too bright and too big to be KiKi.

I reach for the glittering fin, curious, only to freeze as my name echoes through the waves in a feminine song. It’s faint, yet alluring, and causes me to rotate toward the soft melody.

Every part of me shivers as I recognize the hymn. I… I don’t know where I’ve heard it before, but it’s a hum that echoes inside my mind, one I somehow know all the words to.

Curiosity ensnares my actions, drawing me toward the sound. My fin beats with the water, moving me faster than I intend, the powerful kick far too natural to be real.

I must be dead.

Or dreaming.

My eyelashes flutter, my brow furrowing. *That’s how I know this song—from my dreams.*

Then none of this is real.

But it certainly *feels* real.

How strange, I muse, caught up in a memory twisted with sleep. It’s almost tangible. A woman with vibrant purple hair humming this tune. Rocking me to sleep. Promising me a future of greatness. *“My sweet, beautiful Miza Lynn, how you’ll rise on a flourish of fins. A princess, you will be. Now sleep and dream of the deep blue sea.”*

Miza Lynn, I think, trying to understand, to recall the strange vision.

But it’s gone as I reach the source of the song.

A golden shell that morphs into a strange light.

Like I’ve been lured into some sort of trap.

Something closes around me, and suddenly I’m soaring upward through the water with the force of a geyser.

I scramble, my fin flapping in my wake, my arms trying to pause the movement, but it’s too late. I shoot up into the air, my mouth parting on a much-needed breath, just to land on a rocky surface.

Crystal lights blink at me.

So majestic, like stars.

So unreal.

Where am I? I think groggily, my lower half still somewhat submerged. *Is this a… a cave?*

My head spins. My eyes drooping. Too much… change. Oxygen. Water. Drowning.

Every part of me feels exhausted. My legs feel weak. The fin is gone. The gills, too. *A fantasy? Something I imagined?*

I run my hands over my naked form, noting that the lingerie I wore for the trial is long gone. But I’ve… I’ve made it to shore. So is it done? Have I won?

“Miza!” a familiar voice bellows, followed by a wave of serious energy. One only a Kraken King can create. Because that shout came from the water hole, er, *geyser*, I just shot up out of. But it doesn’t seem to be a geyser now. Just a simple lagoon-like pool.

Strange how Tiru’s voice sounded so clear yet incredibly far away.

No watery gargles, though. Almost like he shouted into the air, not the ocean.

Except I know it came from below… somehow.

I blink, dazed.

Then I close my eyes.

Just for a moment.

Because I can’t seem to properly focus. All I want to do for a few seconds… is dream of my frilly fins… and the way it felt to finally *swim*.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

TIRU

"*Miza*!" I roar, her essence all over the fucking ocean and nowhere at once. I had her. She was right in front of me. Then that damn cyclone of energy hit, and her presence *vanished*.

It's like she was sucked into a portal or a dark hole.

Minutes passed with *nothing*.

Until suddenly, she reappeared, and now I'm sprinting after her, trying desperately to reach my soul's mate.

The only aspect of all of this that kept me calm was sensing our bond. It remained intact through the madness, telling me she was alive somewhere, just… unattainable.

But now her presence is tangible again. I simply need to *find* her.

My tentacles swirl, my kraken taking on impossible speeds as I shoot through the darkness once more. I keep partially shifting so I can shout her name. However, I give up on that now. My beast has picked up on her scent. Her essence. Her *trail.*…

There's powerful energy here.

Warmth.

The kiss of a siren.

I'm not sure if that's coming from her or if a siren has my mate.

A growl rumbles from my chest, one that's echoed by the dragon approaching my side. *Ika*. I recognize his dark purple scales flecked with glittering gold. He's as large as my kraken and apparently just as fast.

I ignore him entirely, following my nose as I chase the strands of citrus blossoms through the sea.

We go impossibly deep—far deeper than Miza should ever have gone—before shooting upward along an invisible stream of energy. It feels suspiciously like a wake, one that's quickly dissipating.

Narrowing my gaze, I gather my strength into a burst of ink to chase after Miza's essence, my tentacles whirling to turn me into a water torpedo.

I don't even look to see if Ika's keeping pace. I can *feel* his dark presence in pursuit. It's a strange sort of link, one I suspect has been created through Miza.

I'll investigate what that means later.

For now, I'm thankful to have him at my side. Because if a siren has Miza, then she's likely been lured into some sort of trap. Which means we're about to enter the same net.

A threatening bellow emanates from my chest. Krakens and sirens have maintained an alliance for millennia. If the sirens have chosen now to defy me as the Kraken King, there will be absolute hell to pay, and I make sure they know that by releasing my warning call.

Miza is mine, my beast is saying. *Touch her and you die*.

Ika's dragon releases a similar rumble, though his is deeper and laced with ominous promise. He's deadly, and everyone who feels his approaching aura will know it.

I've only ever encountered his irritatingly playful nature, but I've always known this side of him existed beneath the teasing veneer. It's why I've never trusted him and always kept him at a distance—I knew he would be a formidable adversary in a fight.

Right now, though, he's the ideal ally.

Together, we'll annihilate anyone and everything in our path.

More growls echo from our beasts, the sounds powerful enough to carry through the waves for all the nearby sea creatures to hear.

Colorful fish swim away from us with swift pumps of their fins.

Sharks avoid us, too.

As do all of the other beings nearby.

Which leaves us with just Miza and the sirens above.

I don't hesitate in reaching the surface, my upper half already shifting into human form so I can properly see what we're dealing with.

But all I find is an unconscious Miza lying partly on some nearby lava rocks, her legs floating in the water behind her.

I blink and finish my transformation, my humanoid feet kicking to carry me over to her. “Miza,” I breathe, my hands finding her upper half and skimming her torso for signs of injury.

Her chest moves with an inhale, the air seeming to come in and out of her with ease. And I find no signs of trouble anywhere on her.

Yet she’s definitely asleep.

I pull her into my arms, my fingers running through her already dry hair. It’s like she’s been here for hours, but I know that’s not possible.

Ika joins me, his dragon scales replaced by human skin as he walks out of the water cove to squat on the rocks beside us. “What happened?” I demand.

He blows out a breath and runs his fingers through his tangled, dark strands. “Mariana picked a fight with Seren. I left Zael behind to clean up their—”

A whoosh of sound cuts him off as Zael flies into the cave, his dragon’s massive wings creating a wind tunnel as he lands right beside us. He engages his shift instantly, his light blue scales disappearing into skin, his icy gaze on Miza.

“Is she all right?” he demands, his hand going to her cheek and then her neck, his fingers clearly checking for a pulse.

“She’s unconscious, but breathing,” I tell him seriously.

“I thought you were handling Mariana and Seren,” Ika says.

“I used a blast of fire to turn their brewing cyclone into mist before it could hit the hoverjets, then gave authority to Farrah to take over before chasing after you.” Zael utters all of that without glancing away from Miza. “I figured you and Tiru were covering the water, so I had the air.”

He runs his knuckles across her cheek again, then touches her dry hair, his brow furrowing much like mine probably did when I completed the same action.

“But where did she go?” he asks in a whisper. “How did she survive so long beneath the waves?”

“I think a siren may have helped her,” I admit, my voice just as soft. “I sensed the presence right along with Miza’s essence. However, he or she was gone by the time we surfaced.”

“Or Miza *is* the siren,” Ika says. “She’s not human.”

Zael shakes his head before I can reply to that. “She was born on my islands, Ika. While I agree that she’s been genetically altered—as all mortals here have been—our scientists can’t create inhuman species.”

“Maybe your scientists didn’t create her at all,” he counters. “We both know Giovanna isn’t her biological mother.”

Zael finally looks at Ika. “Most mortals don’t live with a biological parent in my region. However, *all* births go through the research institute. But that’s not the point you’re making, right? You’re suggesting a siren left an offspring—*Miza*—in the care of a human. *Why* would a siren do that?”

Ika folds his arms, his dark eyes giving nothing away as he studies Zael. “Do you find it interesting, or perhaps *coincidental*, that Mariana left her name off the list of those who would benefit from a war between you and Seren? Then proceeded to pick a fight with the Monster Island Queen right before the survival trial?”

“Do you find it annoying when Ika changes the subject rather than answering the question I voiced?” Zael asks, his attention shifting to me.

“I think you both have posed important inquiries,” I respond quietly, considering each of them independently. “Regardless, we need to focus on ensuring Miza is safe and recovering. While this cave feels isolated, there are too many entry points. I would prefer something with stronger protective qualities.”

Ika can teleport.

Zael can fly.

Meanwhile, my power exists within the sea—which won’t aid me in helping Miza escape from this cave, as she can’t breathe underwater.

When I say as much out loud, Ika raises a brow. “I may have something that can help with that. However, we can discuss the particulars of that later.” He reaches for me and Miza, his power instantly engulfing us as he shadows us through time and space.

A bedroom appears in the next moment, followed by Ika gently laying Miza on an ornate bed decorated with blue silks. I’m not sure when he picked her up or how he took her from my arms, but he did it far too effortlessly.

My lips curl down, my mind whirring with complicated equations of power and energy forces.

I’m the Kraken King, the reigning monarch of the Cephalopoda Realm. I’m not weak. Yet somehow Ika not only took my fated mate from me

without me feeling it, but he also managed to move her over ten feet away from me before I *noticed*.

And took me to a place I don't recognize. "Where are we?" I demand.

"Zael's suite," he answers without hesitation.

My jaw clenches. I don't really care that we're in Zael's personal quarters. However, I am bothered that Ika managed to so easily take Miza from my grip.

Am I responding instinctually? I wonder. *Or is he manipulating me with one of his infamous toxins?*

"Tiru," Ika says softly, glancing up at me as he tucks Miza into the bed. "I'm not your enemy. I'm your ally. And she's my fate, too. Remember that, please."

With those far-too-potent words, he vanishes from sight.

Either he can read my mind, or he's foreseen my reaction to this moment.

I… I don't care for either option.

But he was right to say what he said.

He's not my competition or my enemy. He cares about Miza. That much he's proved.

Although, there's still the issue of the bounty on her head. Plus everything else surrounding her existence and Ika's foresight regarding this mate-circle.

"You and I need to work on our communication," Zael is saying as he appears beside the bed with Ika. "You can't just grab Miza and shadow off without commentary."

"I didn't want to risk wasting time with a frivolous conversation like this one," Ika replies, his gaze on Miza. "She looks good in your bed, Z. Let's keep her here for a while, yeah?"

With that pronouncement, the asshole disappears again.

Zael's hands fist at his sides. "He's fucking impossible."

"He's not wrong either, though," I point out, admiring Miza's hair fanning across Zael's pillows. "Our mate is so fucking beautiful."

"That's not what he said."

"It's what he meant," I murmur. "And as irritating as he is, bringing her here makes the most sense. Now teach me your security protocols so I can ensure her protection."

“You want me to share my private security details with you?” Zael asks, sounding incredulous.

I simply stare at him and reply, “Yes.” There’s no need to elaborate. If we’re going to make this mate-circle thing work for Miza, then we need to trust each other.

Zael is either in or he’s out.

His choice.

And if he opts for the latter, I’ll tell Ika to shadow the three of us to my palace. Zael’s precious rules can go fuck themselves.

“Fine.” Zael waves a hand, one that seems to indicate that he wants me to follow him.

Fortunately, he doesn’t take me too far from Miza. He simply walks me over to an electronic pad beside the door of the bedroom, where he initiates a tutorial on how all the alarms work, along with the access controls for entry and exit, and starts explaining overall palace protocols when the device in question begins to ring.

His jaw tightens. “And *that* irritating sound is Mariana demanding entry into my suite.”

“How do you decline?” I ask conversationally.

“He doesn’t,” a voice says through the speaker. “Zael, we need to talk.”

“If your statement doesn’t begin with an apology, then we have nothing to discuss,” he returns flatly.

“Seren’s with me,” Mariana replies instead.

My eyebrow wings upward and Zael’s gaze narrows.

“Never mind. Ika’s letting us in,” Mariana adds, the speaker cutting off.

“Of course he fucking is,” Zael mutters. “It’s not like this is *my* suite or anything. Fucking stealth dragon.”

“So we’re agreed that killing him isn’t entirely off the table?” I wonder out loud, aware that Ika can probably hear me in the other room. In fact, I hope he does. “I mean, he has his uses, but…”

“I’m more than useful,” Ika murmurs, appearing right between us. “I’m also a good host, a trait you’re clearly lacking, Z. But it’s okay. I’ll help. First, you’re going to let me borrow a suit. We’re basically the same size. Tiru… may need some sweats instead.”

The nuisance shadows off before either of us can comment or reply, causing Zael to shake his head. “You stay here with Miza,” he tells me. “I’ll

handle Seren and Mariana with Ika. Then we'll bring you up to speed. Or…"

He presses a few buttons on the console in front of us and shows me how to bring up a security feed of the living area.

"Feel free to listen or interrupt as needed," he goes on. "But I don't want Miza to be alone."

I nod. "Agreed." We don't know what happened to her beneath the waves, how much water she may have inhaled, or *if* she's even going to wake up anytime soon. Leaving her here without supervision is not an option. "I'll guard her with my life."

"I know," Zael says quietly, looking at me for a long moment. "I trust you."

We stare at each other, some sort of bond seeming to pass between us. It's the same connection I felt to Ika. The link is murky yet tangible. And definitely a result of my claim on Miza. Or, perhaps more accurately, *her* claim on *me*.

It's been so long since a fated-mate bond came to fruition that it's quite possible the rules have changed. Maybe she has more than one destined link.

Regardless, I accept whatever this is with a nod.

Because while I may not trust Zael implicitly with everything, I do trust him where Miza is concerned. He clearly feels strongly for her. And, if I've read the situation correctly, it wasn't something he expected. However, he's not fighting it, which is what matters most.

"I'll let you know when she wakes up," I tell him.

"Thank you," he replies, glancing at her with a concerned longing in his gaze that I very much recognize.

He doesn't like that she's still asleep.

Frankly, neither do I.

Ika returns again, his lanky form clad in an all-black suit. He holds out an identical outfit for Zael before tossing a pair of gray sweatpants my way. "For the tentacle" is all he says.

"Your obsession with my dick is starting to concern me," I mutter.

"It's an impressive specimen, T," he replies as I yank on the pants. "But all I really want to do is watch you use that monster on Miza. I've always preferred pussy to cock. However, if you're curious about what it's like to take a dick, maybe Z will help you out."

Zael grunts.

I cut him off before he can even offer a response to that. “No.” It’s a flat reply, one underlined in vehemence. “I only want Miza.” It’s not about Zael and Ika being men. It’s simply about them not being *her*. “She owns my mind, body, and soul. *Always*. There will be no one else.”

Ika tilts his head, causing his thick hair to fall into his eyes as he considers me. “I find myself agreeing with that assessment.”

Then he looks at Miza on the bed, his gaze seeming to soften.

“Pretty sure she took possession of my mind years ago,” he adds, his voice lower now, almost a whisper. “I may not have been celibate my whole existence, but I have refrained from intimacy these last few years, ever since learning she was real.”

“So that makes me the odd one out,” Zael says, buttoning up his shirt. “I never wanted a mate, nor did I ever expect to take one.”

“Didn’t want to share your kingdom with a queen?” Ika guesses, sounding amused.

“I’ve always preferred my independence. It’s easier to manage a kingdom as a solitary monarch,” he replies slowly, his focus on the beauty sleeping in his bed. “Now I’m wondering if I’ve just been waiting for the right woman to challenge my reign.”

“Don’t let Seren hear you say that,” Ika muses. “She might take offense.”

“Too late,” a feminine voice says from the doorway. “I don’t have all night, Zael. So stop swooning over your female. She’s not your queen yet.”

With that pronouncement, she turns in a flurry of purple hair, leaving the room.

Zael stares after her with a dangerous expression, one that suggests he’s on the verge of following her just so he can *drown* her. “I do not like that woman in my personal space,” he declares.

“Then let’s meet with her so she can fuck off,” Ika suggests.

“Says the man who let her into my personal space to begin with.”

“Says the man who’s stalling and prolonging our inevitable meeting,” Ika fires back. “As Seren pointed out, Miza isn’t our queen yet. You’re the Elite Island King. How about you go remind the Monster Island Queen what that means?”

Zael turns his attention to Ika. “I’m not sure what warped reality I’ve stepped into where I’m relying on *you* to have my back.”

“It’s a warped reality called our future, Z,” Ika replies with a grin, clapping the other man on the shoulder. “So glad you could join the mate-circle. Spoiler alert—we’re fucking awesome. Now let’s start by facing off with the Siren Queen.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

IKA

My relationship with the future is unstable. There are times when an event perfectly matches one of my dreams.

And then there are moments like this, where nothing goes according to plan.

"That tidal wave wasn't mine."

Of all the things I expected Seren to say, it wasn't that.

Zael must feel similarly because he stops walking and stares at her. "You have the audacity to enter *my* space and lie to my face?"

"No, I have the courage to walk into your quarters—*unarmed* and *unprotected*—to tell you that I didn't attack those Offerings. Someone is trying to provoke a war between us, Zael, and I'm attempting to quell the storm before it breaks."

Seren's silver eyes gleam with barely restrained power, her comment about being *unarmed* and *unprotected* false, given the energy brewing in her aura. She doesn't need protection because she *is* the protection.

But rather than allow all that potency to detonate, she reins in it and gives Zael her focus.

"It would take a lot more than a few barbed comments from a hybrid pet to make me lose my temper," she adds, casting a disdainful look at Mariana.

"Call me a hybrid pet one more time," Mariana dares her.

"No," Zael interjects. "You two have spoken to each other enough for one evening. I want to focus on the tidal wave. If it wasn't yours, then

which of your people created it? Because I *know* it was one of your opera singers, Seren. I felt the siren energy all over it when I burned it to mist."

Mariana folds her arms, her black eyes glowing with vampiric intensity. She looks ready to *bite*.

And the Siren Queen appears to be her meal of choice.

"That's why I'm here, Zael. I felt the same energy that you did, but I didn't recognize the signature. Whatever, or *whoever*, called on the water like that… is a powerful entity. While I agree it felt siren-like, it's entirely possible that the being altered the aura. So we need to work together here, not against one another."

I glance at Zael, waiting for him to agree. But he just studies Seren like he's trying to get inside her head.

Shrugging, I walk over to his en-suite bar. "If we're going to have this conversation, we may as well have some drinks."

The three of them ignore me.

That's fine.

I'll just pour myself something from Zael's personal liquor stash.

Apple-honeyed bourbon, I read, scanning the labels.

Sea vodka. I arch a brow at that one and continue perusing.

Eucalyptus sour patch. Okay, *that* makes my eyebrow go even higher.

Cranberry spritz. That's a bit boring.

Obsidian crush. I pick up that bottle to examine the contents, unfamiliar with whatever it's made from.

"Who on our list is powerful enough to not only conjure a wave like that but also potentially alter the energy of it?" Zael asks.

"Ika," Mariana says immediately.

"Yeah?" I ask, glancing at the tall, slender female. "Want me to pour you a drink?"

"No," she returns. "I'm saying you're on the list and strong enough to create that water mass."

I whistle low, amused. "I can alter auras now? Impressive. I had no idea." I mean, she's not wrong. I probably could. Actually, I *definitely* could with the right venom. "There's just one problem with your theory, vampire. That wave almost hurt Miza. And I wouldn't do that."

"Yet you accepted the bounty on her head," Seren points out. "So you actually *would* do that."

Ignoring them, I pick up the sour patch drink and open the lid to give it a sniff. “Oof.” I nearly gag and quickly put that shit back. “What the fuck, Z? That smells like rotten eggs.”

He says nothing.

So I glance at him. “If you don’t trust me yet, I don’t know what to tell you.” With that, I return my focus to his drinks and select the apple-honeyed bourbon as my next scent candidate. “This one is much better,” I inform the room. Not that anyone seems to fucking care.

“That one is superior,” Zael responds, surprising me a bit. “Pour me a glass of that.”

I slowly look back up at him. “I’m your servant now?”

“If you’re going to enjoy my favorite liquor, the least you can do is share it with me,” he returns. “Besides, you said if *we* are going to have this conversation, then *we* should have some drinks. I assumed that meant you were offering to *serve*.”

“The apple-honeyed bourbon is your favorite?” I ask, curious enough to ignore that last part of what he said about me *serving* him.

“I thought you knew everything, stealth dragon.” He gives me a somewhat taunting look. “Or did you not *foresee* this meeting?”

“Actually, I didn’t foresee any of this,” I admit. “Seren’s commentary. This meeting. Miza being unconscious in the bed.” I frown, then busy myself with the drinks. “I knew something would happen. But not what.” My words are quiet. “And for the record, I didn’t create that wave.”

“I know you didn’t.” Zael’s comment is underlined in confidence. “He was standing right beside me, Mariana. I would have felt it.”

“Like you *felt* Seren’s power in the wave?” Mariana counters.

“I sensed a siren, and with how pissed off she was at *you*, I made a logical assumption,” Zael bites back.

I rejoin the group, handing Zael a glass of his *favorite* bourbon, and casually take a sip from the cup I poured for myself. A subtle bite of apple hits my tongue, making me hum in approval. “This is good.”

“You sound surprised,” Zael murmurs, indulging in a long swallow of his drink. “I only like the best.”

Mariana snorts.

Meanwhile, I grin. “Explains why we’re destined for this mate-circle.”

Seren glances between us, a hint of approval glinting in her gaze before she masks it with an expression of disinterest.

Hmm, I think, intrigued by that glimmer. Because I know what I saw. Why would she approve of me joining forces with Zael? *What are you up to, Siren Queen?*

"Assuming Ika isn't the culprit," she says, drawing us back to the conversation at hand.

"I'm not," I insert, not that anyone is paying attention to me.

"Then we have a very short list of those who could benefit from a war between us *and* potentially possess the ability to manipulate a wave like that," she goes on, ignoring me entirely.

But I don't let any of them disregard me as I say, "Mariana should be at the top of that list."

Everyone *finally* looks at me.

"Oh, I have your attention now?" I smile. "Good. Because as far as I can tell, there are only two individuals who'd benefit from a war between the pair of you, and those individuals are Mariana and Celina."

"How the fuck would I benefit in this?" Mariana demands. "I would be dragged into the damn war! And so would Celina, for that matter."

I nod. "Yes, and then something tragic could happen to the current king and queen, thereby freeing up the leadership positions for their seconds—which would be *you* and Celina." I look her up and down. "You possess all the skills required to rule, and you're absolutely powerful enough to have created that wave."

"Except I have no desire to rule," she fires back.

"So you say," I hedge.

She dismisses me with a look before turning her attention to Zael. "You've known me for hundreds of years. To quote Ika's earlier statement, 'If you don't trust me by now, then I don't know what to tell you.'"

"I said *yet*," I correct her. "If you don't trust me *yet*."

She rolls her eyes. "Zael, I—"

"I know it's not you," he interjects, glancing at me with a warning look.

I hold my hands up in surrender, one of them clutching the glass filled with his favorite bourbon. "I won't fight your judgment." Not because I necessarily agree with him, but because I trust his instincts.

If we're going to make this mate-circle work with Miza, we have to be able to rely on each other. May as well start now.

He holds my gaze for a beat, perhaps mentally questioning why I'm acquiescing, but then shifts his focus to Seren. "What about Celina?"

“If I told you it’s not her, would you believe me?” the Siren Queen asks, arching a violet brow into her matching hairline.

“Probably as much as you would believe my defense of Mariana,” he replies. “But I would like your assessment.”

Seren says nothing for a long moment, surprising me. I assumed she would be quick to defend her daughter. However, she appears to be taking this allegation seriously.

Which again has me wondering *what* is happening in the siren world.

There was clear tension between Celina and her mother when we met with them. This hesitation in the Siren Queen only confirms my assessment that something is amiss.

“Celina has aspirations to lead,” Seren says slowly. “I’m aware of them. However, I would have recognized her energy in that wave, and I know it didn’t belong to her.”

“Is she capable of masking auras?” Zael asks.

Seren shakes her head. “No. That’s not one of her talents.”

“That you know of,” Mariana interjects.

Seren glances at the water vampire hybrid. “I’m very familiar with all of my daughter’s talents, Mariana. As I said, she’s expressed a desire for the crown. Be certain I’m keeping a *very* close eye on her skills.”

“Is that why you let her take the lead for the games?” Zael’s question isn’t voiced as an accusation so much as obvious curiosity. “And why you sent Huntz as your messenger with the invitation list?”

“She requested to be more involved this year because of Tiru’s invitation. I believe she wanted to see if he found his fated mate.”

“And how is she taking the news that he did indeed find his other half?” I wonder out loud. “She seemed shocked last night.”

“Because she was,” Seren replies. “I’m sure you’re aware that krakens and sirens haven’t experienced true mate bonds in several thousand years. Learning the Kraken King found his soulmate was, well, surprising. But not in a negative way.”

A small smile plays on Seren’s features, one I find difficult to read.

She’s hiding something.

That much has been clear since we began speaking.

“I think Celina feels *hope*,” Seren goes on, her voice softening a touch. “And it’s a hope she very much needed.”

Right. That's *two* times tonight the Siren Queen has said something I didn't anticipate.

Granted, this entire meeting has never featured in my dreams. I honestly have no idea what to expect tonight.

Which is rather titillating.

It's nice not to know what's going to happen.

For once, anyway.

Though, I have an idea of what may occur once Miza wakes up. And I am *very* much looking forward to that part of the evening.

"Shall we discuss the rest of the list?" Seren suggests. "I believe it's mostly other royals in this realm."

"They're all powerful enough to challenge our rule," Zael responds, taking another sip from his drink. "But only those closest to us have motive to want to take control of our islands. And I'm rather certain Cain isn't interested in our tumultuous seas. Nothing *dreamlike* here."

Seren snorts. "We would drown him."

"We would," Zael agrees.

"If you're awake to do so," I insert, shrugging. I've never had the pleasure of meeting the infamous Elite City King, but I've heard of him. He's a powerful adversary, one who would absolutely be able to face off with these two royals. "Although, the last time I checked, Cain doesn't create waves."

Maybe in dreams he can.

But in reality? Nope.

"And the Monster City Queen isn't all that water savvy either, is she?" I go on, curious. "I don't know much about Helia."

"Neither of them is capable of creating tidal waves," Mariana replies. "But the Shima King could. He's also somewhat nearby."

"If you consider four thousand miles close," Zael mutters, shaking his head. "I'll talk to Kiyo. However, I doubt he's responsible for this." He finishes his drink and sets it down. "The only thing he could potentially want are our Offerings, especially with Miza's spectacular presence." He looks at Mariana. "Any luck locating Giovanna?"

"No." Her lips flatten. "It's like she vanished."

"Because she did," I point out. "With some powerful entity's signature in her wake. I imagine that's related to the tidal wave."

Everyone falls quiet, their silence seeming to imply agreement.

“If that person knew to take Giovanna, they may know something about Miza’s genetics, too,” Mariana says, her brow furrowing a bit. “Which could be why there was a bounty on her head. Maybe it was about cleaning up loose ends?”

“Or drawing attention to Miza,” I counter. “That bounty went out to several powerful entities, thus ensuring Miza was noticed. What if the goal was never to kill her, but to just make her presence known? I mean, it’s not every day a *human* is on a hit list.”

“It had better not be *any* day,” Zael mutters.

“Exactly,” I reply. “I mean, has there ever even been a day when a mortal has had a bounty on his or her head? Specifically, an *Offering*?”

“I’m not the one to answer that question,” he tells me. “Since I’m not the one receiving assassination offers.”

“I’m not usually one who receives these types of assignments either,” I reply, thinking it through. “Why didn’t I consider that before?”

I feel… *blind*.

“I’m usually only contacted for significant hits, ones involving targets that are nearly impossible to reach,” I add, processing out loud. “A mortal in the Monster Games isn’t exactly difficult to manage. So why offer it to me?”

“You mean the bounty was sent to you directly?” Zael asks.

I nod. “That’s how it always works. I don’t typically go hunting for them; they land in my inbox, so to speak.” I was so caught up in why Seren’s name was tied to the bounty that I hadn’t really considered why or how it ended up in front of me. And then all I cared about was ensuring no one else carried out the hit.

Which is an asinine oversight on my part.

I should have considered *how* it came to me.

As well as *why* I was even offered such an “easy” job.

“For a minute, I thought Seren might be trying to coax me into killing an Offering to piss you off,” I admit, still talking to Zael more than to the others. “Only, that didn’t feel right either. Thus, I’ve been questioning her involvement from the beginning, when I should have been questioning *my* involvement.”

It was perhaps meant to lure me here.

But why?

And who else received the bounty information?

“Nobody has tried to hurt Miza,” I continue, speaking slowly. “Other than that tidal wave, except that didn’t hurt her…” I glance at Zael’s bedroom door. “Unless it did do something to her that we’re unaware of…”

“You think the wave may have been an assassination attempt?” Zael translates as a question, obviously trying to follow my convoluted statements.

“Maybe.” It comes out as a whisper. Because that assessment feels inaccurate. I can’t explain why, though. That massive tower of water certainly headed right for her position in the ocean. Then Miza went under, into the sea, for an undetermined amount of time…

Just to end up in that cave.

Unconscious, yet breathing.

Definitely not human, I think.

But I already know she’s not mortal.

I’ve dreamt of a future where she swims with my dragon beneath the waves for far longer than a human ever could.

But that’s neither here nor there.

The point is that something happened tonight. Something huge.

And I don’t think it was meant to kill Miza so much as help her.

“Ika?” Zael prompts, making me wonder if I’ve missed something the group has said while lost in my thoughts.

I blink at him. “Hmm?”

“I asked if you know who else has accepted the bounty,” he says.

“Oh.” I cant my head. “No. And I’m not convinced anyone else has accepted anything. I’ve been watching for threats all week and haven’t met a single one.”

“Except the attack tonight?” he prompts.

“Was that an attack?” I counter. “Or something else entirely?”

Seren shifts a little in my periphery, drawing my attention to the small smile playing over her lips.

It’s gone in a flash, her mask falling into place.

I narrow my gaze. “There are things you are not saying, Siren Queen,” I declare out loud.

“Many things,” she admits, her lips twitching again. “But on this topic, I think we’ve exhausted our avenues of discussion. My next step is to question my sirens, see if I can determine who created that wave. And I believe you all should focus on Miza’s… unique traits.”

With that, the queen vanishes, not giving any of us time to respond.

Not that I really think there's much to say.

Though, Mariana seems quite irritated. "She admits she's hiding things and then disappears?"

I shrug. "Seems rather… typical."

"You would say that," Zael says, sounding more amused than annoyed. "You would do the same."

I consider his words and hum in agreement. "True. But I think she's right—we need to find out from Miza what occurred under the water. Maybe she saw something that can help us determine what happened?"

"And we need to talk to someone who understands her genetics," Zael adds. "Because I agree with the assessment that this could all be related—the bounty suggests that whoever set this up knew about Miza before the games."

"You mean like how Ika knew about her?" Mariana suggests, gesturing at me.

"I dreamt of her being my mate," I reply, smiling. "And those dreams were absolutely *wet* and *delicious*. But unfortunately, they did not reveal too many specific things."

A lie.

Or rather, a mistruth.

My dreams have revealed a great many potentials for the future and who Miza may become. I'm simply trying to make certain fantasies come true.

"Cain is a dreamwalker," Mariana says, frowning. "If you dreamt of Miza, could he have… facilitated those dreams?"

I blink. "Are you suggesting Cain has been feeding me images of the future? Because I don't believe he has the gift of foresight."

"But he could make you think you're able to foresee things by planting ideas in your head," she hedges. "Right?"

"How would he even know about Miza?" Zael interjects. "Unless he's illegally accessing our files…"

"I don't think—"

"I can talk to him," Mariana says, interrupting me. "And while I'm visiting with him, I'll see if I can pick up on Giovanna's scent anywhere."

"Her scent?" I repeat, no longer interested in what I was about to say a second ago—which was simply that Cain likely has nothing to do with this

—and more intrigued by her commentary on tracking a mortal's *scent*.

"Water Vampire," she reminds me. "I'm basically a bloodhound."

Zael narrows his gaze. "When I called you that once, you threatened to rip my head off."

"Because it's an insult to call me a dog," she responds flatly. "But I can refer to myself however I choose to. Now, if you're in agreement with my plan, I have a call to make."

"I still doubt Cain is involved," I say, not that either of them is listening to me. "Though, if you want to waste your time with the Elite City King, I don't care."

"Zael?" she prompts, obviously disregarding my commentary.

Which I would care about more if she were *my* second. But she's not. She's Zael's problem to deal with. I tried to offer my two cents. Not my fault she didn't care to listen.

"Talk to Cain," Zael says. "We'll focus on Miza."

"Yes, we will," I agree, finishing my drink and returning the glass to the bar. "We'll focus *all night* on Miza."

Assuming she wakes up soon, anyway.

Mariana continues to act like I'm invisible, her eyes on Zael as she says, "I'll report back tomorrow." Then she vanishes, her stealth dragon power rippling across my skin.

I arch a brow. "She's strong." It's an assessment of her ability and the energy she left behind. It doesn't feel anything like the wave in the ocean, making me reconsider my comments about her being the potential culprit.

But as far as I'm concerned, *everyone* is still a suspect.

Except for Zael and Tiru.

They're meant to be here with Miza.

Manipulated dreams or not, I'm certain of our future as a mate-circle.

Just like I'm certain something big is coming again.

Something powerful.

Something impactful.

"We need to be with Miza when she wakes up," I tell Zael, the vestiges of a former fantasy trickling through my mind.

It's that hint of déjà vu that tells me I've lived this moment before.

The meeting with Seren may not have been one I foresaw, but whatever is about to happen is an experience I've at least seen flickers of in my dreams.

Is this it? I wonder, already heading toward Zael's bedroom. *Is this the night I've desired for five very long years? The night when I finally claim her?*

Or is this another event entirely?

So many paths.

So many outcomes.

So many fates…

But there's one I desire in particular.

Tick tock, I think, entering the room to find Miza still asleep. *Tick… tock…*

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

MIZA

I'M SWIMMING in a pool of fire.

Warmth bathes me from every angle. Front. Back. Legs.

All I want to do is squirm and moan and *scream*.

Because everything burns. I don't understand it. I need to breathe. To find air. Something cold. A refreshing splash of *anything* that will calm the flames rippling around me.

I open my eyes on a hiss, my body *alive* with fiery need.

"Lei," Tiru whispers, his palm on my cheek as he stares down at me. He's the source of intensity at my front, his muscular form molten and *perfect*. "You're burning up."

"I think she's going into heat." Ika's voice comes from near my legs, his dark eyes capturing mine as he lowers his lips to press a kiss to my ankle.

"Heat?" Zael asks, his accented tone near my ear, his chest a blazing presence against my side. "She was sound asleep mere seconds ago."

"And very much awake now," Ika muses, his hand drifting up my calf to the back of my knee and higher to my thigh.

I groan in response to his addictive touch, the three men surrounding me in a cocoon of protection and *sex*.

Oceans, yes…

They're not naked. But they're all shirtless.

And I can *smell* their virility.

I have no idea how or why, only that I can, and I'm suddenly encased in their masculine colognes.

It's like an evening on the beach, lounging a little too close to the fire where coconuts are roasting with pineapples, all while the ocean waves bring scents of the deep sea.

Shells, I think, wanting to roll around in that alluring fragrance. *I need… more.* Except I don't know what *more* means. I just feel an intense craving. A yearning singeing my insides. Making my legs tense. Vibrate. Pebble with goose bumps.

Ika notices, his lips skimming my ankle once more as he captures me with his midnight gaze.

However, it's Zael who says, "Humans don't go into heat."

"I believe we've established that our future isn't human," Ika replies, his words sending a much-desired chill down my spine.

Because there's something important related to his words. Something I need to talk about. To *remember*.

Scales, I think, picturing glittering green fins in my head. *A… a fish?*

"If she's going into heat, then she can get pregnant." Tiru's comment has me blinking at him, my mind temporarily halting all previous thought.

Because *what*?

"Yes, T, that's typically the point of a heat," Ika replies, sounding amused. "Glad your inexperience isn't interfering with your understanding of what's happening here."

Tiru makes a low growling sound that tickles my chest, causing my nipples to bead with appreciation. *Oh, I like that rumble…*

"I was commenting on it because we don't know if Miza wants to be bred or not," he says, that delicious growl reverberating through his words and making my thighs clench in response.

Ika's hands travel up my legs, pulling them apart, as Zael slips a palm toward my belly to help guide me to my back.

I'm suddenly sprawled out beneath three men, one of whom is crawling up my lower half to reach my bare sex.

"Did you two not discuss preferences for *breeding* before fucking each other?" Ika asks conversationally, his mouth so close to my clit now that I can feel the warmth of his breath as he speaks each word. "Seems like something you should have asked about before slipping that monster into this pretty cunt, T."

Zael's touch drifts up my abdomen, past my chest to my neck, before clasping my chin to draw my gaze to his. "Miza." He speaks my name with that delicious, deep tone of his, the one that I've heard in my dreams for years. "How are you feeling?"

I gaze up at him, slightly confused by the question. It should be rather obvious that I'm on fire, right? "Hot." The word leaves me on a pant, my body tingling all over with need.

He gives me a soft smile, his thumb tracing my jaw. "Do you remember what happened in the water?"

My brow furrows. *Water? Like the shower?* Because yes… "*Yes*." I definitely remember that.

Zael studies me. "Can you tell us about it?"

My frown deepens. He was there. Why would I need to elaborate on the experience? Unless he's trying to get me to talk about the pleasure, maybe to inspire boldness? "Orgasms," I tell him, hoping that's the right answer. "*So many orgasms*."

He glances down at Ika.

"Are you talking about what Zael and I did to you in the shower, sweetheart?" my Stealth Dragon King asks softly.

"Yes." I swallow. "More, please."

Ika chuckles against my sensitive flesh, the vibration eliciting a moan from me.

"Not yet," Zael says, a hint of dominance underlining his tone and forcing me to return my focus to him.

I'm not sure when my eyes drifted shut, but they're open again now.

Which feels like a mistake because all I see is intensity in Zael's icy irises. *Intensity and lust.*

"I was talking about the ocean, Miza," he informs me, his words edged with authority. "What happened in the ocean?"

My lashes flutter, my mind blanking. I have no idea what he's asking me to remember. We've never been together in the ocean.

Other than that first night we met.

The night he carried me home.

Shells, he smelled so good then. Just like he does now.

I want to bury my face in his bare chest and rub myself against him, revel in his cologne of burning sage and bonfire embers. The eucalyptus overlay is calming and perfect, too. *Protective. Safe. Mine.*

“Miza.” Zael utters my name once more, this time with a hint of indulgence that has me looking up at his eyes again.

I was apparently focused on his mouth. Which makes sense. His lips are so full and kissable. I need to taste him. Kiss him. *Coax him into doing more…*

“Do you have any idea how you ended up in my bed tonight?” Zael asks.

I resist the urge to try to roll toward him, as I know my lower half can’t move—because Ika is firmly lying on my legs.

“I don’t care how I ended up here,” I admit, a sensual note to my voice that I don’t think I’ve ever heard before. It’s a little raspy. But I don’t care. All I want to do is embrace him. *Be with him.* “I’m where I want to be.” Those words feel important, like my men need to know I not only need this, but I *want* this.

Whatever *this* is.

Oceans, *please*. I don’t want to talk anymore. I just want to feel. Isn’t that the point? Because I’m pretty sure this is a fantasy. A dream. *My version of reality*.

Maybe it’s truly happening.

Maybe it’s not.

I don’t care.

I just know I want all three of them. And I want them *now*.

“We need to know your limits, sweetheart,” Ika says right against my clit. “But I’m going to help take some of the edge off so you can properly focus.”

Zael’s hand drifts down to my throat, his palm clasping it roughly as he demands my attention without words.

“*We* are going to help take the edge off,” he states darkly, correcting Ika’s statement. “But afterward, I expect you to answer a few questions. If I’m satisfied with your responses, we’ll give you more pleasure. If I’m dissatisfied…”

He doesn’t elaborate.

But I can guess that I won’t like whatever he isn’t saying.

That’s fine.

All I care about right now is the way his face is nearing mine. “Tell me you understand, little queen.”

I shiver, still loving that nickname. “I understand, my king,” I reply, the formal address rolling off my tongue instinctively.

He hums, clearly liking it, then presses his mouth to mine and claims me in a kiss that stokes the flames inside me.

“Play with her tits, T,” Ika says, each word a breath against my heated flesh.

“I don’t need you to tell me what to do, stealth dragon,” Tiru growls, his chest still near my arm. But I sense him moving, his lips meeting my shoulder before kissing a path downward toward my breasts.

I reach up to thread my fingers through his hair, my opposite hand finding Zael’s muscular arm. I clutch them both, not willing to let either of them go as I kiss my Elite Island King while the Kraken King takes my nipple into his mouth.

Electricity sizzles across my skin, my body trembling in waves of passion and excitement.

I feel so alive.

So pent up.

So hot.

Zael’s tongue brands mine, hypnotizing me with the strength of his kiss.

Tiru’s mouth pleasures my nipple, his touch near the claiming mark on my chest.

And Ika’s lips are sealed around my clit, his fingers inching upward toward my entrance.

I’ve never experienced sensations like this. Warmth from all sides. Possession beneath the hands and mouths of three *kings*.

They’re monsters. Supernatural. *Powerful beings*.

Yet they’ve chosen to put me between them. To treat me like a queen. *Their* queen.

I don’t know what that means yet or if this arrangement is forever or not, but I can’t bring myself to question it in this moment.

I just embrace it.

My nails dig into Zael’s arms, my fingers tightening their hold on Tiru. And my thighs *clench* around Ika’s head.

I’m keeping these men. *My males. My fate. My mates.…*

Maybe I can make this forever after all.

No more thinking. No more concerns or questions. Just indulging in the ecstasy rippling through my veins.

It’s amazing.

Euphoric.

Overwhelming.

So many hands and tongues and lips…

Zael’s still holding me down with his palm around my throat, mastering me with his kiss. Tiru’s playing with my other breast, his fingers tweaking my nipple while he sucks the opposite one deep into his mouth. And Ika’s skillfully drawing me closer to orgasm with his rhythmic thrusts and taunting licks.

I moan.

Pant.

Squirm.

It’s so much and not enough at the same time.

Until suddenly it’s everything and I’m exploding on a wave of bliss that threatens to drown me in sensation.

Growls erupt through the room, my men drawing out every inch of pleasure I have to give before dousing me in a fresh surge of *need*.

I writhe beneath them, then release Tiru to grab for Zael because he’s the closest to me, his mouth still on mine. “*More*,” I demand, my fingers going into his hair as my opposite hand drifts down his rippled physique to his pants.

His hand steadies mine before I can rip off his belt, his strength forcing me to stop. His other palm is still against my throat, restraining me. “Miza.”

I shake my head, then fight his hold and go for his mouth again—*with my teeth*.

He hisses as I bite his lip, blood pooling between us and causing me to groan in delight. Because *shells*, he tastes *good*.

He’s just like he smells—eucalyptus mint with a hint of burning.

I suck his injured lip into my mouth to get more, needing to *swallow*.

“*Fuck*,” Ika breathes. “That’s hot.”

“She just claimed him,” Tiru whispers. “She’s not in her right mind. This isn’t okay.”

“She’s embracing her soul,” Ika argues back. “It’s not about being in control, Tiru. It’s about following her instincts.”

Yes, that, I think, clinging to Zael as he lets me kiss him. “*Mine*,” I tell Zael.

“Fuck, darling,” he replies, shuddering against me.

I capture his mouth before he can say anything else, desiring more of him. His blood. His tongue. *His essence.*

He's all around me, warming my blood, heating me from the inside out.

It's a different kind of fire than before. A… a *claiming* inferno that's all him. And I love it. Love *this*.

I pull him closer, needing his chest against mine.

He gives in as the other men move, allowing me this moment with Zael. My Elite Island King. "*Mine*," I say again.

Because I want it to be true. And I see no reason why I shouldn't tell him that. Why I should shy away from *any* of this.

Some part of me is blossoming into life, taking control of my body, heart, and mind, and I'm… I'm *allowing* that presence to flourish.

I like how bold this being makes me. How confident I feel in my own skin. How *right* all of this seems to be.

With these men, I'll never drown.

With these men, I'll forever *swim*.

No wave will be able to take me down again. The uncertainty I always experience in the ocean will dissipate. Because these men are freeing a part of me I never knew existed.

My soul, I realize with a start. *They've freed my soul.*

I don't know how.

I'm not even sure how I've come to that conclusion. But I sense the truth of it deep down.

I'm becoming who I was always meant to be.

And these men are *why* I'm finally *whole*.

Their souls have merged with mine. Perhaps not completely. However, the process has begun. And now, we're going to finish it.

Assuming my men accept me, I think, stilling against Zael. He hasn't bitten me back. I feel… I feel like that's necessary. Some foreign part of me simply *knows* that's what I need.

That's why I claimed him. Why I *bit* him.

Now it's his turn to claim me.

Yet all he's doing is letting me kiss him, his palm against my throat, the other holding my hand against his lower abdomen.

"Why haven't you bitten me?" I whisper, pulling back to look into his eyes. "Why haven't you made me yours, Zael?"

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

ZAEL

Fuck.

Miza isn't in her right frame of mind. But the way she's looking at me right now—all queenly demand with a hint of soft vulnerability—has me struggling to respond.

I shouldn't claim her like this.

I… I should make sure she knows what this means. That I truly have her consent.

Yet, I've never been more certain of anything in my life. This female is meant to be *mine*. Holding back my claim was bordering on impossible mere seconds ago.

And now… now it's crossed that invisible line.

Because my queen is staring up at me with the biggest blue eyes, sadness creeping into her features. "Zael?" she prompts again, that hesitation growing in her expression and bleeding into her tone.

Fires…

"You don't want me?" she asks, whispering now.

"Fuck, Miza, I've never wanted anyone more than I want you." That's the truth. "Until you, there was no potential queen. Not even a thought of having one. Because I… I didn't *want* a mate."

"Oh." She swallows against my palm, the motion drawing my gaze to her mouth. "But I want to be your mate, Zael." Her fingers are still in my

hair, her grasp less severe than before but still very much present. “And I need you to be mine.”

My eyes slowly return to hers, my heart skipping a beat in my chest.

I’m a king. I give the demands. Yet this woman has just brought me to my knees.

Because she’s telling me clearly what she desires. And that confidence is sexy as fuck. It’s regal, too.

I’m not sure where the timid human I met that first night went. Although, I suppose she wasn’t exactly timid then either. She held my gaze. Talked to me like an equal. Nor did she show an ounce of fear.

However, she was reverent at certain points.

But now she’s looking at me with abundant clarity.

“Do you understand that you’re going into heat?” I ask her, searching her expression. “Do you know what it *means* to go into heat?”

“No,” she tells me.

“It means you’re overcome by lust and the need to breed,” I tell her. “That you’re going to be begging us to fuck you for hours, maybe even days. I’m not sure how long, honestly, because humans don’t usually have heat cycles. Yet it’s very clear that you’re… something spectacular.”

Her brow furrows, her gaze searching mine. “What does that have to do with claiming me?”

“I want to make sure you truly want this, Miza. That you’re not just saying things in the excitement of the moment.” I slip my hand up to cup her cheek. “When I bite you, it’ll solidify our bond. Then I’ll be connected to you and Tiru.”

I utter the words slowly, as I need her to understand what she’s asking for here. Consent is important. Especially when it involves something that will change her life for eternity.

“You’ll become my queen,” I go on. “And I’ll have to share you with Tiru. Is that what you want?” I don’t mention Ika because she’s not currently mated to him.

However, I assume that’s going to change, too.

I assume she’s going to choose the Stealth Dragon King as well, which means I’ll be joining a mate-circle with Miza at the center.

A mate-circle that comprises two of my biggest rivals.

Though, they haven’t felt like enemies these last few days. They’ve actually seemed more like partners. Something about Miza has anchored us

in a new reality. Grounded us in a place where *she* is our focus and we're working together to put her first.

We've essentially been united by a similar goal—protect Miza.

And now she's asking me to make this arrangement permanent.

I don't know how this will work with all of us having competing priorities. But for her, we'll figure it out. That much has been proved just in these last few days.

Miza nibbles her lip, her cheeks pinkening as she glances from me to Tiru. He's lounging beside us, his head propped up on an elbow as he watches whatever is about to unfold between us.

His expression isn't one of anger or jealousy, just interest.

"You already told me you'll share me if that's my choice," she says to him, swallowing. "That's still true…?"

"I'll never make you choose, lei," he murmurs without hesitation. "Although, I agree with Zael on this—I want to know you're making this decision with a clear mind, not one fogged by heat-inspired lust."

She frowns at him and then at me. "But I… I've wanted you for years."

My eyebrow wings upward. "Years?" I echo. "We haven't known each other for years, darling. Only—"

"I've known you for years," she interjects. "I've dreamt of you since I first heard your voice coming from the sky. The only reason I didn't recognize you on the beach that night was because of the shadows. But the moment you stepped into view, I *knew* you, Zael. You're mine."

She speaks the words so easily. So *clearly*. Like her claim is resolute.

It floors me that she can be so certain.

My kind doesn't have fated mates. But whatever she is—siren, human, or otherwise—she obviously has fated links.

Which explains so much about how I've been consumed by this mate-circle. How I've more or less forgotten eons of rivalry in favor of merely being with her. Of creating a completely unexpected link to my enemies via this beautiful woman.

I *despised* Tiru and Ika, wanted them removed from the suitor list and uninvited to this realm.

Now, I've entirely lowered my guard and placed myself in a sensitive position.

All for her.

My intended mate.

My other half.

The one meant to marry my soul and become my queen.

“I’ve been enamored with you since I saw you on that lily pad,” I admit in a whisper. “I’m not sure what fate has brought us all together or how you’ve so irrevocably changed my existence and outlook on life, but I’m not going to fight my instincts, Miza. If this is truly what you desire, I’ll give you everything and more.”

She leans into my palm, her eyelids heavy. “You’re mine, Zael,” she repeats. “And I want to be yours, too. Bite me.”

I glance at Tiru, mostly because I want to see if he agrees that she’s of sound mind. He’s already linked to her soul. I assume that means he can sense her desires.

And the little dip of his chin he gives me confirms it.

Or maybe that’s his way of providing permission. Not that I need his consent to claim my mate. However, I consider us a team when it comes to protecting Miza and ensuring her happiness.

So if he agrees with proceeding, then we’re going to proceed.

But I’m not just going to sink my teeth into her flesh and be done with it.

“If I’m claiming you as my queen, it’s not going to be with just a bite, Miza. You’re going to take my cock, too.” Because I need that hot pussy wrapped around me while I make her mine in every way imaginable. “Tell me to fuck you, darling. Tell your king to *worship* you.”

Her fingers thread through my hair, her blue eyes exuding sensual energy. I’ve never seen a more stunning female. A more *hypnotic* being. She’s like a fucking succubus, her expression exuding sex and wicked promise.

But there’s a softness to her that’s all Miza.

An innocence I recognize from when I first met her.

Yet she’s complete and utter confidence now as her grasp tightens, her nails scraping my scalp when she tugs me closer and says, “Fuck me, Zael.”

A growl escapes me, my dragon roaring to life inside me with the need to possess the female beneath me.

“Worship me, my king,” she adds.

And I’m fucking lost to her.

There’s never been a choice. Not truly.

She ensnared me the moment I caught her conversing with that cephlalosune, something that instantly struck me as inhuman and unique.

Miza Kananaka has always been more than a simple Offering. She displayed her rebellious nature by being outside after curfew, something I'm certain she's done numerous times throughout her life. She also expressed her courage by trying to master something she clearly feared.

And now she's showing me what our life together will be like.

How she'll bring me to my knees with a few choice words.

"You're going to be a stunning queen," I say, my lips brushing hers.

Then I kiss her.

Hotly.

Passionately.

Thoroughly.

Mastering her with my tongue as my dragon paces beneath my skin.

I let her play last time, allowed her to use her mouth on me at her own pace and learn how to take my seed.

There's no part of me that can submit now. I need her to know I'm worthy of her regality, that I'm a king who can worship her even while he possesses every inch of her.

She draws her hand down to my nape, her nails biting into my skin as her opposite hand roams over my torso toward my belt again.

This time I don't stop her.

Instead, I light my pants on fire with my power and burn the fabric from my legs in a quick wave of heat.

She gasps against my mouth, the inferno brushing her bare skin.

But I keep her safe with my own energy, allowing her to feel the blaze without injury.

"How…?" she breathes.

"I'm *always* in control," I reply against her mouth. "I will never hurt you, Miza."

That's something I need her to understand.

Because I'm not going to go easy on her now. I can't. My dragon is too hungry. Too *starved* for this moment. I didn't realize how much I've restrained my beast until now.

I've been hesitant to release him around Miza.

But my intended is demanding that I let him out to play now.

I can feel it in the way she's kissing me. Hear it in her moans. *Smell* it in her arousal.

Flames, I'm going to destroy her in the best way.

I roll on top of her, my cock meeting her soaking wet pussy as her legs part to greet me. But I don't slide into her. I simply allow her to feel my brand by rubbing myself against her, and take control of her mouth again.

She kisses me with abandon, her smaller body arching into me. "Fuck, Miza," I say against her mouth. "Your cunt is practically begging me to slip inside you and claim you with my seed."

She shudders in response. "Then do it."

I shake my head. "No, darling. We're going to make sure you can handle me first. I refuse to hurt you." She might not be a virgin anymore, but she needs to be ready.

I glance to my left, aware that Ika has moved into the position I previously occupied on the bed. Just like Tiru, he's lounging on his side, head propped on his hand, his gaze on Miza.

"Tell us what to do," the Stealth Dragon King says, his words obviously for me. "We can watch or play. Whatever you need, Z."

"I want her ready for me," I tell him, pulling back and reconsidering my words. "Actually, no. I want her *demanding* that I fuck her."

Ika grins. "I think we can accomplish that."

"*Zael*," Miza hisses as I go to my knees between her legs.

"Yes, Miza darling?" I ask, taking hold of my aching shaft and giving it a solid pump while she watches. "Do you want to lick my cock clean? Because I'll happily feed it to you…"

Her eyes widen, then she slowly lowers her gaze to my groin and licks her lips. It's a purely instinctual reaction. However, the look she gives me afterward is all seductress. "Yes. I want to suck your cock, my king."

"Mmm, well played, sweetheart," Ika praises her before I can fathom a response to her forward words.

She continues to surprise me.

And I fucking love that.

"Why don't you straddle Tiru's face and give him that sweet pussy to lick?" Ika encourages her. "Then you can lean down and suck Zael's cock." He moves closer, his lips at her ear as he whispers, "I'll teach you how to drive him insane, little siren." Then he straightens and winks at me, the stealth dragon clearly ready to play.

I’m not sure why I like that, but I do.

Fuck, I *love* all of this.

Miza naked.

Lips parted on a pant.

Tits flushed.

Pussy wet.

She’s the picture of sin, surrounded by three men ready to drive her wild with need.

And I suddenly can’t wait for all of us to be inside her at once.

It’s the only way our female will ever truly be satisfied.

No choosing.

All worship.

Three kings. One queen. *And days of fucking*.

I have no doubt she can keep up.

Because she was made for this.

And the three of us were destined to be hers.

“Do what Ika told you, Miza,” I demand. “Let Tiru prepare that cunt while you suck my cock. Then *we* are going to fuck you, darling queen, until you command us to stop.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

MIZA

I'M ENGULFED in masculine energy.

Swimming in a sea of feral need and addictive virility.

It's intoxicating. Hot. *Overwhelming*.

Yet my body moves on autopilot, my legs straddling Tiru's head just like Ika told me to do. But before I can bend to try to take Zael into my mouth, I find my hair caught in Ika's fist and my mouth being yanked to his.

Except he doesn't kiss me.

Instead, he smiles and says, "Sit. Down." The words are enunciated distinctly, his meaning clear.

However, I struggle to obey. "I'll suffocate Tiru if I sit on him," I whisper. That's why I hovered over his face—still following Ika's directive without hurting Tiru.

The male beneath me chuckles, the sound a vibration that travels up my legs as the heat of his breath touches my slick flesh.

"I think I speak for every man in this room when I say there's no sweeter way to die, Miza," Ika muses. "Right, T?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely," the kraken beneath me says, his hands suddenly on my waist and pulling me down. "Give me your pussy, Miza. I'm *starving*." That last word is a rumble right against my clit before his mouth seals around me and begins to drive me wild.

“*Oh*!” I startle, my hips bucking. Or trying to, anyway. Tiru has a hold of me, refusing to let me budge, and his lips are… “Oceans…” I can already feel an orgasm building, the inferno having instantly reignited within me.

“That’s it, little siren. Ride his face,” Ika says against my lips. “Soak him with your arousal. *Drown* him in your need.”

I feel possessed from all angles. Ika’s fist in my hair. Zael’s palm against my neck. Tiru’s tongue caressing my—

Ika’s kiss momentarily stills my thoughts, causing all aspects of reality to simply trail off. I’m lost to his sensual claim and suddenly realizing that I need to bite him next.

He’s mine, just like the others. I simply haven’t told him that yet.

I haven’t *tasted* him the way I need to.

Both Zael and Tiru have bled for me, all during a kiss. Now they’re branded as *mine*. They might not be scared, but I know they’ll forever feel my presence on their lips.

I need Ika to experience that, too.

But right before my teeth connect with his lip, he pulls back and tsk-tsks me. “Oh, no, little siren. I want your claiming mark on my cock, not my mouth. It’ll look so pretty with my piercings.”

I blink at him, a little stunned that he knew what I was about to do.

However, all my stealth dragon does is smile. “Feel free to bite Zael’s dick, too. I don’t think he would mind wearing more than one mark, sweetheart.” With that profound statement, he uses his hand in my hair to guide me toward my Elite Island King.

Which Zael welcomes openly, his palm tightening on my throat as he drags my face to his groin. “Do what Ika told you to do, darling. Wrap those pretty lips around me and claim me again.”

“I knew you would approve,” Ika murmurs, his hand drifting down my nape to my spine, pushing me toward Zael.

I do as I’m told, taking Zael into my mouth and accepting his thrust down my throat. I gag, but I don’t let that stop me from dragging my teeth along his skin, determining *where* to mark him.

Because now that Ika’s put the idea in my head, it’s all I can think about.

Well, that and Tiru’s tongue between my thighs, because *shells*, he’s driving me crazy. They all are.

Ika’s caress along my back.

Zael’s growl of approval as his hand slides back to grasp my nape, holding me to him.

Tiru’s rhythmic motions against my heated flesh. If he’s suffocating, he hasn’t let me know. He’s feasting on me like a starved man, his tongue circling my sensitive bud as he drives me closer to the edge of oblivion.

But then Ika’s hand slips over my ass, toward my center, and I detonate the moment he slides two fingers into me.

“Such a needy little cunt,” he muses as I moan around Zael’s shaft.

“Focus on sucking my cock, darling queen,” Zael demands, his grasp tightening on my neck. “You’re going to come a lot over the next few days. Multitasking will be exceptionally important. So learn how to take us while you orgasm, Miza. Otherwise, you might drown in our seed.”

I choke again, my eyes seeming to roll into the back of my head.

“Shh,” Ika hushes, his lips at my ear as he drives a third finger into me from below. “Pull back a little, sweetheart. Take a good breath and try to relax. That’s it. Just like that.” He presses a kiss to my temple. “Such a good girl for us, learning how to come while continuing to pleasure us.”

My thighs clench, my nerve endings suddenly on fire again despite the fact that I’m still climaxing from their combined efforts.

Shells…

There are black spots in my vision.

But a growl from Ika has me blinking back to the present.

“Flatten your tongue against his shaft,” he’s telling me. “And don’t be afraid to use your teeth. He wants you to bite him. We all do. Over and over again, little siren. Make us *yours*.”

My insides tighten around his fingers, every part of me spasming in response to his words.

I want to bite him.

To bite Zael.

To bite Tiru.

Then ride them all.

Claim them in every way imaginable.

It’s such an intense need that I begin to shake.

Then I give in by sinking my teeth into Zael’s shaft.

He curses, but it’s not a sound of pain so much as desire, his palm turning to granite on my nape.

"*Swallow*," he demands.

And I do.

His blood.

Followed by his *seed*.

Because he's suddenly coming down my throat without warning, my claiming mark having coaxed him into action.

I drink from him, trying not to choke like last time, but it's too much.

And then the world is shifting, his dick leaving my mouth in a sharp motion that has me crying out in protest, only to end up on my back with him raging over me.

Pure fire stares down at me through his blue gaze, the irises resembling icy flames. *Beast*, I realize. *Dragon*.

Zael's animal is very much in charge, yet his touch is almost reverent as he cups my cheek and leans down to kiss me.

He's still coming, too. I feel it against my center, his seed coating my already damp flesh.

Then he slams into me, both with his tongue and his cock, the intrusion causing me to gasp as I bow off the bed.

Oceans!

He's going to rip me in two.

His monster has a hold of the reins, yet he stills after bottoming out inside me, giving me a blissful moment to accept his size.

Just as that euphoric sensation created by his fiery seed begins to overwhelm my senses.

Ohhh, yes. It's just like the time I sucked him off before, except more intense because the sensation is in my throat *and* between my legs. Inside me. *Deep*. "Zael," I breathe, pressing up into him.

"*Mine*," he returns, and my world rotates again until I'm on my knees and he's positioned behind me. I almost fall face-first into the mattress, but Ika catches my shoulders, keeping me from collapsing, and places my mouth right by his pierced cock.

I have no idea when he lost his pants, but he's naked now.

And aroused.

And his dick is kissing my lips.

"Open," he demands.

I do. Because how else could I even respond? I want this. Want them. *Need their claims…*

So I let Ika take my mouth while Zael fucks me from behind, his hand on my throat again, holding me in place for Ika's thrusts.

Flames ripple across my skin. Real or invisible, I don't know. I just feel the warmth engulfing me and taking me under as euphoria lights me up from within.

My men are giving me what I need.

Rutting me.

Filling me.

Owning me.

It's exhilarating.

Perfect.

Intense.

Tiru's hand finds mine, his touch calming as he clutches my fist against the bed. That simple gesture tells me that he's here if I need him. He's not lost to his beast. He's protecting me. Watching me. *Cherishing me.*

Or maybe he's simply demonstrating his approval.

We claimed each other first.

Then he told me he would never make me choose, that he would accept whomever I desired. And he's reaffirming that now by allowing Ika and Zael to mate me, too.

Zael's chest touches my back as he bends over me, his lips suddenly at my ear. "Are you going to bite Ika's dick like you bit mine?" he asks, his voice deep and accented and oh so sensual. "Or are his piercings in the way?"

I haven't really started playing with Ika's decorated shaft yet, my throat more focused on accommodating his thrusts than anything else.

But now I'm curious, my tongue exploring the unique ladder-like pattern.

I'm not sure where to mark him.

With Zael, it was about halfway down his thick cock.

That doesn't seem to be possible on Ika. Which I think is okay because I have another idea for him.

I draw my mouth to his unpierced head and look up at him.

He arches a brow, obviously aware of what I'm thinking. There's a challenge in his expression that I refuse to deny.

So I do exactly what I'm thinking and clamp down on the fleshy head.

He hisses in response, his hand fisting my hair to hold me in place.

However, unlike Zael, he doesn't come. He simply allows me to lick up his bloody tip and swallow my claim.

Every part of me lights up with excitement, my heart seeming to beat for the first time in eons as something feels *complete* inside me. Like my soul has finally found its anchors in life.

Vitality blossoms through me, drawing out a scream of power from deep within.

I feel *alive*.

In charge.

Energized.

"*Fuck*," Ika groans. "Look at her eyes, T."

"I see them," he replies, his thumb caressing my knuckles. "Siren."

I'm not sure what they mean. I'm too overwhelmed by the sensations rippling through my middle to properly hear them.

I'm lost to the sizzle of electricity swimming through my veins.

The very real sense of euphoria threatening to drown me.

All of it centering on my heart. My bonds. *My mates*.

There's something building inside me. Something big. More than an orgasm. An explosion of utter intensity.

I welcome it.

Embrace it.

Call for it.

It's all-encompassing madness.

A need unlike anything I've ever experienced.

I clamp down around Zael, demanding that he take me there. Join me in oblivion. "*Claim me*."

I think I say those two words out loud. Or maybe I think them. I don't know. I hope they heard me, though. Because I need my mates. My *monsters*.

They haven't bitten me yet. Haven't truly come inside me either.

And I want it all. *Require* it.

"Please," I beg. "*Please*."

I'm starting to combust. To come apart at the seams. I need them to put me back together before it's too late. To *ground* me.

No, *anchor* me.

Because I'm flying.

Swimming.

Soaring?

I don’t know. It’s too much. A swirl of magnetic buoyancy.

Where am I? I think, dizzy. *Who am I?*

Theirs, another part of me whispers. *I’m theirs…*

I try to find my men, to feel them once more.

Zael’s inside me. Rutting me.

Ika’s fucking my mouth.

It’s not enough.

I clutch Tiru’s hand.

His voice is near my ear, asking me something. Or maybe that’s Zael. I… I don’t know.

But there’s a sense of urgency swirling in the air, sucking out all my oxygen. Taking me under. *Like before*, I muse, losing myself to a memory of glittering fins. The ocean. A giant wave.

The present is mixing with the past.

Something important.

A realization.

“*Miza*.” The powerful voice rumbles through me, making my legs shake.

Zael, I try to reply, aware that he’s the one who spoke, yet I can’t seem to speak. I’m twisted up in a blanket of heat as water pours over me.

I’m on fire. Yet not. I… I think I’m in a whirlpool?

It’s all so…

Teeth pierce my neck, the bite making me *scream* as my stealth dragon’s essence floods my veins.

Yesss, a voice inside me hisses. Or maybe it’s out loud.

A wave of virility overwhelms me just before fangs pierce my inner thigh. *Zael*.

Followed by Tiru at my breast.

I… I don’t know how I’ve ended up in this position between them, or when it happened, but I’m instantly cooled.

At peace.

Yet whirling in a cyclone of ecstasy.

Coming.

Screaming.

Until I float up to the surface of utter tranquility.

Warm. Safe. *And claimed*.

By three beasts.
Three kings.
Three mates.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

IKA

OUR SIREN IS A FUCKING GODDESS.

Magnificent in her regality.

Coming alive with power and *sex*.

I've only ever dreamt of the moments that led up to this experience, then witnessed glimpses of the aftermath—us worshipping her on her throne, protecting her with our lives, and being utterly devoted to her existence.

But I've fantasized about the events taking place between those futuristic prophecies.

The events involving hours or days of fucking.

And it's finally here.

"Gods, you're beautiful," I tell her.

The others hum in agreement, just as lost to our mate as I am.

I know they're confused. Surprised. *Elated*. I know there will be questions. But for right now, all any of us can do is exist with our siren and answer her lustful call.

I lean in to kiss her first, needing to taste her. She meets me with equal fervor, her fingers roaming up my arm to my nape to slide into my hair. Our embrace slows, blossoming into a shared rapture only our souls will ever understand.

She's mine.

I'm hers.

Yes, I have to share her. But this kiss is for *us*. No one else.

I roll onto her, needing to align our bodies, to feel her against me. To finally *join*.

So many years of wanting this. So many years of *waiting*.

I've not touched anyone since learning of Miza's existence. She's the only one I've desired. My beautiful intended. My future. *My now*.

I slide my tongue into her mouth, creating a sensual pace with her, while an inferno ignites between us. "You have no idea how long I've waited for this, little siren," I say against her mouth. "How long I've wanted you."

She shivers, her lashes fluttering as she reveals her pretty blue eyes. "I feel like I've wanted you forever, too," she admits. "Which I don't understand."

"It's destiny," I tell her. "Your soul has multiple fated mates, and you've finally united all of us."

"Is that why I feel so alive right now?"

I nod, my nose brushing hers. "Yes. And you're going into heat." The others have assumed she's already in heat, but Miza's still aware enough to think for herself. "We need your limits, Miza. Anything you don't want us to do."

"We need to know how you feel about breeding," Tiru adds from beside us, his low tone filled with yearning.

He wants her to agree to make little kraken babies.

I don't have a preference either way. We'll all be fathers, no matter the biological makeup.

But I do agree with his curiosity about what Miza wants.

"From what I understand, sirens can control their desires during a heat. If you want a child, it'll happen. If you don't, then your cycle is merely pleasurable for all parties involved." I press a kiss to her lips again.

Her eyes focus and blur, a thought I can't hear seeming to pass through her mind. "I'm a siren." It's not a question but a statement.

"Yes," I tell her. "You are." I wasn't entirely sure of that before, just mostly suspected it because of my visions. Plus, her mating to Tiru kind of confirmed it. Then her claims on Zael and me finalized it. "A siren who is about to go into her first estrous cycle."

It's not uncommon for her kind. Sirens are sensual creatures for a reason, the equivalent of succubi and incubi in the water world. They're alluring. Deadly. *And fucking insatiable*.

“Kiss me again,” my seductress says, her eyes exuding an invitation that’s impossible to ignore.

I give in, loving the taste of her on my tongue.

Then I glide my cock against her pussy, enjoying how wet she is for us. Miza jolts as one of my piercings strokes her clit, making me smile against her mouth. “Just wait until I’m inside you, sweetheart,” I tell her. “You’re going to love feeling what I can do.”

Zael might be able to light her on fire from within, but I can *intoxicate* her. When I come, she’ll scream. Because I’ll lace my pleasure into my seed and ensure she experiences every ounce of ecstasy right along with me.

Which I suppose is similar to what Zael can do. His essence is heightened by his fiery abilities. Mine is altered by the venom I can produce.

But not all venom is bad.

That’s what my little siren is going to learn.

I roll my hips, giving her a preview of my laddered piercings before pulling back to position my head near her entrance. “Are we making a baby or just fucking?” I ask her. Either way, I’m happy to play.

“I-I don’t know,” she whispers, staring up at me. “But you said sirens choose during a heat, right?”

“They do,” I murmur, then glance at the Kraken King. “Right?”

“Yes, that’s typically what happens. A child is only created when the female siren desires it,” he replies.

“Then Miza’s soul will choose the future,” I murmur, satisfied with that logic, and slide myself into her tight cunt.

She instantly clamps down around me, her back arching as a moan spills from her kiss-swollen lips.

“Fuck, little siren.” The words come out on a choked whisper, my neck straining. “I knew you would feel good, but this…” I can’t even finish the statement. I’ve craved this moment for what feels like eons. And now that it’s here, all I can do is *indulge*.

Which is how I find my face pressed to her neck, my body rigid as I lock myself deep inside her.

“I’m never leaving this pussy,” I declare softly. “Gods, Miza, you feel *so fucking good*.”

She squeezes me with her walls, her legs wrapping around my waist. “More, Ika. I need to feel you *move*.”

“Mmm,” I hum against her raging pulse. “You want to move?” I roll us so she’s straddling me, her startled yelp making me smile. “Ride me, Miza. I want to watch your tits bounce.”

Zael makes a sound of approval, his chest against my arm since I rotated toward him when I flipped my position with Miza.

She doesn’t immediately shift to sit up, her breasts still pressed to my chest as she tries to catch her breath.

So Zael takes it upon himself to change positions and goes to kneel behind her, his hands caressing her back before taking hold of her shoulders. “I’ll help you, darling,” he says softly, guiding her upward.

Miza’s lips part as the new angle takes me deeper, her pussy tightening even more. “*Ika*.”

“If you think that feels good, wait until you start moving,” Zael replies, his mouth near her ear. His palms skim down her arms to her hips, his chest aligning with her back as he straddles my thighs with her. Then he starts to *move* her, the motion causing my jaw to clench.

“*Gods*,” I groan. “She’s strangling my cock with that tight cunt.”

“Feels good, right?” Zael muses, obviously aware of how good she feels since he was the last one inside her. “Bet it would feel even better if I fucked her ass while she rode you.”

My balls tighten at the prospect, and Miza’s eyes widen.

“We won’t do anything you’re not ready for,” Tiru assures her, his steady presence coming from the pillows on our other side. He’s lounging there with his hand on his dick, giving it lazy strokes while watching us play.

“I think she could handle all three of us at once,” I say, my voice strained as she draws out to the tip before slamming back down on me.

Something tells me this is Zael’s way of paying me back for the cock-sucking lessons I gave Miza. Now he’s returning the favor by teaching her how to drive me insane with thorough movements and a teasing pace.

I’m not mad about it.

In fact, I’m *very* pleased with it.

But I want to play with Miza, too.

“Do you want us to test your boundaries, little siren?” I ask, swallowing as she shifts her hips in a sensual rhythm—one Zael is teaching her with expert ease. “Because I rather like the idea of Zael asserting some dominance by fucking your ass.”

Miza's nipples tighten into tempting little buds, answering my question before her mouth can form the words.

But I let her process what I'm saying and reach up to caress the pretty pink peaks instead.

She shivers, and I add a little temptation by leaning up to capture her nipple in my mouth.

"I can help prepare you," Tiru offers, a tentacle suddenly slithering up Miza's side to fondle her opposite breast. "Just like our first time, only… different."

Miza looks at him, her nostrils flaring as she processes what he's saying. I can only imagine what he means, how he *prepared* her, because I assume it has something to do with that tentacle sliding across her tit.

"I'll go slow," he continues. "And if it feels like too much, we'll stop."

She swallows, her cheeks turning redder than they already are as she says, "Okay."

He sits up and takes hold of her nape with one hand, pulling her into a kiss as that tentacle of his wanders to her hip and back toward Zael.

The Elite Island King glances down with interest. "Now *that* is an intriguing development."

I chuckle, then groan as Miza's pussy strangles my cock. "*Fuck*, sweetheart." I arch up into her, unable to stop myself from moving. "If you keep doing that, I'm going to come before we even begin."

"Don't you fucking dare," Zael growls. "You're not coming until I'm in her ass."

Typically, I'm not one to allow another man to boss me around. But feeling Miza's reaction to his words has me reconsidering any sort of retort I could utter.

Because *Gods*, the way she's throttling my cock is fucking incredible. It's going to be hard to *obey* Zael. However, I want to make this the best experience for Miza, too. And having him join me as we both explode inside her will absolutely send our mate soaring to a new level of pleasure.

"Oh!" she exclaims against Tiru's mouth, causing the other man to smile.

"You know how this works, lei. It's just a little tighter back here."

Zael's still watching Tiru's tentacle work, making me curious. Though, the moment I start to feel a hint of pressure through the thin wall, I realize he's already slid that tentacle of his into her ass.

Must be a self-lubricating appendage, I think, arching up into her pussy as a subtle rhythm begins inside her. *Very fucking useful*.

“Seeing you being double penetrated like this is making my dick throb,” Zael says against her ear, his hands on her hips as he forces her to move in tandem to take me and Tiru. “I can’t wait to continue fucking you, Miza. We’ve only just begun, my queen. And I meant what I said—we’re going to pleasure you for *days*.”

She shudders between us, her hand going to my chest as though to seek balance.

But we’ll never let her fall.

She’s ours to care for, and we’re going to prove that to her through touch and orgasms.

A second tentacle appears, causing me to arch a brow. I can’t partially shift the way Tiru is now, nor have I ever desired that ability, but I’m suddenly seeing the allure as his appendage slides across Miza’s body.

I relax into the pillows, content to enjoy the show.

He plays with her tits first, his mouth still on hers, then gently wraps the blue and purple scales around her middle before heading back to slide between her and Zael. Miza’s pussy contracts around me deliciously as he moves in and out of her, clearly sliding the thicker appendage into her.

“That’s so fucking useful,” Zael breathes, his gaze on the actions below.

“Who needs butt plugs when you have a Kraken King?” I muse, then groan as Miza’s hips shift over me. “*Fuck*, beautiful. Do that again.”

She does, obviously seeking pleasure, something a third tentacle provides as it glides across her core, just above where we’re joined. He rubs his scaled limb along her clit, drawing a scream from our mate. I’m about to comment on it when his tentacle brushes the base of my cock, causing me to release a curse as a guttural moan.

“*What the fuck is that*?” I grind out, slamming up into Miza on instinct.

“*My* talent,” the Kraken King returns, kissing Miza again while torturing us both.

“And what a talent it is,” Zael says on a low whistle of sound. “Flames, that’s… impressive.”

Tiru growls, then loses himself with Miza once more, his tentacles everywhere. The three limbs seem to have sprouted from his lower back, yet he’s fully humanoid, almost like he’s just grown three tails.

However the fuck that's possible, it's working, and our mate is *thoroughly* reaping the benefits of Tiru's "talent."

By the time he's done, she's a writhing mess of need, panting against him with little pleas of unintelligible words.

"She's ready," he murmurs, his appendages gliding along her skin and wrapping around her like claiming ropes as he holds her in place. "Fuck her."

I absolutely do not need the demand but realize it's for Zael more than me.

Rather than fight Tiru's authority, Zael obeys it, his jaw clenching as he maneuvers himself behind Miza to align his cock with her ass.

He doesn't go slow, obviously aware that our female can take whatever he intends to give—thanks to Tiru—thus slamming right into her.

She screams, and Tiru tightens his hold on her, his mouth still devouring hers even as she shrieks.

But that response soon turns into a low moan as Zael and I begin to move, her body being pushed to a limit she likely never knew could exist.

All while Tiru's tentacles titillate her skin, the one appendage fucking *vibrating* her clit and my base.

I'm trapped beneath Miza, punching my hips upward as Zael drives into her from behind, and Tiru continues to claim her mouth and tits. All I can do is grab her hips close to where Zael has a hold on her and enjoy the ride.

"Fires," Zael whispers, pressing a kiss to Miza's shoulder. "You're taking us so beautifully, darling. Bringing your kings to their literal knees."

"She was always destined to be ours," I pant, matching Zael's pace as we fuck her in unison. "Our. Perfect. Mate."

"Too fucking right," Zael agrees, growling against her neck before sinking his teeth into her pulse point.

She jolts between us, her nails digging into my chest as Tiru hisses into her mouth. The scent of iron touches the air, suggesting she may have bitten him at the same time Zael claimed her neck.

It's hot as fuck.

The most arousing sight of my life.

And forces me to… to… "*Fuck…*" I lose control, my orgasm slamming into me with a ferocity that steals my air and makes me unload inside my female. My mate. *My now*.

It’s so intense that she joins me in the cries of passion, my seed laced with a venom meant to make her feel every ounce of my pleasure while influencing hers to erupt in kind.

Zael releases a string of curses as Miza falls apart between us, his own orgasm ripping free on a roar that sends us all spiraling into an oblivion of such insane intensity that I lose my sight.

Everything burns in the best fucking way. I’m shaking. Groaning. Spasming. *Flying*.

My dragon feels like he’s been yanked out of my chest and given his own existence. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. And blasts every expectation I ever anticipated out of the water, beating all of my fantasies in one single moment.

Miza’s moans are all I hear, her body spasming in a way that milks my cock dry. Yet somehow I’m still coming. Still soaring in the clouds.

And then she collapses on my chest, her lips seeking mine like she needs me to remind her how to breathe.

I do because that’s who I am for her. An anchor. Her safe place. Her protector. Forever and always.

I’m only vaguely aware that Tiru and Zael have switched positions and Tiru’s now rutting her ass. All I focus on is Miza, her lips, her breasts pillowed against my pecs, her small body quivering with ecstasy.

My cock is locked inside her cunt, holding my seed where it belongs. It’s like my piercings have connected us. Or maybe just our position. I don’t fucking care. I simply indulge and kiss her.

A growling roar comes from the Kraken King, his beast clearly in control. Yet his tentacles have vanished, and he’s all man behind her. Fucking her. Driving more screams from our mate. Unending rapture.

Somehow, I’ve found more seed to give her, my cock spurting to life once more, and we’re all moving in a mass of limbs, grunts, and pants.

Fucking.

Reveling.

Uniting.

It’s a mate-circle built on tentative trust, yet solidified by lust.

Because we’re finally a team.

Unified.

Connected.

Officially ready for whoever or whatever is coming for us.

We just have to survive the Monster Games.
And then, Miza can become our queen.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

MIZA

I'VE BEEN LOST in a sea of lust for days. Maybe weeks. Or perhaps it's been hours? No, I'm pretty sure it's been *days* because there's been some sleep. A lot of meals. More sex. And… and I think I saw the sun glowing through the windows at one point. But it's hard to say since we're underwater.

Maybe it was a bright fish or something.

My brow furrows at that.

Bright fish…

Glowing scales…

Hmm, I'm pretty sure that's important. But I… I don't know why.

I'm currently floating in a bathtub, with Ika and Tiru sitting nearby. Zael went to fix a tray of sweets. "Eating is important" my mates keep telling me.

Blah, blah, blah.

I suppose I like the energy. And having them feed me is fun, too. It usually leads to other things.

Though, right now, I just want to relax. Which is strange. I've been rather needy, desiring my men in all sorts of positions—some of which are suddenly making me blush as I think back on them. Another abnormality. It's like my boldness has left. And now I'm… I'm feeling a little… well, *exhausted*.

"Why are you frowning, little siren?" Ika asks, his lips suddenly at my ear as he pulls me into his lap.

I go with a giggle, feeling a little sensitive and a whole lot shy. Because the last time he did this, he slid that pierced length of his into me, then moved me to the edge of the tub, where he fed me Tiru's cock.

I squirm, thinking about it, and feel my skin flush even more.

What's wrong with me? I wonder, dizzy with confusion. *Just hours ago, I was trying to convince Zael and Ika to let me have their cum for breakfast instead of food. And now…*

"Miza." Ika's fingers on my jaw force me to look at him, his dark eyes searching mine. "Talk to me."

"I'm fine," I lie. Or is it the truth? I don't know, my lips curling down once more. "I'm confused."

"About what?" he asks, his eyebrow inching upward.

"I…" My mouth perches to the side as I try to find the words. "I feel less… something."

"Less horny?" he suggests, a smile playing over his lips. "Less insatiable?" He cocks his head. "Less mindless with lust?"

I glare at him. "I was not *mindless*."

"You were consumed by your inner siren, and we fucking loved it," he tells me. "You were and are a fucking queen, Miza Kananaka. Own it. Be proud of it. *Accept* it. Because you're ours now, beautiful. And we are *very* pleased with our chosen mate." He leans in to press a kiss to my lips. "You're *exquisite*. And we adore you."

"Love," Tiru interjects, drawing my gaze to his. "We love you. And adore you. And everything else you."

Ika chuckles, the sound a vibration against my back. "I swear you have heart-shaped eyes right now, Kraken King."

Tiru ignores him entirely, his gaze on me. "I meant every word."

I shiver beneath the intensity of his stare. Ika releases me so I can move over to Tiru and straddle him, my lips automatically meeting his. But our kiss isn't as sexual as it was hours ago. It's more emotional now. Tender. *Promising*.

"I love you," he says against my mouth. "And I think what you're feeling right now is your heat subsiding."

I blink at him, pulling back a little. "Oh." That… that makes sense. But I kind of miss the boldness I was feeling earlier. "Is that why I'm… less confident now?"

“You’re still confident, lei,” he says, his knuckles brushing my cheek before he wraps a palm around my nape. “You’re just less demanding at the moment.”

“I was demanding?” I ask, frowning.

To my dismay, he nods, yet he smiles as he does it. “Yes, and it was *amazing*. I loved hearing you tell us how to pleasure you. Feel free to do that again at your leisure. I’ll lick your pussy all fucking night if you want me to.”

“Sounds like we’re discussing dessert,” Zael says. “Be a good girl and eat everything on this tray, and we’ll absolutely indulge you in that request.”

His tone makes me shiver even as heat engulfs me from head to toe. “I… I didn’t… I mean…” I close my eyes, hating the uncertainty that’s overcoming me.

What’s wrong with me?

I like the bold version of me. The one that voiced all my wants and needs without a care as to how they might be perceived.

“Miza,” Tiru murmurs, his palm sliding to my cheek. “I think whatever you’re feeling right now is a natural response to your first heat. Let’s just eat and relax for a bit longer. There’s no rush. No concerns. We’re here to take care of whatever you need. Okay?”

I swallow and meet his gaze once more, noting the sincerity in his silvery depths. Nodding, I agree to his suggestions, then shift in his lap so I can properly eat.

Zael enters the massive tub, placing the floating tray on the water.

Silence falls as the four of us indulge in the items he brought from the kitchen. It’s mostly fruit, but with some cheeses and meats, too.

Each bite seems to awaken more of my hunger, making me realize how famished I am.

Zael leaves at one point and brings back more food, ensuring my stomach is full before reality truly sets in around us.

A reality where I’m mated to three kings.

A reality where… *I’m a siren*.

“How is this possible?” I whisper, more to myself than to my mates. “How… how am I a siren?”

“That’s a question we intend to answer,” Ika replies, still lounging across from me and Tiru.

“But my mother isn’t a siren, is she?” I ask, my brow furrowing. “Maybe my father?” I never met my father. So that… that feels a lot more likely. “I don’t know who he is.” Which isn’t an uncommon occurrence in my home village. “My mom never spoke about him.”

Most of my peers grew up with a single parent—either a mother or a father. I learned in my teen years that procreation was the act between a man and a woman, and I had some questions then for my mother about who fathered me, but she dismissed the subject.

“Is my father a siren?” I ask, thinking out loud. “Is that how…?” My frown deepens. “Are all Offerings… part monster?”

Ika glances to his left, where Zael is sitting. “Want to take that one, Elite Island King?”

Zael runs his fingers through his thick hair, his icy eyes holding a note of unease. “All the humans in my islands are genetically altered in ways to better accept monster mates from water-related realms.”

“So my dad is a siren?” I ask, understanding his unease now, as I feel the same way.

“No. Well, maybe.” He frowns. “I’m actually not sure. Whatever has happened with your genetics is… under investigation. The geneticists are supposed to slightly alter DNA, not create supernatural beings. I’m still trying to determine how you’re a siren.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, drawing out the word a bit as my lips curl down even more.

“The humans on my islands are all created through mortal donations or pairings,” he adds, like his words are helpful.

“I don’t understand,” I admit out loud. Because I… well, yeah, I have no idea what he’s trying to say right now.

“There’s an island devoted to procreation,” Ika interjects. “One where all the humans are made in this region. Except for those who are conceived through more natural means or connections. You know, like the *connections* we just did—sex.”

My eyes widen, a vision forming in my head.

But Zael is quick to fix my viewpoint as he explains how human pairings work in his region. He talks about natural bonds—where humans have chosen one another—and other methods for creation.

“We try to ensure that choice is part of the process,” he says at one point, referring to the *natural* aspect. “We also ensure that those who

willingly take part in the procreation clinics are compensated well."

He elaborates by discussing all the different villages under his control.

I'm apparently from one of the Offering villages, meaning everyone who lives on the island I resided on is eligible for the Monster Games. But there are other islands full of humans in his territory who are responsible for the creation of those Offerings.

"Every human born in my region is tested at birth. If the genetics are found favorable, they're sent to one of the villages designed for training Offerings," he tells me. "And most of the time, the caretakers are not related to their charges."

"Which is Zael's *very* roundabout way of saying that you could have siren genetics from your mother or your father… or both," Ika adds.

I blink at him. "Wait, what? My mother isn't a siren."

"The caretaker you know as your mother isn't a siren," Ika replies. "But your *biological* mother might be."

My heart stills in my chest. *My mom isn't my mom?* I think. *I…* "No. She's my mom."

"Yes, of course she is," Ika says, his voice softer now. "She's just not your biological creator. But that doesn't take away from her being your mother, Miza."

"I…" I swallow, my mind blanking for a moment. This is a lot to… to *accept*. "So there are islands where humans are allowed to mate with each other," I say slowly. "But if they create children with certain genetic profiles, they're sent to villages like mine."

Zael nods. "And they have the option to accompany the child, too. Which is why some of the Offerings have two parents in your village. But it's rare."

"Why?" I whisper, confused as to why only some parents go with their children and others do not.

"Because it's considered an elite privilege to have created an Offering and they prefer the payout to being actual parents." Zael's expression darkens a bit. "They're given a choice—a life of luxury on the islands or residing with their children in the villages. Most choose the first path and let someone else raise the child."

My mouth opens, then closes, then opens again. "They give up their children for… wealth."

“Yes.” He utters the confirmation with ease, like this is perfectly natural.

“I would *never* give up my child for wealth,” I spit out, my palm on my belly. “*Never*.” I don’t even know if I’m pregnant, not quite sure how I could tell yet. But I’m aware I just went through a heat and that I *might* be carrying a child.

“We would never ask you to choose,” Zael assures me. “I’m merely explaining how genetics and procreation work in my region to help you understand how and why you’re different. I’m actually starting to believe you were somehow inserted into the process. Because you’re not human.”

“Did I come from another… island?” I guess. “Another, uh, *region*?”

“As in another human area of this realm?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “All the regional kings and queens manage their own mortals and Offerings, plus they have different versions of the Monster Games. Some even call it Monsters Night. But that’s not relevant to us because I don’t think you were born in this world.”

“Oh.” I’m… I’m following what he’s saying now. But it’s a lot to take in.

He’s saying my mother isn’t my biological mother.

That there are islands of humans who prefer status and wealth over being parents.

That villages exist to train Offerings for monster pairings, but not all villages send Offerings to the Monster Games or Monsters Night or whatever.

And… and… *I’m not human.* A flash of fins enters my mind again, the memory vivid yet intangible. *Did I—*

“There’s one more thing,” Zael says, wary once more.

Just that tone has me hesitant to hear whatever it is he wants to tell me. But I give him my attention anyway. “Okay…”

“Giovanna is missing,” he tells me, causing my eyes to widen.

“Giovanna, as in my… my…?” I struggle to say *mother*. Which is really frustrating because she *is* my mother. Even if they’re saying she’s not *biologically* mine. She’s still the one I call *Mom*.

“Your mother,” Zael utters for me. “She’s missing.”

“Missing how? When? What do you mean?” The questions rush out of me as demands, my spine straightening as I slip off of Tiru’s lap to stand.

“Why am I just now hearing about this?”

“Because we’ve been trying to find her,” Zael informs me. “Or rather, my people have been hunting for her. And until I had more information, I didn’t want to worry you.”

“And now?” I ask him. “*Now* I can worry?” There’s a shrill note to my voice that’s very unlike me. But this information, on top of everything else… it’s… “How long have you kept this from me?”

But then, no.

I think… I think I already know.

“The night you brought back the bread…” I didn’t think about it at the time. Because Ika said… “You told me she wasn’t in the kitchen.”

“Not a lie,” Ika says, though his expression is as sheepish as his tone. “More of an omission, as she wasn’t in the kitchen… or the house.”

I gape at him.

And then at Zael.

Both of them are staring at me with equal looks of guilt. However, Tiru is simply watching me like he’s waiting for my response. “Did you know?” I demand.

“At the time?” he asks. “No. I learned about it later. And I agreed with the decision to gather more information before worrying you, as there was enough going on already.”

I scowl at him, not pleased at all with that last statement.

“Although, I’m realizing now that not telling you about Giovanna was the wrong choice,” he goes on, holding my gaze. “Keeping you in the dark doesn’t protect you. You’re our queen. Our heart. Ensuring you’re informed is vital to our success as a mate-circle.”

My frown somewhat lessons, his words giving me pause. Mostly because they’re not ones I expected to hear, yet needed to all the same.

“I’m sorry, Miza,” Zael says softly. “Tiru’s right. We should have told you. I thought my seaguards would find Giovanna quickly, which doesn’t excuse the decision not to inform you, but I wanted to solve the problem for you. However, what I should be doing is solving the problem *with* you.”

“What *we* should be doing,” Ika corrects.

“That’s exactly it, though,” Zael mutters, glancing at him before refocusing on me. “I’ve spent eons ruling. I’m not used to having anyone else to answer to, let alone request help from. I give directives. And yes, I

occasionally work with my second to resolve issues, but the resolution is always grounded in *my* decision."

Ika nods. "I haven't been a king for as long as you, but I didn't claim the Stealth Dragon Throne by relying on others. It's an isolated role at the top."

"Yes," Tiru agrees, "it is. But this connection changes everything. We have to make decisions as a circle, not as solitary units. And Miza has to be involved." He looks at me. "Sorry, I'm not trying to talk as though you're not here, lei. I'm just… I'm apologizing, but also trying to correct our course."

"We should have told you when we realized she was missing," Zael says, sounding contrite. "I honestly thought we would have found her by now, but whoever took her… is powerful."

"Did you hear back from Mariana on what Cain's been up to?" Ika asks, focused on Zael.

"It's not Cain," he replies. "But yes, I did hear back from Mariana. Apparently, he's focused on a political situation evolving in the Monster Isles. She said he wasn't actively involved, just observing, and had little interest in discussing what's happening here."

Ika frowns. "Why does a Dream Eater King care about a bunch of vampires and shifters? Doesn't he have his own monsters to worry about with Helia in Monster City or the Elite City or whatever the fuck it's all called?"

Zael shrugs. "Mariana didn't ask questions, just checked for any traces of Giovanna and left." He looks at me. "She didn't find anything."

"With the… vampires?" I ask, trying to follow. "Or the, uh, Dream Eater King?"

"In Cain's territory. Cain is a Dream Eater. The vampires, at least in this context, are in the Monster Isles, which is in another ocean. Very far from here." That last part he seems to add because he can tell I'm getting overwhelmed by mentions of other areas of the world.

"Oh." I rub a spot on my head that's beginning to throb. "Maybe someday you can show me a map." I've only ever seen references to our "region," as he calls it. And even then, it wasn't all that informative.

"I can arrange that," Zael replies, giving me a soft smile. "I'll tell you anything you want to know. Show you everything. Give you whatever you ask for. Just name it, my queen."

He uttered those last few statements as he stood in the water to join me in the middle of the tub, his palm on my cheek by the end.

"I'm going to find your mother," he promises me. "*Both* of them. We're going to figure this out together, too. I want to know how a siren ended up being raised on an island full of humans. And I want to understand *how* this went unnoticed. As well as why you can't shift."

My brow crinkles on that last statement.

Shift.

A fin.

The wave of energy.

That spiral under the water.

I take a step back from him toward the stairs. "Can you take me swimming?" I ask. "In the ocean?" I don't tell him why. I'm not sure I can explain it. Instead, I simply say, "I need to… try something."

I'm not sure what that something will be, but I need to understand what happened during the last trial. It's all murky in my head. Yet there's an important detail lurking on the edges of my thoughts. I can *almost* remember it.

"Please?" I add.

"You're asking three sea monsters to take you swimming," Ika muses. "No begging required, sweetheart. We'll happily show off our scales for you anytime."

A few hours ago, that comment would have made me shiver with interest.

But urgency flowing through my veins has me simply exiting the tub.

Because I need to get in the ocean.

I need to *know*.

Maybe this inkling is born from a dream.

Or maybe… maybe it's *real*.

There's only one way to find out the truth.

In the ocean.

Under the water.

With my mates.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

MIZA

FOUR DIFFERENT LOCATIONS AND NOTHING.

No fin.

No magic.

No hint of a siren whatsoever.

Just that strange, lurking, ominous presence I always feel when in the ocean. I would think it might be due to my current location—in the lagoon Zael found me in with KiKi however many nights ago—but I've experienced the same sensation in all four places.

A growl escapes me, causing Ika to lift his head from the shoreline. He's lounging in dragon form, his golden accents glittering in the moonlight. The rest of him resembles the night around us, his dark purple scales perfectly blending into the midnight atmosphere.

Very unlike Zael, who is standing a few feet away from me on two legs, his arms folded across his bare chest. He's practically illuminated by the light above, resembling a marbleized god with his flawless pale skin and athletic physique.

He arches a dark brow at me. "Frustrated, darling queen?"

"Yes," I admit. "*Very*." That word comes out with an echo of the growl I released seconds ago. "I don't feel any different from a week ago."

And yet, I *know* something has changed. I feel it deep in my soul.

Unless it was a dream?

But that doesn’t explain my heat or the very real fact that I’m now mated to three kings.

Well, the latter could be a result of my “altered genetics.”

My lips purse. Before coming to the lagoon, Ika shadowed us all to my village home. Then Zael suggested I look for anything that feels out of sorts.

“The whole hut feels ‘out of sorts,’” I told him. “My mother should be here.” That last part left me on a whisper, my heart skipping a beat in my chest.

Because my mother—I don’t care if we’re biologically related or not; she’s still my mother—is *missing*.

I’m still not sure how I feel about my mates keeping the truth from me. However, their apologies felt sincere. As did their promises to never do anything like that again.

Being angry at them doesn’t fix what happened. We need to find my mother.

I just don’t know how.

My instincts told me to embrace the ocean, to try to define my power—whatever that might be—so that I could help locate my mother. Not that I knew *how* I’d be able to help. I just… Well, I needed to be productive.

Except nothing about this is working.

Why would someone take my mother? I wonder. *And how…? How am I a siren?*

“Maybe I’m something else entirely,” I mutter out loud. “Just a human with some abnormalities or whatever.”

Zael cups my jaw, his touch drawing my gaze up to his icy eyes. “You are something extraordinary, Miza. And perhaps, as you said, you’re something else entirely. But there’s siren energy all over you, which started after the last trial. So regardless of what you may feel right now, you’re definitely more than human.”

Tiru surfaces before I can reply, his kraken head large and squid-like, only he has a tentacle beard, too. And I swear his glittering pupils are the shapes of hearts. However, he shifts too quickly into his human version before I can really get a good look.

It’s miraculous to watch him change shape and size, his motions so fluid and natural.

Though, I’m rather jealous at the moment since I’m still just me—two legs, two arms, a torso, a head. A regular old *human*.

A tentacle wraps around my waist, telling me he’s actually only partially changed into a humanoid form. That tentacle pulls me into his bare chest, which is all man, causing me to grasp his shoulders for support as I’m lifted off my feet.

“It’s time for a break, lei,” he tells me. “You’ve been trying to embrace your siren soul for hours. I think the issue here is simply that your other half isn’t ready to come out to play.”

“Or there’s some sort of power throttling her inner siren,” Ika adds, materializing beside us in the water. “But I agree with taking a break.” He leans in to kiss me, his fingers brushing my jaw as he angles my head toward him. “Let’s go back to the palace and—”

The blaring of a seahorn cuts him off, the sound echoing through the night and stirring goose bumps along my arms.

That sound has haunted my nightmares for *years*. It indicates that the final countdown has begun.

Twelve blares.

Twelve hours.

And then the Monster Games will initiate.

That horn is a way to inform the villagers it’s time to seek shelter and hide. Because the monsters are coming.

Except they’re already here, something I’ve learned this past week while participating in the trials. Plus, the ocean part I’ve always witnessed in the video feed has already happened.

Or has it?

“Miza,” Zael murmurs, his hand on my cheek once more as he draws my focus to him and away from Ika. “You’re safe.”

“That sound says otherwise,” I whisper.

With everything going on these last few days, I… I *forgot* about the games. The inevitable climax that has marked my fate since my name was called up as an Offering.

“But I’ve already been claimed,” I add, my voice barely audible, my brow furrowing. “So what happens in twelve hours?”

“In twelve hours, you run,” Ika murmurs, still nearby.

“And we hunt,” Tiru adds, his tentacle tightening around my waist.

“The first trial is about the Offerings proving their competency in the water,” Zael tells me. “The second is about accepting intended mates in their monster forms, which didn’t exactly go as planned. However, everyone improvised and found ways to test their compatibility in other ways these last few days.”

Ika snorts, clearly amused by whatever Zael means by that.

“The third and final trial,” Zael goes on, “is the Monster Games. Which is designed as a trial where the suitors are forced to embrace their human forms—and hunt our human prey.”

“We’re going to chase you on Monster Island,” Ika explains with a grin. “And we might claim you again. For fun.”

“Technically, we broke the rules by mating you already.” Zael’s lips twist up into a wry smile. “Fortunately, the king in charge of enforcing those rules is one of your mates.” He tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. “But it would be wise for us to make our claim public, like Ika’s saying.”

Tiru’s tentacle pulses around me, drawing me closer to him once more. I glance up into his silver eyes and find him smiling. “Everyone already knows you’re ours, lei.” He brings his lips to mine, kissing me softly. “This is just a formality.”

“A formality where I run away from all of you?” I ask, not understanding what that trial proves.

“Think of it as a game,” Ika suggests, stepping up behind me to press his chest to my back, his lips at my ear. “Challenge us, Miza. Make us work to claim you.” He kisses the thudding pulse point in my neck. “Arouse us with your cleverness, sweetheart.”

Tiru releases me to Ika, allowing the other man to spin me in his arms, his hand on my nape as he forces me to stare up into his handsome face. He looks intense like this, cast in sharper shadows and lines from the moonlight above.

“By the time we find you, we’ll be so hard and ready for you that we’ll rip off your lingerie and reward you with pleasure beyond your wildest dreams.” He utters the words like a promise, his deep voice wrapping around me in a seductive wave of yearning. “You’re going to love it, little siren.”

Zael’s mouth meets my shoulder. “And we’re going to love hunting you.”

“Just as much as we’re going to love worshipping you for the rest of our lives,” Tiru adds, his lips brushing my temple as his chest meets my back. “You’ll be safe, even when you question your surroundings. Because we’ll be there lurking in trees, playing the role of expert seekers.”

“Monster Island might not be under my jurisdiction, but I know the land there well.” Zael’s words are a breath against my bare skin, casting warmth through my upper body. “Nothing will hurt you.”

“No one will touch you.” Ika’s statement resembles a benediction.

“And only the three of us will ever claim you,” Tiru vows, rotating me toward him. “You’re ours, Miza.”

“Ours to hunt,” Zael muses.

Ika chuckles at that, then murmurs, “Ours to *fuck*.”

“Ours to love,” Tiru whispers against my mouth, then captures me in a kiss that short-circuits my brain.

Zael and Ika add their own cherishing touches, additional comments about what’s to come, how I’m their chosen queen, and promises that everything will be fine.

But as the countdown continues over the next few hours, the seahorn numbers diminishing far too rapidly for comfort, I wonder if what they’re saying is too easy to be true.

They told me the last trial would be safe, that Tiru would catch me in the waves and deliver me to safety.

Yet I’m still not entirely sure what happened that night.

And I’m definitely uncertain about the approaching Monster Games.

There’s also the bounty on my life, plus my missing mother. It seems a bit counterproductive to run away from my mates with all of that going on.

Although, I suppose this could present us with an opportunity to learn more about what’s happening. Maybe determine why I seem to be at the center of all this madness.

I also don’t want to avoid our fate.

The Monster Games are the final trial.

What will it say about me as a worthy Offering if I refuse to participate?

I’m still considering that question when the seahorn sounds, ringing only once to indicate the final hour before the games.

Our time together has flown by with my mates ensuring I’m well fed and cared for.

But now it’s time to make a choice. To say goodbye and join the last trial, or be a coward and hide.

Perhaps not the most accurate of a summary. Though, it certainly feels correct to consider it cowardly to avoid the games.

I’ve trained for them all my life. I’m also not actually human. I’m a siren… or, well, something else entirely. Regardless, I’m not fickle or easy to break. I’m a survivor.

And I will survive this.

“We’ll see you soon,” Zael promises me as he walks me to the elevator toward a waiting seaguard. *Farrah*.

When I don’t reply—because I’m lost in my thoughts—he stops and turns me toward him.

“I can feel your nerves,” he tells me softly. “It’s like a pulsing beat of uncertainty in my soul. Talk to us, Miza.”

“Do you want us to pull you out of the games?” Ika asks, joining Zael.

“Because we’ll do it,” Tiru adds. “Just say the words.”

My jaw clenches. These three men have spent the last however many hours taking care of me while talking about their excitement for the upcoming hunt.

This is a sensual game for them.

And more than that, it’s a public declaration.

I somewhat understand the importance of the latter, especially since Zael said something about having broken the rules by claiming me before the end of the courting period. If he bends the rules again by letting me skip the final trial, that could be seen as cheating.

Or, worse, *cowardice*. Just like I considered moments ago. Only now there’s more to it—I can’t afford to be seen as a coward if I’m going to become a queen.

Gods, a queen, I think, my head spinning. I really haven’t thought about what that means. I’ve been too caught up in everything else. Worrying about my mother. Thinking about a fin that may or may not exist. *Reliving vivid images of my heat.*

I shiver at that last thought, then take in the three men currently waiting for me to comment.

If I tell them I don’t want to be chased on Monster Island, I know they’ll respect my choice and take me out of the games.

But there's an eagerness in them that I can feel humming through our bonds, a *need* to finish this properly.

Or perhaps I'm sensing their hunger for the chase.

Ika's made it rather clear that the notion of hunting me down and fucking me appeals to him. Zael seems to feel similarly, while Tiru simply wants the world to know I'm their mate.

I suppose this is kind of like a formal declaration, one meant to solidify our mating for all the realms.

Which means I need to get over my nerves and do what needs to be done.

Those nerves are simply a by-product of watching the Monster Games over the years. Nothing more. I know the truth about the trials now. They're nothing like what I've seen on the translucent screens. Those always depict water creatures pursuing Offerings and dragging them into the depths.

The real games are on land.

I can do this, I decide. "I'm okay," I tell my mates. "Just a little nervous, is all. But I'm going to be fine."

Three sets of eyes assess me, my mates trying to decide if I'm truly going to be "fine" like I said.

My gaze narrows back at them, a hint of annoyance simmering to life inside me. "I can do this," I promise them, echoing my decision out loud for them to hear. "I *need* to do this. It's how I prove myself worthy of being your mate, right?"

"It's how *we* prove our worth to you," Ika corrects me. "That's the point of the hunt, sweetheart."

"Yes, but for you to be successful, I have to create a challenge," I say, purposely using the word he said earlier. "Which brings me back to my point—I can't avoid the games. And even more important than that, I can't go easy on you. You have to work for it."

Which is also what Ika said.

However, I'm beginning to comprehend what he meant.

Excitement hums through the air as all three of my mates stare at me with matching expressions of desire. But more than that, their beasts are all lurking in their gazes right now, watching me with open anticipation.

I've awoken them with my words, thus proving everything I've said to be right.

They *need* this hunt.

Therefore, I *need* to ensure they're properly tested.

A hint of something hot rushes through my veins, that boldness inside me seeming to arouse in response to my sudden understanding of the situation.

Monster Games.

Hunt. Claim. Unite.

"I'm ready," I tell them. "But you'd better catch me."

My monsters grin.

"Oh, we will, sweetheart," Ika promises.

"And if I hide?" I counter.

Tiru responds to that with a confident "We'll find you, lei."

"Then we'll claim you again," Zael adds before pulling me into a kiss.

When he's done, he releases me to Ika, who captures me with just as much passion before spinning me into Tiru's waiting arms. His mouth is less urgent, his kiss slower and filled with unspoken promises.

"Protect our queen with your life, Farrah," Zael demands as Tiru continues to embrace me.

"Of course, Your Majesty," the seaguard responds, giving a low bow. "Consider her my sole priority."

I barely hear her words, my heart hammering so hard in my ears that it's difficult to focus on anything other than the adrenaline flooding my veins.

Whatever fear I possessed before seems to have been overrun by finally comprehending the needs of my men.

I'm about to be hunted.

By my mates.

On Monster Island.

I'm worthy of them, I tell myself. *And I'm going to prove it by creating a chase they'll never forget…*

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CHAPTER FORTY

MIZA

I STARE at my reflection in the mirror, noting the similarities to the Day of the Choosing.

Turquoise lingerie.

Freshly brushed hair, curled over one shoulder.

Pale skin with a hint of a flush.

It's like déjà vu. Except my eyes have changed. Not the color or the shape; those are the same. But there's a knowledge to my gaze that didn't exist the last time I studied myself like this. I see a hint of confidence, too.

Maybe because I know this trial takes place on land.

I'm also missing Tiru's flower. I kind of wish I could go back to my guest suite to put it in my hair, but it's too late for that. I'm currently in the belly of a hoverjet, following Farrah's instructions to "get ready." She brought me the translucent outfit to wear—a pair of boy shorts and a lacy tank top—as well as a brush.

Nothing else.

That's fine.

I don't really need anything other than what she's provided. Although, some shoes for running would have been nice.

The rumble of the engine ceases, causing my heart to skip into my throat.

We're here, I think, doing another once-over in the mirror.

I knew we were close when the hoverjet began to slow down several minutes ago. Though, Farrah never commented from above. Actually, she's barely said a word to me other than to issue her brief instructions. It seems rather clear that she's not fond of me.

I can accept that. I feel the same way about *her*.

Although, I barely know her, so I suppose it's not fair of me to dislike the woman. But my introduction to her was Zael escorting her out of the ball the other night. And he's *my* mate. He chose *me*. Not her.

I'm not even sure if she wants him like that. However, my instincts have me feeling all sorts of territorial about my men.

And they're about to hunt me down on an island to claim me, I remind myself. "Get it together," I tell my reflection. "It's time to *run*."

Not swim.

Not tread water.

Run.

Because this exercise is on land.

It's fine.

Everything. Is. Fine.

Swallowing, I step back from the mirror and force my legs to carry me up the stairs to where Farrah is no doubt waiting with a scowl on her pretty face. It'll be the same look she gave me when she instructed me to head down here to prepare myself for the games.

She didn't seem as openly antagonistic with me before, did she?

Or maybe it's all in my mind?

Regardless, I keep my head held high as I ascend the stairs, only to freeze when I reach the top of the hoverjet and see nothing but water.

Blinking, I spin, wondering if the land is behind me.

Nope.

Still only water.

And worse than that, I seem to be the only one on deck.

"Farrah?" I ask, confused as I glance around. The steering helm is half a level up, the short set of steps around the back. I make my way there, expecting Farrah to magically appear. But she doesn't.

Saying her name again, I take a few stairs to the top and frown when I find it completely empty.

"Umm." I spin around once more, taking in every inch of vacant deck space.

This hoverjet isn’t that big, maybe large enough for ten passengers to move around comfortably. The cabin below was a single bedroom with only one bathroom, so I know Farrah couldn’t have slipped by me and hid anywhere in there.

Which means… she’s abandoned me on this hoverjet.

I look for keys or something to ignite the engine. Some sort of device to call for help. Anything to reach shore.

Not that I know what I would do or how to operate it, but I’d try.

Yet there doesn’t seem to be anything useful up here. Just the single seat and steering wheel, along with a bunch of controls that appear to have no power.

I check them anyway, flipping them on and off, trying to figure out how to ignite the engine.

Nothing.

“Shells,” I mutter, whirling back and forth while scanning the surrounding ocean for any sign of Farrah. She wouldn’t just abandon me out here, would she? Zael told her to guard me. He’s her king. She wouldn’t disobey him… right?

My lips twist to the side.

Perhaps Zael knows I’m out here…?

At the very least, he’ll notice when I’m not on the island. And… and I should be there for the start of the games. Which should be any minute now.

It feels like a long time has passed since the last seahorn blared.

My hands curl into fists at my sides, then my fingers unfurl to flex. The motion has the hairs along my arms standing on end.

I have no idea what to do.

But at least I’m not in—

A blaring sound rips through the air, causing me to cover my ears and duck. It’s so loud that the boat *vibrates* beneath the power of it. Then a whooshing follows, one that has me glancing left as a giant wave comes right for the hoverjet.

My eyes widen as I leap to my feet and lunge for the steering wheel, holding on with all my might as the wall of water slams into the side of the boat.

What in the oceans is happening? I wonder dizzily.

That blare… that blare was announcing the start of the Monster Games… I think?

Maybe I’m supposed to start here and… and make it to shore?

But how? I don’t even know which way to go!

Zael said this was a *land* exercise. He and the others all promised to chase me *on* the island. Not *to* the island.

Do they even realize I’m out here?

Is this a setup?

A trap?

A—

Another wave hits the hoverjet, harder this time, and causes the water vehicle to rotate dangerously in the sea.

“Oceans!” I shout, my legs swept out beneath me as a third jolt slams into the hoverjet.

Sea spray hits me in the face, the salt stinging my eyes and forcing them to close.

I have no idea where Farrah is, but she’s clearly left me out here to fend for myself. Maybe it’s a test and part of the trials.

Or it’s something else entirely.

A chirp from the ocean has me forcing my eyes open just in time to see KiKi jump out of the water onto the deck.

“Where have you been?” I demand, breathless, as I fight to hold on to the steering wheel. “Careful!” I shout in the next breath as another wall of water slams into the boat again, this one causing the small watercraft to tip all the way to the side.

The dynamics of the ship are confusing, as we’re hovering above the water—hence the name—not *floating* in it.

I have no idea if this device can remain buoyant in turbulence like this. But if I jump into the water, I have no idea where to go.

It’s like Farrah drove us out into the middle of the ocean—*away* from the islands—and just left me here to navigate the angry seas on my own.

I growl, irritated. Then sigh when the hoverjet rights itself again.

KiKi scrambles up the stairs, her emerald eyes glittering as she chirps urgently at me.

“I have no idea what you’re saying, but I can guess,” I mutter, clinging once more to the steering wheel as the hoverjet bobs dangerously. “This thing is going to tip, isn’t it?”

I’m talking more to myself than to KiKi, but she releases a loud squeak in response, which I assume is an exclaimed “Yes!”

“I can’t just jump off the boat!” I tell her. “I’ll drown out here!”

She snorts.

“You’re mocking me now? Really?” More turbulence knocks me off my feet, causing my shoulders to spasm angrily as I’m jolted the wrong way across the top deck. I can’t hold on to this steering wheel for much longer.

But I meant what I told her—I will literally drown in these waves.

“I’m supposed to be on land!” I scream, infuriated by this trial, or *whatever* Farrah drove me into. She was supposed to protect me.

Well, she abandoned me out here.

In these angry waves.

On a hoverjet that’s about to subside.

KiKi chirps again and spins in a rapid circle, her blue and purple fur fluttering with the movements. Then she bends into a play bow, gives me a yip, and jumps high into the air.

I gape as she executes a perfect dive into the tumultuous water.

After a beat, she surfaces and spins around once more, then cocks her head in a very obvious “follow me” gesture.

How many times has she done this with me over the years?

And how many times have I laughed her off, telling her I don’t feel comfortable leaving the lagoon?

My throat works as I try to swallow, my heart hammering in my ears.

Maybe she can lead me to land, I think, bracing for what feels like the fiftieth time while the hoverjet bounces on top of the water in an ominous manner.

Staying here isn’t a good option. Swimming is potentially a worse option. But KiKi has never steered me wrong before… I just wish I knew where she’d been these last few days. Although, it’s not like I was easily accessible in the palace.

“Ugh!” My knees buckle as my balance is totally swept away by this unruly tide.

Holding on to this steering column is going to dislocate my shoulder. Or worse.

Shells.

KiKi chirps urgently from the water, grabbing my attention as a much larger wave forms in the distance. It glints in the rising sun, the morning never once appearing so ominous in my life.

Oh, oceans…

I find my footing again and backpedal to the stairs, almost falling down them as the wooden planks creak beneath me, suggesting this vessel is minutes away from being ripped apart.

I'm going to have a few things to say to that seaguard general when I find her, I decide, furious.

She had *one* job.

And maybe she thinks she did it correctly because this might be part of the Monster Games.

But my gut tells me this isn't related at all.

That Farrah set me up for another fate.

Does she know about the bounty? I wonder, freezing at the edge of the boat, my eyes widening. *Should I have—*

KiKi executes a dolphin-like flip in the air before me, grabbing my attention. Then she surfaces with more of those beckoning motions coupled with urgent cries.

"You had better know what you're doing," I tell her. "Because I—" A scream leaves me as I'm thrown off the hoverjet, my legs kicking beneath me while my arms flail, my hands seeking something to grab onto but only finding air.

Then water.

So. Much. Water.

I'm instantly hauled under the surface by an invisible force, my ankles ensnared by hands or seaweed or *something*. It's too fast for me to take a proper breath, my lungs already begging for air thanks to my scream upon entry.

Monsters!

I claw at the liquid around me, trying to swim, but whatever has a hold of me is yanking me deeper, making it impossible to surface.

This is ridiculous, I hiss, hating that I'm once again being pulled in the opposite… *Wait…* My brow furrows as memories of the other day begin to flood my mind, the very real sensation of drowning until suddenly… I was *breathing* underneath the water. Developing gills. *A fin*.

It wasn't a dream or a fantasy. It was real…

Except, I… I don't know how to replicate it.

My insides scream at me to try, my need to inhale overwhelming my mind and causing me to see dark spots. Or maybe that's the sunlight disappearing from above. Because I'm deep now. *Too deep.*

With that invisible entity guiding me downward.

What happened to KiKi? I wonder, blinking as darkness overcomes me. *Wh-why can't I… I… shift?*

Nothing feels intuitive.

Everything is too heavy. Too cold. *Too deadly.*

It's like I've been pricked with venom.

By Ika?

No.

Someone… someone like Ika?

He has poisonous abilities.

Another stealth dragon?

That would explain the *invisible* nature of the one dragging me toward the ocean floor.

But why? Who? How?

Salt bites into my lungs, causing my eyes to widen in the midnight water.

Everything's burning now, the cold vanishing in a blink as my body lights itself on fire.

I'm drowning.

Again.

And I *hate* that this is happening. That I feel so helpless against the entity trying to *kill* me.

I haven't survived this long to go out like this. I refuse.

My chest protests, needing air. But all I can inhale is *water*. It feels like acid inside me, the salt stinging my senses and weakening my reflexes.

Still, I kick, trying desperately to free myself from my invisible chains.

A sharp tug defeats the action, hauling me along this unknown path.

Everything is black now.

No light.

A waning glimmer of hope.

Futile fighting.

Sea-logged lungs…

I feel enslaved to the ocean. A prisoner of the dark depths.

Yet my heart… still… beats.

I hear it echoing in my ears. Feel it pounding in my chest.

Followed by a *clank* as something truly shackles my ankle.

A hand skims up my side, featherlight, reminding me of seaweed.

For a moment, I think I've imagined it, but then I feel the press of lips against my cheek. Or I think I do, anyway. Because in the next second, I feel nothing at all.

Silence falls.

My heartbeat vanishes.

And I realize… *I'm dead*.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

TIRU

A Few Minutes Earlier

My beast paces inside me, irritated by the sand beneath my bare feet.

Wrong, he's growling. *Wrong, wrong, wrong.*

He isn't actually uttering that word, but I translate his sentiment into the phrase I've been repeating to myself for the last thirty seconds.

Every instinct I possess is calling me to the water, not the heart of the island. I can't explain why, as I *know* the Offerings are all being dropped in the middle of Monster Island with instructions to run.

Yet I have the strangest feeling that Miza isn't among them.

"Something isn't right," Ika mutters beside me, glancing around while we wait for the seahorn to announce the start of the hunt.

"What do you mean?" Zael asks, his expression holding a strange note of relief. Almost like he wanted to voice the same statement as Ika but had refrained.

Maybe because his logical side is telling him the same thing it's telling me. Which is that the underwater monorail—carrying all the Offerings, *including Miza*—just passed the beach five minutes ago before heading into the island's cave system.

We're seconds away from hunting her.

She's fine.

This is expected.

Everything is okay.

“This isn’t…” Ika trails off, frowning as he glances around the beach. It’s full of other suitors, all of them salivating in anticipation of what’s to come.

I should be feeling the same way.

So why is my beast flooded with dread?

“Something isn’t right,” Ika mutters, still taking in the sights surrounding us. “I haven’t *seen* this moment. We’re not in the correct place.”

“This is where the chase begins for everyone,” Zael says, his tone holding an uncertain edge as he glances down at his watch. A screen appears, one that’s facing him, not me. However, it becomes clear what he’s doing when he tells the device to “Call Farrah.”

His icy eyes narrow on the third ring, his lips flattening by the fifth. After the tenth round, he ends the communication and tries Mariana.

No answer.

“I don’t—”

His statement is cut off by the resounding blare of a seahorn, the echoing roar indicating the commencement of the final round of the Monster Games.

A flurry of activity ignites around us as all the others take off toward the tree line.

But Ika, Zael, and I remain rooted in the sand.

It’s instinct. A call I can’t define. A *need* to swim. “She’s not on the island,” I tell them, unsure of how I know that. I just do.

Maybe it’s our link.

Maybe it’s my inner kraken understanding something I can’t quite grasp.

However, I believe with all my soul that I’m right.

“She’s in the water,” I add, taking a step toward the waves. “She’s calling us to join her.”

“Or it’s a trap,” Ika interjects, shadowing to block my entry into the ocean. “I haven’t foreseen any of this, Tiru.” There’s a hint of fear in his gaze. “Nothing about this moment makes sense to me.”

“Which finally makes us equals in the present,” I counter. “Welcome to life *without* foresight.” I try to move around him again, but he blocks me once more.

“You don’t understand. My visions started with Miza. Dreams, all about her. I thought it was merely a fun fantasy at first. But then I saw her during a Day of the Choosing ceremony and realized she was real. I’ve been seeing our future ever since. Until now. Until…”

He pauses, swallowing.

“Until what?” I demand.

But the bastard just shakes his head. “Our choices are going to define everything. We need to work together. That’s the only way…” He trails off again, wincing. “Everything’s foggy now. Nothing makes sense. And this moment—it was never a path in my mind. So I don’t know which way we should go.”

He sounds lost, making me frown.

Up until this moment in time, it seems Ika has predicted every potential outcome.

Now that he can’t, he almost seems powerless.

I frown at him. “You’ve been relying on your foresight to guide you, not your instincts.”

“Foresight that seems to be tied to Miza’s existence,” Zael interjects slowly, his expression thoughtful. “Do you ever dream of futures that are not related to Miza?”

Ika glances at him. “I…” His brow furrows. “Sometimes my visions involve the two of you, but Miza is still the focus of those predictions.”

“Meaning you haven’t foreseen any fates unrelated to our mate,” Zael presses. “You said your visions started with Miza. It seems they’re also only about her, too. So when did this ability of yours manifest?”

“A decade ago,” Ika says. “It’s not abnormal for a stealth dragon from my bloodline to acquire new abilities. However, your observation is… enlightening. If my foresight is directly tied to Miza’s existence, is it a gift she somehow gave me?” He cants his head. “Perhaps it’s somehow tied to her own talents?”

“Or maybe Mariana was right,” Zael replies. “She suggested Cain might be manipulating your dreams.”

“And disproved that,” Ika returns.

Zael nods. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean someone else wasn’t feeding you visions.”

Ika stares at him, understanding darkening his gaze. “Similar to how someone also targeted me with that bounty.” His tone indicates he’s

displeased by this development.

I can't blame him. If I found out someone had been fucking with my head to manipulate me, I'd be furious, too.

But now isn't the time for solving the mystery of who's behind all of this.

"We need to focus on finding Miza," I interrupt, my tone brooking no argument. "Your foresight can't help us, especially if it's all been fabricated or forced into your mind. So we need to rely on our instincts, and mine are telling me to go for a swim."

Ika considers me for a moment. "Your kraken was able to trace Miza's essence to that cave last time. I followed you then because my visions told me to. I'll follow you now because I trust your connection to our mate."

That's all I need to hear, so I look at Zael. "And you?"

He says nothing for a moment, his gaze calculating. "The point of the final trial is for the suitors to embrace the human forms of their chosen mates—by hunting them *on land*. It's the opposite of the previous trial, where the Offerings accepted the suitors as their beasts. Only, Miza isn't human."

"She's a siren," Ika murmurs before I can utter the words. "Which means we need to hunt her in the water, not on land."

"Exactly," Zael replies, glancing at Ika. "But who else knew that? And how did they orchestrate this change?"

"Does it matter?" I demand, yanking off my shirt. "Our mate is somewhere in the ocean. We can figure out who set this up later." Debating it isn't going to help the current situation. "Finding Miza is all that matters."

"Knowing who arranged this trial could provide important information about where they put Miza," Zael points out.

"I don't need to rely on knowledge," I counter, my pants already halfway down my legs. "Just my intuition. And my kraken wants to swim. *Now*." I head toward the water, preparing to dive into the waves so I can shift into my beast's form.

The moment the first trickle of a wave touches my skin, my senses ignite with understanding.

Mate, my heart seems to say with a solid beat. *Mate. Mate. Mate*.

"She's definitely in the water," I breathe, moving forward.

Ika joins me, already as naked as I am.

Zael claims my other side, his skin burning with flames. His suit falls away in strips of ash, his gaze scanning the ocean. “We’ll follow your kraken,” he tells me. “But we need to be aware, Tiru. We don’t know what or who we might be facing. This could be a lot more than a trial.”

“Do you think Farrah’s involved?” Ika asks.

“I don’t know,” Zael replies. “But someone has been manipulating my seaguards all week. The trials haven’t gone as expected. And Miza appears to be at the heart of whatever is happening here.”

“All the more reason to hunt her,” I growl, my legs already transforming.

“Carefully,” Zael stresses.

I glance at him. “Feel free to be as *careful* as you want, Elite Island King. But your seas are about to experience the determination of an enraged Kraken King.” I don’t listen for his response. I simply dive into the waves like my inner beast demands.

Then shift.

And swim.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

MIZA

IT'S STRANGE BEING DEAD. I… I expected more, I don't know, light? Atmosphere? *Something* other than this perpetual sea of darkness?

Maybe it's because I drowned.

But how strange to have a consciousness while not alive.

Is it because of my mates? I wonder, feeling my threads to them thriving in my mind. Though, that might just be my imagination. A hope, maybe, that I'll forever be linked to them.

Or perhaps it's real.

And if it is, I think slowly, *I should probably try to reach them somehow. Tell them what happened. Or… or find them.*

I'm not sure how long it takes me to come to that decision. Minutes. Hours. Days. Time feels irrelevant down here. Like an eternity may have passed that could have been mere seconds.

Hmm, I hum to myself, a sense of lightheadedness overwhelming me. It comes and goes. Ebbs and flows. *Like water.*

Something about that feels important.

Oh, yes. Because I drowned.

Except… except I feel like I'm floating.

Everything's dark. But I… I think there's a glimmer of light ahead.

How am I seeing this if I'm dead?

How am I still thinking?

This is all very confusing.

It’s like I’m trapped in an alternate reality. A bubble of sorts. An abyss of endless consideration and hints of sensation.

Because I think I just felt a chilly wave, followed by a warm kiss.

A kiss, I repeat to myself. *Like the one I sensed before the world blackened entirely*.

But who would kiss me?

My mates, certainly.

Only, they’re not here.

I hum again to myself, considering my options. However, the sound isn’t internal. It’s… it’s *external*. And it vibrated around me.

No, it *rippled*.

I’m still underwater.

I already knew that. Understood it. Except now that understanding appears to be shifting. *I haven’t truly drowned.*

My lungs are full of the sea. I’m no longer breathing.

And yet I feel my sides shifting.

Gills? Did they come back?

I try to wiggle, wondering if I have a tail.

Nothing happens. I don’t sense a single thing. It’s bleak and dark once more.

No. I narrow my eyes. Or I think I do, anyway. *If there’s even a remote chance that I’m not actually dead, then I need to* fight.

A sound touches my ear, one that sounds distinctly like an underwater screech.

From me, I realize, my instincts roaring to life with an overwhelming need to writhe and break free of these binds.

Sensation sparks through my system.

Seaweed. That’s what has me trapped. They’re like vines around my arms and legs. Another over my eyes. I can feel them now. Maybe it’s not proper seaweed, but that’s the only substance I can think of, and I don’t even care to name it. I just want to *destroy* it.

Another shriek leaves me as I squirm against the slippery ropes, determined to escape. To free my limbs. *To breathe*.

This might all be in my head. A warped nightmare. *The afterlife*.

But I don’t allow myself to consider that option.

All I care about is tearing off these seaweed-like chains.

A growl emanates from my chest, a sound I shouldn't be able to make without air. Though, the same could be said about my shrieking. So I ignore the *how* and focus on making as much noise as possible.

Because it seems to be helping.

It's entirely surreal. Unfathomable. But the vines are *listening* to me. They're responding to my voice. Every sound from my lips results in a lessening of their hold, the sticky ropes slithering across my skin and allowing me to breathe a little more.

Or… or whatever I'm doing.

Inhaling water?

Through gills?

Maybe?

My lungs are not expanding. There doesn't appear to be any movement in my chest at all. Yet I have enough of *something* to scream.

No. Not scream. *Sing?* It's not an entirely unpleasant sound. It startled me at first, but now it resembles a song as I command the vines to release me. *To let me swim*.

The desire blossoms inside me with renewed life, flooding my veins with the need to pump my legs in a butterfly kick. To allow my arms to scull through the water. To move the waves with my palms. *To flip and dive and whirl*.

I have no idea where these ideas are coming from, but I embrace them and allow them to fuel my song.

It's so pretty.

A hypnotic melody beneath the surface.

A call to everyone nearby and far.

Can my mates hear me? I wonder, a thrill curling inside me and increasing my tone, causing my voice to carry farther.

Oceans, I've lost my mind.

Maybe that's what dying does? It frees the spirit to *dream*, and this is a fantasy I long to fulfill.

To command the sea, not allow it to control me.

A whirlpool of power flourishes through me, my mind set, my heart beating erratically in my chest. The binds are disappearing, granting me freedom to—

Thunder rumbles beneath the sea, the vibration sending me twirling into a cyclone of foreign energy. Screams erupt all around, the screeches making

me flinch and cover my ears.

The essence I felt moments ago—the one overwhelming me with joy—dissipates in a blink, leaving me shaking as the ocean takes over once more.

Down, I think, whirling dangerously. *Down, down, down*.

I thought I was at the bottom before. I was wrong. I'm soaring the wrong way. Yanked toward the obsidian floor below.

No! I shout in my mind, my mouth opening on another *song*. Not a complaint or a shrieking roar, but a melody that sounds wrong. Frustration pools inside me, tugging at my limbs, encouraging me to kick and move my hands to seek traction.

But the water doesn't move the right way.

It's all upside down.

What's happening? I think, dizzy, as I find myself spinning inside a violent whirlpool of that foreign entity. More screeches claw at my ears. Sharp stones bite into my flesh. And my lungs… *they burn again*. Like I'm fighting for air.

This doesn't make any sense!

I was just surviving beneath the waves on… on… *on water*. Or oxygen in the water. I… I don't know. However, I need to make it happen again.

Focus, I think, looking internally. *Focus and breathe*.

My mouth opens.

I inhale.

Choke.

Growl.

Sputter.

The song stops.

Annoyance tickles my mind, overshadowing the fear I should be feeling. But all I seem to be experiencing is a mounting *rage*. Because the water shouldn't be suffocating me. It should be helping me. Responding to me. *Obeying me.*

A scream rips from my throat, one I shouldn't be able to voice, given my struggling position, yet the musical note that leaves me is one filled with command. Everything stops. The weight on my chest. The tugging sensation dragging me downward. It all stills.

And then it begins to spin as that foreign energy rages right back at me, trying to force me to submit.

Glittery color blossoms in my vision, the sight of pink hair giving me pause. It's the same color as my own. Only it's too far away to be mine. Just as the face it's framing is ghostly and cast in shadows, the eyes are black as night.

Who are you? I try to ask.

Then a beam of light illuminates the other entity for a brief moment in time. But it's long enough for me to gasp.

Is that…? I trail off, trying to see. *Oceans, is that Celina?*

For a second, it looked like her. However, she's too far away for me to know for sure.

Another blast of power hits me, knocking me deeper, the seaweed taking hold again.

My chest rumbles in response, irritation mounting once more.

I will not be subdued by this unknown entity!

If it is Celina, I'm going to fight.

Not that I know how to battle with her, but I refuse to just *sink* to my death again.

Maybe this is all in my head. Maybe it's a weird, nightmarish dream. I'm basically surviving underwater, after all. But I'm not going to overthink it. I'm just going to react.

Because I haven't survived this long to merely drown.

I have three mates who are looking for me. I can feel them hunting my essence. They know I'm out here. And I'm going to make sure they find me.

Another songlike noise leaves my mouth as I call for them.

Just as more power erupts around me, forcing the sea to release me.

I'm done fearing the ocean. The entity inside me longs to swim. It's that same boldness that took over with my mates. The voice that pushed me into my heat. And I have no interest in ignoring that part of me. I embrace her instead, setting her free, and sigh with relief as all the pressures surrounding me disappear.

Blinding light chases away the darkness, allowing me that glimpse of pink hair once more. Black eyes. A fin of turquoise and purple gemstones.

Then another wave of angry energy sends me spinning into what feels like my millionth whirlpool of insanity.

It's unending.

A war I don't understand.

I'm missing something, I realize, dizzy from the ocean's assault. *I don't… I don't know how to breathe again…*

This battle is incomprehensible. I don't even know who I'm fighting.

Celina? I guess again, thinking about the hair and dark eyes. *Seren?*

But why?

Is this related to the bounty? To my fate? To the fact that I'm not human?

So many questions. No time for answers.

I need to swim again, to break through these suffocating binds.

My soul takes over once more, helping me. But it's short-lived, the crushing external force immediately dragging me under in the next breath.

I don't understand. My internal strength seems to burst from within only to be squandered in the next instant. It's like I can't maintain the gift for long, as though I need something external to latch onto.

My mates? I guess. *Do I need them to… help tether me somehow?*

More dizziness overwhelms me for a blink, shrouding me in darkness.

Uncertainty begins to creep into my mind. *What if none of this is real? And this is all just some sort of mental test?*

My eyes open. *Test. Trial. Hunt.*

Those words are important.

They *mean* something.

The Monster Games.

It was supposed to be on land. But maybe… maybe mine are meant to be in the water.

Unless none of this is related and I'm just spiraling for other reasons. Ones related to someone wanting me dead?

But why?

What did I do other than *exist*?

My gaze narrows. *This is ridiculous*. Annoyance rekindles inside me, causing my inner boldness to rise for the hundredth time. Only, I can't seem to lasso the energy long enough to truly fight the current around me.

Because I need anchors, I think. *My mates.*

This is all… all about them.

Or perhaps me and my growing power.

I shake my head, tired of thinking. Tired of trying to solve this ludicrous mystery. What I need to do is *surface*.

Breathe real air.

And master the ocean around me long enough to reach land.

Yes.

Decided, I push the essence out of me and command control. Except the song that leaves my lips sounds wrong to my ears. More like a shriek now than music.

And the water reacts accordingly, thundering through my ears as it yanks me farther down, drowning me in its dominance.

I choke, this time truly unable to inhale or survive.

It's… it's…

I'm dying.

Again.

I don't understand!

My heart beats loudly. *Too* loudly. The rhythm matching the whirlpool of power.

Help me! I try to scream to my mates. But I don't know how our links work. I can sense them searching, feel their panic now.

They're close.

Maybe.

I…

The world is darkening. *Not again*, I think. *Am I dead? Was this all just… a moment in the afterlife?*

I shake my head, refusing to believe it. Refusing to *succumb*. These seas have longed to drown me for over two decades. Yet I've pushed back. I've tried to figure out how to master my fear, to balance on those damn lily pads, all while the water threatened my existence.

To let it win now feels wrong.

I just don't know what to do. How to let my soul break free. How to *embrace* my power and *maintain* it.

Frustration curls inside me for the thousandth time, my inner whatever-this-is—my siren?—seeming to beat at my bones and hammer at my mind.

I grab my hair and pull, voicelessly screaming as I do, needing to release this tension, to lessen the pressure on my lungs.

It's too much.

It hurts.

It burns.

There's no oxygen here. Just ink. Mud. *Death*.

Madness exists. I am insanity personified.

Because I’m fighting a figment. A being I can’t truly see. Celina? I don’t know. A pink-haired version of myself?

And all I’m doing is spinning, spinning, *spinning*.

Until everything ceases.

The seas calm.

The world rights itself once more.

And air touches my lips for the first time in eons.

I don’t understand how. Can’t fathom where I even am, as it’s still dark as night. But I’m inhaling. Exhaling. And for now… that’s all that matters.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

ZAEL

"WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE?" I demand as Ika and Tiru meet me at the surface.

We've been hunting Miza for *hours*. Her essence is fucking everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

"It's like she keeps blinking in and out of existence through a damn portal," I go on. "But I haven't sensed any illegal breaches in my domain."

"Ika can portal without detection," Tiru points out.

"So you think I'm responsible?" Ika asks, sounding far too amused by the prospect. "Why would I engage in this asinine game of hide-and-seek with *our mate*?"

"I'm not saying you're responsible, Stealth Dragon King," Tiru growls at him. "I'm saying you possess the ability to teleport or shadow or whatever the fuck it is that you do, and I usually can't sense it until you're already in front of me. Which means someone else might have that ability, too."

"Someone like Mariana?" Ika suggests, glancing at me. "She did that the other day when fucking off to meet with Cain."

My jaw clenches. I don't appreciate the accusation. However, I haven't heard from my second-in-command since this chase began earlier today, and now the sun is beginning to set over the horizon. The final trial should be finished. Flames, it probably is done on the island.

But ours feels far from over.

And I want to know *why*.

I want to know who set this up.

I want to know what fucking game we're playing.

Though, most importantly of all, I want to know where in the fires my mate is right bloody now.

Farrah was supposed to guard her. Yet the seaguard hasn't responded to my calls. Neither has Mariana.

That can't be a coincidence.

Something is happening among my ranks. Inside my *region*. And either Miza is at the heart of it, or someone has crafted this game as a distraction from the coup d'état happening in my palace.

"You feel that?" Tiru asks, his question stilling my thoughts as a wave of power overwhelms my senses. "It's just like the wave the other day."

I nod, my gaze narrowing as I search the unending sea. It's darker now, the moon glittering off the water in splashes of gold and white.

While I can sense the threat of foreign energy, I can't *see* the source of it. And that fucking infuriates me.

"I don't know who has manifested this game, but I'm done playing," I growl, my voice carrying across the ocean and amplified by my own power. "*I* am the Elite Island King. And I bow to fucking no one."

Except for Miza. I'll absolutely bow to her.

Which requires me to *find* her.

My dragon paces within me, furious that our hunt continues to be thwarted by a shifting essence. Ika's dark eyes showcase a similar exasperation, his beast very much evident in his glare.

Tiru is the only one who seems to be calm. Although, I can sense his kraken's agitation. He's still partially shifted, his tentacles swirling dangerously beneath the waves.

"This isn't a game, Elite Island King," a feminine voice says right behind me.

A voice that belongs to the Monster Island Queen.

"It's a *trial*," she adds as I spin to face her. "A trial you all are failing."

"You're responsible for this." I don't voice it as a question because her presence here already confirms my statement. So instead, I demand, "*Why*?"

Her honeydew-colored skin tone appears even more green in the moonlight, giving her a sickly appeal that's only betrayed by her vibrant

violet hair. Still, something doesn't seem *right* about her.

She looks tired.

Too tired.

I narrow my gaze at her. "What's really happening here, Seren?" Because she hasn't seemed like herself all week. I may not like the Siren Queen, but I *know* her. And all the shit she's pulled lately is very out of character.

"An ascension," she tells me. "The rise of a new monarch is being tested, and it's an exhausting ritual, one you're prolonging by wasting my time. *Go to Miza*. She needs you."

"Where is she?" Ika interjects, suddenly at my side. "Tell us how to find her."

"Don't you have a pet that guards her?" she counters. "One you stole from Tiru?" She glances at the Kraken King, then back at me. "Pursuing Miza's essence isn't the solution. You need to embrace who and what she is and *anchor* her. She's growing into her power, and it's too much for her to contain."

"So you know she's a siren." Another statement, not a question, because clearly Seren is aware of Miza's heritage.

"Of course I do," Seren replies, sounding even more exhausted. "She's—"

Huntz surfaces, interrupting whatever she was about to say. His gray eyes flick between the four of us, the orbs narrowing to slits. "I don't mean to interrupt, Your Majesty, but—"

"I know," Seren snaps. "*I know*, Huntz. But she's my—"

"*Your Majesty*," he interjects, arching a brow. "How about you go for a swim while I handle our candidates, hmm?"

"Candidates?" I repeat, staring him down. "Are you referring to the Offerings under my protection, or *us*, the three *kings* swimming before you?"

He ignores me entirely, his focus on Seren as something seems to pass between them.

Something that feels a little too akin to affection.

Is this opera singer more than just an emissary to the Siren Queen? I wonder, utterly unimpressed by her choice if that's the case.

Yet she appears to submit to him because she nods and disappears without a word.

“It’s not typical for a queen to bow to anyone, let alone someone ranked lower than her,” Ika remarks, taking the thought right out of my head. “I would ask for more information on what’s happening between you two, but I don’t actually care. Instead, I want to understand what you meant by *candidates*.”

For as infuriating as I find the Stealth Dragon King, he’s at least proving to be a respectable ally, given that he’s repeating my question as a demand.

Tiru moves behind the emissary, his focus on the back of the siren’s black head as he says, “Speak, *merman*. My kraken is out of patience.” He reveals two tentacles while he utters the words, his insult not lost on me.

Sirens hate to be referred to as mercreatures. They’re not truly mermaids or mermen, but another species entirely.

“It’s unwise to irritate potential advocates, Kraken King,” Huntz murmurs, his soft tones barely carrying over the waves. “My queen took a risk to speak with you, just as I am now, too. We’re not meant to interfere with fate. But you’re as unaware of our customs as the princess below. So I feel compelled to provide some context.”

I share a look with Ika and then Tiru, all of us clearly feeling the same way about Huntz’s presence.

We can’t trust him; that much is clear.

But listening to whatever he wants to share shouldn’t cause any harm.

Unless he chooses to *sing*, in which case I’ll flame his ass before he can utter a second note.

“Every millennium, the ruling tides change,” Huntz says, sounding as haughty as he did when providing the Monster Games invite list all those weeks ago. “The reigning monarch spends centuries preparing for the succession, the primary duty of their rule being to produce an appropriate heir or heiress.”

I scull my arms through the water, focused on Huntz while fire rages through my veins. My dragon is impatient and wants this opera singer to get to the fucking point. It’s a sentiment I share with my beast.

“Our seas are turbulent. Therefore, only the strongest of our kind can succeed. Not too dissimilar to how your own realms and species ascend, I’m sure. But our fates are tied to the ocean’s needs. And the oceans of this world do not operate like the waters of our origin. Which is why a new kind of heiress was… created.”

My eyebrow inches upward. “Let me guess—*Miza* is the heiress that was ‘created’?”

He smiles. “These waters are frequented by mortals. Therefore, only a human could enchant our seas. But she has to be more than extraordinary to win over our ocean. Which means an abundance of power and the need for anchors.” He glances at the three of us knowingly. “Three *kingly* anchors.”

“Why is it acceptable for you, but not Seren, to share these details with us?” Ika interjects. “You just finished chasing her off, presumably because she’s not allowed to provide us with this information, yes?”

“The ascension is complicated, and as I said, I’m merely providing context. I’m not telling you how to succeed.” He looks directly at Ika. “I would expect you to understand better than anyone else how the interpretation of terms can be flexible. That’s why you enjoy the art of negotiating recompense, yes?”

Ika stares back at him, his gaze narrowing as his expression shifts through a variety of emotions. Or perhaps I’m witnessing his mind work. I can’t quite tell, but he’s clearly beginning to understand this riddle. “You sent the bounty.”

My brow furrows at that reveal. Something Huntz said must have clued Ika into that realization because he voiced the words as a fact, not an inquiry.

Huntz blinks at him. “I’ve done many things, Stealth Dragon King.” He looks at me. “Providing you with the list, thus piquing your intrigue.” He glances back at Tiru. “Helping draft that contract between my queen and your father.” He refocuses on Ika. “You have always been the unknown entity in this equation.”

Ika’s expression doesn’t change. He merely treads water in a fashion similar to mine while holding the emissary’s gaze. “Understandable.” That single word is all Ika says.

Is it? I wonder, my arms still sculling through the waves. *Is it understandable? Because this sounds like Huntz maneuvered us all into pieces on a waterlogged chessboard.*

And I want to know *why*.

Except he’s already somewhat provided an answer to that.

They created Miza to serve as a potential queen. But the power is too much for a human to manage… or perhaps he means *survive*.

Which is why she needs anchors.

Three kings.

Three mates.

All of whom Huntz seems to have brought together… for Miza.

“How do we find her?” I demand, bringing us back to the relevant parts of this conversation. “Her essence is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.”

Huntz nods. “The ocean is… negotiating with her. And she’s fighting her siren nature.”

“Miza has spent her entire life believing she was human,” Ika replies, gaze narrowing. “She has no understanding of her true self. No *training*. She’s also always been uneasy in the water because she felt the sea’s demands but didn’t know how to embrace its call.”

“You threw our mate into the literal deep end, expecting her to magically survive,” Tiru growls, clearly furious. “I spent eons training for my ascension. You gave Miza nothing and now intend for her to lead.”

“We gave her everything we could,” Huntz returns, rotating in the water with a swift kick of his fin to face off with the Kraken King. “She has *three* royal mates to help her flourish. Three rival powers that have united for her benefit. Now stop wasting time and *hunt*. The fate of all our kingdoms depends on your success.”

With that profound statement, the emissary vanishes.

Just like Seren did moments ago.

“That’s not an ordinary gift for a siren,” Ika says, his head canting to the side. “Seren appears to be not only the Siren Queen but a queen of secrets, too.”

“Indeed,” I mutter, agreeing with him. My arms shift beneath the water once more, keeping me afloat while I evaluate everything Huntz and Seren said.

“The cephlalosune,” Tiru whispers to himself, his head snapping up as he looks at Ika. “That’s the pet Seren mentioned, right? The one you stole from me and tasked to guard Miza?”

My brow furrows. I was replaying the ascension parts of our discourse in my head and ignoring what Seren said before disappearing. However, it seems Tiru possessed a similar notion—to consider what Seren and Huntz told us—only he focused on the earlier section of the conversation.

On words I should have been thinking about this whole time.

“KiKi,” I say before Ika can respond. “*KiKi*.”

Fuck. We've wasted so much time. And Seren pointed that out at the very beginning, but I was so caught up in her presence and wanting an explanation for the game that I didn't *hear* her very clear hint.

"KiKi!" I repeat on a bellow, my voice carrying across the waves of the ocean as I call for the creature that should be able to serve as a guide.

Ika and Tiru don't ask questions, just echo the call, both of them yelling for the small creature I discovered the night I first met Miza.

Gods, why did I not think of calling for the little guardian before?

And how did I miss Seren's obvious hint?

This is why Miza has a mate-circle. The three of us provide her with alternative points of view and a variety of skills. A single mate could never be enough for her.

Especially if what Huntz has said is true—that she's a being of unique power who is destined to rule the sirens.

I have so many questions.

But all I truly care about is helping our female survive this ascension. And truly making her our queen.

Once she's on the throne, we'll demand answers. We'll seek revenge. We'll do whatever she desires. *Anything and everything for our mate.*

Tiru releases a growl that vibrates the waters around us, the sound commanding stillness. Quiet. *Submission*.

My inner beast stills at the power of it, enthralled more than infuriated. This male is a worthy counterpart. In any other situation, I would challenge him for authority. Demand that he kneel in my territory.

However, everything's shifted between us.

We're equals now.

This region is no longer mine… It's *ours*.

With Miza as our center.

"There you are," Ika practically purrs as a foxy face with big emerald eyes peeks up at us from beneath the water.

She doesn't surface.

Simply stares at us with a mixture of uncertainty, fear, and ruthlessness. It's an intriguing combination, one that tells me that even though she's afraid, she's prepared to fight us if needed.

"We don't want to hurt you, little guardian," I promise her, my tone lower now. "But we need your help."

“Take us to Miza,” Tiru demands, obviously opting for a different approach with the creature.

I suppose he sees her as a minion since she’s a servant in his realm.

Although, he surprisingly adds, “Please,” after a beat, like he’s ascertained he owes this being more respect than he originally displayed. “I’m worried about our mate, KiKi. She needs us. And my patience… is wearing thin.” His explanation holds a note of despair, one I feel in my very soul.

We’re running out of time, I realize.

“Please, KiKi,” Ika echoes. “Lead us to our queen.”

The cephlalosune slowly lifts her head out of the water, her big eyes blinking. She releases a chirp and executes a perfect spin to dive downward, the order to follow her clear.

I don’t think; I act, my dragon taking over to shift me into an appropriate swimming form. Ika is right beside me, with Tiru already beneath us. For a big fucker, he’s *fast*.

But this isn’t a race.

We’re a team.

And together, we’re going to win this fucking trial.

Hold on, little queen, I think. *Just hold on…*

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

MIZA

Awesome. I'm trapped in an underwater cave. Or, I guess, more accurately, a volcanic cave.

Still, it's definitely deep beneath the waves.

And it's glowing red all around me, thanks to the lava tubes.

Fire. Water. Inky darkness. No exit apart from the pool of water that spit me out onto the black rocks.

"Yeah," I mutter. "This is fine. Perfectly fine."

A lie.

Obviously.

Because nothing about this is *fine*.

I have no idea how long I've been in this cave, just that I've searched every wall and corner of the cavernous space. The only thing I haven't done is try to *climb*. But that seems even more dangerous than diving back into the water.

"*Ugh*." I feel restricted in here. Claustrophobic. *Lost*.

My instincts are telling me to return to the sea.

My mind is screaming negatively in response.

My heart is racing.

My lungs… my lungs are sore. Throbbing. Tight from the lack of oxygen that exists down here in this cave. Or maybe it's because I'm not meant to be breathing right now.

I still don’t know if I’m alive or dead. Everything is confusing. But I want to survive. I desire *life*. My mates. *An existence as their queen*.

Just like they promised.

But they haven’t hunted me properly. They haven’t *found* me.

I told them I might hide. I meant on land. However, the seas and Farrah clearly had other ideas. Still, they *promised* to come for me.

Oceans, I’m growing delirious.

This cave doesn’t feel right at all. It’s too hot. Too cold. Too stuffy. Too dark. Too *dry*.

I glance at the pool of water again, my instincts roaring with *need*. All I want to do is swim. Which contradicts everything I’ve ever felt before.

I’ve always feared what the seas desired, how it longed to take me under, to *drown* me. Yet I’ve never felt more alive than I have this week.

Pulled under the tide.

Unable to breathe.

When, suddenly, freedom touched my insides.

Yes, I think, taking a step forward. *Wait, no.* I shake my head, trying to clear the conflicting thoughts. “None of this makes sense!” I hiss out loud.

But my voice sounds all sorts of wrong.

It’s louder than a hiss. Almost like a *screech*. Very unlike the melody I created beneath the waves.

“I’m meant to swim,” I whisper to myself, blinking as something glitters in the pool. A light. I dart forward, curiosity ensnaring me. *Hope*. “KiKi?” I breathe, wishing beyond everything that my purple-blue fox-like friend would return to me.

I haven’t seen her since she abandoned me on the hoverjet.

Alas, the item appearing looks green in color. Not like her emerald eyes, but a dark green—a color distorted, perhaps, like the lava tubes running through the cave.

A lily pad, I think as the item takes shape. “*Starfish*. You’re kidding, right?” I demand of the cave. Of the water. Of whoever or whatever is controlling all of this. “A lily pad?!”

Yep. Definitely losing my mind.

This is exhausting.

Infuriating.

Terrifying.

“If you think I’m going to kneel on that, well…” I trail off. “Well, you might be right.” Because what else am I supposed to do?

This is clearly some sort of test. Maybe a trial for the afterlife? A warped Monster Games designed just for me?

I don’t know.

And there is *no one* here to explain it.

I’ve been alone for what feels like months. Probably only hours, though. Still, the entire situation resembles a ridiculous nightmare.

My lips twist, my gaze narrowing. “You clearly appeared for a reason,” I say to the lily pad. “A final evaluation of some kind? A way to see if I’ve learned how to balance after all these years? Because we both know I haven’t.”

Silence is the only response I hear.

Naturally, given that I’m *alone* in a *cave*.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes. “Totally losing my mind,” I mutter to myself. “Maybe it’s the lack of quality air.”

Or the fact that I need to breathe in water.

Right, then.

To the lily pad I go.

What choice do I have?

Besides, as I said out loud, it clearly presented itself to me for a purpose. Might as well find out what it has in mind.

I suppose the only other option is to wait down here. But wait for what? My mates to find me? I can’t even sense them anymore. It’s like the cave cut me off.

Or I’m dead, I think for the thousandth time.

If that’s true, though, I definitely have nothing to lose.

And if it’s not true, I only have experimentation on my side.

My hand drops away from my nose, my eyes opening to fixate on the lily pad. “It’s you and me,” I say, pointing at the slippery object floating in the water. “I’m done being afraid of you.”

It’s the kind of comment I may have thought previously to myself in an attempt to boost my confidence. But as I uttered the words just now, I realized… I meant them.

I’m not afraid of the lily pad.

I’m not even sure I fear the ocean.

Yes, it keeps trying to kill me. But I know I can breathe underwater. I've done it more than once. I just have to figure out how to do it again.

Then I can swim back to the surface. Or at least attempt to reach my mates via our bonds.

To just *sense* them again would be nice. I don't actually know how to connect to them. We haven't had enough time together to learn how our circle works.

Shellfish, I still don't even know if I'm pregnant.

Everything has happened so fast.

However, I'm determined to find them. To beat whatever this is. *To survive*.

The moment I move toward the water again, I feel the rightness of my choice. *This starts and ends with the lily pad.*

Such a ridiculous notion.

Yet it oddly makes sense.

I feel as though I've come full circle in a way. Zael met me the night I was practicing, only my training goes back so many more years than that. I've always been afraid of kneeling on the slippery surface and falling into the ocean.

But as I slip into the water now, I feel none of that trademark terror. No shivers. No uncertain movements. Not even the skipping of my heart.

Just… peace.

I grab the slick pad and pull myself up onto it, then execute the perfect form—kneeling with my head slightly bowed.

Except… that doesn't feel right.

I don't want to kneel. I don't want to lower my gaze. I don't want to *submit*.

My brow furrows, my gaze lifting. "I'm not an Offering." The words are for me more than the water around me, yet I hear the words carrying. "I'm not even human. I'm… *a siren*." Except it's more than that. I'm not just a siren either. "I'm a queen."

A queen who is mated to three very powerful kings.

Warmth hums through my veins, my body seeming to come alive with renewed understanding. That boldness inside me is growing. Taking over. Blossoming with purpose. With life. With *desire*.

I stand, not because I tell my body to do so, but because my *soul* has seized control.

I give in, allowing that part of me to flourish, to overtake the mortal shell I've worn for twenty-three years. And I simply… dive into the water.

No breath is taken.

No hint of hesitation.

Just a perfectly executed entry.

The sea parts for me, a welcoming hum rushing to my ears. This feels so much better than the cave. I have no idea how deep I am beneath the surface or how I've survived the crushing pressure of the ocean at this level. But all I can do is embrace my fate.

I inhale because I can.

Feel my legs kick as a solitary unit—*a fin*.

Angle my arms into the stream created by my power.

And swim.

The speed pounds through me, knocking my hair from my face as I move impossibly fast. Some part of me registers that it's my fin doing all the work. A fin that didn't exist moments ago in the cave. But I can sense it now.

I didn't even feel my shift.

Or maybe… maybe I did when I gave control to my soul.

No, not my soul, but my inner siren.

It felt so natural. So *easy*.

Except it took me *forever* to figure this out. And I'm not even sure I did it correctly.

But I'm free! I'm swimming through the darkness, speeding along in this current I've created. I have no idea where I'm going. I'm just—

A shock of power blasts into my side, sending me whirling into a dangerous undertow. My arms flail, my fin flaps the wrong way, and my insides *burn* from the way my body bends in the wrong direction.

What…?

I don't understand what just happened. I was swimming and—

Another jolt hits me, causing my back to bow beneath the electric energy. It feels wrong. Foreign. *Unacceptable*.

I'm underwater.

Why would there be *electricity* here?

Unless… an eel?

No.

No, this was something else entirely.

It’s like I’m being *attacked*. But by whom?

I fight to see, to claw my way out of this lethal current and find my balance once more. But it’s pitch black. I can’t figure out which way is up or down, my body seeming to be caught in this intense whirlpool.

A shriek leaves me, the protest one I hear ripple through the water around me in a command to *release me*.

To my utter shock, it does.

I spiral out of it into a flat float, my head dizzy from the rapid motion as everything stills again.

It worked, I think, blinking into the darkness. *I—*

Two volts slam into me at once, cascading me right back into the violent cyclone, causing me to growl in annoyance.

“Stop!” I shout as glittering lights appear all around me, illuminating the sea in an enchanted glow. I’m not sure of the source, whether it’s some sort of fish or… or if my eyes have finally adjusted. Regardless, I can *see*.

At least, sort of.

There are shapes around me.

Flashes of hair.

Pink.

Just like before.

Only there are glimpses of ruby, too. And violet.

I try to study the forms, to determine what and *who* I’m looking at.

But I’m overridden with more power surges, cascading all over again into another undertow.

It infuriates me.

Why are they attacking me? I’m a siren. A *queen*.

Wait, I think, catching sight of the pink-haired vision once more. *Is that…?*

I swear I just saw Celina.

And I’m pretty sure the ruby-haired one beside her was *Mariana*.

What color hair does Farrah have? I wonder dazedly. *Violet?*

Someone or something kissed my cheek before securing me under the water. Was that Farrah? I can’t remember seeing her hair then. Only pink a bit ago.

Was Farrah the one who shackled me? Or was it someone else entirely?

My world is shrouded in darkness again as I momentarily lose my focus, too lost in my thoughts to fight.

With a growl, I command the water to obey me again. The notion comes to me a little easier now, my reaction more of an instinct than a desire.

I'm not as surprised when it works, my mind and soul seeming to blend together as one to accept that this is my fate. This is my *gift*.

I'm not human.

I'm a siren.

The ocean is *mine*.

And it needs to bow.

I shoot upward with a swift pump of my fin, my body streamlining with a new current—one *I* have created.

But after only moments of fleeing, I find myself dragged back under by invisible chains of foreign power.

Celina, I recognize, seeing her clearly as her face finally comes into view a few feet away from me.

I narrow my gaze, fury erupting inside me.

Why is she attacking me?

Does she not like that I'm a siren? Or is this because of her engagement to Tiru?

My hands curl into fists at my sides, the thought of this being about *my* Kraken King sending a fresh wave of annoyance through me.

Tiru Engeri is *mine*.

My monster.

My king.

My mate.

She can't have him.

Possessiveness blossoms inside me, a need to demonstrate my claim taking over my ability to properly process or think. Because all I care about is making a statement.

Tiru never belonged to you. He's my *fate*.

Maybe I should feel bad that I ruined their engagement.

And perhaps I would have if she weren't actively *attacking* me.

Part of me wants to return the favor, but the desire to publicly establish my link to Tiru is stronger than the need to fight back.

Shells, I miss him. I miss them.

Where are they?

Why aren't they here?

I swallow, then close my eyes and search for the strands within me that link to my kings. All while chaos erupts around me. Celina has sent me into another cyclone. I ignore the whirling water and instead focus on Tiru, putting all my energy and desire into making a statement regarding our fate.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

I can feel his beast agreeing, his roar echoing through the water to match my resounding scream. We're taking ownership of the seas. Announcing our connection. Becoming a united queen and king.

But it's not enough.

I need Zael and Ika, too.

They're mine just as much as Tiru is.

And I need the world to know it. All the realms. All the kingdoms. *The entire universe*.

It's an overwhelming compulsion, one I don't try to dissuade or dismantle. I simply allow it to consume me. To become me. *To be me.*

The ocean rages.

Salt fills my lungs.

I'm suffocating once more and don't care.

This is who I am. Who we are. And I will not allow anyone or anything to stand in my way of establishing our rule.

My perpetual fear of the ocean is finished. Gone. *Dead*. It's time for the ocean to fear me. To fear *us*.

I proclaim that with a melody, one meant to weave together fates and futures. It's a song that leaves my lips from my soul, a scream I've been holding deep within that longs to be heard. I can't explain how it's happening or what words I'm actually saying. I'm just a vessel meant to deliver this incantation. This *call.*

Power rotates around me, crafting an essence that emboldens my lungs, allowing me to sing… sing… *sing*.

A siren's heart.

The ocean's music.

Calming. Tranquil. Soft yet deadly.

I feel it all. Experience the lethality lurking deep down. See the serenity that unites the sea and all its beautiful creatures. And witness the temperamental surface. So deceptively inviting, while maintaining the true depths of chaos below.

The perfect home.

A beacon of balance.

My intended throne…

It’s right there, surrounded by light and glory and framed by my mates.

A kraken. Two dragons. All kings. Arms outstretched, pulling me toward them as our mating finalizes for everyone to witness.

It’s a dance of need. A waltz of insanity. A marriage meant to last an eternity.

I spin between them now, the water twirling me violently as an offering for my mates.

Or perhaps to taunt them. I’m not sure. It’s all so elusive. So intangible. Yet I’m here. I feel them. *See* them. Hear the ocean. The enchanting songs of fellow sirens.

We’re ascending to something new.

I can’t define what’s happening. I just know better than to try to stop it.

So I simply allow the ocean to present me, aware that I command the essence twirling me around.

And engage in the anchors latched deep into my soul. The anchors of my mates. Their power. Their authority. Their protection. *Their love*.

My heart beats for them in kind. My lungs breathe the ocean waves. My soul swims in the depths below. All while the stars above illuminate everything around us.

I register somewhere deep within that I’m no longer living on the ocean floor, but gracing the surface of the seas, being swept toward an island as the water urges me to accept its favor. I can feel the waves yielding to me, their movements meant to appease my spirit rather than provoke it.

There’s no more terror between us. Only understanding. A purpose. *A future reign*.

I sigh, pleased with the change.

Close my eyes.

And allow fate to swallow me down… one final time.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

IKA

This is the moment I've fantasized about for years.

The culmination of Miza's ascension.

The union of all our souls as fate takes hold.

It's a vision I crafted based on instinct, not dreams of the future. It's something I thought might happen if our union proved to be worthy, and it has.

She's a fucking diamond in the waves, glittering with power, her beautiful form shifted into a siren of glorious power.

"Fuck me," Zael breathes, watching our mate twirl into a cyclone of elemental energy. She's commanding the water around her just as easily as it controls her. A symbiotic relationship of fate. "I've never felt power like this."

I nod, agreeing with him. Tiru releases a low hum that I translate to be his appreciation as well, the three of us treading water while observing our female's rise to power.

It's very unlike my own ascension, which was shrouded in death and destruction.

This is so much kinder, despite whatever Celina was doing to her in the sea below. I sensed her more than saw her. Mariana and Farrah, too. And Seren.

Along with dozens of others.

All of them appeared to be blasting our mate with energy, fighting her beneath the current. Yet their stares are ones of wonder now as they watch her continue to rise on an ocean-like throne.

I'm not even sure Miza is aware of how high above us she is on this spire of watery energy.

I tense as the tower gives out, my mate suddenly falling from the sky while cradled in the palm of the sea.

She's taken deep within a cavern of endless tides, her body disappearing right along with her essence. Only to pop up seconds later as the sea delivers her to the beach on a gentle wave.

Zael is the first to take off toward her, his arms moving in a fluid motion as he executes perfect strokes along the surface.

I follow, with Tiru disappearing beneath us.

It's Tiru who wins the race to the shore, probably because he used his tentacles to propel him. Zael and I are not far behind him, though, the waves seeming to help us along to meet up with our circle.

"She's breathing," Tiru tells us, his words ones I appreciate hearing even though I already knew our mate was fine. She's practically glowing with energy despite being in human form now, not the one of her siren.

Still, there's no question that she's our queen. The way the ocean calms tells me the seas are pleased with their choice, the ascension… *complete*.

"It's done," a familiar voice says behind me, the relief in the former Siren Queen's tone palpable.

"We're free," another woman adds, causing me to turn my head. "*I* am free."

My eyebrow inches upward at that proclamation. "Free from what, Celina?"

"The demands of the sea," she whispers, looking not at me but at the ocean. "I was never going to be strong enough to meet her needs. But now that Miza has taken the throne, I'm allowed to go *home*."

Seren says nothing, her sorrowful gaze on my mate, not the ocean. There's a hint of pride in her expression, too. But mostly, all I see is heartbreak.

Well, heartbreak and something else—a striking resemblance.

I'm not sure how I missed that before. But Seren has the same facial structure as Miza, just aged. Different hair and eye colors. However, similar statures—short with curves—and the same elfin chins.

My eyebrow inches upward. “You’re Miza’s mother.”

“I am,” she replies, kneeling and reaching for her daughter.

Zael reacts before I can, his hand grabbing the former Siren Queen’s wrist to keep her from touching our mate. “I respect who you might be to Miza, but she doesn’t know you. And frankly, I don’t fucking trust you.” He’s clearly ascertained the maternal link, just as I have.

Tiru grunts, the sound one of agreement to my ears, confirming that he, too, has determined the link between them.

“Everything Her Majesty has done has been meant to preserve Miza’s chances at succeeding in her ascension,” Huntz states as he enters the beach from the trees, his lanky form clad in an all-black suit. “Giving up a child isn’t easy, King Zael. I pray the seas never require it from you.”

And there’s the confirmation of everything we’ve all just learned.

“That’s why the contract between you and my father said an heir or heiress, and didn’t specifically list Celina,” Tiru says matter-of-factly. “And you drew up that contract?” The question appears to be for the emissary, likely because he commented on it in the water before.

“Yes.” Huntz looks at me. “I sent you the bounty as well, which you already know. But the visions were all Her Majesty’s influence.”

My eyebrow lifts. “Visions?”

“Your dreams.” Seren stands, her focus still on Miza despite talking to me. “I’ve possessed the gift of sight for many years, which is how I knew what the seas required. Just as I foresaw Miza’s ultimate potential—with the right mates. But convincing the three of you proved vital for her success.”

She finally turns to face me.

“*You*, Stealth Dragon King, were the one I distrusted most, yet you became my most remarkable ally. The dreams were a test at first. Then I allowed you to see her during the Day of the Choosing, merely to witness your reaction. It was… fascinating, to say the least.”

My jaw clenches. “You’ve been fucking with my head?” I can’t help the irritation underlining my tone. Obviously, I’ve been considering the potential concept of someone messing with my visions. But it never occurred to me that Seren was the one responsible for implanting my views of the future.

“I prefer to think of it as lending you access to a worthwhile power,” she responds without a hint of remorse. “And in return, you ensured my legacy

survived.” She holds my gaze. “Thank you, Ika.”

I don’t share the sentiment of gratitude because I’m too busy wondering what else this female has done to me. How she’s potentially manipulated my mating choice.

But the moment I hear Miza gasp in awareness, I realize none of that matters.

Because Miza’s my heart.

My path may have been altered to meet my future. However, she was always destined to be mine. *That* I feel deep within my soul as my beast rejoices in response to our waking mate.

For all of Seren’s power, she can’t influence how I feel. Only Miza has the ability to do that. And that’s simply because I love her.

I will forever be enslaved to my mate’s needs.

Maybe Seren set this up by showing glimpses of the future in my head.

But I finalized that fate when I *chose* to pursue the potential destiny. Then Miza solidified it when she mated me.

Or maybe all of this was contrived by some divine intervention.

Does it matter? I wonder, staring down at my beautiful female. *No. Because I would crave this woman every fucking time.*

Falling to my knees in the sand, I palm Miza’s cheek just as she opens her eyes. Then lean down to kiss her. Soundly.

She returns the motion with a fervor, her hand creeping up my arm to my shoulder before locking around my neck.

This magnificent woman has always been my intended. So maybe Seren’s outlook is correct in regard to lending me a worthwhile power.

It led me to Miza.

That’s all I care about now.

I scoop her off the ground to settle her in my lap, still kissing her as I cradle her to me. Tiru’s there, too, kneeling right beside us, his hand on Miza’s back. He’s not pushing me to release her, just waiting while Zael guards us.

His protective energy is *everywhere*. He’s clearly not over what just happened and wants to ensure this game is truly finished.

I should join him. Stand by his side. But I can feel Miza’s need. Her despair. Her joy. Her confusion. Her excitement. A thousand emotions at once. And it’s pulsing through her with immense power that seems to feed directly into my soul.

This is why we're anchors, I think, holding her even more tightly. *She's overflowing with energy. Without us, she would drown in the power of the seas.*

And without her, we would cease to truly exist.

Our lives have been so unfulfilling without her. Living a life of solitary leadership, managing our realms with the single purpose of protecting those who relied on our survival.

But with Miza, we have a united objective.

She's the center of our world now. We're destined to lead in this realm *with* her. Protect the humans. Manage the Monster Games and the visiting candidates. Ensure everything runs smoothly, safely, and effectively.

I see it all now.

Probably because of Seren.

Or… or maybe because of Miza.

I'm not sure and I don't care. I'm just thankful for this experience. For the warmth flooding my veins. For the beating of my heart.

For finding my other half.

It takes all of my strength to release her to Tiru, but I can sense his mounting need for her. He feels just like I do about this situation. It's a vibrant understanding in our mate-circle, one that seems to be increasing in power with each passing breath.

I wouldn't be surprised if we soon hear one another's thoughts.

This union is strong. Our mate-circle is complete. And now it's time to worship our queen.

I settle her against Tiru, watch as she melts into his lap and begins to kiss him in kind, then stand to join Zael as he faces off against Seren and the others.

I'm surprised and not surprised to see Mariana and Farrah standing among them.

"Did you know?" I ask Mariana, interrupting whatever Huntz was saying to Zael.

Honestly, I wasn't even listening to the conversation transpiring between them. Beyond hearing that my visions were contrived by Seren's gift, I don't really care to hear more. But that's why I'm talking to Mariana now.

"You were the one who suggested Cain might be provoking my dreams," I go on. "Is that because you knew about Seren's interference?"

“I did,” Mariana murmurs. “I was trying to help you consider alternatives.”

“And were you trying to help protect me when you allied with a rival queen?” Zael interjects, rightfully pissed at his second-in-command.

“Yes,” she answers, staring him down. “Everything I’ve done has been to ensure your success as the Elite Island King. In case you haven’t noticed, your position remains unchallenged and stronger than ever. And you now reign over this entire region as the mate of the newly ascended Monster Island Queen.”

His jaw visibly tightens, his eyes remaining narrowed.

“You’ve also aligned with two powerful realms by joining a mate-circle with the Stealth Dragon King and the Kraken King,” she adds. “I would argue that you’re in an elevated position from a week ago, Z. You may not appreciate the methods I deployed, but they were clearly fruitful.”

I fold my arms, unimpressed. “You withheld vital information from your king. That’s not an act of loyalty, Mariana.”

She smiles. “Are you saying that you’ve never made difficult choices for the betterment of a situation, Stealth Dragon King?”

My teeth grind together in response to her words. “I’ve made questionable choices my whole existence, but I’ve never claimed loyalty to anyone other than myself.”

Until now, anyway.

But I don’t bother adding that part out loud.

She lifts a shoulder, still unapologetic. “I knew the potential for this outcome and opted to pursue it. It’s what’s best for this realm. What’s best for Zael. And what’s best for me. Perhaps that last part is primarily why I made this decision. But it’s a moot point anyway. Zael no longer needs me as his second.”

“Which you knew would happen when you urged him along in this journey,” I state, understanding her a little better now. “And you?” I ask, glancing at Farrah. “You feel similarly and are okay with the loss of your job?” Because she’s never going to be in charge of anything in this realm ever again.

The seaguard risked our mate’s existence by promising to guard her, simply to leave her for that fucked-up trial.

Or maybe she was overpowered and forced to do it.

Regardless of whether it was a choice or not, she failed.

That’s grounds for execution in my realm.

But I’ll defer to Zael’s authority here.

Actually, no. I’ll let Miza decide. Hopefully, she’ll request Farrah’s death. Then I’ll rip the bitch’s head from her neck and hand it to Miza as a trophy.

“Farrah was acting under my orders,” Seren interjects. “She serves Monster Island, not Elite Island.”

“She’s a seaguard and *mine*,” Zael growls.

Which has Miza releasing a rather adorable growl of her own from Tiru’s lap, one that sounds an awful lot like a furious protest. “*You* are *mine*,” she says, pushing away from Tiru to get in Zael’s face. “Not hers. Not anyone else’s. *Mine*.”

I arch a brow at our possessive little mate, adoring this fierce side of her. “I think you owe our mate an apology, Zael.” I cock my head. “Or perhaps a boon. Can we let her rip Farrah apart for fun?”

The seaguard looks a little green in response to my comment.

Good.

Unfortunately, Miza is too focused on Zael to respond to my request for violence. She has her hand on his heart, her nails digging into his bare chest. “*Mine*,” she repeats again.

Zael’s lips curl affectionately. “Yes,” he agrees. “Yours. And only yours, darling.” He grabs her and kisses her with a passion I feel to my very soul.

Her possessiveness has turned him on.

Just as it’s done to me.

And a glance at Tiru says he’s feeling the same way.

“Everyone, leave,” I demand, making a much-needed decision on behalf of my circle. “We’ll regroup when our queen is ready.”

Because right now, the four of us are naked. We’re on Monster Island. And there’s a hunt I’m eager to complete.

Our siren caught us in the water and brought us to shore.

Now it’s time for her to run.

So we can chase.

Fuck.

And claim.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

MIZA

TIRU GROWLS, the sound one of dominance that seems to echo Ika's command. I heard my Stealth Dragon King tell everyone to leave, but I was too caught up in Zael's possession to fully process what it meant.

Truly, I've been ignoring our audience. Everything they're saying. Everything that's happened. And simply focusing on the power flourishing inside me. Igniting me from within. Making me feel *alive*.

There are questions I should be asking.

Demands I should be making.

But all I can think about is the power thriving between me and my mates.

That's the only reason I heard what Zael said about Farrah being *his*.

Some part of me realizes he meant it from a hierarchy point of view, meaning she works for him. But the words on his tongue were *not* okay with my inner siren. And I tell him that without words as I kiss him with a mixture of fury and desire.

He picks me up and carries me away from the beach, my legs wrapping around his bare hips.

We're all naked.

That's fine. Perfect, really. Because all I want is to make this man mine all over again.

Except, rather than take me up against a tree, he sets me down in the dark and grasps my hips. "I will only ever be yours, Miza," he vows. "Your

king. Your mate. Your everything." He kisses me again, hungrily, passionately, exquisitely.

And walks me backward into a masculine chest.

Tiru, I recognize instantly, his warmth bathing my back in protection and devotion.

"When I called Farrah mine, I meant as a general in my guard," he begins to explain.

"A *former* general," Ika interjects. "Preferably a *dead* general."

"Obviously," Zael replies. "I just meant she should have been reporting to me, not to Seren."

"We're not killing Farrah," I tell them both, frowning at the idea of ending her life.

She may have… Well, actually, I don't know what she did. Abandon me? Set me up? Chain me? I don't know. But she didn't really hurt me. I'm alive. And the seas seem pleased with the outcome of the trial I just went through.

"I… I want to speak to her," I decide out loud. "But later." Not now. I don't want to talk to *anyone* at the moment. Just my mates. "You finally caught me."

"I think you caught us, little lei," Tiru says, his lips at my ear before he kisses my temple. "You anchored us with your power and dragged us to shore."

My brow furrows. "I did?"

"You did," Zael confirms, grinning down at me in amusement.

"KiKi helped, too," Ika adds. "She guided us toward you, anyway."

"Then you took control and claimed us as your anchors," Zael murmurs, his palm against my cheek. "It was amazing, Miza."

"And hot," Ika adds, beside us now. "So. Fucking. Hot."

"Indeed," Zael agrees, rubbing his nose against mine. "You announced your choice of mates to the world in the sexiest way, darling queen. Now allow us to return the favor." He nips at my lower lip and releases me. "Time to run, Miss Kananaka."

"R-run?" I repeat with a stammer, confused. "Why would I run?"

"So we can hunt you, little siren," Ika says, taking hold of my hand and pulling me into his arms and away from Zael and Tiru. Ika clasps my chin, forcing me to hold his gaze. "We haven't properly concluded the Monster

Games. And we very much want the opportunity to make you ours in a primal manner."

I shiver at the promise underlining his tone.

Shells, it feels like weeks ago that I boarded that hoverjet with Farrah. But given the high moon, I suspect that was earlier today.

It doesn't matter, though. I'm not tired. I feel alive. Aware. *Excited*.

So very different from before, when I still possessed reservations about the final trial. Now I feel untouchable. Supernatural. *Like a queen*.

And I'm very ready to taunt my kings.

"You want to chase me?" I say, leaning into Ika.

"We do," he replies, his dark eyes glittering in the night.

"So you can fuck me?" I add, aware that I'm being crass and embracing it.

"Mmm, I like the way that sounds on your lips, sweetheart," he muses. "Say it again."

I shake my head. "I won't repeat it until you catch me, Stealth Dragon King." I lift myself up on my toes and nip at his lower lip, grazing him with a bite, then pull away and take a step back as the ocean begins to swirl.

I'm close enough to feel the power of the waves, my mind calling them to me.

Zael notices first, glancing back at the approaching wall of water with a furrowed brow. "Miza…" He starts, a warning clear in his voice.

"You want to chase me, right?" I ask, taking a step backward. "Well, I want a head start."

Ika looks between me and Zael, then focuses on the watery mass heading right for the beach. "Oh, sweetheart. It's like I'm falling in love all over again."

Tiru chuckles. "Let's play, lei. *Run*." He times that final word for the moment the wave reaches the beach, the roaring sound a crash against the island as I take off through the trees and leave my mates to deal with the incoming cyclone.

I told the water to ensnare them. But only temporarily.

The men are my anchors, after all. It seemed appropriate to trap them in the sand, which I do now as the sea wraps them in those invisible ropes.

I'm *very* familiar with them now.

Those seaweed-like binds.

I’m pretty sure a siren royal—perhaps the former queen, or maybe Celina—used that magic on me beneath the waves. I still don’t fully understand the purpose. And I should probably be asking a lot of questions.

But all I want to do is indulge my mates.

To be alive.

To run free.

Because I not only survived… I *dominated*. And now it’s time to finish the Monster Games.

There are no cameras here that I can see. Just trees and endless wilderness. Pretty sure I’m in some sort of maze, actually, based on the walls towering around me. The vines and flowers decorating the formations resemble shadows in the night, making me wonder how vibrant they are during the day.

Maybe I’ll come back here at some point.

But at the moment, I want to run.

My mates are chasing me now. The ocean has released them, not because I allowed it, but because my kings reminded the seas of their own power.

Goose bumps pebble down my arms, anticipation mounting. I *like* that they’re powerful. That they balance me. That they’ve *chosen* me.

But now I want them to catch me.

I could fight them. Thwart them. Try to hide and make this difficult. But I don’t want to prolong the inevitable. I just want to embrace their beasts. Give them my body. *Mate them again*.

The need is a temptation that thickens my blood, making me feel warm all over.

I’m deep inside this maze now, having taken so many turns and twists that I have no idea how to escape.

So instead I find a place to nest. A place to *play*.

There are a myriad of palm leaves here. Giant ones that have fallen to create a bed. I maneuver them appropriately, arranging the items into a comfortable place to lie down.

But from the corner of my eye, I see the roof of a hut glinting beneath the moonlight. It… it reminds me of something. A place I’ve been. A former home.

Only, that thought vanishes beneath a wave of need. The energy inside me is growing, the desire to *mate* overriding my thoughts.

Questions can wait.

My needs cannot.

I stand and head toward the small structure, wondering if it's something for the games. There could be other Offerings and monsters inside.

Hmm, my instincts tell me it's vacant.

Pretty sure that's my inner siren being able to hear and smell things I can't understand as a human. She seems to be driving my instincts right now, our souls having united as one.

Or perhaps I've always been connected to her like this.

Shoving the analysis away for later, I examine the hut.

There are palm leaves at the top, creating a roof. A door made of vines. And inside, I find a *very* inviting bed. Plus trays of fresh fruit, all of which appear to be untouched. There's even a container of water bottles.

Yes, this was definitely created for the games.

Yet it seems no one found it.

Perhaps because fate reserved this space for me in this moment.

It's perfect.

Not exactly the primal notion Ika expressed, but perhaps I can meet him outside, then lead my mates back in here.

Smiling to myself, I creep out of the cabin to wait near the maze wall.

I can sense them approaching, can practically feel the heat of their arousal as they search.

When Ika turns the corner first, I push away and *sprint*, aware that he needs to catch me.

Only to run headfirst into Zael's chest.

His arms come around me as I shriek in surprise, then he picks me up and *tosses* me to Ika.

I yelp, startled and very much not into flying, then giggle when Ika pins me between his hot form and Tiru's.

These men are feral.

Intimidating.

And mine.

"You were supposed to hide, lei," Tiru murmurs, his lips near my ear.

"You told me to *run*," I remind him, practically purring in response to being caught. "I did."

"Hmm," he hums, kissing a path down to my shoulder, where he nibbles slightly. "So you wanted to be found, then."

“No,” I reply, boldly looking at Ika as I say, “I want to be *fucked*.”

Ika’s arms tense around me, a groan leaving him. “*Fuck*, sweetheart.”

“Yes,” I tell him. “*Fuck me*.”

He groans again, then carries me toward the door that Zael has propped open. They’re clearly aware that I’ve chosen this hut as ours.

Ika doesn’t wait. He throws me on the bed and crawls on top of me, his pierced cock hard and ready against my weeping center. But rather than slide into me, he kisses me softly. Tenderly. Almost too sweetly.

I sink my teeth into his lower lip, desiring more.

Which causes him to grin against my mouth. “Demanding siren.”

“I told you what I want.” It’s all I can think about. All I desire. There’s something about this ascension, this *power surge*, that has taken control of my mind and my desires. I *need* to finalize our circle to embrace who we are as a unit. To rise to our throne. *To declare our mateship*.

“You did,” he replies. “But it’s our turn to claim you, sweetheart. Which means *we* are in charge. Not you.”

He captures me in a kiss before I can respond, my chest vibrating with a resulting growl.

But as the bed sinks from Tiru’s and Zael’s weight, I still, curious about what they plan to do.

Tentacles curl around my legs, slithering upward to where Ika’s hardness rests against my damp core. Two tips press against my wet slit, causing me to moan as one enters me. But it leaves before I can truly enjoy the pleasure, only to slip to my ass and glide inside.

My eyes widen when the other slides into my front, Tiru’s limbs penetrating me from both sides. And *vibrating*.

“Oh…” I arch up into his appendages and Ika, suddenly lost to the sensations.

“I’m never going to tire of watching you fuck her like that,” Zael says softly, his fingertips skimming up my side to my chest.

Ika shifts slightly, allowing the other man’s hand to slip between us to palm my breast. His thumb strokes my nipple, his hum of approval a vibration against my shoulder as he leans down to kiss me there.

My men have only just found me, and I’m already prepared to beg them for more.

Every part of me is a live wire, my nerve endings frayed from the abundance of power thriving through my veins. It’s so foreign. So intense.

So freeing.

I feel like I'm on fire. Almost similar to my heat. Except even more so now. Like I'm about to *explode*.

My mates must understand because they all continue touching me, kissing me, *penetrating me*. But they don't let me come. Instead, they stroke me until I'm on the verge of climaxing, then pause to edge me again.

"*Please*," I whisper against Ika's mouth, needing more. "*Please fuck me*."

Rather than follow through on my request, he simply kisses me and silences me with his dominant tongue.

I feel Tiru slipping out of me, his tentacles shifting in size and weight before coaxing more pleasure from me below. Continuing to push me right up to mere seconds before orgasm, then yanking me back again.

I'm reminded of the water, the way it ebbed and flowed while I was fighting to survive. How I finally took hold of my power by *singing*.

Which gives me an idea…

I open my mouth and sing the words "Make me yours, my kings." It's a low melody, a hum of sound, and it causes all three of my males to pause and pull back.

"Clever little siren," Ika replies, his hands going to my hips. "That's a beautiful song."

"Let's fuck her while she sings," Zael suggests. "I want to feel those chords against my cock while I take her pretty mouth."

"I want her pussy," Tiru adds.

"Hear all that, pretty siren?" Ika asks me, his mouth still against mine. "I think it's time for you to straddle the Kraken King and put that thick tentacle of his in your cunt. Then I'll take your ass while you sing to Zael's dick."

Lava runs through my veins at the image he's painting.

All I want is to feel my men inside me. To experience their primal claims. To be *owned* by these three kings.

Ika gives me another kiss, then rolls off of me just as Tiru's tentacles wrap around my waist to pull me over his hips. A pleased sound leaves my lips at the show of strength, his kraken very much staring up at me through his silver eyes.

Two of his appendages tighten around my middle as he navigates me to the place that he wants me, all with his hands tucked behind his head.

It’s impressive.

Monster-like.

Alluring.

And utterly captivating as he angles me right over his cock before penetrating me *deeply*.

I fall onto his chest, only to be dragged back up by his tentacles and positioned for Ika.

My Stealth Dragon King doesn’t waste time entering me from behind, the pair of them taking my front and back at the same time in two harsh thrusts.

I scream, though just like in the water, the sound is melodic.

But unlike in the ocean, it’s quickly throttled by a dick slipping between my lips.

I’m not even sure when Zael grabbed my nape, only that he’s suddenly feeding me his cock, and I start sucking like a woman starved.

I feel full.

Yet not full enough.

I need more.

And I tell my men that with a song that comes out more like a hum.

Still, it seems to encourage them, their motions suddenly cohesive and sharp all at once.

“Fuck, darling,” Zael whispers, his fingers running through my hair while his opposite palm remains against the back of my neck. “That song feels amazing. Please don’t stop singing.”

“Yes, sweetheart,” Ika adds. “I want you to make Zael come down your pretty throat so we can all join him in the ecstasy.”

My insides clench around Ika and Tiru, my body spasming with the notion of coming.

They’ve all teased me for what feels like hours, placing me on the dangerous edge of what I know will be a cataclysmic experience.

I want to force them to join me, to draw the biggest orgasm from them as possible.

Though, I’m not exactly sure how to do that. But given that Zael’s enjoying my hum, I increase the volume and nearly smile when his dick pulses in response.

A curse leaves his beautiful mouth, his head tilting backward with the word.

Victory warms my mind, only to be distracted by Tiru's sudden vibrations.

His tentacles had ceased their penetrating movements, the limbs merely holding me astride him while he pumped up into me. But now he's providing unique sensations through *every* scaled part of him, including the hardness lodged deep inside me.

I moan, which subtly changes the tune and causes my men to growl in response.

"*More*," Zael demands.

"Sing," Ika adds.

"And *ride*," my Kraken King commands, the *r* in *ride* a rumble of sound that reverberates down each of his appendages, driving me *wild*.

I start to really move, suddenly aware that I was barely shifting before. But now I'm *riding*, just like he requested.

All while alternating between humming and sucking.

And *squeezing* my inner walls, both front and back.

Driving all of my kings toward the inevitable while I chase the high that's long overdue.

It's a wicked dance. Hypnotic. Sensuous.

I love every movement. Every touch. Every *thrust*.

We're a united circle.

Broadcasting our regal status.

Declaring our claim.

Roaring with pleasure as the tides rush the shores in response. I sense it—the call of the ocean—rippling in time with my mounting rapture.

A dangerous insanity.

An overwhelming sensation.

A stunning ascension.

Zael explodes first, his cum drowning my siren song as his ecstasy becomes mine. I swallow, then scream as my nerves ignite. I'm pretty sure I choke as well, but I don't care. I'm too busy trying to drink his euphoric essence while Ika and Tiru erupt inside of me.

All four of us are coming undone with rapture.

Falling headfirst into oblivion.

Twirling in a whirlpool of intensity.

I never want it to end.

I merely want to drown in this moment.

Remain here for eternity.

Love my mates fiercely.

Until the end of time.

Which is entirely feasible, I realize happily. *Because this is reality. My life. Our present. And most importantly, our future.*

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

MIZA

We stayed the rest of the night in the hut and played throughout the morning, the power writhing through us and giving birth to a new reign.

I felt insatiable, like I couldn't stop touching my mates. Like my life and ascension depended on our joining.

And I still feel that way, honestly. Even while standing in Zael's oversized shower with all three mates bathing me.

Maybe it's the fact that their hands are everywhere that makes me want to return the favor.

Or I'm just obsessed with them.

Yeah, that's probably it.

"We're obsessed with you, too," Ika murmurs against my ear, his smirk one I sense more than see.

However, his words make me frown. "Can you hear my thoughts?" I wonder out loud.

"Not quite, no. But I can sense what you're thinking. I believe our bond is… growing stronger." He says it slowly, like he's considering how it all works. "You're still coming into your power. It stands to reason that our circle will blossom with new abilities as your talents continue to emerge."

I contemplate his comment, my lips still curled down.

But what he's saying makes sense.

"I think that's why I'm not pregnant," I whisper, revealing something I realized about thirty minutes ago when my mind finally started to process

the last few days. “My siren wasn’t ready for a baby because I’m still learning who I am, who *we* are.”

I swallow, glancing at each of my mates, worried they’ll be disappointed by this revelation.

Although, all they do is study me, like they’re waiting to see how *I* feel about it.

At first, I simply felt it was strange to suddenly *know* the verdict of my heat. It was like my body just randomly signaled the details to my brain, allowing me to be aware of my pregnancy status.

But then I started to consider *why* I wasn’t pregnant.

And that led to sharing the information I uttered out loud a few seconds ago.

“I need to master my powers and learn what it means to be a queen before I can produce an heir or heiress,” I add, still frowning a little. Mostly because I’m thinking about my ascension now.

I’m a queen.

The Siren Queen.

That… that detail didn’t fully register after mastering the waves. I mean, I *knew* what it all meant and how it happened. I was aware of my rise to power. But afterward, all I could think about was being with my mates. Expelling power to them. Claiming them. Announcing our joint ascension.

All of that overrode reason.

It… it kept me from truly processing and considering what this all means.

At some point, I learned that Seren is my biological mother. I’m not sure if I overheard that reveal from my mates or the former Siren Queen herself. My mind is a little foggy about all the details from the last, uh, well, week? Month? I don’t even know anymore.

What happened to the one I consider to be my mom? I wonder. *Did we find her?*

I’m about to ask when Ika says, “We have all the time in the world to breed you, sweetheart.”

His words draw me back to our pregnancy conversation as he wraps his arms around me. “There’s no need to rush anything along. Besides, I selfishly won’t mind spending years or decades playing as a mate-circle before we create a family.”

He presses his lips to mine, kissing me soundly, while Tiru steps up to my back, his chest a rumble of masculine energy as he says, “I agree. We’ve only just begun getting to truly know each other, lei. While our souls have eons of history, our minds and hearts are still catching up.”

“It’s true.” Zael skims his hand down my side, grasping my hip and tugging me away from Ika the moment my stealth dragon stops kissing me. It’s like my mates are in sync with one another, aware of when one desires his turn.

I instinctively rotate toward Zael, my palms landing on his pecs as my body melts into his.

“Our love for you has only just begun, my queen,” he murmurs, his forehead meeting mine. “I want to learn how to properly worship you. How to help your powers grow. How to make you *sing* for days on end. There are still so many firsts we can explore. A myriad of opportunities to develop as a mate-circle.”

I swallow, agreeing with everything my mates are saying.

And yet, part of me is still somewhat disappointed.

“That’s not to say we want to put a time limit on anything,” he goes on, his palm cupping my cheek. “With how fast we’ve all come together, it’s entirely possible we’ll be ready in a month or a year. I’m simply telling you that there’s no pressure from us on when and how our family develops.”

“We love you no matter what happens, lei,” Tiru adds, his chest at my back again as his lips ghost across my shoulder. “You’re our heart, Miza.”

“Our goddess,” Ika muses, his gaze intense as I glance his way.

“Our queen,” Zael growls, his mouth on my neck as he kisses a path up to my ear. “We’ll take this one day at a time. Figure out how to rule this realm and the others under our control. And take each step forward as a solidified circle. We’re yours to command. Always and forever. And you’re ours to love.”

Zael takes hold of my chin to draw my attention back to him so he can kiss me.

It’s passionate.

Promising.

Arousing.

And ends too soon before he’s giving me to Tiru, who embraces me similarly. Only, his tongue is less demanding in my mouth. More sensual. Slow. *Purposeful*.

All three of my men offer different experiences. Different perspectives. Different talents.

Which has me feeling like the luckiest Offering in all the regions.

Winning these three mates in the Monster Games defied all my expectations. I merely wanted to survive. These males ensured I did so much more than that. They've shown me what it means to *live*.

However, I still have so many questions.

So many *concerns*.

Not about them, but about how I ended up here.

How I became the Siren Queen.

There's only one person who can provide the answers I crave.

"I need to see Seren," I tell my mates after we finish our shower. "I want to meet… my biological mom." *And find out what happened to the one I consider to be my real mother…*

Because I'm positive Seren has something to do with her disappearance. The former queen is behind all of this. As the new monarch, I deserve to know the truth. *About everything*.



THE MONSTER ISLAND Palace is vastly different from the Elite Island Palace. The structure is built mostly above ground rather than beneath the surface, providing an array of balconies that overlook the ocean instead of floor-to-ceiling windows with underwater views.

It's also framed by a beach, the palatial estate fully on land. But there are a myriad of sirens lounging in the sand, their colorful hair reminding me of my own.

However, Seren's hair is violet, not pink. And her eyes are silver, reminding me of Tiru's a bit, though her irises are not as vibrant as his.

With a hopeful expression, she watches me enter an open-air sitting room, her lips curling a little at the sides. Celina sits beside her, the two of them wearing summer dresses that end near their upper thighs.

I chose black pants and a flowy top.

Very different from their pale colors and elegant lines.

But I’ve primarily worn lace my entire life. So when Ika offered me a choice, I selected something different. Something *new* to represent who I’ve become, not who I used to be.

“Hello, Miza,” Seren says, bowing her head slightly. “It’s lovely to see you again.”

“And it’s good to officially meet you… sister,” Celina adds, giving me a somewhat bashful look. It seems out of character, given what little I’ve seen of her. I expected her to hate me because of her failed engagement to Tiru.

There’s also the fact that she *attacked* me in the ocean.

Can’t forget about that.

“You tried to drown me,” I say to her, not bothering to return the pleasantries. “Why would it be *good* to officially meet?”

She cants her head. “I didn’t try to drown you. I was helping you.”

“By hitting me with energy beneath the water?”

“By waking up your powers and forcing you to react,” she counters, her brow furrowing. “I would never try to hurt you. We’re half sisters. I wanted you to *succeed* so we could finally go home.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Seren interjects. “I think it would be more prudent to start at the beginning and explain.”

“Yes,” Zael says from beside me. “Let’s do that so I can decide if I still want to kill you or not.”

Seren smiles at him, appearing amused. “My power might be drowning in this realm, Elite Island King, but I still possess enough strength to withstand your attack and survive. Let’s not waste time bickering when we have an alliance to build.”

“You would not survive our mate-circle,” Ika informs her flatly. “But I’ll agree with not wasting time. Speak and we’ll listen.”

Tiru presses his palm to my lower back, his body warm as he guides me to the couch across from Seren. We sit and Zael joins us, his thigh brushing mine as he settles on my other side. Meanwhile, Ika stands behind us, his hand finding my shoulder to give it a reassuring squeeze.

“When the sirens first came to this realm, the seas embraced us and provided us with the control needed to rule over Monster Island and the surrounding ocean,” Seren begins. “But as time and humanity have evolved, so have the requirements of this region.”

Seren goes on to explain that an illness has spread among the sirens, causing many to retreat to their home realm for recovery.

“At first, I didn’t understand the cause,” she tells us. “I thought it was related to our natural ascension timeline, but Celina’s power growth proved that not to be the case.”

Celina shifts uncomfortably as her mother talks about the struggles with acceptance, how the ocean all but denied Celina as a potential candidate.

Which led to Seren’s discovery that the seas needed a different kind of heir.

“Part siren, part human,” she says, making the hair stand up along my arms. “But mostly siren.”

Apparently, I was created through the art of selective insemination. Altered sperm genetics that came from a human donation, but put inside of Seren.

“I carried you just like I did Celina,” the former queen murmurs, giving me an affectionate look that feels all sorts of wrong. “And I raised you for the first two years of your life, providing you with the nutrients you required to grow.” Her gaze falls then as she whispers, “But then I had to give you to the humans to raise.”

“Why?” I demand.

“Because the seas called for it,” she explains. “And I needed you to enter the Monster Games.” She swallows, her gaze meeting mine. “One of my talents is a relationship with the future, which is how I foresaw the ocean’s need for you as its queen. That’s also how I determined appropriate anchors for your power.”

Her attention shifts to my mates, her explanation carrying into how her foresight abilities aided her in identifying my fated matches.

The contract between Tiru’s father and her predated the need, but had been drawn up in a way that simply stated the future Kraken King would mate the future siren heir or heiress, assuming he didn’t find his fated mate.

“It was all moot anyway,” Seren tells him. “I saw your intertwined destinies and knew your union would restore hope among both our kinds.” She looks at Ika. “But I knew you would be the most difficult to convince. That’s why I temporarily granted you access to my gifts.”

Ika’s gaze narrows as she elaborates on *how* she pushed her talent into his mind, allowing him to see the potential of our mate-circle.

“I knew you would need to accept that fate before it could truly come to fruition,” she admits. “Tiru’s soul would guide him, but yours, Ika, has always been married to chaos.” She looks at Zael. “And you… convincing

you required assistance. Mariana willingly gave it once I explained everything to her. Farrah did not."

I lean forward at the mention of Farrah, my inner siren growling in annoyance at how that seaguard has treated me.

"Manipulating the mind is a difficult skill that requires a lot of energy. I'm rather certain that Farrah's fight against my control is why I've deteriorated faster in this realm than expected. She's strong, Zael." Seren utters that fact like it's something to be proud of. "I've since released her mind, allowing her to recover from my influence."

"I assume she wants to kill you," Zael states flatly.

"She does," Seren muses. "But I'll be gone before she can try." She pauses to accept a drink from the tray that a well-dressed male siren brings in, her eyes lifting to his with open gratitude. "Thank you, Huntz."

Silence falls as she sips the green liquid, her eyes closing like she needs the strength the refreshment provides.

The male siren—*Huntz*—doesn't offer any of us a similar glass.

Instead, he places waters on the table, one of which Celina grabs. "As my mother already said, she's dying. But returning to our realm will help her and all the others. We can travel back and forth. However, there's a cost that comes with us staying here for too long. A cost… to our power."

"A cost to our fated-mate links as well," Seren adds softly, her eyes still closed. "Or that's what I suspect, anyway. It's also entirely possible that being here has irrevocably altered our needs. Only time and healing will help me understand what's to come for siren kind."

She sounds sad.

And her eyes heighten that emotion as she opens them once more.

"I've done what I can to protect my people. I can only hope it was enough." She sets her drink down and focuses on me again. "These details might not be the ones you wanted to hear, Miza. I know I'm not the mother you deserved or likely desired. But you are the queen that these oceans need to thrive."

Huntz settles into the chair beside her, his hand capturing hers and bringing it up to his lips for a kiss.

"Being a queen is all about sacrifice." The siren's velvety tone is borderline hypnotic, his dark gray eyes glancing at my mates. "The same goes for being kings."

No one replies, likely because we all know what he's saying is the truth. But this… this is a lot for me to comprehend. A lot for me to *accept*.

"Imagine giving up your heiress to be raised by another," Huntz continues, voice still a hum of sound. "Imagine *creating* that heir knowing she would never be yours. That doesn't make you love her any less. If anything, it only makes you love her more."

His words settle between us, resulting in additional silence.

Seren lifts her drink to take another sip, then puts it down again.

And focuses on me.

"The evolution of this world is why the Monster Games were created. Why Monsters Night exists in other regions. Monster kind desired potential mates. *You* are the result of that marriage. It's not a wonder that the seas required your existence. But it was up to me to ensure you survived the transition of fate."

"You and everyone you recruited to help you," Mariana says, appearing without knocking or entering—just simply shadowing into the center of the room.

With a familiar woman beside her.

"Mom!" I exclaim, jumping up and running toward her.

She opens her arms to catch me, then hugs me so tightly that, for a moment, everything stills and feels entirely *normal*.

At least until I open my eyes to the elegant decoration and coral adornments of the room.

My mother doesn't release me, though, just continues to hold me like she can't afford to let me go again. I feel similarly, and I hate that it's taken me this long to find her. I should have demanded that Seren tell me where my mother was the moment I arrived, but I was too caught up in the history of my creation to focus properly.

Shells, I'm a horrible daughter.

"Are you okay, Mom?" I whisper, worried. "Are you hurt?"

"No, sunshine, I'm fine," she replies. But there's a hitch in her voice that has me pulling back to see her tear-streaked face.

Except she's not frowning. She's *smiling*.

"I'm so proud of you, Miza." She cups my face. "So, *so* proud." She hugs me again, and I feel tears prick my eyes.

"I… I should have tried harder to find you," I admit, feeling like I've failed somehow. "I…"

“You were busy becoming a queen,” my mom reminds me. “Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for *you*, Miza. For this moment. For your ascension. I love you as if you were my own, sunshine.”

“I love you, too, Mom,” I whisper, a tear falling from my cheek.

There’s so much more I want to say. But I don’t even know where to begin.

So we just hug again, holding one another tightly as tensions mount throughout the seating area.

“You took her?” Zael demands, his voice and tone telling me he’s furious. I can also *feel* his ire in our bond, the heat of his anger singeing my soul.

I look over and find him squaring off with Mariana, his hands fisted at his sides, his icy eyes narrowed. Ika is right beside him, the pair showing solidarity in their fury.

Tiru’s focus is on them as well, but he’s right behind me. *Guarding*, I realize. *He’s* guarding *me*.

“I took her,” Seren interjects. “Giovanna has known the truth about Miza all her life. I had to protect her from your discovery, or it could have altered our fate.”

Zael slowly turns toward the former queen. “So you’ve been playing chess with all our lives.”

“I suppose that’s one way to look at it,” she replies, seemingly unconcerned. “But I didn’t *move* any of you on the board. And your souls were always destined for one another.”

“Consider where you are now,” Mariana says, looking at my Elite Dragon King. “The relationship you’re in with Ika, Tiru, and Miza. Would you desire any alternative fate? A life without mates? A rule where your only love was for the Offerings you protect?”

Zael’s jaw clenches as he returns his attention to the ruby-haired woman.

“Are you happier now?” she presses, voice softening. “More fulfilled? Or did you prefer your previous life?”

I swallow, stepping away from the woman I consider to be my mother—the woman who *raised* me—and wait for Zael to respond.

I understand how he must feel, knowing all of this was orchestrated without his consent. My entire life has been constructed in such a way. Even more than I could ever have imagined.

But I don’t regret where we are now. I don’t regret bonding with my mates. I don’t regret mastering the ocean and becoming its queen. And I definitely don’t regret falling in love with these three kings.

They’re mine.

Fate or not, it doesn’t matter.

My heart is theirs.

Always and forever.

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

ZAEL

I DO NOT APPRECIATE BEING TAKEN advantage of or manipulated in any way.

But Mariana's questions ring *loudly* in my ears. Especially the last one regarding my preferences.

"Or did you prefer your previous life?"

What she's really asking is if I would give up the hand that fate has dealt me to return to a life of solitary leadership.

And the answer is easily "Absolutely not." But it's more than that. I've experienced *bliss*. Complete and utter satisfaction. *Love*. I would never give that up, not even knowing that I've essentially been pushed down this path.

Because my soul belongs to Miza.

My heart is hers, too.

She's the only one I will ever truly love. The only one I'll ever bow to. The only one I will forever worship.

I see now that Mariana was trying to help, that she was attempting to do what she thought was best for me.

However, I'll never be able to trust her again. I can see in her eyes that she knows that, too.

Leadership is about sacrifice, I think, summarizing what Huntz said moments ago. I may not like the opera singer, but his words ring true.

Mariana knew our friendship would change irrevocably as a result of her choice to help Seren. And from what I can tell, she did it for all the right reasons.

“I’m not going to thank you for going behind my back and orchestrating all this madness without my consent or knowledge,” I tell Mariana, my words for Seren, too. “Nor will I ever forgive you for betraying me and my trust.” Again, a comment for both of them. “But I’m not going to seek retribution.”

I shift my attention to my mate. To the center of my world. To the woman standing ten feet away from me and watching me with uncertainty in her eyes.

“I love you, Miza,” I tell her, not caring that everyone hears my declaration. “If *you* demand punishment as a result of all their meddling, I’ll be your flame in this war. But I personally see no cause for retaliation. Because I know our souls would have found each other—with or without their interference.”

“Or you would have killed the Stealth Dragon King and the Kraken King,” Mariana mutters. “We both know you’ve wanted to more than once over the years.”

“I’m not easily killable,” Ika interjects.

“Neither am I,” Tiru growls.

My lips twitch. “It would be a fun battle, though.”

“That’s true,” Ika agrees. “Forcing you to your knees and watching you beg for mercy would be *very* fun indeed.”

I scoff at that, glancing at him. “I will never kneel for you, stealth dragon.”

“You will if it benefits Miza,” he counters.

My lips purse. He’s not wrong. But… “I would annihilate you in a battle.”

“I think we’ve already proved that to be a lie,” he replies. “However, I’m game to spar any day, any time, Your Royal Haughtiness.” He gives a mock bow, one that has me wanting to breathe fire in his general direction.

Miza clears her throat, our mate looking a bit uncomfortable.

And I don’t think it’s because she’s worried we’re about to fight so much as *imagining* it and *liking* it.

“I don’t want to punish anyone,” she says, her cheeks reddening a little. “I just wanted answers and to understand what happened.” She glances at Giovanna before looking at Seren. “I think… I think I’ve learned what I needed to know. Except… who kept attacking me if it wasn’t Celina?”

“You were attacking yourself,” Seren replies. “Sort of, anyway. The sea was testing you as part of your ascension, and you kept fighting your instincts, which caused the ocean to retaliate.”

“That’s why I kept hitting you with energy,” Celina says. “We were all trying to provoke you into embracing your siren.”

“You’re quite stubborn,” Mariana adds, grinning. “No wonder you and Zael are an ideal match.”

I glare at her. “I am not stubborn.”

She snorts. “Okay, Z.”

“This isn’t a good way to promote forgiveness between us,” I point out to her.

“Says the man who claimed seconds ago that he wasn’t stubborn.” She rolls her eyes and looks at Ika. “That wave was the ocean testing Miza, by the way. In case that wasn’t clear. Not me. Not Seren. We both knew that, though. Our fight was staged.”

“Why are you focusing on me while saying that?”

“Because we both know you’re the one who suspected something wasn’t quite right. And I know you’re impressed by my power. Which is why you’re not going to fight me when I go play on your throne for a bit in the Stealth Dragon Realm.”

His eyebrow wings upward. “You’re declaring yourself as queen of *my* kingdom?”

“Only temporarily, Stealth Dragon King. You need some time to determine how all this is going to work between this world and yours. I’m the correct candidate to reign in the interim. Besides, it’ll give me a chance to get back in your circle’s good graces. That’s going to be needed after, well…” She waves a hand at me.

“I’m not the one who hurt the trust between us, M,” I remind her.

“I know. But after a few years of extreme happiness, you’ll be a lot softer and more forgiving.” She winks at me, then looks at Ika. “Seriously, don’t challenge me. I can handle this. Part water vampire, remember?”

She doesn’t wait for him to respond, just vanishes.

Ika’s jaw ticks.

I suspect he’s not pleased with this development.

But one look toward our mate has him shrugging. “I’ll deal with the hybrid later. Or my kingdom might just eat her alive. It’s a bunch of solitary creatures who dislike being ruled anyway.”

Miza frowns and gives her attention to Tiru. “What about the Cephalopoda Realm? Do you need to, er, go back?”

The Kraken King smiles and shakes his head. “The ascension rites will go to my brother. If he passes, he’ll take over. If he fails, we’ll… figure it out. Or we can reign over both. We have time—and plenty of it—to determine the right path forward, lei.”

I nod, agreeing with that. “This sort of alliance has never been done before, at least not in this region. We’ll take it one day at a time, just like I said earlier.”

Miza considers me for a moment, then dips her head and echoes my sentiment. “One day at a time.”

I walk toward her and pull her into my arms. “I love you, Miza.”

“I love you, too,” she breathes back at me, her pink lashes fluttering. “I love all of you.”

“And we love you,” Ika says, joining us with Tiru right beside him.

“For always,” Tiru murmurs, kissing her shoulder.

“Fated mates,” Seren sighs, causing me to glance at where she’s now standing with her daughter and Huntz at her side. She’s staring right at me, her silver eyes glinting. Then she dips her head in a bow of respect, the queen formally resigning to the new power in the room.

It’s a subtle gesture that means more than many could ever understand.

And it’s one that has me giving her a nod of equal respect.

“Take care of this region, Monster Island King,” she says to me, the change in title clearly intentional. “And more importantly, take care of my daughter. She’s more powerful than us all, and she’s only just begun to ascend.”

With that, she vanishes with her other daughter and Huntz in her arms, the three of them disappearing from the realm.

I sense their departure through a portal, one that cascades through the island as additional sirens take their leave.

A new reign is here.

A new siren hybrid.

A new queen.

“What now?” Miza whispers, glancing at the space they just occupied, then at Giovanna, and back to me.

“Now?” I smile. “Now, we lead, my beautiful Monster Island and Elite Island Queen.”

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EPILOGUE

MIZA

Several Years Later

"Show-off," I mutter as KiKi executes another jump through the air. "You look like a dolphin." I try to voice that as an insult. But we both know it's a compliment.

No matter how hard I pump my fin, I can't seem to gain nearly as much momentum as KiKi. She glides through the water with enchanted ease, flaps her fins once, and basically *flies*.

When I do that, I create a small arc over the surface that isn't necessarily ungraceful, but it's definitely not as pretty as KiKi's movements.

"She weighs about a fraction of what you do," an unexpected voice says, causing me to whirl around as Mariana appears in the ocean nearby. "She's also like a fox, but for the water. Executing leaps is practically her specialty."

My lips twist, my gaze narrowing. Mariana's not wrong. But I… I don't exactly know why she's here. It's been almost five years since my ascension, which was when I last saw the hybrid.

She's kept in touch with Ika and Zael, though. From what I understand, it isn't often. However, every time she's reached out, they've let me know.

"Are you here about Farrah?" I guess, aware that she messaged Zael with an update regarding his former general.

Shortly after my ascension, he sent Farrah to the Stealth Dragon Realm to be with Mariana. He felt it was a suitable way to help Farrah maintain a position of status, just not under his command.

There were too many conflicts after everything that had happened. While Seren might have been controlling Farrah's every move, I still didn't trust her. And neither did Zael.

Sending her to be with Mariana just made sense.

And it seems it was the right move, as apparently Farrah recently mated a stealth dragon. Or that's what Mariana's communication said, anyway.

"Yes and no," Mariana tells me vaguely, her arms sculling through the waves while she treads water a few feet away from me.

Her power is like a beacon, her energy something I can taste with my enhanced abilities. I might not be able to see the future like my biological mother does, but I can sense auras now.

And Mariana's aura is bright and fiery.

KiKi splashes between us, her playful energy nearly making my lips twitch. Alas, I'm too aware of Mariana's presence to express amusement.

She's not supposed to be here. She also has never tried to reach out to me privately before. Which means she's up to something. "What do you want, Mariana?" I ask, having no desire to play political games or beat around the bush.

She wasn't necessarily banished from our region. However, she's not exactly welcome here either.

"To find a mate," she replies, her words causing my eyes to widen.

"What?"

"I know. It's not what I expected either. But after Zael found his circle, and then Farrah—"

A flurry of power ignites beneath me, causing me to jump as Tiru and Ika materialize in their beast forms, the pair of them clearly having felt my uncertainty over Mariana's arrival.

I'm not surprised at all when I spy Zael approaching from the sky, his icy scales glittering like diamonds in the lowering sun.

I sigh. "I was handling this just fine," I tell them all, aware that at least Ika and Tiru will hear me. They might be underwater, but their beasts have supernatural senses, and hearing is one of those senses.

Unfortunately, our bond hasn't allowed us to communicate telepathically. I guess that can happen with some matings, but it hasn't with

ours. Instead, we can only share our emotions.

And locations, I think as Tiru's head pops up from the water.

Ika is next, his purple scales disappearing as he reveals his human form. "Mariana," he growls in greeting. "I don't recall you requesting permission to *portal* in."

"Is it portaling when a stealth dragon shadows?" she counters, tapping her jaw. "Because I seem to recall several times when you visited this region illegally, too. Or did Giovanna not yet mention the relationship we established years ago?"

I grimace, aware of what she's talking about. Apparently, Mariana *guarded* me for years. When Seren allowed Ika to see me that first time, she sent Mariana to the village to lurk in the shadows and observe Ika's reaction.

She was also there the night Ika gave me the flower.

It's a little creepy knowing I had a water vampire as a bodyguard.

"Why are you here, Mariana?" Zael asks after transforming to his human form and joining us in the water.

KiKi swims around him like she's trying to get him to play, her energy as happy as ever. When he ignores her, she chirps and dives underwater to jostle my fin. It's her way of saying, "*Come on*."

Sometimes she reminds me of a puppy more than a cephlalosune.

"She wants a mate," I say before Mariana can respond. "So I'm guessing she wants permission to participate in the games." That's the only rational reason I can come up with for her impromptu visit and why she chose to approach me and not my mates.

I manage the invitation list. And I also help protect the Offerings.

"A lot has changed since you left," I go on, staring at Mariana. "The games are not as intimidating as they used to be." Not for the humans, anyway. I've ensured several improvements were implemented once I learned more about the process.

And one of those improvements involves giving Offerings a *choice* to participate.

Only those who volunteer to add their names to the sacred Chalice are eligible on the Day of the Choosing.

Interestingly, now that everyone knows the true purpose of the games, over ninety percent of the Offerings have opted to participate.

Which simply proves that fear was never necessary.

As Seren said all those years ago, my existence is an example of why the Monster Games began. Monsters and humans *can* exist together. In this world, our souls are fated to dance.

“Which Offering has piqued your interest?” Zael asks, his focus on Mariana. “Because one of them must be the reason you’re here, given that you once told me you had no desire to take a mate.”

She smiles. “What was it that I said to you shortly before you met Miza? ‘Never say never’?”

“Hmm,” Zael hums, considering her before glancing at me and the others. “We’ll discuss the request and let you know our answer.”

KiKi pops up before Mariana can speak, the fox-like creature’s emerald eyes flashing at me as she spits water in my direction. Clearly, she’s not pleased that I’ve focused on someone other than her.

Tiru’s tentacle appears beside the cephlalosune and pats her head, then he waves it in front of her face like a taunt.

KiKi releases a yip of excitement and dives after his appendage as it disappears into the water.

When I glance at him, he winks.

A series of little ripples appears afterward as KiKi begins playing with the kraken’s limbs.

Mariana watches the scene, then clears her throat and asks, “No more questions as to why I feel I deserve a mate?” There’s a hint of surprise in her voice. And I think I catch a slight hint of hurt in her features, too.

“We all know why you *need* a mate, Mariana,” Ika says, his emphasis on *need* changing the intention of her question. “The Stealth Dragon Realm isn’t embracing your hybrid status as strong enough for the position. Therefore, to truly ascend the throne, you *need* a powerful circle. That’s the only way to assert dominance.”

“Not to mention your need for blood,” Zael adds, his eyebrow winging upward. “Can’t imagine you have many tasty options among the stealth dragons.”

She lifts an athletic shoulder, her dark tank top blending in with her wet skin. I didn’t even realize she was wearing clothes until she shrugged. I’m guessing her pants are a similar shade, too.

Seems appropriate, given her vampiric nature. From what I understand about water vampires, they prefer the night.

“So you know why I need a mate, but not why I *deserve* one,” she says, frowning at Ika and Zael. “I take that to mean five years isn’t long enough recompense for aligning with Seren.”

“We’re not punishing you, M,” Zael says softly. “*You* chose to leave.”

“We both knew I couldn’t remain on as your second, and not just because of what I did, but because you no longer needed me,” she replies, offering him a sad smile. “I’m never going to apologize for my choices, Zael. We both know I’m not sorry about what I did. If given the choice, I would do it again every time.”

“I know,” he answers. “Just as, while I agree with the outcome, I’ll never thank you for betraying me.”

She nods. “I understand.” Her ruby eyes find mine, the color a little duller than I remember it being. “Everything I did was meant to ensure your reign, Queen Miza. I don’t say that to earn your favor or leniency. I just want that reiterated before you discuss my fate with the others.”

With that, she dips her head in reverence and vanishes, leaving me alone in the sea with my mates.

KiKi pops up again, her legs wrapped around Tiru’s tentacle like a fierce little cat playing with a toy mouse. She bites at the tip, her little growls echoing around the waves.

Tiru wiggles the appendage in response, drawing more growl-like sounds from KiKi.

“Such a useful creature,” he muses. “And then you do things like *this*.”

Her emerald eyes lock on him, and she snarls, aware of the insult.

“A useful guardian,” Zael corrects Tiru. “Fierce, too.” He adds that part with a smile cast in KiKi’s direction.

She pauses her assault long enough to preen, then sinks her fangs into Tiru again, drawing a hiss from my kraken mate.

With a delighted chirp, she releases him and executes a backflip in the air, showing off again before speeding away.

My lips twitch at the antics.

Seeing my mates indulge KiKi tells me what kind of father each of them will be, which has me wondering if it’ll soon be time for us to breed. My next heat is in a few months, so it’s a topic that’s very much been on my mind.

Along with the upcoming Monster Games.

Games that apparently Mariana would like permission to attend.

“I think we should let her play,” I tell my mates.

“I think Tiru already handled that,” Ika muses. “KiKi left a mark on his tentacle. You’re going to have to kiss it to make it better now, little siren.”

The innuendo in his tone isn’t lost on me. And after all these years, he’s still able to make me blush.

But I force myself not to react and instead look at Zael. “I was talking about Mariana.”

“I know,” he replies, his lips twitching. “Ika did, too. He just wanted an excuse to talk about Tiru’s tentacle.”

“He does have a strange obsession with my limbs,” Tiru agrees.

“They *vibrate*,” Ika reminds everyone. Not that we *need* the reminder. I’m *very* aware of Tiru’s talents. And Ika’s talents. And Zael’s talents, too.

I clear my throat. “Mariana isn’t a threat to us. And she said she was more or less inspired by you and Farrah finding mates. Or, well, she insinuated that was part of her inspiration. Regardless, I’m okay with her joining the games.”

Zael studies me, then looks at Ika and Tiru.

Neither of them comments.

“If you’re truly comfortable with her visiting and finding a mate, we can make the arrangements. But the seaguards will be watching her carefully,” Zael says.

“As they should all the suitors visiting our realm,” I point out. “Besides, I believe Mariana had good intentions for what she did. I also think she may have orchestrated all this to have cause to take over Ika’s realm, too.”

It’s something Ika and I have discussed a few times, usually after I ask him about missing his home.

His answer is consistent—he doesn’t.

He’s still technically the Stealth Dragon King, but he never visits and seems to prefer this world.

Tiru has actually ventured into the Cephalopoda Realm more times than Ika has returned to the Stealth Dragon Realm, and Tiru abdicated his throne three years ago.

I think that says a lot about how Ika feels regarding his birthplace. Though, I think it has to do with his lack of having a family there more than anything else.

Tiru’s parents and brother—who is now the Kraken King—are why Tiru visits his home world. I’ve gone with him a few times and love the beauty

of his former kingdom. But the seas in this realm require me to remain here.

I'm the Monster Island and Elite Island Queen for a reason.

"Then we're in agreement," Zael says. "Mariana will be allowed to participate in the games."

"Sure," Ika drawls. "Not sure it'll help her win my kingdom over, but I'll leave that nightmare up to her to manage." He swims up to me, his hands finding my scaled hips. "Can we discuss more important matters now, little siren? Like how badly I want to fuck you out here in the open water?"

I narrow my gaze at him. "You're obsessed with hunting me."

"Abso-fucking-lutely, I am. It's excellent foreplay, sweetheart."

"So you've said," I reply, my lips curling a little. "What do I get if I outswim your dragon?"

"Orgasms," he says without missing a beat.

"I'll get those even if you catch me," I point out.

"Then it's a win-win scenario, gorgeous. I don't see the problem."

I'm fully smiling now as I shake my head. "You're insatiable."

"Says the siren who took all three of us four times last night," Zael replies as he grabs me from behind and wraps his arms around my waist. "I'm with Ika on this one, love. Let's play."

A tentacle slides up my fin. "If you can outswim us for more than ten minutes, we'll let you choose which form we fuck you in, Miza." The tip of his appendage strokes my backside, sending tingles up my spine.

Or maybe that's his words.

Because there's a real promise underlying his statement.

A true reward for *when* I win.

"All three of you?" I ask, barely breathing.

"Yes," he replies.

"I think she likes the prospect of playing with our beasts," Ika muses, his nose brushing mine. "Craving some dragon dick, sweetheart?" He kisses me before I can respond.

Not that I know what to say.

We almost always play in our human forms.

But we've experimented with other… activities.

And I'm *very* eager to continue those experiments.

Because these kings are more than just my mates. They're the loves of my life. My soul's complete circle. *My world*.

With them, I feel safe. Cherished. *Goddess-like*.

They give me freedom to *live*.

In return, I love them completely. Wholly. Passionately.

So if they want to chase me through the ocean, who am I to deny them?

"Beasts," I whisper. "When I win this race, *I want your beasts*."

I don't bother to ask what they'll get if they somehow defeat me.

Because we all know I'm the queen of this sea. It responds to me. And I remind them of that by wrapping them in watery shackles, then tug them beneath the surface.

"Ten minutes starts now," I sing. "Chase me, my kings…"

THE END

If you enjoyed *Their Royal Pet*, I recommend reading *Their Lethal Pet* from the Monsters Night series.

Craving more tentacles and dragon peen? Miza and her mates are ready for you to join the chase here.

Other standalone reverse harem books in the Monster Games world:
Their Rejected Queen (by J.R. Thorn)
Their Fierce Little Monster (by Mila Young)

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Regally Bitten

Rebel Bitten

Kingly Bitten

Cruelly Bitten

Blood Alliance Standalones - Dystopian Paranormal

Blood Day

Blood City

Crave Me

Frost Bitten

Dark Provenance Series - Paranormal Romance

Heiress of Bael (FREE!)

Daughter of Death

Paramour of Sin

Princess of Bael

Son of Chaos

Captive of Hell

Drakon-Clan Series - Shifter Omegaverse

Gold Sector

Silver Sector

Elemental Fae Academy - Reverse Harem

Book One

Book Two

Book Three

Elemental Fae Queen

Winter Fae Queen

Hell Fae - Reverse Harem

Hell Fae Captive

Hell Fae Warden

Hell Fae Commander

Hell Fae Prince

Hell Fae King

Immortal Curse Series - Paranormal Romance

Book One: Blood Laws

Book Two: Forbidden Bonds

Book Three: Blood Heart

Book Four: Blood Bonds

Book Five: Angel Bonds

Book Six: Blood Seeker

Book Seven: Wicked Bonds

Book Eight: Blood King

Immortal Curse World - Short Stories & Bonus Fun

Elder Bonds

Blood Burden

Assassin Bonds

Mershano Empire Series - Contemporary Romance

The Prince's Game

The Charmer's Gambit

The Rebel's Redemption

Midnight Fae Academy - Reverse Harem

Ella's Masquerade

Book One

Book Two

Book Three

Book Four

Mythos Fae - Standalone RH Omegaverse

Knotty Mythos Fae

Netherworld Fae - Reverse Harem

Their Lethal Pet

Bride of Death

A Nest of Lies

Knotted Myths

Noir Reformatory - Ménage Paranormal Romance

The Beginning

First Offense

Second Offense

Third Offense

Fourth Offense

Underworld Royals Series - Dark Paranormal Romance

Happily Ever Crowned

Happily Ever Bitten

X-Clan Series - Shifter Omegaverse

X-Clan: The Origin

Andorra Sector

X-Clan: The Experiment

Winter's Arrow

Bariloche Sector

Venom Island

V-Clan Series - Shifter Omegaverse

Blood Sector

Night Sector

Eclipse Sector

Kodiak Sector

Lunar Sector

Vampire Dynasty - Dark Paranormal

Violet Slays

Crossed Fates

Other Books

Carnage Island - Standalone Reverse Harem Romance

Claim Me - Standalone Reverse Harem Romance

Dark Obsessions - Standalone Monster Romance

Lark- Contemporary Omegaverse Romance

Monsterland Mayhem - Standalone Reverse Harem Romance

Rotanev - Standalone Poseidon Tale

Scarlet Mark - Standalone Romantic Suspense

Their Royal Pet - Standalone Reverse Harem Romance

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