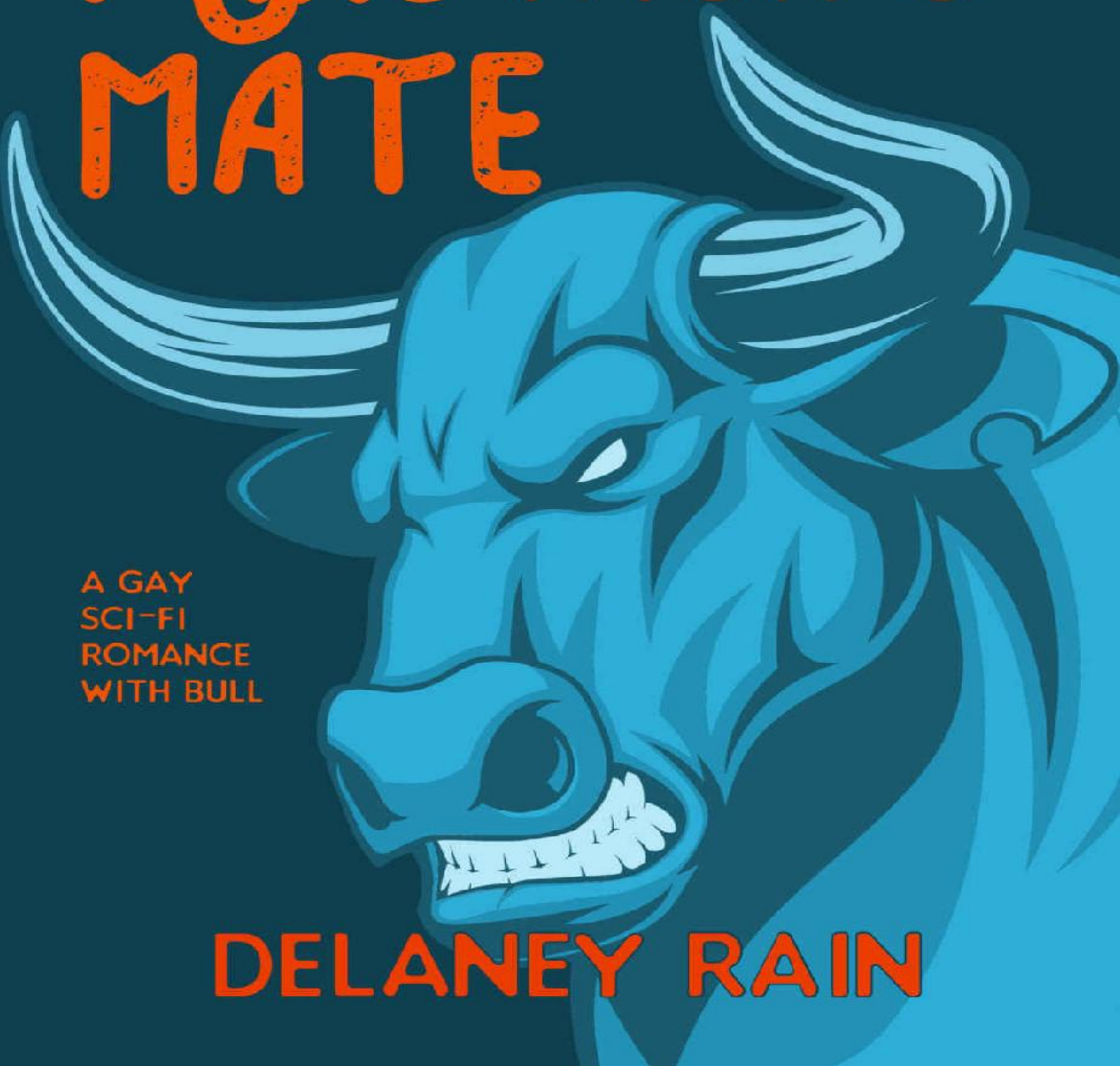


# THE MINOTAUR'S MATE

A GAY  
SCI-FI  
ROMANCE  
WITH BULL

DELANEY RAIN



# **THE MINOTAUR'S MATE**

A GAY MONSTER ROMANCE WITH BULL

# DELANEY RAIN



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*For Eliza Jean.*

*You're already the stubborn one, so that's why you get the book about a bull.*

*With thanks to Tammy, Nicole, and Trace for their collective advice and eagle eyes.*

*With unending appreciation for all the members of the Queer Monster Sanctuary Facebook Group.*

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

**Can a bull-headed man and a marshmallow-hearted bull unite to prevent a war and save a people?**

All his life, Nat Konstantinidis has watched helplessly as his people sacrificed their own to the Minotaurs who dominate this planet. Are they killed? Are they eaten? No one knows what happens to the captives, but Nat is determined that this is the year it finally ends. Whatever it takes, he's going to stop the sacrifices.

But from the first moment he's handed over to one of the beasts, nothing is what he thought it would be. Now Nat doesn't know what to believe, but he might know whom to trust—the Minotaur prince Nat might not hate as much as he thought he did.

What's a virgin to do when a big brute looks at him with hearts in his eyes while making promises about saving the world together? And did he just propose?



*This novella has an enemies-to-lovers, virgin hero, size difference story with sci-fi elements, a bull-headed human and a marshmallow-hearted bull, spying on your neighbors, shopping for sex toys, one heck of a history lesson, monster-sized anatomy, megalomaniacs fighting to stay in control, and a little stabbing, but there's a wedding and a HEA ending.*





## CHAPTER ONE

I volunteer as sacrifice,” Nat Konstantinidis bellowed the instant he shoved through the council guards. Two of them grabbed his arms and another tried to yank him back by his belt, but Nat held his ground.

“Ignatius, no!” His father scrambled to stand and get between Nat and the rest of the council. His dark red robes billowed around his legs and the cloth covering his head fell to his shoulders, revealing his baldness. “Ignore him,” he said frantically. “Ignatius is nothing more than a—”

“I’m *volunteering*,” Nat said over his father’s protests, “to steal a ship and kill Rhenok. *I* am going to save my people instead of bowing to the sick demands of the minotaurs’ treaty until we’re all dead.”

Even in the dim candlelight inside the ramshackle building, Nat could see when they’re upset at being interrupted turned into curiosity. His father quieted as well, but that could have been due to horror more than intrigue. Nat was, after all, calling the council cowards and giving them an excuse to send him to his death.

But he had a plan.

Unlike so many of the sacrifices from years past, he was strong, determined, and fast. He’d taunted the minotaurs at the city’s edge plenty of times and always gotten away unscathed. He could free himself from ropes binding his wrists and ankles. He was observant, smart, and adaptable. From the moment the minotaurs took him away, he would be working on his escape and seeking out their weaknesses. He would use every advantage he had to steal their largest ship to take every human from this cursed planet once and for all.

And, if he was lucky, he would also destroy the minotaurs from within by killing their king.

Wayne Deacon, the council president—a more corrupt man than any who had been sacrificed in the past twenty-seven years—stood up from his low stool, a cold smile on his weathered face as he smoothed down his cream-colored robes. “You’ve sealed your fate, young Ignatius.”

Nat smiled, head held high. They thought he would fail, but he wouldn’t. Despite their years of giving in to the minotaurs and sending their people to their deaths, he’d still rescue them and accept their eventual apologies and thanks with dignity.

“Bind him,” Thornhew said, the old man’s voice low and angry. “Take him away while we determine who will go with him.”

Nat let the guards tie his wrists behind his back before they led him from the council building. The walls weren’t so thick that he couldn’t hear his father saying, “Listen to me. You can’t do this!” but Nat walked too far away to hear why. It was probably a show, not a real protest. His father would side with the others, following his favorite advice to never rock the boat. He also liked not fixing what wasn’t broken. But their entire society was broken, and the boat was sinking. If no one else was

going to do anything, then Nat would.

As one of the first births on this planet, Nat had never known life without the constant threat of the minotaurs hanging over him. He only knew the stories of what it had been like on the crowded space station orbiting Earth before thousands had volunteered to leave—had bravely sacrificed themselves for the good of those who'd stayed behind. He also only knew the stories of how they'd crashed onto this planet, tried to integrate with minotaurs, and been thrust into a war with them instead. It hadn't taken long for the war to end, the humans reduced to a few hundred, and the compound becoming the total sum of their world. Nat couldn't blame them—not entirely—for doing absolutely anything to end the slaughter and give the survivors necessities like fresh water so that they could eke out a life in a place that had become their prison.

But not anymore.

At twenty-three, Nat was going to use the privileges he'd received as a council member's son to give back in the best way he knew how. He was stronger than the guards that put him into the cockpit of an old ship and shut the door behind him. Well-fed and muscular, he could've easily overpowered them and escaped from the pathetic holding cell. He felt like he'd been training for this moment his whole life. Now was the time to enact every plan he'd ever dreamt up and use his skills to keep him one step ahead of the minotaurs.

It wasn't long before the cockpit door opened and the guards shoved a woman in with him.

"Brigid?" Nat let her smack into him instead of the panel beside him and then gave her a moment to straighten up. "Why are *you* here?"

Tears had cleaned lines down her thin face, and she blinked up at him, making more fall. "I don't... I don't know what happened. God, Nat, they've accused me of adultery."

"What? You?" He kicked at one of the broken pilot's chairs. "This is why things have to change! *You* aren't the adulterer."

She nodded, big eyes wide. "Of course not! I'd never do..." She frowned at him. "Why did you say it like that?"

"Ah, Brigid." He slumped against a chair. "Tony's been bedding Peony for months now. I'm so sorry."

Her suntanned face paled. Fearing she was about to faint, Nat used his upper body to press her back against a broken panel, making her sit on it. "Easy," he said. "Deep breaths."

For a moment, he debated freeing his hands from behind his back so he could hug her, but he didn't want to reveal his ability to do that just yet.

"My sister?" she whispered as pain pinched her expression. "Oh, god... They did this to me?"

Suddenly, the door screeched open and the guards pushed Moses in with them.

"No!" Nat yelled. "This is insane!"

Neither guard spared him a glance as they shut the door again.

Brigid looked between them. "What's going on? I don't understand. Our strongest warrior and our best farmer? What are they doing?"

"They accused me of *stealing food*," Moses said, clearly bewildered.

Nat closed his eyes and tipped his head up, striving for patience and calm. He'd heard rumors that anyone could pay off the council to have someone else sacrificed, but he'd resisted believing it. Until now. Brigid Horn was sweet, helpful, and their best teacher. She adored all the children and did what she could for each of them like they were her own. And everyone knew her sister and husband had been sneaking around behind her back. If anyone deserved to be tossed away from the community, it was them, not Brigid.

And Moses Dooley? The man was dedicated to plants like they were his religion. When food was scarce, Moses found a solution. He'd kept more of the citizenry alive than any other person. But Nat knew why Moses was here—the council didn't like it when someone stood up to them, and Moses had recently protested the council's decision to stop removing the seeds from strawberries before eating them. It had been deemed too tedious even though they would have fewer seeds to plant and grow more berries if people weren't required to de-seed them. But Moses had spoken up, gotten others to listen, and now he was a threat to the council's power.

"I'm so sorry, Moses," Nat said miserably. "It's all so stupid."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Nat." Moses shook his head, gray dreads swaying. "This whole system..."

As Brigid told Moses what was happening to her, Nat wanted to tell them his plan but held his tongue. No one knew what awaited them once the minotaurs took them into their city. The stories said sacrifices were often enslaved but some were killed and eaten. Could he risk his mission by giving Brigid and Moses a secret they might be tempted to reveal to improve their situations...or save their lives? He hated to keep them in the dark—hated that they might *need* leverage and he was denying it—but he felt like he couldn't take the chance.

They were stuck inside the cockpit long enough for the temperature to climb to near-unbearable levels. It was one final slap from the council, locking them away with no water to stew in their worries and fears. Even Nat's confidence started to wane. But then the door opened and there were the guards to haul them all out.

The minotaurs must have arrived.

Most people didn't leave their homes when the sacrifices were walked down the road to where the minotaurs always waited. Nat had watched out of curiosity until he was old enough to understand that those people wouldn't be coming back. Now it was him and two other innocent people being prodded across the packed red soil from one end of the single road to the other...and everyone was there to watch them go by.

"Bless you, Ignatius Konstantinidis!"

He looked over to see Thomas with one arm around his wife's shoulders and the other cradling his young daughter to his chest. Minerva broke away from her husband to rush over and hold a cup of water to Nat's lips. He wasn't allowed to stop walking, but he did drink.

"We know what you did," Minerva said urgently. "We'll never forget you. Thomas renamed our daughter in your honor. She'll carry your story."

*Oh, god...* They thought he'd volunteered to save Thomas from being sacrificed? Thomas was their handyman! There was nothing he couldn't rig up or fix. How could the council think it was right to sacrifice him?

When the water was gone, Minerva stumbled to a stop and called out her blessings to Nat. Thomas's voice rang out as well, and others joined his.

Nat couldn't look at them. He didn't want to take away from them what they thought was happening, but he didn't want their praise either. If the council had voted to get rid of Thomas once, they'd do it again—and they'd see this reaction as further proof that he had to go.

The importance of his mission weighed on him even heavier. He absolutely had to succeed. By any means necessary. The council couldn't keep destroying them all, and the minotaurs couldn't keep demanding sacrifices. It had to stop.

That Nat's father wasn't there broke his heart a little more.

The crowd thinned out near the end of the road. The two rows of buildings they'd constructed

from their destroyed ships nearly thirty years ago stopped abruptly. All they had to do was walk through the makeshift gates and they'd be on minotaur land.

Nat nearly lost his nerve. Was he truly ready for this? Was today really the day?

Brigid walked past him. "They don't deserve us," she said, her voice hard. "Regardless of what awaits us, these people don't deserve our help. They never did."

Nat nodded in agreement and walked with Moses behind Brigid. The guards unchained the gate and pulled one side open. Nat's heart started pounding when the minotaurs came into view.

All of them were over seven feet tall and broader than a doorway, their horns making them wider still. Their skin tones ranged from black to white with all shades of brown and gray as well. They had two arms, ten fingers, and two legs, but that was where the similarities to humans ended. Thickly muscled, they had bovine heads with short snouts, hooved feet, and long tails tipped in hair. They wore kilts and capes in various bright colors with silver breastplates. Some of them had rings on their horns, fingers, or through their wide noses.

And each of them had a sword sheathed on their hips.

Brigid gave a squawk and recoiled when one of them reached for her, bumping into Nat, who stepped back and knocked Moses right on his ass. One of the minotaurs snorted and managed an expression that brought Nat's hatred roaring to the surface.

"Shut up, cow," he snarled, "and help them up."

They didn't understand his words, but he could see them recognize his tone.

A brown minotaur wearing a red cape said something in their language and waved a hand toward the three of them. It almost looked like he was smiling, but then he exhaled through his nose like the beast he was. Three other minotaurs stepped forward.

Nat let the one that came for him get close and was surprised when he only gestured for Nat to keep walking. He had his other hand behind Nat but didn't touch him. The minotaur that helped Moses back onto his feet brushed the red dirt off the seat of his gray trousers. And the one with Brigid also gestured for her to carry on without touching her. Nat didn't know what to make of this respectful treatment. Suspicious, he walked toward the egg-shaped pod they used for transportation.

Never had Nat gone anywhere he didn't walk or run to reach, so his nerves spiked when he stepped into the pod. The brown minotaur got on and stood behind him, making Nat uncomfortable with the closeness. It couldn't be helped, of course, since there were so many of them inside the thing. And then the minotaur at the front did something to make the pod move forward, and Nat stumbled backward.

He bumped into the minotaur and his hands were at just the right height to get filled with a fat set of balls and a thick cock. Nat gasped and jerked forward, nearly losing his balance, until the minotaur gripped his shoulders and held him still for a moment. Nat looked back and up at the minotaur's face, bracing for...he wasn't sure, but he feared the end of his mission right then and there. Except he realized that was mirth on the beast's face, not anger or disgust. He even smiled before patting Nat's shoulders and letting him go.

Nat kept his legs braced and stared out the front window of the pod after that. He tried very hard not to think about what he'd had in his hands because he'd never before considered the anatomy of a minotaur and wasn't sure he liked knowing about it now. He'd heard a woman tell a man he was hung like a bull once, and now Nat knew what that meant. The minotaur was huge everywhere.

And it pissed Nat off that all he'd done so far was fondle someone. He refocused on the minotaur driving the pod, watched his movements, and tried to learn what he was doing. That was the sort of thing that could come in handy later.

Knowing a minotaur's cock was at least seven inches while soft was not helpful information.



## CHAPTER TWO

The minotaurs' city was behind a wall on the other side of a wide moat with a shining metal bridge arching across the water. The pod floated over the bridge and just like that, they were cut off from everything Nat knew. No human ever went into the city and returned, so he had no idea what was in there. Well, no, he knew there was a castle with turrets and flags somewhere in the center from the few times he'd snuck close enough to see the city's walls and the castle on the hill, but he didn't know anything else. Not knowing had his heart rate picking up again.

How much time did he have to escape? Would he be auctioned off or killed right away? All he needed was a few minutes to run and—

The minotaur behind him gripped the rope binding Nat's wrists together and he realized he'd been wiggling them, readying himself for when he'd twist free. Angry at himself for giving his first plan away, Nat tried to wrench free of the hold, but the minotaur held firm. Held firm and completely ignored him. He didn't look down at Nat, didn't bark any harsh words, didn't jerk him to be still—he just kept hold of his wrists like he had nothing to worry about. Like Nat wasn't a problem.

Nat wanted to fight then, but the pod stopped and the minotaur started using his bound arms to steer him out of it. Either Nat was going to walk or the minotaur was going to drag him, so he stumbled out and onto a gravel path. Thankfully, the stones were smooth and didn't bite into the soles of his feet as the minotaur maneuvered him away from the pod so everyone else could exit.

He watched Brigid and Moses come out, their minotaurs holding their arms almost politely. Nat glared at his manhandling minotaur, but the brute continued to ignore him. Being so...insignificant to his enemy was... Was that the plan? Was the minotaur trying to make Nat feel small and weak? Nat clenched his jaw and straightened up. Everything in him wanted to fight back, to prove that he was strong and shouldn't be ignored. But he wasn't going to rise to the challenge. He wouldn't give the minotaur what he wanted. It would be to his advantage if they thought he was insignificant.

As Nat refocused on what was happening, he realized Brigid was smiling. A minotaur was in front of her with two teenage calves beside her and a toddler in her arms. He'd never seen a female minotaur before but recognized one now because she had an udder on her abdomen that she'd covered up with a sort of sling. It was about the only difference between males and females that he could tell.

Then the minotaur who had escorted Brigid untied her and— Nat gasped as the female set the toddler down and the little one walked over and took Brigid's hand. And no one reacted. They didn't pull the child away or yell at Brigid to release him. The female herded the teens to start walking, encouraged Brigid and the toddler to follow them, and brought up the rear.

Brigid looked over her shoulder, saw Nat watching, and held up her free hand as she shrugged. He couldn't blame her for going along with whatever this was. Not even he was so cruel as to risk children. Maybe she could escape after dark, considering they'd untied her already.



Looking around again, Nat saw Moses standing with an older couple of minotaurs. He had a box of seedlings resting on one arm as he touched the leaves and peered at the flowers. Nat didn't know what kind of plants they were, but he could easily recognize the rapt interest on Moses's face.

What the hell was going on?

The minotaurs had given Brigid to what looked like a single mother with three kids and had handed Moses over to minotaurs who'd brought him a box of plants. How did they know those were their passions? How did they know anything at all about either of them?

And what did they know about him?

Nat chanced a look up at the brown minotaur still holding onto the rope binding his wrists and found him...smirking. Like an honest to god "I know something you don't know" smirk. It made Nat gulp with worry that his every plan was destroyed. Either the council had given up information when they'd sacrificed them, or else the minotaurs had some way of spying on them. He wasn't sure which was worse.

Suddenly, the minotaur was prodding Nat along ahead of him, steering him with his arms down the road. And Nat...didn't know what to do. Resist? Comply? He couldn't think.

Looking around he saw crowds of curious minotaurs watching his every move. He'd never accomplish anything by escaping or fighting now. He took a deep breath, calming with the decision to wait. If they knew what he planned, fine. Twisting free and running wouldn't save him because the minotaur holding onto him still had all the rest of the guards with him. Nat needed to wait for a moment when he was alone or at least had fewer of them around. Then he could act.

Refocusing on his surroundings, Nat realized he was being driven into one of the buildings nearby. A younger minotaur in green snapped to attention and opened the door for them. The brown minotaur didn't even let Nat pause to see what he was walking into, just shoved him over the threshold and inside. They didn't stop there, continuing past a curved desk and more minotaurs who also wore green. Was this a shop? Judging by the humidity and pockets of visible steam he would say they sold water.

When the minotaur guided him into a room, Nat let out a relieved breath to see they were alone. Well, he was alone with the brown minotaur and the six others with them. The guards lined the room, facing an indented area in the center, and the brown one steered Nat over into that indentation. There was a drain in the middle and the tiles here were damp.

The clank of chains had Nat looking over his shoulder just before the metal snapped around his wrists. In the next moment, the rope was removed, and Nat cursed himself for waiting. As dangerous and fool-hardy as escape might've been outside, now he was shackled in something he had no experience freeing himself from. He could bring his arms around in front of him, but he had cuffs on his wrists and chains hanging from each of them.

And when the damn minotaur walked around in front of him with that smirk on his bovine face, the other end of the chains in his hands, Nat knew real fear for the first time that day.

When the minotaur reached over Nat's head to loop the chains over a hook he hadn't noticed, Nat had to fight a sudden instinct to beg for his life as his hands were raised over his head.

And then the knife came out.

"No. Please," Nat said, his voice strained in his ears as the minotaur aimed the blade at him. "Oh, god, please don't!"

The minotaur made a clicking noise before grasping the shoulder of Nat's shirt. He flinched back, but there was nowhere for him to go. He couldn't believe his eyes when the minotaur cut through his shirt. That was...it?

"I could've taken that off myself," he snarled, "you fucking cow."

The minotaur chuckled at him. "You'll have to do better than that if you want to insult me, little one."

Nat gasped and forgot all about his clothes as the minotaur cut everything off of him because he'd never known that the creatures could speak his language. He'd heard them speak to each other and knew they were intelligent enough, but why were they able to talk to him?

Before he could ask, water suddenly rained down on him and he made the mistake of looking up and nearly drowning himself. As he coughed and gasped, he realized he stood there naked now, the minotaur having taken every stitch of his clothing from him. The water went off, and the fucking minotaur accepted a sponge from one of the guards who poured something thick from a pitcher onto it.

"No," Nat barked. "Unchain me and I'll fucking wash myself." He tried to get away from the minotaur as he came toward him, but the chains wouldn't let him get far. "Don't you touch me!"

"Calm yourself," the minotaur grumbled, "or I'll have them fetch me a gag."

Nat stopped but only because he didn't want to find out if someone had one. Considering what had already happened to his clothes, it was possible it wasn't an empty threat.

Standing there and gritting his teeth, Nat endured being bathed like he was a small child. It was humiliating. And while the minotaur who deserved to rot in the deepest corner of hell washed him, he spoke to one of the guards in their language so Nat couldn't understand them. If he'd had to guess, he would've said the son of a bitch was naming off all of Nat's scars, new injuries, and bruises. Maybe even his tan lines. What did anyone care if he had such things? Why map or catalog them?

And then the minotaur started washing Nat's groin.

He tried to flinch away again, horrified at his body reacting to the strokes of that sponge and the silky soap. When the minotaur grasped Nat's cock, he went still.

"Why?" he said with a grunt as the minotaur pulled back his foreskin and washed everywhere it revealed. "What possible purpose could you have to do this to me?"

"It isn't a punishment, little one."

"Don't call me that."

The beast tsked at him and washed Nat's balls.

"Stop! This is—" He stumbled when the minotaur shoved his hand between Nat's legs and washed behind his balls.

"Necessary. This is necessary," he said quietly as he moved behind Nat. "I'm nearly done, and then you'll never have to endure this again. Unless you want to, of course."

His cock half-hard and his face burning, Nat clenched his jaw and shook with anger and shame. He didn't say anything as the minotaur scrubbed his asscheeks and the crack between them. He kept silent as his legs were washed one at a time. And even when he was tempted to kick the minotaur in his ugly face as he washed Nat's feet, he stared straight ahead and still said nothing.

When the water came on, he let it rinse him off. He thought he might crack a tooth because he was clenching his jaw so hard as the minotaur used his hand to make sure every inch of Nat's body was rid of the soap. He imagined slaughtering the beast with his knife, but even that didn't make his cock deflate and relieve his humiliation.

Finally, the water turned off, and the minotaur accepted a long white cloth that he used to dry Nat from stretched arms to ankles. When the minotaur...lingered at Nat's groin, he met the brute's gaze.

"That isn't for you, beast."

He smirked and handed the towel off to one of the guards. "I know."

Was this all preparation for a sexual assault on him? The sudden realization had Nat's cock

shrinking in horror. The minotaur hadn't been upset when Nat had fallen against him in the pod and accidentally held his anatomy in his hands. And the way he his time touching Nat? Abuse was the only reason he could think of for it.

He certainly wouldn't ever consent.

The minotaur took a red length of cloth from one of the guards and draped it over and around Nat's body. It was a small relief to be covered up again, even if he was bare-assed beneath the short skirt the minotaur had created on him.

To Nat's utter astonishment, the bastard then walked over to another indented area and undressed. Nat stared as one of the guards held each item the minotaur removed until the massive beast was completely naked.

*Holy shit.* Nat had known the minotaur was enormous, of course, but seeing him bare from horn to hoof was startling. So many muscles and he was hung like— Nat looked away and then just closed his eyes. By the sounds alone, he assumed the beast was washing himself, though faster than he'd washed Nat.

When the door opened and closed, Nat opened his eyes. The minotaur returned to him—now wrapped up in a red cloth the same as he was—and lowered the chains holding Nat's arms up so that he could relax. While that was an improvement, Nat saw that an older minotaur female wearing white had joined them. She held a thin device and other supplies in her hands. Medical supplies.

"Is this when you take my organs?" Nat grasped the chains at his wrists and shook them, trying to dislodge them from the hook in the ceiling. "Are you going to kill me by slitting my throat over this drain?"

The minotaur grasped the chains and tugged Nat into his chest. "From this day onward, none will touch you but me."

For just a moment, Nat stared up into big brown eyes and got lost. Was that a promise of protection? Said so fiercely, like a declaration, it had Nat shivering in... He wasn't sure what. Did he *like* having someone want to protect him?

*No. Wait.* "I belong to *no one*," Nat said and hit the minotaur's chest with both of his fists.

He sighed and looked... Disappointed? What the hell for? He couldn't possibly have thought his enemy would be pleased to be his slave.

And then the minotaur held out his hand, and the medical minotaur set a needle on his palm.

Nat fought, twisting and pushing at the bulk of the minotaur, but that only caused the beast to squeeze Nat tighter.

"I need a blood sample," the minotaur said like he might be struggling to hold on to Nat.

"Fuck you!"

Nat lifted a leg to start kicking, and one of the guards warned, "Your Highness..."

"I have him."

Suddenly, Nat was thrust up and over the minotaur's shoulder like a sack of grain. The breath was knocked out of him for a second, but he still registered what the guard had said. This brute was royalty?

"No one said where the blood had to come from," the minotaur said a heartbeat before Nat's ass stung, making him jerk. "I was going to prick your finger, but this works just as well."

"You could've said so! Your Highness," Nat sneered.

He removed the needle, passed it back to the other minotaur, and set Nat on his feet again. There was a swab in his hand and he aimed it at Nat's face. "Open your mouth."

"Why?"

“This is for your well-being, boy. I need to know if you’re healthy or not.” He poked the swab closer to Nat’s head, making him flinch back. “Now open your mouth.”

“And if I refuse? Your Highness.”

“You keep saying that like you’re trying to insult me. Yes, little one, I am a Bostaurus prince. You may call me Asterius. And if you don’t open your mouth, I will open it for you.”

He quirked a brow up before grabbing Nat’s jaw, fingers digging in. Nat opened his mouth. After two quick swipes against the insides of both cheeks, the minotaur prince let him go. He handed the swab back to the other minotaur.

If only they’d known the prince himself had been coming to collect the sacrifices. Nat could’ve coordinated an attack, taken the beast hostage, and negotiated for an end to the treaty in exchange for the prince’s safe return. They could’ve had leverage like never before!

They could’ve been saved.

“Spirits preserve us,” the minotaur said, “I can see your devious little mind working.”

Without a thought as to what might come next, Nat grabbed onto his chains and swung them toward the minotaur’s head. Maybe he would’ve injured him at the very least, or maybe he could’ve wrapped them around his thick neck. Instead, the prince reached out and caught them long before they came anywhere near his head. And a moment after that, he’d twirled them around Nat.

He got right up into Nat’s face. “We’ll play more later, little one, but there’s still quite a lot to do yet today.”

And then he licked the tip of Nat’s nose.



## CHAPTER THREE

Nat sincerely had no idea what the hell was going on. His Highness Prince Asshole had left the chains wrapped around Nat's upper body and then gone and used one end to tow him along. It was humiliating! They walked through the town, and far too many of the minotaurs they passed looked at Nat and snickered behind their hands. Sure, some of them seemed scandalized, but most were laughing at him. And Prince Dipshit just kept clomp-clomp-clomping his wide ass down the road like he was enjoying himself.

What the fuck had that lick been about? Who licked another person? Who licked *their enemy*? Clearly, the prince was insane. Nat hadn't exactly thought he'd be up against a genius, but he hadn't been prepared for lunacy.

And playing? Nat wasn't *playing*, so clearly Prince Shithead didn't think Nat was any kind of a threat. Humiliation on top of humiliation.

It was demoralizing. It really was. He'd been so sure he could accomplish his every goal, but now he was tired, confused, and his goddamned feet hurt from walking on fucking pebbles. He didn't have hooves! Or shoes, because sacrifices had to leave everything behind, so he'd gone to the council with nothing but the clothes on his back for decency's sake. Which he hadn't needed to worry about, had he? Could've just shown up naked, and Prince Fuck-stick wouldn't have minded at all.

Nat stumbled and went down but didn't hit the ground. There had only been two feet or so of chain between him and Prince Beast, so all the bastard had to do was raise his arm to stop Nat from eating gravel. He could've been grateful that the freak had great reflexes, but he just wanted him to go to hell with a lit torch up his ass.

That Prince Dumbfuck helped Nat regain his feet and then *patted him on the head* only made Nat angrier. He'd trained for nearly a year with a handsy motherfucker to learn how to fly—theoretically, since every piece of interstellar equipment they had was broken—in preparation for this day. He'd begged their best hunters to teach him how to hone his body and build his strength. And he was being *patted on the head*?

"Go *fuck yourself* and *die*," he snarled.

Prince Fat-Cow blinked down at him, and one of the guards coughed as someone else on the street giggled. Nat stared the brute down and would've welcomed even a small smack at that point because

---

The goddamned minotaur smiled and shook his head. Amused.

Nat screamed. He couldn't stop it, push it down, nothing. His rage needed out and it left him as a deep-throated roar into the face of his tormentor.

When he was done, he felt a bit light-headed and sucked in a huge breath. A small part of him felt childish for that reaction, but honestly, it was all he had right now. He'd been reduced to...an

amusement. He was *nothing* to these people.

“It’s not far now, little one, and then you can rest.”

Nat just hung his head and waited. He was so tired all of a sudden. Tired, hungry, thirsty, and unprepared for...whatever was happening. The day wasn’t done, but dear god, he was.

They got moving again. Nat made himself feel slightly better by walking *beside* Prince Clomping-Hoof instead of behind his expansive ass. Maybe it irked the creature, maybe it didn’t. Nat liked being on an even level with Prince Matching Outfits while the guards walked behind him. He was just going to find the silver linings anywhere he could.

Eventually, they walked right up to a fucking castle in the center of the walled town. Up on a hill and made from the same pale yellow stone as the wall, it loomed over the area like a stern taskmaster. Nat hated it on sight. He knew it was going to be cold and sterile and—

Blessed hell, it had smooth floors.

He could’ve wept from how happy his feet were to get off those murder stones. The floors were wide slabs of white with gray swirled through each one in random patterns. He didn’t know what kind of stone they were, but he loved them a little bit right now. He walked slowly, flexing his toes, and liked that he made Prince Walks-Too-Fast finally slow the fuck down.

And then Nat noticed that the floor was changing colors. No, it was something shining down onto it. He looked up and gasped.

The ceiling was a dome of a billion different colored pieces of glass. As the clouds cleared and the sun shone down, it lit up a scene of blue sky, yellow sun, white clouds, and a rainbow raining down onto a field of trees and flowers. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“That is the day of—”

“Shut up,” Nat hissed. “Don’t ruin this for me, too.”

Amazingly, the giant cow didn’t say anything else. He also let Nat stare until he got a crick in his neck. But seeing such beauty was worth a little discomfort. Nat sighed and rolled his neck, wishing he could rub at the muscles. How much longer would he have to be wrapped in these chains?

As if he heard Nat’s thoughts, the prince started untangling Nat from the chains. Not wanting to interrupt and risk ending that, Nat didn’t say a word or move at all. He barely looked at anything except the staircase in front of him. But he dismissed the idea of making a run for it once he was free. He was...curious. He wanted to see what was next.

When the prince touched the cuffs circling Nat’s wrists, Nat looked up at the big brute and waited. The urge to run came back, but where would he go? He’d originally thought that he’d have no time to learn the lay of the land and plan things out once he knew where he was going. Now he wondered if he might have the opportunity to spy and absorb new knowledge. Could he play nice and make them believe he was harmless? He might be able to trick them into allowing him an audience with the king or a tour of a ship.

“Promise me you will not attack anyone,” the prince said quietly. “I’m the only one who’s caused you any harm today. Everyone else is innocent.”

Nat blinked up at him. He was concerned for everyone except himself?

The prince switched from touching the metal cuff to holding Nat’s hands. “Promise m—”

“I promise.”

He gave a nod and released both cuffs.

Nat stayed where he was.

A pleased little smile curled the beast’s lips. “Come, little one. I will escort you to your chambers.”

Choking down any insistence that he not be called that, Nat kept pace with the clacking hooves of his escort as they walked to the staircase. But when the prince started climbing, Nat hesitated.

“Here? I’m staying inside the castle?”

As the minotaur looked back at him, Nat wondered suddenly if he possibly didn’t understand how castles worked. Maybe this one had a second level out into a space where slaves were kept in a yard or something similar. Or maybe the dungeon was above rather than below. The buildings in the compound were all above ground and on one level only. He knew about stairs, slave quarters, and dungeons from books.

“You are,” Prince Asterius said. “Your chambers are, in fact, near mine.”

Why that caused heat to cascade through Nat’s body, he didn’t know. Proximity of that sort probably meant that the prince could keep a better eye on him, or that guards might be nearer.

Nat went up the stairs.

The castle was massive. He tried to take it all in because he could easily get lost if he didn’t, but there was so much to look at. He didn’t even have names for everything he could see or reasons for other things. Like why were there so many tables and chairs in the hallway? What was that hollow-looking metal minotaur for? Rugs were hanging on the walls and paintings were under thick clear stuff on the floors. Flowers he’d never seen before were everywhere. There might’ve been a room down another hall that had trees in it.

Of course, all the artwork depicted minotaurs doing one thing or another. Dancing, battling, gazing up at the stars... Nat would’ve thought there’d be at least one small thing that showed a minotaur slaughtering a human, but he hadn’t seen one yet.

And then the prince stopped at a door, and Nat realized he couldn’t have gotten himself back down to the front room with the dome ceiling if his life depended on it.

“Displeased already?”

Nat cleared his throat and tried to neutralize his expression. No one else needed to know he was disappointed in his recognizance skills. Instead of saying anything, he approached the door and put his hand on the large knob in the center of it. A beep sounded, and he snatched his hand away.

“It’s coded to you.” The prince put a hand on Nat’s back. “Only you may open it when no one else is inside.”

“And if I’m inside, all may enter?” Nat shrugged the beast’s hand away.

He huffed a breath through his wide nose. “No. If you’re inside, the system will announce any visitors and give you the option to send them away or allow entrance. Their request, your response, and their actions will be recorded for security purposes.”

The prince gestured to the knob, and Nat went ahead and put his hand on it. There was a faint vibration against his palm before he heard the door click and it opened by itself. Nat stepped inside, his gaze sliding over every aspect of this room that was supposed to be his.

It was a larger space than anywhere he’d slept at the compound; it would take several steps for him to cross the room in any direction. And it was far more lavish as well. Though the bed was just big enough to accommodate his height, the mattress was as thick as his thigh. There was a comfortable-looking chair beside a lamp and a small bookcase full of books. A closed door was barely visible beside the bookcase with another opposite it. A sturdier chair was behind a desk with spindly legs that had a notebook, loose papers, and writing tools on it. Clothes in a wide array of colors hung on a bar beside a curtained window, letting lights on the walls illuminate the room.

“You will remain here for the most part while you acclimate to this new life,” the minotaur said behind him. “You have a private bath and a selection of entertainment options that we thought you



might enjoy, but if you need anything else, let me know. You will receive meals here three times a day and may request more should you wish it.”

It was a prison. A nice one, but still a prison.

“I will escort you about the castle, gardens, or the town every day to—”

“I’m not a pet,” Nat said as the thought occurred to him. “Or a slave or in any other way yours.”

He turned around to pin the beast with a glare.

The beast grinned back at him. “I assure you, I am aware. But let me also say that I have your best interests at heart and being here with the charbrays is the best thing for you.”

Nat put his hands on his hips and demanded, “Are you spying on us?”

“Of course we are.” His grin became more of a smirk.

With a fast swing of his arm, Nat slammed the door closed between them.



## CHAPTER FOUR

What Prince Grins-Too-Much failed to mention about Nat's prison accommodations was that the notebook was not made of paper but was, in fact, an electronic device. When Nat opened the cover on it, just exploring his prison cell, the device came to life and greeted him by name.

"Good Afternoon, Ignatius. How may I help you?"

Since the compound had a single working computer in a cockpit similar to the one he'd been imprisoned in, he was familiar with talking to an artificial intelligence once a month on his turn day. Perhaps he could use it to further his mission.

"What are your capabilities?" he asked it.

"I can play music or read books to you, explain Bostaurus culture or history when queried, teach you the Taur language, connect you with other humans here in—"

"That! Do that." He leaned on the desk, staring down at the device's black screen with its pulsating white dot. "Connect me."

"Who would you like to connect with?"

He debated for a moment before saying, "Brigid Horn."

"One moment."

He heard a sort of birdsong trill before a slow beep began. On the fourth one, the device's screen suddenly showed him a video of Brigid smiling at him.

"Nat!" she said with delight. "Isn't this wonderful?"

Frowning at her, he picked up the device and held it at eye level since a smaller screen in the corner showed him his face. He assumed it was her view of him, his hair a wild mess from drying naturally. But what on this godforsaken planet was wonderful?

"What are you talking about? Are you safe?"

"Of course, I'm safe," she said with a laugh. She set her device down but his view of her remained clear. Now he could see that there was an infant minotaur curled up and asleep against her chest. "I'm a nanny. Can you believe it? They know so much about us that they knew I was coming and placed me with this family. I get to—"

"They've been spying on all of us."

"I know! Isn't it great?"

"What? Why would spying be a good thing? Brigid, I'm trapped in a prison and—"

"Prison? What?"

He turned the device around and slowly turned in a circle, showing the room to her. Focusing the video on his face again, he said, "I'm in the castle in this room after being paraded through the town."

They took blood and swabbed my mouth. I've been—"

"Oh, that was just to make sure we're healthy. They discovered I have an iron deficiency that they're going to treat for me. It's why I've been so tired all the time." She cocked her head at him, frowning. "And your room is nicer than the compound, Nat. How is that a prison?"

"I'm to stay here while I 'acclimate'—whatever that means. I'll have my meals here, sleep here, and be allowed out only with an escort. Probably one of the guards if the prince himself has something better to do."

"A prince?"

"The minotaur with the red cape on is the goddamned prince. Can you believe that? I'm in the castle right now."

She gasped, her blue eyes widening. "I haven't gone out at all yet, but I'd love to see a real castle."

"They don't let you out either?"

"Oh, no, they will. I just haven't had a reason to go anywhere yet." She glanced down at the sleeping minotaur child in her arms and then looked back at him with a soft smile. "I've been getting to know the children. They're all such sweethearts. So very eager to learn all about humans."

Before he could say anything, she picked up her device and panned the room she was in. It was large and open with several columns and many plants throughout it. Two older minotaur children sat at a table working on assembling something, while a smaller one played with toys on the floor. Those seemed to be the ones she'd left with earlier.

"And acclimating is what they said I was going to be doing for a while," she said when she set the device down again. "It makes sense, really. I wasn't even sure how to use the bathroom until Dafora explained it to me. So of course we all need time to get used to our new lives here."

Her happiness with the situation was starting to grate on him. "Well, learn everything you can about that family then, and maybe something will be useful when we return home. They could be politi—"

"Return home? Nat, I don't want to go back."

"What? Brigid, how—"

"There's nothing for me to go back to. You said it yourself; my husband was cheating on me with my sister. They probably paid off the council to get rid of me, which means everyone else who's ever claimed they were being wrongly accused was right. The council is corrupt, Nat, the rest of them are horrible people, and I'm never going back."

He didn't disagree with her, but... "Brigid, they're our people. We have to help—"

"No," she said with some bite to her voice. "You're free to do whatever you want, but don't include me. While I'll miss the children of the compound, I won't miss a single one of their parents or anyone else for that matter. Eventually, I'll go out and meet up with the other sacrifices, but right now I'm happy to take care of these children and learn about living in this city."

She didn't give him a chance to respond, reaching out and making the screen go black.

Nat couldn't believe it. He dropped into the chair at the desk and set the device down, horrified by this turn of events. How could she so easily abandon their people? Yes, he understood that she hadn't had any idea what they were heading into at first either or that he had a mission at all. But to now embrace her situation like it was a blessing? A relief? She was saving herself without a thought for anyone they'd left behind.

Just because he felt like he had no one to go back to didn't mean he was going to forget about them so he could improve his lot in life.

And then he recalled what she'd said about other sacrifices. Brigid was a nanny. Was Moses working with plants? Were all of the sacrifices from years past also living new lives that they loved?

Nat poked at the device to wake it. "How many other humans reside in the city?"

"Sixty-eight humans live within the walls of Neorah."

"So many?" he whispered. It wasn't every sacrifice ever sent over, but some of them had been elderly and could've passed on over the years.

"Given the context of your conversation, I can expand on that information for better clarity."

It had been listening to him and Brigid?

"Over the past twenty-seven years since the end of the war, eighty-one humans have been given into the care of the charbrays. Ten have passed on from old age. Of the humans who were captured or sought asylum during the war, one thousand thirty-three still live. The majority of them live outside Neorah on farms or in smaller villages throughout the kingdom of Zerrin."

Nat leaned back against the chair with a hand on his stomach and tried to steady his breathing as he stared blindly up at the ceiling. He couldn't think to do the math, so asked, "How many humans live on this planet?"

"Bostaurus is home to one thousand three hundred and fourteen humans."

"Oh, my god," Nat said in utter disbelief as he slumped forward to lean on his knees.

There were only eighty-seven people in the compound after today. And not once had he ever heard of anyone seeking asylum during the war—only that thousands had been killed in the fighting. They'd agreed to the sacrifices to stop the minotaurs from continuing to slaughter them. That people had left of their own free will... That none of them had truly been sacrificed...

What was the truth?



BY HIS EVENING MEAL, Nat could accept that he wasn't trying to escape simply because he needed more information. He kept thinking of the posters inside some of their homes in the compound that had once been on the walls of the ships that had brought them to this planet. *Listen to both sides of a conflict. Understand everything before deciding. Have an idea instead of a belief. Be open to possibilities.* He'd tried to live by those maxims, but he'd never had a chance to ask anyone—any minotaurs—about what they knew of the past.

He'd never *tried* to ask them.

For his entire life, he'd believed what his elders told him and everyone else about their arrival, what the minotaurs had done, the war, and the sacrifices. And when he'd asked why there had been such conflict between their peoples, he'd only gotten the human side of things and he'd accepted those answers as indisputable facts.

He needed to know the other side now.

He'd asked the minotaur who'd brought his dinner tray if he could talk to the prince, that he had questions. He'd been polite. He'd said please. It wasn't as though he'd fought the others who'd brought his meals or checked on him throughout the day, but he'd made an effort at being more like a guest. Getting more information was important to him.

But the prince hadn't sent an answer back or showed up himself to find out what Nat wanted to talk about. Nat had waited all day and was making himself stay awake just in case Prince Piss-Me-

Off finally decided to stop by. Seriously, if he didn't show up tonight, Nat was going to try escaping so he could go find him, maybe stab him a few times, and then ask his questions.

As Nat was stalking toward the door, a panel in another wall popped open. It startled the hell out of him, but he still went over and peered into the opening because there was light coming from the space on the other side. It looked like another bed chamber. Grander than this one, yes, but that was a bed.

Nat straightened up, frowning in suspicion. It couldn't possibly be that there was a hidden door connecting his room to another's for any reason other than service. The damn door only opened from the other side. That said he wouldn't be the one to decide *when* it opened.

And only one goddamned person would ever think that was a good idea.

Nat flung open the door and marched into the next room. There was the presumptuous prince of shithheads himself, standing over a desk with a drink in his fat hand and his ample ass now covered by black material that clung to his...muscles. But Nat wasn't going to be distracted.

"What the actual fuck?" he hollered. "Is that the goddamned door you open when you want me? For what? Huh? I swear to god!"

The prince gulped the last of his drink and set the glass down before turning toward Nat. He wasn't wearing any armor now. That might have been formal wear for a minotaur and, dear lord, it was clinging to his every bulge and valley.

"I've left a dinner party because you requested a meeting with me. Why would I not invite you in for that meeting?"

Nat narrowed his eyes at him and crossed his arms. "I have questions. I want to know the minotaur side of things about when humans arrived and the war."

"Charbrays."

"What?"

"We're called charbrays, not minotaurs. The planet is Bostaurus, not Primus. The kingdom is called—"

"Whatever. We named things as necessary. It wasn't like anyone was there to educate us."

"But we were, Nat," he said quietly as he walked closer. "We were there."

That damn outfit was showing off things that it shouldn't. Nat looked away. "Oh. Yes, I suppose everyone was aware that we'd arrived. You can still see the evidence of the crash."

The prince stopped less than a foot away, and Nat took a step back, glaring again. "You don't need to crowd me to talk to me. I won't allow you to take any more liberties."

Asterius huffed a laugh, shaking his head, before he turned around. As he walked toward the foot of the enormous bed, he did something to make his shirt come open down one side. It made sense that someone with horns as wide as their shoulders wouldn't want to take a shirt over their head, but why the hell was he undressing now?

"Will you tell me about our history?" Nat said as politely as he was able at that moment.

"Tomorrow, little one."

Nat clenched his jaw and counted to ten before saying, "I would like to talk *now*."

"I have an entire day full of educational experiences planned for tomorrow."

"Dammit, you giant cow! I'm trying to understand whether my people have been lying to me and everyone else *for our entire lives*."

The prince pulled off his skirt and turned around. Nat gasped at seeing the beast entirely naked. Again. He wanted to look away but, this time, he couldn't. Everything about the minotaur was enormous from his pecs to his thighs to his...cock.

“I am retiring from this very tiring day, little one, so unless you wish to get on the bed with your ass in the air, I will speak with you in the morning.”

That had a vision of him doing exactly that popping into Nat’s mind. He gasped in horror at himself for thinking of such a thing and spun to the door back into his room.

“Fuck off and die, Prince Beast!”

Nat marched out and slammed the door shut. Or tried to. The fucking thing closed at its own slow speed and very gently clicked.

Nat yelled wordlessly at it, hoping it wasn’t soundproof. He only stopped screaming when he ran out of breath. *Damn* that insufferable cow! After everything he’d put Nat through today and he couldn’t spare a few minutes to talk to him? At least he’d been the only one naked this time, but that still wasn’t fair because he’d used it to intimidate. And proposition him? As if that would ever happen. He couldn’t possibly think Nat would ever consent to such a thing. He might’ve considered a dalliance with a few of the men in the compound, but he’d never acted on his interest. And that interest didn’t even come close to extending to bovine aliens with potentially foot-long cocks.

“Fuck,” Nat whispered and covered his eyes. He was never going to be able to get that image out of his mind now that it was there. And Prince Danger-Dick probably knew that.





## CHAPTER FIVE

Though Nat had been more comfortable than ever before in his life while in bed last night, he'd been restless from having too much on his mind. While the notebook could tell him facts and figures, it couldn't tell him why. Not really. The thing made explanations sound like something an official would say, not a real answer. Not the truth. Nat needed to understand from a person's point of view.

And even though he probably shouldn't trust a single thing that came out of that damn prince's mouth, Nat wanted to talk to him.

He made it through breakfast, a bath, and getting dressed—in clothes and shoes that actually fit him—before someone knocked on his door. Assuming it was someone who would take him to the prince, Nat opened it with a smile on his face, eager to get his answers.

"Oh," he said, losing the smile. "It's you."

The prince himself stood there wearing a silky-looking green robe that covered him from neck to ankle. Some kind of matte black shoe covered the lower half of his hooves that, when he stepped back, turned the clack of his hooves into a much quieter thud. He looked like he hadn't gotten dressed yet.

"Are you canceling?" Nat asked with a glare. "I swear to god, I'll run right now if you are."

"No, I'm not here to cancel. I'm escorting you."

"You look dressed for a day in bed."

He held out his bare arms and looked down at himself as if in confusion. But then he was smirking at Nat. "If you would like to add that to our agenda, I wholeheartedly—"

"I would not!"

The smirk stayed where it was as Prince Inappropriate gestured for Nat to join him in the hall. "Then if you're ready?"

Nat stepped out into the hall and well away from the prince. "You need to stop propositioning me. It's inappropriate and unwelcome."

Surprisingly, the big minotaur bowed and said, "My apologies. I'm finding it harder to resist you now that you're here, little one."

He...what? Nat was speechless for long enough that the prince walked off down the hall without him. The beast couldn't possibly mean to imply that Nat was tempting him. Could he? Frowning, Nat stomped down the hall after the insufferable creature. Of course, he didn't mean it. He just liked making Nat mad.

Aside from a few guards standing against the walls here and there, fewer minotaurs seemed to be about today than when Nat arrived. It was so very tempting to run, but Nat didn't have a plan anymore. Didn't have a goal. Well, aside from finding out what he didn't know. And unfortunately, he

needed Prince Thud-Foot to get what he wanted.

He'd probably done that on purpose. Maybe a normal notebook could've told Nat everything he wanted to know, but the prince needed Nat to be dependent on him. It was just another tactic an enemy could take to keep someone under their power—Nat had learned that from the same man who'd taught him to fight.

A man who'd been sacrificed two years ago.

Nat rubbed at his forehead and sighed. Was Tyfus living somewhere in the city? Was he allowed to teach combat tactics and mixed martial arts to anyone who wanted to learn? Hell, for all Nat knew, the man might've had a passion for breeding those little yellow birds and was off somewhere happily scrubbing bird shit off perches thanks to the minotaurs' spying.

"Headache?"

"Yes," Nat said absently. Growling at himself, he changed that to, "*No*. Shut up."

The beast chuckled as he descended a staircase. "I only ask so that I might ease your pains, little one."

"*You* pain me. And stop calling me that."

"Yes, *edurah*."

Nat fisted his hands. "I swear to god if that means little one..."

"You'll stab me with my own horn?" he asked as he waited for Nat at the bottom of the stairs.

"Exactly." He pointed at the horns in question, which were covered by a few inches of golden metal with spheres covering the tips. "Even though you've blunted them, I'll make it work."

The prince threw his head back and laughed. "You could take the cap off, snap the horn and stab me with it, and then use the cap to scoop out my guts."

As he gestured for Nat to proceed him through a large doorway, Nat frowned up at him. "That's disgusting. You're *dead*. Why would I want to scoop your guts out?"

The minotaur laughed again and caressed Nat's back as he passed him. The touch sent a shiver down Nat's spine and had him blushing. He should protest such a thing. He should put a stop to it once the prince rested his big hand on the small of Nat's back just above his ass.

But as he opened his mouth, the room's electrical lighting clicked on and revealed a long gallery with display cases on both walls. Nat had read about the grand museums of Earth and he'd enjoyed visiting the small building they'd had in the compound where they'd kept the few items that had come with them and survived the crash. But this place... He was dumbstruck at the sheer number and size of the artifacts lining the walls of this expansive room.

"This gallery contains the whole of charbray history on Bostaurus, but I have asked the curators to set it to only the time since humans arrived." He pointed to a silver button in a strip of wall with seams on either side of it that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. "Each panel can be turned to reveal one of three displays, allowing the curators to prepare a thorough experience or several different themes, depending on the viewers' needs. And while the gallery is normally open to the public or reserved for school groups, today, it is yours."

Nat stopped staring at the endless amount of information to snap his gaze to the prince. "Mine?"

"To answer your every question," he said with a nod. "If the panel's explanations aren't enough, and I can't help, the curators are also available to speak with you."

Nat's heart was racing as he looked at the display nearest them on the left. Clearly from the charbray point of view, it showed photographs of the ship breaking up in the atmosphere, sections of it in the air or on the ground. How had anyone survived that? It was a horrifying sight.

"Nat?"

The whispered word made him flinch and tear his gaze away from the display. Concern filled the big brown eyes of the prince. “Tell me what you need. A moment alone? To leave? I can—”

Nat shook his head and took a deep breath. “No, I’m fine. It’s just...a lot. More than I thought I could see. I thought you might hand me a book and make me learn to read it.”

“Our curators are passionate people who take their profession very seriously. They’ve been planning this gallery for nearly a year. They needed yesterday to assemble it for you.”

Absently nodding, Nat let his gaze wander down to the other end of the room. It was clear these curators had been thorough. He doubted anything had been left out.

*And wait a minute...* “You said this was prepared for *me*.”

“Yes.”

“For a *year*?”

One of his brows ticked up and he cleared his throat. “Ah, well...”

Nat shoved at him, growing angrier when he didn’t even wobble. “What the ever-loving *fuck*?”

The minotaur frowned and pointed a fat finger at him. “You have to know by now that your council is corrupt. Of *course*, your time in the compound was limited. If you hadn’t volunteered, they would’ve kicked you out simply for being strong-willed and intelligent. You *know* that.”

Nat tried to hold onto his anger even as it dissipated. “Damn you.”

“Don’t damn me, little one. Damn them.” He flicked his wrist and said, “Except for your father and Petru Cazacu. They do try.”

Nat knew that his father and Petru weren’t as bad as the rest, but that didn’t mean they had enough power to do anything helpful. “Did your spies tell you that?”

Prince Caught-Lying pointed out of the room the way they’d come. “Do you want to see that first? There’s an entire tower dedicated to our spying. Let’s go.” He started walking away.

“No!” Nat grabbed a handful of silky green material. “I want to do this. I want to understand what happened.”

The prince turned around, and Nat let go of the cloth because holding it had caused it to tighten obscenely all down the front of the minotaur’s form. It didn’t appear that he wore anything under it at all. Minotaurs were not modest people.

Nostrils flaring for a moment, Asterius took a deep breath before finally saying, “Then let us begin with my people discovering that a large spaceship was approaching our planet.”

They focused on the first display, a triangle of glass with shelves holding broken bits of metal and plastic that had symbols and words on them that Nat had seen for his entire life. It was strange to see things that had been on the walls of his room documented as if they mattered. There were also photographs and moments of looping video with written explanations beside each. He couldn’t read the strange symbols, but everything seemed very thorough.

The prince talked to him about how the charbrays had kept their distance at first, not knowing what they were witnessing. They hadn’t had the means to do anything about the ship breaking up in orbit because there hadn’t been time to get up there. They could’ve destroyed what entered the atmosphere, if it had been necessary to save themselves, but the crashes had happened in an unpopulated area and scans had showed signs of life. At that point, some of the charbrays had wanted to intervene, assist the strange creatures, but caution had won out and they’d waited and watched instead.

“A cry went up again to intervene once it was clear so many humans were not surviving interactions with the flora and fauna.”

Nat nodded, looking at aerial photographs of the crash sites over time. He wasn’t sure how long it

was between shots, but the movement of people and objects was obvious. “They say a hundred people died in the first week. On top of the number that didn’t survive the crashes.”

They moved to the next display that had a large photograph of a delegation from both sides facing each other, a crude fence between them. The minotaurs looked regal and were smiling, while the humans looked filthy and either terrified or angry. Only one side was holding weapons at the ready.

“They didn’t trust them,” Nat said quietly. “Look at them.”

“I allow that they had been through horrors no one else could imagine by the time this meeting took place.”

“But when someone comes over and says they’d like to help...”

“Ah, but there was a language barrier back then.” The prince pointed to a torn and dirty piece of paper with the alphabet written out. “It says here that getting this was the first negotiation. Our linguists used it and available technology to work out a rudimentary understanding of your language.” He sighed. “But then the humans forced the charbrays to leave the area under threat of harm.”

“They were defending... I was taught that they were defending their territory from invaders. From the very beginning, the min— charbrays were there to roust us from where we’d started to build. That they wanted to run us off with nothing but what we could carry.”

Nat felt so foolish for believing all of the lies. He’d let a generation of hate mold him.

“No, we—”

“I get it, okay?” Nat looked up at the prince, feeling small and stupid. “*We* were the invaders. *We* were the problem.”

When the prince reached for him, Nat didn’t avoid the comforting hand that landed on his shoulder.

“Both sides made some terrible decisions,” the prince said, his voice low and sympathetic. “None of it had one side being the consistent aggressor. Don’t take on that blame or guilt.”

“But I was taught that the charbrays wanted things from us in exchange for their help. Like, we learned which plants to eat because we gave them fuel.” He held out a hand to the displays. “I’m guessing that’s not true either?”

“We asked for knowledge,” he said with a shrug. “Curiosity about new people. Your origins, customs, language. Our academics were fascinated.” He pointed to the delegation photo. “Most of those charbrays are scholars from one discipline or another.”

“Fuck,” Nat said and rubbed at his face in frustration. “I mean, I get that they might’ve been cautious. They were venturing into the unknown and could’ve run into who knows what kind of aliens. They were primed for a fight. But...”

The prince stepped closer and rested his arm across Nat’s shoulders. It was a commiserating touch, because it was becoming clear from his words and tone that he was just as disturbed and disappointed as Nat was.

“Why did you never offer to send us away on one of your ships? We know you have interstellar capabilities. You could’ve kicked us off the entire planet any time you wanted to.” Stealing a ship had been part of his goal when he’d volunteered to be sacrificed, after all.

“We did make that offer.” He pointed to the next display. “It was included in the third round of negotiations and promptly refused.”

Nat threw up his hands and groaned. “Why? For god’s sake, *why*?”

“We don’t know. The humans here weren’t involved in the negotiations back then.”

Shaking his head, Nat said, “There are only two still alive who were there. Deacon and Thornhew are on the council even now.” He pointed at their photographs showing both as younger

men. “I bet neither of them has ever told the truth in their lives and I seriously doubt they would start now.” He’d suspected them before, felt they were power-hungry liars, but now he knew they were.

“Others may not have been involved with the negotiations, but they were there. When the war started, hundreds of humans asked for sanctuary with us. Over time, more joined them.”

He knew as much from the notebook, but now they’d come to the real heart of the issue.

“Why did the war start?”

“Someone murdered my brother.”

“They *what?*”



## CHAPTER SIX

Horried, Nat followed the prince to a display that seemed like a shrine with several photographs of a dark brown charbray that looked a lot like the one standing beside him.

“My eldest brother, Androgeus, was the heir apparent. I was born two years after his death and sometimes wonder if he was as saintly as he’s remembered.” He smiled fondly at a photo of several young charbrays together and looking silly. “But he did want to aid the humans and was present for each of the negotiations after the first one.”

Nat hated to say it, but... “I don’t know anything about him.”

“No?” He didn’t seem surprised, though.

“No. They said they were attacked. Threatened with enslavement. I thought you were going to tell me they went to war over some kind of misunderstanding that led to an attack. Not the murder of a prince.”

What he knew of princes came mostly from the children’s stories they had in the compound—which he knew wasn’t exactly accurate—but he did know that murdering the next in line for the throne would cause a huge problem. Like starting a war. What had his people been thinking?

Sure, okay, he’d had it in his head that he would kill the king if he got the chance, but he knew now how absurd that idea had been. He hadn’t even been able to get past the youngest prince. Maybe he could’ve done it with some kind of long-range weapon, but he didn’t have access to or know how to use any such thing.

And now that he knew just how wrong everything that he’d ever been told about their shared history was... He didn’t *want* to hurt anyone.

“So your brother’s murder started the war,” Nat said with a nod. “Then what happened?”

“Well, Father—the king—recused himself from leading, knowing he wasn’t in his right mind and couldn’t be impartial or fair. His regent sent a delegation to the compound to investigate. The goal was to know what had happened and bring the guilty to justice.”

“So they don’t even know what happened?”

“Not really, no.” He gestured to a written passage, everything about him seeming to sag. “Androgeus had left the negotiations to relieve himself and was found a stab wound in the back of his neck that severed his spinal cord.”

“Shit, that’s awful. I’m so sorry.” He was the one to put his hand on the prince’s arm, discovering his skin was velvety soft.

“Thank you, Nat.”

He took his hand back and felt like he might be blushing. Clearing his throat he said, “I’m impressed that your father would give up power knowing he couldn’t be trusted to wield it

responsibly.” He winced and gazed up at the prince, betting he knew where this was going. “But I’m guessing the delegation didn’t get very far in their investigation.”

The prince leaned in, again reading something. “They were refused entry into the compound, attacked, and sent away with the message that negotiations were over and the humans had claimed sovereignty over that part of the territory.”

Nat groaned in disappointment. “Of course, they did. Just... Why couldn’t they live peacefully? *What* was so terrible?”

With a grin, the prince said, “Asks the man who tried to kill me just yesterday.”

“You have to know *why*.” He made a sweeping gesture to the entire room. “I didn’t know any of this. Or barely. In my version, we were the victims in every single encounter.”

The prince made a considering noise. “Well, you were and you weren’t. Or they. We should use ‘they’ since neither of us was present.”

“Fine, they. All the idiot theys.” Nat stepped back to look ahead to the next display. “So tell me why they declared war. What did they do next?”

The prince held out his hand toward the display and followed Nat over to stand in front of it. Before he even said anything, Nat knew what had happened. There was a photograph of a dam and another of a burned-out cottage. “For fuck’s sake,” he mumbled and rubbed at his eyes.

“Do you want to stop for a while?” the prince offered. “Perhaps—”

“No, let’s just get through it.” He sighed. “Please.”

The prince nodded. “The humans dammed the river that irrigates several farms, creating a lake near the compound. We found out later that they had fish that had survived the crash and had released them into the new lake. They felt that would allow the fish to thrive without predators. However, the charbray farmers complained, and the king—who was back on the throne by then—sent soldiers to destroy the dam. They used an explosive device.”

Nat felt a strange sort of exhaustion creeping over him as he said, “They said we were bombed.”

“No, they did the bombing.”

“What?”

He pointed to the remains of the cottage. “We don’t know why the humans attacked that farm—not precisely—but they did take credit for it and threatened to do worse if they were harassed further. They speculate that the loss of the fish was devastating, but—”

“That’s no excuse to destroy a home!”

“And murder the family within.”

Nat turned away. “Oh, god.”

“The local farmers took it upon themselves to retaliate—”

“Can’t blame them.”

“—and word of the skirmishes soon reached the king. He sent soldiers to protect the farmers, but also to stop them from participating. He didn’t *want* a war. At that time anyway.”

Nat walked over to the next display on his own, just knowing something devastating was coming. “No. Aw, fuck,” he said and looked away the moment he realized that the entire back of the display was one long photograph of a hole in the city’s wall, shrouded bodies lying on the cobblestones.

A broad, warm hand covered the base of Nat’s neck, fingers splayed and massaging. At least the prince didn’t hold any of the past against Nat. He could’ve. Nat had blamed all of the minotaurs for everything—he’d been taught to hate them all.

“This is why the king declared war.”

Nat nodded. Murder after murder... “How many died?”



“Forty-seven adults and...” He sighed.

“Children,” Nat said for him before rubbing at his temples.

“Yes, but it’s still...”

Nat looked up at him. “What?”

“He declared war on a people who had no possible means to defend themselves. We weren’t equal then any more than we are now. The humans *couldn’t* have won, and the charbrays never should’ve attacked as they did.” He swallowed hard, his eyes huge and pained. “Nearly one thousand humans were killed in the attacks. *Within days.*”

Nat didn’t know what to say, but he understood now why the prince had said that both sides had been wrong. He knew that some seven thousand humans had died when the ship broke apart and in the subsequent crashes. Hundreds more because they hadn’t known what they were doing. And then the war had killed— He frowned up at the prince. “Over a thousand humans asked for sanctuary during the war, right?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

Nat sighed heavily. “I think they count them among the casualties because they say over *two thousand* died in the fighting.”

“I imagine they consider them traitors.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Nat looked to the next display. “So how did they get from war to the sacrifices?”

“My mother.” The prince led Nat to a display one down from where they’d been. “Queen Faiza looked beyond her grief and her anger to see that the charbrays were slaughtering a people, that causing an extinction was not winning, and she forced others to see that the fighting had to stop.”

Since the display they’d skipped had looked like it detailed the casualties, Nat was fine with leaving it behind. The display they stood before showed a portrait of the queen sitting down with a group of human women. He recalled his nanny saying that men talked but women got shit done.

“Though it was the humans,” the prince said, “who ultimately asked for peace, they expected that they would have to sacrifice something to achieve it.” He peered at one of the panels, reading again. “They offered nothing to guide the negotiations, but asked only that they be allowed to remain a sovereign entity.”

“Which sounds like they didn’t want to integrate or even talk about the possibility.”

“Exactly. By this time, they charbrays knew that integration was possible if both sides made an effort to learn the other’s ways. But they also knew that the humans still in the compound—namely the leaders—had not learned Taur, so the likelihood of more failed negotiations was high.”

“They wouldn’t listen and, if they did, they’d probably misunderstand or actively twist the real meaning to keep their enemy as their enemy.” He groaned and rubbed at his eyes. “What a petty bunch of megalomaniacs.”

“Well, before Mother intervened, the charbrays were going off of a lot of assumptions and not making the effort to try anymore.”

“I can see why, though. Everything before had literally led to an explosion.” He sighed before gesturing to one of the photographs in the display. “I don’t know those people, but I’m guessing they’re the first sacrifices.”

“They are. The queen’s goal was to integrate, and the humans assumed a punishment was required, so when the charbrays offered the idea of sacrifices, the humans accepted. The humans held a lottery for the...” He leaned closer, reading something in the display. “For the first five years. After that—”

“They started using it as their punishment.” Nat shook his head in disappointment. “Two decades of punishing their people.”

“And, technically, the system has been working.” He gestured to the next display, and they moved on. This one seemed to show happy humans and charbrays working alongside each other. “Both sides have learned from the other which has resulted in advancements in medicine, technology, agriculture... The problem was that, though the system was designed to send the humans back with their new skills, none of them wanted to go.”

“Wait. They were supposed to go back?” He looked at the photographs and artifacts, but there was nothing that he could see to explain. “Did everyone know that was how it was supposed to work?”

The prince eyed Nat like he knew his next words were going to be disappointing.

Nat groaned. “Just say it.”

“The charbrays found out later that the lottery was rigged—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“—and that the human leaders hadn’t shared all of the information about the system with their people. Specifically, that the sacrifices would return.”

“And that’s why we all believed we’d be tortured, killed, eaten... No one wanted to go. Everyone hated it. We’re still enemies. And they knew. This whole time, they *knew*.” Nat balled a fist, suddenly really wanting to hit something.

“There’s a pillow over there.”

“What? A pillow?” Nat looked at the sitting area the prince was pointing to.

“I’d rather you didn’t hit *me*.”

Nat snorted and the fight drained out of him. “I’m not going to hit anyone—or anything. It’s fine.” He took a deep breath and looked to the next display. “Is this when you started spying on us?”

“They.”

He opened his mouth to ask what the prince meant, but then caught on. “Right. Historical stuff, not you and me. So was this when *they* started spying on *them*?”

“Yes, it was. They wanted to be better prepared for the people who would arrive, especially after a few incidents of aggression.”

Nat huffed a laugh. “You say that so politely, but I’m guessing a human or two did something dangerous and stupid. Believe me, I understand now who the problem is. The charbrays might’ve agreed to the war, but the humans started it. Hell, it’s like they *wanted* it.”

The prince reached over and caressed up and down Nat’s back for a moment, and he realized he’d fisted both hands this time. He took another deep breath and sighed it out.

“I think I’d rather take you up to see the surveillance for yourself,” the prince said and gestured to the door closest to them at the end of the gallery. “The displays now only show a small portion of the whole, and you’re familiar with the rest just by being here.”

Curious to see just how deep their spying went, Nat agreed, and the prince led the way.



STANDING in the doorway of a round room in one of the turrets of the castle, Nat realized that though the charbrays didn’t flash their tech all over the place, it didn’t mean they weren’t incredibly

advanced. They were just subtle about it and maybe even made an effort to hide it or downplay it for the aesthetic. Because the expansive room—and probably several others on multiple floors—was packed with surveillance equipment and the personnel monitoring it.

“You can go in,” the prince said behind him. “They’re expecting us.”

Nat stepped in, his gaze flitting around the room, trying to take it all in as the prince followed him. Those nearest them stood up and faced them with others promptly noticing and doing the same.

“Your Highness,” a female charbray said as she walked over. “Mister Konstantinidis. Thank you both so much for coming.”

“Thank you for having us,” the prince said from where he stood behind Nat.

As if that was their dismissal, everyone else sat down again and returned to their work.

The one who’d approached them smiled at Nat. “I’m Sevna Mar-Bostik and I’m in charge of Compound Observation.”

“Ignatius Konstantinidis,” he said as he put his hand out to shake. When she did, he realized it was the first time he’d ever done anything like that with a charbray.

“I’m delighted to meet you, sir, and eager to answer your questions about the programs we run here.”

“Oh. Um...” He blinked several times, feeling overwhelmed by the number of monitors he could see showing people he knew living their lives on the screens. “I don’t know, um...”

“Why don’t you tell us about the equipment?” the prince said, his hands still resting on Nat’s shoulders.

“Of course, Your Highness.” She used some kind of remote to make a map of the compound appear on the wall nearest them. Numerous green lights were all over the place, from the buildings to the fields. “Within the compound, we have managed to place over two thousand pieces of surveillance equipment. That includes not only cameras and microphones, but also devices that monitor for mold, air and water quality, illness, and a host of other potential problems.”

Nat frowned as he looked between the map and her open face. “You’re monitoring all those things? Why?”

“We keep track of everything that could become a potential hazard to human lives. For example, when several sacks of grain became compromised by a mold that would have caused a dangerous intestinal illness if consumed, we were able to know before anyone ate it and swapped the sacks out for clean ones.”

“Hold on.” Nat held up a hand, not sure he could believe that. “A charbray went into the compound to remove and replace sacks of grain? You just...go in?”

“Oh, well...” she said, fidgeting. “It would’ve been a human doing that work because of the treaty. Several humans work with us on similar missions for that reason.”

Nat’s first emotion was betrayal—how could someone do that to them?—but then... How could they not? If he knew someone could be hurt by a thing they didn’t know was there, he’d be moved to intervene. He’d even say something to the person he liked the least.

“Okay,” he said with a nod. “So you make sure we don’t kill ourselves through our ignorance. That’s... Yeah, that’s a good thing.”

“We also help where we can, like fertilizing the crops or adding purification tabs to the wells. Those can be accomplished by ADVs during the night,” she added hastily.

Nat had to ask, “ADV’s?”

“Oh, yes, sorry. Autonomous delivery vehicles. They’re machines that someone can fly remotely. Very quiet and, when flown at night, nearly undetectable.” She did something else with the device in

her hand to show a photo of a drone as well as a black-and-white video of an aerial view of the compound before a small box dropped into one of the wells.

“And you do all of this to keep us alive.” Nat couldn’t get past the fact that they were taking care of the humans—himself included until yesterday.

“Well... Yes?” Sevna looked nervous now, her gaze flicking between him and above his head, no doubt looking for help from the prince.

“Without such measures,” the prince said, “the humans in the compound would’ve died out years ago.” He squeezed Nat’s shoulders. “You included.”

“We’ve tried to educate as well,” she added. “Subtly, of course, but it isn’t just us doing things *for* you. We didn’t dig the wells, but we did make sure you could find the equipment to do it yourselves.” She shrugged. “We just hid it amongst the crash debris and made it look appropriately... human.”

Suddenly, what was nagging at him solidified and he shrugged free of the prince’s hands as he moved to face both of them. “This is...” he said, pointing to the monitors filling the room. “This is animal husbandry. You’re raising us like *pets*.”

“It’s the only successful way we’ve ever been able to help you,” the prince said. “Literally the *only* way. After everything you’ve seen—”

“But—”

“*No*. Before today, would you have listened to advice from a single one of us?” He cocked his head. “Would your council have listened to us?”

Part of him wanted to rage over the fact that he was right. They were caring for humans no differently than he had done with a feather-rabbit when he was young. He’d given the flightless bird that resembled a rabbit food and water, taught it to live in the environment he provided it, and cleaned up after it. He could easily compare what the charbrays were doing to raising humans as pets.

But... Could he ever see anyone on the council—even his father—taking advice from a charbray? About anything? He didn’t have to think about it. The answer was just a hard no. It was possible some of them would do the opposite out of spite. Like, they’d assume the charbray who told them was trying to trick them and eat the moldy grain in some misguided effort to prove they were smarter. And then they’d die and blame the charbray for it with their last breath.

“Fine,” he said with a defeat he felt in his bones. “You’re right.” He sighed heavily before looking at the prince. “You offered a break earlier. Could we take that now? Maybe outside somewhere?”

With an understanding smile, the prince guided him from the room. “Let’s go rest in the garden.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

The garden they went into was small and enclosed by greenery with a lazy fountain they could sit by. It was quiet except for the trickling water and the gentle rustling of tree leaves. Nat took a deep breath and felt calmer already. One of the stone benches was long enough to stretch out on, and someone had left a platter of fresh fruits and vegetables on a low table nearby.

“Is this for us?” he asked as he sat down.

The prince sat opposite him on the fountain’s edge. “It is. Someone must’ve anticipated that we might be hungry.”

Nat huffed a laugh and lay back on the bench, crossing his ankles and resting his head on a smooth curl of stone. “It occurs to me that you’ve probably spent your whole life being watched, too.”

“Well, yes,” he said with a quiet laugh. “I’ve known that they were, though.”

Closing his eyes, Nat tried to be understanding about everything he’d learned today. “You know, I don’t think we’ve ever had a truly successful harvest. Only when they started listening to Moses a few years ago did anyone try new ways of farming. And yet, not one of us has ever suffered from malnutrition.” He looked at the prince. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

“Probably,” he said with a shrug. “I’m not entirely versed in everything they’ve done to care for you over the years, but I suspect that if they couldn’t find a way to increase what your plants yielded, they shared what was grown from our fields with you.”

Nat sighed. “I’m trying not to keep thinking of us like your pets.”

“Have you ever had a neighbor who wouldn’t accept help? Who was too proud or too stubborn?”

With a snort, Nat peeked at him. “Have you met us?”

The prince smiled. “Does it make the neighbor your pet if you give him help without him knowing you’ve done something?”

“Oh. No, I guess not.” He’d known a few people who spent most of their time barking at others about how they didn’t need anyone else, could do it themselves, and whatever else. Cantankerous old-timers who knew what they knew and didn’t need to change a thing.

“So we give you medicines and water purification tabs and extra food,” the prince said, “in ways that disguise our help or let you believe you did it yourselves.”

“Like every time someone found a cache of critical supplies in a newly-discovered section of the ship?”

“Exactly like that.”

Nat considered it from that view and liked it a lot better. He was still disappointed and horrified with past and present council members who’d chosen to distance themselves from readily available help. Their choice to wall off the compound from the charbrays literally could’ve resulted in their extinction the same as if the queen hadn’t stopped the war. He might never have been born.

But as much as he understood why the charbrays had been helping, Nat still had a problem with his fellow humans who'd left the compound, learned the truth, and never returned.

"I'm struggling with what to think of the humans who left," he admitted. "And the ones who sneak back in to deliver some kind of aid that the ADVs can't bring." Nat sighed up at the sky framed by tree branches above him. "They won't come back, prove the council wrong, save us all from the lies... But they will keep us alive in our ignorance and fear? How do they justify that?"

"We could ask them. I could have some of those who are local come—"

Nat groaned and rubbed at his eyes. "Not today. I can't."

"Alright."

"It's a question I want to be answered," he said, looking at the prince, "but I'm overloaded as it is."

He nodded. "You need time to process everything."

"Yes, that. To process."

They sat in silence for a while then, and Nat appreciated it. He was grateful for a lot of what the prince had done today. Why his face heated when he thought about thanking him, he wasn't sure, but he kept the words to himself because it did.

Eventually, the prince reached over and snagged something from the platter to munch on. Nat considered the offerings and realized, "I don't know what any of this is named. Like this," he said, pointing, "is a pink fruit. That's literally what we call it."

"It's a vegetable called a forfin."

"There's so much we don't know." Nat took a bite of the juicy flesh.

"Don't worry, Nat," he said with a kind smile. "I'll teach you anything you want to know."

Again, he blushed, something squirming inside him like embarrassment but not quite. He smiled and nodded but couldn't quite meet the prince's gaze as he ate the rest of the forfin.

"Or the tablet in your room can help. I'm sure it can teach you most things if you'd prefer to learn on your own."

"Oh. Sure. Yeah, I'll give that a try later."

They lapsed into a silence again but it felt uncomfortable to Nat. He realized what he wanted to say wasn't so much about his thanks but about his regret. He sat up and leaned forward on his knees.

"I, um..." He cleared his throat and made himself continue. "I'm sorry. About earlier. Yesterday." His face heated. "Yeah, pretty much all of yesterday, but also just how I've behaved toward you."

The prince waved that away. "You don't have to—"

"I do, though. I mean, I know I didn't have a clue about the truth, but still, I could've done better."

"There's nothing to forgive, Nat. I like your spirit."

Without even thinking about it, he asked, "Is that why you kept me?" He cringed at himself. "Never mind. Maybe I don't want to know."

"It's not a bad reason," he said with a small grin. "Partly, yes, I do like you, Nat. But also I want to end our spying and caretaking and finally unite everyone once and for all."

Nat didn't know what to say at first, just sitting there gawping like a fish and staring. The prince liked him? Choosing to ignore that very confusing part of his answer, Nat said, "I want that, too."

"Good." The prince looked less downtrodden as he picked up a forfin and popped it into his mouth.

"How though? Like, just march in and snatch them all up?" Nat shook his head immediately. "No, that would never work. They'd fight back, people would get hurt... Would just me going back and explaining everything be enough to convince them?"

“Actually, I thought I’d do as generations of charbrays have done before me and unite two territories through marriage.”

“Marriage?” Nat sat up straight, staring at him. “Who are you going to marry?”

“You.”



SWIPING branches out of his way, Nat fought to get through the brush of the endless fucking garden. He hadn’t thought about it as he’d bolted, but clearly, he’d gone in the exact wrong direction to get back inside the castle.

“Nat! Come on,” the prince called from somewhere behind him. “Let’s talk about this.”

“Oh, talk about what, Your Highness? The fact that we’ve been secretly betrothed for the past two days, and I didn’t even know it?” He stopped when he realized he’d arrived at a wall. “What the hell?” he muttered before yelling, “Is this goddamned garden inside a room? Are we still in the castle?”

“It’s a courtyard.”

“Like I know what the fuck that means.” He started marching to the right, figuring there would be a way out somewhere, even if he eventually got back to where they’d come in. He wasn’t going straight back, though, because he could hear Prince Thrashing-Cow stumbling around.

“Nat, please. I just want to talk about this.”

“Well, I don’t! After everything today…” He stopped millimeters from taking a giant spider web to the face and then skirted around the hideous thing. “It’s been a long damn day and I am done!”

“It’s for the good of your people, Nat,” Prince Deception said, sounding closer. “Didn’t you volunteer to be sacrificed so you could save them?”

Nat stopped walking. “Dammit,” he whispered and rubbed at his weary eyes. The damn prince had him there. And he *was* curious about how the two of them marrying could solve any of this. It was probably political—something he knew nothing at all about.

“How long have we been engaged?”

“Technically, we aren’t.”

“What?”

“Neither of us has asked the other.”

Branches moved and Nat realized that the prince had somehow looped around in front of him. He held those branches up and gestured with his other hand for Nat to precede him.

“So I still have a choice,” Nat said as he crossed his arms and stayed right where he was.

“You do.”

Taking a deep breath, Nat admitted to himself that he should at least hear what the prince had to say. He’d made some good observations all day, been sensitive and accepting the entire time, and been quick to answer all of Nat’s questions. Nat groaned inside. Fine, he’d listen.

“Come sit down, Nat, and I’ll explain everything.”

Nat growled, balling his fists.

“Nothing’s set in stone,” he said with clear aggravation. “You can still refuse if you absolutely must.”

Full of suspicion, Nat squinted up at him.



“Just listen first. Please.”

“Fine.” He gestured for the prince to go first, not wanting to admit he had no idea where the fountain was anymore.

Thankfully, Prince Full-of-Surprises just started walking and occasionally held a branch out of Nat’s way. They made it back to the fountain frustratingly quickly, and Nat realized that if he’d just gone left instead of right, he’d have exited through the very clear doorway. He slouched back down on the bench as the prince sat again on the fountain’s edge.

“There is a treaty in place right now,” the prince said in a calm and rational voice. “It prevents the charbray from—”

“Invading. I know.”

“The way it’s worded, though, prevents us from even visiting without prior approval, which can’t be granted because methods of communication have never been established. The date and time of every sacrifice are calculated from the original twenty-seven years ago.”

“And that’s why humans are the ones to deliver supplies or whatever. They’re the only ones who can go into the compound without breaking the treaty.”

The prince pointed at him and smiled. “Exactly.”

“And our marriage would do what?”

“Our engagement alone would break the treaty. Null and void. They can’t call for war if we walk into the compound because we would be one people.”

Nat couldn’t help leaning forward. “It says that?”

“It’s...an interpretation.”

Glaring at him, Nat asked, “One a *human* would accept?”

He grinned at him. “Want to find out?”

“Come on. Be serious. If we’re going to be the first mixed couple, I—”

“Oh, no, we won’t be. There are plenty of charbray-human couples, married and otherwise. We can’t breed, but romantic relationships are common and accepted.”

Nat blinked at him. He couldn’t stop himself from thinking that his inappropriate thoughts about the prince and his anatomy were fine for him to have. Clearly, he wasn’t the only one who ever had. Which was helpful, because he didn’t want to be seen as doing something taboo by either of their people. Even if it felt kinky as all hell.

“So why me?” Nat asked. When the prince smiled at him, Nat added, “I’m not looking for compliments or anything. Just... Why?”

“First of all, because you’re same-gender attracted.”

“How do you figure that?” Because he’d never done anything with another person that they might’ve caught on one of their many cameras. And he refused to believe they could read his mind.

“The signs are there for someone who’s looking for them.”

“And you’ve... What? Been scouring the surveillance for someone like that?”

*Did he just roll his eyes?*

“No,” the prince said, “when I first became aware of you, I was pleasantly surprised to find we shared that trait. It wasn’t difficult to see that when a woman propositioned you, you flinched away and refused. When a man did, you smiled and thanked him as you declined.”

Nat felt his face heat. “That could be—”

“You have a habit of staring at men with their shirts off. More than once, you’ve hidden in the bushes and pleased yourself while watching the men in the fields.”

“Alright!” he snapped, his face burning. “Fine, I’m solely attracted to men.”

The prince grinned at him. “And I am attracted to you.”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Sitting there caught between embarrassment and suspicion—because he couldn’t fathom why the prince would be attracted to him specifically—Nat had to say, “I’m not the only person in the compound who’s attracted to men. Obviously, since you’ve seen them approach me.”

“You’re the only *you*, Nat,” he said with a soft smile.

Nat tried not to squirm where he sat.

“While we’ve contemplated other matches over the years,” the prince continued, “we quickly concluded that a same-gender pairing would be the least problematic.”

“In what way?” Nat asked, glad to move away from talk of attraction.

“As I said, our people aren’t able to breed because the offspring...” He sighed, shaking his head. “They are severely misshapen and only live for a few days, if at all. It hasn’t happened for over a decade now, but it was traumatic for everyone.”

Nat had never considered the possibility of hybrid children, assuming they were different species and couldn’t mix. “As much as you’ve studied us, you’ve never gotten a sample of...” he said before he realized that might be in poor taste.

“You’re not wrong, but genetic material isn’t something humans readily part with for any sort of experimentation.”

Nat nodded. “Yes, that’s true enough. My father told me several times that I shouldn’t, uh, waste it,” he finished lamely, regretting that sentence entirely.

The prince chuckled, but that faded quickly. “The other problem was that even as soft as they are, the fetuses’ hooves were devastating to human wombs. Several females nearly died from the damage caused. We had to invent ways to prevent pregnancy so that sexually active couples would not accidentally conceive.” He cleared his throat and sat back. “But a same-gender attraction seems to be rare for us compared to you, and I am the only one in my immediate family with that trait.”

“So they’re forcing you into this, too?”

He tilted his head, that strange expression on his face again. “It was my choice, Nat.”

“Then I’m just... What? Convenient?”

“No, you’re the son of one of your people’s rulers, making you the equivalent of royalty. I have a sister who was willing to experiment with another council member’s daughter if I refused, but I didn’t like how she worded the offer.” He paused to smirk at him. “And then I saw you.”

Nat glared back. “Saw me doing what? I have no doubt there’s a record of every time I undressed to bathe or touched—” He stopped himself from finishing that thought, but his face flamed because it was already clear they knew when he’d touched himself outdoors and what he’d looked at while he had. He’d been so sure no one would ever know.

The prince chuckled. “I had not seen your naked form until yesterday,” he said before his smile

softened. “No, the first time I saw you, I watched you passionately make a case for more resources so the children of the compound might learn the history you now know. You were fifteen.”

Nat remembered that. He’d gotten time in front of the council, the first for someone his age, and he’d spent days working on his speech. In the end, he hadn’t gotten what he wanted—of course not—but he had developed the idea he finally enacted yesterday. And he’d always spoken up after that day. Always.

“You made me want to fight for what was right, too,” the prince said. “So while I’ve had years to settle into our engagement, I was attracted to a loud and demanding boy with a big, brave heart from the first moment I saw you.”

Nat had no idea what to say. The fact that none of the prince’s inappropriate suggestions were just to rile Nat up but were, instead, actual expressions of his attraction had Nat squirming where he sat as heat flooded his entire body. He’d been told he was attractive plenty of times, but the people who’d said it had been referring to his body. Never his personality or inner strength or drive to do what was right.

He wasn’t sure what to think. Part of him wished he’d given in to someone’s advances simply for the experience that he’d be able to lean on. Because he didn’t know what to do with such sincere appreciation and interest. All he knew was that he wasn’t put off by the prince now that he knew so much more about him.

But that his betrothed hadn’t seen him naked before yesterday did make Nat wonder... “Why did you strip me down like that? And in public? That was...humiliating.”

“I know and I’m sorry,” he said with a wince. “It’s an old and horrible custom that requires both parties to present themselves to each other and their families—or chosen representatives—with no secrets between them. It began as being unclothed but has advanced to include a thorough record of physical and health conditions.” He flipped his hand over and added, “You’re perfectly healthy by the way.”

Nat recoiled from the entire idea. “*Everyone* has to do that? Why?”

“No, only royals. It’s because of the alliances formed by such unions. Symbolic, really.” He sighed and shrugged. “I can see the point of it—to come into the marriage with nothing between us and the past washed away—but the execution leaves much to be desired.”

“Especially when your intended doesn’t know what’s going on,” he said with a frown.

The prince grinned. “And would you have cooperated if I’d explained then instead of now?”

Nat huffed. “No.”

“I only had my guards there instead of family since you were determined to kill us all.”

Nat rolled his eyes. “Like you were worried.”

“Oh, no, I wasn’t. Not at all,” he said with insulting confidence. “They were, though. They take all threats on my life seriously.”

There had been six guards with them the entire time, which was something of a compliment. He would’ve been insulted if there had only been one. Of course, there were no guards with them now. “Are there none here because they don’t fear me anymore?”

He smirked at him. “There are four here.”

Nat frowned as he looked around. How was it possible he couldn’t see four hulking charbrays in a garden? Yes, there were portions of it that were thick with vegetation but how could he not see a single one?

Quietly, the prince said, “I look forward to the day when they aren’t worried about you.”

Rolling his eyes, Nat said nothing because he didn’t want to admit yet that he had no plans of ever

harming the prince or any other charbray. Not anymore. Maybe he never could've done it in the first place. While he'd killed to eat plenty of times over the years, to look someone in the eyes and take their life... Knowing what he knew today... No, he wasn't that sort of person.

"Tell me what you're thinking," the prince said. "Is this a terrible idea? Do you hate it?"

Nat sighed and admitted, "No, I don't hate it, but does it have to be immediate?"

"No, we can have an engagement period as long as you need."

Well, that helped some. At least he didn't have to do it tonight so they could march on the compound tomorrow morning. He could get used to living here, interacting with the charbray, and learning more about his intended. It was for the betterment of his people, so he'd try. The council and anyone else who knew the truth could go fuck themselves, but the rest of them, the ones who believed them, who trusted them, those people deserved to know everything and make their own decisions. To stop living in fear of being sacrificed. To have a chance to thrive instead of just meeting their basic needs. He couldn't deny them those chances simply because he didn't like being married off to a prince.

He huffed a laugh as he realized, "I suppose I should start calling you by your name." He paused, having to think about what that was for a moment. "Asterius."

He cocked his head at him. "What have you been calling me?"

"Prince Shithead, Prince Clomping-Hoof, Prince Piss-Me-Off..."

Asterius laughed with clear delight instead of taking any offense. "Ah, yes, you did call me Prince Beast last night." He shrugged. "Well, at least you've been respectful."

Nat sailed right past thinking about why he'd called him a beast last night and said incredulously, "Respectful? None of those names are respectful."

"Ah, but you've always used my title."

Nat stared at him for a moment before rolling his eyes. He was right. Even when he wasn't naming him, he'd still spent the day thinking of him as the prince. *Dammit.*

"Well, I won't do it anymore. You're just Asterius now, my utterly annoying betrothed. Perhaps just Aster. I believe that's a type of flower on Earth. It's big but delicate."

Asterius didn't take the bait, instead asking, "So you accept my proposal?"

He said it neutrally enough, but Nat saw the way Asterius gripped the edge of the bench and leaned toward him, gaze fixed and body tense as he awaited Nat's answer. A little part of him wanted to say he needed time to think about it just to be bothersome. But no. This was too important.

"For the good of my people," Nat said with a nod. "I accept."

"Excellent," Asterius said with a smile brighter than Nat had seen from him so far.

Then before Nat registered what was about to happen, Asterius was up from the fountain's edge and bending down in front of him. Nat blinked up at him, and Asterius pressed a brief kiss to Nat's lips. He barely had time to register the purse of Asterius's slightly bumpy lips, but he heard the breath he caught when they touched Nat's.

When Asterius stood straight, Nat couldn't do more than stare up at him. He didn't even know what to do when Asterius caressed the side of his face as he grinned down at him.

"There is one last thing you should know."

Nat cleared his throat. "What... What's that?"

"I mean to have a fully-bonded marriage, little one."

The lecherous look on his intended's face told him exactly what Asterius meant. The way he slid his thumb across Nat's bottom lip solidified it.

Nat gulped.



## CHAPTER NINE

Nat awoke to a warm hand resting on his hip. He was only mildly surprised to find Asterius sitting beside him on the bed, pale sunlight filtering through the curtains and highlighting the worried expression on his bullish face.

“I apologize for invading your space, little one, but you’ve been in here for two days. They tell me you’ve barely eaten.” He squeezed Nat’s hip. “I’m worried about you.”

That was kind of nice. Nat gave Asterius a small smile and sighed before rubbing his eyes.

After the massive history lesson and that proposal in the garden, Nat had asked to go back to his room to think. He’d had lunch while quizzing the notebook on any factual information he could think of only to end up deep diving into even more history. Battle statistics had led him to what the charbrays knew about medical treatments for humans which had led him, somehow, to the number of times they’d recorded him masturbating.

He couldn’t be sure, but that high of a number had to mean every single time.

He’d promptly asked who could know such information about him and learned that he only had access to it by Asterius’s order. Which was good of him to provide since Nat would’ve probably lost it if some bit of information had been denied to him at that point.

The next morning, he’d made an effort to get up, bathe, and dress. He’d eaten like he was starving and realized he might’ve sent away the person who’d brought him dinner the night before. He had planned to find out what else he could do in or around the castle that might be completely unrelated to history or learning of any kind. He’d done some exercises just to loosen up, thought maybe doing something physical might be a good idea, and ended up asking the notebook about charbray exercises—they were muscle on muscle after all.

He’d learned about their sports. That the charbray *played*. They had the time and energy to play games, follow teams, and just have fun. While every day had felt like a struggle to Nat, they’d been enjoying their lives. He and everyone else he knew had strained for some kind of rest, longed for an elusive someday, and the charbrays had been out here laughing and playing.

He hadn’t left the room after that.

“I’m sorry,” Nat said and rolled so he didn’t have to look over his shoulder to see Asterius. “I got caught up in asking questions to that damn notebook thing and it sucked me under.” He sighed again and patted Asterius’s hand, which was back on his hip. “I’m fine.”

Asterius nodded and looked like he was relieved. “I’ve brought a simple breakfast in with me. Perhaps after you eat, we could explore the city.”

“Okay. That was my plan yesterday. Or something like it. But then I just...” He twirled his finger in a downward spiral before splatting it against the mattress. “I don’t remember going to bed, but I know I—” He cut himself off, biting his lip, not wanting to admit that he’d cried himself to sleep.



Asterius tsked as he squeezed Nat's hip. "I should've checked on you sooner. I wanted to give you space to think, but I see now that it was too much space. You needed a break, some help, and I wasn't here."

"Oh, yes, it's all your fault I got myself overwhelmed while doing research." Nat gave him a little kick but grinned while he was doing it.

Asterius slowly smiled until it transformed his entire face and leaned over Nat. "Are you teasing me?"

Nat snorted and pushed against Asterius's forehead to get those horns away from him. "Maybe, but if you poke me with one of those horns, it'll stop being fun."

With one hand sliding up from his hip to the center of his back and the other bracing him against the mattress, Asterius loomed over Nat in a way that suddenly had his heart beating harder. Not in fear, though. No, this was raw, sexual awareness.

Nat was on his side and bent his upper leg a little more, hoping to hide his sudden, growing erection. "I'm naked under here," he whispered, meaning it as a warning but he was too breathless to be convincing.

But also, did he *want* Asterius to stop?

Asterius grinned as he crawled his fingers against Nat's back, pulling the sheet away a little at a time. Nat laughed, tugging the material back up under his arm and holding it there.

"That's the first time I've heard you laugh," Asterius said with a delighted grin. But that faded as he said in all seriousness, "I want to do all I can to keep you happy, Nat."

"I am," he said quietly. "Right now, I am."

"Truly?" He took a breath and went still, his nostrils flaring. "Nat, you smell so good."

When Asterius's gaze slid down Nat's covered body as though looking for something, Nat realized Asterius could scent his arousal. With a snout like that, of course, he could. Blushing hotly, Nat bit his bottom lip, unsure what to do.

What he did know was that he...liked Asterius's attention.

"Nat, I desperately want you," he said, his voice somehow deeper. "You're so beautiful I ache with wanting to touch you. So strong and brave, all I want to do is please you." He swallowed hard, concern back in his gaze. "But, oh my little one, I don't want to move too quickly and make you hate me."

Nat remembered then how he'd gotten from medicine to masturbation the other night. He'd asked about charbray anatomy. Male anatomy. Even though he'd looked at drawings that were meant to show him labels and could be peeled back to examine the deeper structure, he'd found himself getting turned on. He'd touched himself while imagining what it might be like to touch a male charbray. To touch Asterius.

"I won't hate you," he said as he pushed the sheet out of the way, baring his naked body. "But I might if you don't touch me."

Asterius huffed a laugh like it was surprised out of him, his gaze devouring every inch of Nat's form. Then he nodded and stood up to begin undressing. "We do only what you agree to do and nothing more. I have no expectations, goals, or requirements. We—"

"My god, shut up and just get naked, alright?" He sat up and reached for a buckle that may or may not have had something to do with holding up the thick brown material of Asterius's kilt. "I spent most of the other night getting off to drawings of naked male charbrays, so I'd appreciate it if I could get to know the real thing now. The one meant to be mine? So let's go already."

That buckle hadn't been key to anything, but something Asterius did at his shoulder had his entire

outfit dropping to the floor at his hooves with a shush of cloth and clank of metal.

Like every other time Nat had seen Asterius naked, he couldn't quite keep his gaze from flicking over acres of brown skin covering one bulging muscle after another. But this time, Asterius's cock wasn't fat and flaccid. No, right then, it was deep purple, ribbed with veins, and rivaling his horns in length and stiffness. When he took himself in hand and stroked from base to flared head, Nat shivered in bone-deep want as a bead of precome gathered at the slit of that monstrous beast.

Without really thinking about what he was doing, Nat leaned over and licked up that drop. Asterius gasped while Nat savored his taste and blushed terribly as he realized what he'd done. He couldn't interpret the expression on Asterius's face. Was he shocked? "O-oh," Nat stammered. "Was that...wrong? Do you not do that?"

Asterius smiled and cupped Nat's cheek in his other hand. "Little one, if you want to taste every inch of my entire body, please feel free to do so." He poked his thumb against Nat's tooth. "Just be careful where you bite."

Grinning, Nat nipped the pad of Asterius's thumb and then followed up with a little kiss to it. As Asterius chuckled, Nat swung his legs over the side of the bed and held Asterius's hips to bring him closer. Asterius's skin was lightly furred in such a way as to make him incredibly soft to the touch. So while Asterius held his cock still, Nat used both hands to pet up and down his flanks as he leaned back in again.

Wanting to know if he was doing this okay, Nat kept his eyes open and looked up at Asterius as he let his tongue and lips guide him all along that hot, leaking cock. Asterius's precome tasted sort of salty-sweet and Nat lapped it up. Above him, eyes low-lidded and gaze fixed on him, Asterius moaned every exhale and petted Nat's hair like he had to touch him, too.

"Gods, Nat," Asterius whispered when Nat opened up and leaned closer to take Asterius's cock into his mouth. The awe in his tone beamed a strange sort of power right into Nat's core. He was impressing Asterius and knowing that urged him on.

But what a mouthful! Nat closed his eyes to savor the way the veins bumped against his lips as he eased forward more, curious to see how much he could take. When he nearly gagged, he stopped going any farther and used his tongue to caress the underside of the cock forcing his jaw wide. He opened his eyes and the look of deep, hungry desire on Asterius's face had Nat reaching between his legs for his suddenly throbbing cock.

He had a moment to moan around the cock in his mouth as he stroked himself before Asterius was pushing Nat off of his cock and back into bed. Nat went with it, hoping for more of something, *anything*, and shivered with want when Asterius kneed Nat's legs open so he could get on the bed between them. The position had Nat gasping a breath, fingers biting into Asterius's ribs, as he was covered by hot, firm muscles. A straining cock slid against his own when Asterius settled down on top of him.

"Oh, fuck," Nat moaned and found himself holding onto Asterius with arms and legs. "Yes. Please," he begged and hoped Asterius knew what he needed.

He did. Oh, did he! The muscles in Asterius's arms and shoulders strained as he held his upper body away from crushing Nat and rolled his hips, grinding them against each other. Asterius's velvety skin, hard body, and the slickness of his cock had Nat moaning and rocking with him, chasing his orgasm.

"Gods, you're everything," Asterius panted, staring down at him. "Everything... Nat!"

Heat flooded the scant space between them, and Nat gasped to realize that Asterius was coming. As if that could trigger him, Nat hollered and came, too. He could've wept from how good it felt to

shudder in ecstasy while holding onto Asterius and knowing he was doing the same.

When he felt Asterius's back muscles ripple as he shivered, Nat hugged him tighter and was rewarded with Asterius settling a little more fully on top of him. A warm nose nuzzled against his neck as they came down together, and Nat discovered there was another sort of bliss he could achieve.

He'd never been so content. The warm, heavy weight of Asterius combined with knowing what they'd done for each other, had Nat feeling incredibly satisfied. So much so that when Asterius shifted as though he was going to get up, Nat couldn't help the little whine that left him as he squeezed with arms and legs to keep Asterius close.

"I don't want to crush you if I fall asleep," he rumbled as he gazed down at Nat and cupped his face in one big hand. "Look at you. So beautiful."

Before Nat could respond, tell him he liked the weight of him, Asterius was kissing him. Unlike the other day in the garden, this kiss lingered and deepened when Nat opened his mouth. He moaned as Asterius's long, thick tongue invaded, teasing his into exploring, too. The kiss had Nat reliving how he'd sucked Asterius's cock and he reached down to press them together.

Which was when he remembered that Asterius had a tail. Right at the base of his spine, just before the crack of his ass, Asterius's tail jutted out from his body and must've been waving about because Nat had to catch it. As velvety as the rest of Asterius, Nat enjoyed the texture and the way it wiggled in his grip as he stroked it.

Asterius lifted his head to laugh. "Keep stroking my tail like a cock and you'll end up riling me up again, little one."

Nat increased the speed of his strokes to keep Asterius laughing. But after a lick to the tip of Nat's nose, Asterius pushed up and away, breaking free of Nat's hold on him. Nat couldn't help pouting a bit.

"Don't pout," Asterius said as he stood and held out a hand. "Come with me to shower."

Since he was covered in their combined releases from his chest to his balls, Nat took Asterius's hand and got out of bed. "And then we can go again?"

"Insatiable beast," Asterius said with a grin as he led the way to the door that could pop open between their rooms.

Nat couldn't keep his gaze off Asterius's tail and the ass below it. His prince was muscle on top of muscle and now that he knew he could, Nat never wanted to stop touching him. "And you think I'm beautiful," he murmured as they entered Asterius's room and kept going to a door on the far wall.

"Are you saying I am?" Asterius asked when they walked into a bathroom the size of Nat's entire bedroom. His big, brown eyes twinkled as he smiled down at Nat.

"Well, obviously." He gestured at the whole of his impressive body. "But I realize now... Well, no, I realized earlier, the other day, that you're also..." He felt a blush building and couldn't quite meet Asterius's gaze. "You're kind and generous. A terrible tease, but considerate, too. You're... nice."

"Oh, little one," he whispered before hugging Nat close and kissing him gently.

Something was happening inside Nat that made him feel vulnerable and afraid. But not so much so that he wanted to stop. It was like he'd cracked open and exposed delicate parts. Instead of wanting to hide them again, though, he wanted Asterius to see them. It was as if... As if he trusted Asterius.

As if he could grow to love him.

Asterius distracted Nat from diving into those thoughts—thank goodness—by turning a dial that resulted in warm water cascading down on top of them like an indoor rainstorm. Nat laughed, tilting

his head back and trying to see what was happening. The tub in his room filled for him, but it didn't produce rain like this. The come washed off of him almost like magic, and he easily wetted his hair.

"I like this," he said, blinking droplets from his eyelashes. "It feels wonderful."

Asterius chuckled at him before pointing at a low, wooden stool. "Stand on that for me."

Nat stepped up on it, curious. "What's this for?" He looked up, but he'd only gotten about a foot taller and couldn't reach anything above him.

"This," Asterius said before easing up behind Nat and aligning their bodies in such a way that Asterius's cock could wedge itself between Nat's cheeks. "Now you're the perfect height."

He knew about this, of course, but had never done it. He'd imagined letting a man inside him many, many times. Nerves made his hands shake now, but he pressed them against the damp wall and looked over his shoulder at Asterius. "Okay."

Asterius's brow ridge hopped up, his expression surprised. Then he chuckled and kissed Nat's ear before saying, "I adore that you're willing, little one, but you're untouched and not nearly ready for such things."

"What do I need to do?" He frowned at him. "I can do it. Just tell me how."

Asterius positioned his cock between Nat's thighs, high up so the head touched the back of Nat's sac. He knew how long and thick it was, but to have it there suddenly made him feel like maybe he wasn't ready for it to be inside his body. It couldn't possibly fit!

"Someday," Asterius whispered in Nat's ear as he slowly rolled his hips, sliding that monster back and forth between Nat's legs. "I'll do this while snug inside your body."

Nat opened his mouth to pant, suddenly overwhelmed by sensation. The cascading water, the grip of Asterius's hands on his hips, the thick and hot rod mimicking a fuck...

"I'll take you slow and deep. Fill you up when I come. Flood you," he said with a nip to Nat's earlobe. "I'll watch it drip out of you, slither down these strong legs, and know you're mine."

"Wh-What if I want to keep it?" Nat said as Asterius's hand wandered around to grip Nat's cock. He moaned as Asterius matched his stroking hand to his thrusting hips.

He chuckled, the sound of it so very wicked. "Then I'll ease a plug into your pert little ass so you can keep some of me inside of you for as long as you want."

Why that made Nat moan, he didn't know, but he wanted it. As Asterius fondled him, kept sliding his veiny cock against Nat's hole, Nat rocked with him and drove himself faster toward completion. When Asterius reached down with his other hand to cup Nat's balls, Nat hollered and came. He felt his thighs tremble, squeeze, and then Asterius was bellowing, pressing hard against him, and a splash of heat coated Nat's sac and slithered down his inner thighs. Feeling that had him shuddering, gasping for breath as his hole tightened in envy.

Asterius let go of Nat's cock and balls to wrap both arms around his chest. Rubbing his cheek on Nat's head, Asterius mumbled something in a language Nat didn't understand. He sounded grateful, maybe amazed, so Nat nodded in total agreement.

"When can we do that for real?"

Asterius chuckled and kissed the side of Nat's head. "Let's finish bathing, and then I know just the place to start your training."



## CHAPTER TEN

Hesitating on the steps of the castle, Nat looked down over the town below. He'd come into this place hating everyone, wanting violence, and now he was going to explore his new home with his future husband. What a difference a few days made...

Stepping onto the pebbled road—grateful that he wore thick-soled shoes this time—Nat walked over to Asterius and his guards. After that incredible shower, he and Asterius had dressed separately, Nat had grabbed some breakfast, and then a servant of some sort had escorted Nat outside. That said something about the level of trust the charbrays were showing him, right? Sure, the escort probably could've put him on his ass if he'd tried something, but there hadn't been a guard weighed down with weapons and just enough armor to look impervious.

Asterius must've seen Nat eyeing the four guards as he walked over because he said, "They're here for crowd control."

Nat smiled up at him. "I'm taking that as a compliment."

Chuckling, Asterius held his arm out for Nat, and he took it. Nat had wondered whether they would need to do anything to reassure the public about the fact that he didn't hate Asterius anymore. Holding onto Asterius's arm and walking through town should help with that.

Well, that and... "Will we announce our engagement soon? Or..." He squinted suspiciously up at Asterius. "Exactly how many people know about your plan?"

"The king and queen know, as do their advisors and the committee that formed to help create the plan and eventually take action on it." He smirked at Nat. "There's a rumor of something going on between us since your arrival was so public."

Nat groaned quietly. None of that had been the greatest first impression he could've made, but these people couldn't possibly blame him for his reactions—they had to know he'd been ignorant of the truth that they all knew. He would work on letting people see him in a better light going forward.

A delicious smell had him taking a deep breath and looking around for the source. All of the shops there had large glass windows and open doors, so he didn't need to be able to read their signs to know what they sold. And the origin of that mouth-watering scent was a grill outside of a shop being manned by a human. Nat gasped and nearly stumbled.

"Hungry?" Asterius asked. "Did you not eat before dressing? I knew I should've—"

"I know him," Nat said. "Michael Waite. He was sacrificed two years ago."

Asterius covered Nat's hand against his arm, reclaiming his attention. "Do you want to speak with him? With other humans here?"

Nat understood what he meant. After spiraling for two days, did he want to learn anything more, discuss any new topics, or just enjoy the day away from it all?

“Yeah, I do. I mean, I don’t want to avoid them or what we’ll inevitably talk about, but I’m also salivating for whatever it is that he’s cooking.”

Asterius chuckled and led the way over to Michael, whose face split into a big smile when he saw Nat coming.

“Well, look at you!” Michael said, coming around from behind the grill. “You’re about the last person I ever thought I’d see here.” He paused as he seemed to realize who Nat was with and hastened to bow. “Your Highness, sir.”

Asterius inclined his head, and Nat suddenly realized he had no idea whatsoever about the proper protocol for being in the presence of royalty. He had to assume he didn’t need to do anything for Asterius, but what about the rest of them? Good god, he was probably going to have to meet the king and queen at some point.

Well, that was a worry for later on. Nat refocused on Michael, stepping closer to shake his offered hand.

Shaking Nat’s hand, Michael smiled and asked, “So what happened? Why are you here?”

“I volunteered,” Nat said with a slightly embarrassed shrug. “Had it in my head that I’d save us all.”

“Ah, yeah.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets behind his apron. “I’m sorry, Nat. A lot of us needed time to get over the lies and how our council threw us to the enemy. Even though that wasn’t what happened, it’s what they thought they were doing.”

“Did they, though?” He hadn’t meant to say that, but now that it was out there... “Maybe the original council knew more truths once, but Deacon and Thornhew are the only ones left alive who were in the room when the decisions were made back then. The rest of the current members only know what they were told, you know?”

“Huh. I never thought of it like that.” Michael shrugged, seeming unconcerned. “I suppose that’s possible. Everything else was one giant ball of miscommunication—honest or deceptive—so why not?”

Nat couldn’t help thinking about it. He’d started to believe the council as a whole—his father included—was corrupt and downright evil. And they were, to an extent, since they had no problem sending innocent people like Brigid away for the right price. But did they know everything about the war like Nat did now? Had they covered that up? Or were they ignorant like he’d been?

Asterius seemed to think changing the subject was a good idea because he asked Michael, “Is this your butcher shop?”

“Mine and my husband’s,” Michael said proudly.

“Oh! I hadn’t known you—” Nat blushed, recalling the fantasies he’d had about Michael years ago. “Um, that’s great. Congratulations.”

Michael chuckled. “There was a time when I thought I might make a play for you, but your father squashed that idea.”

“He did? I didn’t—” Nat cut himself off as Asterius eased closer to him and reclaimed Nat’s hand on his arm. Nat chuckled quietly, surprised at himself when he let his possessive beast go ahead and claim him.

“Apologies, Your Highness,” Michael said, eyes wide before he bowed again. A bit worried looking now, he pointed a finger between Nat and Asterius. “Are the rumors true then?”

Nat leaned into Asterius’s side. “We’re...courting,” he chose to say since their engagement wasn’t public knowledge yet.

“Excellent! Congrats, Nat.” His laugh then was a bit wicked. “Wish I could see your father’s face

as he learns *that*. The whole councils' faces, in fact."

Nat cringed a little, having no doubt that news would have his father and the rest of the council exploding with prejudices and disgust. He would've done the same just a few days ago, but as he looked up at Asterius... Well, he knew this prince deserved to be a leader because he was compassionate, considerate, sensitive, and kind. Nat felt like he knew more about Asterius in just these few days than some of the people he'd lived with all his life.

A male charbray came out of the shop then and scolded Michael for letting the meat on the grill burn. Michael went over, and they briefly discussed that it wasn't ruined at all before the charbray looked up and gasped, finally noticing their audience. Michael did the introductions, and Nat was quietly thrilled to discover Goran was Michael's husband. He liked knowing he wasn't the only one to discover and give in to an attraction to a charbray.

After saying goodbye to the couple—and being gifted with sticks of meat that were delicious—Nat stayed tucked against Asterius's side as they walked on through town. They nibbled their snacks as Asterius pointed out shops he knew, like one that sold books and the one that made his clothes.

People started to fill the streets as though word had gotten out that Prince Asterius was there. Now the guards stepped up to make a loose ring around Nat and Asterius, even if it wasn't as though anyone was trying to reach them. There was still a growing crowd, and some of them had questions.

"Prince Asterius, who's the human?"

Asterius smiled proudly and said, "Ignatius Konstantinidis."

A murmur went through the crowd, and Nat could see several human faces—people he'd known before they'd been sacrificed and others he didn't know at all. It was clear the former sacrifices remembered him.

As more people asked questions that Asterius answered or ignored, Nat couldn't help wondering what it would be like to have the council members there. Could these people forgive them and live alongside them? Did they deserve to be forgiven?

After a while, the crowd thinned a bit as Asterius seemed to have a destination in mind. The questions tapered off, everyone seeming to just want a chance to wave and be seen by them. Nat did his best to smile and wave back, assuming he was just as much of a curiosity as a royal in the wild. Since Asterius never let him go, Nat also guessed the rumors about their relationship would be much stronger now, and not a single person had appeared to have a problem with that.

Nat wasn't paying attention to the shop Asterius led him into until he noticed how quiet it was inside. He looked back to the street, but the guards were standing along the wall and facing out, blocking most of his view of the people trying to see in through the big windows.

"Oh, my god," Nat whispered as he noticed the shelf full of cocks beside him. Standing up on flat bases or displayed horizontally like swords were likenesses of charbray and human penises of all sizes, colors, and maybe even materials—was that one glass?—decorated the place as if it was some kind of dick store. Nope, that shelf over there had female parts. So this was a... This was...

Eyes wide and face flushed, Nat turned to stare up at Asterius. "What is this place?" he asked breathlessly.

Asterius grinned at him. "They sell sexual aids. I asked that they allow us to shop alone so that you can learn about what it means to prepare your body for mine."

The shelf at Asterius's elbow was covered in tubes topped by buttholes. Nat's face felt like it had just caught fire as he covered his mouth and tried to stop staring at them. Were they meant for practice? Was that why Asterius had mentioned training in the shower?



Oh, but Nat had wanted to receive so... He flinched when he noticed a charbray cock the size of his thigh in shiny black metal thrusting out from a wall up near the ceiling.

"I'm fairly certain that's just decorative," Asterius said.

Nat plucked at his shirt, suddenly sweating.

"Little one," Asterius said with a chuckle, "you'll start over here."

As Asterius walked off, Nat sprinted to keep up with him and tried not to look around too much. There were just...so many. When Asterius stopped and held out his hand to draw Nat in, Nat was very happy to tuck into Asterius's side and look at nothing but— He gulped at the sight of a line of rainbow-colored cocks that varied in size from a few inches to...several more. Others on the shelves also varied in girth and some of them were shaped like teardrops instead of cocks.

"These are plugs," Asterius said of the teardrops, "and these are dildos." He pointed to the array of dicks. "Both can help your body learn how to open up. Typically, the plugs are meant to remain inside for a time to aid in stretching you, while the dildos are meant to be thrust in and out for pleasure."

None of them were the size of Asterius and only a few were close to Nat's length and girth. So he was going to train his ass by starting small. A snort slipped out of him before he laughed. And then he couldn't stop laughing even as he covered his mouth and had tears running down his cheeks, his stomach aching from how hard the laughter came out.

Asterius grinned at him and made sure Nat didn't collapse to the floor when his knees threatened to give. And thinking about being on his knees in front of a million cocks had Nat's laughter amping up until he was gasping for breath.

Eventually, he wiped his eyes as he finally got ahold of himself, sniffing and feeling a little wrecked but weirdly happy. He couldn't remember the last time something had made him laugh like that.

"Now that you can breathe again," Asterius teased, "would you like to choose, or shall I choose for you?"

Leaning against Asterius, Nat shrugged as a chuckle slipped free. "I wouldn't know where to begin," he admitted. "I've never...gone in."

"Well, I like the glass ones." Asterius picked up a cock the size of one of his fingers. "You can warm or cool them and the weight is nice."

It occurred to Nat right then that he hadn't once thought of Asterius taking his cock. Hadn't considered being the one to fuck his betrothed at any point since he'd realized he had an interest in the big brute. Was he an inconsiderate lover?

"I'm sorry I didn't think about what you might want," he said quietly.

"What I might... Oh. Yes, I suppose we should discuss our preferences, shouldn't we?" He set the glass dildo down before encouraging Nat to look up at him by touching his chin. "I enjoy receiving for my partner, but I prefer giving. Do you understand what that means?"

He nodded, fairly certain that he did. So now he had to wonder what he preferred. Did it mean anything that he'd so far welcomed Asterius on top of and behind him? He hadn't even thought of reversing their positions.

"We can try whatever you like, little one," Asterius sort of purred in his ear. "But I have enjoyed what we've done so far, and I will eagerly help you use anything in this shop."

Nat's blushing renewed and he grinned, letting himself imagine how Asterius might look as he watched Nat take one of these cocks into his ass and pump it in and out until he came. Well, yes, that was something to try. He adjusted himself before pointing to the selection from the red one the size of

Asterius's finger to a purple one that was just smaller than Asterius's cock. "I'll take these."

Asterius made a growly sort of noise before picking up a few and taking them to the counter. Nat followed with the rest of them and was momentarily distracted by a plug that had a rubbery charbray tail adhered to the base of it. If that was meant to be in his ass, then the tail would... He chuckled and walked past it, fairly sure he was being adventurous enough for now.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I still can't believe," Nat said as they walked toward their rooms in the castle, "that you told her I've never done, you know..." He looked down the hall but didn't see anyone else. "That I've never taken a cock before."

"I only confirmed what the size of everything you were buying already hinted at," Asterius said with a grin over his shoulder.

Nat glared at the back of him. "And then you just stood there and watched as she showed me how to use the littlest one. With one of the butt ones! Just right there on the counter."

He'd never get the squelching sound of those things coming together out of his mind. Or her motherly tone as she explained how he could find his prostate.

"It was educational for you. Why would I stop her?"

"It was *embarrassing*." He was still blushing terribly. "I was so mortified I couldn't speak."

And their choice of shop had one hundred percent solidified for everyone watching just what sort of relationship they had. There had even been some cheering.

Asterius chuckled. "You did squeak a few times."

"Oh, my god," Nat groaned before he realized Asterius was about to go into his room. Looking at his door and then back at Asterius, Nat wasn't sure if he should follow or not. Was that the end of their day together? Was he meant to test out his dildos by himself?

"Little one, as much as I will treasure the memory of our first time together on that minuscule mattress, I would prefer to explore your purchases with a bit more room to move." Asterius opened his door and gestured for Nat to go inside.

And now Nat was blushing with a weird sort of nervous excitement as he clutched his bag of sex aids to his chest and hurried into Asterius's bed chamber. The room looked different somehow, now that he was here voluntarily and... As an equal? There was an interesting thought.

"Nat?"

"Hmm?"

Concern in his big, brown eyes, Asterius caressed Nat's cheek. "If you would prefer to try them on your own, or don't want to do anything at all right now, then we won't."

"Oh, no, it's fine. I mean, *I do*. Want to. With you." He groaned at himself and set his bag down on the bed. "It just occurred to me that we might be..." Glancing up and away, he blushed for some reason. "That we might be equals."

"Of course, we are."

"Well, I didn't realize that until now," he said in a huff. "Until this morning, you were the prince in charge of me, my former enemy, and now we're just—"

"Mates."

It was clear to Nat that Asterius didn't understand. And maybe he didn't need to. That it was so simple for him, not something he'd questioned... Well, that was a good thing. Asterius wasn't the one changing his view of Nat because he'd known all about him before they ever met. Nat hadn't even known Asterius's name, just that he was one of the minotaur king's seven kids. Now he knew so much more about his big, beautiful beast.

Like the fact that Asterius's heart was completely open to Nat.

Lifting his arms, Nat had meant for Asterius to lean down so he could kiss him. Asterius took it as Nat wanting to be picked up because that's what he did—he caught Nat under his arms and lifted him. Was it instinct that had Nat wrapping his legs around Asterius's waist as he clutched at his shoulders? Whatever the reason, the position went from odd as a grown man being picked up so easily to sexual when Asterius's wide hands cupped Nat's ass and snuggled him closer.

Asterius kissed Nat. Easing his arms around Asterius's thick neck, Nat relaxed into the kiss and the hold, certain Asterius wasn't struggling to keep Nat up off the ground. It was kind of thrilling to know Asterius could tote him around like he weighed nothing at all. That realization combined with the kiss and Asterius's quiet moan had Nat's cock filling between them.

Just when the restraint of his pants started to get uncomfortable, Asterius turned and bent over the bed, setting Nat down on it and lingering to rest lightly against him. Nat hummed happily into their kiss before Asterius eased back. There was a wicked twinkle in Asterius's eyes that had Nat biting his bottom lip as Asterius grinned at him.

"I'm going to undress you," Asterius said quietly, "kiss every inch of you, and then introduce you to one of your new dildos."

He hadn't phrased it like a question, but Nat knew it still was. "Okay."

"If at any point you want to stop or do something diff—"

"I'll say something."

"Good. Then just relax for me, little one, and I'll take care of you."

Why did that put a sudden lump in his throat? Some strong emotion choked him up as Asterius focused on undoing the toggles down the front of Nat's shirt. Was it because Asterius wanted to take care of him? That shouldn't have Nat blinking fast so his eyes wouldn't tear up. Asterius was the one who knew what he was doing with butts and cocks, so of course, he'd be the one to take the lead. But no, it wasn't that. The care. Had Nat ever had someone treat him with such care?

As Asterius spread open the sides of Nat's shirt and bent in to drop kisses on his chest, Nat closed his eyes and took deep, even breaths. Asterius would probably misunderstand and stop everything if Nat got so emotional, but the fact that he was now conscious of Asterius's care for him was combined with awakening Nat's feelings for Asterius.

Feelings that were rapidly heading toward love.

Nat gasped suddenly when Asterius scraped his teeth over Nat's nipple. As Asterius chuckled and did it again, Nat allowed himself to switch over to lust for the time being. He'd contemplate his emotional attachment to his kind and considerate prince later, once he was done debauching Nat.

While Asterius's fingers worked open the front of Nat's pants, his long tongue and blunt teeth on his aching nipples had Nat squirming against the mattress. When he raised his hands to touch Asterius's head and bumped into his horns, Nat found himself moaning as he stroked the length of each hard and smooth bone. The tips were capped simply in silver, the breadth of his horns so far that Nat couldn't reach the caps to remove them.

Asterius freed Nat's cock and stroked it, fondled his sac, as Nat moaned his pleasure and held onto those horns. Shifting up to take Nat's mouth in a plundering kiss, Asterius worked Nat's pants

down over his ass and off his legs, his shoes dropping off with them. He was naked while Asterius was fully dressed. Something about that shot wanton desire through Nat.

When Asterius walked around the bed, Nat had to sit up and track him as Asterius got up on the other side. He sat back against a pile of pillows, long, thick legs out in front of him, and cock standing tall. He pulled the bag of purchases closer to him and then crooked a finger at Nat.

Scrambling over, Nat let Asterius maneuver him how he wished. He ended up with his head between Asterius's hooves, legs bent and looped over Asterius's legs, with his ass up on a pillow and presented to his mate. That shivery, hot desire sang through Nat's body as Asterius grinned wickedly down at him.

Asterius took hold of Nat's knees and slowly spread them, lifting them. The exposure had Nat putting his arms over his head and relaxing as he opened himself up just a little more. Asterius's smile grew.

"Look at you," he said, his voice rumbling now. "Owning your pleasure. Willing to explore." He trailed his big hands down the insides of Nat's thighs, and then his thumbs reached down and spread Nat's cheeks apart. "You are exceptionally beautiful, little one."

"I've never felt like this," he whispered, uncertain. "It's so...much."

"Just breathe. That is, quite literally, all you have to do right now."

So that was all Nat did as Asterius undressed. Though his hands moved to undo different things, his gaze remained fixed on Nat, roaming over him in such a way that it almost felt like a physical caress. By the time Asterius had spread open or taken off his clothing, Nat's cock was leaking onto his stomach.

Asterius reached for the bag of supplies and the way he leaned brought his mouth close to Nat's cock. His long tongue snuck out and lapped at him from base to head, making Nat jerk and gasp. Chuckling, Asterius smacked his lips and brought out the rainbow set of dildos in their simple holder to set them on Nat's chest.

"Choose where you'd like to start," Asterius said as he fished the lube they'd purchased out of the bag. "I recommend the red one for your first, but it's entirely up to you."

The red dildo was the thinnest at about the size of Nat's little finger. All of them were the same length, but their girth seemed key to the experiment. While he was sure the red one would let him know something was there, he had a real urge to make sure he could feel the presence of a cock inside him. He chose the yellow one.

Asterius didn't comment, only smirked at him, and set the rest of them on the bedside table with the rainbow assortment of plugs they'd also bought. Every last one of them glittered in the sunlight streaming through the window.

When Asterius pointed the yellow dildo at Nat's mouth, Nat stared up at him with wide eyes. Did he want him to— Asterius lightly trailed the glass across Nat's bottom lip and said, "Open up."

Nat did, and Asterius eased the dildo into his mouth. There was something deviant about sucking on a smooth, glass cock while looking Asterius in the eyes that had Nat breathing faster.

"You play with that," Asterius said as he put Nat's hand on it, "while I get you ready."

Nat pulled his legs back further, exposing himself, and fellated the dildo as he watched Asterius watching him. It occurred to Nat that they probably didn't need the dildos at all since Asterius had nice, big fingers. Three of them would be enough to open him up for Asterius's cock. Well...maybe.

When Asterius leaned forward, Nat frowned around his mouthful only to gasp and twitch when he felt Asterius's tongue on his hole. His tongue! That firm and wily muscle was twirling around and licking at Nat's ass like... Like... "Oh, my god!"

Asterius chuckled, the vibration making Nat gasp all over again. His cock partially obscured his view of him, but Asterius's eyes were twinkling deviously as he held Nat's cheeks apart and lapped at him. Clutching the dildo in his fist, Nat couldn't quite keep his eyes open as the warm and languid sensation of Asterius's tongue melted his brain.

When Asterius's thumbs started rhythmically pulling at his hole, opening it over and over, while his tongue poked in a little more each time, Nat couldn't control his repeated moaning noises. Never in his life had he thought someone might do this to him, or that it would feel so deliciously arousing. He was hot and shivery all over, his cock leaking steadily now. When he went to reach for it, he remembered that he was already clutching a dildo.

Asterius lifted his head and took the dildo from Nat. While Nat lay there panting, his body thrumming with need, Asterius smoothed lube down the length of that yellow glass. A twinge of nerves hit Nat, but he fought that back, too desperate for more stimulation to hesitate now.

Looking him right in the eyes, Asterius touched the smooth tip of the dildo to Nat's ass. "Push out," he rumbled. Nat did, and Asterius eased the dildo inside of him.

"Oh, fuck," he whispered, alarmed and amazed at the feel of something thrusting into his body. Nat whined, his eyelids fluttering, as Asterius pulled back without leaving, and then pushed in again. Deeper. Nat's hands flailed for a moment before he found Asterius's legs and held onto him.

"Just relax, little one. Let yourself open up."

Nat was nodding, eyes closed and trying to take deep breaths, when he felt his cock get taken into the warm, wet confines of Asterius's mouth. He hollered, bumping his hips up, and inadvertently took the dildo deeper. Which was *fucking brilliant*. Focused inward, spiraling in pleasure, Nat thrust his hips and lost himself in the sensation of a smooth cock taking his ass as a determined mouth sucked his cock.

Nat reached down and grabbed hold of Asterius's horns as he planted his feet on the mattress and thrust his hips faster. Asterius took Nat's cock in his mouth easily and fucked him deeper with the dildo that was somehow too much and not enough all at once.

"Please," Nat begged. "More!"

Asterius suddenly did something that had Nat hollering in startled pleasure. It was as if there was a button inside him that send zings ecstasy all through him. Asterius rubbed it again and again, his sucking mouth demanding, and that fiery blast of sensation becoming too much. Nat screamed as he came with a sudden, blinding intensity.

It was long minutes of panting before Nat collapsed back like a lump in blissful exhaustion. He opened his eyes when Asterius pulled off of Nat's cock with a pop. Grunting and snarling, Asterius furiously fisted his cock, getting himself off. He looked wild and uncontrolled, and then Asterius bellowed and came, splashing Nat's groin with sticky, hot come.

Licking his lips, Nat watched Asterius pant and slowly relax back against the pillows propping him up. His eyes fluttered closed, velvety skin flushed, and lips red and swollen. A line of Nat's come was at the corner of his wide mouth, and Nat wanted to lick it. The dildo fell out of him when he moved, making him gasp and laugh, and then he was flopping awkwardly against Asterius's chest. Laughing too, Asterius caught the back of Nat's head in one large hand and steered him in for a deep kiss.

"You were incredible," Asterius whispered.

"Me? That thing with your tongue..."

Asterius cuddled Nat against him, holding on with both strong arms and tucking his cheek against Nat's hair. They sat like that for ages, just resting and breathing, until Nat moved and realized the

come on him was adhering him to Asterius. Laughing, they separated and tottered into the bathroom to clean up.

When they returned, Asterius swept Nat into his arms and got them back onto the bed. With his horns nearly as wide as his shoulders, for Asterius to lay on his side facing Nat, he had to tuck a stiff and tapered pillow under his head that seemed made for this position. Nat curled up in front of him, liking how Asterius's big hand cupped his hip possessively.

"We should think about announcing our engagement soon," Asterius said, his fingertips caressing Nat's hip.

"Okay. How do we do that?"

"Traditionally, we would tell our parents first."

Nat quietly snorted. "Let's start with yours."

"Agreed," he said with a grin. "We'll tell my siblings next, and then make it public."

And sometime after that, they'd have to figure out a way to break it to the humans in the compound that the treaty had ended and everything they thought they knew was a lie. Sighing, Nat pushed those thoughts away in favor of holding onto this sweetness with Asterius for a little while longer.

"Tell me about your family," Nat asked. "What are your siblings like?"

A soft look settled on Asterius's face as he said, "My eldest sister—the heir apparent—is very serious about everything. Terelia is academic to her core."

"Do you think she'll make a good queen?"

"Oh, yes, no doubt. She loves a rigorous debate, so she'll always consider every side and opinion when something complicated comes up. She has her opinions, of course, but she is an excellent example of open-mindedness."

Nat liked that after the hard line every leader he'd ever known had taken for his entire life. "She'll go into a conflict willing to change her mind."

"Exactly."

"And the others? You have six, right?" How strange that he only knew they existed without knowing a single thing about them.

"I do. Next are the twins, Portinus and Collien, who joined the military as soon as they could. They're both accomplished leaders now who've listened to their soldiers and changed how we fight, what we use, and how we support soldiers during and after any conflict."

Nat frowned in concern. "Are there a lot of conflicts?"

"Even one is too many, but there have been a few in my lifetime. Land was the reason for the last campaign." Asterius caressed Nat's back as if he couldn't resist touching him. "The Secese to the south claimed our land as their own, driving our people away, so Portinus took troops in to stop them. That was two years ago."

"I feel like I should've known something about that, but I don't even know where your borders are."

Asterius shrugged one shoulder. "The southern border is about a day's ride from the compound. The fighting may have sounded like distant thunder if you heard it at all. And the treaty prevents us from moving troops too close to the compound, so you wouldn't have seen them pass."

"It's so strange... I always felt like I was in the middle of everything, but I really wasn't. The compound is so tiny in comparison to your territory. And it's in the middle of nowhere."

"Oh, it's not so isolated," Asterius said as he caressed up and down Nat's thigh. "You're practically a city compared to my sister Olivine's home. She wed a prince of the Ecstorian charbrays to the east, uniting us with a vast population of farmers."



“Hey, farming is important, Prince Snobby.”

Asterius chuckled. “It’s not snobbery. The twins gained military alliances when they wed, while Olivine gained us more crops. It’s something we tease her about sometimes.”

Nat liked the idea of friendly teasing between siblings. He was an only child and, though he’d had friends, he’d always suspected it wasn’t quite the same as a sibling. And when he’d gotten it into his head that he was going to save his people, he’d been so focused on his training that he’d slowly lost touch with those friends he’d had.

Refocusing to avoid his regrets, Nat counted and said, “And your last sibling?”

“A priestess. Very pious.” He grinned and reached around to palm Nat’s ass. “Lorsella would berate me for deflowering you before our wedding night.”

“You have rules against sex before marriage?”

Asterius patted Nat’s ass and shrugged. “Guidelines, really, though I doubt very many follow them. None of the males I’ve known worried about it.”

Nat frowned at him. “Just how many males have there been?”

“A few,” he said with a smirk.

“Don’t be coy, Prince Fucks-a-lot. How many do I have to worry about?”

Seriousness settled over Asterius’s face as he said, “You have nothing to worry about, Nat.” Something soft lit his warm, brown eyes. “They were nothing more than practice while I waited for you.”

That lump was suddenly back in Nat’s throat. He had to swallow it away before he could whisper, “Do you really care so much?”

Asterius’s smile was kind and sweet. “I do, little one.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Since Asterius did have some actual princely things to do, Nat explored the castle until dinnertime. He'd had one guard, which he thought was a compliment, and an escort who could rattle off castle-related facts of all types. Not that Nat needed to know that the original kitchens were now a pottery studio for a famous artist since it was a separate building, but it was another stark reminder that the charbrays had time to pursue interests that didn't directly impact their ability to survive. Nat was pleased that he didn't need to worry about food or water anymore. In fact, the kitchen staff fed him so much that he had a single piece of fruit for dinner.

While lounging in his room afterward, someone knocked on his door. Excitement had skittered through him at the idea that it might Asterius come to claim him again. And though it hadn't been Asterius, the charbray had explained that Asterius was asking for Nat to join him for a "special event." It had sounded secretive and exciting, so Nat had taken the charbray's advice and dressed up.

He'd also put one of the plugs in. A choice he was now regretting simply because he could feel it with every step he took as he followed his escort down a flight of stairs and along a hallway. It didn't help that Nat was still aroused from getting the thing inside himself. But if this was Asterius's attempt to spice things up—even though they were so new and the spice was fully present—then Nat was going to play along. He'd heard of couples doing such things like role-playing and was excited to see what Asterius had in mind for them.

If fancy clothing and pinching shoes were a kink Asterius had, then Nat was okay with indulging him. And he'd wanted to see the look on his mate's face when he discovered the plug, but maybe Nat should've just handed the thing to Asterius and bent over instead. There was no avoiding the fact that it knew where his prostate was.

When he gasped yet again, and his escort glanced back at him, Nat tried to smile and cleared his throat. He nearly cheered when the charbray stopped before a double set of doors and knocked. Someone opened the door, and Nat started to walk in only to stop short.

Asterius was here, alright, but he wasn't alone. A dangerous-looking charbray stood beside the couch where two older charbray sat. Nat didn't even have to guess who they were. Though he'd never seen either of them, they sat regally, dressed expensively, and Asterius looked just like his father.

Dear god, Asterius had invited Nat to meet his parents.

And Nat had a plug in his ass.

Asterius came over, all encouraging smiles, and took Nat's hands. "Come and meet—"

"No, stop," Nat whispered harshly. "I *can't*."

"Of course, you can," he whispered back. "Heimsal is head of the guard, so he always suspects everyone of being moments from criminal activity. Don't worry about him."

Nat stumbled along, his arm caught in Asterius's iron grip, and the plug made him gasp yet again.

Though Asterius gave him a quizzical glance, he still went ahead and stood Nat before the royal couple. As Nat's face flamed so hot he wouldn't have been surprised to see smoke, the king and queen gazed at him with two very different expressions on their faces.

The queen might like him.

The king might ask Heimsal to stab him.

"Welcome to the family, Ignatius," Queen Faiza said and reached for his hands.

Gulping, he stepped closer and gave her his hands, figuring anything else would be just plain rude. He didn't want to embarrass Asterius at this moment.

He wouldn't mind beaming him on the forehead with the glass butt plug for not telling Nat *exactly* and *specifically* what they'd be doing this evening.

"It," he squeaked before clearing his throat and trying again. "It's an honor to meet you, Your, um, Highness." If it was a title that worked for Asterius, maybe it would for the queen, too.

"Is it?"

Nat flinched at the king's voice. There was a whole heap of challenge in the charbray's dark brown eyes, and Nat was strung just tight enough to snap.

"Her, yes, it is an honor. I haven't decided about you yet, but it's not looking good."

Someone made a choking sound behind him—possibly Asterius—but the queen giggled and patted Nat's hand before letting him go. Nat was just about to apologize for being a dick when the queen nudged her husband. He made a grumbling noise and confirmed for Nat just who was in charge when his murderous expression evened out.

"Welcome to the family, Ignatius," King Rhenok mumbled.

With as big of a smile as he could manage, Nat said sweetly, "Thank you so much."

The queen tittered before gesturing behind Nat and saying, "Have a seat, dear."

Oh, there was no way he could sit. Blushing all over again, Nat stepped closer to a wide-eyed Asterius. "I need a bathroom," Nat whispered. "Right now."

"Oh. Of course." He held out a hand to a closed set of doors with a charbray standing in front of them, who immediately opened them.

"Just through there, sir," the servant said, pointing.

Nat walked as calmly as he could toward the bathroom and inside. After closing the door, he wasted no time at all in dropping his pants and grasping the base of the plug. His ass didn't like giving it up quite that quickly, but it was out and in the sink at least.

Before pulling his pants back up, he cleaned himself off. Redressing gave him a moment to catch his breath. Then he washed the plug and his hands while he studiously avoided looking at himself in the mirror.

Nat picked up the plug before opening the door and striding back out toward the sitting room. When he got to Asterius, Nat positioned himself in such a way that he hoped blocked the king and queen's view of their son's face. He held out his hand, Asterius looked at him quizzically as he held out his own, and Nat dropped the plug onto Asterius's broad palm.

"Next time," he whispered, "be more specific about what we're going to do during 'special events.'"

Asterius looked down at the glass plug in his hand before gasping and covering it with his other hand. Satisfied that the beastly bastard was now as embarrassed as Nat was, Nat took a seat and sighed as he did so. Which was when Asterius started laughing.

Nat leaned on the arm of the chair and covered his eyes, suddenly concerned about whether Asterius would share with his parents or not.

“See I told you they’re perfectly suited,” the queen said. “Look at how Ignatius brings real joy to our overly serious boy.”

Asterius was overly serious? Nat peeked at the big goon as Asterius’s laughter began to subside and he wiped a tear from under his eye. Nat could see that Asterius had tucked the plug inside his sleeve, the tip of it poking out. Nat sent up a prayer to whoever was listening that the plug wouldn’t fall out and shatter on the floor in front of his new in-laws.

When Asterius got up and came over to Nat to kiss his mouth and then his forehead, the look of melted love on the queen’s face might’ve made everything worth it. She was definitely on Nat’s side. That was...really nice.

Nat wasn’t so sure he’d ever get that from the king, but he thought maybe he should try for it. “Your Highness,” he said and met the king’s gaze, “I understand the truth of our pasts now—thanks to Asterius’s help—and want to say that I apologize for everything I said about you and your people before now. I believed lies and I let those lies guide my thoughts and actions. I’ll do better from now on.”

With a sigh, the king nodded. “I’ll do the same.”

Nat wanted to whoop, but he held it in and politely nodded back. Though Asterius’s father might not like him—yet—it was possible he had a little bit of respect for him now. He could work with that.

Of course, there was probably zero chance that Nat’s father would do anything of the sort for Asterius. Also, as far as Nat knew, his father thought he was dead. Would he be happy to know the truth and reunite with Nat? He honestly didn’t know.

“My dear,” Queen Faiza said, “now that your engagement is official, the committee would like to include you in the preparations for dissolving the treaty.”

Nat sat up a little straighter. “Yes, ma’am.”

She went on to tell him about the work the committee of charbrays and humans had been doing. Mostly, they had been playing out various scenarios of how the compound’s inhabitants would react to the news of what had been happening for the past twenty-seven years. They thought they had a handle on any possible aggression because they knew where the ingredients to make explosives were and could remove them the night before. Since the alternative was sending more soldiers, which would only put the humans on the defensive, it sounded reasonable to Nat. The spying also let them know who regularly had knives, spears, and other weapons on them or close at hand.

“Anyone who goes in with the committee,” the queen explained, “will have an earpiece that will connect them to someone in the tower, allowing them an even greater awareness of their surroundings.”

“So they’ll be able to talk to someone watching on all those monitors?”

“Exactly.”

Finally, a use for surveillance that didn’t bother Nat. He wasn’t upset anymore that they had been doing so much spying, but he wasn’t fully comfortable with it either. But adding to the safety of people going into what would be a life-threatening situation? That was a worthy cause.

“You’ll need to send in humans who were sacrificed,” Nat said, taking a chance that his opinion was something the queen wanted. “They—the inhabitants, I guess—will be on edge the moment they see your pods coming toward them, so they’ll need something to shock them into not attacking as soon as the gates open.”

“Yes, everyone on the committee will go, as well as—”

“Except you,” the king said sternly.

She smiled and patted his hand on the seat between them. “Yes, dear. Not me.”

Nat tried not to grin when a bit of color pinked the king's cheeks. They were kind of adorable. He hadn't thought of them as being just...people.

"We would, however," she said, "like for you to go, Ignatius."

"Me?" he said just before he realized that it would make sense. "Oh. Yes, alright."

"Which means I go," Asterius said in just as stern a tone as his father had used.

His father said, "No, you're not going."

"Where he goes, I go."

As the king's face flushed brighter—and not from embarrassment this time—Nat said, "And where Asterius goes, a platoon of guards goes, too. Give him If-Looks-Could-Kill over there." He pointed at Heimsal. "He'll make everyone reevaluate their choices."

Asterius and his mother chuckled, and the king snorted before he smiled, but it was Heimsal slowly grinning like a devil that had Nat squirming in his chair.

"Well, then," the queen said, "you should know that your father has turned his grief over losing you into the quiet beginnings of a revolution."

"He has?"

She smiled kindly at him. "Yes, dear. Several times now, his watchers overheard him whispering to Weber and others about finding a way to end the sacrifices without risking the lives of everyone in the compound. He's gathering supporters to go against Deacon and the rest of the council."

Nat couldn't believe it. Jannek Weber had been his father's friend since before the crash, and Nat had wondered several times if they'd become more than friends after his mother's death. If his father was sharing ideas about overthrowing Deacon with Jannek, he was serious about it. That Nat's "death" was what had pushed his father to break with Deacon after their history utterly amazed him.

"My father was orphaned in the crash, and Deacon raised him," Nat said in awe. "He's talking about taking power away from the man who taught him everything he knows. And since everyone else who was on the council during the war—hell, everyone else who was *alive* during the war—has been sacrificed or died, my father doesn't have the first clue about the truth of what happened." Nat shook his head. "But he didn't do anything to stop them from taking me."

"He did," the queen said quietly. "Or tried to. Weber restrained him when he began gathering weapons with the intent to save you."

Nat groaned and leaned forward, head in his hands. He'd been at odds with his father for years, ever since he'd gotten the idea into his head of saving everyone. When he'd told his father, he'd tried to talk Nat out of it. He'd been adamant about not provoking the charbrays in any way. Nat had thought he was weak. Now, Nat was glad Jannek had stopped his father from attacking Asterius and the guards.

Sitting back, Nat nodded. "Yeah, I'm going. It sounds like they're ready for a revolution, and Dad needs me."



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

On the morning of what Nat was calling Liberation Day, he stood in the middle of Asterius's bed chamber with his arms out to his sides, letting his mate strap armor all over him. Technically, it was a shirt made from some kind of flexible metal that was thin but practically impervious. There was also a pair of shorts that went to his knees. Neither fit him perfectly, but he hadn't wanted to wait the week it would take to mold a set of armor just for him.

It was Nat's greatest hope that such protection wouldn't be needed at all. He wanted everyone in the compound to see him and the other sacrifices emerge from the pods and lob questions at them, not weapons. He was wishing for them to be relieved, but knew they'd also get angry. He prayed they would use that anger to leave their old world behind and embrace the new opportunities ahead of them.

And he was sure something would go wrong. Deacon hadn't held onto power this long just to throw up his hands and let everyone leave. No way would he be satisfied by ruling a world of one. But since Nat's dad was sowing the seeds of rebellion, maybe enough people would stop and think, evaluate, and be rational.

He could hope anyway.

With a layer of underclothes, the armor, and then his regular clothes on top of that, Nat felt heavy and stiff. He didn't like feeling restrained when going into something so important, but he didn't complain because he understood why Asterius had insisted on the armor. He was wearing the same thing—his perfectly molded to his every bulge—and it eased a little of Nat's worry. Neither of them was covered everywhere—like under their arms so they had a greater range of motion—but it was enough. And while Asterius also had panels of a firmer, golden metal in front of his groin and on his shoulders, they turned out to be purely decorative.

"Why weren't you wearing that—" Nat asked with a wave at the shield-shaped piece at Asterius's groin— "when you came to get me?" He was thinking of how that would've prevented him from getting a handful of the beast's cock when he bumped into him.

"I didn't want to look too intimidating," he said as he capped his horns with golden tips that were just as pointy and sharp as what they covered.

Since he also wore a long, curved sword with a blade the width of Nat's hand, hoof coverings that gleamed like the horn caps, and had an air about him that seemed to say "go ahead and try it," Nat nodded in agreement.

He also felt a stirring of lust for his warrior prince.

"Don't get hard," Asterius warned. "The armor won't accommodate it, and we don't have time."

Frowning, Nat lied, "I wasn't."

With a grin, Asterius kissed him quickly before ushering him out the door.



Right, Nat needed to focus. He knew the plan, had met everyone who was going with them, and believed they were as ready as they could be. It was time to put it all into action.

On the stairs down into the front hall, Nat held onto the railing and looked up at the colorful glass dome in the ceiling. It was still the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, but he tore his gaze away from it to look down at all of the humans standing under it.

Moses and Brigid had volunteered to return with him, both of them eager to do what they could to spread the truth now that they knew they could help end the sacrifices once and for all. With them were Michael, from the butcher shop, and Tyfus, who did teach self-defense and fighting techniques in town, just like he had for Nat back in the compound. They were all dressed finer than Nat had ever seen them, nervous but smiling, ready to be part of the change that was coming.

Everyone parted to allow Nat and Asterius to pass, the two of them walking outside where the pods and guards waited.

"Oh, for god's sake," Nat mumbled when he saw Heimsal. "I think he overdid it."

"You suggested it," Asterius reminded him.

Well, fine, he had mentioned that Heimsal would make the humans rethink acting aggressively, but good grief. He stood there looking like the personification of death, his clothes and armor as black as his midnight skin, his horns capped by spiked balls, rusty-looking chains looped over his arms, and not one but two massive swords on his hips. Not to mention a giant fucking hammer in his beefy hands.

"You're going to make the babies cry," Nat said as he passed Heimsal. "That hammer cannot be standard issue."

The other guards chuckled as Heimsal just grinned like the demon he probably was. One of his damned teeth was silver, reflecting Nat's alarmed face back at him. Which was no doubt another intimidation tactic—if *you can see this, you're entirely too close*. And of course, he was riding with them. At least he smelled nice, like a spicy cologne.

Asterius had Nat turn around and face the front window, reminding Nat of the first time he'd ridden in a pod. This time, Asterius rested his hands on Nat's shoulders, gently massaging, which helped ease some of his tension.

When the pod was full and they started moving, Nat realized that throngs of charbrays and humans were lining the roads. They didn't cheer or clap, but they were smiling, and a few humans were wiping away tears. Many of them held up signs, but Nat couldn't read the language yet.

He looked to Asterius. "What do the signs say?"

"Let us be one people," Asterius said quietly. "Love not war. Bring them home."

Nat blinked back sudden emotion. All this time, if they'd just started right, they could've been living good, safe lives with people who welcomed their friendship. And some who wanted their love. He cleared his throat and rested his hand on Asterius's as he stood straighter, determined to make sure today was the final chapter in these dark times.



WHEN THE PODS stopped well back from the compound's gate, it was the humans who stepped out of the pods first. When Nat could see around the guards, he realized no one from inside the compound was there. He'd expected some alarm, sure, but then he'd thought they would be

amazed and confused, not simply absent.

“They’re hiding,” Feeda said in his earpiece. She was one of the charbray watching on the monitors in the tower, feeding information to him as necessary. “A call went out for them to hide when someone saw the pods approaching.”

Well, at least they weren’t attacking. “Come out,” Nat hollered as he walked over. “It’s Ignatius Konstantinidis! Come to the gate and let me in!”

Though Asterius and Heimsal stood beside him, the rest of the humans gathered around them with the guards in the rear. Hopefully, knowing it was him, and seeing other familiar faces through the holes in the gate, would make at least a few of them brave enough to open up. It probably wouldn’t help their case if their first act was to break it down.

“Nat?”

He bent enough to look through a gap in the gate. “Dad?”

A wail was his answer, and then the gate rattled and jerked before one side was flung open. Nat had enough time to gasp before his father rushed forward and grabbed him.

“Oh my god! My boy!” He was sobbing into Nat’s shoulder, squeezing him so hard he made Nat’s back pop. He pulled back, brown eyes raking over Nat’s face and body. “How are you alive? What —” He stopped, flinching when he noticed Asterius and Heimsal. “Nat?”

“There’s a lot we need to talk about. Let’s gather everyone, okay?”

Once everyone had emerged from where they’d hidden, it took some time for them to calm down as people reunited. Nat watched as Brigid was mobbed by the children of the compound, all of them thrilled to see her again, while her husband and sister kept their distance. When a few more people who’d been sacrificed to get rid of them started shouting at others, the guards stepped forward. Just them moving seemed to make everyone quiet down.

The committee had decided that the bulk of the news should come from Nat, so he stepped up now. He started simply with, “Everything you know about the war is a lie. Everything about the sacrifices is a lie. We’re here to tell you the truth and free you from this prison.”

Of course, there was a lot of talking then as the inhabitants raised their voices in confusion. Nat raised his arms and called for quiet before he suddenly found himself standing on a table. He grabbed Asterius’s horn on instinct to steady himself and glared down at the beast for a second—he could’ve warned him—but at least the move had everyone giving Nat their attention.

He didn’t want to bombard them with every detail of their true history—they could take the tour like he had later—but he made sure to hit the highlights. Who the real aggressors had been, why the war started, why it ended, and the reason for the sacrifices. Their reactions were disbelief, horror, sadness, and anger—but no one was questioning him.

“Listen,” Nat’s father yelled. “This is what we wanted! I’ve spoken to enough of you that you must see this is just a different way for us to achieve what we wanted.”

Nat hopped down off the table and helped his father onto it. As the queen had said, his father had been fanning the flames of revolution. He used this moment to galvanize into action those he’d rallied to his side before any of them had even known what else was possible.

From out of the crowd, a male voice called out, “What about the treaty? Are we willing to entertain these lies when the treaty already protects us?”

“We ended the treaty,” Asterius said, “when Nat agreed to marry me and unite our people.”

Though Nat smiled up at his betrothed and held his gaze, he was well aware of the gasps and whispers around them.

Suddenly, Wayne Deacon shoved his way to the front of the crowd. “He has no authority,” Deacon

said with a sneer, “to unite anyone for any reason. The treaty stands!”

“He is the son of a member of your council,” Asterius said as he moved slightly in front of Nat. “Your council is your ruling class, therefore he does have the authority.”

“We will not stand by and allow our way of life to be destroyed!” Deacon yelled. But when only a few people raised their voices in agreement, he turned shocked eyes on the crowd.

“If you’ll gather your things,” Asterius said loudly over the murmuring, “we have transportation that will take you to the city. There you can learn more about the truth of our shared history and begin to build new lives in comfort and safety.”

They were, in fact, going to go to the building Asterius had taken Nat to first. Of course, they’d get to have private medical exams and baths before moving up to the second floor which was now outfitted with semi-private living quarters. It was all temporary until this large of a population could be oriented and integrated into city life—or country, if they chose to learn how to be farmers instead.

“Lies!” Deacon screamed. “I was *there*. I know what happened. These monsters slaughtered our people for no reason—”

“Oh, you know the reason,” Nat said as he got in Deacon’s face. “You probably know exactly who murdered Prince Androgeus, don’t you?”

Asterius put his hand on Nat’s shoulder at the same time that Deacon snarled and said, “There can be no marriage, no end to our way of life, if you’re *dead*!”

Nat gasped when Deacon pulled a knife from inside his robes and lifted it over his head. As Feeda hollered in Nat’s ear about the blade, Nat put his hands up to fend off the attack.

Suddenly, he found himself spun around and knocked to the ground. People were yelling as Nat scrambled up and turned around to see—

“No!”

The blade was buried in Asterius’s chest, under his arm.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hours later, Nat sat on the side of Asterius's hospital bed and held his big hand, waiting for him to wake up after surgery. That knife had caused Asterius's right lung to collapse in addition to the rest of the damage done. Nat still couldn't believe that all that armor Asterius had worn, and he'd been stabbed under his arm. It was such a stupid place to get stabbed, but witnesses had said Asterius had reached out to knock Deacon away, exposing his underarm.

Seeing his brave warrior unconscious on a bed of crisp linens in a room designed to monitor his every breath and heartbeat was still torture, though. Not as bad as the race here from the compound when Asterius had turned blue and passed out because he couldn't breathe, but close. Nat wouldn't be okay at all until—

Asterius's hand twitched in Nat's grasp before squeezing his fingers. Nat looked up with a gasp to find Asterius blinking at him. "You're awake!" he hollered as he flung himself over his mate on hands and knees, staring down at him.

"It will take more than that," he whispered, "to keep me away from you."

Nat couldn't hold back the sob that tore out of him then. He'd been fighting back despair and worry for too long and it all burst out of him at once. He hid his face in Asterius's velvety neck and cried. Asterius quietly held him close.

Eventually, Nat got ahold of himself and leaned back to wipe his eyes and look into Asterius's. "I love you," he kind of croaked. Clearing his throat, he tried again, even though Asterius was smiling. "I love you. So much. You're never leaving the castle again without full head-to-toe body armor, though. That's non-negotiable."

Asterius huffed a laugh and cupped the side of Nat's face. "I love you, too, little one."

Something must've alerted the team of doctors and nurses that Asterius was awake because Nat only had time for one quick kiss before they invaded the room. But that flurry of activity was nothing compared to when the king and queen returned with Princesses Terelia and Lorsella. They'd all stepped out to give Nat time with his mate—which he'd greatly appreciated—but clearly that was over now that Asterius was awake.

And Nat didn't know a thing about charbray religious practices, but when Lorsella switched from princess to priestess and started wailing and ringing a bell... Just... Seriously?

Thankfully, though, when Asterius asked for pain medication, everyone shut up, moved out of the way, and let him get that. Nat suspected Asterius might be pretending to fall asleep in self-defense against the commotion of a platoon of medical professionals and his very opinionated family. And not that Nat didn't love everyone's concern, but since Asterius's tactic seemed to work, Nat climbed up onto the bed and snuggled into Asterius's uninjured side, silently daring anyone to tell him not to.

After a few minutes, everyone quietly left the room.

“That worked nicely,” Asterius mumbled, slurring a little.

Nat chuckled but didn’t move. “Shh. Go back to sleep. Save yourself.”

Asterius grunted and curled his arm around Nat before his breathing evened out and he did fall back to sleep. Knowing he was okay, Nat finally let himself relax, too.



IT WAS a few days before Nat asked Heimsal about what had happened at the compound after they’d left. He’d seen Heimsal swat Deacon away with his hammer, but then he’d been so focused on Asterius that he hadn’t paid attention to anything else. It turned out that Heimsal had broken Deacon’s back, and it was unlikely he’d ever walk again, but they had managed to keep him alive. He had joined the inmates of a prison several miles away and, though he would have a trial, it was likely he would remain imprisoned there for the rest of his life for attempted murder. Nat was eager to forget the man had ever existed.

Though most of the guards had returned to the city after Asterius and Nat were whisked off to the hospital, several had stayed behind with Heimsal and the former sacrifices who’d gone to the compound. There had been a few inhabitants insanely loyal to Deacon who’d tried to make more trouble and keep everyone there, but they’d been drowned out by the rest quickly enough.

Nat had known his people had been desperate for change—it had been one of the driving forces for his own actions. He understood now that they hadn’t exactly been suffering, but the feeling of imprisonment combined with that ever-present fear of expulsion looming over their heads had been slowly crushing them all. Heimsal told him that just hearing about the lives the former sacrifices were living had been enough to convince those in the compound to pack their meager possessions and leave.

Resisters had been given the option to stay behind, but no one had.

“It feels weird that it’s over,” Nat said as he lounged against Asterius. They were back in the castle, and Nat had found that the easiest way to keep Asterius resting in bed was to stay in it with him.

“Yes, almost as if...”

Nat twisted to look back at him. “As if what?”

Asterius sighed. “I suppose I expected more resistance.”

“Well, the committee representative stopped by while you were asleep and said the refugees are asking tons of questions and demanding proof of everything. That’s a little more resistance.”

“I mean that I expected more violence. That they would—”

“You got *stabbed*.”

“Yes, and that was the end of it. They didn’t take advantage of my injury. No one moved on you again. They just...stepped back.”

Well, some of them had stepped forward but only so that they could help. Asterius was right, though, in that no one had used the chaos to make things worse. Nat frowned at him. “Are you disappointed?”

“No, not that. More surprised maybe. Confused?” He leaned back against the pillows propping him up and sighed. “I think I expected them to resist as fiercely as you did. I may have just been

anticipating the worst.”

“This was bad enough, thanks.”

Asterius kissed the side of Nat’s head, his big arm tucking him tighter into his side. “I’m sorry, little one.”

Nat lifted Asterius’s hand to kiss his warm palm before setting it back against his chest. “Let’s do some more reading.” He picked up the children’s book he was working his way through. “I feel like I’m getting good at reading in Taur.”

But before he could open the book, a knock sounded on the door. Nat set the book down and got out of bed, padding over to see who it was.

“Pardon the intrusion, sir,” a charbray footman said, “but Mister George Konstantinidis and Mister Jannek Weber are here and requesting an audience.”

“Oh, excellent.” Smiling, Nat looked over his shoulder at Asterius. “Do you mind if they come up? I’d like them to meet you officially.”

While his father had visited them in the hospital once, he had been busy helping with the orientation of their people into their new lives ever since. Nat understood. Humans were well represented in the parliamentary government, and several had been meeting with Nat’s dad to discuss various leadership roles that might be open to him. Nat had no doubt that his father would eventually appear on an election ballot not long from now—and he’d vote for him.

“Of course,” Asterius said and flung the sheet off of himself.

“Send them up,” Nat told the footman before shutting the door and dashing over to Asterius. Hands on his thick chest, he stopped him from getting up. “Don’t you dare. You’re supposed to be *resting*.”

“I can rest in a chair.” He pointed with the arm that wasn’t in a sling. “It’s right there.”

Nat’s gaze flicked all over Asterius’s face, looking for signs of pain or lack of oxygen.

“I’m fine,” Asterius said and cupped Nat’s cheek. “I promise.”

Stepping back, Nat said, “You’ll say something the *second* you feel anything. The *second*.”

“Yes, sir.”

Asterius stood up, didn’t wobble, and let Nat hug his waist and guide him the five steps over to the high-backed chair. But once he was sitting, they both realized how revealing his dressing gown was as it molded to his every contour. Nat grabbed a blanket and dropped it across Asterius’s thighs.

“You could sit on my lap,” Asterius suggested with a smirk.

Nat snorted. “That definitely wouldn’t help.”

After a week of no sex so soon after knowing just how good it could be, Nat was getting too twitchy for a fix to be allowed near his mate’s cock, even in a room with company watching.

Another knock sounded, so Nat went over to answer the door again. He, at least, was fully dressed and entirely presentable even without shoes on at the moment.

The instant Nat had the door open, his father was right there and grabbing him into a hug. Nat smiled at Jannek and hugged Dad back, still feeling guilty for what he’d put them through.

“We have some news,” Dad said with a smile at Jannek.

“And something I’d like to talk about,” Jannek added seriously.

“Let me introduce you properly, and then we can talk.” Nat led them toward the sitting area, determined to do this right even if it was a little late. “Your Highness, Prince Asterius,” he said with a smirk as Asterius rolled his eyes, “may I introduce Jannek Weber and my father George Konstantinidis?”

“A pleasure, Your Highness,” they both said and bowed as though someone had instructed them.

“Please,” Asterius said, “you’re family. There’s no need to be so formal with me.”

Dad and Jannek shared a bewildered look before Dad said, “How did you find out?”

“Find out what?” Nat asked.

“Well,” Dad said, “we kept things quiet at Deacon’s insistence, but, um...” He took Jannek’s hand. “We’re engaged. I asked, and Jan said yes.”

“Congratulations!” Nat didn’t hesitate to hug them both. “I always suspected something more than friendship was going on with you two, but I had no idea you were engaged. This is wonderful news.”

“Well,” his dad said, “that’s new as of two days ago.”

Jannek stopped Nat from moving too far away, his face serious. “It’s also why I want to tell you about the day you volunteered.” He glanced guiltily at Dad before continuing. “I stopped your father from going after you. I wouldn’t let him rescue you when the mino— When the charbray arrived to take you away.”

“Oh, well—”

Dad cut him off. “I tried to talk the council out of allowing you to volunteer. To refuse you and select... Select Marshall like they’d already agreed to.”

“Marshall? Dad, he was a single father of—”

“I know!” He cringed. “Believe me, I know now just how horrible we were being. I tried at every opportunity to reason with them, but Deacon’s people were the majority and—”

“Don’t do that to yourself.” Jannek rubbed Dad’s back consolingly. “You did your best and now you know the council was actually rewarding all of the people they sent away.”

“You should absolutely think of it that way, Dad.”

He sighed heavily, like he was trying to let it go.

“When talking didn’t work,” Jannek said to Nat, “George switched to gathering weapons and intended to attack the charbray when they arrived. That’s...” He sighed. “That’s when I bound George to the post in the house and kept him there until you were gone, Nat. I’m so sorry.”

Nat didn’t even have to consider his response. “No, Jannek. My god, it could’ve been so bad if you hadn’t done that. You have to know some of the history by now, right?”

They both nodded.

“Then you have to see how much better it is for everyone that you didn’t let him attack.” Nat took hold of both of their hands. “I’m sorry for the pain and sorrow I caused by you thinking I was dead or tortured or any of the other lies we all believed. But both of us did what we needed to do to end those lies once and for all. The alternative...” He glanced at Asterius. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

The relief pouring off of Jannek was almost a palpable thing as he hugged Nat and then Dad. When the two of them kissed briefly, Nat smiled and held Asterius’s hand.

“Now let’s sit down,” Nat said, “so you can tell me all about everything you’ve been doing. I know some things from the committee, but I want to hear all of the details.”

They talked for hours, had lunch together, and talked some more. Nat learned that the last of the human inhabitants had been assigned to various charbray or human mentors the same as if they’d been sacrificed. They were gaining jobs within their skill sets or passions and making homes for themselves.

Several humans had returned to the compound to escort archivists who were eager for the artifacts and first-hand stories that they would add to their displays in the gallery. It was strange to think of his life becoming a museum collection, but he supported it nonetheless—there were important lessons about trust and asking for help in it.

And it was during their conversations that Nat learned the startling fact that Asterius didn’t live in



the castle and was, in fact, just visiting.

“My estate is north of here in a town called Ash-Alf, which was named after a great supporter of my parents. I’ve been working to revitalize the area.” Asterius looked guiltily at Nat and nearly whispered, “I was going to tell you...”

Nat huffed a laugh and patted Asterius’s hand. “It’s okay. Something about this room and that little one I was staying in felt off this whole time. Like it wasn’t really yours or was temporary. Guess I was right.” He got up to kiss the big dope. “You can tell me all about our home later.”

Asterius looked relieved, but also like he was getting tired. Nat realized the sun was beginning to set at the same time Dad suggested that they should get going.

Dad and Jannek said their goodbyes, and Nat walked them out into the hallway. Dad cupped Nat’s face in his hands. “I’m so proud of you.”

“You are?”

“Oh, yes. You might’ve done it differently than you originally planned, but you did save us all. You changed our entire world for the better.” He kissed Nat’s forehead. “And it’s clear that you’ve fallen in love with a kind, compassionate, and dedicated...person.”

Emotions welled up inside Nat and choked him up. He hugged his father tightly for a long time, then squeezed Jannek, and waved at them as they walked off down the hall.

As Nat walked back to stand in front of his sleeping mate, he realized he was proud of himself, too. He hadn’t done anything the way he’d planned, but he was very glad of that now.

Deciding to let Asterius rest where he was, Nat gingerly got up on his lap and laid his head on Asterius’s broad shoulder, smiling the whole time.



# EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

After spending three idyllic months at the estate in Ash-Alf, Nat had thought returning to Neorah and the castle would be a relaxing holiday—something he'd never had before. Revitalizing an ancient town with Asterius and a team of advisors and tradespeople was busy work that kept them on their toes from dawn to dusk most days. Why wouldn't he have imagined his wedding to be a time when he'd be pampered and doted on for the entire week leading up to the big day?

His imagination sucked because he wasn't relaxing at all.

"Stop glaring, dear," Faiza said with a poorly disguised giggle. "You'll get wrinkles."

Since Nat was standing on a platform with his arms out and a billion pins threatening every inch of his body, he kept right on frowning. His face was about the only part he could move without getting pricked or yelled at to keep still, so he was going to express every emotion he had.

"We're almost done, Your Highness," the head tailor assured him—for the sixth time.

"I don't believe you, Zeben. I will never again believe anything that comes out of your mouth."

Zeben's assistants snickered even as they stuck yet more pins in him. Or his wedding outfit anyway—they were doing their best not to jab at his flesh and turn this monstrosity of white into blood red.

Then one of them said they were finished, and Nat's hopes soared right along with his nervousness. He desperately wanted them to be finished—even though he could rest his arms on stands, it was exhausting just standing here—but that meant he would be heading down the aisle soon afterward.

With his hand fisted under his chin, Zeben strolled around Nat and inspected their work. How Nat was going to get out of it so that they could sew it was a mystery. Actually, how he'd get back into it once it was sewn he couldn't imagine either because it was formfitting to the extreme.

Finally, Zeben stood in front of Nat and stared him right in the eyes. "Whatever you do, now is the time for not one single twitch. Don't even breathe."

Nat's eyes went wide and he opened his mouth, suddenly needing to scratch his nose, ass, and the bottom of his left foot in addition to having to pee, cough, and fart. Dear god, was he about to explode?

"Ah! Not. One. Move."

Nat didn't move. He even held his breath.

Zeben tapped on the tablet that he hadn't set down this entire time and—*Holy shit!* It felt like every single needle pinning Nat's clothes on him moved at once and all on their own. He couldn't help his gasp and probably twitched a lot, but the needles did whatever the hell it was they were doing, and then suddenly, they dropped to the floor in a rain of ping-pong metal.

Nat didn't move.

The queen clapped delightedly.

Zeben and his assistants circled around yet again.

Nat didn't move.

"Finished," Zeben proclaimed. "My finest work to date."

One of the assistants ran what must've been a magnet around the platform at Nat's feet because the needles disappeared. But aside from looking down, Nat still didn't move.

Zeben sighed dramatically. "For pity's sake, Your Highness, you can move now of course. We're finished."

"Well, how am I supposed to know? My tailor back home takes measurements and doesn't make me stand around for days on end getting poked and prodded and—"

He stopped short when one of the assistants shoved a mirror in front of him. "Oh my god," he whispered.

"Ha," Zeben said before he moved away, leaving Nat to stare at himself.

Never in his wildest dreams of luxury and glitz had Nat ever thought he might look like this. He'd known that he would be dressed fancier than ever before for his wedding day, but this?

On his upper body was a jacket of brilliant white and silver bedecked in opalescent beadwork that somehow made his shoulders broader and his waist smaller without padding or cinching. His pants... Wow. They were tight, glittery, and managed to make his cock look enormous without being indecent. Low, heeled boots had his calves looking tight and his ass extra perky. He was sex on a white stick and yet...

For the first time, Nat felt *royal*.

He was hours away from marrying a prince and officially becoming royalty himself. He was going to be a prince.

"Now now," Faiza said as she stepped in front of him. "Just breathe, dear boy. Just breathe."

Nat blinked and was startled to have tears fall across his cheeks. Faiza wiped them away with her thumb as she cupped his face in her hands, her smile kind and understanding. He didn't try to explain what he was feeling, just leaned a little into her hold, closed his eyes, and breathed for a minute.

A quiet voice said, "Pardon the interruption, ma'am, but they're ready for you."

Nat blinked when Faiza kissed his forehead. "Ready?"

"Yes, dear. It's time for you to marry my son."

"Now? We're going now?"

She patted his cheek as she nodded and guided him down off the platform. "This was the last step before you stand before the officiant and declare your devotion to Asterius."

"Oh. Oh, wow. Okay." He smoothed a hand down his front and realized he really was sewn into this entire outfit from throat to ankle. "How am I supposed to get out of this later?"

Zeben groaned and walked away. One of his assistants said, "It's quite stretchy. Just pull."

Nat tugged on a few spots and saw that they were right.

The queen tittered. "And, if he's anything like his father, Asterius will simply cut you out of it if he has to."

"Oh, Faiza." Nat looked up at the ceiling, willing the picture of his in-laws in his mind to go away. "There's so much about that sentence that I never wanted to know."

She just giggled.

"Your Highnesses?"

"Right," Nat said and straightened up. "Here I go then."

He followed Restin, the castle's butler, through the quiet corridors on their way to the door Nat

knew would take him to the front of the great hall. The wedding planner had guided everyone through all the steps in the process, but that didn't mean Nat felt prepared. His emotions were so high right now that he got teary all over again when he saw his dad and Jannek waiting by the door for him.

"Oh, dammit," Nat said and paused to wipe at his eyes. "Why do I feel like a little kid right now? I'm about to get married!"

"As someone who's done it twice," Dad said as he took Nat's hand, "even a small and intimate wedding feels like a giant leap into the next stage of your life. It's intimidating now but..." He gazed lovingly at Jannek. "...it's marvelous."

The two of them were glowing with happiness in their silver suits that were only slightly less sparkling than Nat's. They'd only been married for only two months, but Nat had learned that they'd been secretly seeing each other for years. That was the sort of devotion he wanted.

"If you're ready, gentlemen?" Restin said, his hand on the door leading to Nat's future.

They got into position with Dad on one side of Nat and Jannek on the other, and Restin opened the doors. Nat took a deep breath, readying himself. He was glad that Dad and Jannek stepped forward first, drawing him with them.

Small and intimate did not describe Nat's wedding at all. He'd lost count of the number of people attending—or maybe he'd stopped wanting to know—because the great hall was packed to the rafters with dignitaries, special guests, close friends, and family. Even though the only sound was the gentle melody that was supposed to help him keep pace, all Nat could hear was the thunderous beating of his heart.

And then he saw Asterius walking toward him. Everything else faded away. Nat was barely aware of his father and Jannek kissing his cheeks and squeezing his hands as he stared up at Asterius smiling down at him. The king and queen disappeared, the hundreds of onlookers vanished, and it was just him and Asterius standing before the officiant.

When Asterius put his hand out, Nat didn't hesitate to hold onto it, smile, and promise to love, honor, and cherish his prince for the rest of his life.



THE NEXT MORNING, Nat woke up to velvety skin sliding across his naked body just before the warm, heavy weight of his brand-new husband settled on top of him. Without even opening his eyes, Nat smiled and hitched his legs up around Asterius's waist and petted his broad shoulders.

They hadn't done more than fall into bed last night after a lovely ceremony, scrumptious feast, and hours of dancing. But that was okay because they'd both agreed not to put any pressure on themselves for an equally epic wedding night. They had the rest of their lives to ravish each other and, by the big cock firming up against him and the lips kissing his neck, Nat was pretty sure the ravishment started now.

"Oh," he said, eyes popping open as he remembered their big plan. "Get the lube!"

Asterius chuckled throatily before lifting his head to look down at him. "Do you mind a bit of foreplay? Or should I just flip you over and start thrusting?"

"Shut up," Nat said with a snort. "I just woke up."

But they had decided that they'd "go all the way" as he couldn't resist calling it once they were married. Not that Nat needed that much preparation, but it had felt like a significant aspect of their

joined lives and he'd liked the idea of waiting. Resisting had been tough sometimes, but they'd done it.

And now they didn't have to resist anymore.

"Seriously, though," he said with a little push to Asterius's shoulder. "Go get it."

Asterius shook his head before kissing Nat.

Well, fine, he could wait a bit longer. Especially with deep, rumbling kisses from his clearly horny mate. *Ha! Horny...* Nat let his hands travel up Asterius's neck to the back of his head, past those big ears of his, to the base of his horns. Nat had learned that he really liked holding onto them and stroking them up and down, and the symbolism wasn't lost on Asterius either.

With a growly noise, Asterius got up on his hands and knees before shuffling down the bed. While Nat bit his bottom lip in anticipation, Asterius grabbed Nat behind his knees and lifted his legs up and

Nat gasped as Asterius hooked his legs up and over his horns! The position had him spread open and trapped in place, and then Asterius went and swallowed his semi-hard cock.

"Oh, fuck!" he hollered, arching up. His toes curled and he fisted the pillow beside his head as he blinked down at the spectacle of himself with a bull between his thighs.

A wanton whine broke free of him when he felt Asterius's slick fingers teasing his hole. Apparently, he had already gotten the lube and while his tongue did filthy things to Nat's cock, he was also going to work Nat open to receive him.

"As-Asterius," Nat said in warning because he was zooming too close to losing control.

Asterius lifted off Nat's cock with a sucking pop that had Nat shivering, but he kept his fingers where they were. At least two were gliding in and out of Nat and all he wanted was more.

"Are you ready for me?" Asterius asked, his voice a low rumble as he licked his lips.

Nat quickly nodded.

Asterius unhooked Nat's legs from his horns before moving in closer, looming over him. Nat trembled with desire for what came next.

Grinning like a devil, Asterius took himself in hand and pressed the fat head of his cock to Nat's hole. "Are you certain, little one?"

Nat grinned back at him. "You know I am. You've watched me take that giant purple dildo plenty of times."

Asterius hummed like he savored the memories—and every time they'd played with those glass cocks was a very good memory—before easing a little closer. The pressure of a blunt force demanding entrance had Nat's breath catching just before Asterius's cock breached his body. And god, yes, he was ready. This was the single best sexual sensation he'd ever felt in his life.

"Yes. Oh, yes. Asterius..."

With a predatory look on his rugged face, Asterius stared at nothing but Nat as he rocked himself deeper and deeper into him. When Asterius lifted Nat's ass up, setting him on his thighs, Nat realized Asterius's cock was already fully inside him. He'd done it! He'd taken that monster cock to the root.

And when Asterius pulled Nat up to sit on his lap, that cock of his so very deep, Nat went boneless with overloaded sensation. Held close and tight, his rigid cock pressed against cobbled abs, and the growl of the beast impaling him? Fuck, yes, Nat was in heaven already.

He cried out in ecstasy when Asterius's hips started thrusting, driving his cock up into Nat and making his every nerve-ending sing. The pressure, the friction, and seeing how everything had Asterius panting and flushed with pleasure was rapidly pushing Nat to his limits. He was exclaiming with every thrust, fingers biting into Asterius's shoulders, almost... Almost...

Nat came with a scream of fiery release as his ass throbbed around Asterius's thick cock. Hot come flooded the space between them as Nat's cock erupted, untouched. He went limp, completely rung out and gasping, only able to moan as Asterius pounded into him again and again and again.

Asterius didn't make a sound as he came, but Nat felt his big body shudder and his cock quake. He sucked in a huge breath and then bellowed it out again, his grip on Nat crushing but so welcome. They held each other tightly for the longest time.

Finally, Nat whispered, "Told you so."

Asterius chuckled and kissed Nat's shoulder. "So you did."

Gently, he lay Nat back against the cool sheets and slowly withdrew from him. Nat moaned at the wide-open, empty feeling and then at the way Asterius massaged his hole and stared at him. The hungry look on Asterius's face had Nat feeling extra triumphant as he basked in bliss.

"We are so doing that a lot," Nat murmured as he stretched against the bed. Even if his ass did throb and tingle a little. Tingle?

"That should help."

"Fucking a lot?" Nat looked down. "Why am I tingling?"

Asterius chuckled and held up a little jar. "It's a special salve designed to help little spouses recover from their massive husbands."

Nat snorted and relaxed. "I feel too good to complain about you still calling me little."

"You'll always be my little one," Asterius said before he started wiping them both off with warm, damp cloths. His preparation and dedication had Nat's heart singing with love.

"I love you," Nat said. "You're wonderful."

Asterius scooped him up and lay back, settling Nat on top of him. "I love you, too. Rest for a while," he said as his hand wandered down to pat Nat's ass. "And then we'll start again."

Nat chuckled. "With me on top."

"Or holding onto the headboard."

"Or swinging from the chandelier."

Asterius laughed. "What?"

But Nat just smiled and snuggled into the velvety muscles of his husband, confident that they'd have the rest of their lives to play in every way.

THE END





**THANK YOU FOR READING!**

I sincerely hope you like Nat and Asterius as much as I do!

If you would be so kind as to write a review telling other readers why you enjoyed this book, that would really help me. As an independent author, reviews are super important to my success.

Please leave your review for *The Minotaur's Mate* at [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#).



THANK YOU!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Delaney Rain is an author of gay erotic romances featuring things that go bump in the night and the men who love them.

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